

The duchess of malfi and a certain fish story



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There are many complex personalities in John Webster's classic play, "The Duchess of Malfi". Webster's character named "Bosola" is perhaps the most complex of any. Throughout the play, one may notice a variety of emotional traits in each of the main characters. There is the greed and resentment of Ferdinand and the Cardinal, the nobility of the Duchess, and the psychological onion that is Bosola. I use the metaphor of an onion to represent the many different layers of Bosola's personality that are peeled away throughout the text. In the beginning, Bosola fit the description bestowed upon him by Antonio in Act I, "(Bosola)...Would be as lecherous, covetous, or proud, Bloody, or envious, as any man, If he had means to be so"(Norton, p1434). However, as the waters of life and circumstance sweep below the bridge that is Bosola, a noble metamorphosis transpires: a "lecherous, covetous, and proud" man becomes a martyr for all the plebes that have been trod upon by the nobility. Through the first three acts of the play, I thought to myself that Bosola was the most unlikable of all the villains in the play. He is a greedy servant who will do anything to please his master. He begins as an informant for Ferdinand, assigned to keep a close eye of the Duchess, sister of Ferdinand. His character is best summed up with his own words on wisdom, spoken to Antonio. "Oh, sir, the opinion of wisdom is a foul tetter that runs all over a man's body. If simplicity direct us to have no evil, it directs us to a happy being, for the subtlest folly proceeds from the subtlest wisdom..."(Norton, p 1449). Here he is stating that "simplicity" (foolishness) is a distributor of wisdom and that folly, the lack of good sense, comes from subtle wisdom. This is the outer layer of "Bosola the onion". These beliefs continue until later on in the play. The first major change in Bosola is triggered by a parable told to him by the Duchess, who is now

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imprisoned by the order of Ferdinand. She speaks to Bosola as he looks over her children and enlightens him about the unknown values of individuals. "A salmon, as she swam unto the sea, Met with a dogfish, who encounters her With this rough language: 'Why art thou so bold To mix thyself with our high state of floods, Being no eminent courtier, but one That for the calmest and fresh time o' th' year Dost live in shallow rivers, rank'st thyself with silly smelts and shrimps? And darest thou pass by our dog-ship without reverence?' 'Oh!' quoth the salmon, 'sister, be at peace: thank Jupiter we have both passed the net! Our value never can be truly known, Till in the fisher's basket we be shown..."(Norton, p1477). She is telling Bosola that, although he is now the superior "dogfish", each of their values can only be measured after death. They are both susceptible to Ferdinand's net. In Ferdinand's case, Bosola is the one that "rank'st" himself with "silly smelts and shrimps". He has yet to realize the wisdom in what the Duchess has told him, but perhaps the second layer of the onion is now hanging loosely. A crucial change in Bosola takes place in Act IV scene II after Ferdinand's orders have led to the deaths of the Duchess and her illegitimate children. After the deed is done, Ferdinand enters the room and Bosola confronts him. Bosola challenges, "She (Duchess) is what you'd have her. But here begin your pity. Alas, how have these (the children) offended?...Do you not weep? Other sins only speak; murder shrieks out: The element of water moistens the earth, But blood flies upwards and bedews the heavens...her infelicity Seemed to have years too many"(Norton, p 1487). The tragic executions of the Duchess and her children are very moving to Bosola. They cause him to reexamine his place in life, and his service of Ferdinand and those like him. Bosola illustrates the changes that he realizes when he continues his

conversation with Ferdinand. " I served your tyranny, and rather strove to satisfy yourself than all the world, and though I loathed the evil, yet I loved you that did counsel it; and rather sought to appear a true servant than an honest man"(Norton, p 1489). Here Bosola represents a common figure in modern society, the " Yes-Man". The " Yes-Man" always does what he is told by powerful figures, even when it hurts or destroys something else; all of this in the hope that he will be promoted to a better position. Bosola has spent his life in servitude, hoping for rewards that would lift him out of his common position. Only now is he beginning to realize that the rewards due him are not sufficient compensation for the damage that he has caused to others. " Off, my painted honor! While with vain hopes our faculties we tire, We seem to sweat in ice and freeze in fire. What would I do, were this to do again? I would not change my peace of conscience for all the wealth of Europe..."(Norton, p1489). With this confession, Bosola's transformation is complete. He has evolved beyond his earlier, greedy self. His second layer is finally revealed when he goes on to avenge the deaths of the Duchess and her family. After he accomplishes this, and dies in the process, the core of the onion is finally revealed. We see the real Bosola. Bosola's transformation represents the beauty of human nature. It represents hope in the noblest sense of the word for all of humanity. His change illustrates clearly that humanity is not always perfect, but at least we can come to a point of self-realization that compels us to atone for some of the pain that we have caused in our lives. Our ability to evolve and change is what makes us " onions". It should be the hope of every human to peel away their layers before it is too late. Fortunately for Bosola, he accomplished this.