

## ***The Tragedy of the Dutchesse of Malfy: Tragic Traditions and Italian Tales***

Below you will find some excerpts from Webster's immediate source for his play, the tale of the Duchess of Amalfi that appears in William Painter's collection of translated tales, *The Palace of Pleasure*, published in 1567. Painter was translating a French translation (by François de Belleforest) of an Italian novella written in 1554 by Matteo Bandello, who knew Antonio Beccadelli di Bologna personally. Bandello's *novelle* also provided the sources for Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, *Twelfth Night*, *Cymbeline* and *Much Ado about Nothing*.

Belleforest introduced a lot of heavy-handed, often misogynist moralizing into his translation of Bandello, which Painter reproduced in his translation. Bandello adds a moral dimension relatively briefly (see the first quotation, below). Belleforest and Painter also frame the tale as a tragedy, which Bandello does not, giving Webster cues for how he might structure his play. One question we might ask of Webster's play, then, is *what kind of tragedy is it? Is it the same kind of tragedy that he finds in Painter's version of the tale?* I've also added two quotations on tragedy from Geoffrey Chaucer and the fifteenth-century poet John Lydgate, which at times seem similar to the kind of tragedy being expressed by Belleforest/Painter. That is, tragedy based around Fortune's turning wheel. *Is Webster's play a tragedy of fortune or society, or both?* In order to answer these and other questions — eg. *whether tragedy is gendered* — have a read over the excerpts below and we will focus on particular scenes from Webster's play in the session itself that will help us formulate some conclusions.

### **Note on Language**

The language of Painter, Chaucer and Lydgate might seem slightly alien at first so don't be alarmed when you first read the excerpts. You will get the gist of what they are saying if you persevere. Webster's language is updated in our modern editions of *The Duchess of Malfi*, just as Shakespeare's language is updated by modern editors. Yet both Webster and Shakespeare, like Painter, wrote in Early Modern English (EME). Chaucer and Lydgate wrote in Middle English (ME), which might seem slightly more difficult, but is by no means as alien as Old English (OE), the language of *Beowulf*. So read and reread to allow the meanings gradually to sink in. If you find yourself struggling with any difficult words then follow this link to the [Middle English Dictionary](#). I have changed the long s (*ſ*) of EME to regular s. Note also that *u* and *v* swapped places after the seventeenth century. Hence what we call double-u looks more like a double-v (*w*). The letters *i* and *y* were also interchangeable in ME and EME. Thus *lyued* is *lived*.

#### **1. Matteo Bandello, Introduction to Novella XXIV**

In this story one can see the scant foresight of a lady who, through illicit appetites, abases her rank and marries beneath her. For the Duchess of Amalfi – who falls in love with [Antonio] Bologna, and marries him, and lies with him, and ultimately is put to death – demonstrates how much pain is caused by the folly of love, and a woman's lack of prudence, the effects of which are the degradation her nobility through carnal appetites, and submitting herself to one lower than her, and the punishment that one sometimes receives for such follies. This teaches others not to run headlong with desire, but to temper their thoughts effectively, so that they remain praised and not blamed in the mouths of men [people], as the latter led to a painful end.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. William Painter, Introduction to his translation of Belleforest's translation of Bandello's Novella XXIV

The great Honor and authority men haue in thys World, and the greater their estimation is, the more sensible and notorious are the faultes by them committed, and the greater is their slaunder. In lyke manner more difficult it is for that man to tolerate and sustayne Fortune, which al the dayes of his life hath lyued at his ease, if by chaunce he fall into any great necessity than for hym whych neuer felt but woe, mishap, and aduersity. [...] So lykewyse the fall of a high and lofty Tree, maketh greater noyse, than that whych is low and little. Hygh Towers, and stately Palaces of Prynces bee seene further of, than the poore Cabans, and homely Sheepehardes Sheepcotes: the Walles of lofty Cittyes more a loofe doe Salute the Viewers of the fame, than the fimple Caues, which the Poore doe digge belowe the Mountayne Rockes. Wherefore it behoueth the Noble, and sutch as haue charge of Common wealth, to lyue an honest Lyfe, and beare their port vpright, that none haue cause to discourse vppon their wicked deedes and naughty life. And aboue all modesty ought to be kept by Women, whom as their race, Noble birth, authority and name, maketh them more famous, euen so their vertue, honesty, chastity, and continencie more prayse worthy. And behoueful it is, that like as they wishe to be honoured aboue all other, so their life do make them worthy of that honour, without disgracing their name by deed or worde, or blemishing that brightnesse which may commend the same. I greatly feare that all the Princely factes, the exploytes and conquests done by the Babylonian Queene Semyramis, neuer was recommended wyth sutch prayse, as hir vice had shame in records by those which left remembrance of auncient acts. Thus I say, because a woman being as it were the Image of sweetnesse, curtesie and shamefastnesse, so soone as she steppeth out of the right tract, and abandoneth the sweete smel of hir duety and modesty, besides the denigration of hir

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<sup>1</sup> 'Fassi fa si vedere in questa novella il poco avvedimento d'una signora, che per illeciti appetiti abbassandosi del suo grado si congiunge ad infimo dise. Per la duchessa d'amalfi che s'innamora del Bologna, e con lui si maritate e giace, et ultimamente son fatti morire, si dimostra il folle amore di quanto male sia causa, e la poca prudenza d'una donna ne' gli effetti suoi in avilire per i carnali appetiti la sua nobilita, e sommettersi a più basso di lei, e la pena che alle volte di simili follie si riceve, imparando l'altre a non correre in fretta col desio, ma temperare si fattamente i suoi pensieri, che restino nella bocca de gli uomini lodate e non biasimate, ne parimente come i sudetti condotti a dolorosa fine' (my translation). *Il primo volume delle novelle del Bandello* (Milan: Giovanni Antonio degli Antonij, 1560), novella XXIV (cc. 190r-198v).

honour, thrusteth her selfe into infinite Troubles, caufeth ruine of sutch which should bee honoured and prayed, if Womens Allurementes solicited theym not to Folly.<sup>2</sup>

### 3. Painter, *The Duchesse of Malfi* (pp. 20, 23-24, 31)

Beholde the first Acte of this Tragedy, and the prouision of the fare which afterwarde sent them bothe to their graue, who immediatly gaue their mutual faith [...]. And this was the second Acte of this Tragical Historie, to see a fugitive husband, secretly to mary, especially hir, vpon whome hee ought not so much as to loke but with feare and reuerence. Behold here (O ye folish louers) a Glasse of your lightnesse, and yee Women, the course of your fond behayor. It behoueth not the wife sodainly to execute their first motions and desyres of their heart for so much as they may be affured that pleasure is pursued fo neare with a repentaunce so sharp to be suffred, and hard to be digested, as their voluptuousnesse shall vtterly discontent them. True it is, that mariages be don in heauen and performed in earth, but that saying may not be applied to fooles, which gouerne them selues by carnall desires, whose scope is but pleasure, and the reward many times equall to their follie. Shall I be of opinion that a houshold seruaunt oughte to sollicite, nay rather suborne the Daughter of his Lorde without punyshment, or that a vyle and abject person dare to mount vpon a Prynces Bed? No, no, pollicye requyreth order in all, and eche wight ought to bee matched according to theyr qalytye, wythout makynge a Pastyme of it to couer theyr Follyes, and knowe not of what Force Loue and Desteny be, except the fame be resysted. A goodly thinge it is to Loue, but where reason looseth Place, Loue is wythoute his effecte, and the sequele rage and Madnesse: leaue we to discourse of those which beleue that they be constrained to folowe the Force of theyr Mynde, and may easilye subdue themselues to the Lawes of Vertue and Honesty, lyke one that thrusteth hys Heade into a Sack, and thynkes he can not get out: futch people do please themselues in theyr loffe, and thinke all well that is noysome to their Health, daily folowyng theyr owne delyghtes. [...] This was the preparatiue of the catastrophe and bloody end of this tragedie.

### 4. Painter, pp. 27-28

Good Ladyes [...] Thefe Hystories be not wryten to trayne and trap you to pursue the thousand thousand slippery sleightes of Loue's gallantise, but rather carefully to warne you to behold the semblable faultes, and to serue for a drugge to discharge the Poyson which gnaweth and fretteth the integrytie and soundnesse of the soule. The wyse and skilfull Apothecary or compositor of drugges, dresseth Vipers flesh to purge the patyent from hote corrupted bloud which conceyueth and engendreth Leprosie within hys Body. In lyke manner, the fonde loue and wycked rybauldry of Semiramis, Pasiphae, Messalina, Faustina, and Romilda is shewed in wryt, that euery of you maye feare to be numbred and recorded amongs futch common and dishonourable women. You Princes and great Lords read the follies of Paris, the adulteries of Hercules, the dainty and effeminate life of Sardanapalus, the

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<sup>2</sup> William Painter, *The Palace of Pleasure*, ed. J. Jacobs (1567; London: David Nutt, 1890), III, pp. 3-43 (pp. 3-4).

tiranny of Phalaris, Busiris, or Dyonisius of Sicile, and see the history of Tiberius, Nero, Caligula, Domitian, and Heliogabalus, and spare not to recompte them amongs our wanton youthes which soile themfelues villaines more filthily than the swine do in the durt : al this intendeth it an instruction for your youth to follow the infection and whoredome of those Monsters ? Better it were all those bokes were drenched in bottomlesse depth of seas, than Christian life by their meanes should be corrupted: but the example of the wicked is induced for to eschue and auoid them, as the life of the good and honest is remembred to frame and addresse our behaior in this world to be praise worthy and commended : otherwise the holinesse of sacred writ should serue for an argument to the vnthrifty and luxurious to confirm and approue their beastly and licencious wickedneffe.

### 5. Painter, pp. 5-35

But what ? It is impossible to eschue that which the heauens haue determined vpon vs: or to shunne the vnhappe which seemeth to follow vs, as it were naturally proceeding from our mother's Wombe: in sutch wyse as many times, he which seemeth the wisest: man, guided by misfortune, hasteth himself with stouping head to fall headlonge into hys death and ruine [...]. Til this time Fortune was contented to proceede with indifferent quiet againft thofe Louers [the Duchess and Antonio], but henceforth yee shall heare the Issue of theyr little prosperous loue, and how pleasure hauing blinded them, neuer forsooke them vntil it had giuen them the ouerthrow.

### 6. Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Monk's Prologue and Tale* (CT, VII. 1972-82, 1991-98)<sup>3</sup>

Or ellis, first, tragedies wol I telle,  
Of whiche I have an hundred in my celle.  
Tragedie is to seyn a certeyn storie,  
As olde bookes maken us memorie,  
Of hym that stood in greet prosperitee,  
And is yfallen out of heigh degree  
Into myserie, and endeth wrecchedly.  
And they ben versified communely  
Of six feet, which men clepen exametron.  
In prose eek been endited many oon,  
And eek in meetre in many a sondry wyse.  
Lo, this declaryng oghte ynogh suffise.

*Heere bigynneth the Monkes Tale*

*De Casibus Virorum Illustrium.*

[Concerning the Fates of Famous Men]

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<sup>3</sup> Larry D. Benson (gen. ed.), *The Riverside Chaucer* (Oxford: OUP, 1988), pp. 240-41.

I wol biwaille in manere of tragedie  
The harm of hem that stode in heigh degree,  
And fillen so that ther nas no remedie  
To brynge hem out of hir adversitee.  
For certein, whan that Fortune list to flee,  
Ther may no man the cours of hire withholde.  
Lat no man truste on blynd prosperitee;  
Be war by this ensamples trewe and olde.

#### 7. John Lydgate, *The Fall of Princes* [*De casibus virorum illustrium*], Prologue to Bk 1

Ful weel he [Giovanni Boccaccio] felte the labour was notable,  
The fall of nobles, with eueri circumstaunce,  
From ther lordshippes, dreedful and vnstable,  
How that thei fill to putte in remembraunce,  
Therin to shewe Fortunys variaunce,  
That othre myhte as in a merour see  
In worldly worshepe may be no surete.

[...]

For a story which is nat pleyntli told,  
But constreynyd vndir woordes fewe  
For lak off trouthe, wher thei be newe or old,  
Men bi report kan nat the mater shewe;  
These ookis [oaks] grete be nat doun ihewe  
First at a strok[e], but bi long processe,  
Nor longe stories a woord may not expresse.

[...]

And as myn auctour list to comprehende,—  
This lohn Bochas, bi gret auctorite,—  
It is almesse to correct and a-mende  
The vicious folk off euery comounte,  
And bi exaumpelis which that notable be  
Off pryncis olde, that whilom dede fall,  
The lowere people from ther error call.