

Describe a significant work of art (visual, literary, film, etc.) and discuss how it takes up and interprets religious motifs and traditions.

Contemporary critical scholarship on John Webster's seminal work *The Duchess of Malfi* is concerned with two main questions. The first is how readers are meant to interpret the Duchess's morality and, consequently, what type of death she dies; the second is whether the play's final act serves the dramatic action of the story or suffers from major structural defects.¹ Focusing on the analogical nature of Webster's dramaturgy and applying that lens to the play's varied death scenes, this essay proposes that these two questions are inextricably linked by how *The Duchess of Malfi* engages the *Ars Morendi* tradition. Also, this essay maintains that, as a work on the "Art of Dying," the numerous death scenes serve not as a mere dramatic device as they might in a revenge tragedy, but as a predominant theme of the piece.

Kim Solga has carefully summarized contemporary critical discourse on the Duchess's morality and martyrdom.² However, to advance the central thesis of this essay, it is vital to convey that the crux of the debate is whether or not the Duchess dies a genuine martyr's death. In other words, is the Duchess truly martyred or is she somehow getting her just desserts for her impropriety? This paper maintains that the Duchess dies a martyr, leaning on evidence that she would not even by Elizabethan standards be transgressive.³ Yet, even for those who agree that she should be considered a martyr, discussion over the "kind of martyr the Duchess of Malfi turns out to be" has continued to provoke textual criticism.⁴ Despite the divergence in

¹ George Rylands, "On the Production of The Duchess of Malfi," in *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. G. H. W. Rylands and C. Williams (London: Sylvan, 1945), vi.

² Kim Solga, "Witness to Despair: The Martyr of Malfi's Ghost," in *Violence Against Women in Early Modern Performance: Invisible Acts*, ed. Kim Solga (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 98-140. Solga herself ultimately argues instead that the Duchess finally "mocks the pose of the heroic female supplicant."

³ Elizabeth Oakes, "'The Duchess of Malfi' as a Tragedy of Identity," *Studies in Philology* 96, no. 1 (1999): 51-67. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4174628>.

⁴ Solga, "Witness to Despair: The Martyr of Malfi's Ghost," 103-105.

viewpoints, scholars tend to employ similar methodological approaches in their analyses. By examining the Duchess's actions, decisions, and embodiment of her various identities—widow, ruler, sister, wife, mother— they seek to establish whether she lives up to or falls short of prescribed Jacobean societal expectations.⁵ It is unsurprising that this discourse has evolved into a debate over the Duchess's most authentic and primary identity.⁶ Yet, it is unclear how investigations of her life's virtue meaningfully answer the fundamental question of how to interpret her death.

Some have turned to extratextual sources, but Webster's writings only further complicate the subject. As many have observed in "The Overburian Characters," Webster contrasts a virtuous widow, who "never receives but one mans impression," to an ordinary widow, for whom "The end of her husband beginnes in teares; and the end of her teares beginnes in a husband."⁷ On the surface, it would appear that the Duchess conforms to Webster's description of the pernicious "ordinary widow," as she is swiftly married to Antonio following the death of her first husband. However, as Brian Chalk has noted, the Duchess does not fit neatly into either of these tropes stating Webster has given her "a gravitas unsuitable to the vulgar figure" of the ordinary widow.⁸

⁵ See Margaret Lael Mikesell, "Catholic and Protestant Widows in 'The Duchess of Malfi,'" *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme* 7, no. 4 (1983): 265–79. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43444435>; Theodora A. Jankowski, "Defining/Confining the Duchess: Negotiating the Female Body in John Webster's 'The Duchess of Malfi,'" *Studies in Philology* 87, no. 2 (1990): 221–45. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4174360>.

⁶ Solga, "Witness to Despair: The Martyr of Malfi's Ghost," 104. Solga draws out several such works, stating Frank Whigham insists the Duchess is killed for being a 'family pioneer', whereas Celia Daileader concludes she is martyred for her "her proto-feminist demand for parity of desire."

⁷ Thomas Overbury, *The Overburian Characters (1616)*, ed. W. J. Paylor (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1936.), 70-71.

⁸ Brian Chalk, "Webster's 'Worthiest Monument': The Problem of Posterity in 'The Duchess of Malfi,'" *Studies in Philology* 108, no. 3 (2011): 379–402. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23055997>.

The Duchess of Malfi regularly utilizes analogy to convey meaning.⁹ For instance, frequently employ comparison as a way to reason through their own experiences.¹⁰ This is on display, perhaps most obviously, in Webster's treatment of the Duchess and Ferdinand, who, while twins, are contrasted in almost every way by the trustworthy Antonio (I.i.180-194). However, more than the distinctions in personality, the many death scenes provide ample opportunities to investigate the play's meaning. The Duchess's show of strength despite the cruelty of her murder, orchestrated by her malevolent brothers, is the play's most potent dramatic element. In addition, the play has no less than eight other on-stage deaths. Rather than weighing the evidence for or against the Duchess based on her life, as a jury might, could we evaluate her based on how her disposition toward dying compares to that of the other characters on stage?

The fourth act is essentially one long death scene. It starts with the Duchess's imprisonment and terminates with her strangulation, a short revivification, and her eventual final death. When asked how she is taking her imprisonment, Bosola, a dispassionate cutthroat, responds that she displays "a behaviour so noble as gives a majesty to adversity: You may discern the shape of loveliness more perfect in her tears than in her smiles," (IV.i.5-8) almost echoing the centurion at Golgotha.¹¹ The fourth act heavily alludes to the story of the death of Jesus. For instance, in her final moments, the Duchess forgives her own executioners (IV.ii.206). In addition to these biblical references, Bettie Anne Dobler points out, "the death of the Duchess is played against brilliant allusions to the *ars moriendi*."¹² Bosola informs the Duchess that he intends to bring her "by degrees to mortification," just as the medieval *ars moriendi* tradition

⁹ Christina Luckyj, "'Great Women of Pleasure': Main Plot and Subplot in *The Duchess of Malfi*," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 27, no. 2 (1987): 267-83. <https://doi.org/10.2307/450466>.

¹⁰ John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*. ed. John Russell Brown (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1997.) I.i.440-448; I.i.500-501; III.ii.200-203. All other references to *The Duchess of Malfi* are from this source.

¹¹ Matt. 27:54

¹² Bettie Anne Doeblér, "Continuity in the Art of Dying: 'The Duchess of Malfi,'" *Comparative Drama* 14, no. 3 (1980): 203-15. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41152898>.

intends to prepare the dying for death. Dobler illustrates that the Jacobean audience would have instantly recognized everything from the Duchess's temptation to despair to the actual physical properties like the crucifix, which is ceremoniously placed around her neck, to be allusions to the familiar tradition of death bed preparation.

For the medieval *ars moriendi*, the aim is to impart encouragement to the dying so that they might overcome the devil's final temptations. Bosola, whether he intends to or not, successfully arrives at the intended outcome of the preparations. When told she will be strangled and asked why she is not afraid, she responds, "Who would be afraid on 't, Knowing to meet such excellent company In th' other world? (IV.ii.209-211)" She boldly commands her executioners not to delay the inevitable.

Duchess. Pull, and pull strongly, for your able strength
 Must pull down heaven upon me:—
 Yet stay; heaven-gates are not so highly arch'd
 As princes' palaces; they that enter there
 Must go upon their knees [Kneels].—Come, violent death, (IV.ii.229-233)

After the Duchess dies, what remains for us is the deaths of no less than eight characters in quick succession. Cariola, the Duchess's waiting-woman, confesses that she is pregnant out of wedlock and has not been to confession as she bites and scratches her executioners (IV.ii.251-253). As Julia, the Cardinal's mistress, dies from kissing a poisoned prayer book, she confesses she does not know where she is going in her afterlife (V.ii.287-288). The Cardinal is undone by his own brother and Bosola, the assassin he hired, and dies in sorrow (V.v.54-55). Even the noble Antonio, upon being stabbed, bemoans the meaningless of his life saying "We follow after bubbles blown in th' air. Pleasure of life, what is't? only the good hours Of an ague; merely a preparative to rest, To endure vexation (V.v.66-69)." When we see how each of the others approaches their deaths, it becomes apparent that the Duchess is made of sterner stuff.

Many critics have argued that the Duchess's death breaks the dramatic action and leads to an anti-climactic fifth act.¹³ However, this position implies that the living Duchess drives the play's action forward. If, on the other hand, we are meant to use her death as a means by which to read the Duchess and the entire play's meaning, it brings the fifth act into focus. In that case, it would be necessary for an audience to see her tragic execution before witnessing the chaos that ensues; it would also be necessary to see the others die afterward. While we hear only the echo of the Duchess in the fifth act, she alone speaks to us from beyond the grave (V.iii.19-45) As Bosola is converted from a malevolent murderer to her zealous avenger (IV.ii.353-374), it's clear that, while she has shed her corporal form, the Duchess reverberates throughout the rest of the play.

John Webster's work is often described as macabre.¹⁴ However, if "dying well" is the central theme of *The Duchess of Malfi*, it would be difficult to argue that the deaths are simply gratuitous. If the Duchess's death is the primary representation of her virtue, we not only read forward her virtue by comparison but also read back and find in all her more subtle forms of resistance the same constitution displayed during her death. Through her death, the Duchess quells all earlier questions of her guilt or innocence.¹⁵ Her hope and perseverance to the end conclusively demonstrate that she led a life worth living, and, at least according to Webster's reimagining of the *ars moriendi*, died a death worth dying.

¹³ Joyce McMillan, "Theatre Review: The Duchess [of Malfi], Royal Lyceum, Edinburgh," *The Scotsman*, May 24, 2019, <https://www.scotsman.com/arts-and-culture/theatre-and-stage/theatre-review-duchess-malfi-royal-lyceum-edinburgh-1416787>. In this review of a 2019 production of the play, McMillan states, "Like Webster's original drama, Harris's version has a long coda of a fifth act, in which the murdered Duchess haunts the living in search of resolution; and like Webster, Harris struggles a little – as both writer and director – to maintain the intensity of the drama once the glowing and poignant Duchess is gone."

¹⁴ William Cook Miller. "Macabre Vitality: Texture and Resonance in *The Duchess of Malfi*," *Renaissance Drama* 43, no. 2 (2015): 193–216. <https://doi.org/10.1086/683142>.

¹⁵ Doebler, "Continuity in the Art of Dying: 'The Duchess of Malfi,'" 203. Doebler proposes, "Such a macabre tour de force transcends all earlier questions of the Duchess's guilt or innocence."

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