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Crime and Punishment
A Thematic Study of John Webster's
The *Duchess of Malfi*

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Abstract

The Renaissance more than any other age deals with violence, crime, and punishment. In most of the plays of the age, especially the Jacobean plays there are two distinct types of criminals. One type is the tyrant, a man whose thirst for power propels him to exploit other individuals, he is also able to disguise his vicious actions under the robe of respectability. The other type of criminal is the avenger, an individual victimized and exploited by the tyrant. Bosola, the villain of the play – ***The Duchess of Malfi*** (which has been discussed in this paper) is an individual who has been a victim and feels he has not been paid for in gratitude. As an avenger, Bosola takes justice and law into his own hands, as the centre of justice itself is corrupted. In the process of taking revenge, Bosola undergoes a change as he evolves into an evil and degenerate man, and thereby loses his true identity. Thus, in order to fight the corrupted system, he thinks he ought to become a part of it.

Key Words: Evil, crime, punishment, revenge, villainy, tyrant, renaissance-drama, Duchess of Malfi, John Webster.

Introduction

The paper attempts to trace the Renaissance attitude to villainy, revenge, crime and punishment. A point explicitly and significantly presented through Renaissance drama is that real criminals are able to conceal their crimes due to their power, and that those individuals who have been a target of power are ironically conceived of as villains and criminals. Certain individuals become so blinded by power that wickedness, tyranny and exploitation of others becomes an inborn and natural trait within them. The Renaissance more than any other age thematically and symbolically deals with corruption and violence.

The plays of John Webster were written approximately during the reign of King James I who led a very extravagant and lavish life-style. The King wished to show off his power not by right rule but through a glittering life-style. This attitude aggravated the people who expected the monarch to pay more attention to political and civic matters rather than to superficialities of court life. The court was more a center of artificialities and corruption than a center for political activities. Lack of concentration on civic and political matters on the part of the king, brought about a feeling of disappointment to the people. Since authority could not be questioned, the unspoken words could have only one outlet, and that is, to be expressed in the drama of the age. Therefore, the drama of the age was obsessed with violence which expressed the turbulent mind of the people. This show of violence in drama can be ascribed in part to the influence of Senecan tragedy also. Seneca's studies of inordinate passion and unnatural crime so impressed the Elizabethans that they seem to have felt from the outset that violence is one of the chief features of tragedy. Deceit, murder, aggressiveness are so well dramatized in the plays of the age, making it seem that these characteristics

are an integral part of man's nature. Man's passions gradually came to control his will, rather than his will controlling his passions.

In order to interpret evil and villainy in the drama of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries we need to take a closer look, and study man in general as conceived by the dramatists of the age. During the middle ages, the church dominated every aspect of life, social, economic, and literary, which made the non-clergy limited and a nonentity. There was no outlet for man to show his creativity, to live as an individual. Moreover, the church forced man into thinking that this life is temporary, and a preparation for the after-life. Man was robbed of all free-will; he could not exercise power in any sphere of life. But when the Renaissance revolutionized the concept of man, and presented him as an individual, man surpassed his limitations. Some individuals crossed the threshold of decency and morality and usurped the rights of others, in order to take power into their own hands. Power was misused, and instead of using power as a vehicle to maintain order and balance, heads of state used it as a means to satisfy ambition. In order to achieve his ambitions, the tyrant had to ignore his ethical standards; he needed to destroy all obstacles that stood in his way. Since violence begets violence, against the tyrant stood the avenger, who needed to take revenge and satisfy his thirst by securing justice.

At the end of the sixteenth and beginning of the seventeenth century, the pessimistic view decided that man's moral character, human institutions, and external nature were all in a state of disintegration. The Renaissance tragedies then started with the medieval idea of man as the victim of a wicked world, and a further belief that he is also betrayed by the conditions of his nature. Through these two forces, external and internal, the former being the wicked world of which man is a part, and the latter his own nature,

was created a complex view of tragedy to which "the notion of universal contrariety contributed both as stimulus and validation." (Mc. Alindon, 1986: 5)

Renaissance tragedies then exposed man either as a victim of external forces or internal forces such as his wild passions. However, it is not only external factors that create a tragic hero, there has to be some potential within his own personality that makes him either tragic or a malcontent. And the element within his personality, which contributes in making him tragic, is the element of inconstancy. The latter is reflected in different ways such as excessive passion and behaviour, in other words, lack of moderation, and this brings about a striking division within their personality. These individuals are divided, and this division occurs between the outer self and the inner self. The dramatists of the age however, believe that human greatness lies in the harmony between psychic opposites, will and passion, and thus what destroys man is the psychic disunity or imbalance between his passion and will.

A fascination with evil as a pre-dominant theme was a hallmark of popular literature in the seventeenth century. Not that evil was absent in earlier literature, but the intensity of evil as a thematic obsession was at its height during the Stuart dynasty. The darker side of the human psyche is revealed and exposed – madness, violence, revenge, adultery, incest, and above all a state of melancholia. Since the theme of evil was so pre-dominant, writers believe it to be related to the social and political temper of the age. Dramatists see evil in the character of those who exercise power. Evil is seen both externally and internally, the outer exemplification being the socio-political environment of the time. Nonetheless, in some individuals evil is inherent and evil action displayed shows the intensity of evil within

each individual. Evil is the outcome of inconstancy, and, results out of a fragmented and disintegrated soul.

Most of the revenge heroes contest against tyrannical force or stand up against those individuals, who, by the use or abuse of their power, try to blot out justice. Thus Renaissance dramatists, especially the Jacobean dramatists, used the theme of revenge in order to establish a link between contemporary problems and the subject of drama. Drama served as a platform to those writers who wished to express dissatisfaction with the political events of the day. Parallel to this was the urge to depict those individuals who would not tolerate injustice of the law and would go to any extremes in order to bring about justice. In other words they would take the law into their own hands, they would certainly cross the threshold of virtuous, lawful ways, till they were finally satisfied that the power which was to exploit them had finally been destroyed. During the process, these individuals undergo several changes, the most important metamorphosis being that they are conceived of as villains in whom evil forces operate involuntarily and who are conceived to be the persona of the devil. One such villainous character is Bosola from John Webster's ***The Duchess of Malfi.*** Bosola has the sympathy of the audience because:

"he is a criminal in action but not in constitution. A man forced by his position to know all the inward resources of his own nature, passing or permanent, and conscious of the possibility of a very brief period of power and influence." (Archer, 1893: 87)

In John Webster's ***The Duchess of Malfi*** we witness a distressed soul, but in a different context altogether. It is the moving story of a man who feels that he has been victimized and not been paid in gratitude. It is the pathetic story of a man who deliberately adopts a negative role merely to fill

in the void that had been created by those individuals who gave him a raw deal. It is the heart-rending story of a man who has been moulded by his circumstances and, like Faustus, retains his conscience, which is a sign that this man is basically good but his fortunes have forced him to be what he is not. It is the story of a man who has been disillusioned with life, with goodness, with humanity. Through the play, Webster does not directly declare who is a criminal, it is the readers who decide, and readers are certainly aware of fact that certain individuals have a natural tendency towards crime, and villainy, whilst others are forced to be evil and criminal.

In order to show the two major characters of the play—The Duchess and Bosola as victims of their society, it is rather relevant then to begin this section with Marx's idea that

"It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness." (Dollimore, 1984: 265).

This leads one to the question – do particular individuals contaminate society or is society itself contaminated and that such individuals are merely products of their society? Jacobean dramatists in general believed the latter to be true. To John Webster the world appears as primarily evil in which adverse circumstances can entangle both the innocent and the guilty. Webster's creation of the character of Bosola in ***The Duchess of Malfi*** therefore emphasizes that society is the real villain and those who superficially appear as villains are not necessarily evil and satanic. Sometimes circumstances or unjust way of their surroundings campel them to commit crime. This is certainly apparent in Bosola, who has been wronged and exploited by the Cardinal.

The character of Bosola overcasts the entire sky of the play. He is so

dynamic and powerful and overshadows the play to the extent that other characters are merely trivial and insignificant in contrast. Bosola feels it is sheer bad luck that he has not been paid in gratitude for the services that he has rendered as a soldier. For Bosola, the greatest sin is dishonesty in personal relationships. He hates life because he is a disappointed man; he has experienced the worst that life could have offered. He certainly dislikes the task that has been given to him, to extract the secrets of the Duchess, and then expose them and finally become her murderer. And being a good man by nature, since he is endowed with a conscience, he feels guilty when he stands besides the dead body of the Duchess. He feels ashamed of what he has done. His conscience will never forgive him.

"I stand like one
That long hath tane a sweet and golden dream.
I am angry with myself, now that I wake ...
I served your tyranny: and rather strove
To satisfy yourself, than all the world;
And though I loath'd the evil, yet I lov'd
You that did counsel it: and rather sought
To appear a true servant than an honest man." (IVii 321-331)

Bosola tries to rectify what he has done by seeking Antonio to tell him the truth of what has happened. The brothers and Antonio are killed and Bosola suffers the feeling of guilt until his death – the feeling of guilt being incurable and permanent for Bosola.

"In Webster's view people commit crimes not from rational motives but because they are corrupted by that original sin with which all mortal flesh is tainted ... the Elizabetheans, members of a society soaked in the Christian tradition, took for granted that the soul of every human being is continually

the battle ground between the forces of spiritual evil and spiritual good." (Cecil, 1975: 265).

In Renaissance tragedy, especially Jacobean tragedy, we see the fall and ultimate damnation of those who violate the Christian law.

In the process of taking revenge from the Cardinal, Bosola went through a metamorphosis himself – he lost his true identity and evolved into a man whose ways were unacceptable even to his own conscience. Bosola however is so deeply agitated and embittered by the Cardinal that he fails to see the consequences of his decision and actions. Since he feels that he has not been paid in gratitude, and on the contrary has been used and exploited by the Cardinal, Bosola does not hesitate to take the opportunity to ruin the household of the Cardinal. Bosola's feelings and emotions have so long been suppressed that they gradually begin to take the shape of a persistent evil force which, once repressed, now erupts as a volcano. At the start of the play, Bosola is already bitter and disillusioned at the hands of the Cardinal. His hatred towards him is at its peak.

"I fell into the galleys in your service, where, for/ two years together, I wore two towels instead of a/ shirt, ... slighted thus, I will thrive some way:/ blackbirds fatten best in hard weather: why not I, in these dog days?" (I I 35-39)

Already, an argument takes place in the very first act of the play. Bosola knows he is confronting a man who uses the robe of religion and authority to conceal his sin and corruption. Certainly the thought aggravates him further. However, the Cardinal finds Bosola demanding more than what he deserves and on the other hand Bosola feels he has been neglected and not been paid his due. The dispute then between the Cardinal and Bosola triggers the rest of the action and shapes the cause of events in the play. The Duchess is

merely used as a battlefield by both her brothers and Bosola. In the conflict between Bosola and the brothers, it is Bosola who experiences loss upon loss. He neither gains any reward nor praise, but on the contrary loses his integrity, his conscience and his soul. The evil mind of the Cardinal is concealed by his power and position, but since Bosola does not hold a social rank or post, and neither is he an important member of society, he is easily seen as wicked and vicious. Bosola's hatred for the Cardinal and frustration at his own limitations seem to intensify his high expectations from the Cardinal to be rightly acknowledged and rewarded.

"... There are rewards for hawks and dogs, when they have done us service; but for a soldier, that hazards his limbs in a battle, nothing but a kind of geometry is his last supportation." (I, I 57-61)

These bitter words and Bosola's disappointment at his circumstances overcast the entire play and although the title is for the Duchess, yet it is Bosola's resentment and anger that give shape to the actions and events of the play. In essence, then, one witnesses here a man who is moulded by his circumstances, rather than the command of his own will. Since he is a victim of circumstances, readers can identify themselves with him, and thus he carries an aura of sympathy, as he is the outcome of the Cardinal's manipulations and exploitation. The brothers hire Bosola as a spy because they are certain of his servitude and also they are quite certain that Bosola's hatred towards the brothers would extend to the sister and he would perform his duties well. Bosola is then seen to play a dual role – as far as the brothers are concerned, he plays the role of a spy, he is debased and cunning. As far as the Duchess is concerned, he plays the role of a sympathizer, which he certainly prefers to the role of a spy.

"O, that to avoid ingratitude/ for the good deed you have done me, I must

do all the ill man can invent." (I ii 94-97)

The real manipulator, the Cardinal, passes on his role to Bosola, who in turn begins to manipulate the Duchess and win her confidence. He is able to fulfill his duty since his passions burn hot to destroy the house-hold, and this gives him the opportunity to ease his frustrations. No doubt he truly lives as a faithful servant rather than a good human being. He confiscates his virtue in order to rectify a vice. The fact that he constantly uses the word "servant" explains that Bosola merely carries out an order, does what he is instructed to do. But when his conscience awakens, and he realizes how low he has stooped, he states:

"O, she's gone again: there the cords of life broke.
O sacred innocence, that sweetly sleeps
On turtles' feathers: whilst a guilty conscience
Is a black register, where is writ
All our good deeds and bad; a perspective
That shows us hell!" (IV ii 353-355)

If one wishes to view Bosola from the Jungian point of view, it can be said that Bosola did allow his 'shadow' to dominate him – his repressed hatred for the Cardinal and repressed anger allowed themselves to be actualized through wrecking the life of the Duchess and her children. The discord and inconstancy that came about in his personality as a result of the dominance of the 'shadow', become less after the death of the Duchess and her children. Their death literally dragged Bosola out of the clutches of the dark powers, and thus he was able to judge his actions himself. Gunner Boklund, a critic of Webster states:

"Webster portrays a world without a centre, a world where mankind is abandoned, without foothold on an earth where the moral law does not

apply, without real hope in a heaven that allows this predicament to prevail." (Boklund, 1957: 79-80).

In Webster's plays salvation and damnation are ever-present realities. There are also clues that the play has political implications – such as the secret marriage of the Duchess, as it was not considered very respectable for a widow to remarry. Also the brothers exert and exercise power over their sister rather than using it for the welfare of the state. Power is seen to predominate throughout the play, holding a prior position even to family relationships. Webster uses the Italian court as a symbol of a corrupted world, and every one of his characters are in some way or the other representing the contemporary political set-up of Webster's time. All characters are shown to be dealing with the experiences of power, whether their own power, or the power of their enemies. Their lives, their deaths, their successes and their failures have been shown to depend upon power. Every character is seen to respond to power to symbolize it as in the case of the brothers, or to harness it and seek it for himself as in the case of Bosola, or perhaps to flee from it as in the case of the Duchess. All characters seem to be motivated and inspired by power. Both the Cardinal and Ferdinand represent church and state, emphasizing the civil power that churchman exercise. Both are foils to the intellectual villain Bosola, who certainly demands a large share of the reader's sympathy and admiration. Bosola is the link between the Duchess and the brothers, the source of communication between them. Both the cardinal and Ferdinand are the mischievous villains who plot and plan against their sister all for the inheritance of power and money and merely use Bosola to carry out their plans. Thus throughout the drama we see the interplay between the forces of good versus evil. What makes the notion of good and evil fascinating is that Elizabethan dramatists

see both evil and good as dependent on each other for identity and substance. If there was no evil, good would not have an identity for itself. Everything would have been one and the same. The world needs two opposing forces, for, the identity of one depends upon the existence of the other. Man thus seemed to be an equal mixture of vice and virtue. Renaissance man thus rejoiced at being a rebel, and craved to indulge in what was forbidden. If righteousness was challenged, so was justice, as he broke laws and social norms to suit his own whims and fancies. For him the present was important; he never anticipated the result of his actions, since he considered it inevitable.

However, the study of this play will remain incomplete without an insight into the historical authenticity of the play. According to Dr. Sandra Clark in ***A Critical Study of the Duchess of Malfi***, the play is based on an historical incident. Webster's main source for his play was William Painter's ***Palace of Pleasure***. The latter was a collection of moral tales which were mostly tragic in nature and in turn had been translated from the French ***Histories Tragiques*** by Belleforest. This was a translation from the Italian ***Novelle*** by Bandello. The Duchess and her brother were the grandchildren of Ferdinand I of Naples. The eldest Ludovico (Webster's Cardinal) renounced his title in favour of his brother Carlo (Ferdinand). Giovanne (the Duchess) married at the age of twelve. She had two children but only a son survived. Eight years later she was widowed and at the age of twenty she met Antonio Bologna who had been in France with Federico of Naples. When Antonio became a steward to her household, they fell in love and married in secrecy, but concealed their relationship for a long while. Antonio left for Ancona with the two children and the Duchess joined them a little later. Eventually they were forced by the brothers to separate. Soon afterwards Antonio was

murdered by Daniel de Bosola, a Lombard captain. This is the Skeleton of the real story. The Duchess's marriage was referred to in contemporary writings such as Robert Greene's ***Gwydonius: the Carde of Fancies*** (1584) and George Whetstone's ***Heptameion of Civil Discourses*** (1582) as an example of an unwise marriage between unequal partners, who are doomed to disaster. Webster made certain changes, and that was in the character of Bosola. (Clark, 1987: 77).

According to T. McAlindon in ***English Renaissance Tragedy***, tyranny in any society (often viewed by protestant playwrights as a reflection of Catholicism), not only causes a society to disintegrate but also affects individuals within that society. This disintegration, resulting in psychic disunity, is the result of the feeling of guilt brought about by serving tyrants which is very common in the characters of Webster. Bosola's regret by the end of the play provides ample proof for this point.

"--- a guilty conscience
Is a black register, where is writ
All our good deeds and bad: a perspective
That shows us hell." (IV ii 354-356)

Bosola has the same values as those of Flamineo in ***The White Devil***, who denies human ties and is one who has suffered through the world's evil. But unlike Flamineo, Bosola learns from the Duchess that life itself can afford a basis for morality in a chaotic world. That is, every individual life, inclusive of pain, pleasure and pitfalls is sufficient to give the individual a deeper insight into the rights and wrongs of life. The world may be chaotic where injustice and evil prevail or perhaps even dominate, but an individual does not necessarily have to become a part of a system that he himself condemns. Bosola, at the start of the play, believed that he should become

part of the system which is unacceptable to him in order to fight its vice, but, through the course of the play, the virtue and patience of the Duchess taught Bosola that, in order to fight and oppose a system, one must not necessarily lose and trespass on one's own values. On the other hand, by retaining virtue and positive values which one strongly believes in, he or she can survive through a chaotic world.

Bosola is a character whom critics have found difficult to explain in terms of human psychology. Up to the end of the play he remains an enigma. The readers are both puzzled and perplexed at his complex personality. He certainly is multi-dimensional; for, on the one hand he is presented as an individual who hates life because of the bitter experiences he has had, above all by the Cardinal's ingratitude. In this way, he is presented as a victim and as a man who has been sinned against. Another side to Bosola is his pity for the Duchess, and a certain awareness of her miserable situation. He pities her, but then he is also her murderer. And Bosola is presented in yet another light. He is presented as a bold spy on the Duchess, and finally as her killer. On the other hand, he is shown as a weak man who resigns himself to whatever has been planned by the Cardinal. He himself admits that fidelity to the cardinal is for him more important than fidelity to himself.

"Rather sought to appear a true servant than an honest man." (IV, ii 329-330)

Thus his black deeds are merely an enforced duty rather than a desired action, for, Bosola's actions do not correspond to his wishes. He is left therefore without any reward: rather he is left with a guilty conscience. Perhaps the Duchess's noble attitude makes Bosola feel more guilty, and that is perhaps when he completely re-awakens. At this point he begins to recognize and explain the evils of the world which will destroy the Duchess.

According to Irving Ribner in ***Jacobean Tragedy: The Quest for Moral Order*** (1962) Bosola's different disguises indicate different symbolic roles. As the old maker of tombs he is a symbol of time and mutability, and the destroyer of life. This throws light on the idea of the insignificance of the human body in order to show the eternity of the human soul.

"Thou art a box of worm seed, at best, but a salvatory of green mummy: - what's this flesh? A little crudded milk, fantastical puff paste: our bodies are weaker than those paper prisons boys use to keep flies in ... didst thou ever see a lark in a cage? Such is the soul in the body: this world is like her little turf of grass, and the heaven o'er our heads, like her looking glass, only gives us a miserable knowledge of the small compass of our prison". (IV ii 124-133)

The lark in its cage provides an image of striking power, stressing the ability of the soul to soar towards Heaven when the fragile cage of the body is broken. The heavens remind man of the smallness of the human body. Disguised as the bell man – whose traditional function was to drive away evil spirits and to invite the faithful to pray for their souls before death, Bosola stands for faith, penance and the hope of Heaven which death affords.

The final act shows that the way of the brothers is that of madness and damnation, the descent of man into beast, and hence the abundant use of animal imagery. It also shows the triumph of the human spirit.

"This spirit forever separates man from the beast, and it justifies human life in spite of the disorder which surrounds it. Man need not fear to live as long as he can preserve his integrity of life and die true to himself ..." (Ribner, 1975: 134)

Bosola can now no longer live by the code which had linked him to the

brothers. While good is possible, he must seek the good values of life, and therefore he now stands for justice. He can now see the fate of Ferdinand as a punishment for sin in a world in which divine justice operates. The guilty must be punished for their sins. The death of the Duchess takes Bosola out of the dark world in which he had been residing for so long. With the death of the Duchess and the end of the contract, Bosola seeks the reward for his crime and wishes to save Antonio. Unfortunately instead of saving him he kills him unaware.

"Neither villain nor hero, Bosola typifies the plight of the intellectual in the world of state, at once its agent and its victim." (Lever, 1987: 94).

No doubt Bosola begins his relationship with the Duchess as her spy and tormenter but gradually becomes a consolation and comforter to the Duchess: this change is quite natural, since change within a character is as important as the various types of conflict in a play. By the end of the play, he bitterly regrets his actions, but he is aware that the price to be paid for crime is punishment.

"Bosola is a criminal with a conscience who derives no satisfaction from the villainy to which he is driven by economic necessity, a corrupt idealist whose bitter railing against human nature and society cannot hide his dissatisfaction with himself." (McAlindon, 1986: 184).

To conclude, man's greatest enemy is his conscience, and man's enemy is more from within than without. The so-called villains of Renaissance and Jacobean drama such as Bosola, Vittoria, Vindice, and Deflores are characters who have been victim of their own folly and weakness, and perhaps also victims of social and political injustices. The actions of the above mentioned characters may not be applaudable, and they easily may appear as negative characters. But the real villains are the corrupted political

institutions and their representatives, tyrants, misusers of power. They are the real, viscious individuals who set the spark of injustice and cruelty and this spark spreads out into a fire. The flames of the fire have to be extinguished by those individuals who have been bruised by its heat and flame. Therefore characters like Bosola and Vindice are not ignorant of goodness and virtue but they need to pursue evil in order to fight evil.

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