



Duchess of Malfi: Deconstructing the play

Interpreting Webster's text for the stage

Elizabeth Freestone

With writers of this era, there are very few stage directions that are actually scripted, so things like when they hear a sound, or when somebody comes onstage or when the person they're talking to has looked away, for example, are all hidden inside the text.

Commentator

The Duchess's speech 'The misery of us that are born great' in the wooing scene gives rich clues to performance.

Kate Aughterson

It's the longest speech the Duchess gives in this act. That in itself tells us that Webster is saying this is an important speech. So a close reading of that text tells us how to turn it into a three-dimensional performance.

Duchess

The misery of us that are born great!

We are forc'd to woo, because none dare woo us ...

Kate Aughterson

She talks about with a lot of emotion about her problem.

Duchess

And as a tyrant doubles with his words,

And fearfully equivocates, so we

Are forced to express our violent passions

In riddles and in dreams, and leave the path

Of simple virtue, which was never made

To seem the thing it is not. Go, go brag

You have left me heartless; mine is in your bosom.

Commentator

Webster's punctuation and sentence structure create varied rhythms. These ensure that the actor follows the changing emotions of the Duchess.

Duchess

Make not your heart so dead a piece of flesh as to ...

Kate Aughterson

If you look at the structure of this speech it actually falls into two parts. The first part is one long sentence where she's talking about the situation that she's in. And the second half she's talking directly to Antonio. She shifts from this kind of general position about her status and how does she, how can she talk about desire when she's a Duchess who is supposed to be in charge of a kingdom. So she does that with a relatively long sentence. She's almost talking like a pompous Duchess. In the second half when she moves to talking to Antonio she's talking in much shorter sentences, much choppy.

Duchess

Go, go brag

You have left me heartless; mine is in your bosom:

I hope 'twill multiply love there.

Kate Aughterson

So she's moving, one can suggest because of that, between a whole set of different emotions. She uses the imperative, for example: 'Go, go brag', she says; 'Awake, awake, man!' These are telling ... you know, they're moving her body into arguing, getting him to do something, getting him to wake up, suggesting her emotion, her involvement. She uses declarative sentences: 'I do only appear to you.' So they describe her, those kind of sentences if we analyse it. And that in itself is a kind of stage direction to tell us how she is appearing.

Duchess

Go, go brag

You have left me heartless; mine is in your bosom:

I hope 'twill multiply love there.

Kate Aughterson

'I hope 'twill multiply love there'. There is there. It's his heart. She probably, you know, the words are telling us that she's touching him. And again, see that seems to me to take us towards a warmer Duchess than a colder Duchess. And what follows that: 'You do tremble.' How does she know that if she's not touching him?

Duchess

You do tremble:

Make not your heart so dead a piece of flesh,

As to fear more than to love me. Sir ...

Kate Aughterson

'This is flesh and blood, sir', she says, just a line, a couple of lines on from what I've just said.

'This is flesh and blood.' It's her flesh and blood. Is she holding herself here? Is she drawing his hand to her? There is some kind of physical gesture here and possibly some kind of physical contact.

Duchess

This is flesh and blood, sir;

'Tis not the figure cut in alabaster

Kneels at my husband's tomb. Awake, awake, man!

I do here put off all vain ceremony

And only do appear to you a young widow

Who claims you for her husband, and, like a widow,

I use but half a blush in't.

Kate Aughterson

The content of the speech in a way comes last to tell us what it means. She's obviously saying I'm a great woman, I haven't got the language, I'm not allowed, other people are not allowed to woo me. How do I find the language to woo? The language I'm given in the world of politics is a language of doubling. So how do I find that language? And she's kind of moving towards trying to find that language. And in the second half of the speech, that abruptness, that idea of who she is in herself is her exploration of finding a language that isn't a language of equivocation.