

Forbidden love: a
comparison of "the
merchants prologue
and tale" and "the
duches...



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Despite the varying contexts with which they wrote their work, as well as the vastly different tone and content, both Chaucer in 'The Merchants Tale' and Webster through 'The Duchess of Malfi' explore the theme of forbidden love- or forbidden lust- and its attractions and implications. Whilst Chaucer's humorous fabliau of adultery and grotesque miss-matches certainly contrasts with the twisted tale of status and gender imbalance in Webster's tragedy, both writers appear to indicate in their respective texts the contradicting forces of the negative consequences of forbidden relationships, as well as their intense magnetism.

Chaucer, through the relationship between May and Damyan, explores the concept that a romance's main attraction could be its forbidden nature.

Damyant's 'love' for May is most often described in the pain he experiences by not being with her, such as his 'langwyssheth for love' and the attraction. Whilst May's character seems to be predominantly motivated by lust- at the first opportunity she gets her and Damyan "had dressed/ in swich manere it may nat been expressed", implying that their romance is driven by sexual impulse rather than romantic love. Chaucer's poetry being a fabliaux, the characters are not fully realized and serve rather stock characters to serve the story, and by the point of Damyan's love letter to May she had not been given any dialogue. This further implies that their attraction for each other does not extend beyond lust. Furthermore, the concept of May's sole interest in Damyan being his status as forbidden and unattainable is stressed by their sexual engagement in the tree- Eve's had the choice of all the fruit in the garden of Eden but sought out the fruit of the tree of knowledge because of its forbidden nature.

Similarly, in the Duchess of Malfi the Duchess' love for Antonio originally appears to have been inspired by the containment of her sexual feelings by her brothers, the Cardinal and Ferdinand. The juxtaposition of the scene in which her brother's declare her "lusty widow" and implore that she let "not youth, high promotion, eloquence...sway your high blood", immediately followed by her claim that she will "wink and choose a husband" seem to imply that her initial attraction to Antonio emerges not because of his personal merits or qualities, but rather her magnetism to the forbidden. Her choice of Antonio for a partner only solidifies this argument. Marrying any man would anger her brother Ferdinand, who rallies against the idea of the Duchess remarrying despite the ideas of the time- a widow, who had far more power and authority than an unmarried woman, was encouraged to get married as soon as possible as she was seen as a threat to the patriarchal order. However, her marriage to a man far below her status presents a more conventional forbidden romance than just her brothers telling her not to. Social mobility was a much-feared concept, and the Duchess' disregard for social norms, represented by her telling Antonio to "raise yourself/... (her) hand to help you", could signify a specific attraction that she cites in Antonio- his forbidden nature as someone below her in status.

That said, Webster portrays the Duchess' love for Antonio as a far less amoral romance than that of May and Damyan's in the Merchants tale. Despite the Duchess' arguably stronger moral compass than the Cardinal and her sounder mental state than Ferdinand, she naturally stands as inferior to her brothers because of the patriarchal ideals of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Her decision to marry Antonio is forbidden only

because the will of the Duchess is suppressed by her brothers, and her marriage to Antonio in part seems to justify their romance as holy and moral, the Duchess asking " what can the Church force more?". The presence of Cariola makes the marriage between the Duchess and Antonio legally and morally bound in the religious context of Webster's time, and the Duchess' defiance of what her brothers deem forbidden, rather than what the Church does, arguably puts the Duchess on the moral high ground and makes her seem a more sympathetic character.

This is a direct contrast to the forbidden nature of the romance between May and Damyan, in which the two directly violate the sanctity of the marriage bond by committing infidelity. Rather than exploring Damyan's moral turmoil over pursuing a married woman, or engaging sympathy for May through her marriage to the old and lusty January, Chaucer presents both of the two as morally weak. This is highlighted by May and Damyan's copulation taking place in " a tree... charged was with fruit", a play on the image of the original sin beginning at the tree of knowledge, in the garden of Eden. Chaucer's comparison of May to Eve in this way is fairly unforgiving, and her increasing calculation, motioning Damyan to climb the tree as she says to January that "(she) is no wenche" contributes to the idea that her pursuit of the forbidden Damyan is immoral and calculated.

Although both the Duchess and May's pursuit of forbidden tastes results, initially, in satisfaction (emotionally or sexually), in some ways both Chaucer and Webster present manifestation of forbidden tastes as disturbing, rather than ' sweet'. Ferdinand's obsession with his sister's sexual actions is

increasingly disconcerting throughout the play, and the audience's view of <https://assignbuster.com/forbidden-love-a-comparison-of-the-merchants-prologue-and-tale-and-the-duchess-of-malfi/>

his character is heavily influenced by his craving of the forbidden. Whilst the Cardinal certainly shows distaste at the idea of the Duchess having sex (to his knowledge) outside marriage in Act II scene 5, he remains relatively impersonal and merely shows aversion to the idea of the Duchess ' sleeping beneath her', expressing contemptuously " shall our blood... be thus attained?". In contrast, Ferdinand shows extreme, unfiltered rage at the idea, fuming " I (will) hew her to pieces", and his anger at the man who impregnated his sister implies a jealousy that is very disturbing in a brother. His references to the Duchess' " milk" and " blood" show an unsavory obsession with her body and his generally unpleasant behavior could be Webster's way of conveying to the audience that that which is forbidden and immoral should not be ventured into.

Similarly, Chaucer presents January's legal, but arguably transgressive, marriage to May as unsavory and grotesque. Although January's marriage to May is not unethical in a religious sense- he ironically goes the extra mile to make sure that he is married before having sex with May so that he may have " leweful procreacioun"- and the context of the time rendered it not an uncommon situation for a far older man to marry a young woman, Chaucer nevertheless creates the image of January's relationship with May as repulsive, if not humorous for the audience. Chaucer's description of January as having a beard " lyk to the skin of a houndfish", and " the slake skin aboute his nekke shaketh" is repellent, and juxtaposing his eagerness to have sex with May sitting " as stille as stoon" almost creates the idea that January had violated her, and that age gap between them makes his lust for her morally, if not religiously and legally, forbidden and illicit.

Furthermore, Webster and Chaucer further explore the idea that the exploration of the forbidden is destructive and only ends in failure by the consequences of those who sought it. Ferdinand's mental health is visible throughout the play, with his threatening his sister with his "father's poniard" after little aggravation, but his instability becomes unignorable once he learns that his sister was pregnant, his ravings leading the Cardinal to ask "Are you stark mad?". The audience's disgust for Ferdinand peaks at the death of the Duchess, a demand of Ferdinand that was influenced by the merging of hate, religious expectation and his sexually repressed feelings toward her, and the harm that the forbidden sexual feelings he had towards her are amplified in his almost immediate regret, stating "cover her face. Mine eyes dazzle. She died young". Once the jealousy and lust he once likely felt towards her is largely dispelled through her death, his judgement appears less clouded, and through this Webster implicitly challenges the notion that forbidden tastes are 'the sweetest'; rather suggesting that they are the most deceptive and destructive, and perhaps outlining the consequences for not following the contemporary moral guidelines.

Chaucer's portrayal of the pursuit of the forbidden is similar to Webster's when it comes to the culmination of the relationship between May and January, in that January's amoral indulgence in 'forbidden tastes' only ends in his own failure and cuckoldry. Whilst *The Merchant's Tale's* ending of deceit and a potential pregnancy is told lightly by the Merchant- in comparison to Webster's response of killing both Ferdinand and the Duchess- the conclusion of the story would no doubt be disturbing to both the Merchant's and Chaucer's male audience. In the context of the late 14th

century, and continuing for many centuries after, being a cuckold was one of the greatest shames a man could bare in society- it implied that he could not control his wife, a member of the fairer sex, and that he was not satisfactory at sexually satisfying her. Although January's blindness (both physically and mentally) to May's infidelity make him seem foolish and it wouldn't be difficult for men of the time to distance themselves from him, his "palays hoom he hith (May) lad" implies that many men may think they are in charge, and are 'leading the woman' so to speak, when in fact that may be just what the women wants them to believe. May's main motivation for her infidelity seems to be that she "preyseth nat his pleying worth a bene", something which we can only assume is due at least partly to his old age. In presenting January's cuckoldry as penance for his seeking of the 'morally forbidden' May, Chaucer is effectively presenting the pursuit of forbidden tastes as not worth the harm they cause, in the same way as Webster presents Ferdinand's lust of his sister as his undoing.

In conclusion, both Webster and Chaucer present the manifestation of multiple forbidden or immoral relationships, but the difference between the former and the latter's take on them is significant. Almost all the romantic relationships explored in the Duchess of Malfi are in some way taboo or controversial, and they almost all end up in tragedy. Although by both a 17th century and a modern audience the Duchess may be looked at as reckless and "ambitious", her willingness to challenge the men who have constrained her is admirable and most would agree she died a moral woman. In contrast, the character of May, also challenging society's expectation of a chaste women (although arguably in not as commendably a way) is looked at with

scorn by the audience, may not get to heaven and she will live her life in immorality, but she will likely relish in it- she has January's money and will get sexual satisfaction from Damyan. From this we can conclude that perhaps forbidden fruits are the sweetest, but that if one is to indulge in them, they must be prepared to deal with the possibly sour aftertaste.