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**Abstract:** Most of Elizabethan tragedies are notorious for their male characters, and people tend to remember female characters as secondary contributors of the development of the plot. However, female characters also play important roles. Without them, many vendettas would not have been fulfilled. In contrast, women during the Renaissance were –supposed to be– confined to the private sphere, and this differs drastically with the role of female characters in Elizabethan tragedies. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to revisit *The Spanish Tragedy* and *The Duchess of Malfi*, two representative plays belonging to the beginning and the ending of the Elizabethan period, respectively, in order to determine if there was a bridge which let women into the public sphere, and if there were changes regarding the role of the Renaissance woman throughout this period by means of analysing these plays.

**Keywords:** Renaissance, tragedy, theatre, women, private, sphere.

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**Carlota PEDREÑO MANZANO**

## **The Role of the Renaissance Woman through Literature: Restrictions & Trajectory**

### **0. Introduction**

Elizabethan literature is world-wide famous for its numerous plays, its well-known authors such as Shakespeare, Kyd, Webster, and Marlowe, and a whole lot of characters such as Hamlet, Barabas, Hieronimo, Macbeth, Faustus, etc., who have caught our attention and have made an impact in literature because of their magnificence and complexity concerning Renaissance tragedies. However, we usually tend to forget another hidden but important part of most of these plays: women. Women during the Renaissance period were so confined to the private or domestic sphere that when it comes to recalling characters from such plays, we tend to list the male ones and forget about the female ones, since the greatest actions for the development of the plot seem to always be carried out by men –at least, apparently. Therefore, my motivation for working in this paper is to give female characters of Elizabethan plays the importance and emphasis they deserve.

A great amount of information we have about how things were in the past is because of literature, since books leave the print of what concerns the authors. All in all, writers – no matter how innovative, futurist, or utopian they are – must set the first step of their work in a reality constructed upon the frame of ordinary everyday life. Even if they aim to create a completely upside-down setting, they must establish the difference between opposites (taking reality as the opposite for this upside-down setting), and therefore, somehow, we can obtain traces of how life was like in the period the author is writing. For this reason, and because Elizabethan plays are simple in their setting, it is not hard to understand what the conditions for people were, in this case, for women, at the time.

We have learnt that in the Renaissance the main characters of Elizabethan plays were usually men, and of course, these plays were also written by men. Later on, we have the Restoration and 18<sup>th</sup> century periods, in which most of the works were written by men, but started concerning women affairs, such as *Moll Flanders*, *Pamela*, and *Fantomina*, but always through a conservative perspective, and if not, at least implying a conservative conclusion or moral. Then, in late Romanticism we observe that more women were prone to literary skills, such as Jane Austen and the Brontë sisters, writing also about women issues but also under a conservative frame. In fact, Austen's works usually deal with young girls seeking a good suitor for marriage. The great change came, in fact, by the hand of 20<sup>th</sup> century Modernism, when women started gaining the same rights as men, and there was a slow but continuous moral and even sexual liberation. Actually, in this period we can see what I would personally like to call *Virginia Woolf's rebellion*, in which she rejected previous novels based on the lives of young women of approximately eighteen or twenty years old, whose stories are finished when they get married, such as those of Jane Austen. Not in vain, Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* narrates the story of a fifty years old woman whose interests in life have not ended at all with her marriage, but instead her uneasiness is growing and growing as long as she goes over her previous life and discovers she has made lots of mistakes in her choices, but even in her mature age, she has to go on deciding which paths she must follow, and also revisits the paths she must have followed.

Observing these facts in a quick overview, we can assume, indeed, that things have changed too much throughout time for women. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to describe the role of women during the Renaissance by analysing two representative plays: Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* (1584-89) and John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* (published in 1612-13), which, somehow, mark a starting point and an end, respectively, to the Elizabethan period. This way we can also obtain a perspective and an answer of whether

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things changed for women during this period or not. Besides, these analyses should answer another question implicitly posed at the beginning of this Introduction: are female characters in Renaissance plays always restricted to the private sphere and the great achievements always carried out by men? Or was there, on the other hand, a bridge which enabled them to take part in the public sphere?

In order to carry out this research, the material used will be the full texts of both *The Spanish Tragedy* and *The Duchess of Malfi* plus other reference works about women and Renaissance lifestyle which will help explain what the conditions for women (concerning heritage, love, sexuality, the public and the private sphere, etc.) were. However, as the evidence for information about these issues in the plays themselves is limited, I will try to reflect my own interpretations on the characters when possible, which may be slightly different from the ones offered by the bibliography used.

The structure will consist of a first part devoted to the analysis of *The Spanish Tragedy*, a second part including the analysis of *The Duchess of Malfi*, a third part in which both tragedies are compared, and a fourth part which will serve as a conclusion.

### 1. *The Spanish Tragedy*

In *The Spanish Tragedy*, the only two feminine characters who appear throughout the tragedy are Isabella and Bel-Imperia. Isabella's maiden also appears on stage once, but her contribution to the story is so vague that here character will not be included in the analysis. However, the number of appearances of Isabella and Bel-Imperia is notoriously unbalanced since Isabella is only on stage in 2.5, 3.8, 4.2 and she is only mentioned once by Hieronimo in 4.3, while Bel-Imperia is taking part 'visually' in almost all the play, not to mention the references to her while she is not on stage. Therefore, we could wonder, why so?

The most obvious factor to take into account is the relevance of the characters in the play: Isabella is Horatio's mother, wife of the Marshal of Spain, but after all, a humble woman whose son has been murdered. On the other hand, Bel-Imperia is Horatio's lover, the cause of his death by her own brother's hands. Besides, she has been raised in the court, where most of the play is set. Given these conditions of setting and personality, it is not surprising that Bel-Imperia appears on stage largely more times for she is in the place in which the events occur, and because her youth provides her with the physical and mental conditions for avenging Horatio rather than Isabella –but this will be discussed in depth later. Therefore, I would like to analyse the character of Isabella in first place, because there are some underlying facts in the play and suggestions in the language employed that we should observe carefully in order to determine the nature of the events presented in the play, that is to say, their *raison d'être*.

Isabella enters for the first time after Horatio has been stabbed to death and his father has seen the massacre of Horatio hanging from a tree. She comes to look for her husband, who has left their home when he has heard Bel-Imperia's screams, then she aids Hieronimo in taking the corpse up and, crying his son's death, she claims for heavenly justice to avenge this crime. At the end, Hieronimo advise her not to cry for Horatio 'or, at the least, dissemble them [thy complaints] awhile' in order to discover the authors of his death. Therefore, Isabella's contribution in this scene consists mainly of two different things: first of all, it consists of showing her marital virtues as a wife who is always behind her husband, looking for him when he is gone, and helping him when he needs it; that is to say, as a secondary mind who does nothing but to follow her husband's instructions without asking a question, fulfilling this way the conception of the woman confinement to the private sphere, while the man is the one who must carry out vengeance if necessary, and even the one who must decide how to act in case there is need to take part into some activity. And finally, she represents the faithful and Christian woman who devotes herself to God's will while Hieronimo thinks of vengeance (if not personal yet, at least judicial).

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Her next appearance is in 3.8, and we can see her talking to her maid as a mother in despair, near to madness, asking for his son as if he were still alive, just after having claimed something that let us know that she is aware of his death:

No, thers no medicine left for my disease,  
 Nor any phisick to recure the dead.

*She runnes lunaticke.*

Horatio! O, wheres Horatio?

Besides, she behaves as a typical mother, attributing qualities and idealizing her son as a model or 'a mirrour in our daies' when he was just a boy as normal as a boy belonging to his time and his position could be.

Finally, her last appearance is in scene 4.2, and her soliloquy and consequent suicide is very meaningful in terms of a more extended analysis, for she gives us the key to understand her feelings, thoughts and aspirations, all of them betrayed by the murder of her son, Horatio. While she speaks, 'she cuts down the Arbour', as a symbol of her own personal vengeance, which, though weak, involves a curse on all the place and even on her husband, Hieronimo: 'make haste to see thy sonne', that is to say, hurry up to die as he died, as Isabella herself is going to die, because the revenge she expected to be carried out by Hieronimo has been delayed for so long that she does not have any hope left. In fact, her grief turns into madness, and in this madness she thinks she has been the one who has fought for justice: 'And none but I bestirre me- to no ende'. And after this speech, she stabs herself.

Curiously, there is only one moment in which Isabella is mentioned when she is not on stage, and it is actually after she dies. Hieronimo says that his wife has committed suicide. Hieronimo's words, so resigned and so natural, made me wonder: Is he so worried about the crime that he completely forgets about his wife? I would rather think that he actually assumes that an old woman like Isabella has nothing more to do in life than to look after her family. Now the bonds of family are broken because of the recent crime, her suicide is something that somehow could be 'expected' by Hieronimo.

As a conclusion, we can observe that the relevance of this character in general is none but to cry and lament his son's murder to her own death. Isabella only appears on stage in her capacity as a mourner. After all, Bel-Imperia's relationship with Horatio is the one of lovers, if someone should feel the need of avenging Hieronimo's son, that would be Isabella, who has given birth to him. But instead, she does nothing but to wait on Hieronimo's decisions which happens to be not so clear to her. In fact, she would have not committed suicide if she had known that her husband was eventually going to plot against Balthazar and Lorenzo. Therefore we should wonder, is this the only role left for mature women? After being married, Isabella is completely devoted to her husband and son while Hieronimo does not share his plans with her, even to the point that she goes mad and decides to kill herself. Here we see the patterns of the wife's life during the Renaissance: after marriage, women are completely tied to the bonds of family and they do not take part in more action than the mere attending of their husbands' needs.

However, I see a clear and abrupt development of Isabella's personality. At the beginning of the analysis we have discussed that her contribution to the play could be summarized in the fulfilment of her marital qualities as a humble, obedient and virtuous wife and good mother, and her Christian devotion. Nonetheless, at the end she rejects those virtues: she curses her husband, and she commits suicide, which is against the law of God. But it can be easily understood by the fact that Isabella is driven mad because of her grief.

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Therefore, we could think that the feminine characters in this play fit the stereotypes or expectations on women in the Renaissance period -because after all, Isabella only 'misbehaves' because of her madness- but this is not the case. Through the character of Bel-Imperia we can observe that there is a reversal in the virtues associated to women, and even so, she becomes the great heroine of this tragedy. Given that her appearance on stage is almost permanent, and therefore more complex to analyse than Isabella's, I will analyse her character by explaining the topics and the roles in the play associated with Bel-Imperia, giving more emphasis to her speeches, in order to convey the relevance and connotations of her words and actions throughout the development of the story, but also taking into account how she is portrayed by the other characters, which will help understand what it is they think and expect about her.

### 1.1. Revenge

The central topic of the play is revenge, and it is Bel-Imperia that fulfills this purpose with Hieronimo's help. This issue is very important as long as this has always been understood as a vendetta carried out by Hieronimo, but in fact, if we read between the lines we can see this is not completely true. Horatio's murder forces Bel-Imperia to take a personal vendetta against Balthazar and Lorenzo, her own brother. While Bel-Imperia is captive, she manages to send a letter to Hieronimo, telling him the truth about the death of his son, and as this man is delaying his revenge, in act 4.1 Bel-Imperia manages to meet him and she reproaches his coward attitude for not being able to avenge Horatio and encourages him to get into action as soon as possible. This scene and its consequences are somehow linked to our discussion about Isabella's resolution to sit down and cry. Indeed, it is the young girl that solves the conflict, instead of the mature woman. This would fit the stereotype that we were discussing before: the eternal submission to dynamic youth and static adulthood. However, the tables turn when we take a careful look into the details. As we said before, Bel-Imperia avenges Horatio's death with the aid of Hieronimo, so there is a union between a young woman and an old, deranged man. Taking into account the assumptions about women in the period in which the play is set, we can conclude two things: the first one, it is not typical at all that a revenge tragedy has a woman as the 'star' of the play, as the character by which all misdeeds are solved. It would have been easier –and more fitting to the period- to depict Hieronimo as a young, strong and resolute father than to let the character of Bel-Imperia do what was supposed to be his job, or at least, a manly job (recall *Macbeth*, *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, *Richard III*, *The Avenger's Tragedy*, *The Jew of Malta*...). The second one, once we have assumed that the revenge is going to be carried out by a woman, it would be more coherent for Isabella to be the avenger, because after all she is her mother and her own blood, not a mere lover.

### 1.2. Love

And that leads us to the following topic: love. Throughout the story, we are so involved in the plot that we give it for granted that Bel-Imperia is in love with Horatio and it is her duty to avenge him. However, if we focus on this we might forget that her initial motivation for vengeance is the death of Don Andrea. In fact, in the very beginning of 1.4 Bel-Imperia herself states that Andrea 'was my garlands sweetest flower, and in his death hath buried my delights', but soon in the same scene we can see how she rewards Horatio's service in battle with the scarf Andrea gave to her, and how her love moves from Andrea to Horatio. Therefore, it is unavoidable to wonder about the reasons for Bel-Imperia to change her mind so quickly and easily, and when thinking about it there are a few lines which serve as the key to understand her:

'Yes, second love shall further my revenge.  
 Ile love Horatio, my Andreas freend,

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The more to spight the Prince that wrought his end.'

However, after a second meeting between Bel-Imperia and Horatio, we notice that there is no fake in her love and her feelings, and it is not until Horatio's death that the plans of revenge are set in motion. So the amount of questions arousing here is extense: is her love for Horatio a pack of lies? Is Horatio a marionette in Bel-Imperia's hands? Or is it that Bel-Imperia has forgotten Andrea so easily? The truth is that the beginnings of Bel-Imperia and Horatio bring a great confusion to the reader. However, if we put the whole matter in context we could interpret it under the light of one important factor: the death of Andrea serves as the starting point of the play, and therefore we could understand that it is only a way of beginning the story. At first it seemed to me a very plain reason, a failure in the author's creativity but in fact because of his creativity we are talking about a story providing us with a play within the play, in which Andrea and Revenge are all the time in scene, and also a play in which the tragedy starts with Andrea's death, and the initial 'device' for revenge, Horatio, gets himself killed, transporting us to the first stage again, with another tragedy that must be avenged. In other words, Bel-Imperia's love for Andrea would be as real and intense as her later love for Horatio, serving the first one only as a beginning marker of the plot. I thought later of a more twisted explanation of the events, by means of a second factor very convenient to an author of his period, and this would be the stereotype of women as people with fickle tastes and an unpredictable code of behaviour, who give free will to their emotions and who are not reliable. In this way, Kyd would reverse the virtues expected to be present in a young woman, and would provide us with a character who fulfils the stereotype and vices attributed to women. Anyway, I discarded it, for it would be not fair to brand Bel-Imperia as a self-seeking person, for her intentions are always honest and she does not fall in love with any other man after Horatio dies.

### 1.3. Sexuality

But going on with Bel-Imperia's relationship with Horatio, we should not forget to pay attention to the allusions about chastity and eroticism throughout the play. The fact is that although it is not indicated explicitly in either the stage directions or the speeches, in act 2.4 Bel-Imperia is caught having sex with Horatio. The implications and consequences of this are notorious both before and after this scene. In act 2.3 the Duke of Castile, Bel-Imperia's father, while talking to the King about her uncertain love for Balthazar, states that 'she coy it as becomes her kinde' in a very proud way, referring thus that her woman condition forces her not to show her emotions and suggesting that it is not only normal but also the right thing to do if she wants to keep her honour intact. Otherwise, she could be seen as 'cheeky'. Recall that at the time, for a woman to show her affections to a man in public –and even more, before marriage- was thought not to be ethical, and moreover, ethical coming from a girl of her social position. Thus, chastity appears as a powerful opposite of Bel-Imperia's behaviour, which lets us notice even more clearly society's attitude towards sexuality at the time. When Bel-Imperia is confined in a peripheral room in the palace, Lorenzo visits her and pretends to be worried about her reputation by cynically claiming:

'For I have done you no disparagement;  
 Unlesse, by more discretion then diserv'd,  
 I sought to save your honour and mine owne.'

### 1.4. Heritage & Social Condition

Bel-Imperia's honour seems to be in danger more because of the status of her lover rather than for the fact of having a lover. However, as most of prejudices, Lorenzo's intention when he kills Horatio is not to protect her reputation, because otherwise, he would not have been encouraging Balthazar to court his sister. His real motivations are purely ambitious, as the

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ones of the Duke and the King: they expect a union of Portingale and Spain after their marriage, and the consequent benefits deriving from it.

Though their purposes are hidden under this veil, however, it is true that women chastity was –and even in contemporary society still is, though to a lesser extent- something that mattered. Not in vain, women's virginity is lots of time referred of as their *virtue*. As we all know, a young girl was valued and worthy because of it, and throughout the play we can find some evidences of it, for example, in Hieronimo's depiction of 'Perseda, chaste and resolute'. Nonetheless, I would like to analyze Lorenzo's words to Bel-Imperia while she is still imprisoned:

'Why, then, remembering that olde disgrace  
 Which you for Don Andrea had indurde,  
 And now were likely longer to sustaine,  
 By being found so meanely accompanied,'

Bel-Imperia's reputation is therefore assumed to be lost twice, actually. The first one, because of her relationship with Don Andrea. The second one, because of her relationship with Horatio. And as Lorenzo puts, the consequences of this is that she is in a state of 'disgrace'. Besides, in the choice of the adverb 'meanely' I find that apart from the obvious connotation of Horatio having a lower status than hers, there is also a witty suggestion of the adverb meaning that she has not been discovered with him in having an informal chat, but in a very awkward situation.

It is the assumptions on the fragility of women worthiness that forces them, and in this case, Bel-Imperia, to be living in obedience and submission under the rules of a patriarchal family system. It is clear that once again, she does not fulfil these expectations, nor is ready to do it. The Duke, the King, and Lorenzo are not happy enough about taking decisions and appointing a suitable marriage for her. Instead, the submission reaches an extreme point in which the dialogues among the characters suggest –sometimes in a very explicit way- that they underestimate Bel-Imperia's ability to make right choices, her strength as a woman and her intelligence as a rational being. In fact, Lorenzo is sure that 'as a nine daies wonder, being ore-blowne' Bel-Imperia will forget all about it. Instead, Bel-Imperia, who is aware of her situation, takes advantage of it. The conversations held between Bel-Imperia and Balthazar are very funny if we read them assuming that Balthazar does not even imagine she is clever enough to mock him, although she is doing it all the time, showing thus that she is above the circumstances, their expectations on her future, and all the mistreatment suffered. In 3.10 we find a very good example of it:

'To love, and feare, and both at once, my Lord,  
 In my conceipt, are things of more import  
 Then womens wits are to be busied with.'

### 1.5. Education

The only one who trusts her is Hieronimo, who needs her help in vengeance and is not ashamed of it. Besides, he is aware of her intelligence and because of it not only lets Hieronimo that Bel-Imperia take part in the play he has prepared for his vendetta, but also 'In courtly French shall all her phraises be', showing thus that she is an educated woman and that Hieronimo gives his recognition to it in contrast with the other characters, who think of Bel-Imperia as a fool because of her youth and her woman condition.

### 1.6. The Theatre

Pedreño Manzano, Carlota. "The Role of the Renaissance Woman through Literature: Restrictions & Trajectory." *JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research* 3.1 (2015): 43-60  
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Finally, there is a critic on the theatre laws and the role of women in it. As we know, women could not take part in a performance at the time, but Hieronimo provides Bel-Imperia with a place in it as the main character: Perseda. This leads us back to the fact that it is not Hieronimo on his own who avenges Horatio, but with the aid of Bel-Imperia, who is a woman, and therefore, not supposed to carry out such a 'manly' task. The other characters, who believe in the importance of men in the public sphere, or in other words, who do not believe in women's valuability and recognition, are very surprised when they hear about Bel-Imperia's role of Perseda. In fact, the Viceroy of Portingale expresses his amazement aloud in 4.4: 'Who? Bel-Imperia?'

For these things, I would like to summarize the character of Bel-Imperia according to the meaning of her name. *Bel-Imperia* means 'beautiful empire' or 'beautiful reign', thus suggesting that she is often taken as valuable according to her beauty and to her social position as the king's niece and heir, and as the potential wife of the future viceroy of Portingal. But she is more than that: she is an empire in which only her consciousness rules her life, she is the sovereign of her mind and her actions, and she proves to have more to offer as a clever woman aware of her situation than as a walking personification of beauty and material richness.

## 2. *The Duchess of Malfi*

*The Duchess of Malfi* is a play with a larger amount of female characters than in *The Spanish Tragedy*. For this analysis we will devote a section for each of them, because even the one which appears the least is important in its contribution to the whole background of our female study in Elizabethan plays. Instead of discussing them in order of appearance throughout the play, we will leave the Duchess for the end of the analysis, because it is precisely the features of the rest of the characters that will help us understand the behaviour and personality of the Duchess, by a simple mechanism of self-fashioning. That is to say, we cannot understand the actions, decisions and the inner wishes of the Duchess if we do not put them in contrast with the aspirations of the other characters, and at the same time, we definitely cannot try to define who this Duchess is if it is not under the light of her environment and the women who surround her.

The Old Lady appears precisely to personify the vices of mature women who devote themselves to the pleasures of sexual encounters. We cannot forget that this play is morally constructed under the laws of men, and therefore, the features and characteristics of these women on stage are 'seen through male eyes' (Lisa Jardine: 1983, p. 69). Obviously, this Old Lady is lacking the vigorous and fresh beauty of youth, but her representation is somehow exaggerated by the depiction that Bosola gives us of her in 2.1 by comparing the Old Lady with a woman he knew, thus creating a hyperbolic vision of the Old Lady that highlights her ridiculous physical appearance:

Bosola            You come from painting now?  
                       [...]  
                       There was a lady in France that [...] whereas before she looked a nutmeg  
                       grater, after she resembled an abortive hedgehog.

She appears for the last time once again in 2.2, and Bosola takes advantage of the situation to scold her lustful ways:

Bosola            And it was only to know what strange instrument it was should swell  
                       up a glass to the fashion of a woman's belly.



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Old Lady                      I will hear no more of the glass-house, you are still abusing women.

Bosola                        Who I? No, only by the way, now and then, mention your frailties.

Although the Old Lady appears in only two scenes of the same act, her contribution to the whole play is important as long as her behaviour is implicitly put in contrast to that of the Duchess, who is also an old woman, a widow, who falls in love with Antonio and passionately proposes marriage to him, not taking into account her reputation and the advices of her brothers. All the male characters in the play give their disapproval to the relationship between the Duchess and Antonio, and this fact dominates the attitude of the readers towards the development of the play as long as the only characters that can convince us that the Duchess and Antonio are acting in a proper way are the Duchess and Antonio themselves.

Moving on to the following woman on stage, we can find Julia, Castruchio's wife and Cardinal's lover. She plays the role of the unfaithful wife, one more time reflecting the vices associated to women at the time: their inconstant love and their changeable and passionate behaviour. The interesting point here is analysing her in relation to the Cardinal, who spends a large amount of time throughout the play in criticising the Duchess' actions while he is entertaining himself with a married woman.

In 2.3, the Cardinal meets Julia and puts all the guilt of their affair on her. Here, there is a glimpse of the contradiction that covers all the play: do what I say, not what I do. The Cardinal's words challenge, indeed, this environment created by men in which they are always right and accept the consequences of their behaviour and women are deceitful and guilty of lust. In contrast, his speech clarifies two things: first of all, he blames this woman and the Duchess because of their lust, when he is as guilty as these women can be; and secondly, his affections also change so quickly that, put in his own words, 'lightning moves slow to't'. It is obvious, therefore, that the play is full of irony, hypocrisy, and different measurement of men and women's duties. However, before Julia's death in 5.2, she proves to be the unreliable woman the Cardinal said she was, for she betrays the Cardinal's secret for obtaining the favour of Bosola in such a shameless way:

Julia                        We that are great women of pleasure, use to cut off  
                                   These uncertain wishes and unquiet longings  
                                   And in an instant oin the sweet delight  
                                   And the pretty excuse together. Had you been in th'street,  
                                   Under my chamber window, even there  
                                   I should have courted you.

Thus, the character of Julia constitutes a contrast which serves for the self-fashioning of the Duchess.

But before we get into detail, we have our final woman on stage before we start analysing the complex character of the Duchess of Malfi. Cariola is the Duchess' maid, and she is presented during most of the play as a young woman with clear ideas fitting society expectations about chastity and obedience. As the only woman to whom the Duchess is close, Cariola is aware of every movement of the Duchess. At the end of act 1, she even lets herself give her opinion aloud for the public to hear what she really thinks about the secret marriage of the Duchess and Antonio:

Cariola                      Whether the spirit of greatness oro f woman  
                                   Reign most in her, I know not, but it shows  
                                   A fearful madness. I owe her much of pity.

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However, she remains faithful to the Duchess until the day of her death: she hides behind the curtains while the Duchess is proposing marriage to Antonio in order to serve as a witness, she covers the Duchess' pregnancy and the couple when they sleep together, and even when the Duchess is going to be murdered Cariola claims that she wants to die with her.

But the question is: what is loyalty to her? She is faithful to the Duchess' decisions and she does not let her down, but she is not so loyal in the sense that she should have told the Duchess what she really thought about her reckless acts, thus avoiding the tragedy.

The interesting point is that when she talks to Antonio one morning when the Duchess and her husband have got up, Cariola says to him that she will never get married and they have a dialogue in which she appears to be so sensible and careful. Even when the Duchess is escaping from the court faking a pilgrimage, Cariola says that she does not like these kind of lies involving religious themes, thus showing a strong moral attitude towards Christianity. The truth, nonetheless, is that when she is actually going to die she regrets her words ('I will die with her') and she confesses that she is pregnant. This makes her whole exterior of faith and chastity turn upside down.

Somehow, this would justify Cariola's silence in spite of thinking that the Duchess is doing the wrong thing by marrying Antonio, and this way she would prove her real loyalty to the Duchess because although they are rather close friends than anything else, Cariola is still a subordinate maid for the Duchess and cannot say what she thinks as she pleases, but moreover, she would be a hypocrite if she tried to stop her superior's marriage –no matter how inconvenient it is- when Cariola herself is pregnant without being married, and therefore, has acted worse than the Duchess.

Here the topic of religion plays an ambiguous role for if she were so pious and religious she would not have got pregnant or she would have married before having sex with anyone. It is true that it could be interpreted as if she were remorseful before dying because she confesses her 'guilt', but in my opinion it is not like that because in fact she does not want to have her killed in order to have her baby and because her sudden confession is the most logical resource the author has for the audience to notice her true condition at the very end of her acting on stage.

This way, it would be confirmed the old theory spread by men that women are inconstant and liars by nature, and that they let themselves be seduced so easily. Nevertheless, she behaves in a very honourable way towards the Duchess and she does not sell herself to Ferdinand and the Cardinal as Bosola does, a man who enjoys very much his critics and insults about women. Taking into account this aspect of Cariola's behaviour, she would stand as a better intentioned character and thus more reliable morally talking than Bosola and the other men in the play in spite of her sins.

So far, we have analysed the three feminine characters, which constitute a great contrast between them and the Duchess of Malfi. To describe properly the figure of the Duchess, I will develop separately -when possible- the different topics explored in the play: love & sexuality, family roles & inheritance, social mobility and death. The greatest part of this analysis will be devoted to the first point, for it is the most central one: it is what moves the Duchess to create the conflict with her brothers, the most criticised issue by the male characters throughout the play, and equally important, the topic which creates more controversy if we put the Duchess' love for Antonio in contrast with the depictions of the other feminine characters.

## **2.1. Love and sexuality**

Love and sexuality are two topics that are implicitly related in this play, and therefore, they cannot be separated. They are even mistaken too many times, and the male characters are not able to refer to love without addressing to lust, as if women were incapable of loving

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someone in a pure way, but as if they were unavoidably prone to be both victims and guilty of seduction and the purposes were merely sexually motivated. Not in vain, the Duchess is 'forbidden' to marry again, with the excuse of maintain her honour intact. This is completely absurd, for she has been previously married and subsequently she is not supposed to be a virgin anymore. And more than that, she is not even doing anything wrong – neither against the law of men nor against the law of God – by having sexual relationships after being married. For this reason, when Ferdinand discovers about her marriage with Antonio, in Duchess' words, she herself points out at the ridiculous ways of her brothers:

Duchess        'Why might not I marry?  
                       I have not gone about in this to create  
                       Any new world or custom.'

It is true that she breaks her oath deliberately, because in 1.1 she promises to her brother she will not marry again. However, the reasons they give to her are too loose to make sense; Ferdinand states that 'they are most luxurious will wed twice', thus supporting the idea that the Duchess' decision is pushed only by lust and passionate affection. On the contrary, the Duchess is too clever to be deceived by her senses, as she chooses a man who, in spite of belonging to an inferior social position, is valuable for his services to the realm, honourable, smart, and therefore, a suitable candidate to be the Duke of Malfi.

Moving back to her decision, she does act impulsively and puts in risk her familiar relationship with her brothers and her own life, but she is never blinded by love so much that she neglects her duty as a ruler. She proves to be an effective duchess during her life, and for this reason, she cannot be attached the stereotype of a woman who loses her mind for a man and who lets the dukedom fall apart. She provokes her own destruction with her actions, but it is not her guilt what leads her to death, but the ambitions of her brothers. She is, definitely, not to blame.

To reinforce my opinion, I would like to put in contrast the behaviour of the Duchess with the characters of the Old Lady, Julia, and Cariola. Apart from the Duchess, these three feminine characters represent the vices of lust but each of them mirroring a particular aspect of it.

First of all, the Old Lady is presented as the wholly known prostitute. She makes use of her body not for pleasure but for money. As we were discussing before, she is depicted as an old woman whose youth beauty is no longer visible. Assuming that the Duchess sexual life is not to be comparable with that of the Old Lady, there exists, however, a certain parallelism between the two characters. In the development of the character of the Duchess, we can appreciate the difference between the resolute and youthful Duchess, searching for love and political establishment in Antonio's arms, and the mature Duchess who complains of her beauty's progressive disappearance and who goes through her pregnancy 'not as a natural and happy part of love and marriage, but as agonising and dangerous', as stated in the Introduction of *The Duchess of Malfi* edited by Brian Gibbons. The contrast in this 'at-first-sight' parallelism lies in the fact that, unlike the presumably 'clients' of the Old Lady, Antonio loves her and never ceases to express his admiration and devotion for her, reaffirming therefore the difference between lust and love the other male characters are not able to see.

Secondly, Julia is presented as the unfaithful wife who has extra-marital relations with the Cardinal. The situation of this characters serve to establish another difference favouring the innocence of the Duchess: she is in her right to marry as she pleases because she is a widow, she does not live in couple, and therefore, she is not disrespectful to anyone. Besides, the relationship between Julia and the Cardinal gives us a hint about the condition of the Duchess' brother, who is a hypocrite and has a different sense of innocence and guilt when it comes to women than when it comes to him himself. The only similarity between

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these two women is that both are who court the men instead of being the other way round, as it was supposed to be. In this sense, both subverts the conventions and assume the role of the man. However, the Duchess does it in a more witty way and her wooing is far more elegant than that of Julia.

Thirdly, Cariola seems at first a very chaste woman, but later she proves deceitful, while the Duchess is threatened and assumed to be guilty since the very beginning of the play. However, there is a parallelism between Cariola and the Duchess, but is more a question of perspective than anything else. Cariola and the Duchess are condemned because of their pregnancies as a result of their lustful ways. The Duchess is, indeed, married, and there is no guilt in that, but we need to notice that when she is blamed for this by her brothers and by her subjects, people do not know yet that she is not single because she keeps it a secret. The interesting thing here is, however, that the death of the Duchess is not a question of punishment because of her behaviour, but for other reasons that help defining the double moral of her brothers.

The Cardinal accuses her of being a promiscuous woman, yet he is having an affair with a married lady. His true reasons are political: he does not want her to rule; he wants to ascend socially and go as far as possible. Ferdinand, on the other hand, has a more secret and darker reason for not wanting the Duchess to have contact with any man. He is secretly in love with her, and therefore if the Duchess is to blame, Ferdinand is to be condemned to hell the first in line, for he is bearing incestuous love for his sister.

Taking into account the motivations of the male characters, their words and actions, their criticism about women and their hypocrisy, as well as the differences between the three feminine characters and the Duchess, we could fairly assume that it is not that the Duchess is acting wrong, but that there existed different ways in which to measure what a man or a woman could rightfully do and what they were forbidden to do. In the play this is explored over and over again, and we even have an overwhelming perspective of this inequality because the Duchess is only surrounded by male characters. Her personality and right to choose as a free person is alienated by their presence, their expectations and their venomous criticism about what a woman has to be like.

Nonetheless, and although Webster intends to make us aware of her numerous mistakes, at the end of the play we see that the Duchess is a real tragic heroine even after her death. The evil forces that drive her to a bloody murder are subverted in such a way that her captors and enemies are finally beaten in a just and deserved vengeance, thus creating an apotheosis end of the play which questions all the things assumed as universal truths before. All in all, if Ferdinand, Bosola, and the Cardinal were right, would they end up like that?

## **2.2. Family & Inheritance**

Family roles and inheritance are also two important themes explored throughout the play from an intertwined perspective. She is tied to her bonds as a sister, and as the woman in the family, she is expected to obey her brothers. Her bond to Antonio as a wife also implies that she should obey him and confine herself to the private sphere of domesticity while he is in charge of the rest of the things as the visible spokesman of their family in the public sphere. However, nothing works like that in this play, and the reason for this subversion lies in the fact that she occupies an important place in the court as the Duchess of Malfi. This provides her with access to the public sphere; even more than her brothers or Antonio, for she is the one in charge. From the text, we do not know if it is her position which gives her strength, or if it is her innate strength which makes her suitable for her position, but the truth is that she manages to behave as a proper duchess in spite of being a woman, and moreover, of being without the supervision of a man. Adding the wooing of Antonio by the Duchess, this let us see that throughout the play the Duchess is assuming the role of men, but lacking their freedom.

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The Cardinal and Ferdinand try to control her personal movements by their constant threats and suggestions, but they also show a great interest in influencing how she 'runs' the dukedom, as we can see in 1.1 when Ferdinand asks her to give Bosola the title of 'the provisorship of your horse'. He has his own reasons, but the fact is that although in this case she appears to be obedient, we will later see how she defies all their expectations. Not in vain, they decide to talk to the Pope to deprive her of her possessions and then they kill her, because if she were still in her initial conditions, they would not have the right to exert any power over her.

In the case of Antonio, although he is her husband, he is subjected to her. The obvious reason for this is that she is from a superior rank, and as her Duchess, he has to accept whatever she commands. But the implicit reason for his submission is that he does not seem to believe in male power over their wives. He is totally in love with her, and as he states after marrying her, he is very fond of her because she is beautiful, chaste, but also – and I would dare to say, most important – because she is intelligent. He is the only man in the play who recognizes and appreciates this. Thus, while Antonio is ready to do as she commands, the other characters are not ready to accept that a woman has the power to do as she pleases, and finally do their best to deprive her, her husband and her children of her dukedom and to get it for themselves.

Social mobility is another important issue concerning the play, but as we are analysing only the feminine characters, and now the Duchess, we will only discuss it in relation to her. The fact that Antonio ascends in the social scale bothers Bosola because he is jealous, but it also bothers Ferdinand and The Cardinal, because as stereotyped men of the Renaissance society, it was not well seen for a woman to marry a man with an inferior position, not to talk about a woman who was a duchess. Although he proves to be more honest and well-intentioned than the rest of the characters (even if they had higher social positions), that is not enough for the brothers of the Duchess. And this fact let us be aware of the discrimination towards women at the moment: if the man marries a woman of an inferior position, she acquires his; but if the woman marries a man of a superior position, he does not acquire hers. Instead, she lowers herself. Therefore, male chauvinism is also constructed in terms of social aggrupation and mobility.

And just to end with the Duchess' analysis, I would also like to devote the final part to a very shocking moment of the play: the Duchess' death. It is neither her decisions, nor her resolutions, nor her tricks to challenge her brothers, nor her efficient way to rule the dukedom that make us aware of her true majesty. Instead, it is the very moment of her death that lets us see her power as a Duchess and a strong person in spite of being a woman. As stated in Brian Gibbons' *Introduction*, she 'exerts her will at the last and intervenes' in the moment she is going to be executed. Her commands to the executioner 'pull, and pull strongly', as well as her last will about the disposal of her body, later satisfied, reflects that although she is betrayed and deprived of her material possessions, her dignity is never taken away, for she is 'Duchess of Malfi still', and that makes her a heroine even during her death.

### 3. Comparison of the plays

#### 3. 1. Love and sexuality

Both *Bel-Imperia* and the Duchess let themselves go by their passion and they do not think about their family or the consequences of their choices. They definitely prove to be more prone to passionate affection than men. But the point lies in the fact that there is nothing to blame in that, as *Bel-Imperia's* brother, the Duchess' family and Bosola try to point out.

In fact, the character of Cariola let us see the hypocrisy behind this criticism, for she herself, who has criticised the attitude of the Duchess, and states that she is mad for hoping to marry Antonio – thus disobeying her brothers- later proves to be not so coherent: Cariola is pregnant. This shows that in this case it is better to be passionate but 'real', as the

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Duchess, than deceitful as Cariola. And moreover, *The Duchess of Malfi* does not end with her death, but her brothers'. This means a reversal in Webster's first attempts to locate the audience against the Duchess, proving this way that Ferdinand and the Cardinal are the ones to blame.

Concerning sexuality, the one that disobeys the 'law' which dictates that women should wait for marriage to have sex is Bel-Imperia, in contrast with the Duchess. However, both are judged equally since, to the court's eyes, the Duchess is single, although she is actually married. Anyway, both women are depicted as if all their motivation for what they do is merely lustful and sexual, but it happens not to be true. As I said before, if Bel-Imperia were not really in love of Horatio, she would not have reached the point of letting her brother be killed nor of committing suicide for avenging him. The reasons for the Duchess are quite the same; she has much to lose by marrying Antonio and if her real intention had been to have sex with him, she would have done it without anybody noticing it. Nonetheless, she waits for marriage. Besides, she thinks beyond love issues, she carefully thinks about her heritage and her social position, and even so, convinced that Antonio is an honourable man, she decides to marry him. In the same fashion, Bel-Imperia intends to marry a man whose rank is inferior to hers, but first observing that he is a noble man, with good feelings and also an excellent warrior.

Another resemblance between these women is that they act autonomously and there is a rebellion against patriarchal authority in choosing partner or husband. In addition, in both plays there is no wooing of the Duchess and Bel-Imperia, but rather the other way round. Bel-Imperia and the Duchess court Horatio and Antonio respectively, thus contributing to the portraying of such women as 'sexual predators'. Obviously, this surely would cause uneasiness on the readers or audience, positioning them against these females, because as stated in *Still Harping on Daughters*, "the impulsive offer of love by a woman is most likely to be a sign of unreliableness and untrustworthiness if the male characters are allowed the final say in 'reading' that offer" (Jardine: 1983, p. 73)

Besides, both the Duchess and Bel-Imperia spill the beans as they finally tell about their romances: Bel-Imperia to Pedringano and the Duchess to Bosola. There are also prejudices against this, since in the period the plays are set, silence meant virtue and excessive speech meant disorder, and the consequences of their inability to hold their tongues confirms it.

No matter how many signs of weakness they have in their personality, the sole truth is that despite all their mistakes (their initiative, their incapacity to keep their secrets), they remain absolutely faithful to Antonio and Horatio until the ultimate consequences.

### 3.2. Heritage

Both Bel-Imperia and the Duchess are presented as valuable for their social status, the first as a court member (niece of the King), and the second as the owner of a dukedom. Apart from that, they are not recognized as valuable for their human qualities. Instead, they are often criticized just because they are women. In this sense, both plays would show a chauvinist attitude towards the female main characters, mirroring the general attitude towards women in the Renaissance period.

Besides the obvious similarities between the Duchess and Bel-Imperia, both the Duchess and Isabella share another feature. As mature women who are no longer available for marriage (or at least, in the case of the Duchess, not supposed to), they are expected to be confined to the private sphere. In the beginning of *The Duchess of Malfi*, when the Cardinal and Ferdinand leaves, they expect the Duchess to let a man take a leader part in the ruling of the dukedom, just as Hieronimo expects Isabella to be at home waiting for him to carry out the revenge. This helps reinforce the idea of women seen as weaker than men throughout the Renaissance. So far, things had not changed too much from the beginning to the end of the period. The difference between them, obviously, lies in the fact that the

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Duchess, instead of complaining but obeying, decides to adopt a silent attitude but she always does as she pleases.

To sum up, as in the third chapter of *Still Harping on Daughters* is stated, 'The female hero moves in an exclusive masculine stage world, in which it is the task of the male characters to 'read' her' (Jardine, p. 69). That is to say, it is through the eyes of the male characters that we see the Duchess and Bel-Imperia, and sometimes, if not always, the depiction or portray we are given about them is completely distorted, presenting them as monsters or lustful women who are driven by their sexual impulses instead of thinking of the common safety. For this reason, it was important to analyse carefully the actions and motivations of the characters, because there are lots of underlying factors that are not clearly presented so that the public could be manipulated towards a vision in which women are bad by nature. Even the authors could be misunderstood if it were not because of the little details that take the blame off them for what they are presenting in their plays.

### 3.3. Action & Revenge

As it is stated in *Woman and Gender in Renaissance Tragedy*, 'female transgression undermines the emphasis on male tragic action' (Callaghan: 1989, p. 63). This way, although Hieronimo assumes the role of the avenger and creates the plot for avenging Horatio, it is Bel-Imperia who insists on not delaying the revenge, and therefore the means by which the *vendetta* is eventually carried out. In this sense, Bel-Imperia assumes the leader part in killing the villains, decentring the tragic hero, who would be Hieronimo. 'Seen as transgressors, female characters cease to be passive victims' (p. 63). The Duchess also acts overtly in courting and marrying Antonio. Her suffering is a direct consequence of what she has decided. This way, although Antonio should not be considered the tragic hero, he also pays the consequences of what he does, but the focus is on the Duchess, thus giving more importance to female actions than to male's.

### 3.4. Death

In fact, both Kyd and Webster reverse all the assumptions previously stated in the plays in a very intelligent fashion. Both the Duchess and Bel-Imperia die, but their compromise with society survives: they finally make their voices heard and at the end of each play we can check that their offenses have been avenged, positioning the readers and the audience finally against Balthazar, Lorenzo, the Cardinal, and Ferdinand, and supporting Bel-Imperia and the Duchess' causes. Moreover, they reign over their deaths. The Duchess commands the murderers while she is being killed and Bel-Imperia is the one who takes her life away. They are, whether the other characters like it or not, the ones who rule over their lives.

### 3.5. Moral

'The emphasis here [The Renaissance concept of tragedy] is on the recognition of human baseness and moral degradation as a means to amelioration, and it is only to this end that tragedy is posited as being in any sense spiritually uplifting' (Callaghan: 1989, p. 51) In *The Duchess of Malfi*, the play does not end with the death of the Duchess, thus giving strength to the fact that problems, though muted, are not solved. The moral of the play cannot be inferred at this point because her murder is not fair, and Webster makes it clear in finishing the play when her death is avenged. In a similar fashion, *The Spanish Tragedy* does not end with Bel-Imperia marrying Balthazar after Horatio's death, but instead with the killing of the villains. Therefore, we can assume that what Webster and Kyd do is putting the blame off these women and ending the play with the death of the 'bad guys'.

## 4. Conclusion

Pedreño Manzano, Carlota. "The Role of the Renaissance Woman through Literature: Restrictions & Trajectory." *JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research* 3.1 (2015): 43-60  
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After the analyses of *The Spanish Tragedy* and *The Duchess of Malfi*, we can easily reach a conclusion for the first question of the Introduction: are female characters in Renaissance plays always restricted to the private sphere? No, they are not. However, they are expected to be confined to this sphere, and to be only worried about domestic issues. In fact, what the authors try to convey in these plays is precisely the way they are supposed to behave, how these women refuse to accept the rules, and the consequences of their actions. We see that in the way male characters see and think of their counterparts.

But there is more than that: since the authors seem to have a friendly attitude towards them (notice that at the end of these plays, both Bel-Imperia and the Duchess appear as righteous and prove to have a more consistent moral system than the ones who insist on blaming them for what they do), it is not difficult to assume that Kyd and Webster are, to some extent, against society 'laws' and manners proposed and established in their period.

If we take these plays as the points that connect the trajectory line of the Elizabethan period, we can conclude that there is little change in people's minds about women and women's rights. Indeed, the allusions towards female fragility and biological weakness do not cease to be expressed explicitly. However, a slight difference does exist in the way these women react. Although at the beginning of the plays both Bel-Imperia and the Duchess act secretly, when their secrets are discovered, they take criticism in a different fashion. Bel-Imperia avenges what she thinks is just, but she plots and looks for the protection of Hieronimo until the end of the play; she lets the misunderstanding go on as she does not confront his father's wishes nor she stops being silent about Horatio's death to the eyes of the court. In contrast, the Duchess claims clearly that although she is being killed, 'I am Duchess of Malfi still', consisting this of not only a reaction in terms of how she acts or how she feels about what people are doing to her, but also a verbal defiance and an overt statement that she has authority even though they are putting the blame on her, that she is right, not a victim of circumstances. In this sense, some developments concerning women affairs in Elizabethan theatre do exist.

The second question proposed was "was there, on the other hand, a bridge which enabled them to take part in the public sphere?" The answer of this question is not as easy as the first one, for there are some details to take into account. On the one hand, there is clear evidence that society customs do not appear to make the situation comfortable or easy for women during this period. These customs are mostly imposed by men, although even some female characters reinforce or seem to resign themselves to this idea. In this sense, there is no such bridge and women do not have any facilities, but instead they have to walk their way step by step, on their own, paving the road for new generations. And they do it, indeed, though building these bridges by themselves. On the other hand, our heroines make use of other characters to reach their goals, so it is fair to recognize that their merits would have been limited if these other characters had not helped at all. In this respect, the bridge does exist. However, we need to recall that such characters do not express their views in public. In my opinion, there was no link between women and the public sphere already created, but there were women able to create it and to fight for their rights.

Therefore, it is clear for me that things for women during the Elizabethan period did not change too much, but contemporary female characters and anonymous real women found a way to make their voices heard, and this way, to help women start gaining the attention of the masses; a way to encourage them to keep on struggling; a way to make them reach the state we are in now. There are still too many things to do for women to be equally treated as men in practice, not only in the theory, but if they ask us about characters from the Elizabethan period we could start making a difference in our answer: Bel-Imperia, the Duchess of Malfi, Lady Macbeth, Viola, Annabella...



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