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Creative Project - Analysis
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Bosola and Chaos:
Dynamics Within Webster's Duchess of Malfi

What I have appreciated most about reading great works is the creativity it inspires in me. More specifically, when reading, research, learning, and analysis are cultivated in such a way that promotes deeper thought processes, previously unimaginable things are suddenly inspired in me. So it happened that during a particularly interesting discussion about Bosola's character in The Duchess of Malfi one day that I connected that idea to a David Lynch TV show I was also watching at the time: Twin Peaks. In Twin Peaks, a small town is ravaged by the murder of a young girl. As an investigator and the police try to track down the killer, they are drawn into a world that borders on myth and legend. A character by the name of Bob repeatedly eludes their capture. Throughout the show, the audience member comes to find that Bob is actually a being that has the ability to inhabit and influence other people. His evil deeds are recorded as the deeds of those he inhabits and he cannot be proven to exist at all (Lynch). These two factors combined in my mind to possess me with the desire to portray The Duchess of Malfi from a different angle: to present Bosola as the protagonist of the play, and to have him be the embodiment of Chaos.

With the main premise for the adaptation chosen, what was necessary next was to definitively determine Bosola to be a worthy applicant for the main protagonist of the play. As, arguably, the only 'non-static' character of the play, it is a trait that is easily attributable to him. Susan C. Baker actually argues to the contrary. She states that the static nature of the Duchess' character is what moves the play, it being "structured as succeeding reenactments of [an]

informing choice," which occurs at or before the beginning of the play and sets up the characters' actions throughout (Baker). However, Baker also writes that "the advantage of approaching The Duchess of Malfi as static protagonist drama is that doing so clarifies the value of the play's superficially disparate or discordant aspects and thus enables us to comprehend more fully Webster's remarkable achievement." I have to disagree with her on this point, because what she has stated so eloquently sums up the design for my imagining of the play. The discordant aspects of which she speaks can potentially be explained in the way she suggests, by approaching the drama as static and attempting to let all of the pieces fall as though they were meant to be in those places; however, I propose that the reason that discord exists in the play is a simple one: chaos. Because of the discord in the play, Chaos is a welcome driving force behind the actions of the only character with any movement throughout the play: Bosola.

With Bosola established as the main protagonist, the motivations for his actions comes into question. In the play, it can be seen that he struggles with his position in society, with his need to serve The Cardinal and Ferdinand in order to try to ascend, and with his personal moral compass. As a person living in the class to which his character is attributed at that time, his struggles with class (society) and even attempting to ascend within society are easily explained by the creation of his character. It is potentially extremely convenient that Webster chose to frame Bosola in this way. The third thing with which he struggles, however, is the one that has the most potential to be of interest outside the societal commentary of the play. Because Bosola struggles with his duties as he is presented them by The Cardinal and Ferdinand even as he carries them out, he becomes a character of more depth. This struggle, then, requires an inspiration.

For me, that inspiration was borne out of Chaos. The character of Bosola, once overtaken by Chaos, would not be wholly consumed. He would be partially aware of the actions that he was taking while being influenced by Chaos. This awareness led to his continual struggle to try to break free of the bonds of Chaos so that he could try to do what was right (and save Antonio). Unfortunately for Bosola, Chaos was ever his superior and used him right to the end to the destruction of all.

The idea of Chaos is a difficult one to research. More common is the idea of Fortune and her wheel. Fortune, who is represented as feminine, was often represented as either a wheel or a woman turning a wheel on which the fortunes of men were ever changing (Radding). In the Middle Ages, people used the idea of Fortune to explain misfortunes with "a growing awareness that much that happens in human existence is not governed by God's justice but by chance" (Radding). This idea of 'having something to blame' is the reason, according to Radding, that the idea of Fortune became popular again at that time. Fortune, herself, is mentioned a few times throughout Webster's play. In my adaptation, I chose to reword those parts to reflect my representation of Chaos. In keeping with the generally static nature of the play, I saw Chaos as the inescapable static nature of Fortune, where here wheel is cut off at the middle and all that remains is the bottom, in the form of a swinging pendulum blade. Rather than the traditional figure of a woman turning the wheel of Fortune, Chaos is a woman cloaked in shadow, with long, flowing black hair; she stands on the blade as it swings ever closer to its target. By representing Chaos in this way, I take from fortune the idea that there is hope of a circuit and end it by creating no loop through which people can rise. Instead, Chaos serves only to keep people down until they meet their untimely doom.

The only characters in the play that are free from Chaos are the Asylum girls, who live and function within and without the play as narrators and plot influencers. Inspired by the furies as written about in Aeschylus' Oresteia, these three women can only be seen by those who are doomed. They speak often in riddles rather than explanations, and they frequently foreshadow a grim event that will take place. The inspiration for these women originally came from a book (and subsequent music) written by Emilie Autumn. In her book, Autumn breaches the line between reality and fiction, the present and the past in such a way that she calls into question the treatment of so-called mad-women. In the Victorian age (the historical era in which part of her novel takes place) women were often committed to asylums for fits of hysteria, for the inability to have children, for the desire to not marry. The relevancy of this to *Malfi* is that the Duchess could be attributed to one of these categories (or a similar one, at least) by her brothers who wish her to only do as they command. Defiance robs her of her life, and she is even tormented by 'mad-folk' at one point in the play as a form of punishment to her before her death. My choice to include three Asylum Ladies within the play was a calculated move to make a commentary on the treatment of women and madness within the play, for though they are the Asylum Ladies, they are not mad; rather, they function to observe and record what others cannot see.

It is with these thoughts and inspirations in mind that I created the adaptation of *The Duchess of Malfi.* It is a dark representation of what can happen to brittle human lives when an entity beyond human understanding takes control and shapes it to its own dark purpose. What is important to remember in this adaptation is that, though the mind seeks to find solace, though it desperately wants for some explanation of events that justifies what has happened, Chaos owes no explanation. The point of Chaos is to rebel, to break, to tear, to hurt. That is the theme.

Works Cited

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