

Presentation of Madness in *The Duchess of Malfi*

The Duchess of Malfi, by John Webster, is a typical Jacobean Drama; a tragedy rife with dark themes such as death, revenge, deceit and madness. The theme of madness specifically is multifaceted, Webster takes full advantage of this and employs in several ways; as a test, as a way to critique Renaissance society and practices without the threat of censorship and finally as a path to insight.

Webster employs the theme of madness in order to critique 17th century practices. Webster uses the image of the madmen tormenting the Duchess as a method to critique the Jacobean practice of removing mentally unwell people from asylums to use them as entertainment, to mock and exploit them. The 'wild consort / Of madmen' is used to torment the Duchess while she is imprisoned by her brothers, the noun 'consort' in a renaissance context refers to a group of musicians which reflects how the mentally unwell would often be used for entertainment. It is likely that, in the 17th century, this particular scene may have been interpreted as a light, humorous break from the previous dark showcase of the captive Duchess, this is because madness was often satirised in the renaissance period. Although, a modern viewer would be much more receptive to the disturbing subtext in this scene than a member of the renaissance audience as cultural and medical advancements have led to a deeper understanding of what 'madness' is. The intense language of the madmen is laced with images of suffering and death, it is employed to present their pain to the audience, 'Hell is a mere glass-house' says one, this decorative metaphor reflects the suffering of the insane, hell as portrayed by religion isn't comparable to what the madmen endure in their exploited state. There is a hint of dramatic irony in this scene, to a modern reader the knowledge that this scene was a moment of lightness on a renaissance stage only increases the pity felt towards the madmen and a critical view towards the values of renaissance society.

Madness is presented as a test for the Duchess. Whilst imprisoned by her brothers Ferdinand attempts to send her mad, the imagery of the Duchess kissing a 'dead man's hand' is disturbing, appalled she calls 'lights! -O, horrible!', the audience may expect the Duchess to go mad after Ferdinand reveals the hand belonged to Antonio, but she remains determined, she will 'endure'.

Madness threatens the Duchess again when Ferdinand reveals the bodies of Antonio and her children that have been created to trick her, she believes what is fake to be real, a form of madness. Madness as a test is presented here, she seems to fail when she wishes for death 'I'll starve myself', but her strength is revealed in the face of death 'it affrights not me', her fearlessness suggests her triumph over the madness her brothers attempted to bring her. It seems for a moment as if the Duchess has succumbed to instability again when she appears to have forgotten her identity. She questions Bosola, 'Am I not thy Duchess?', 'Who am i?', but in the end she firmly asserts in a short, impactful statement; 'I am Duchess of Malfi still.' Her strong intimation can be interpreted as her overcoming her brothers' tyranny by keeping her sanity. In a surprising rhyming couplet, the Duchess again defies the madness her brothers intend to impose upon her, 'I have so much obedience in my blood, I wish it in their veins to do them good', this can be interpreted in multiple ways, it suggests the Duchess's power over her brothers as she is still loyal and sane though they have imprisoned her, it also shows her strength. The Duchess, at the time of her death, kneels before the executioner, 'they may feed in quiet' is her last full line in the play. It is significant that her final word is 'quiet',

juxtaposed against the earlier ravings of the madmen this intimates that the Duchess has not gone mad, she has overcome the test of madness, her final act of defiance against her brothers.

Madness and insight are closely linked in *The Duchess of Malfi*, this connection is best shown through Ferdinand. The Duke's madness is presented through the symbol of the wolf and animalistic imagery. Once he has carried out his final act of revenge against his sister, he is overcome by guilt, causing him to develop 'lycanthropy', a disease that makes him believe that he is a wolf. The madness he develops is a consequence of his guilt, he 'digs up graves', most likely the grave of the Duchess. The digging up of graves is significant, wolves usually dig holes to bury and hide bones but Ferdinand purposely unearths them, implying a guilty conscience. It is in this guilty state that Ferdinand makes the realisation 'all of you like beasts for sacrifice...there's nothing left of you, but tongue, and belly, flattery and lechery'. Ferdinand's madness leads to the realisation that the courtiers are flatterers and panderers. The imagery of the courtiers as 'beasts' also has connotations of political insanity; the animalistic description accurately creates a picture of greedy, savage men willing to do anything to advance themselves socially. The ravings of the madmen are also laced with insight, 'the law will eat to the bone' one says. The 'law' can be interpreted as the Cardinal, as throughout the play he has used his political power for his own gain as in the case of imprisoning and banishing the Duchess, this metaphor therefore foreshadows her death, she is metaphorically consumed by her brothers and their ideals.

In conclusion, Webster takes advantage of the multifaceted nature of the theme of madness and applies it in a multitude of ways across the text.