

# IN AND OUT OF THE BIRD-CAGE: THE LANGUAGE OF CONFINEMENT IN THE DUCHESS OF MALFI

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Professor Bradbrook has written that Webster's most famous plays, *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*, could both be subtitled "A Woman at Bay". The similarities in dramatic structure, however, should not hide the differences, as Vittoria's "heroic action" serves her worldly ambition, while the courage of the Duchess gives her fortitude to endure the consequences of her bid for feminine happiness and fulfilment<sup>1</sup>.

This paper will focus on the Duchess of Malfi who is certainly cornered and kept at bay by her powerful, repressive brothers through confinement and death. Her "bid for feminine happiness", her assertion of female independence with complete disregard for her brothers' coercive advice represents an instance of women's disruptive behaviour and a reversal of her expected role in the family and in society. Oppression and subordination were the context in which women lived at the time. The fact that the Duchess is a member of the nobility and as such she is entitled to some social power does not seem to make any difference as far as her brothers are concerned: she is totally powerless in the family circle.

Before analysing Webster's treatment of the figure of the Duchess both from a moral and social point of view, I would like to trace the story back to its original source. It was based on a real event: the secret marriage between the young widowed Duchess and the steward of her household, their love and happiness during five years, their attempt to escape the revenge of the Duchess's brothers and the eventual murder of Antonio Bologna in October of 1513.

The story survived because it had been recounted by a contemporary, Matheo Bandello, who may have been the Delio of the play, as he seems to have known Antonio personally. He stressed Antonio's role in the story and transmitted it as Antonio's tragedy.

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<sup>1</sup> M.C. Bradbrook, *John Webster. Citizen and Dramatist*. (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980) 142.

One hundred years elapsed between the actual event and Webster's play, which is thought to have been first performed between 1512 and 1514. His narrative source was William Painter's *The Palace of Pleasure* (1567). The story had become almost a tragic legend when through the French it reached Painter, who added some of the events which had no historical support: the Duchess's imprisonment and death by strangling, together with her maid and children.

Webster in a way updated the legend by including some contemporary issues. On the one hand, as M.C. Bradbrook has pointed out the Spanish rulers of the kingdom of Naples could be interpreted in the light of contemporary Spanish honour and Spanish pride (Lope de Vega used this very source for one of his plays some years later). Webster's contemporaries were also aware of the end of Penelope Rich and Charles Blount's love affair, or the story of Antonio López and the Princess of Eboli. These two ladies shared a similar fate with the Duchess of Malfi who ended her life as a prisoner in her palace<sup>2</sup>. On the other hand "the court of Amalfi presents in miniature the court of Whitehall, with its adventurers, its feverish pulling of strings for office and promotion, its heedless and heartless pursuit of privilege"<sup>3</sup>.

The narrative sources of *The Duchess of Malfi* have already been studied in depth by Dr. Gunnar Bocklund<sup>4</sup>. On giving this brief account of them, my interest lies in analysing the different moral approaches to the figure of the Duchess from its original source to Webster's play.

Bandello's narrative records his extreme shock at the events and blames everybody: Antonio for his presumption, the Duchess for her lust and the brothers for their cruelty. As for Painter's account, the arguments of critics on his attitude towards the Duchess are contradictory. Some argue that Painter disapproves of the young widow remarrying in secret, beneath her rank and against her brothers' wishes and that he stresses these blemishes on her conduct<sup>5</sup>; while others claim that Painter explicitly defends remarriage on grounds both of morality and common sense. They also quote Painter's characters as their own convincing apologists for the violation of "degree"<sup>6</sup>.

2 Ibid. 142.

3 J.M. Lever "The Tragedy of State" in R.V. Holdsworth (ed.) *Webster: The White Devil and The Duchess of Malfi* (London: Macmillan, 1975) 200. See also J.R. Brown (ed.) *The Duchess of Malfi* (London, 1964).

4 Gunnar Bocklund, *The Duchess of Malfi: Sources, Themes, Characters* (Cambridge, Mass., 1962).

5 L.G. Salingar "Tourneur and the Tragedy of Revenge" in Boris Ford (ed.) *The Pelican Guide to English Literature*, Vol. II (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1979) 351.

6 J.M. Lever. 204.

Critical responses to the figure of the Duchess in Webster's play are also contradictory. Clifford Leech pointed out that the remarriage of widows, though quite lawful was viewed with scepticism or disapproval<sup>7</sup>; Inga-Stina Ekeblad went further to say that the Duchess was presented as "an exemplum horrendum to all women contemplating a second marriage"<sup>8</sup>; finally, according to James L. Calderwood, the Duchess is punished for her "uninhibited passion", her "violation of degree" and her "disrespect for external realities"<sup>9</sup>.

Opposite views are supported, for example, by L.G. Salingar<sup>10</sup> and J.M. Lever who describe the Duchess in terms of her dignity and moral strength<sup>11</sup>. These baffling differences could be accounted for by the contradictions which arise in the presentation of the Duchess within the play itself: the way in which the heroine is seen by the different characters and, in particular, by the language and imagery related to her<sup>12</sup>.

It is in this context where I want to discuss the language of confinement related to the heroine. At the beginning of the play, she is figuratively confined by the language, by enclosing male definitions of womanhood; later she will be literally confined, first in a prison and then in the ultimate confinement: her coffin.

By language of confinement, therefore, I mean not only the explicit images of seclusion or imprisonment, but also those images which confine her to female archetypal roles as defined by men: from the virtuous lady and mother to the whore. This ambivalence (women are either good or wicked, angels or devils) is found here in one single character by combining these two contrasting images. It is this pattern of imagery and the denouement of the play which elicit the negative critical approach, as they seem to punish the Duchess's disruptive behaviour and her reversal of expected roles.

The first instance of this type of language in the play comes from Antonio himself who describes his future lover and wife in the language of exemplary virtuous womanhood, an image of a saint in a stained-glass window which "stains the time past; lights the time to come" (I.ii. 132).

7 Clifford Leech, *John Webster* (London, 1951) 68-77.

8 Inga-Stina Ekeblad "The 'Impure Art' of John Webster" in R.J. Kaufmann (ed.), *Elizabethan Drama: Modern Essays in Criticism* (New York, 1961) 257-8.7.

9 James L. Calderwood "The Duchess of Malfi: Styles of Ceremony" in G.K. and S.K. Hunter (eds.) *John Webster: A Critical Anthology*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969) 266-280.

10 L.G. Salingar. 351.

11 J.M. Lever. 205.

12 see Hereward T. Price "The Function of Imagery in Webster" in G.K. and S.K. Hunter, opus cit 176-202.

This vision is opposed later by the enclosing image of the lasciviousness of remarrying widows, represented in the brothers' warning:

Ferdinand:                   And those joys  
 Those lustful pleasures, are like heavy sleeps  
 Which do forerun man's mischief.

Cardinal:                   Fare you well.  
 Wisdom begins at the end: remember it.

Duchess:                   I think this speech between you both was studied,  
 It came so roundly off.

Ferdinand:                   You are my sister;  
 This was my father's poniard, do you see?  
 I'd be loth to see't look rusty, 'cause 'twas his.  
 I would have you to give o'er these chargeable revels:  
 A visor and a mask are whispering-rooms  
 That were never built for goodness -fare you well-  
 And women like that part which, like the lamprey,  
 Hath never a bone in 't.

Duchess:                   Fie, Sir!

Ferdinand:                   Nay,  
 I mean the tongue; variety of courtship.  
 What cannot a neat knave with a smooth tale  
 Make a woman believe? Farewell, lusty widow.  
 (I.ii. 32-48)

Later in the play, this pattern of imagery related to her morality and reputation will confine her within the archetype of the prostitute, the "fallen woman". In a way, she is partly responsible for this for failing to make her marriage public. Her reputation is destroyed, as Antonio himself will acknowledge: "the common rabble do directly say she is a strumpet". (III.i. 25-26).

Ferdinand also believes that she is promiscuous and "a notorious strumpet" and he claims in violent anger that he is not going to be appeased by her maternity, but only by her death:

"Tis not your whore's milk that shall quench my wild fire,  
 But your whore's blood"  
 (II.v. 48-49)

The Duchess tries to escape by refusing to accept or oppose the versions of womanhood provided by either her brothers or Antonio. Her reply to her brothers' warning or threat quoted above is ambiguous and compromising, as if

reconciling these extremes within female nature. She presents herself, not as Antonio's virtuous woman (the bawdy joke denies that possibility) nor as her brothers' lascivious widow:

Ferdinand:                   Marry! They are most luxurious  
 Will wed twice

Cardinal:                   Oh, fie!

Ferdinand:                   Their lives are more spotted  
 Than Laban's sheep.

Duchess:                   Diamonds are of most value,  
 They say, that have passed through most jeweler's hands.

Ferdinand:                   Whores by that rule are precious.  
 (I.ii. 5-11)

She struggles throughout the play to be not an angel or a devil, but a woman, a free human being. It is only in her final scene, when she is about to die, that Webster frees her from the archetypal extremes and invokes an image of caring, unselfish motherhood. However, it is difficult to tell whether that image is intended to present a "real" woman and mother, with dramatic life outside the fiction in which she appears; or whether it is just a dramatic device to heighten the pathos and sense of loss in this crucial scene<sup>13</sup>.

The Duchess tries to escape again from these two versions of womanhood in the wooing scene. There is a clear reversal of the conventional structure and roles in a seduction scene. Antonio's role is passive, indeed feminine, while the Duchess is given the attributes and the dramatic behaviour traditionally associated with a man, and it is precisely a woman, Cariola, who is aware of this, as she seems to hint at in her epilogue to the scene:

Cariola:                   Whether the spirit of greatness or of woman  
 Reign most in her, I know not; but it shows  
 a fearful madness: I owe her much of pity.  
 (I.ii. 204-6)

These lines, however, can also be interpreted as the opposition or struggle between "her spirit of greatness", her rank or public role imaged as "her figure cut in alabaster", and "her spirit of woman", her womanhood or private role, "her flesh and blood".

13 Kathleen McLuskie, *Renaissance Dramatists* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989) 144.

Rank is also a confining factor which also involves isolation and misery. Before Antonio, she is happy to reveal her own vision of womanhood: a free, independent woman who boldly asserts her right to choose a husband without regard to her family or to her social class:

Duchess: The misery of us that are born great!  
We are forced to woo, because none dare woo us;  
.....  
          You do tremble:  
Make not your heart so dead a piece of flesh,  
To fear more than to love me. Sir, be confident:  
What is 't distracts you? 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 appear to you a young widow  
That claims you for her husband, and, like a widow,  
I use but half a blush in 't.  
  
(I.ii. 154-163)

This pattern of imagery is further developed in Act III, when she rebels against the fate that her brother wants to impose on her:

Duchess: Why should only I  
Of all the other princes of the world  
Be cased up, like a holy relic? I have youth  
and a little beauty.  
  
(III.ii. 135-138)

This opposition between woman and monument, life and death "is given a visual force by the image of the Duchess, kneeling before her own tomb, forced by her brother into a symbolic submission"<sup>14</sup>.

The language of confinement is also closely linked to the imagery of animals, which is not only associated with the Duchess, but with most of the characters. Webster's use of these clusters of images is very consistent. The Duchess only uses images related either to fish or birds, animals which are netted or caught by hunters (men), as she is by her brothers. It is therefore appropriate that Antonio should accurately describe Bosola as "an impudent snake" and Ferdinand as "a tiger". The Cardinal is "an old fox".

Ferdinand is generally associated with wild, predatory animals, especially with the wolf, as we can see in this macabre image after the Duchess's death:

Ferdinand: Oh, I'll tell thee;  
The wolf shall find her grave, and scrape it up,  
Not to devour the corpse, but to discover  
The horrid murder.  
  
(IV.ii. 296-299)

This image is also an omen of Ferdinand's fatal destiny at the end of the play, when he becomes a werewolf and these lines are echoed by a doctor describing the symptoms of Ferdinand's disease.

The Cardinal uses an image from falconry. He is imaged as the falconer/hunter and Julia, his married mistress, as the falcon:

Cardinal: You may thank me, lady,  
I have taken you off your melancholy perch,  
Bore you upon my fist, and showed you game,  
And let you fly at it. I pray thee, kiss me.  
  
(II.iv. 27-30)

Although Julia is associated with a bird, a falcon, it should be noted that there are some clear differences between this and the ones associated with the Duchess. Julia is married and therefore is committing adultery as the Cardinal's mistress. The Cardinal is then the hunter who has taken her off from the "melancholy perch" of her marital home, but she very aptly has to be "a falcon", a wild bird, which is caught and tamed by "the falconer" and allowed a limited freedom to fly from his lover's "fist" to her marital "perch" and back.

The Duchess's bird images are, on the other hand, associated with little, wild birds. She envies their freedom. They are free to choose their mates, because they are not subject to family, society and rank. She regrets and resents the fact that she is denied the right which is available to one of the smallest and humblest creatures. There are also images of little, helpless birds kept in captivity, where an ominous sense of approaching death can be perceived:

Duchess: The robin-redbreast and the nightingale  
never live long in cages.  
  
(IV.ii. 13-14)

Marriage, the event which triggers off the tragedy, is also presented in confining and dangerous terms, as a trap. For Ferdinand courtship is "a kind of honey-dew that's deadly", which will eventually poison her fame. It is also dangerous and "subtler than Vulcan's engine", the net in which Vulcan, Venus's husband caught her unbehaving with Mars. This indirect mythological reference to illicit sex links this image to his vision of the Duchess as "a whore".

<sup>14</sup> Kathleen McLuskie.144.

Courtship eventually leads to "weddings" which are only the first step to death by "execution". The figurative threat eventually becomes literal revenge:

Ferdinand: Such weddings may more properly be said  
To be executed than celebrated.  
(I.ii. 31-32)

The Cardinal also introduces his own threatening allusion to her likely fate, should she dare to defy their warning:

Cardinal: The marriage night is the entrance into some prison.  
(I.ii. 33-34)

The Duchess is aware of the danger involved. She sees her projected marriage as "a dangerous venture". She is, nevertheless, firm on her resolution, defies her brothers and marries Antonio.

The image of marriage in the wooing scene is associated with the image of a circle. It is first introduced by the wedding ring as a symbol of marriage and is immediately imaged as a conjuring circle associated with witchcraft when Antonio says:

Antonio: There is a saucy and ambitious devil  
is dancing in this circle.  
(I.ii. 116-117)

The wedding ring thus becomes the charmed circle which the necromancer first draws on the ground to conjure up the devil. The sexual connotations of "saucy" seem to be alluding the Duchess, while the "ambitious devil" is referred to what Antonio feels to be a dangerous temptation, ambition, if he marries the Duchess. Finally, the figurative "Gordian knot" of marriage not to be "untied by violence" becomes ironically by violent death the literal noose/cord of the Duchess's strangling, a deadly trap for the couple and their children.

Webster seems to be exploring new possibilities for a female character in this play. He is, nevertheless, constrained by the dramatic traditions of archetypes of women. There seems to be a gap between the enclosing male definitions of women and the Duchess's dramatic behaviour, a contrast between language and action. As Kathleen McLuskie puts it, "women characters can step out of the enclosing misogyny of other characters' view of them but are ultimately controlled by the power of the men who control the world in which they live"<sup>15</sup>.

<sup>15</sup> Kathleen McLuskie, *opus cit.* 145.

## RELATIVIZATION AND REGISTER: A SEVENTEENTH CENTURY SURVEY

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The syntactic function of the relative in its clause is important in as much as it can be correlated with the stylistic complexity of the text in which it is inserted. In this sense I will be following S. Romaine (1984) and X. Dekeyser (1984 y 1988), who have already completed studies in which they tried to confirm this premise. In their analysis, they have attempted to show which syntactic functions are more easily relativizable and which less, following Keenan and Comrie's (1977) theory of the Accessibility Hierarchy. This hierarchy positions the syntactic functions performed by relative pronouns and adverbs in an implicative scale. The order of functions in this scale is as follows:

SU > DO > O > OBLI > GEN > OBJ.COMP

The adverbial function is placed, according to Dekeyser's conclusions, between oblique and genitive. From this hypothesis it emanates that a text or discourse will be the more complex the further down the use and frequency of relative constructions reach in this implicational scale of relativization. In this sense a text that contains relatives functioning as direct or indirect objects will be more complex than a text in which relativizations perform more frequently the subject function and so forth.

The choice of one or other level in this order of relativization might be a reflection of the register to which a text is ascribed. Similarly, register is important in determining the restrictive or non-restrictive nature of the relative construction, since this distinction seems to be characterised, among other variables, by the syntactic complexity of the discourse (Dekeyser 32).

The correlation between the choice and use of relativizers with the syntactic complexity and the stylistic level of the register employed in a given text or discourse has been examined so far for P.D.E. (Present-Day English) informants. X. Dekeyser and M. Ingels, S. Romaine and others have also analyzed texts from other periods to explore the possible application of this theory to stages of the English language when the uses of the relatives were not