



## **Duchess of Malfi: Deconstructing the play**

*Bosola*

### **Elizabeth Freestone**

So Bosola is also a really interesting character. For me I really knew that Bosola had to be a military man for me, he had to be somebody who physically could carry that training in their body, that could be really convincing as a killer, and someone that had suffered, that you know he's been on the galleys for seven years, he's been through hell, he really has been through hell.

### **Kate Aughterson**

Another thing about Bosola is his low status. That's very interesting and something that he mentions a lot, that he feels he has to get involved in this political world and political chicanery because he doesn't have any choice.

### **Commentator**

Bosola's importance is evident even in the cast list which appeared in the original text. Bosola comes top of the list, before Duke Ferdinand, although conventionally, male characters of the highest status appeared first.

### **Kate Aughterson**

Bosola heads these actors' names and I think this is Webster saying this is a key figure in this play, I'm moving away from emphasising status as creating importance in the play. And he's just flagging up Bosola as this key character I think.

### **Commentator**

Despite her importance the Duchess remains firmly down the cast list with the other female characters.

### **Bosola**

*Your brothers mean you safety and pity.*

### **Duchess**

*Pity!*

*With such a pity men preserve alive*

*Pheasants and quails, when they are not fat enough*

*To be eaten.*

**Bosola**

*Are these your children?*

**Duchess**

*Yes.*

**Kate Aughterson**

He's a character who appears in almost all the scenes of the play, he has the most lines, he's the key character. There are only little minor scenes where he doesn't appear. He's also important because he's the only character who takes the story all the way through.

**Commentator**

One of Bosola's key scenes is Act 3, Scene 5. In this scene a question arises in the text as to whether or not he's wearing a mask. And if so at what point should the unmasking take place.

**Duchess**

*What devil art thou that counterfeit'st heaven's thunder?*

**Commentator**

Elizabeth and the actors experiment with the moment of unmasking.

**Elizabeth Freestone**

So that version we did the reveal of Bosola, we unmasked him very early, on 'What devil art thou that counterfeit'st heaven's thunder'. Let's see if the scene can hold right up until 'Were I a man, I'd beat that counterfeit face into thy other'.

**Aislin McGuckin**

*OK.*

**Bosola**

*Fie, madam!*

*Forget this base, low fellow –*

**Duchess**

*Were I a man,*

*I'd beat that counterfeit face into thy other.*

**Bosola**

*One of no birth.*

**Duchess**

*Say that he was born mean,  
Man is most happy when's own actions  
Be arguments and examples of his virtue.*

**Bosola**

*A barren, beggarly virtue.*

**Elizabeth Freestone**

In the comfort of the mask you can be quite strong, you can be quite strident with her, you know 'safety and pity' and 'is that terrible'.

**Tim Treloar**

Because there's one thing that Bosola's not which is false, he's not false and in this passage he is found out to be false.

**Elizabeth Freestone**

So if we do the reveal that late in the scene it's a much stronger moment, it's a really public dressing down of Bosola, and it becomes about the Duchess forcing him to look at himself and be ashamed of himself. I think in the overall arc of the show this would be a really hard moment for him ever to recover from with the Duchess.

**Tim Treloar**

Yeah, absolutely – and he doesn't.

**Duchess**

*I prithee, who is greatest? Can you tell?  
Sad tales befit my woe: I'll tell you one.*

**Commentator**

The scene closes with an extraordinary parable from the Duchess: the 'salmon and dogfish' speech.

**Duchess**

*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.  
Here's life:  
Return, fair soul, from darkness, and lead mine  
Out of this sensible hell.*

**Commentator**

In Act 4, Scene 2 the Duchess is murdered. This proves an emotional turning point for Bosola.

**Kate Aughterson**

When he changes at the end of Act 4 we think yeah he's got there, you know, he's moved from service to a masculine aristocratic court to something more honourable, something more authentic if you like.

**Bosola**

*Her eye opes,  
And heaven in it seems to ope, that late was shut,  
To take me up to mercy.*

**Duchess**

*Antonio!*

**Bosola**

*Yes, madam, he is living;  
The dead bodies you saw were but feign'd statues.  
He's reconcil'd to your brothers; the Pope hath wrought  
The atonement.*

**Duchess**

*Mercy!*

**Bosola**

*O, she's gone ... there the cords of life broke.  
O sacred innocence, that sweetly sleeps  
On turtles' feathers, whilst a guilty conscience*

*Is a black register wherein is writ  
All our good deeds and bad.*

### **Commentator**

Bosola's powerful soliloquy is unlike many of his other speeches. It's in verse not prose and the verse is quite regular.

### **Kate Aughterson**

It's a speech obviously of conversion, of the conversion of him and of conversion of the play, from the play about the Duchess into a play about the revenge for her life.

### **Bosola**

*There the cords of life broke.*

### **Commentator**

Webster's language and rhythms again guide the actor in emotional expression.

### **Kate Aughterson**

We can see that there's one very short line, there's several very short lines actually, but one in particular, line 360, 'This is manly sorrow'. There's only six beats to that line. What's he doing with the rest of the beats? He's weeping. That gap is often represented in editions as happening after he's said 'This is manly sorrow'. In my view, you have the pause first and then he speaks. He's weeping and then he speaks. The weeping is part of the beat of the line, part of the poetry of the line.

### **Bosola**

*That we cannot be suffer'd  
To do good when we have a mind to it!  
This is manly sorrow;  
These tears, I am very certain, never grew  
In my mother's milk.*

### **Kate Aughterson**

The tragedy of *The Duchess of Malfi*, is it her tragedy or is it the tragedy of this court or this political and social system that we look on? Or is it Bosola's tragedy? He, after all, heads that list. And I don't think there is a single answer to that. I think that individual performances may pick up elements of that. Or is it the tragedy of the decay of patriarchal, aristocratic court that cannot see outside of itself? That cannot allow change? That will not allow woman a voice? That will not allow Bosola or Antonio the right to be who they can be? I think that depends on a production and performance.

**Bosola**

*Come, I'll bear thee hence,  
And execute thy last will; that's deliver  
Thy body to the reverend dispose  
Of some good women: that the cruel tyrant  
Shall not deny me.*

**Kate Aughterson**

If we speak it out loud, the text will make our body move, will make our voice move, will make our chest move in a way that tells us how to deliver the line, that tells us how the character feels. And if you do that yourselves, you'll find that you'll have a sense of what Webster's trying to do with this text.