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“To Suffer Death or Shame for What Is Just”: The Seed of an Alternative Governance in Webster’s Bosola

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Abstract:

This article tries to interpret John Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi* and his adoption of the malcontent Bosola in the light of alternative governance that could challenge the prevalent administration of the Cardinal and Ferdinand. Such a reading goes beyond the conventional definition of a malcontent as a person dissatisfied and wronged by his social positioning who turns out as the seething, scheming ‘villain’ who offers the play its tragic climax. This article tries to posit Bosola at the crossroads of an existing patriarchal dominance of the two brothers of the Duchess and the newly germinated egalitarian governance seen in Antonio, and hoped to be continued through Antonio’s and the Duchess’ infant son. Bosola does not directly become engaged with the governance, but his words and his development from a malcontent to a politically sensitive character definitely point towards such a shift which this article would illustrate.

Keywords: alternative possibilities, administration and governance, malcontent, egalitarian principles.

While reading the character of Bosola, one has to look at the backdrop against which such a character is sketched. The malcontent figure that appeared in the Jacobean revenge tragedies could be identified by certain characteristic traits like- discontentment, rebelliousness and satirical. A malcontent is also often dispossessed or detached from a corrupt society by his grievances. The character of Bosola in *The Duchess of Malfi* can be read in the light of all these characteristic features. However, to read Bosola only as a conventional malcontent figure would be reductive. What is interesting in Bosola is that he does not remain fixed to a particular state of being; rather, he transforms and each phase of his transition attributes a new dimension to the narrative of the play.¹ It is often observed that conventional malcontent figures act out a one-dimensional role- that is, they either disguise or feign honesty or madness to comment on the contemporary milieu as seen in the characters of Iago (although many modern critics refuse to call him a malcontent²), Hamlet³ and Malevole⁴, Bosola seems to occupy an ambivalent

¹ In her essay, Bettie Anne Doebler suggests on these transformations of Bosola, “Bosola in the first scene is a demonic instrument; in scene 2 the intensity of the irony is heightened by the way in which he as murderer largely shifts his demonic role to that of angel of comfort.” (Doebler 163)

² Elmer Edgar Stoll’s article “Iago Not a ‘Malcontent’”.

³ Stoll writes in his article on the feigning of madness by Duke Altofront which can be likened to Hamlet’s ‘method in madness’: “Malevole, furthermore, Marston’s Malcontent, the only one of these revengers so designated, who is the supplanted Duke Altofront in disguise, is like Hamlet in his role as a pretended madman. Though also like him (in our sense) melancholy, he is like him particularly as feigning (short, however, of the madman) the Elizabethan melancholiac- liable to sudden extreme changes in mood as well as conduct, and in sentiment satirical or pessimistic, burrowing or sepulchral, whether openly or when soliloquizing.” (Stoll 163)

position, oscillating between his roles as a part of the corruption in the court and a commenter of the court misgivings and his own involvement in the court vices.

One of the primary conflicts in *The Duchess of Malfi*, then, is clear: on the one side is the Duchess, motivated by worth, attempting to institute a rule by merit in her kingdom; on the other side are her adversaries, the Cardinal and Ferdinand, the conservative representatives of degree and aristocracy, the spokesmen for rule by blood. And caught in the middle, vacillating, is Bosola. (Selzer183)

Jacobean England witnessed the prosperity of the age, but it was a prosperity unevenly distributed across the nation. The urban middle class of merchants, bankers, entrepreneurs flourished while, the landowners and the peasantry suffered, both in the rural and urban sectors. It was also a period of widespread unemployment. The exodus of the nobility to London and the Court and the purchase of estates by wealthy merchants, reluctant to pursue the feudal system, led to a decline in the traditional activities of the gentry- activities like dispensation of hospitality, patronage and the local administration of justice.

The basic pattern was the economic organization directly inherited from the Middle Ages, whilst superimposed on this was pattern formed by the development of Capitalist enterprise...What we may call the traditional order was not static; since the fourteenth century modification and development had been slow but continuous. Even more obviously the newer organizations (most of them had a medieval ancestry) were changing rapidly indeed, and however we define 'capitalist', many forms of capitalist activity existed side by side...It was during this period that modern forms of commercial and industrial enterprise took shape...(Knight 15-16).

Webster portrays this unsettlement and disorder by referring to the model of the judicious French Court, at the beginning of the play. This model acts as an obvious contrast to the chaotic courtly system seen in Malfi. This reference is made by Antonio upon his return from France, and when he is asked by Delio, whether he liked the French Court, he replies:

I admire it.
In seeking to reduce both state and people
To a fixed order, their judicious King
Begins at home, quits first his royal palace
Of flattering sycophants, of dissolute
And infamous persons... (1.1.4-9)

Antonio appreciates the French Court for the judicious nature of the king and his responsibility in ridding his court of undesirable people, harmful to both the king and his subjects. Through this reference, Webster opens before us a striking contrast between an honest court and the corrupt court of Malfi. From the beginning of the play, the distinction between members of the particular social classes is clear, with the exception of Bosola. It acts as a prophecy to the disastrous ambition that this distinction is going to incite. As the play proceeds, it lays bare that inherent

⁴ Peter Thomson writes in his "Introduction" to *The Malcontent* (2002 edition), "The material out of which *The Malcontent* is formed is familiar: usurping and usurped dukes, ruthlessly self-serving courtiers, adulterous and loyal wives, explosion of violence, reliance on the convention that any disguise is impenetrable (except by the audience)." (Thomson XV)

desire in each of the characters to compete in a society where corruption exists on all levels. It begins with the two brothers asserting their power over the Duchess⁵. While Ferdinand shows his concern for his class and stature, the Cardinal represents corruption that exists not only in men of a higher class, but within the Church as well.

Bosola is, perhaps, the most confusing of all the macabre characters present in the play. His villainy lies in his self contradictory nature that makes him more dubious than his employers, Ferdinand and the Cardinal. He portrays a combination of a keen sensitivity to human nature blended with a shrewd genius devoid of human sympathy. However, he finally assumes the character of a tragic figure, becoming the only character in the play that acknowledges his own folly and stays true to his character with dignity and pride, with no discretion.

I stand like one
That long hath ta'en a sweet and golden dream
I am angry at myself, now that I wake (4.2.323-325)

It is this nature of Bosola that helps in the movement of the plot in so far as the tragic element in the play is concerned. It is the simultaneous juxtaposition of intellectual and emotional disposition that establishes Bosola's actions as not totally whimsical. The audience is introduced to a capricious Bosola when the play begins, but as the plot proceeds it begins to see Bosola transform from his 'base' state to somebody who starts to think and take decisions, although fatal, independently. Thus, it might prove instructive to consider Bosola's employment and the functions that he discharges not only for the development of the plot, in respect to the heightening of the tragic spirit of the play, but also in serving as a pointer to the possibility of an alternative social order to that of the tyrannical reign of the two brothers.

The insidious, power hungry nature of the almost all the characters is revealed at the beginning. When Delio describes Bosola as a notorious murderer who is secretly hired by the Cardinal for his crimes, it is tempting to read Bosola's nature as eccentric; as one whose drives are determined by nothing beyond materialistic concerns. However, as the play progresses one sees his transformation following the death of the Duchess. His apparently contradictory actions might be, therefore, regarded as fickleness conditioned by his function as a catalyst to the action, because when the action regarding the Duchess is concerned, Bosola is the chief instrument in

⁵ The Duchess comes out of her role and seduces Antonio, her steward, a person much below her rank. She resists the pressure from her brothers and transcends the contours of her class. There have been different opinions regarding the disapproval of the marriage between the Duchess and Antonio. While Stone opines, "...the custom of the dowry, according to which brides from all ranks of the propertied classes were expected to contribute a cash sum, together with the great sensitivity to status and rank, meant that there was a very high degree of social and economic endogamy (i.e., required marriage within the group, here defined in terms of class). Since marriage involved an exchange of cash by the father of the bride for the settlement of property by the father of the groom for the maintenance of the couple and a pension of the widow, it was inevitable that the great majority of marriages should take place between spouses from families with similar economic resources... The fact that most families aspired to maintain status and enlarge connections through marriage meant that in most cases like would marry like." (Stone 60-61)

Again, Bob Hodge suggests incest to be the chief reason behind this disapproval: "Ferdinand in *The Duchess* is the only main protagonist who is concerned about class or status, but his incestuous obsession with his sister's purity is a stronger motive than his concern for Antonio's lowly status." (Hodge 106)

meting out to her a fatal treatment 'By degree of mortification' (4.1.117), yet, when the action is directed against the two malicious brothers, Bosola becomes the agent of justice, avenging their crimes. Reading him in this light, it could be deduced that Bosola is employed as a mere tool in the play who is first directed by and later, directed against the two brothers to meet the tragic requirements of the play. However, Bosola's attempts at discovering himself, in defining, in justifying and sometimes in concealing his real motives that underlie his actions are pointers towards an ambivalent trait in Bosola. This ambivalence results out of his inability to find himself on a static ground. Charles R. Forker in his *Skull beneath the Skin: The Achievement of John Webster* says that Webster attributes such ambivalence to his characters for his 'acknowledged interest in the mysterious unpredictabilities of personality and behavior.' He further adds that this is Webster's design "to remind us latently that no human nature, probingly observed, is ever susceptible to easy or merely sentimental delineation. A perception that underlies all Webster's most compelling drama concerns the disequilibria, both within the psyche and outside it, that threaten a secure or fixed estimation of the self." (Forker 333)

The position that Daniel de Bosola occupies is the most problematic aspect of the play. He is not simply an added character to fill the canvas of the play but also one with the most speeches and appearance. His transformation from being a comic character, a malcontent, an instrument that operates according to the whims of the two brothers and then finally to an individual who acts according to his mind reveals an internal progress that is entwined with the thematic aspect of the play- it is a transformation from an almost irreversible 'base' form to a consciousness determined to discern its own follies. Bosola first enters the stage as a comic character, a melancholic, a malcontent who rails cynically against the world he inhabits. He is used and neglected by the Cardinal and appointed for the most heinous crimes by Ferdinand. Bosola protests against the Cardinal for the delayed payment of his earlier crimes thus:

I have done you
Better service than to be slighted thus.
Miserable age, where only the rewards
Of doing well is the doing of it. (1.1.29-30)

Apparently, Bosola's hunger for power and wealth incites him to commit any criminal act that promises a reward at its completion. But, it also shows an individual's struggle to remain occupied in a constant position 'where only the rewards/ Of doing well is the doing of it.' (1.1.29-30) However, when he is 'slighted' by the Cardinal, he vows to establish something to prove his worth- "I will thrive some way: blackbirds fatten best in hard weather; why not I, in these dog days?" (1.1.37-39) And this is how the whole scheming of the horrible murders ensue as Bosola is employed and accepted as a man of some worth by the Cardinal. The episode of the secret marriage of the Duchess to Antonio provides Bosola with a fertile ground to act out his strategy of gaining himself a position, a consistency for himself. This is what Antonio says about Bosola:

...I have heard
He's very valiant; this foul melancholy
Will poison all his goodness... (1.1.75-77)

It is not merely greed but rather a latent desire to owe nothing to this world that determines Bosola's course of action and his subsequent co-operation with Ferdinand:

I would have you curse yourself now, that your bounty

Which makes men truly noble, e'er should make
 Me a villain: oh that to avoid ingratitude
 For the good deed you've done me, I must do
 All the ill man can invent! Thus the devil
 Candies all sins o'er; and what Heaven terms vile
 That names he complemental. (1.1.171-77)

In the world of his sinister employer, Bosola finds himself oscillating between his functions as a moral commentator and an almost creaturely accomplice. His action is caught up in a growing tension caused by the friction between a human world of moral concerns and responsibility and an animal world devoid of compassion and rationality. The essential virtues that Antonio and the Duchess see in him in glimpses soon degenerate into mindless activities of a subhuman entity earned through his allegiance to Ferdinand. Bosola soon becomes an expert in his intrigues and delights in the bloody practices issued forth by Ferdinand. He remains nothing more than a creature and one gets to see his incapacity of imagining anything but 'creaturely', subservient to Ferdinand. He surrenders his individuality and functions as a soulless agent: 'I am your creature.' (1.1.286-87) However, Bosola's transformation to bestiality is nothing compared to the eventual madness of Ferdinand, as a result of this animalistic obsession. In the course of the play, Bosola is further transformed into a compassionate being, reversing his degeneration and moving towards humanity. What is interesting here is that in the course of his grotesque services to Ferdinand and implementation of his malignant schemes, Bosola never tries to justify his actions nor does he, in any of his introspective soliloquies, provide a convincing logic behind his actions. He acts as a catalyst and carries out the orders from above as an automaton. Forker says that it is the desire to be loyal even to an 'undependable' person such as Ferdinand that explains Bosola's ambivalent feelings towards the rest of the characters.

It accounts for the mixture of love and hatred the duke's half-willing servant feels for his master, and it suggests how he can continue to persecute the Duchess and her spouse even as his respect for them persecutes (Forker 333).

The nobility of the Duchess and her investment of trust in Bosola fill him with awe and admiration. He is strongly attracted to her rebellious, although evasive, nature.

Oh, she's gone again: there the cords of life broke.
 Oh sacred innocence, that sweetly sleeps
 On turtles feathers: whilst a guilty conscience
 Is a black register, wherein is writ
 All our good deeds and bad
 ...
 This is manly sorrow:
 These tears, I am very certain, never grew
 In my mother's milk. My estate is sunk
 Below the degree of fear: where were
 These penitent fountains while she was living? (4.2.350-353)

Bosola recognises that he has learned to shed tears of remorse which is unlikely of him. In the previous act, Ferdinand also notices Bosola's qualms, when the former is drawn to pity when he hears about the Duchess's plight:

Bosola: Never in mine shape;
 That's forfeited by my intelligence, (4.1.133)

...

Ferdinand: Very likely:
Thy pity is nothing of kin to thee. (4.1.135)

Bosola tries to compensate his folly by discharging the body of the Duchess 'to the reverend dispose/ Of some good women' without being instructed by his employer:

...here is a sight
As direful to my soul as is the sword
Unto a wretched hath slain his father. Come,
I'll thee hence,
And execute thy last will; that's deliver
Thy body to the reverend dispose
Of some good women: that the cruel tyrant
Shall not deny me. (4.2.360-365)

He sees in her an opportunity to elevate him from his 'baseness', but he does not realise it until he has eliminated this embodiment of strength and innocence to satisfy the whims of her frenzied brother. He is filled with remorse at this fatal mistake and says to Ferdinand:

I serv'd your tyranny; and rather strove
To satisfy yourself, than all the world;
And although I loath'd the evil, yet I lov'd
You that did counsel it; and rather sought
To appear a true servant, than an honest one. (4.2.329-33)

The character development of Bosola begins with his realisation that he had not only invested his friendship in people unable of reciprocating his loyalty but that he had also killed two promising people who could have elevated him from his baseness (Forker 337). Bosola's growing awareness of the capricious and malignant quality of the two brothers becomes more acute after he involuntarily kills Antonio. He recognises his folly and vows,

(O direful misprision!)
I will not imitate things glorious
No more than base: I'll be mine own example. (5.4.80-82)

Bosola begins, only towards the end of the play, to recognise the dictates of the court and its insidiousness. When he vows 'to be mine own example', he begins to deviate from the court and its authority and a resistance ensues from this point. Where the revolt against the existing authoritative discourse against the two brothers had already begun from above in the form of resistance by the Duchess, initially in a subtle manner, Bosola carries forward this revolt- this time a resistance from below. The aristocratic dominion of the two brothers is thus counter attacked and this rebellion keeps one pondering whether if these two forces had aligned earlier in the play, there could have been an alternative social order- a counter discourse that could have changed or more so, displaced the existing one. Webster not only exposes the political strategies of the Cardinal and Ferdinand, but also challenges such a reign with an egalitarian world order epitomised by the Duchess⁶ (her act of transcending the contours of class difference and

⁶ In her thesis, Prendergast comments on the language of the Duchess while convincing Antonio into marrying her, According to her, "However, the very fact that the Duchess addresses only the economic position of her spouse, rather than Antonio's deficiency in having an aristocratic background indicates her divergence from an ideology that maintains a class hierarchy. It is through a language and ideology of a shifting economic situation that the Duchess is able to find a place for her marriage to exist." (22)

marrying below her rank. Whether she does this consciously or it is an act of passion, it cannot be ascertained. On several occasions, the Duchess articulates her desire to remarry as an innate sexual desire: This is flesh and blood, sir;/ 'Tis not the figure cut in alabaster/ Kneels at my husband's tomb' (1.2.370-373). Further, she uses justifies her reasons for remarriage to her brothers thus: 'Why should only I,/ Of all the other princes of the world/ Be cas'd up, like a holy relic?/ I have youth,/ And a little beauty. (3.2.137-140)) What Webster attempts to do through the portrayal of the two most powerful characters that act as a foil to the aristocratic rule is the existence of a simultaneous discourse that runs alongside a system of patronage which promotes greed, where Bosola is employed as an agent. Although with negativism, because the two characters are terminated, Webster allows us a glimpse of what might succeed in displacing such a corrupt political system, insinuating that where the two failed individually, their aligned forces would have at least displaced the tyrannical administration, if not completely undo it. It is to be noted here that the Duchess not only comes down from her stature to marry Antonio, but also engages Bosola as her confidante. Bosola wins her trust and the latter confides in him about Antonio and their secret marriage. What is interesting here is that Bosola reveals a part of his self that prefers 'merit' to 'degree'.

No question but many an unbenefic'd scholar
Shall pray for you, for this deed, and rejoice
That some preferment in the world can yet
Arise from merit. (3.2.282-285)

But owing to his allegiance to his employers, Bosola cannot remain static in his role as the Duchess's confidante and proceeds to carry out his employers' orders.

Unfortunately, however, there is another side to Bosola, the side that cannot shake his age's allegiance to the concept of the inherited position. This side of Bosola pays allegiance to the Cardinal and Ferdinand; Bosola's desire to get what he deserves ironically makes him give homage to degree. Although he admires virtue, he nonetheless accepts Ferdinand's hire...Consequently, Bosola at times contradicts his assertions that support merit over degree. (Selzer 183)

At the end, though, these three characters are terminated, there remain the Duchess's son, and Delio, Antonio's trusted friend. It could be said then, that the playwright plans to suggest a different form of hierarchy which is not informed by the bloody episodes that coloured the previous one. Bosola desires to have an explanation for having the children strangled- 'Alas, how have these offended?' to which Ferdinand replies heartlessly, The death/ Of young wolves is never pitied.' (4.2.250-55) Filled with remorse at witnessing the murder of innocent children, Bosola's moral anguish comes to the fore and it is for the first time that he retorts, without ambivalence, the tyranny of his employer. He cuts himself away from their influence, and one sees him 'wake' up to a different persona,

You may be brothers: for treason like the plague,
Doth take much in a blood. I stand like one
That long hath tane a sweet and golden dream.
I am angry with myself, now that I wake. (4.2.316-20)

Yet, while Bosola here exhibits an insight into the political schemes of the court and the need to resist it, the need to endure 'shame' and what he often suffers from, 'neglect', he fails to undo

the underlying power that initiates his debasement in the first place. He cannot altogether root out the ignoble hereditary privilege that encourages ruthlessness through patronage, owing to its hierarchical stratification. At the end, Delio's announcement of making 'noble use of this great ruin' by restoring the infant to his rightful position of his mother perpetuates another discourse of hereditary privilege- but this time, it is a noble attempt of installing the rightful owner to its position. Bosola's soliloquy in the last scene of the play is an acknowledgement of his true nature:

In a mist: I know not how;
Such a mistake as I have often seen
In a play. Oh, I am gone:
...
Let worthy minds ne'er stagger in distrust
To suffer death or shame for what is just:
Mine is another voyage. (5.5.93-103)

Although Bosola's transformation is more of an emotional one than of action, it is a transformation nonetheless. The employment of exaggerated scenes to infuse horror in the play by the playwright is a pointer to an unrealised possibility that fails to take its final shape. Edmund A. Wright advocates such exaggeration 'for it must be bigger than life if it is to reach an audience. Merely finding the truth is not enough. Reality must be interpreted and expressed in a distinctive way.' (Wright 4) Apparently, by the end of the play, nothing much has changed except that an awe struck audience is left with a gory stage, coloured with the blood of the characters. With the restoration of the son of the Duchess and Antonio, another hierarchy is established. But because of the presence of these two characters- the Duchess and Bosola, who went out of their roles and challenged the tyranny of the two brothers, one can well expect a hierarchy that is grounded more on egalitarian values and less on gruesome plotting and incentives⁷. The prospect of revolt among the repressed remains an interesting dimension in the play and although it is not realised fully, this aspect serves as a subtle indicator of alternative political possibilities represented by Bosola.

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⁷ Bosola acknowledges that a 'politician' or an 'intelligencer' promotes every action by bribing one with incentives. This is a pointer to his awareness about the existing political strategies that colour the milieu of his time and where he is himself a part of: "Why every quality I'th'world/ Prefers but gain, or commendation: / Now for this act, I am certain to be rais'd,/ And men that paint weeds, to the life, are praised." (3.3.325-328)

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