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Queering the Duchess: Exploring the Body of the Female Homosexual in John Webster's

The Duchess of Malfi

In John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, homosexuality may not be the first theme that jumps out of the play's dark and mysterious depths. Perhaps due to the play's classification as a revenge tragedy, criticism has conventionally centred around themes of power, revenge, desire, and violence. More modern critical work, specifically feminist readings, have attempted to destabilize conventional notions of gender through interpreting the Duchess as a strong and sexually liberated heroine, moving away from what Lesel Dawson describes in early modern literature as "a polarized view of women (which constructs them as either chaste angels or whorish devils)" (312). One of the most familiar of these critical works is Theodora A. Jankowski's "Defining/Confining the Duchess: Negotiating the Female Body in John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*," published in 1990. Unfortunately, this relatively new area of feminist critical discourse surrounding the Duchess conforms strictly to heterosexual readings. This essay thus argues that *The Duchess of Malfi* deserves a place amongst a growing number of Renaissance works being reconsidered by queer theory by seeking to deconstruct previous criticism that has presumed heterosexuality in its readings of the Duchess.

Although queer theory didn't gain serious consideration and popularity in the critical sphere until the early 1990s, hardly any scholarly work since then has focused on the potential homosexual tendencies of the Duchess, despite her explicitly identified gender nonconformity and her quasi-sexual relationship with Cariola. Through the lens of a queer reading, Webster portrays the Duchess's rejection of heteronormative ideals as a way to

explore the boundaries of heterosexuality and play with ideas of what a powerful aristocratic homosexual woman looks and acts like. Jonathan Goldberg is keen to characterize the Renaissance era as a culture that did “not operate under the aegis of the homo/hetero divide” (2), thus allowing for broader readings of homosexuality in relation to character representations. Indeed, accounts of aristocratic women in the early modern period engaging in homoerotic activities were not uncommon and, more importantly, not suppressed by their male reporters (Drouin 88-89).

Heteronormativity is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as “the privileging of biologically determining gender roles,” constituting an alignment in the relationship between the biological sex of the body and the perceived gender of the self. In *The Duchess of Malfi*, Webster severs this relationship, with the Duchess displaying masculine characteristics despite her sexed female body. Although Webster would not have been familiar with heteronormativity and ideas of gender and sex binaries that have become foundational discourses in the construction of queer theory, Webster’s conscious presentation of the Duchess as simultaneously masculine and feminine does imply that he intends for the audience to realize the Duchess’s subverted gender roles. Yet according to Jankowski, “[N]o language existed for describing the nature of female rule,” and thus masculine language was the only language of power available for female rulers such as Webster’s Duchess (221). While progressive in its own right regarding the patriarchal structure of language, Jankowski’s reading does not consider queer readings for the Duchess’s significant masculine traits.

Moreover, the femininity of the Duchess’s body is often fixated on by male characters, and her masculine characteristics such as ambition, drive, and leadership are ignored. Bosola observes that during her pregnancy—an undisguisable signifier of the female body—the Duchess “pukes, her stomach seethes, / The fins of her eyelids look most teeming

blue, / She wanes I' th' cheek, and waxes flat I' th' flank" (Webster 2.1.58-60). Interestingly, in this same scene, the Duchess is concurrently depicted with such masculine traits as she directs her ladies imperatively: "Come hither, mend my ruff; / . . . Thou art such a tedious lady (2.1.102-03). The emphases on "eyelids," "cheek," and "flank" reinforce how Bosola is solely interested in identifying the corporeal feminine features of the Duchess's body and disregards the masculine characteristics she performs.

Furthermore, the Duchess's brother Ferdinand fixates obsessively over her body as a site solely for masculine pleasure, imposing a virile heterosexual metaphor onto her when he declares "women like that part which, like the lamprey, / Hath never a bone in 't" (1.3.44-45). The phallic associations of the boneless lamprey recall images of penetration. Even the Duchess's husband, Antonio, communicates in sexual euphemisms emphasising the heterosexuality of their relationship. Antonio declares that "my rule is only in the night," to which the Duchess responds, "To what use will you put me?" (3.2.7, 3.2.8). Yet while male characters sexualize her female body, Webster allows the audience to connect with the Duchess on a more profound level through the construction of a complex masculine self. She likens her marriage to Antonio as a "dangerous venture" and creates a semantic field of masculinity using war terminology such as "men in some great battles," "impossible actions," "soldiers," and "frights and threatenings" (1.3.51, 1.3.52, 1.3.53, 1.3.54, 1.3.55). Further, Ferdinand also recognizes a disconnect between her sex and gender. He calls her a "hyena" (2.5.39), referring to the contemporary belief that hyenas were hermaphrodites; Marta Powell Harley refers to Ovid's description of a hyena, in book 15 of *Metamorphoses*, as a "female, and another while becommeth male again" (336).

Webster's rejection of heteronormative gender ideals therefore invites a queer reading of the Duchess. Evidently, this reading is not explicit or overt, or perhaps even intentional by Webster, but it does signal that Webster succeeded in constructing a female character outside

of the contemporary heteronormative scope. As Goldberg surmises, “[T]he aim [of queering the Renaissance] is not to ‘find’ gays or lesbians hidden from history,” but to note the gender ambiguities and androgyny prevalent in work by established Renaissance writers that was previously assumed to be heteronormative (4). Thus, instead of assuming heterosexuality in one’s analysis, one can consider that Webster could be entertaining homoerotic tendencies in his gender nonconforming Duchess through a disconnect between her female physical body and her perceived masculine self.

The Duchess’s intimate and quasi-sexual relationship with Cariola is the most explicit reinforcer of this interpretation. The scene where Cariola has the most dialogue on stage is in act 3, scene 2, staged in the Duchess’s bedchamber, and Judith Haber has identified the bedchamber as “the Duchess's attempt to construct and control her own body, to create a circular, ‘feminine’ space that is free from invasion” (138). While Haber recognizes the bedchamber as a feminine space free from male invasion, I argue that it can also be read as a homoerotic space that is free from heterosexual invasion, as this is where the Duchess and Cariola are the most intimate. Webster and his contemporaries may have been familiar with private women’s quarters as a space for intimate female-female desire, and Jennifer Drouin evidences the circulation of multiple accounts of sex between women in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: “M. de Clermont Tallard, visiting the court of king Henri III of France, spies two ladies having sex in the adjacent closet: ‘he saw, by a little chink, . . . in another closet, two very great ladies . . . kiss each other like doves, rub and frig one another’” (90).

Drouin affirms that “from this historical narrative, it becomes clear that early modern lesbian sexuality was able to flourish in the closet where it was usually invisible to the male gaze” (90). Indeed, Cariola asserts that she “lie[s] with [the Duchess] often” and that “she’ll much disquiet [Antonio]” when they are in bed together (Webster 3.2.11). Considering the euphemistic sexual language between Antonio and the Duchess immediately before, Cariola

is likely hinting at sexual experiences with the Duchess. Furthermore, she describes the Duchess as “the sprawling’st bedfellow,” consolidating her use of lewd images to depict herself and the Duchess in bed together (3.2.13). In this sense, the Duchess’s masculine self discussed earlier could be a way for Webster to rationalize her homoerotic desires toward Cariola. Contemporary perceptions of same-sex desire in women ascribed to this interpretation that homosexual women were more likely to be masculine, and Drouin summarizes that for Pierre de Brantôme, the author of the 1585 work *La vie des dames galantes*, “a tribade’s desire for another woman imitates male desire for women, thereby testifying to the masculine woman’s desire to be more masculine” (89).

Further, when the Duchess proclaims that she “winked and chose a husband” (Webster 1.3.55), a common interpretation of this line depicts the Duchess as a liberated heterosexual woman defying patriarchal convention.¹ Yet, one significant structural quirk that is ignored is the fact that the Duchess’s full line reads “I winked and chose a husband. Cariola.” Perhaps Webster, by placing “husband” and “Cariola” on the same line, is implying that the intimacy between the Duchess and Cariola exceeds the platonic. At the time of her marriage proposal to Antonio in act 1, scene 3, the Duchess instructs Cariola to “place [her]self behind the arras, / Where thou mayst overhear us” (1.3.64-65), making her not only a witness but also a desired component in the Duchess’s seemingly heterosexual marriage to Antonio. Indeed, Antonio’s remarks that “there’s no third place” in marriage and that “a saucy and ambitious devil / Is dancing in this circle” could translate into dramatic irony, as the audience is aware of Cariola’s presence on stage throughout the proposal (1.3.102, 1.3.116-17). Aside from Cariola’s entanglement with Antonio and the Duchess’s marriage, Antonio in general is depicted as feminine and passive. It is the Duchess who “*puts the ring upon his finger*” and she who “*kisses him*” (1.3.19, 3.1.20). Following Brantôme’s analysis that a tribade “desire[s] to be more masculine” (Drouin 90), one can therefore advance the

interpretation that the femininity of Antonio only reaffirms the Duchess's queer position as a way for her homosexuality to be rationalized onto a male body with feminine characteristics.

Webster's Duchess also proclaims her masculine self by calling herself a "prince" multiple times throughout the play: "Whether I am doomed to live or die, / I can do both like a prince" (3.2.67-68). Ferdinand perceives this as highly alarming and responds: "Die then, quickly! (*Giving her a poniard*)."

The stage directions here are highly significant considering the phallic associations of poniards as a symbol of masculinity. In this sense, Ferdinand attempts to quash any power the Duchess has from her masculine self by asserting a masculine power he expects to intrinsically have because of his biologically male body.

Thomas A. King's summary of Carole Pateman's argument in *The Gendering of Men, 1600-1750* is particularly relevant to this interpretation: "the fraternity that positions men . . . as bearers of political right in civil society is founded in the sexual right in women's bodies that men achieve in both the public and private sphere" (13).

Thus, Webster achieves a "sexual right" over the female body through his characters by highlighting the extreme anxiety that Ferdinand experiences due to the Duchess's rogue masculinity that has no place alongside her female body (King 13). A queer reading would further theorize that Ferdinand's anger and fear toward the Duchess as a discordant symbol of masculinity is rooted in the idea that masculinity in women is associated with female homoerotic desire (Drouin 90). The female body of Webster's Duchess is often damned in the mouth of male characters, most notably Ferdinand. He uses a series of violent verbs to describe what he wants to do to her body: "I might toss her," "root up her . . . blast her," and "lay her" (2.5.18, 2.5.19, 2.5.20). Considering that the violent and virile masculine language he uses suggests a sexual desire toward the Duchess, Ferdinand's obsession over his twin sister's body could also have to do with how she does not conform to heteronormative conventions. Thus, Webster makes clear how the Duchess's masculine self is a threat to other

male characters like Ferdinand, not only under the heteronormative analysis of rogue feminine power, but also in the light of Ferdinand's potential confusion and rejection of the Duchess as a tribade. Ultimately, Webster represents Ferdinand as attempting to downplay or eradicate her masculinity by demanding virile sexual control over her body.

There are a number of scholarly works on queering the Renaissance era; however, these queer studies have generally focused on male homosociality and homosexuality of Renaissance literature.² Of the few recently published works specifically on lesbianism in the Renaissance era, such as Valerie Traub's *The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England*, none include *The Duchess of Malfi* in their pages.³ Webster portrays the Duchess as falling outside of heteronormative conventions in the Renaissance period. This is achieved mainly through her masculine traits, the feminization of Antonio, and the Duchess's quasi-sexual relationship with Cariola. Considering the play as a whole, male characters desire to constrain the Duchess in a static femininity by either ignoring her masculine characteristics or accentuating her physical feminine features. The Duchess's body as biologically feminine thus leads to constraints over the representation of her masculine self, which is anxiety-provoking to the biologically male characters around her who wish to impose a feminine self onto her. Further, a queer reading of the Duchess opens up a more nuanced interpretation of her masculine self as a way for Webster to rationalize her homoerotic desires toward Cariola. In this sense, Webster uses a disconnect between the femininity of her body and the masculinity of her perceived self to explore an intimate same-sex relationship that falls outside of heteronormative ideals.

Notes

1. This interpretation is present in Jankowski's and Haber's work and is the conventional line of thought taught in the English A-level curriculum in secondary schools in the United Kingdom.

2. Most likely because Shakespeare is the most prominent literary figure from that era who had explicit homosexual themes in his work and because critical writers in the twentieth century tended to be men.
3. While some certainly include themes that can be directly applied to *The Duchess of Malfi*, such as gender nonconformity and intimate relationships between aristocratic women, none relate them specifically to the play.

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