The Wooing Principle in *The Duchess of Malfi*

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Puzzling and baffling though, the courtship scene in John Webster's masterpiece, *The Duchess of Malfi*, is nevertheless intriguing, where the Duchess proposes to Antonio Bologna, her steward. It is no less mysterious to see that a man seldom chooses a lady of his peer and above, except for reasons that have not much to do with love; rather he prefers the inferior. That is why we see more scenes, where a prince pursues after a pretty pure village maiden, than a princess leers at a handsome and unsophisticated shepherd boy, in romances, dramas, and poetry, as well as in fairy tales. For a man to target at the lower seems quite natural, and the larger the gap, betwixt him and the targeted, the more will he be likely acclaimed as a man, sans of prejudice, enlightened, and well-bred. A classic example near at hand will be Cinderella, from *Grimms' Fairy Tale*, who is a poor yet charming maiden, envied and bullied by her two half-sisters, wins a prince’s love at last. Contrariwise, a lady is less seen to choose an inferior man, than to aim at a man better or higher than her, be it in status, learning, wealth, or power, lest she be burdened under great pressure of public opinions, a disgrace to her womanhood. What will happen, then, when a noblewoman woos a man of a lower status, to say, for example, her steward? The steward has two choices, willy-nilly, i.e. he can either accept or reject it.
Consequently, the result will not be hard to predict, that is, three possibilities: a happy ending, if the lady’s favor is returned with kindness, preconditioned that this lady is free, and has the right and power to be master of her own fate; or a tragic ending, in this case, things can be further divided into two circumstances, the lady is rejected, kindly or rudely; or she is accepted, but alas, she is not free, neither has she the right to decide for her own fortune, nor the status quo allows her to do so. For the latter, a rigorous and perverse father, or a jealous and meddlesome brother, or harsh and jaundiced convention and social ethic, will hinder this union. So our concerns will be the courtship in The Duchess of Malfi, the whys and wherefores, the archetype thereof, and the enigma, why the Duchess takes the initiative, rather than Antonio.

I. The Courtship, Why and Wherefore?

The Duchess of Malfi is in a dilemma when the play opens. She is a widow, which is no joking a matter, but a severe misfortune to any woman, in particular to a powerful woman like the Duchess. A widowed woman lives not easy, from time immemorial to the present, ever since monogamy becomes the dominant matrimonial form between man and woman, and things become worse when she is powerful as well as attractive, for the number of potential pursuers is inversely proportional to her status and power. It is of small probability for her to remarry a new one of her peer, e.g. a duke, since he has much a wider and better choice than her, from a country maiden, a countess, to a princess of his peer. Besides, blood lineage, public opinion, and personal honor have to be considered, before any duke has the courage to stride out his first step for a widow. Even if she is broad-minded enough to favor a count, it is hard for her to accept it, for one reason and another. Thus she has but a small choice, and the most available would be no doubt those that are close to her.

There are many obstacles, however, to be surmounted, before she sets out, and reaches her goal at last. Social convention, prejudice, public opinions, that are usually heaped upon her person as a widowed duchess, for people expect a chaste and ascetic widowhood from her person. Besides, the Duchess has herself to conquer first, psychologically as well as physiologically, since it is she, who has to take the initiative, and offers Antonio the proposal, which should rather have been a duty and gallantry offered from a gentleman to a lady. However, the largest hindrance is from her two brothers, the Duke Ferdinand, her twin brother, and the
Cardinal. These two spare no means to block her intention to get a second marriage, especially the Duke. The characters of the Duchess’s two brothers are cunning, jealous, and mean, not commensurate to their high status and honor. How unpopular these two brothers are, as we can see from the commentary of their followers. Daniel de Bosola, Gentleman of the Horse to the Duchess, once opines: “He and his brother are like plum-trees that grow crooked over standing-pools; they are rich and o’erladen with fruit, but none but crows, pies, and caterpillars feed on them.” (Act 1, Sc. 2.) That is to say, these two brothers are of bad quality, although born well, but ill-bred, and useless. Otherwise they would have been compared to noble trees like elm, ebony, or at least fir or pine, which are noted for their good quality, unique height, and uprightness among trees.

Antonio also gives out his impression about the Cardinal, when Delio asks him, “he is a melancholy churchman. The spring in his face is nothing but the engend’ring of toads...he did bestow bribes so largely and so impudently...” (Act 1, Sc. 2.) This echoes and confirms the comments given out by Bosola, and reveals at the same time an insightful observer of human nature Antonio to be. Thus the Cardinal is a man of good form but bad nature, just like a whitewashed grave, beautiful outside, with stench, worms, filth, and skull swarming inside. He is venomous as a toad, good at laying plots to trap others, fond of “flatterers, panders, intelligencers, atheists... political monsters”, receiving and giving briberies. What is more, he is ungrateful, and never keeps his promise to reward duely, as we can see from his attitude toward Bosola, the one he has employed to do something ignoble.

The Duke is no less “crooked”, “Ferdinand is characterized in terms of certain images: light, disease, stagnation, masks, and ceremony.”[1] In Antonio’s eyes the Duke is of “a most perverse and turbulent nature.” And “He speaks with others' tongues, and hears men's suits With others' ears; will seem to sleep o' the bench Only to entrap offenders in their answers; Dooms men to death by information; Rewards by hearsay.” (Act 1, Sc. 2.) “Perverse and turbulent” are not a good nature for a prince, and the contrary are much more preferred, such as sagacious, steady, prudent, mild, temperate. etc. The Duke is dishonest even in a seemingly hearted laugh, a duplicity of human nature. He is double-dealing, who never speaks out his mind, and like his brother, relying on informers for intelligence, such a one is indubiously dangerous. Professor Allison gives an excellent summerization of these two brother’s characters:
The cardinal, being deliberately and diabolically wicked, occupies the lowest position upon this graduated scale. Ferdinand, being compulsive rather than deliberate, daemonic rung... The Cardinal represents an active and positive evil. Ferdinand represents a passive; he is possessed and wielded, as it were, by that evil which the Cardinal possesses and wields.[2]

However, it is the Duke who makes the most troubles, and is the greatest impediment in his twin sister’s remarrying. He reacts most violently, and interferes so justifiably with his sister’s second marriage, why? First of all, the Duchess’ remarriage is a matter of “government and inheritance”, and woman’s body is regarded as a “use” then, “for her production of children the patriarchy considers illegitimate would decrease her value as a trade article for her family.”[3] So the interposition from him and the Cardinal is tainted with a political color. Moreover, remarriage is a matter concerning decency and family glory, especially when the bridegroom is of a humble birth, “Ferdinand perceives the Duchess as the craven, lustful widow who incurs the wrath of the society by flaunting its mores.”[4] The Duke knows the Duchess of Malfi too well to let her have a free hand in a second marriage. He threatens several times to kill her with their father’s poniard, explicitly or implicitly. And when he finds out that she is already married again, he is mad, and sends man to kill her and her kids and her paramour. However, a psychoanalysis from the angle of Freudian might be more convincing. The Duke has most probably cherished a secretly unhealthy yearning for his sister, “Her twin brother Ferdinand shares both her self-will and her erotic bent. The least sign of resistance drives him frantic, and his feeling toward his sister is a morbid complex of attraction and antagonism.”[5] The death words he leaves behind is also his sister, “My sister, oh! My sister, there’s the cause on’t.” (Act 5, Sc. 5) This is further supported by modern psychology and physiology, that a natural attachment toward each other between twin brother and sister does exist more often than not. Besides, the duke’s marital life remains a mystery. He seems to be still single so far, and this is quite unnatural then. This secret yearnings of brother for and advances to his sister, however, find no positive, or at least not sufficient, response from the Duchess, otherwise she would enjoy her widowhood with a good flavor. On the contrary, she seems to be averse to that, so she gets herself engaged as soon as possible, and tries as hard as she can to keep it a secret.

Nevertheless, there is still one enigma to be uncovered, that is, why it is Antonio the steward, who becomes the selected? Antonio is not the most ideal one for a
husband, of course, but much desirable than nothing. As a gentleman, he does have something to be worthy, notwithstanding of a lower status. He is “a complete man,” “filled with all perfection,” a man of “a combination of Christian and stoic ethics”, that “have long serv’d virtue, and ne’er ta’en wages of her.” (Act 1, Sc. 1) The dialogue in the beginning betwixt Antonio and Delio, his close friend, when Antonio returns back from French court, shows how acuminous the steward is: “Considering duly that a prince’s court Is like a common fountain, whence should flow Pure silver drops in general, but if’t chance Some curs’d example poison’t near the head, Death and diseases through the whole land spread...” (Act 1, Sc. 1.) These viewpoints are no less wise and sharp-eyed than a great philosopher and politician can offer. Had he be the Duke, it would be a great blessing. And through his remarks on horsemanship, he speaks out well, proffering the Duke some roundabout advice: “as out of the Grecian horse issued many famous princes, so out of brave horsemanship arise the first sparks of growing resolution, that raise the mind to noble action.” (Act 1, Sc. 2.) Antonio’s valor can be inferred at least from one fact that he is of good horsemanship, “took the ring oftenest.” Here the “ring” is from “Running at the Ring”, a popular game then requiring high horsemanship. So on the whole he is not a bad choice, as circumstances allow her to do.

How is the Duchess’ proposal regarded, then, out of love or lust, or both? The image given out by herself can be a reference, “This is flesh and blood, sir; ’tis not the figure cut in alabaster kneels at my husband’s tomb.” (Act 1, Sc. 1) When the Duchess declares that she is of “flesh and blood”, it means she is an ordinary woman, endowed with passions and desires. She is not “chaste”, and is taken as a “great woman of pleasure”, “There is an air of bravado about her marriage...And dispensing almost scornfully with any formal rites, she consummates the union at once...The Duchess is a woman of sexual energy and vulnerability; she appears pregnant on the stage in the following act.”[6] But bravado can also be interpreted as defiance against the Duke’s authoritarian interposition in her private life, and a struggling away from his unhealthy inclination toward her. Hence her wooing can be regarded as a rebellion for self-realization, and the Duchess can well be considered as a forerunner in feminist movement. She condescends to woo Antonio, because she loves him, and as her entourage, he reveres her at the same time, and not without some suppressed admiration and love perhaps. None the less, she is a woman of pleasure likewise, the tragic flaw that leads to her downfall is partly, if not wholly, due to her carpe diem nature, “The Duchess is tragic protagonist: her
flaw is a temperamental excess of which one token is her eroticism.\textsuperscript{[7]} Anyhow, the climax arrives, when she does propose to Antonio, putting him into a predicament. Accept or decline, that is the question, for it is really a matter of life and death, if it be not dealt with handsomely. To understand this, let’s read a similar case first.

II. An Archetypal Instance of Courtship

Although it is but rare for a dignitary lady to deign to woo an inferior, we can still find an instance in the story of Joseph and Potiphar’s wife, from \textit{The Bible}. This is a standard story of a lady woos a man of a humbler birth, and similar to the Duchess of Malfi’s proposal to her steward. Potiphar is a high officer of Pharaoh in Egypt, he buys Joseph one day as a slave, and makes him butler of his house. Joseph is “a goodly person, and well favoured”, and wins the fancy of Potiphar’s wife, who covets him, and tries to seduce him, one time after another:

After these things, that his master’s wife cast her eyes upon Joseph; and she said, Lie with me. But he refused...as she spake to Joseph day by day, that he hearkened not unto her... Joseph went into the house to do his business; and there was none of the men of the house there within. And she caught him by his garment, saying, Lie with me: and he left his garment in her hand, and fled, and got him out...That she called unto the men of her house, and spake unto them, saying, See...he came in unto me to lie with me, and I cried with a loud voice...And Joseph’s master took him, and put him into the prison... (Genesis 39: 7-20)

The above is a wonderful dramatic episode with a beginning, a climax, and an ending, and the process of seduction is described in minute details. Because Joseph is a righteous man, and grateful, he refuses such a favor, and refrains himself from her indecent advance, and see, he is falsely countercharged of trying to abuse her. Such a deliberately trapped up accusation is hard to contravene, even if the accused is as fluent as Aaron, for people’s sympathy is naturally nine out of ten toward the weaker vessel, since it is less likely for the weaker to bully the stronger. So Potiphar’s wife is in an advantageous position, she is the hostess, and the weaker sort. But to Joseph, he is the butler, the inferior, and attached to their family. Therefore he is imprisoned by his master. But Joseph’s story is said to have an earlier model:

In the Egyptian tale of \textit{The Two Brothers}, thought to be the source of the Potiphar’s wife story in the Joseph legend, an elder brother’s wife attempts to
seduce an unmarried younger brother who lives with them, and, when he resists her, accuses him of attempting to rape her. The younger brother is then forced to run away, with the enraged elder brother in pursuit.\[8\]

Professor Northrop Frye wants here to introduce a theory of myths in archetypal criticism, nevertheless, he leaks out the original source for the biblical story. The similarity and dissimilarity are obvious: A disloyal wife, who seduces a third person, one is her husband’s brother, and the other is the butler of the house. But the disloyalty and seduction is the same. But Joseph’s story finds more affinity in plot with *The Duchess of Malfi*: a woman of a higher status woos her household steward. In other words, the former provides with the latter an archetype. However, there are some distinctions: in Joseph’s story, what we can see is only lust. Potiphar’s wife is unfaithful to her husband, hence immoral. In *The Duchess of Malfi*, the Duchess is widowed, and has the right to choose whomever she likes, and her action is more out of love than lust. Nevertheless, the question put before the targeted man is the same, that is, the same predicament to be dealt with. In Joseph’s story, Joseph refuses, and he is falsely accused of sexual harassment of the hostess, and is put into prison. The same ordeal is laid before Antonio. How does he respond when the Duchess does woo him? He is nonplused, and quite at a loss what to do in the beginning, but soon reason gains the upper hand:

Ambition, madam, is a great man’s madness,  
That is not kept in chains and close-pent rooms,  
But in fair lightsome lodgings, and is girt  
With the wild noise of prattling visitants,  
Which makes it lunatic beyond all cure.  
Conceive not I am so stupid but I aim  
Whereeto your favours tend: but he’s a fool  
That, being a-cold, would thrust his hands i’ the fire  
To warm them. (Act 1. Sc.3)

Even now, Antonio has not lost his head, and he knows where he is. But could he reject this proposal? What if he refused? The situation he is in differs from Joseph and the younger Egyptian brother. What drives the elder brother’s wife and Potiphar's wife forward is not love, but lust. For them, the flirting is indecent and immoral, for both of the flirters are legally a wife of a husband respectively therefore, the action itself is disgraceful, and to accept it would be a degeneration in
morality, and the receiver a shameful accomplice, which will be spurned and condemned by the society.

Yet to Antonio, nothing is wrong. The Duchess is widowed and free, and her wooing, not a flirtation, is earnest and justified. In addition, the Duchess herself is a charming lady, graceful, elegant, courageous, virtuous, an ideal one of her sex, even with her high status left out of consideration. Besides, Antonio has to consider the consequences of refusing his hostess. Had he rejected, he needed not worry about a false countercharge from the Duchess, she would not be so base. However, the relationship between them would be in a most awkward and dreadful way, even if the Duchess is magnanimous enough. The once warm and close ties of the two would cool down gradually, and at last, it deteriorate into indifference, detest, and hatred. In this case, what waits for Antonio can be predicted: he must go, fired or resign of his own free will, sooner or later. To reject, he might drift into hell soon, but to accept, in paradise, most probably. Consequently, he accepts the wooing with grace.

Nevertheless, under certain circumstances, illegitimate liaison between a lady and an inferior man is pardonable, and people bear it with sympathy and tolerance. For example, when her consort is a good for nothing, and not her match, or he is a rogue, a libertine, a womanizer, thus disloyal first to her, or he is impotent, out of one reason or another. For the last case, we find an instance in Lady Chatterley's Lover by D. H. Lawrence. Due to the impotence of her husband, who is wounded during World War I, Lady Constance Chatterley has an illicit communication with a gamekeeper, Mellors, a person inferior than her. This illegal liaison is not severely blamed, instead, people seem to have enjoyed such a union, and public opinion is obviously in favor of Lady Chatterley: "the relationship with Mellors has been seen by many critics as a vivid symbol of social and class shifts as a result of the war."[9] It is true that this book is for a long time a banned book, but not for the affaires itself, but for the description thereof. This being solved, there remains the last problem to be tackled with, that is, why is it the Duchess, rather than Antonio, that takes the initiative, and is not blamed thereby, rather she is ever more fascinating with the elapse of time?

III. Why the Duchess Rather Than Antonio Takes the Initiative?

Generally speaking, males are and should be more active and aggressive than females in the long journey of love, culture teaches that, convention expects that,
and the two sexes' constitutions demand that. The traditional virtues and merits expected from a man is, wisdom, strength, ability, etc., and from a woman, beauty, virtue, tenderness, consideration, etc. To be brief, man is expected to have intelligence and strength, and woman, beauty and tenderness, so that in love man is entitled and has the duty to act as an offensive, and woman, a defensive, as is predetermined by the two sexes' psychological and physiological characteristics. In other words, the stronger gives, and the weaker takes, not vice versa. However, in the case of the Duchess and Antonio, situation changes completely. The Duchess is the more powerful, and the stronger one than Antonio, at least in social status, if not in physical strength. And if she does not take the initiative, God knows when Antonio will or anyone else dares break the ice, for Antonio is in a disadvantageous position in this case, as Joseph is. He dares not and should not exceed the bounds, for he is duty-bound, and his identity confirms that and inhibits that. The proposal from the Duchess, condescending though, is out of love, a right endowed by God the Almighty. But if from Antonio, he is coveting what he should not usurp, a transgression, which is bound by his position and duty. The Duchess knows it well and confesses it well, when she proposes to Antonio, and offers him her wedding ring: "The misery of us that are born great! We are forc'd to woo, because none dare woo us." (Act 1, Sc. 3) Here the Duchess explains explicitly, why she woos, rather than the others. As analyzed above, greatness in status, wealth, or power, contribute nothing to a woman's popularity in marriage, it rather hinders it, that is what confronts her, so that she has no choice, but to step out courageously, and proposes to Antonio, and is not blamed thereby.

Moreover, to the Duchess, this adventure is worth doing at all cost, judged from a hereditary point of view, for her proposal has increased greatly the possibility to have more descendants of her own. To procreate is the innate instinct of all animals, be it a male or female, to keep species from extinction, "We are all programmed to try to win our generation's game of reproduction—we are all programmed to pursue reproductive success."[10] In choosing a mate, what comes to a lady's view first, instinctively or consciously, is, the quality of the genes available. With this in mind, what come to her notice is naturally the outer data of a man, such as constitution, the stature, and complexion. Hence a man healthy, strong, and high, will be preferred, for these outside indexes promise a sound body, and that is a prerequisite for a promising seeds. The next thing comes to a lady's consideration would be the inner quality of the potential candidate, such as intelligence, breeding, ability, and
the like, since a high quality of these assures a high quality of genes, and a prospect of well-born and well-bred for her descendants. But to the Duchess, she does not need to worry about subsistence, and only if her mate can provide her with good genes, then all will be OK. In this case, Antonio is the most suitable and handy one: his outer and inner qualities are excellent, even if he is not potent and wealthy enough, but that does not matter a bit to the Duchess. In the end, what she gets from this adventure is 3 more children (although two of them are murdered in the end), and that offsets all the cost spent.

Furthermore, if the wooing is not from the lady in such a case, but from an inferior, say, her steward, what will happen? Fortunately enough, we have such a classic exemplar, in which a steward is indiscreetly enough to woo his hostess, and see, what happens! A most absurd and comic spectacle has been produced, and the overreacher has been a laughing stock ever since. This exemplar is Malvolio, steward to Olivia, from Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*. As a steward, Malvolio is “dutiful, restrained, judgmental”, but puritanical, and is against carousal. The other epicureans decide to give him a lesson, and play a trick on him, by spreading out misinformation, that Countess Olivia falls in love with him. Malvolio believes in it, and after a series of “signs” deliberately let out by the trappers, he takes a bold step, to woo his hostess Olivia, but only to be mocked at, and regarded to be out of wit and order, and is put into confinement in a dark cell. The lesson taught here is that Malvolio has overreached himself, he covets what he should not have coveted:

> “Malvolio aspires to become Count Malvolio, gaining Olivia to command others and securing the deference his egotism considers his due... Symbolically, Malvolio’s punishment is fitted to his crime of self-obsession, of misappropriating love for self-gain.”[H]

Anyhow, why man is afraid of a woman superior? This can be answered from a sociological and psychological perspective. To help a man succeed, give him confidence; to destroy him, make him feel inferior. A superior woman, be it in intelligence, wealth, or power, is too much for his manhood, his intelligence and strength, with which by convention, he should be born a protector of a woman, otherwise he would be overshadowed, and a skirt-hanger, or a good for nothing, would be a great humiliation to his manly pride. Dependence of a woman is bearable and even encouraged to a certain extent, while independence is the first and paramount quality to be cultivated and expected from a man. This explains
further that, if the Duchess fails to woo Antonio, it is less probable for the latter to woo her, hence all the feelings and passions they have cherished for each other would be blanketed and smothered, as if nothing had happened.

To put it briefly, in *The Duchess of Malfi*, the Duchess’ wooing her steward Antonio is an action to seek for self-identity, for pleasure, as well as for love, and the urging force behind is an innate animal instinct to procreate. An archetypal case of the courtship in the play can be traced back to Joseph’s story in *The Bible*. In love, the strong woos the weak, and the advantageous takes an offensive against the disadvantageous, is an unacknowledged principle in the conventional arena of marriage, so that it is usually praiseworthy for a man to woo a woman inferior, and for a woman to accept or woo a man superior, whereas the converse would be, more often than not, ridiculed, ruthlessly. Therefore, in the play, the Duchess woos her steward Antonio, rather than the other way round, because she is in a comparatively advantageous position, and psychologically stronger than him, although she has to encounter and overcome great impediments and obstacles from her brothers and social conventions, and sacrifices her life for that fulfillment at last. As for the Duchess herself, she is a lady of flesh and blood, and ever dares to love and to hate, to pursue self-realization, in defiance of convention and prejudice, ahead of her time, and perhaps that is why she is so fascinating, ever since she is created.

Notes:

[1] Giannetti, Louis D., “A Contemporary View of ‘The Duchess of Malfi’”, *Comparative Drama*, 3:4 (1969/1970, Winter): 303.

[2] Allison, Alexander W., “Ethical Themes in ‘The Duchess of Malfi’”, *Studies in English Literature*, 1500-1900, 4:2 (1964, Spring): 267-268.

[3] Jankowski, Theodora A., “Defining/Confining the Duchess: Negotiating the Female Body in John Webster’s ‘The Duchess of Malfi’”, *Studies in Philology*, 87:2 (1990, Spring): 228.

[4] Oakes, Elizabeth, “The Duchess of Malfi as a Tragedy of Identity”, *Studies in Philology*, 96:1 (1999, Winter): 63.

[5] Allison, Alexander W., “Ethical Themes in ‘The Duchess of Malfi’”, *Studies in English Literature*, 1500-1900, 4:2 (1964, Spring): 265.

[6] Luckyj, Christina, “Great Women of pleasure’: Main plot and Subplot in ‘The Duchess of Malfi’”, *Studies in English Literature*, 1500-1900, 27:2 (1987, Spring): 265, 268.

[7] Allison, Alexander W., “Ethical Themes in ‘The Duchess of Malfi’”, Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900, 4:2 (1964, Spring): 267.

[8] Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000, p. 135.
[9] Ronald Carter and John McRae. *The Routledge history of literature in English*. New York: Routledge, 1997, p. 415.

[10] Robin Baker. *Sperm Wars. Infidelity, Sexual Conflict and Other Bedroom Battles*. London: 4th Estate, 1996, p. 4.

[11] Daniel S. Burt. *The Drama 100: A Ranking of the Greatest Plays of All Time*. New York: Facts On File, Inc. 2008, pp. 57-58.

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