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The Case for the Duchess: Teaching Webster's *Duchess of Malfi* in Undergraduate English Classes

by Darlene Farabee

John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* (1614), an obvious choice to include in an Elizabethan and Jacobean drama course, also works well in lower-level undergraduate courses and in British Literature I survey courses. In some cases, Webster is more useful than Shakespeare. Although Webster is a canonical author in the period and the subject of much scholarship, his name hardly carries the cultural baggage that Shakespeare's does—a fact I believe students find liberating. When students are writing about Webster's play rather than one of Shakespeare's, they find the quantity of critical materials less daunting, and they seem more willing to contribute if they have useful ideas to add to the current critical discussion.

The Duchess of Malfi has worked well in three different types of undergraduate courses: a theme-based freshman Honors course, a second-semester freshman Introduction to Literature course, and in multiple sections of the British Literature I survey course. The Honors course had the common theme, "Truth, Fantasy, and Perception," a theme that seemed tailor-made for this play's continual questions about,

as Elizabeth Brennan puts it, “the conflict between appearance and reality” (xxiv). In a second-semester freshman Introduction to Literature course, I taught *The Duchess of Malfi* and Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest* in a short unit on drama. The course focused on generic conventions, terminologies of scholarly discussion, and writing about literature. These two plays worked well, both together and in conjunction with these goals, and students found both plays quite accessible. In a British Literature survey section, I taught Webster’s play instead of a Shakespeare play. In other versions of the survey, I have taught Webster’s play with other early modern drama, Jonson’s *Volpone* or Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*, for example.

The Duchess of Malfi offers several thematic contact points for students’ engagement: revenge and repentance; perception and misperception; betrayal, selfishness, and corruption; the spectacles of violence and the macabre; rich metaphorical descriptions; fantastical stage elements; and compelling use of stage properties. My approach to encourage students’ close readings of the play arises from two related questions: How did people in the early modern era imagine their bodies and minds working together? and How does the play text provide us (as readers) with the materials to imagine or to stage the events of the drama? Depending on the emphasis in the course, the time available for the text, and the other texts being used, I have weighted differently these two questions; but, generally, I have used them in connection with one another in all of the courses I described.[1]

Characters in *The Duchess of Malfi* often describe one another in terms based on the humours' effects on individuals' minds and bodies. Lower-level undergraduate students are often unfamiliar with the Galenic descriptions of the humours and Paracelsus' sixteenth-century popularizations.[2] The basics of humoral theory are explained easily enough, and, in my experience, students with any notion of "holistic medicine" quickly see how the system could make sense and often are familiar with the idea of "bleeding." Additionally, some explanation of medieval and early modern notions of causal links between bad behavior and resulting punishment in the form of illness or disease places these frameworks in a context that reminds them of the existence of a variety of physiological models. A basic chart of the humours and the associated personality types gives students a general understanding of the elements involved. In addition to the humours, their attributes, the organ of production, and personality types, the chart below offers two examples of the early modern tendency toward correlations (to the four seasons and the four elements).

humour	Blood	Black Bile	Yellow Bile	Phlegm
organ of production	Liver	Spleen	Gall Bladder	Lungs
attributes	Hot & Moist	Cold & Dry	Hot & Dry	Cold & Moist
Personality	Sanguine	Melancholic	Choleric	Phelgmatic
<i>correlations</i>				
seasons	Spring	Autumn	Summer	Winter
elements	Air	Earth	Fire	Water

The chart of the humours in Thomas Walkington's *The Opticke Glasse of Humors* (1607) clearly demonstrates the correlations to other important categorizing elements, such as astrological signs, the stages of life, and the planets (F7v).[3] The attributes of the particular humours are most clearly important in relation to questions of diet.

In the early modern period, one primary mode of maintaining health was to attempt to achieve equilibrium through control of the diet, since taking in food and drink with the opposing attributes (hot and dry, for example, to combat cold and moist) could help balance the humours. Examples from period cookery and health books easily demonstrate these connections to students. William Vaughan, in the opening pages of *Directions for Health* (1617), claims, "They that observe a good *diet* need no artificial *Physicke*, for these after a sort are contraries" (B1r).[4] The title page of Thomas

Dawson's *Good Huswifes Iewell* (1587) promises "most excellent and rare Deuises for Conseites in Cookerie" and "diuers approued medicines for many diseases." The ways the characters in *The Duchess of Malfi* interact with one another demonstrate many of these interconnections between sickness, health, control of diet, consumption of particular foods, personality types, and character tendencies.

The correlations, once brought to students' attention, are easily recognizable. The Duchess' hunger for apricots, the descriptions of Bosola as melancholic, and the behaviors of the madmen all connect to these notions of how the body and mind function. The pervasiveness of the language of humoural theory can be brought to students' notice by pointing out multiple instances in any scene in the play. Here, for example, is a (by no means exhaustive) list of examples from the first scene of the play: "foul melancholy" (1.1.71); "foul chirurgeons" (1.1.107); "melancholy churchman" (1.1.150); "study physiognomy" (1.1.227); "livers are more spotted" (1.1.289).[5] In some instances, I have put students in groups to highlight similar examples from other scenes, or encouraged them to consider the variant uses of particular words aided by information from *The Oxford English Dictionary*. In particular, these frames of reference can be useful for discussing the implications of Bosola's actions and speech at the end of 4.2 and, in a play so focused on bodies, the dis-embodied voice of the echo in 5.3.

The links between the concerns about the body and the actions as they appear on stage offer rich moments for students to engage with the text as a dramatic script. Many

of the tensions about the Duchess' reproductive activity, for example, are made apparent in the apricot eating scene. In many instances, implied stage directions and the necessity for stage properties require that students imagine the specific actions in order to clarify events. In René Weis's edition of the text, some staged actions remain implicitly expected rather than explicitly called for through added stage directions. In the proposal scene (1.1), Weis does not add a stage direction when the Duchess remarks to Antonio, "One of your eyes is bloodshot; use my ring to't" (1.1.395). If it weren't already clear enough that he has taken the ring, Antonio remarks "You have parted with [the ring] now" (1.1.398). In cases like this one, students acting out the scene soon realize in rehearsal that the scene requires particular actions and stage properties. Likewise, the taunting of the Duchess with the dead man's hand and wax figures in 4.1 and the by-the-book murder of Julia in 5.2 require specific actions and properties.

The necessary stage properties are not particularly difficult to find and can be improvised easily. A leather glove stuffed with paper serves well enough for the dead man's hand. A package of dried apricots quickly adds verisimilitude to the Duchess' eating in 2.1. In one case, the student actor playing the Duchess stuffed his shirt fully with a winter coat, leaving no doubt about the Duchess' state. He also managed, with his elbow jutting out and one hand on the small of his back in support of his heavy pregnancy, to appreciatively gorge himself on the dried apricots with the other hand.

These circumstances made Bosola's aside comments, "How greedily she eats them" and "you are too much swelled already," all the more entertaining (2.1.140, 148).

The play depends heavily on a stage space that includes some type of a discovery space (for revelations of the wax figures in 4.1 and the discovery of the strangled children in 4.2) and that allows two levels for actors (for the Cardinal's vain attempts to raise the alarm in 5.5). Students working through these sections as dramatic scripts often become better close readers in conjunction with improving their ability to imagine what a scene must look like on stage. My students are not likely to have seen a stage production or film version of *The Duchess of Malfi*, and this circumstance encourages them to imagine more fully for themselves what the play might look like on stage. When they are engaged with acting the scenes themselves, they quickly realize that they can develop, or already have, these reading skills, and they more fully understand the text as a dramatic script.

Critical Readings and Copies of the Text

In most of the courses I have mentioned, I have not assigned extensive critical materials on the play. However, in some situations, I have found three particular essays useful to illuminate different readings of the play. Nicholas Brooke's chapter on *The Duchess of Malfi* in *Horrid Laughter in Jacobean Tragedy* examines how the macabre and laughter are intertwined in the play; my students have found this exceptionally

readable discussion enlightening. Included in Kastan and Stallybrass's *Staging the Renaissance*, Frank Whigham's essay examines "anthropological notions of incest" as they appear in Webster's play (263). James Calderwood's essay in *Shakespeare's Contemporaries* proposes that Webster's "use of ceremony helps clarify some of the rather vexing problems of action, motivation, and characters" (279)—all difficulties that my students have found engaging in this play.

The Duchess of Malfi appears in the *Norton Anthology of English Literature* (8th edition) and is widely available as an individual text. Although it is likely the cheapest available text (\$2.50), the Dover Thrift edition does not have line numbers, which makes it unsuitable for course adoption. Surprisingly, Frank Kermode's Modern Library edition, *The Duchess of Malfi: Seven Masterpieces of Jacobean Drama* (\$17.95), also lacks line numbers. Brian Gibbons' New Mermaids edition (\$14.95) has informative, but not intrusive, notes that appear at the bottom of the page. Leah Marcus' edition (\$17) was the initial text in the Arden Early Modern Drama Series; this lovely edition has loads of interesting material and an engaging introduction. However, when I have used Arden editions with lower-level undergraduates, some of them have found the extra-textual apparatus overwhelming. There is a free Kindle edition for those of us being pushed toward "mobile computing initiatives" and willing to try to sort out the difficulties of citation inherent with these editions.[6] I have most frequently used *The Duchess of Malfi and Other Plays* edited by René Weis in the Oxford World's Classics series. It is

reasonably priced (\$13.95), carefully edited, and includes a glossary and useful notes.

However, the notes appear in the back of the text, which unfortunately can be for some students an uncharted world in the far-off distance.

Endnotes

[1] The survey courses have fallen into two different types of classroom situations: one with an extended class period meeting once a week with 35 students, and another in fifty-minute class meetings three times a week in a lecture situation with 65 students. In both sets of circumstance, I have been able to incorporate students acting out scenes although to a greater and lesser extent because of time constraints and numbers of students.

[2] For an accessible translation and selection of Paracelsus' work, see Jolande Jacobi's edition *Paracelsus: Selected Writings*. Michael Schoenfeldt's *Bodies and Selves in Early Modern England* (1999) provides important readings of early modern texts using Galenic understandings of health.

[3] The illustration from Walkington's text is freely available through the Folger Library website.

[4] Vaughan's text also includes a series of vivid descriptions of the different behaviors exhibited when persons of the various personality types are drunk (D8r) and offers a cure for "How to make them which are drunke sober" (D8v). These items may or may not have certain resonances depending on specific student populations.

[5] Direct quotations from the play come from René Weis's edition.

[6] In this instance, it is nearly impossible to figure out who edited the text; I did *not* figure it out, but I imagine with iron-like perseverance, loads of time, and many texts for comparison one could track it down.

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