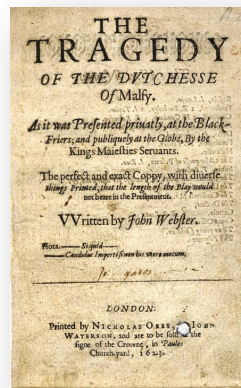


Notes on John Webster's *The Duchess Of Malfi*.



The Tragedy of the Duchess of Malfi title page, 1623

Biography.

John Webster is one of those Renaissance playwrights, like Shakespeare, about whom little is known. He was born around 1580 and he died around 1634 so his life and career overlapped with the end of Shakespeare's. Richard Burbage, the first actor to play Hamlet, was also the first actor to play Ferdinand in *The Duchess of Malfi* and the young Webster gets a brief cameo in *Shakespeare In Love*, as the creepy boy who feeds live mice to a cat saying, 'plenty of blood, that's the only writing'.

Webster's two best-known plays are *The White Devil* (1612) and *The Duchess Of Malfi* (1614). This was the period when plays moved from the big open-air stages like The Globe into smaller, more intimate, candle-lit theatres such as Blackfriars Theatre. *The Duchess Of Malfi* was performed in both The Globe and the Blackfriars and in 2014 it was the play Dominic Dromgoole chose to open The Sam Wanamaker Theatre in London, a replica of the Blackfriars Theatre.

The plot.

The Duchess Of Malfi is based on a true story about an Italian woman who married her servant and was persecuted by her brothers for it. In the play, the Duchess (we never learn her name) is a young widow who marries in secret and bears three children by her second husband, Antonio, but refuses to reveal his identity. She has two brothers, one is her twin, Ferdinand, and the other (also never named) is older than her and a cardinal in the Catholic Church. In the course of the play the duchess is tortured, her husband is exiled, Ferdinand goes mad and everyone dies.

Themes.

The Duchess Of Malfi is about the abuse of power and how corruption in high places spreads to everyone else. Antonio sums it up at the beginning of the play when he says, 'a prince's court is like a common fountain, whence should flow pure silver drops in general, but if it chance some cursed example poison it near the head, death and diseases through the whole land spread'.

Webster wrote the play as a thinly-veiled portrait of corruption in James I's court. He set it abroad and in the past to evade the English censor but his audience would have spotted the references to contemporary English politics and if our audience sees any similarity with our own political scene then that's fine too.

From a feminist perspective, the Duchess is one of those surprisingly good female roles written for the all-male English Renaissance stage. She is a widow, so she is independently wealthy, and she makes real choices which determine the action of the play. She chooses her husband in defiance of her brothers' wishes and it is her quick thinking that saves Antonio's life and lets him escape into exile. She is made to suffer for it though, just as Julia and Cariola, the two other principle female roles, do, so the patriarchy gets its own back, although the men who persecute her survive little longer than she does.

Staging.

Webster set the play a hundred years before the year in which it was first performed so we will too. Our production will therefore be set in 1930s fascist Italy, a world with a sharp division between rich and poor (we have some beautiful 1930s costumes in Wardrobe so you will look fabulous) and governed by people who will do anything to get, and then abuse, power. It is a studio show and we will perform it with the audience on three sides of a thrust stage, which is as close as we can get to the original Blackfriars Theatre audience configuration.

The title page of the First Quarto edition said it included 'diverse things printed, that the length of the play would not bear in the presentment', meaning the published text was longer than the originally performed version. We will also perform a cut version which will run under two hours.

The production will be gender balanced with a cast of eight, four male and four female actors, with some doubling.

Audition dates.

There are two audition dates: Sunday 31st July at 2pm in the Cumberland Room and Monday 1st August at 7.30pm in the Rehearsal Room. If you would like to audition but you can't make those dates then please let me know and we can arrange a convenient time for you to come in.

Rehearsal and performance dates.

Rehearsals start on Monday 12th September, so that gives you a month to familiarise yourself with the script before we start. The weekly pattern of rehearsals is Sunday afternoon and Monday and Wednesday evenings so please make sure you are free.

The play will run for one week in the Ron Barber Studio from the 12th to the 19th November 2022 at 7.15pm (no performance on Monday 14th). There are two matinees, on Sunday 13th and Saturday 19th November at 2.15pm.

Andrew Cowie (director) July 2022.
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