

The Two Villainous Brothers, their Crimes and Punishments in John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*

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Abstract

Ferdinand and Cardinal in John Webster's renowned revenge tragedy *The Duchess of Malfi*, are two brothers of the central character, the Duchess. They symbolize evils, although the elder one expresses remorse just before the end of the play. Among the three siblings, Ferdinand is the eldest, Cardinal is the middle, and the Duchess is the youngest. Ferdinand and Cardinal are infamous for their villainy in the Jacobean drama. At the start of the play, set in Italy, the volatile eldest brother, the Duke, plans to control the acts and decisions of his only sister, a widow with three children. The deceitful Ferdinand threatens that if she marries secretly, the consequences will be disastrous, and the brothers will not accept it. His younger brother, the Cardinal, joins Ferdinand in conspiracies with him. They appointed Bosola to work as a spy on her. He works as the head of her stables to collect information about the Duchess's secret marriage. After learning about her clandestine marriage with a low-ranking steward, Ferdinand shows volcanic eruption and becomes determined to take revenge on her. The innocent Duchess, unaware of the brothers' schemes and revenge plan on her, falls into her brothers' prey and is murdered by Bosola. This way, the brothers committed crimes and sins as they were the masterminds of the brutal killing of their sister and her two children. The Cardinal remains unaffected and proves him the worst brother. English literature has

some notorious villains in different texts, who remain unchanged and show no sign of regret at their deaths. But, in this tragedy, Duke Ferdinand's villainous activities were deliberate, and his repentance is also genuine. He is revealed as a man who is not a thorough villain. Throughout the play, the reader does not find his commendable qualities in him. In the end, his repentance uplifts him as a human being. His realization and repentance arouse sympathy in the reader as he does not lose all traces of humanity. He recreates his identity from a wicked to a moral person. But we do not see any repentance in scheming, dishonest the Cardinal. This paper attempts to show the crimes and punishments of both the brothers. It also aims to show who is the worst between the two.

Keywords: The marriage of the Duchess, Ferdinand and Cardinal's villainy, their punishments, Ferdinand's guilt.

John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* is a renowned woman-centric tragedy of early 17th-century England. The story is about a Duchess and her two monstrous twin brothers- Duke of Calabria, Ferdinand, and the Cardinal. In this painful tragedy, her cruel brothers murdered their sister for marrying a low-ranking person in the court who worked as his wife's household steward. Both the brothers conspired against her as they knew her marriage was beneath her status. The brothers are alike in their plan against the killing of the only sister and her innocent children. In the words of Syed Md. Jashimuddin "the evil pair of the brothers is complementary to each other" (2018: p. 69). They commit crimes together; and suffer together, but the Cardinal gets unrepentant.

The story takes place in a patriarchal world full of political conspiracy, bigotry, torment, killing, and revenge on the family members. After the Duchess's widowhood, her class-conscious brother Ferdinand, the elder brother, appointed Bosola, the ex-galley prisoner, to collect information about her secret marriage to her steward, Antonio Beccadelli di Bologna. He John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* is a renowned woman-centric tragedy

of early 17th-century getting to know the news of her marriage to an unworthy person, Ferdinand reacts angrily because he considers the sister a “lusty widow” and says:

“O most imperfect light of human reason,
That mak'st us so unhappy, to foresee
What we can least prevent! – Pursue thy wishes,
And glory in them; there's in shame no comfort
But to be past all bounds and sense of shame”

(Act III, Scene II, Lines: 79-83).

Both the “brothers reflect the traditional patriarchal society. They believe in woman's inferiority and look to woman specially widow as weak creature”(Ikhlas, Nati & Rashid, 2025: p.4).

In the Jacobean England, Stewards played significant roles. They were also prominent in the Elizabethan Period. In this period, the steward was an official for domestic affairs of the household, who monitored the service of his master's table, directed the domestics, and managed household expenditure. Although the post was significant, it was not respectable at that time. They used to work not only in the domestic sector but also in the royal families and noblemen.

Daniel de Bosola, the steward, instructed by the brothers Ferdinand and the Cardinal, works in the court of the Duchess, who never doubts his activity. He secretly observes the Duchess and discovers her pregnancy, despite the efforts of husband Antonio to keep the delivery time of his wife a secret. Bosola knows the labor of the Duchess by seeing a piece of paper with the details of the birth. Hurriedly, he leaked the information to the brothers Ferdinand and the Cardinal. They assure Bosola to keep the news a secret and decide to take revenge on the only sister. Some years later, when the Duchess is a mother of three children,

Ferdinand comes to Malfi to confront her bedroom and the Duchess, remaining undoubtful about his activities.

The Duchess, to pacify the brutal brothers, lied to them about firing her husband, Antonio. She continued her meeting with him secretly in the town of Ancona. The innocent Duchess trusts Bosola and shares with him the news of her marriage to Antonio. Bosola leaked the information to the Cardinal and Ferdinand. Later, they removed Antonio from Ancona, and Antonio got separated from The Duchess due to his lack of status and money. The brothers are unaware that Antonio married their Duchess sister for her sweet appearance and virtuous nature. He was not greedy for her money or status. The courtmen capture Cariola and the two younger children. At the order of Ferdinand, Bosola kills the Duchess after torturing them. After seeing the dead body of the only sister, the conscience of Ferdinand awakens, and he attacks Bosola, who feels remorse for the brutal killing of a mother, wife, and sister. As a result, he tries to restore the life of the Duchess. His attempts get fruitless. The Cardinal's lover, Julia, assists Bosola in witnessing the Cardinal's admission that the Duchess was murdered according to his plan. Bosola accidentally kills Antonio and then attacks the heinous brother, the Cardinal. Ferdinand has gone mad with anguish and lethal wounds given by Bosola. The friend of Antonio Delio requests the court to make the Duchess and Antonio's surviving son his mother's heir.

The twin brothers of the Duchess have terrible evilness, selfishness, and tyranny. Ferdinand orders the merciless killing of the innocent sister, her maid, and her two children through strangling to get perverted satisfaction. They create a negative lasting impression on the reader for their ruthlessness towards their sister, who has done no crime or sin. Ferdinand gets violent to find out the Duchess. Ultimately, his intention to remove her and the children from the world was successful. The reader sees him as a cruel, malicious, and bold man who is not easygoing to his close ones. He desires to control the Duchess and is determined and

ruthless to fulfill his revenge plan on her. He did not initiate the terrible violence that occurs in the play. He has some humane sides, but they remain hidden till his conscience pricks him for the groundless, brutal killing of the only sister, her husband, and her two children at his instruction.

The good side of Ferdinand's character comes out after the loss of his dear ones, and he becomes grief-struck and behaves like a mad man. He desired to punish the Duchess' husband for his low status. As the main villain in the play, he inflicted psychological torture on her in several different ways till the end of the play. Before his death, he transcends himself from a cruel brother to a soul with moral gradation. The reader shows sympathy for his guilt. The other brother, the Cardinal, fails to draw sympathy from them for having no guilt or morality despite being a religious figure in the church. This paper attempts to show the crimes and punishments of both the brothers. It also aims at showing which brother is the worst between the two.

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Through his repentance, Ferdinand shows his human side. He was never a doting brother to his sister. The Duchess also did not trust him as she knew him to be a tyrannical man. His anger is different from his brother, The Cardinal. When the Duchess becomes submissive, the Duke becomes wild and tries to make her insane. Bosola is also affected by Ferdinand's cruelty towards his sister.

When Ferdinand sees the dead sister, he repents for hiring Bosola for the merciless killing of the sister who did not do any harm to her brothers. The realization and the repentance eventually make Ferdinand lose his sanity, believing himself to be a wolf. The cold, calculating, and villainous Ferdinand dies an undignified death and fails to arouse pity on the reader.

During the marriage, the Duchess discharges Antonio's debts:

“And, ‘cause you shall not come to me in debt,
/ Being now my steward, here upon your lips / I sign your quietus est.”

(Act 1, Scene II, Lines: 463- 465)

From the beginning of her marriage, the Duchess was aware of the unfeasibility of the match with a steward who is socially and financially unworthy of her. Ignoring the issues of his social standing, she marries him secretly despite knowing the wickedness of the class-conscious brothers. She ignores the long-lasting social customs of her love for her husband.

The Cardinal, a high-ranking official in the Roman Catholic Church, and Ferdinand, a Duke and an established member of the aristocracy, are commanding figures. The Duchess did not tell her brothers about her marriage as she knew the marriage news would impact them negatively. Her marriage will challenge the positions of the brothers. Furthermore, her union with Antonio in the “companionate marriage” is “a relatively modern concept of marriage as a partnership of love and mutual helpfulness” (Jankowski, 1991: p.87). According to Stone, “While the aristocracy still relied on the Catholic notion of arranged marriages, Puritan doctrine attempted to add greater stress on marital compatibility through companionate marriage” (1961: p.205). In the words of Mikesell, “Companionate marriages called for the preeminence of mutual comfort and “due benevolence” as a necessity among married couples. Advocates of companionate marriage disregarded marriages based on financial security among the dignity and gave importance to life partners” (1991: p.235). Through her marriage, she shows the changing nature of marriage, which can be based on love, not on the social and financial standings of the partners:

“Where he is jealous of any man, he lays worse plots for them than ever was
Imposed on Hercules, for he strews in his way flatterers, panders,
Intelligencers, atheists,
and a thousand such political monsters,” (Act 1, Scene II, Lines:160-163)

Ferdinand is a judge and is expected to be right in his dealings with clients. Similarly, his brother the Cardinal requires him to be caring, responsible, and equal to his parishioners. However, both the brothers are equally corrupted and have no moral sense. They aspire for power and domination over the sister. Ferdinand views her “marriage for love . . . is for those who lack status and wealth, not the Duchess” (Prendergast, 2007: p. 29). He also objects to her children as illegitimate because her marriage was not presided over by the Church: “Our

national law distinguish[es]bastards / From true legitimate issue” (Act IV, Scene IV, Lines: 36-37).

Bosola acted on the instructions of the brothers, but his appeal for reward for his unjust action against the Duchess remains unfulfilled by Ferdinand. He paints Bosola by putting all the blame for the murder of his sister:

Bosola: Let me quicken your memory, for I perceive

You are falling into ingratitude. I challenge

The reward due to my service.

Ferdinand: I'll tell thee

What I'll give thee –

Bosola: Do.

Ferdinand: I'll (Act V, Scene V, Lines: 113).

Ferdinand finds the activities of the Duchess unacceptable, illogical. In his view, she needs to be apologetic for her behavior and actions as a Duchess. He refuses to listen to her:

“Pray sir, hear me” (3.2.74), at which point, Ferdinand continues to rage against her

and states “Do not speak” (Act III, Scene II, Lines:76).

Later, he tries to exact information from her about the identity of her husband:

“Let me not know

thee I came hither prepared

To work thy discovery, yet am now persuade

It would beget such violent effects

As would damn us both” (Act III, Scene IV, Lines: 94-97).

Moreover, the Duchess's decision to remarry violates the social norm of her time. Among the nobility, families arranged marriages of the bride and the groom when the fathers were no

more. The brothers were responsible for arranging a marriage for their sibling in “which a brother became responsible for arranging a partner as well as settling the business aspect of a union” (Mikesell, 1991, p. 237-238). Ferdinand wanted to play the fixed role set by society. So, both the brothers are horrific, and strive to deter her from remarriage:

“You are my sister / [*Showing his dagger*] This was my
father’s poniard. Do you see?” (Act 1, Scene II, Lines: 331-332).

Ferdinand presents the Duchess with their father’s dagger again. She realizes that her remarriage against the brothers’ knowledge will make them furious with her. According to Calderwood, “Ferdinand views private marriage as reprehensible because a reliance on personal choice conflicts with the established social hierarchy” (1962: p.133). The Duchess has failed to understand the significance of aristocratic narrowness to her brothers. He gets furious with the Duchess because he believes aristocracy depends on loyalty to the family name. By marrying without the permission of her brothers, the Duchess deceived her brothers as per the opinion of them. She lost the shine of her position when her brothers found out about her secret marriage. In this regard, Ferdinand states,

“And so, for you:
You have shook hands with Reputation / And make him invisible”
(Act III, Scene II, Lines: 136-138)

In his opinion, she has belittled herself and brothers, and he wants to separate himself from her:

“So, fare you well. / I will never see you more”

(Act III, Scene III, Lines:138-

Ferdinand refused to “recognize and accept the validity of a marriage consummated without his approval”(Adhikari & Saha, 2021: p.135). The marriage of the Duchess to Antonio ends tragically with her killing for breaking the family name.

The Duchess was unsuccessful in keeping her marriage alive due to the opposing, evil brothers. Thus, her attendant Cariola fears about her Duchess. Ferdinand and the Cardinal exploited their power to control the life of the only sister. They used the religious institutions – of which the Cardinal is a leader – to loosen the Duchess's ability as a ruler. Ferdinand ordered the murder of his sister, husband, maid, and children. He put the Duchess in the darkness to unnerve her and showed the look-alike wax figures of her husband and children to scare her. He employed all tricks to break her spirit. Some Madmen, placed by Ferdinand around her room made disturbing noises at the instruction of Ferdinand. He also imprisoned her. The brothers also suffered for their brutality to the only sister and her family. After the instruction given to Bosola, Ferdinand does not repent for the merciless killing of the only sister and her children. Post-murder, his sense of realization starts to work as no human being cannot be a complete angel or a complete Satan.

Ferdinand possesses both negative and positive characteristics. All his life, he took revenge on the persons who deprived him of his love and necessities of life. He destroyed his son Linton. Just before his death, he lost interest in his revenge plan. At last, he spared the lives of his enemies, Cathy and Hareton, because evil and goodness exist in all humans. Similarly, Ferdinand is not an exception. Hence, he gets changed unexpectedly. He loses his sanity and grows morally for his repentance.

Any man goes through a change in his life. People cannot remain the same. He goes through noticeable changes at different stages of his life due to several factors. Ferdinand is not an exception, although nobody expected his tremendous positive change as villainous persons rarely transform. Most of the time, they remain unrepentant after committing serious crimes or sins.

Through his repentance, Ferdinand gives evidence of his human side after the murder of his sister. A change of mind is not impossible, even for an evil, if he has a realization. He

was never a doting brother to his sister. The Duchess also did not trust him as she knew him to be tyrannical. His anger is different from the Cardinal. Earlier, with the growing submissiveness of the Duchess, the Duke became wilder and tried to make her mad. Bosola is also affected by Ferdinand's cruelty towards his sister. Most people of all ages and classes commit sins and crimes. Only a few regret their wrongdoings to the Almighty or others. Bosola takes revenge on Ferdinand by killing him, who also attacks him before his death. Bosola's killing is crucial for the aristocratic man.

Ferdinand's sudden transformation from a sinner to a remorseful man compelled him to murder Bosola. His unexpected transformation uplifted him as a person with flaws and a humane side although we cannot like him. Still, he changes from a beast to a moral person. The level of atrocity which he showed to the only sister was a beggar description.

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At the end of this frightful story, Ferdinand, the main villain, considers his atrocity towards the sister and her family meaningless and sinful. He gets repentant of his revenge on the Duchess. His sudden realization of the Duchess's death brought tremendous remorse in him. Only villainous people rarely have this pang of guilt. Ferdinand's repentance and ending teach us the moral that change is normal in some human beings although "naturally evil men and women remain evil; the good remain good"(Holdsworth, 1975: p. 9). The Cardinal symbolizes these types of people. He is a religious figure, committed multiple crimes and sins, and died immoral and unrepentant. He is power-hungry, and to become the Pope, he attempts to bribe, orders the spy Bosola to kill a man, and also gets involved in an illegitimate affair with Castruccio's wife, Julia. He was more calculative, mean, and dangerous than his brother and poisoned his mistress Julia because she learned his secrets to kill the Duchess. As a religious figure, he knew that his actions were heinous, but he did not shun them. He was a false religious man and abused to keep his power. He never had remorse for his actions, but the Almighty arranges his death by Bosola's stabbing. Thus, the Cardinal was unremorseful

till his death because of a lack of realization, which proved him the worst of the two brothers to the reader.

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