

Sources for The Duchess of Malfi

The story of the Duchess of Malfi was taken from Volume 2 of William Painter's *Palace of Pleasure* (chapter 23) (1567):

http://www.archive.org/stream/palaceofpleasure03painuoft/palaceofpleasure03painuoft_djvu.txt

This was a reasonably accurate translation of Francois Belleforest's French *Histoires Tragiques* (1565), which itself was an expanded version of the twenty-sixth novella in Matteo Bandello's Italian *Novelle* (1554). It is possible that Bandello knew the original Antonio personally. Both Belleforest and Painter take the attitude to the Duchess that she was a whore for marrying outside her class, and (essentially) so full of lust that she deserved the punishment she got. Bandello and Webster both treat her much more leniently, and more like a tragic figure.

The character of Bosola is changed significantly from Painter, too: he is only a minor figure who kills Antonio with a troupe of "Ruffians", and is not involved earlier in the story. The changes to Bosola are among the most important that Webster makes to the story, along with most of the contents of Act One, and the invention of the character of Julia, which are not in his sources.

Webster's previous success was the tragedy *The White Devil*:

<http://www.gradesaver.com/the-white-devil/e-text/section2/>

Bosola's character development in *The Duchess of Malfi* is very reminiscent of Flamineo in *The White Devil*: he is not merely Painter's hired assassin, but something much more suffering, and melancholy, somewhat like Vindice in *The Revenger's Tragedy* (often attributed to Cyril Torneur, but now thought to be mostly the work of Thomas Middleton):

<http://www.tech.org/~cleary/reven.html>

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Also worth comparing is the character of Malevole in Marston's *The Malcontent*:

<http://www.lettrs.indiana.edu/cgi-bin/eposed/eposed-idx?coll=eposed;type=HTML;rgn=DIV1;id=;byte=172821994>

or even Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, which has not only a famously sceptical hero, but also revolves around a lot of spying. Webster develops the theme of spying and secrets, however: almost every character in *The Duchess of Malfi* has a secret, which is exposed through spying.

Webster's attitude to the "illicit" love between The Duchess and Antonio reflects the changes Shakespeare made to similar condemnatory source material in *Romeo & Juliet*, where love overcomes class, but is objected to by a family that appears fanatical. Both Brooke, from whom Shakespeare took his story, and Painter are much more rigid and "conventional" in their moralistic attitudes.

The idea of the poor man who marries the rich widow, or even wins the love of his Lord's wife, is a commonplace of Troubadour Poetry, which originated in Provence in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and despite the later Mariolatry that was imposed upon it after the Albigensian Crusade, this theme was a staple of folk-songs and ballads ever since. The folklorist Sophia Kingshill has suggested similarities between *The Duchess of Malfi* and Scottish songs such as *The Gypsy Laddie* (now better known in its versions *The Raggle-Taggle Gypsies* or *The Gypsy Davey*). Despite the song's first appearance in print not being until 1740, the characters in it seem to be historically based in 1540 or 1611 (which would make the popular song a key source for *The Duchess of Malfi*). For further details on the song, see Westwood and Kingshill's recent and fascinating *The Lore of Scotland* (Random House 978-1-9052-1162-3).

<http://www.amazon.co.uk/Lore-Scotland-Scottish-Legends-Galloway/dp/1905211627>

Interestingly, Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* mocks Malvolio for believing an upper-class woman can fall in love with her steward. Attitudes, even among the theatre-going public, were very mixed, and could lead either to the cruel comedy of *Twelfth Night* or to the tragedy of *The Duchess of Malfi*. In 1552, the Duchess of Suffolk married a servant of her household, Richard Bertie, with whom she had two children. She was much admired, particularly after her persecution by Mary I for her Protestant beliefs.

Webster was very much following on from Shakespeare, whose last plays had come out recently before the first performances of *The Duchess of Malfi*. Much of the same cast as Shakespeare used (Burbage, Condell etc), the same company (The King's Men), and the same theatres (certainly The Blackfriars, though probably *The Duchess of Malfi* was performed in the second Globe, built in 1614, after the first one had burnt down). Webster makes a number of verbal, physical and theatrical references to a lot of Shakespeare's plays (and other King's Men's shows such as *The Revenger's Tragedy*), but most notably he echoes *Othello*:

<http://shakespeare.mit.edu/othello/full.html>

Among the deliberate echoes must be the fact that Ferdinand was played by Richard Burbage, who also created the part of Othello, and he would want his audience to remember that: there are too many close references for this to be accidental, so Webster was obviously playing a *verfremdungseffekt* game of some kind.

Among the sources from which Webster quotes, which lead one to suspect that he had a copy of the text in front of him, particularly when writing Acts Four and Five, is Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia*:

<http://www.luminarium.org/renascence-editions/arcadia1.html>

This poem was favourite reading of university men and young gallants of the early seventeenth century, and quoting from it was a way for Webster to impress the slightly more refined audience that came to the Blackfriars, and possibly the Inns of Court. To our knowledge, no one has yet done a detailed study of the precise *midrash* Webster makes of Sidney's works, but in the last two acts it is extensive.

So much of this play is about echoes; not only echoes of other plays and Webster's sources (what Structuralists call "the cultural code") but also echoes and parallels of various scenes within the play (what Structuralists call "the symbolic code"), where the play is deliberately divided into various structural dyads. Webster has taken much of his source material and manipulated it so that these echoes are more apparent than in a lot of other plays of the period.

The 1623 Quarto claims that the play was "prefented priuatly, at the Blackfriars; and publiquely at the Globe". These were the two main theatres of the King's Men, the Blackfriars an indoor theatre for the winter and the Globe outside for the summer months. The two theatres were very different in dynamic, and in audience: the Blackfriars tended to be much

more upper-class and university-educated (being closer to the Inns of Court), whereas the Globe was a popular theatre, holding up to three thousand audience members at a time. The Globe referred to was likely to be the rebuilt “new” Globe, but the first performance must have been before December 1614, as William Ostler, who was the first Antonio, died then.

Webster makes it clear to his readers that what they are reading is the definitive, rather than acting, text: bits of this were cut in performance by the King’s Men. It is not clear which bits, however, and each subsequent director has had to make decisions about how (and how heavily) to cut the text for performance. The Blackfriars style was probably more intimate than the more bombastic and declamatory Globe style, and it seems that authors for both playhouses would have to write in a style which matched both settings, with possibly some of the more intimate scenes, maybe the “echo” scenes in Act Five Scene Four or the Julia scenes in Act Two, being cut (or cut down) for the Globe. It is entirely likely that the dumb-show in Act Three, while excellently suitable for Globe audiences, might well have been cut for the Blackfriars. The adaptability of scripts for different playing spaces (particularly for touring companies like the King’s Men) was one of their selling points.

ACT ONE SCENE ONE:

Elizabethan & Jacobean tragedies very often start with two courtiers explaining the backstory of the play (see the openings of both Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* and his *Antony & Cleopatra*).

<http://shakespeare.mit.edu/cymbeline/cymbeline.1.1.html>

<http://shakespeare.mit.edu/cleopatra/cleopatra.1.1.html>

Where Webster plays with this, is in making Antonio, one of these supposedly insignificant courtier-characters, a key protagonist of the story.

In Painter, Antonio Bolgona had recently returned from serving the Aragonese Frederick IV of Naples, in exile in Tours, after Louis XII of France and Ferdinand II of Aragon had forced him to abdicate in 1501. Delio makes a reference to Antonio's French dress. Antonio expresses admiration of the reforming Louis XII, well-known for reducing taxation and controlling his nobles.

Antonio makes it clear that Bosola is one of the group of "malcontents", which his audience would recognise from previous plays, many of them from the same (King's Men) theatre company, men such as Vindice, Flamineo or Hamlet. Bosola is traditionally dressed in the black clothes of a "malcontent". The comments from Antonio suggest him to be more like a "melancholy" in the tradition of *As You Like It's* Jaques, who "rails at those things which he wants":

http://www.shakespeare-literature.com/As_You_Like_It/4.html

It may be that he is already laying the scene for the metatheatrical devices he uses throughout the play, making clear the structure of the play to any members of his audience clever enough to pick it up.

The galleys were common punishment for murder, and we see various anti-heroes in Jacobean drama, such as Iago in *Othello*, or Mosca in Jonson's *Volpone*, being condemned to the galleys. It was almost invariably the punishment of a working-class man who had got above his station.

The reference to the "dog days" is to the hottest days of Summer, just after the traditional astrological times for the rising of Sirius, the dog star, when people and dogs were supposed

to go mad more often, from the heat. The link to Ferdinand's later madness from lycanthropia is almost certainly deliberate.

Bosola's dismissal of the Cardinal is a reversal of Montaigne's dictum that travel broadens the mind: in his case, he has met many people as well-travelled as the cardinal who are as closed-minded.

He compares himself (or indeed anyone who hopes for advancement from the Cardinal or his family) to Tantalus, son of Zeus and King of Phrygia, who was punished by the Gods by being kept in a pool of water in the underworld with a bunch of grapes just out of reach. It may be relevant that Tantalus was punished like this for killing and eating his own child, Pelops (cannibalism, human sacrifice and infanticide).

ACT ONE SCENE ONE (B)/ SCENE TWO:

In the original Quarto edition of the play (1623), there was a scene break at line 80, yet Antonio & Delio continue their conversation. Some Renaissance dramatists followed the convention that a major exit or entrance justified a new scene number, even if following Aristotle's theories of Time and Place within the Act. Both Nicholas Udall and Ben Jonson are examples of this.

Others (notably but not only Shakespeare) demonstrate the theory that a scene represents a place. Webster elsewhere in the play only changes the scene when he changes the setting, so some editors feel that this is the compositor (Ralph Crane) putting in his own stage direction here.

The entrance of Ferdinand allows Webster to make it clear that he is supposed to be Ferdinand of Aragon, Duke of Calabria, son of Frederick II, but this is probably the conflation of two different Aragonese noblemen. The historical Duchess was granddaughter of Ferdinand I of Naples. Painter makes it clear that her brother was the Cardinal Lodovico d'Aragona, but is less clear who the Duchess' other brother was (actually Carlo, Marquess of Gerace).

The reference to “taking the ring” is a reference to a jousting game introduced to the English court by King James I, but sets up all the further use of the “ring” as a prop throughout the play (Antonio being given the ring by the Duchess, the Cardinal’s removal of her ring of office, the severed hand having a ring, and the noose as a ring). There is almost certainly a vaginal reference in this as well, as evidenced by the last line of Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*:

http://www.shakespeare-literature.com/The_Merchant_of_Venice/20.html

The reference to the Sons of Ishmael is a reference to the Biblical story from *Genesis* 21: 9-21:

http://www.genevabible.org/files/Geneva_Bible/Old_Testament/Genesis.pdf

“Tent” is both a pun on dressing a wound, but also a reference to the “intense” “lie” Julia and the Captain had together.

Ferdinand’s question about Antonio’s horsemanship could be a reference to his sexual prowess, and Antonio’s reply, referencing Ulysses’ Trojan Horse, could be either an innocent reply or a sexual-boasting one.

The Cardinal’s face causing the “engend’ring of toads” could be a reference to the supernatural nature of his evil, to the disgusting nature of his tears, as in Chapman’s *Bussy D’Ambois* Act Three Scene Two:

<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/20890/20890-8.txt>

Chapman’s play, first published in 1607, may be a template for the style of play Webster is writing here: Bussy, who is supposedly employed by Monsieur (King Henri III’s brother) is too wild to be kept as a lackey and eventually has to be captured and killed, much like Bosola later.

Alternatively, the line could be a memory of Ajax’s line from Shakespeare’s *Troilus & Cressida*, Act Two Scene Three:

http://shakespeare.mit.edu/troilus_cressida/troilus_cressida.2.3.html

where Ajax compares a “proud man” (Achilles) to “the engendering of toads”. This image may therefore suggest that the Cardinal is proud.

The idea of twins and twinning reflects the ideas of echoing, reflecting and paralleling that run throughout the play, and there is a clear idea that the Cardinal and Frederick are twins

in spirit while Ferdinand and the Duchess are twins in the flesh. The most obvious cultural echoes are with Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, where the boy and the girl are so alike that even their lovers cannot tell them apart:

http://shakespeare.mit.edu/twelfth_night/twelfth_night.2.1.html

http://shakespeare.mit.edu/twelfth_night/twelfth_night.4.3.html

There is also the clear suggestion in *Twelfth Night* that Olivia is marrying her social inferior, though the idea that she should marry her steward is seen as a ridiculous idea, and open for mockery of the steward (Malvolio) who thought it.

The concept of twins and twinning is an important one for the theories of the post-Freudian psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, whose "Mirror Theory" explores the concepts that we are attracted to the things that are most like ourselves. While a lot of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory is unsupportable, this play, with all its echoes, mirrors and twins, does seem to be a good one on which to use Lacanian theory. The sexual attraction of Ferdinand (and in some productions the Cardinal also) for his sister seems to support a Lacanian reading of the play.

Delio's reference to Antonio being a "wire-drawer" implies both someone who tells tall tales and could also have the implication of a midwife (someone who performs abortions). The double meaning is probably deliberate.

Bosola's suggestion that a man's urine being as misleading as a man's face could be a further reference to *Twelfth Night*, where the proof of Malvolio's madness is in his urine (and possibly in his unaccustomed smiling):

http://shakespeare.mit.edu/twelfth_night/twelfth_night.3.4.html

To be a "creature" in the seventeenth century would not be quite as insulting as it would be now: it meant someone bound in service to a higher power: both Robert Carr and Lord Hay ("Favourites" of James I) were originally creatures of powerful men such as Francis Bacon.

Ferdinand's threatening of the Duchess with a dagger suggests to many interpreters a sexual (incestuous) interest in the Duchess; certainly the dialogue around it is sexually charged. Ferdinand was played in the first production by Richard Burbage, who had also recently played Shakespeare's Othello, and who had similar sexual jealousy to express.

The Duchess' decision to marry Antonio immediately on having been told not to by her brothers could be seen as a piece of bloody-mindedness. Imogen, at the start of Shakespeare's late play *Cymbeline*, marries her playmate Posthumus Leonatus on a similar whim, and yet her relationship with him is kept "chaste":

<http://shakespeare.mit.edu/cymbeline/cymbeline.1.1.html>

The entrance of Cariola is left unclear by the 1623 Quarto. She should almost certainly not arrive with everyone at line 80 (as suggested by the vague list at the start of "Scene Two"), and some scholars put her entrance with the Duchess at line 284, which means she is witness to everything that the Cardinal & Ferdinand say to the Duchess, and to the Duchess' response. Others believe she should not enter until she is addressed in line 341, thus leaving the Duchess alone on the stage for her "soliloquy" of refusal.

The placing of Cariola behind the arras in this scene may well recall the scene in Shakespeare's earlier *Hamlet* (another example of a Revenge Tragedy), Act Three Scene Four, where Polonius hides behind the arras to spy on Hamlet and Gertrude (another possibly incestuous love scene). Polonius, however, ends up dead (like Cariola will later):

<http://shakespeare.mit.edu/hamlet/hamlet.3.4.html>

The Duchess is entering a "wilderness" without a "clew" (a ball of thread such as Ariadne gave Theseus to get him through the labyrinth). She is also, noticeably, without a "clue" as to what she's doing.

In trying to seduce Antonio, the Duchess references *The Gospel of Matthew* 6:19-21, but the scene makes a number of echoes of the whole chapter:

<http://www.studylight.org/desk/?l=en&query=matthew+6§ion=0&translation=gen&oq=Genesis%25201&new=1&nb=mt&ng=1&ncc=1>

The Duchess' invocation of St Winfred (normally known as St Boniface, or sometime St Wynfrith) in the first Quarto seems very obscure: he was an eighth century Apostle to the Germans and the first Archbishop of Mainz, who was murdered by a mob in Frisia in 754; it is possible Webster is making some reference to the parts of Devon he came from, in honour of some audience member from that region. It seems more likely that this is a misprint for

St Winifred, a Welsh noblewoman decapitated by her suitor for protecting her chastity and becoming a nun in the seventh century. Shrines for her were erected in the middle ages in Holywell, Shrewsbury and Woolston. Most of these were destroyed by Henry VIII.

Antonio's statement (or at least indication) that he denies Purgatory, in the same way that he thinks marriage contains either Heaven or Hell, but no mixture, would encourage Protestant audiences of Jacobean England to approve of him. Belief in Purgatory was very Catholic, and therefore blasphemous for most Protestants. The fact that Antonio, as a sixteenth century Italian who had served Louis XII, would never have such anachronistic beliefs would be irrelevant.

There could (just about) be an innocent explanation to the Duchess giving Antonio her wedding ring, in that gold was supposed to have curative powers on styes in the eye.

Quietus Est could mean a legal completion of contract (as that of her steward) but could also suggest death.

Charles Nicholl's book *The Lodger* (Penguin, 2007, 978-0-141-02374-8)

<http://www.amazon.co.uk/Lodger-Shakespeare-Silver-Street/dp/0713998903>

interestingly explores a number of issues surrounding marriage contracts in Jacobean England (particularly in relation to a court case in which Shakespeare was involved), and most Jacobeans would accept the private (but witnessed) "handfasting" (sometimes called "troth-plight" or "*sponsalia per verba*") as being legally binding, though some expectation would be that this would normally be followed up by a church blessing. This would of course be impossible with the Cardinal in opposition, and the historical Duchess had her regency annulled by the Pope (Alexander VI, the very corrupt Roderigo Borgia) because of her relationship with Antonio. Henry Swinburne, in his *Treatise of Spousals* (1600), says that handfastings (if "*de praesenti*" and if *copula carnalis* had occurred) were legally binding contracts, especially if "made sure" by having a witness present to hear the avowals. The Duchess mixes these two concepts in her "*per verba praesenti*", but there is no need to imagine that the two were completely separate concepts.

The Duchess' power over her court (including the power over the males in her court, such

as her Steward) must have been much more common in the renaissance era than we would expect. The average life expectancy for a man in England in the seventeenth century was just under thirty, so there would have been many powerful widows left at their husbands' deaths (historically, the Duchess was twenty when the Duke died). The possible wooing of a steward is hinted at (as a form of comedy) in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* (Act Two Scene Five), where even the possibility is seen as a source of cruel and farcical comedy:

http://shakespeare.mit.edu/twelfth_night/twelfth_night.2.5.html

Webster deliberately makes this scene funny, and throws in references to the festival of Twelfth Night, such as (later) appointing Antonio the "Lord of Misrule".

The story of Alexander and Lodowick was a tale about two friends who were so alike that Alexander's wife did not notice she had married the wrong man. Lodowick kept a sword between them so that he would not be tempted to have sex with his friend's wife. Antonio makes a suggestion that they should do the same. Yeah, right.

It is worth bearing in mind that the Cardinal's name (in Painter, and briefly referred to elsewhere in the play) is Lodovico (Lodowick).

ACT TWO SCENE ONE:

Bosola's insults to Castruchio would be insults that would specifically refer to up-and-coming barristers at the Inns of Court, which Webster himself had attended fifteen years previously. Both the twirling of the bands, and the "sup-a nights" were comments about eminent barristers. When this was played at the Blackfriars, many of the audience would have been lawyers, who would have welcomed this mockery, especially as Castruchio was old (and, as his name implied, impotent).

The list of medicaments old women use to make themselves young is strikingly similar to the ingredients of the witches' brew in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* Act Four Scene One:

<http://shakespeare.mit.edu/macbeth/macbeth.4.1.html>

It could be that Webster was making a deliberate reference to the contents of a regular apothecary's shop, calling the old woman a "witch", or saying that only magic could make her look beautiful.

The wells at Lucca were supposed to have healing properties, particularly from the effects of sexually transmitted infections. Bosola could be making another joke about Castruchio's inadequacy in bed.

The choice of an apricot for the Duchess suggests an oriental (and therefore possibly decadent) approach. The word apricot (or apricock in its Quarto spelling) comes from the Arabic *al-burquq*. Bosola picks up on the cravings, but also on the long-held belief that eating apricots would bring on early childbirth.

The reference to the devil that rules in the air echoes *Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians* 2:2 :

<http://www.studylight.org/desk/?l=en&query=ephesians+2§ion=0&translation=gen&oq=Genesis%25201&new=1&nb=mt&ng=1&ncc=1>

The reference to King Pippin is probably to Pepin the Short (714-768), son of Charles Martel

and father of Charlemagne, and the first of the Carolingian Kings of the Franks, having forced Pope Zachary to declare the last Merovingian King, Childeric, invalid. Whether Bosola is arguing that Kings (and therefore Dukes, and therefore the husbands of Duchesses) can come from nowhere, or whether he is making a comment about how Pepin was Mayor of the Palace (Steward) to Childeric before he had him deposed, is not clear. Whatever, he is making a negative comment about Antonio's control (and therefore power) over the Duchess.

The Duchess claims she is "troubled with the mother". Madness (hysteria) in women was often perceived to come from the womb (hysterion).

The reference to blackthorns, damsons and pippins may be taken directly from Nicholas Breton's *The Wil of Wit* (1599). It may also be a reference back to apricots.

ACT TWO SCENE TWO:

The Blackfriars glass factory is also referenced (by Flamineo, the malcontent in that play) as something that all women want to see, in *The White Devil*, Act One Scene Two:

<http://www.gradesaver.com/the-white-devil/e-text/section2/>

Bosola makes a reference to Danae, the mother of Perseus, whose father Acrisius kept her locked away so that she couldn't have children, but Jupiter bypassed him by coming down as a shower of gold to impregnate Danae. Danae is thus referenced as a woman who would do anything for gold.

The servants make jokes about a man found in the Duchess' bedroom, with a pistol (which would have sounded like pizzle – or penis) in his codpiece, possibly spreading the "French plot" (syphilis). Even with the crisis happening around them, the servants find time to make filthy jokes about their mistress.

ACT TWO SCENE THREE:

The opening of this scene echoes Shakespeare's *Macbeth* Act Two Scene Two:

<http://shakespeare.mit.edu/macbeth/macbeth.2.2.html>

which again has a couple who have done something wrong hoping not to be found out.

The situation with the handkerchief is clearly meant to recall the story of Shakespeare's *Othello*, which had been played with much the same cast by the King's Men about eight years previously. The handkerchief is such a central part of the story of *Othello*, and none of Webster's audience would have missed the reference.

ACT TWO SCENE FOUR:

Julia is a character invented by Webster. Orazio Busino, who saw the play in 1618, complained that the play was anti-Catholic, possibly in part because of the Cardinal's illicit sexual relationships.

Webster makes the Cardinal refer to Galileo Galilei's telescope, first demonstrated in 1611 at the Accademia dei Lincei, though actually first built by Flemish engineers about ten years previously. Galileo, to be fair to him, was the first person to use it for accurate observation of the skies, and was a great populariser of the tool.

The tame elephant that Julia is compared to was shown off in a cage in London in 1594.

ACT TWO SCENE FIVE:

To pull up a mandrake was to go mad. The roots were supposed to resemble a man, and scream as you pulled them up. There could also be a reference here to *The Mandrake Root*, a translation of *La Mandragola*, Machiavelli's comedy of adultery, which, unlike *The Duchess of Malfi*, ends happily, but shares a number of themes with it.

Ferdinand calls for rhubarb, a well-known cure for the choleric.

The left side was seen as (literally) the “sinister” side. Women’s hearts were seen as further over to the left than men’s, as they were more likely to be corrupted.

ACT THREE SCENE ONE:

Satires were commonly known as “Pasquils” or “Pasquins” since the sixteenth century Roman custom of attaching satires to the statue named after Pasquino, a sharp-tongued cobbler.

Walking on burning coals was a common test of chastity in medieval England (whether actually used or not is another question). Medieval stories abounded of virgins who could resist fire and burning because of their chastity. The thirteenth century Cardinal Jacques de Vitry collected a series of tales (largely used either to preach the Albigensian Crusade, or to preach the Fifth Crusade), one of which tells of a boy brought up in a monastery who has never seen a woman, who is able to pick up a red-hot iron fresh from the anvil. After he has been seduced by the innkeeper’s wife, he picks up the same iron and is horrifically burnt. Sir Gawain, in the late fourteenth century *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, is powerful until he has sex; at which point he is susceptible to the Green Knight’s power. The English Saxon King St Edward the Confessor’s mother, Emma of Normandy, is said to have walked barefoot across red hot burning ploughshares, or coulter.

Ferdinand suggests that magic charms cannot deprive people of their will: it is merely people’s own desires.

Ferdinand suggests putting a “girdle ‘bout the world”, much as Puck does in Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (Act Two Scene One), just after Oberon has been telling him about bewitching Titania into love:

<http://shakespeare.mit.edu/midsummer/midsummer.2.1.html>

ACT THREE SCENE TWO:

This scene is entirely an invention of Webster’s, not being in any of his sources. There is, however, a lot of borrowing from Act Four Scene Three of Shakespeare’s *Othello*:

<http://shakespeare.mit.edu/othello/othello.4.3.html>

Calling Antonio the “Lord of Misrule” would also bring to mind Twelfth Night, the last day of Christmas celebrations until the coming of Protestantism, where the village idiot, or lowliest servant, would be made King for a day, and all authority was made topsy-turvy. It has been suggested that (in Pagan times) the “Lord of Misrule” or “Bean King” was sacrificed at the end of the day to ensure the coming of spring, though whether this is history or anti-Pagan propaganda is difficult to say. Calling Antonio “Lord of Misrule” has, of course, all these connotations, as well as bringing to mind Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*, which also centres around a Steward believing he will marry his mistress and live happily ever after.

Antonio’s list of goddesses and nymphs from classical mythology who were transformed is from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*: Daphne and Syrinx from Book One:

<http://www.elizabethanauthors.com/ovid01.htm>

and Anaxarete from Book Fourteen:

<http://www.elizabethanauthors.com/ovid14.htm>

The story of the Judgement of Paris came from an Epic Cycle called the *Cypria*, roughly contemporaneous to the *Iliad* (roughly 850 BC) but now lost. The story is well-known across antiquity, and involved a mortal prince being asked to choose between three goddesses, and being persuaded by each of them as they bribed him with military strategy, wisdom, and the ability to get the most beautiful woman in the world. A number of Renaissance artists painted pictures of the scene.

Ferdinand’s secret arrival echoes Othello’s sneaking in to kill his wife in at the start of Act Five Scene Two:

<http://shakespeare.mit.edu/othello/othello.5.2.html>

Ferdinand’s threat with a dagger echoes Othello’s plan not to use a dagger in his opening soliloquy.

The basilisk (sometimes confused with the cockatrice) was a mythical king-lizard or serpent who could turn onlookers (or possibly those who felt its breath) to stone. Pliny the Elder mentioned it in his *Natural History* (AD 79).

The accusation that the Duchess loves the wolf’s howl is echoed later when Ferdinand suffers from lycanthropia.

The idea that “more earthquakes” and “whirlwinds” are coming suggests the coming of the end of the world, again echoing ideas from *Othello*.

Bosola (deliberately?) confuses Plutus, god of money, Pluto, god of death and the underworld, and Vulcan, the lame god of fire and metal, who was married to Venus, and arranged a trap for her when she was sleeping with Mars.

The “Bermoothes” (Bermudas) had been well-known as a dangerous place to sail your boat since William Strachey had published his *A True Reportary of the Wracke* in 1610, which described how the ship *The Sea Venture* crashed in the Bermudas. This was one of the principal sources of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*.

ACT THREE SCENE THREE:

Webster places historical characters in the backstory of this scene: the Emperor Charles V (for much of the sixteenth century the most powerful man in the world), Charles de Lannoy and Fernando d’Avalos, Marquis of Pescara. His dates are slightly out, however: The historical events of *The Duchess of Malfi* took place roughly 1498-1513, whereas Charles was not Emperor till 1520, and Pescara and Lannoy would not be “famous” or “right fortunate” until about 1520. According to Painter, however, Cardinal Ludovico did continue to be an active soldier even after having been ordained and become a cardinal. There could be some reference to Pope Julius II, “the Warrior Pope” who famously went into battle himself, even dressed as Pope, who would be about the right date for the events in the play.

The Count Malateste is, of course, the man Ferdinand suggested marrying her to earlier in Act Three. The scene backs up the view expressed by the Duchess earlier, that he is not a manly man, but merely an academic.

The reference to the Cardinals being like foxes with their burning tails tied together is a Biblical gloss: the Judge Samson destroyed a Philistine harvest by this method in *Judges* 15:4:

<http://www.genevabible.org/files/Geneva Bible/Old Testament/Judges.pdf>

Ferdinand is compared to a salamander (believed to live in fire, and therefore passionate or in torment) whereas the Cardinal's face is opposed to the beautiful faces painted by Michelangelo Buonarrotti: Michelangelo's fame would be roughly correct for the period of the historical play, and would further link to the character of Julius II, for whom he painted much of the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican.

Ancona, like Amalfi, had been an independent republic, but by the late sixteenth Century was one of the Papal States, thus allowing the Pope to rule that the Duchess was no longer ruler.

ACT THREE SCENE FOUR:

The behaviour and dress of the pilgrims closely echoes the description in Sir Walter Raleigh's *The Passionate Man's Pilgrimage*, written in about 1504:

<http://www.luminarium.org/renlit/pilgrim.htm>

The Shrine at Loretto had a famous black Madonna and Child, which may be echoed in the bodies and the tomb in later scenes.

The performance in dumb-show is a dramatic oddity for the seventeenth century (much more common in court masques of the time), though echoing plays such as *The Mouse-Trap* from Shakespeare's Hamlet. The "ditty" to accompany the piece is clearly stated in the corrected edition of the First Quarto as not being by Webster. It is possible that Ralph Crane, the compositor, put this in from the play version, and Webster only saw it in proof copy.

ACT THREE SCENE FIVE:

This scene and Act Four Scene One contain a large number of verbal echoes of Sir Philip Sidney's works, particularly *Arcadia*, though the reference to the "slave-born Russian" compares from *Astrophil and Stella*, Sonnet 2:

<http://www.shakespeares-sonnets.com/Astro1.htm>

The comparison of the little boy to a top comes from *Arcadia* Book 12.

The idea that “Heaven fashion’d us of nothing” is stolen directly from John Donne’s *An Anatomy of the World*, though, because of the Abuses Act of 1606, for the stage Donne’s “God” had to be changed to “Heaven”:

<http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/an-anatomy-of-the-world/>

The Duchess’ words could be an echo (or reversal) of Lear’s comment on nothingness and God (in reply to Cordelia) from Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, Act One Scene One:

<http://shakespeare.mit.edu/lear/lear.1.1.html>

The reference to the kissing of the anchorite could be a reversal of Romeo & Juliet’s love sonnet when they first meet in Shakespeare’s play, Act One Scene Five:

http://shakespeare.mit.edu/romeo_juliet/romeo_juliet.1.5.html

The betrayal and arrest of the Duchess is reminiscent of the arrest of Jesus in the garden from the Bible:

<http://www.studylight.org/desk/?l=en&query=mark+14§ion=0&translation=gen&oq=Genesis%25201&new=1&nb=mt&ng=1&ncc=1>

There are also comparisons to the Jacobean court masques entwined with this reading.

Charon was the boatman of the dead in Classical mythology.

The fact that the Duchess wants to teach her children curses echoes Caliban’s speech in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, Act One Scene Two:

<http://shakespeare.mit.edu/tempest/tempest.1.2.html>

ACT FOUR SCENE ONE:

The imprisonment of the Duchess is very reminiscent of the imprisonment of the Kings in Shakespeare's *Richard II* and Marlowe's *Edward II*:

<http://shakespeare.mit.edu/richardii/richardii.5.5.html>

<http://old.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.03.0007&layout=&loc=5.5.1>

Where Webster differs is in making the progression of the Duchess' punishment much more explicit: she is still in the clothes of a noble in this scene, and she is in put in penitent's clothes for her next (her last) scene.

As in the previous scene, large chunks of the speeches in this scene are taken from Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia*:

<http://www.luminarium.org/renascence-editions/arcadia1.html>

Even if Webster's audience did not recognise specific lines, his more educated Blackfriars audience would have picked up some of the references: *Arcadia* was one of the most widely-read texts among the University and Law-Courts set in early Jacobean England.

Bosola refers to Ferdinand as the Duchess' "elder brother", whereas elsewhere in the play he is called her "twin". It is possible this is just a mistake, it is possible he is making some comment about the idea of inheritance through primogeniture, or simply that Ferdinand was the first twin to be born. Whatever, it is a patronising comment towards her.

The scene where Bosola tortures the Duchess and Ferdinand's use of the dead man's hand are Webster's inventions, and not in his sources. The use of dead hands, however, is clearly indebted to Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, still very popular in Jacobean England, where Lavinia has both hands chopped off and Titus chops off his own hand, and Lavinia has to carry it in her mouth:

<http://shakespeare.mit.edu/titus/full.html>

In Bandello's *Novelle*, the story immediately preceding the story of the Duchess of Malfi also features a piece of psychological torture using a severed hand.

In Middleton & Rowley's *The Changeling* (written 1622), De Flores presents a severed finger to Beatrice-Joanna, almost certainly echoing Webster.

In the seventeenth century, many sculptures would have been painted in "lifelike" colours: we see this in the confusion between sculpture and real people in plays like Shakespeare's *A Winter's Tale*:

http://shakespeare.mit.edu/winters_tale/winters_tale.5.3.html

More recently, the people of London would have seen a wax effigy of the dead Henry, Prince of Wales, carried through the streets. Henry was a popular Prince, not least because of his (at times public) opposition to his father, James I.

A common image in emblem-books was to have a living person tied to a dead body, to symbolise a bad marriage. The Duchess reverses this, but the image she provokes might well bring that idea to people's minds.

The Duchess also compares herself to Portia, who swallowed live coals to kill herself on hearing of her husband Brutus' defeat, also referenced in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*.

"Let me blow these vipers from me" could be a reference to John the Baptist's comment on the "generation of vipers" from Matthew's Gospel:

<http://www.studydrive.net/desk/?l=en&query=matthew+3§ion=0&translation=gen&oq=Genesis%25201&new=1&nb=mt&ng=1&ncc=1>

It could also be a mishearing of "vapours": Webster's original audience would be hard-pushed to hear the difference between the two words.

The exit of the Duchess and Cariola has been used as a scene change by a number of directors, which would mean a time-jump in the next dialogue between Ferdinand and Bosola.

The driving to despair is an important part of Mephistophilis' aims in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* (of which there is, incidentally, a very good DVD & Teacher Pack from *Stage on Screen*): a person who despairs cannot be saved, because despair is a denial of the possibility of God's salvation.

This scene could be an unpleasant echo of the taunting of Malvolio in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*:

http://shakespeare.mit.edu/twelfth_night/twelfth_night.4.2.html

This play also features the psychological torture of a steward.

ACT FOUR SCENE TWO:

Again, Webster echoes themes of the endings of *Richard II* and *Edward II*, such as the Duchess being moved to a "prison". There is possibly also a reference to Heywood's *The Second Part of Edward the Fourth*, where Mistress (Jane) Shore is paraded as a penitent for her adulteries.

The "masque" or "consort" of the madmen seems to be a deliberate parody either of a charivari or a Jacobean wedding masque. Certainly the dance at line 107 seems to be parodying a traditional wedding masque.

The flaming brass round the Duchess' head seem to be the punishment for sin laid out by Moses in *Deuteronomy* 28:

<http://www.studylight.org/desk/?l=en&query=deuteronomy+28§ion=0&translation=gen&oq=Genesis%25201&new=1&nb=mt&ng=1&ncc=1>

Although the servant names eight madmen, only four of them speak (and one sings), and only the doctor can be identified consistently with real confidence. There may be specific targets Webster had in mind when mocking these professions, or they may just be commonplaces. The farmer sectioned for "transportation" may be a reference to the Act of 1613 banning export of grain, because of scarcity.

Madman 1 is probably the astrologer, but could equally well be the lawyer; madman 3 is a puritan of some kind (so may be the secular priest), as he refers to the Geneva Bible as being the only source of truth; madman 4 is the Doctor.

The entry of Bosola dressed as an old man, may be a parody of the Old Man at the end of Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, which in itself was an echo of Chaucer's *Pardoner's Tale*, who is possibly a representation of Christian death. The presence of the Old Man was a commonplace in pictures of the Danse Macabre from the fourteenth century.

Bosola's statement that "the soul in the body" is like a "lark in a cage" is an element of second century Gnosticism that the Christian Church had not yet expunged. Gnostics believed that the material world was made by a false god (a demiurge) that trapped the sparks of God that comprised the human soul. At death, if we were enlightened, we would be re-attached to the true God. While this belief is still present to some extent in Catholicism (at baptism, godparents are asked to reject "Sin, the Flesh, and the World"), the belief that our souls are trapped here in unfamiliar surroundings was strictly speaking heretical. Is Webster deliberately making Bosola a heretic?

Bosola moves from being an old-man to being a "tomb-maker", and quotes Webster's earlier play, *The White Devil*, as he does so. Webster's use of intertextuality is one of the things that makes this play so rich and dense.

The idea of dead princes lying on their tombs must have been particularly recent (and poignant?) after the recent lying in state of Prince Henry, for which Webster took a break from writing this play to write the dramatic poem *A Monumental Column*:

<http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/a-monumental-column/>

Then Bosola becomes the "bell-man", announcing the execution of a criminal at Tyburn. The Merchant Taylors' bell is still visible at St Sepulchre's Church.

Bosola moves from the standard blank verse into heroic couplets (rhyming iambic tetrameters) as he becomes more threatening.

The murder of the Duchess seems to be a deliberate echo of the murder of Desdemona in *Othello* Act Five Scene Two, even comparing both heroines to statues of "alabaster", and the fact that they both come back to life briefly after strangulation:

<http://shakespeare.mit.edu/othello/othello.5.2.html>

The decision to kill off his titular heroine, however, a whole act (45 minutes or so) before the end of the play is reasonably radical, possibly echoing Shakespeare's *Antony & Cleopatra*, which leaves Cleopatra as the only lead character in Act Five:

<http://shakespeare.mit.edu/cleopatra/cleopatra.4.15.html>

This leaves the way clear for Bosola to become the hero (antihero? protagonist?) of the play, in a way unanticipated by Webster's sources.

There is also a sense in which the play echoes Machiavelli's play *La Mandragola* (*The Mandrake Root*) to which the Duchess may make a passing reference here. Ferdinand is certainly a "machiavel" character, reminiscent of Marlowe's *Jew of Malta*.

The refusal of Ferdinand to reward Bosola for the murder compares to the ending of *Richard II*, where Bolingbroke refuses to reward Richard's murderer, despite the murder being done with his (tacit) approval:

<http://shakespeare.mit.edu/richardii/richardii.5.6.html>

Bosola's comparison to thieves hanging could be a reference to the two thieves hanging beside Jesus in the Gospel of Luke, chapter 23:

<http://www.studylight.org/desk/?l=en&query=Luke+24§ion=0&translation=gen&oq=Luke%252024&new=1&nb=lu&npc=%A0%3C%3C%A0&ng=24&ncc=24>

ACT FIVE SCENE ONE:

The Marquis of Pescara is the noble and “famous” condottiero of the Italian Wars, also (like the Duchess’ family) of Aragonese background. In the 1520s, he performed an impressive victory and managed to capture Francois I of France. Certainly his behaviour in this scene seems less than noble to Antonio; his capture of Francois had been an act of trickery and strategy, rather than noble tactics.

Saint Bennet is another name for St Benedict of Nursia, founder of the Benedictine Order.

ACT FIVE SCENE TWO:

The scene seems to contain a number of echoes of the madness scene in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*:

<http://shakespeare.mit.edu/macbeth/macbeth.5.1.html>

Pescara talks to Ferdinand’s doctor, who tells him Ferdinand is suffering from “lycanthropia”, a disease mentioned in Simon Goulart’s *Admirable and Memorable Histories* (1607), of which lines 8-19 are largely a direct copy; Webster has only altered them enough to fit the blank verse.

The reference to Paracelsus, the sixteenth century alchemist and physician, may be a reference to his supreme knowledge of medicine for his time, or may be a reference to the quasi-magical stories that had built up around him of his amazing powers. A lot of the Doctor’s remedies are quite clearly nonsensical.

The doctor was, according to the notes left by Webster, played by the same boy-actor (R. Pallant) who played Cariola, and there are some odd similarities in the language-usage between them. Almost certainly, he would have worn a comedy beard and eyebrows for this part.

Ferdinand's fear of his own shadow is a legendary depiction of madness and paranoia.

Ferdinand's reference to himself as a sheep-biter is similar to Sir Toby's comment on Malvolio in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*:

http://shakespeare.mit.edu/twelfth_night/twelfth_night.2.5.html

The Barber Surgeons' Guild were allowed four corpses a year from executed felons on which to practise anatomy. They displayed these skeletons in their Hall in Monkswell Street in Cripplegate.

A lot of the scene between Bosola and Julia contains echoes of Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia* again, suggesting Webster had a copy of it in front of him, from which he was copying lines:

<http://www.luminarium.org/renascence-editions/arcadia1.html>

The references to the Emperor are probably to Charles V (if we accept the power and reputation of Pescara: he would have been an unknown under Charles' predecessors), despite the historical references in the first Act quite clearly placing the events of the play under the reign of Maximilian I (or even Frederick III).

Julia promises Bosola to find out what's wrong with the Cardinal "cunningly". This quite clearly has a sexual (even vaginal) reference that is less obvious to us.

ACT FIVE SCENE THREE:

This scene, despite its echoes of the story of Echo and Narcissus from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, is Webster's invention, and is not in his sources:

<http://www.elizabethanauthors.com/ovid03.htm>

The idea that the nymph Echo replies back the truth of what you are saying is a commonplace of Jacobean thought, but it is creepily effective in this scene, particularly when we believe that it is the dead Duchess talking to Antonio.

The stage effect may be a repetition of a stage effect Webster saw in *The Second Maiden's Tragedy* (performed by the King's Men in 1611). It has been suggested that this play is the lost *Cardenio* by Shakespeare, but most scholars believe it to be by Middleton.

Antonio's walking in the ruined abbey, and his romantic appreciation of them, uses lines from Florio's 1603 translation of Montaigne's *Essays*.

ACT FIVE SCENE FOUR:

Bad weather being a presage of disaster is a commonplace of Renaissance drama, with obvious references in both Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and *Julius Caesar*.

The accidental wounding of Antonio is Webster's invention: in Painter, Bozolo is an efficient hired assassin, who is paid to kill Antonio.

The reference to being the "Stars' tennis balls" is a Renaissance commonplace, previously used by both Sidney and Alexander.

ACT FIVE SCENE FIVE:

The Cardinal, as a Cardinal, should of course know the Bible well enough to understand its references to Hell. There are, of course, very few references to Hell (as such) in the Bible, which may be part of his confusion.

Ferdinand's cry as he rushes onstage is very similar to the heroism of Richard III at the end of Shakespeare's play:

<http://shakespeare.mit.edu/richardiii/richardiii.5.4.html>

This is a piece of meta-theatre, of course, as Richard Burbage, the actor playing Ferdinand, was also the actor who made the part of Richard III famous.

The last couplet alludes to Horace's *Odes* Book 1: 22

http://tkline.pgcc.net/PITBR/Latin/HoraceOdesBk1.htm#_Toc39402028

However, as the ode makes clear, someone with integrity is actually safe from wolves, in a way that the Duchess was not safe from the wolfish Ferdinand. It is likely that Webster's more educated audience would be aware that the quote was only part of the story.



Because plays are
written to be seen.