

"i am duchess of
malfi still": how the
duchess redefines
the role of the woman



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In British literature of the 16th and 17th centuries, plots often center on romance, royalty, and the battle for power. With this emphasis come stories that feature the stereotypes of the damsel in distress, the powerless princess, and the haughty heiress. Although women of this era may have been born into nobility and unending wealth, society and expectations of the time period placed limitations on many of the women in such literature.

However, this rarely stopped some of the fictional female characters from bending the rules in the best interests of themselves and those they cared for. In the *Duchess of Malfi*, the main protagonist, the Duchess, steps beyond societal boundaries by destroying the image of herself as a powerless widow and instead recreating herself as a powerful political figure, a mother, and a wife; since society worried about giving women too much power or control, the Duchess took matters into her own hands and showed her ability to make her own decisions while still excelling at her "feminine roles" as a mother and wife. Instead of hiding in the shadows of her husband or other male leaders, the Duchess does it all. Through her actions, she demonstrates an early glimpse of feminism and of "the modern woman" in early literature.

As one of the most audacious female characters in British literature, the Duchess is aware of her political position once she becomes the Duke of Malfi's widow. In the play, Webster first introduces her in the role of a widow. However, the Duchess does not intend to stay in this position of mourning, regardless of what those around her advise her to do. Her two corrupt brothers, Ferdinand and the Cardinal, want full control over her decisions, including whom she decides to marry. The Duchess ignores the requests of her brothers and marries whom she wants, her social inferior and steward

Antonio, in secrecy. This action conveys a bold statement on the Duchess's opinion of societal expectations because she not only marries below her social class but also marries against the orders of her power-hungry brothers.

Widows, like the Duchess, had clear expectations that Renaissance society expected them to follow. The behavior of women following being widowed was an issue that needed to be addressed because early death was not uncommon. In his essay "Webster's 'Worystest Monument': The Problem of Posterity in The Duchess of Malfi," Brian Chalk points out that "Widows were thus common figures who needed to be acknowledged and accounted for in everyday life. In his Rule and Exercises of Holy Dying, Jeremy Taylor articulates a view toward widows disturbingly similar to Ferdinand's, insisting that 'a widow must be a mourner and she that is not, cannot so well secure the chastity of her proper state'" (388). By marrying too soon after her husband's death and to someone not equal or higher in political position, the Duchess was not fulfilling what society expected her to do as a widow. Although remarrying was typical for widows, and although the Duchess remarks, "I have not gone about in this to create / Any new world or custom," her brothers believed that they should be in charge of when and who was the recipient of her power (1604). Society recommended that a mourning widow should not be responsible for securing a new, appropriate husband; however, the Duchess decides, against the wishes of her brothers, that she can make her own decisions without their interference.

Perhaps one of the main reasons the Duchess's brothers attempted to control her actions was because of how dangerous her new status made her. <https://assignbuster.com/i-am-duchess-of-malfi-still-how-the-duchess-redefines-the-role-of-the-woman/>

Chalk continues: " As a new widow, the Duchess is a particularly dangerous figure to her brothers. An early exchange makes clear that their desire to control both her present and posthumous reputation is at the center of their concerns: ' Duchess: I'll never marry. Cardinal: So most widows say. But commonly that motion lasts no longer than the turning of an hour-glass; the funeral sermon and it, end both together" (387). Her brothers are preoccupied with the idea of their sister remarrying and what it might do to her reputation; as a result, they highly recommend against it. They want to be completely involved with her decision-making; similarly, society felt that women should not make important decisions. However, there is more to the brothers' interests in controlling their sister. They view her as a gateway to their own increased power and wealth. If she remarries, especially an unsuitable person, it may affect their political position.

In addition, Ferdinand's apparent infatuation with his sister resides at the root of all the reasons he does not want her to remarry. He is attracted to the Duchess, as most men are: she is powerful, beautiful, and intelligent.

Ferdinand's opposition to her remarriage arises partially because he would prefer to have her for himself, and if he cannot have her, no one should. In a conversation with his henchman, Bosola, Ferdinand says, " She's a young widow, I would not have her marry again." When Bosola questions why, Ferdinand responds, " Do not you ask the reason, but be satisfied I say I would not" (1578). He declines to share his reasoning for not allowing his sister to remarry, a sign that his logic may be his inappropriate desire to have an incestuous relationship. In " Defining/Confining the Duchess: Negotiating the Female Body in John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*,"

Theodora Jankowski explains, " The brothers may be justified in taking an interest in their sister's marital affairs, but it is rather difficult to see how they can be justified in their inordinate interest in her sexual being as well" (227-228). Although Ferdinand has a clear sexual interest in his sister, their obsession with her sexuality comes back to power. To them, the Duchess is not a powerful political figure; she is an " object of trade to be owned" (Jankowski 228). By producing heirs, their sister has the ability to make treaties with other rulers. Jankowski continues, " In this sense, their inquiry into the chastity of their sister's body is understandable, though grotesque, for her production of children the patriarchy considers illegitimate would decrease her value as a trade article for her family" (228). If the Duchess has children out of wedlock, she will not be as valuable as an object of trade. Her brothers fear that her status, as a widow, will cause her to act with promiscuity. They want to keep a close eye on her to make sure that this does not happen.

The Duchess confirms her brothers' fears when she does exactly what they hoped to avoid: she marries a social inferior, her steward, and begins defining her image as a wife. Jankowski points out, " It also becomes easier to understand Ferdinand's obsession with the Duchess's blood and her reference to " all [her] royal kindred" who might lie in the path of her proposed marriage to a steward of lower rank, which would pollute this blood" (227). The Duchess's choice of marriage does not help advance her politically; as a result of this decision, some critics view her as a bad ruler since she failed to place the needs of her subjects before her own desires. Because her brothers would object to this marriage, the Duchess must keep

it a secret. Even though marrying Antonio did not result in political advances, her decision to marry the man she cares for shows a leap of feminism.

Instead of marrying for power, politics, or wealth, the Duchess redefines the meaning of marriage as an act between two people who have real affection for each other. She selects Antonio because he is kind and loyal, a union John Halkett describes as “ a relatively modern concept of marriage as a partnership of love and mutual helpfulness” (qtd. in Jankowski 230). The Duchess’s reasoning behind her marriage completely opposed society’s expectations for a woman of political power. To society, the union of a powerful woman to a man of lower class was madness because the woman did not gain anything; if anything, she lost value. Jankowski argues, “ She has violated existing patriarchal conventions of marriage to create her own concept of the state. To do so, this character has drawn upon an ideology of marriage quite different from the dynastic union her brothers speak of” (230). The Duchess upsets the definition of marriage as dictated by society and instead creates her own idea of wedlock. She plays into the image of the wife as a loving companion who helps her partner as he helps her. Instead of becoming the powerless wife of another aristocrat, the Duchess uses marriage to Antonio as a gateway to shared power and mutual respect.

The intimacy and friendship shared by the Duchess and Antonio appear in various scenes throughout the play. The pair even incorporates fun and flirtation into marriage. An example of this is in Act 3, Scene 2, as Antonio and the Duchess fool around before bed: “ Duchess: To what use will you put me? Antonio: We’ll sleep together. Duchess: Alas, what pleasure can two lovers find in sleep?” (1601). Their ease with each other and loving

demeanor proves the depth of their relationship. The Duchess shows her ability to be a loving spouse to Antonio. As a result, the Duchess and Antonio are friends, lovers, and life companions until death.

Yet another duty the Duchess takes on faithfully is the role of a mother.

Unlike many wealthy mothers of the time who distanced themselves from their children with servants and wet nurses, the Duchess cared for her children and their well-being. In the moments before her death, she instructs Cariola, " I pray thee, look thou giv'st my little boy / Some syrup for his cold, and let the girl / Say her prayers ere she sleep" (1625). In " Just a Spoonful of Sugar: Syrup and Domesticity in Early Modern England," Wendy Wall questions, " What does it mean for a ' hero' to bid farewell in these terms? How are audiences to understand a character who is prepared to die ' like a prince,' but who concerns herself, at this momentous occasion with administering homey remedies to her children?" (149). The Duchess's final requests to her friend demonstrate her nurturing, maternal instincts. She worries about her son receiving medicine for his cold and her daughter remembering to say her prayers when she is no longer there to care for them. Although the Duchess had duties as a political figure and a wife, among other things, she valued her role as a mother most.

In addition, the Duchess did not fear for the political future of her children; she is most concerned with their health and well-being. Some view the Duchess's final moments as her recognition of her defeat as she gives up her power and life. Lisa Jardine regards the Duchess as a " stereotypical nurturing mother . . . stripped of dynastic power" (qtd. in Wall 150).

However, the Duchess proves herself to be anything but the stereotypical
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mother of her time, since losing prestige does not bother her. Any other mother in her position would worry about the social and political status of her heirs (offspring being regarded first as heirs, second as children) after her death. Wall continues, " the Duchess's indifference toward seeing her children as heirs, paired with her general lack of concern for her political legacy, convinces critics that something new – perhaps mystifying, perhaps liberatory – is afoot" (150). Unlike a majority of the powerful and wealthy people of her time, the Duchess is able to separate politics from her private life. She does not view her children as heirs and objects; she views them as her children whom she loves. In her final moments, she does not concern herself with the legacy she will leave behind or how they " dispose [her] breath" (1626). As Bosola dangles the cord the executioners will use on her and attempts to frighten her about her manner of death, the Duchess merely remarks that she does not care how she dies. She announces, " What would it pleasure me to have my throat cut / With diamonds? Or to be smothered / With cassia? Or to be shot to death with pearls?" (1625). To the Duchess, whether she dies with diamonds or pearls is irrelevant so long as her son receives his cough syrup. " This is maternal care, feelingly revealing her core values as she is extinguished by a corrupt world" (Wall 150). This is yet another example of the Duchess's modern ability to set herself apart from society and act as both a human and a mother. Instead of concerning herself with her own loss, she worries about her children. She offers a final display of her selflessness by placing the needs of her children before all else.

What makes the Duchess a remarkable character is not her position of power alone; instead, she is remarkable in her ability to balance all of the roles she

must fulfill: mother, wife, and duchess. When looking only at her role as the Duchess, one may not view her as successful. As Joyce Peterson argues, “Webster’s character places her private desire to marry Antonio above her public responsibility as a ruler, an action that identifies her with her corrupt brothers” (qtd. in Jankowski 223). This is not true. In her singular role as a political figure, the Duchess may have failed. However, looking at her actions as a duchess alone is not an accurate manner of evaluating of her success or failure as a character because she does not fill a singular role. Instead, the Duchess takes on the role of the modern woman: she has a “career” and is a mother and wife. With her ability to balance her duties, the Duchess represents a type of woman that would not surface for several hundred years; she is a glimpse of the modern woman before such a female existed. Today, society does not define a woman solely on the success of her career. Society instead looks at a woman’s ability to make a living for herself and family, her dedication as a mother, and the loyalty and compassion in her marriage. When rating the Duchess’s success using modern standards, society would view her as a highly respectable woman who balances her work, children, and marriage.

Ultimately, this attempt to redefine the image of the monarch, mother, and wife costs the Duchess her life. Her ambitious, feminist behavior made a bold statement before her life spiraled out of control and into the hands of her corrupt brothers. However, Webster still painted a bold picture of how women can successfully take on multiple roles, both as leaders and as mothers. Even with the murder of the Duchess, the conclusion of the play sends a strong message. As Michelle Dowd points out in “Delinquent

Pedigrees: Revision, Lineage, and Spatial Rhetoric in the Duchess of Malfi," " Many commentators argue that the play champions Protestant ideals of marriage and domestic life; by privileging the Duchess' child from her marriage to Antonio, the play thus validates the ideology of companionship and domestic harmony that this union represents" (500). The Duchess's legacy lives on through her surviving son. With this conclusion, Webster indicates that the Duchess was justified in her secret marriage to Antonio. Thus, in the Duchess of Malfi, Webster created a female protagonist with ideals and beliefs far ahead of her time. Readers and spectators of the play could reconsider what the expectations of a widow in a position of power and wealth should be, and realize that a woman could successfully take on the complex role of monarch, wife, and mother.

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