

# English Renaissance Drama: Status of Women in “The Duchess of Malfi”



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**Abstract:** Renaissance dramas mostly illustrate gender relations and women’s complex roles of empowerment. Writers of that time examined the social issues of this day through dramas that usually featured a strong female character at the centre of the play, societal issues such as the stereotypical role of the female, elements of class-consciousness, and the role of faith in a patriarchal society. Analysis of literature in this type gives the researchers much pressure to reveal real situations of that period. The main topic of this article is to analyze John Webster’s “The Duchess of Malfi”.

**Keywords:** Jacobean plays, Renaissance drama, patriarchal society, gender identity, class-consciousness, ideology, themes, social tragedy, societal issues.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Jacobean plays displayed women as inferior to men and usually had extreme restrictions on their deeds. During the seventeenth century authors began to illustrate gender relations and women’s complex roles of empowerment. They had an opportunity to criticize the real situations that women had to face in their lives, difference in the power that men and women were able to attain depending on their gender and social class roles. Women had fear of punishment to tell their opinions and had to deal with the expected traditions in a patriarchal society. Nevertheless some characters of the plays of some great writers such as John Webster, William Shakespeare began to change the ideology for women to show power over their lives and relationships.

Although women of Jacobean era may have been born into nobility and endless wealth, society and expectations of the time set up restrictions on many of the women. In Renaissance society, widows of marriageable age inheriting the property and businesses were to be controlled their sexual and economical lives by their adult male brothers or children. In fact, there is some demographic evidence that financially independent widows often chose not to

remarry, thus preserving their freedom of action, whether or not they chose to remain sexually active[1].

## II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

In “The Duchess of Malfi” the main protagonist, the Duchess, steps beyond limitations of society by ravaging the image of herself as a powerless widow and instead recreating herself as a powerful political figure, a mother, and a wife; whereas society worried about giving women too much power or control, the Duchess took matters into her own hands and demonstrated her ability to make her own decisions. Through her actions, she demonstrates an early glimpse of feminism and of “the modern woman”.

John Webster examined the social issues of his day through his drama that usually featured a strong female character at the centre of the play. Through his use of satire, he reveals and examines societal issues such as the stereotypical role of the female, elements of class-consciousness, and the role of faith in a patriarchal society. Webster’s decision to choose strong female characters as the protagonists in his tragedy could have been accepted controversially by the audiences of his time. In “The Duchess of Malfi” playwright’s presentation of women such as the Duchess, Julia and Cariola focuses on whether Webster objectively had a social and moral purpose in promoting the rights of women at all. His play “The Duchess of Malfi” can be examined as a social tragedy on different levels. Alternatively, analyzing the plot of the tragedy can lead us to an argument that Webster was in fact a vivid stage manager to delight audiences with blood and death.

In the Jacobean era the social tragedy genre had a different undertone. It was seen as a warning against social norms of a woman to destroy social bounds. As modern readers, we are able to criticize the society that prevents resistance of conventions and forces death of those who break the suppressive rules.

However, plotline can be analyzed differently as themes of the tragedy are various and opposite.

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## English Renaissance Drama: Status of Women in “The Duchess of Malfi”

Our choice is to analyze power and role of women in the play and how human beings can be effected badly by the title they hold in the society.

“The Duchess of Malfi” is generally considered to be John Webster’s greatest work. He probably wrote it in 1613 or 1614. The play was first performed by the King’s Men at the Blackfriars Theater.

“The Duchess of Malfi” tells the story of the Duchess and her attempts to live in peace with her loving husband and children, attempts that ultimately fail due to brutality, jealousy and greed of her hostile brothers. When a young widow the Duchess secretly remarries her household steward and gives a birth to three children. Her brothers’ spy Bosola reveals this secret and angry Ferdinand and Cardinal destroy her and her family. After they succeed, Bosola, regretting about his sins turns against them, and the three of them destroy each other. The tragedy focuses on the imposition of the deadly male will on the Duchess’s life and the resistance is psychosexual and social, through the strong love Webster shows male anxieties leading to abuse of woman. “The Duchess of Malfi” is full of contrasting themes as love and cruelty, female and male, warmth and coldness, integrity and deceit, life and death, sympathy and brutality.

### III. DISCUSSION

The main concern of this research is based on the theme of status or power of willfulness of women rather than men.

Webster creates fallen and corrupted world through the actions of the Duchess, Ferdinand, the Cardinal, Antonio, Bosola and shows the pride and social prohibitions; how an individual can turn to an evil, power and title dominated world with class division and, finally, whether people create their own heaven or hell.

The theme of free will is both implicit and explicit in the play: People are responsible for the choices they make. Webster forces the smaller worlds into collision through the various themes and tragic ending. The last hope is put on an innocent son of Duchess and Antonio. The Duchess is persistent but noble woman who says to her executors: “Pull, and pull strongly, for your able strength/ Must pull down heaven upon me.” (4.2.228-229) Even though she is a noblewoman her “passion is out of place,” for Antonio, her steward. Even at the moment when she and Antonio admit their love, they are therefore threatened. In act 1, scene 3 (lines 176-181), when Antonio worries about her brothers, she tries to ease his fears:

–“ Do not think of them: All discord without this circumference. Is only to be pitied, not fear’d: Yet, should they know it, time will easily scatter the tempest. “

She misjudges the power of those outside “this circumference.” Her willfulness and passion are desire in the eyes of her brothers, the Church, and society on whole.

The title she earned as the Duchess of Malfi, can make her able to make decisions on her own and impose her power. However, Fred Wigham declares that “Upon the Duchess’

husband's death she entered a new realm of freedom from male domination, the only such realm open to Jacobean women, and it is this transformation that directly enables her outlaw marriage”

The Duchess confirms her decision rebelling against her brother. She exclaims,

“So I through frights and threatening will assay / this dangerous venture. Let old wives report / I winked and chose a husband” (1.3.54-6).

This shows her first rebellion towards her brothers, but also illustrates her independence and willfulness to get what she wants. To demonstrate her brothers that she is not an object she asserts her control proposing to Antonio and successfully hiding it.

As explained by Theodora A. Jankowski the females were generally represented as their main purpose was to bear and develop family generations. Jankowski states, “That a wife's body became, in essence, a vessel for reproducing her husband's or her father's bloodlines made it necessary for that vessel to remain unpolluted by sexual contact with unapproved males” (228).

Since Antonio was seen as an “unapproved male” in the eyes of her brother’s, the Duchess demonstrated her political authority to find a way in achieving her desire to marry for love.

The status of women in the play is shown as they try to be powerful, equal with men. The Duchess used her social status to marry whom she wanted, but she preferred to have marital life, pure sexual interests for having children. Even though she knew she wouldn't survive in the life she asserted her authority demonstrating her bravery and confidence as “prince”. Her proclamation to the very end “I am the Duchess of Malfi still” (4.2.125) reflects masculine traits of bravery, pride and rightful authority. Exclamation of her title maintains her power over her decisions to the very death. Duchess displayed control over her life in that period and it opened door for a revolution of women’s empowerment. Through this character, Webster opposes current views of marriage and of women being seen as objects. The play is essential to shift from patriarchal views to the new idea of the role of women. As a woman she refuses limitations and rejects her brothers’ commands not to marry, expresses her love to Antonio. Thus a rich widow presents a special threat to male-dominated families, placing her personal desires above all as an individual. When her husband cannot protect her from destruction, she could stay firmly showing self-discovery and not to be dependent on man. As a free-spirited individual, she places pleasure above reason. However, the common view of women for reasoning was weaker than men, women were easily deceived and controlled by passion. It can be seen when Duchess dismisses her brothers’ evil character saying “time will easily scatter the tempest” and later she trusts Bosola telling her secret. She has attempted to make her own destiny in a world controlled by men.

Though she has lost her gambit, she remained defiant and proud to the end, high above the sordid world she leaves behind.

The Duchess's defiant insistence on marrying Antonio, her second, is an action which shows that she has her own desires, and a more dominant will than anybody around her. Webster has given her all the qualities that Antonio, her spouse, lacks, qualities which were not thought to be desirable in a woman of that era; she plots, schemes and has a bold and impetuous nature.

The Duchess is portrayed as a woman of great integrity and honor, such that Antonio speaks of "her days are practiced in such noble virtue that sure her nights, nay more her very sleeps are more in heaven than other lady's shrifts". We see her as a noble woman of childlike innocence and naivety. Her secret marriage to Antonio is seen as a woman's need for companionship and love 'tis not a figure cut in alabaster to kneel at my husband's tomb', something she obviously cannot derive from her villainous brothers. Even at this point, she comes across as a strong character of intense emotion and longing for affection and love that she must resort to a secret marriage.

One certainly pities her and feels that she should not be made to suffer so much for following her heart. She accepts suffering as her 'fate' and is 'acquainted with sad misery as the tanned slave is with his oar'. Yet to some extent, we pity the Duchess, we cannot deny that we feel a great admiration for her strength of character.

The Duchess is a character to be admired and respected. That she is a historical figure shows that Webster was indeed perceptive in the plight of the Duchess at such a time when her behavior to marry Antonio outside the social status of her family would have been dealt with death, no question to the reasoning behind it. Webster's play is a statement against this convention, and the Duchess comes across as a real person of human emotion that each individual can relate to.

#### IV. RESULTS AND CONCLUSION

John Webster's "The Duchess of Malfi" centering on the character of the Duchess is full of mixed feelings as sensuality, passion, rage, lechery, pity, torture with nobility, tenderness, forgiveness and virtue. The opposed themes of the tragedy maintain the interest of scholars and audiences for centuries.

Jacobean society experiencing breakdown of free will, moral courage and positive vision of life, corrupted institutions were skillfully demonstrated by John Webster in this play. Awareness of societal division and corruption is nowhere more obvious than in Webster's most well known play, "The Duchess of Malfi". During this period, powerful women were considered dangerous and unnatural. Female dominance was accepted as social disorder.

In patriarchal society all levels of the society looked towards a male figure holding supreme power, therefore, powerful women were disapproved by population. Political women must have had contradictory qualities of "manly" intelligence, motherly kind and merely obedient. In the Duchess's society, it was considered immoral and wrong for a noble woman to marry beneath her. Webster attempts to provoke thought through this socially unequal marriage

and question what was considered morally acceptable. He himself does not pass moral judgment on her marriage, thus allowing for interpretations over the years to vary, with evolving times.

In "The Duchess of Malfi" the Duchess demonstrates her most attractive character traits: strong, passionate, sensual, independent, intelligent, witty and ambitious. These qualities which we admire today was dangerous in male-dominated society. William Painter's Palace of Pleasure (1567) criticizes her being lustful and breaking rules of her social status. For the modern readers she plays a role of existential hero with her independence and finding herself in a corrupted world of men, having no women equals and with her free spirit in a world of restrictions.

Being criticized, analyzed and learned differently by various authors the play "The Duchess of Malfi" never lost its fame, but could find new norms and approaches.

As mentioned above, we tried to analyze women's power and status shown in the play and society's effect on the people. The attempt we did to analyze the role of women in the play can be summarized as following:

- Webster masterly helped to open the way to freedom of women in the society, gender equality, sufferings of the women in patriarchal society must be limited;
- Social life in Renaissance period were mostly based on the acts of powerful man, high ranked people, then it led to corruption;

"The Duchess of Malfi" has been read and will be of great value for the readers of any period and society.

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