

Detailed comments requested

Ferdinand: Dost thou know what reputation is
I'll tell thee-to small purpose, since the instruction
Comes now too late.

Upon a time, Reputation, Love, and Death
Would travel o'er the world; and it was concluded
That they should part, and take three several ways,
Death told them, they should find him in great battles,
Or cities plagued with plagues. Love gives them counsel
To inquire for him 'mongst unambitious sheperds,
Where dowries were not talked of, and sometimes
'Mongst quiet kindred that had nothing left
By their dead parents. "Stay," quoth Reputation,
"Do not forsake me; for it is my nature,
If once I part from any man I meet,
I am never found again." And so for you:
You have shook hands with Reputation,
And made him invisible. So, fare you well.
I will never see you more. (III.II.118-133)

Duchess: I prithee, who is greatest? Can you tell?
Sad tales befit my woe: I'll tell you one.
A salmon, as she swam unto the sea,
Met with a dogfish, who encounters her
With this rough language: "Why art thou so bold
To mix thyself with our high state of floods,
Being no eminent courtier, but one
That for the calmest and fresh time o' th' year
Dost live in shallow rivers, rank'st thyself
With silly smelts and shrimps? And darest thou
Pass by our dog-ship without reverence?"
"Oh!" quoth the salmon, "sister, be at peace:
Thank Jupiter we both have passed the net!
Our value never can be truly known,
Till in the fisher's basket we be shown:
I' the' market then my price may be the higher,
Even when I am nearest to the cook and fire."
So to great men the moral may be stretched:
Men oft are valued high, when they're most wretched.
But come, whither you please. I am armed 'gainst misery;
Bent to all ways of the oppressor's will:
There's no deep valley but near some great hill. (III.V.120-141)

The Dogfish and the Salmon: A Glimmer of Hope in a Tale of Despair?

For a play that casts a Cardinal as one of the central characters, *The Duchess of Malfi* has surprisingly few references to religion, Christianity, or an afterlife. This results in a very dark, hopeless production consistent with the Jacobean tragedy genre. An examination of Ferdinand's and the Duchess' contrasting rhetoric in their allegorical stories, however, provide a glimmer of hope in the tragic tale. The Duchess' parable has distinct Christian ideologies that ultimately manifest themselves in Act Four when the Duchess is executed. By weaving this Christian thread into the play, Webster suggests not only that the Duchess, Antonio, and their children, will find happiness in an afterlife in spite of a poor reputation, but also that their murderers will be punished. Good intro with clear argument/goals set against the usual traits of the genre.

After learning that the Duchess has given birth to Antonio's children within their secret marriage [just thinking about outside readers], Ferdinand enters her room with a poniard and proceeds to tell a story about Reputation, Love, and Death personified. He explains that the three "travel o'er the world" (III.II.121) together but eventually decide, "That they should part, and take three several ways" (III.II.122). Ferdinand is preoccupied with his elevated social status and preserving his noble bloodline so he centers the story on Reputation. As they part, Reputation says, "Do not forsake me; for it is my nature, / If once I part from a man I meet, / I am never found again," (III.II.129-131) proposing that a bad reputation is a permanent condition. He is so focused on Reputation in his story that he neglects Death. Death only remarks to his companions that, "they should find him in great battles, / Or cities plagued with plagues," (III.II.123-124). Ferdinand fails to realize that Death, not the loss of a good reputation is a true permanent condition.

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The Duchess provides her own allegorical story about reputation and death that contrasts Ferdinand's in Act Three. At this point in the play, Bosola has come to Ancona to renounce Antonio and his children because Ferdinand and the Cardinal view the children as illegitimate and Antonio as a threat to their noble bloodline as he is of a lower social class. The Duchess invites Bosola to judge which characters is greatest in a parable that details an encounter between a pompous dogfish and a salmon and appears to be in direct response to Ferdinand's story earlier in the play. In the Duchess' allegory, the dogfish insults a lowly salmon that swims too closely by the stately dogfish. The dogfish says, "Why art thou so bold / To mix thyself with our high state of floods" (III.V.124-125). The dogfish considers the salmon to be of a lower social class because the salmon keeps company with, "silly smelts and shrimps," (III.V.129). This is ironic, of course, because the salmon is worth considerably more at market. The salmon tastefully mentions this to the dogfish, "Our value never can be truly known, / Till in the fisher's basket we be shown: / I' the' market then my price may be the higher" (III.V.133-135). The Duchess is articulating an important, and very Christian moral here; that men are not judged in death ("in the fisher's basket") by their reputation or social class. This moral sharply opposes the one her brother established in his story. Her brother values reputation over everything; for Ferdinand, the Duchess' reputation is equal to her worth. By contrast, the Duchess has a more realistic and Christian outlook; she acknowledges that death spares none, regardless of class, and that in the end, man is not judged by the reputation imputed to him by others/anyone other than God (?).

The Duchess goes on to extend the metaphor in her story. "To great men the moral may be stretched," (III.V.137) she proclaims to Bosola, suggesting she intends the

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Comment [1]: I suggest streamlining things, and even removing the quotation because you don't really do anything with it – and we want to use quotations to maximum effect.

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characters of her story, the dogfish and the salmon, to correspond to even aristocratic characters, such as those in the play. The Duchess' brothers Ferdinand and the Cardinal are of an elevated social status, the former through his position in the government and the latter through his position in the church. In the Duchess' story, the dogfish represents Ferdinand and the Cardinal, two men of high social class who seek to preserve their noble bloodline by exerting control of the Duchess' sexuality. The Duchess explains to Bosola, "Men oft are valued high, when they're most wretched," (III.V.138). This comment references her two brothers, particularly her twin Ferdinand, men of a high social class who perform a number of atrocities including torture, murder, and adultery. If her two brothers are the dogfish in the parable, then Antonio, the Duchess (by association with the "lowly" Antonio), and their children are salmon. Much like the salmon in the story, these characters are the most noble of character? in the play, though they are valued as lower in the social order (Antonio and the children) or as having a less-respected reputation (the Duchess), by their higher-class counterparts. [it wasn't clear who was doing the valuing – and it's most effective to clarify that the valuing here is from the brothers' viewpoint]

The parallels between the salmon and the Duchess become even more apparent when the reader applies the allegorical tale to the Duchess' final moments in the play. It is during her final moments that the Duchess' Christian view of life and death that is suggested in her tale manifest themselves. The salmon in the Duchess' story says, "I' the' market then my price may be the higher, / Even when I am nearest the cook and the fire" (III.V.136-137). This means that, according to the Duchess, her true worth can be determined only when she is "nearest the cook and fire," (III.V.137), that is, when she is near death. Since the salmon represents the Duchess, we can apply the story to the

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Comment [2]: I tweaked this because the Duchess is not referring to the play, so I think we want to be grammatically clear about that.

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Comment [3]: The concept of Ferd and the Card as high-ranking gets a bit repetitive here. Say it once, and use other sentences to add new information.

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Comment [4]: Awkward syntax.

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Duchess' final moments before she is executed. When Bosola enters the Duchess' living quarters with the executioner who is sent to strangle her to death, he asks, "Doth not death fright you?" (IV.II.188). The Duchess responds, "Who would be afraid on 't, / Knowing to meet such excellent company / In th' other world?" (IV.II.189-191). The Duchess' response showcases her Christian outlook. Her belief in "th' other world" (IV.II.191) is consistent with the Christian belief of two different afterlives: heaven and hell. This line offers the most hope to the audience. Before she is executed, the Duchess believes Antonio and her children have been murdered. With these lines, the Duchess suggests that she and her family ("excellent company") will meet again in heaven. Her Christian view of life and death gives the Duchess peace in her final moments and allows her to exhibit poise throughout the rest of the execution scene. In the face of death, the Duchess affirms, "I am Duchess of Malfi still" (IV.II.125). The Duchess even takes charge of her death and exerts authority over the executioner by giving one last order, "Dispose my breath how please you, but my body / Bestow upon my women, will you?" (IV.II.206-207). And she gives the order to pull and pull harder, actually commencing her strangulation! It is because the Duchess views life and death through a Christian lens that she is able to exhibit so much authority, dignity, and poise in her final execution scene. Nice ideas/analysis

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The Duchess of Malfi is indeed a dark play, riddled with violence, death, and despair. However, in light of the Christian moral provided in the story of the dogfish and the salmon, the murders of the Duchess and Antonio may actually offer the audience some hope. The Duchess, in her allegorical tale views the net, or death, as the ultimate equalizer for all people, regardless of social status. Her view on life and death that is established in her salmon and dogfish story manifests in the Duchess' execution scene. If the audience

subscribes to the Duchess' Christian view of death, social status, and reputation, then the play becomes considerably less dark (or at least offers a way out of the darkness through faith!). In fact, the murder of the Duchess could be viewed as a necessary evil that reveals her true nobility for as the allegory of the salmon and the dogfish tells us, "Our value never can be truly known, / Till in the fisher's basket we be shown," (IV.I.133-134).

- as before, your reading of the dogfish/salmon parable is well done and engaging.

Carrying those analyses over to use them to explore the Duchess' death scene is an excellent way to follow up on whether they apply to the whole play. I might have liked to have seen a quick paragraph on Ferdinand's mad, crazy, deserved death as the parallel that helps drive home this important glimmer of hope.

The only major advice I might give is to consider giving a bit more background to situate the story, just in case you were ever to have outside readers or something like that (like the info I inserted about Antonio's and the Duchess's secret marriage). Minor advice would include some editing for clarity. Otherwise, this is very well done and it articulates an original view of the text and play.

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Works cited needed.

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