

The development of characters in passages in the duchess of malfi

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This passage from the Duchess of Malfi is important for many reasons. It is a pivotal scene in terms of character development and plot progression. The scene in question entails the final meeting between the Duchess and her husband Antonio. It illustrates the climactic moment of three main characters in relation to their motivations, actions and perspectives. This influences the plot, thereby making the scene vital to the drama. It also marks the beginning of the Duchess' demise as well as a setting for the sophistry of those that are against her. The scene also highlights relationships the Duchess forms with Antonio and Ferdinand which again is pivotal to the story as each character is exposed through either love or hatred. Relationships are a dominant theme throughout the play resulting in the unearthing of information detrimental to the plot. This essay will examine the language used in the passage and how it could be translated into performance.

The scene is divided into two; the Duchess' meeting with Antonio and Cariola, followed by her encounter with Ferdinand. This again is balancing love with hatred. Both parts are equally powerful in the themes that they represent. The first half represents the extremely resilient love between the Duchess and Antonio and the second half represents the hatred Ferdinand makes the Duchess subject to. By contrasting these themes it highlights each individual theme as they both complement each other.

The passage is written cleverly, demonstrating the way the dramatist uses disjointed time as a metaphor. Webster compresses the events of a number of years into the duration of the play which lasts a few hours. This is

suggested as the Duchess states that ' You shall get no more children till my brothers/ Consent to be your gossips'. This indicates that Antonio and the Duchess have already children and are together as a secret family. Through the use of disjointed time, Webster is providing the audience with a dramatic context against which the themes of love and marriage are understood. However, the elapses of time are not explained leaving the audience to assume the actions. This causes confusion.

This could be translated into the performance through the use of an interval between acts two and three.

The scene is set in Amalfi, the Duchess's palace, namely her bed chamber. The Duchess warns Antonio that he cannot stay with her tonight, but Antonio says he must, and they tease each other good-naturedly. Their conversation is of a sexual tone and highlights that they are more at ease with each other, unlike their first meeting in the play. Their banter is significant and sees the Duchess taking charge of the situation, evidently demonstrating her superior strength of mind.

She refers to her husband as ' a lord of misrule'. This is an example of a double entendre as it refers to Antonio as a carnivalesque figure of low status chosen to preside over feasts and celebrations for a day, therefore making him an archaic figure in reversing the social hierarchy. The imagery behind this implies that Antonio has ensued anarchy in his increase in status through marriage.

He says that ' My rule is only in the night' which is a flirtatious comment and a pun to his sexual relationship with the Duchess which takes place at night, forcing him to conceal their clandestine marriage. It is also a reference to the theme of darkness which is used to conceal their relationship. This also suggests that Antonio, like Malfi the place are constantly on the edge of dysfunction.

As this is tied in with the theme of secrecy throughout the play, it proves to the audience that their love has proved to be a success. They have sustained their love after many years of scrutiny and jeopardy.

The passage explores questions of ruler ship as it relates to a female sovereign, the Duchess but also because it explores the relationship between herself and Antonio. A major theme developed in this scene is that of empowerment through the Duchess. She combines virtue with powerful sexual desire and exercises transgressive independent sexual agency in defiance of social conventions in the form of re-marriage. Therefore, she violates the society's notion of female conduct by exercising her own will and sexual choices in choosing a husband who is her social inferior. Through her words ' Alas, what pleasure can two lovers find in sleep?', she is violating the norms of femininity by adopting the dominant flirtatious role in the marriage. The passage highlights the Duchess as an open and direct person. She is aware of her passion and shows it to Antonio throughout this scene, evident through the sexual innuendos.

The gap in social status between the Duchess and Antonio is dramatized here through the contrasting language the two characters use. The Duchess takes the verbal initiative and dominates the dialogue between her and Antonio. However, Antonio dominates the conversation between himself and Cariola which would suggest that he is still weary of the gap in social status. The theme of class becomes most developed in Act Three.

Through the banter between them, it is clear to see that Antonio enjoys the company of women. His contributions to the conversation are filled with fun. For example, his tongue-in-cheek answer to Cariola's double entendre about him always 'rising' early when he sleeps with the Duchess, sees him playfully referring to the chores of 'labouring men'.

Antonio jokes that sleeping with the Duchess is work 'Labouring men/Count the clock off'nest, Cariola/ Are glad when their task's ended'. This informs that he was and technically still her steward.

The Duchess also uses a series of commands which reminds us of her position of authority over her steward she commands Antonio to 'Bring me the casket hither and the glass'.

Webster's work is poetic and therefore resonates with many emotive and highly vivid imagery patterns. This is expressed in the use of beautiful language which enables the layers of different meaning to validate. This is seen when Antonio uses examples from classical mythology to disdain matrimony. The allusions he makes are to Ovid's metamorphoses and all three examples are of women who scorned love and so were transformed

into 'fruitless' objects. They stand in contrast to the Duchess who embodies 'Those which married or proved kind unto their friends'. She is not a woman turned to marble but the personification of the natural fertile woman. 'The olive, pomegranate, mulberry' are all trees that give sustenance to those around them and are fruitful. This is a metaphor relating to the Duchess and the life she brings into the world. It shows the more positive light of the play, domestic life and reproductive womanhood.