

6-15-2019

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Recommended Citation

Daniel G. Lauby (2019) "RSC's *The Duchess of Malfi* and the Male Grotesque," *Early Modern Culture*: Vol. 14 , Article 36.
Available at: <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/emc/vol14/iss1/36>

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RSC's *The Duchess of Malfi* and the Male Grotesque

Directed by Maria Aberg

The Royal Shakespeare Company, Stratford-upon-Avon, UK

Performance Date: July 7, 2018

Review by DANIEL G. LAUBY

The RSC's *The Duchess of Malfi* stunned audience members – even those wearing the requisite splash guards – with its gory male violence. By the end of the play, however, most sat transfixed by a brilliant production aimed at constructing and reflecting a world infected by toxic masculinity. At the core of *The Duchess of Malfi's* power was an adept fusion of physicality, musicality, and space that emphasized male grotesques as well as female rebellion, tragedy, and transcendence to amplify a cultural horror show within an already visceral tragedy. Resisting the temptation of mere spectacle, the play demonstrated enough purpose and control to establish itself as the highlight of the RSC's 2018 summer season.

Director Maria Aberg once again collaborated with designer Naomi Dawson to create a powerful “memory theater” that explored toxic masculinity, not only as it relates to female oppression but also as it pertains to the male psyche.¹ Having previously worked together on other RSC early modern productions such as *The Winter's Tale*, *Doctor Faustus*, and *White Devil*, Aberg and Dawson employed an artful use of lines and objects to unite the past and present. Such temporal fusion illuminated not only the persistence of unchecked masculinity from the renaissance until now, but also the very mechanisms of its construction.

From the moment spectators entered the theater, a bull carcass chained to a pulley claimed the stage as a masculine space by signifying the history of animal husbandry and the mythos of man's rule over nature. In the play's program, Dawson describes the body as a “creature of enormous power and strength, yet trussed up and dragged through the space,” suggesting male violence and positioning man as predator and consumer. However, the play began when the Duchess entered, grabbing the chain and hoisting the body. Her groans and strains performed a visceral resistance as her deep, resonant voice confronted a male grotesque – the bull as an abstract embodiment of both power and impotence. When the Duchess stepped to the corpse again at the end of Act 3, she enacted a figurative and literal castration as she sliced through the bull's groin. Blood gushed from the wound for the second half of the performance, eventually covering the stage and linking this castration to all future acts of cruelty as characters fought and died, soaked in the bull's gore. Thus, the play's violence emerged from a castration that made evident the fragility behind performances of toxic masculinity.

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The production further created dissonance by eschewing any single temporal or spatial locale and by utilizing stage markings that merged the puerile with the martial and the masculine with the feminine. The set was an athletic court marked with boundary lines that resembled those of basketball and volleyball courts to my American eye. As male bodies marched, wrestled, shouted, and flexed amongst gymnasium boundaries, the performance convincingly linked toxic masculinity directly to a place of competition, rules, and expectations that seemed to align the tribalism and aggression of sporting culture with martial code.² The play further established such a connection when adult male bodies invaded the stage as athlete-soldiers who marched and grappled in the fashion of the Roman infantry in Julie Taymor's *Titus* (1999) as men/not men, soldiers who transformed from toy to soldier and moved like machines of war rather than human beings. When the Duchess confronted these athlete-soldiers by thrusting her hips at them violently as they screamed and posed threateningly at her during the beginning of Act 1, tension arose not only between her yonic power and the surrounding phallic landscape, but also between the men's past and present, between the suppressed child and the adult who obscures the vulnerable self through masculine performance.

Despite the play's ability to make visible the cultural construction of male grotesques, it adamantly insisted on the culpability of men who enact both physical and psychological violence against women, even while such violence remained grounded in childhood games. In fact, the very conflation between play and violence turned men into monsters as death scenes were at once uncanny and abject, disorienting in their simultaneous familiarity and unfamiliarity while causing the spectator to recoil fiercely from the deeply disturbing actions on stage. As an example, the Duchess's murder turned into a game of tug o' war as two competing soldiers horrifically strangled her, pulling ever tighter the center knot that enveloped her neck. The traumatic scene left her writhing as they played at her torture before the Duchess finally broke free in death. In this moment, the spotlight shined upon her on the darkened stage, transforming the Duchess into a luminescent angel who reclaimed her bed – a transcendence that reflected the hopeful final lines of Webster's play that went unspoken in this production. Much like in Michael Cox's *Revenger's Tragedy* (2002), in which a foosball match creates dissonance with the surrounding violence that persistently victimizes women, the violence played out onstage in *The Duchess of Malfi* fused childhood games and adult atrocities.

Intruding upon a masculine space throughout the play was the Duchess's bed, which signified both the Duchess's transgressive power and her subordination. As a memory object, it recalled the tribulations of female experience related to early modern locales of matrimonial subjection, of maternal danger, of postpartum confinement, and of eventual death.³ Consequently, the bed represented loss as a place where virgin becomes bride, bride becomes mother, and mother becomes spirit. This transitional space was sometimes associated with the domination of men who penetrate and isolate. The bed also offered a site of female power and a location where transgressive desire could interrupt a vexed space. So when the Duchess seduced Antonio, sending him virtually cowering

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before her feminine sexuality, she dominated him in the very place so often used to subordinate women. This scene in which the Duchess powerfully exerted force over a man – through her sexuality, class, and sheer will – disrupted normative order and left the site itself transformed. The bed remained throughout the play as a constant memory object that linked both staged and unstaged transformative moments, culminating in the Duchess's death scene where she broke free of the knot. She is incapable of liberation within the patriarchal society while resting on the transitional space of the bed during life, so for her, freedom is only attainable in death.

The association between mask-making, aggression, and female resistance occurred not just through memory objects and physicality, but through an impressive use of instrumentation and vocalization. Associating masculinity with electric guitars and percussive instruments, music director David Ridley states in play's program that he endeavored to create a "turbo-masculinity around the Duchess." Aside from the instrumentation, a male choir – the same actors who portrayed the athlete-soldiers – vocally competed with the Duchess as each gender attempted to drown the other out. Within the choir, Ridley also utilized the portrayal of an early modern castrato, a countertenor played by Francis Gush, who appropriated the feminine voice and effectively denied female participation in the choral role at the end of Act 3. The Duchess's voice was powerful and deep in an attempt to combat what Ridley calls the "muscular 'wall of sound.'" Unfortunately, the rising castrato male voice and the choir overcame the Duchess, even as she increasingly strained to be heard. The choir notably also played a central role during the Duchess's captivity as the crazed masses, penetrating the Duchess's psyche and extending the violence beyond the physical. As such, the men of the company variously performed toxic masculinity from the playground to the battlefield and from the stage to the asylum, conveying the multi-faceted culture of male aggression.

Predictably, Alexander Cobb as Ferdinand and Chris New as the Cardinal became the most focused representations of male aggression and desire. While Ferdinand and the Cardinal were clearly the villains of this production, Aberg complicated the relationship between all three siblings through memory objects and dumbshows. In the midst of rising tensions and macho rage, spectators were privy to a brief flashback in which two boys played with their sister, a scene that reminded spectators of tropes regarding childhood innocence and pre-pubescent, ungendered relationships. As such, the scene attempted to persuade spectators that masculinity repressed something vital and meristemetic in its potential. The result of such repression was the violence that played out onstage. However, the childhood flashbacks also represented psychological fractures in Ferdinand and the Cardinal, suggesting a vulnerability associated with the image of the castrated and bleeding bull because the play imagined masculinity as a construct based upon the duality of frailty and power. Ferdinand and the Cardinal's consciences bubbled up through these mnemonic fissures and complicated their male subjectivity so that Ferdinand's guilt drove him insane and culminated in his own transformative experience: man into werewolf. He both succumbed to nature and became a male grotesque where masculine performance results in the prey/predator duality. Even

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the Cardinal seems to struggle with his conscience after poisoning Julia in Act 5 and before he was stabbed by his own assassin, Bosola. Only Antonio escaped the trap of toxic masculinity.

As a masculine Other, Antonio's initial appearance onstage marked him as a man who stepped outside of gender roles as well as social class, and who was a transgressive Other like the Duchess. As such, he stood in stark contrast to the Duchess's brothers, but as the play progressed, one could not ignore that, while an Other, he was still the recipient of privileges denied to the Duchess. Though Antonio fled while under suspicion of embezzlement, Bosola complimented him. Antonio roamed free with his children while the Duchess was tormented and killed, and even his death was accidental in contrast to the Duchess's execution. Antonio resided in a liminal space, neither suffering the extreme persecution that men who forsake privilege often experience nor abdicating his position in an oppressive system of male privilege and consequential violence. Yet the play did not go so far as to clearly situate Antonio as inhabiting this complex borderland, instead leaving spectators with only the vague feeling that he operated somewhere in the peripheral.

Throughout the play, the Duchess was unmistakably the focal point of resistance, oppression, torment, and liberation, but the production also emphasized the corrosive nature of masculinity not only on women but also on the men who performed it. The production effectively established masculinity as both vulnerable and violent. In this way, it presented male grotesques that made visible the paradox within masculine performances. Thus, while Ferdinand, the Cardinal, and the company were unforgivable villains, they were also products of the cultural forces that shaped them. As such, *The Duchess of Malfi* was a powerful commentary on the pervasiveness of masculinity and its tragic consequences for both the men and women who operate under its influences.

Notes

1. In *Shakespeare's Memory Theatre: Recollection, Properties, and Character* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), Lina Perkins Wilder explains how the use of both physical and imagined objects make up a "memory theater" that "places the mind on display" (56).

2. Aberg and Dawson's reference to boundaries and rules demonstrates Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's notion of a "striated space" versus "smooth" or "nomadic" spaces. Deleuze and Guattari use chess and an example of striated space and Go as an example of smooth space. Striated spaces constrain while smooth spaces offer endless potential. See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, translated by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 353.

1. In "The Dark Backward and Abyss of Time," *College Literature*, 33.1 (Winter 2006), Evelyn B. Tribble's refers to the "remembrance environment" and its complex

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relationship with individuals and communities in contrast to the limiting associations with “social memory” (153-155). Lina Perkins Wilder later argues, “Through the use of physical objects, real or imagined, this ‘memory theatre’ places the mind on display” (*Shakespeare’s Memory Theatre*, 56).

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