



Duchess of Malfi: Deconstructing the play

Understanding Webster's text

Duchess

*Why might only I,
Of all the other princes of the world,
Be cas'd up, like a holy relic? I have youth
And a little beauty.*

Commentator

In 2010, a production of *The Duchess of Malfi* was staged at Greenwich Theatre in London, directed by Elizabeth Freestone.

Elizabeth Freestone

Again, we never really explored that, did we? It would be quite interesting to look at that ...

Commentator

Today Elizabeth is revisiting the text and possible ways of interpreting it with three of the original cast members.

Elizabeth Freestone

It's a hugely complex play to work on. A massive part of that is obviously the language, and you have to spend a large part of preparation before rehearsals and time during rehearsals just tackling the language: what do words mean, why is he choosing certain words at certain times, how to make the story accessible, how to technically help actors get their mouths around delivering some quite long thoughts, often parenthetical thoughts, you know, often metaphoric thoughts. How do you do all of that, with all of that poetry, but keep on story as well, keep the story moving forward?

Aislin McGuckin

Once the words are in you can really play them with the thoughts that come through the words.

Elizabeth Freestone

Once you've absorbed them into your mind and body then you're free to be able to try different ways of saying them and different ways of processing thoughts.

Commentator

Working with Elizabeth today are Aislin McGuckin as the Duchess, Tim Treloar as Bosola and Edmund Kingsley as Antonio.

Duchess

Fie, what's all this?

One of your eyes is blood-shot; here, take my ring to't ...

Duchess

What's all this?

One of your eyes is blood-shot; here, use my ring to't ...

Elizabeth Freestone

I knew straight away that I didn't want to set it in Webster's time, so that was an early decision I made. I was really intrigued in the play by the build up to war that happens in the background – there's the sort of slow rumble all throughout the play. It being set in a Catholic country was really crucial to the imagery that came to me, so I suppose that lent itself to Europe. I wanted to make it sort of accessible that we as an audience had some kind of shared reference with the world of the play. So I think those decisions just led me quite easily to the 1930s and the build-up to fascism and the Second World War.

Commentator

Back in the seventeenth century, Webster's peers recognised the importance of his play and wrote verses praising it in the front of his book. One of these is by Webster's fellow playwright Thomas Middleton.

Voice over

... thy Note

Be ever Plainnes, 'tis the Richest Coate:

Thy Epitaph only the Title bee,

Write, Dutchesse, that will fetch a teare for thee,

For who e'er saw this Dutchesse live, and dye,

That could get off under a Bleeding Eye?

Kate Aughterson

So what Middleton's saying about Webster here is really, really important. It tells us about not only what Middleton thinks but about what audiences think at the time. 'Thy style be ever plainness.' It's a plain style that Webster's writing in.

Duchess

*I sent for you: sit down;
Take pen and ink, and write.
What did I say?*

Antonio

That I should write somewhat.

Duchess

O, I remember.

Commentator

Besides talking about Webster's plain language, Middleton's commendatory verse celebrates the power of the Duchess as a character.

Kate Aughterson

'Thy Epitaph only the Title bee, Write Dutchesse, that will fetch a teare for thee, For who e'er saw this Dutchesse live, and dye, That could get off under a Bleeding Eye.' So the audiences wept and that's really important, they were moved. And this is very, very important in terms of how we then look at the text as script. How does Webster show us the Duchess creating that emotion in the audience?

Duchess

*Make not your heart so dead a piece of flesh,
As to fear more than to love me. Sir, be confident:
What is it distracts you?*

Elizabeth Freestone

I've got to admit that I didn't know Webster was as good as this when I first started working on the play – I'd not directed Webster before, I've directed Shakespeare before – and the more I looked at Webster the better and better I think he is. I think he's really rich in terms of his mining of human experience. I mean, Shakespeare probably uses much broader language, he has a broader frame of reference, broader imagery, you know, in a Shakespeare play you'll get legal references, and floral references, you know, God knows, naval references, anything and everything, whereas Webster's much more direct, he's much more kind of on-message all the way through but there's a ... God there's a muscularity about it, and a weight in it that's, yeah, it's pretty shocking at times.

Commentator

Webster peppers his text with proverbs or well-known sayings, all the more memorable as they are often presented in the form of rhyming couplets.

Duchess

*Our value never shall be truly known,
Till in the fisher's basket we be shown:*

Duchess

*I'th' market then my price may be the higher,
Even when I am nearest to the cook and fire.
So to great men the moral may be stretched;
Men oft are valu'd high, when they're most wretched –*

Kate Aughterson

A visible thing about the text of 1623 is that some lines are italicised. And they're italicised because those lines are rhyming couplets or proverbs. And these rhyming couplets are a way of closing off a scene or a moment in a scene and just pausing. It's an indication, a dramatic indication of a pause, which is quite important.

Duchess

*I am arm'd 'gainst misery;
Bent to all sways of the oppressor's will:
There's no deep valley but near some great hill.*

Kate Aughterson

She really closes that scene on that rhyming couplet, and with the Duchess having made a very important political and personal point, Bosola doesn't say anything. Bosola doesn't have the last word in that scene, rhyming couplet, the exit point for the Duchess who's actually imprisoned, you know, she's being taken off the stage, but she has that last word in that rhyming couplet.