

The Duchess of Malfi

Act I, Scene i

[Enter ANTONIO and DELIO]

DELIO

You are welcome to your country, dear Antonio;
You have been long in France, and you return
A very formal Frenchman in your habit.
How do you like the French court?

ANTONIO

I admire it:

In seeking to reduce both state and people 5
To a fixed order, their judicious king
Begins at home, quits first his royal palace
Of flatt'ring sycophants, of dissolute
And infamous persons – which he sweetly terms
His Master's masterpiece, the work of heaven – 10
Consid'ring duly that a prince's court
Is like a common fountain, whence should flow
Pure silver drops in general, but if't chance
Some cursed example poison't near the head,
Death and diseases through the whole land spread. 15
And what is't makes this blessed government
But a most provident council, who dare freely
Inform him the corruption of the times?
Though some o'th'court hold it presumption
To instruct princes what they ought to do, 20

o s.d. ed. (*Actus Primus. Scena Prima. / Antonio, and Delio, Bosola, Cardinall. Q1*)

At the head of this and all subsequent scenes in Q1 there is a 'massed entry' listing all the persons involved, irrespective of where they actually make their entrance. This is often a feature of manuscripts intended for literary use, and is typical of the work of the scribe Ralph Crane. Antonio and Delio, like other courtiers, may enter 'as from a tournament' and be accounted accordingly: Antonio differently from Delio – see n. 3 below.

2 *long in France* The historical Antonio had accompanied Federico, the last Aragonese king of Naples, into exile in France from 1501 until Federico's death in 1504.

3 *habit* dress: Delio says that Antonio's French clothes set him visibly apart in the Italian court of Malfi, but is politely implying that Antonio remains essentially unchanged by his time abroad. NCW suggest he could be wearing the sign of his office as steward, a gold chain: but the steward's gold chain is only mentioned once, quite late in the play and then derisively, by an Officer, at III.ii.221–2, in terms recalling the ridicule of Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*, II.iii.119–20.

9 *which* Referring to the policy of cleansing the court.

It is a noble duty to inform them
 What they ought to foresee.

[Enter BOSOLA]

Here comes Bosola,
 The only court-gall; yet I observe his railing
 Is not for simple love of piety,
 Indeed he rails at those things which he wants, 25
 Would be as lecherous, covetous, or proud,
 Bloody, or envious, as any man,
 If he had means to be so.

[Enter CARDINAL]

Here's the Cardinal.

BOSOLA

I do haunt you still.

CARDINAL

So.

BOSOLA

I have done you
 Better service than to be slighted thus. 30
 Miserable age, where only the reward
 Of doing well is the doing of it.

CARDINAL

You enforce your merit too much.

BOSOLA

I fell into the galleys in your service, where for two years together
 I wore two towels instead of a shirt, with a knot on the shoulder, 35
 after the fashion of a Roman mantle. Slighted thus? I will thrive
 some way: blackbirds fatten best in hard weather, why not I, in
 these dog days?

CARDINAL

Would you could become honest.

BOSOLA

With all your divinity, do but direct me the way to it. I have 40

23 *court-gall* 'a person who harrasses or distresses the court' (*OED*) – *gall* means bile, but also a sore produced by chafing. As a malcontent Bosola is presumably dressed in black; his appearance indicates his poor reward for service, including the hardship of having been a galley-slave. *railing* abusive language

31–2 *the reward* . . . *it* Proverbial – Tilley V81.

34–67 ed. (as verse Q1)

38 *dog days* A period of oppressive and unhealthy hot weather, associated with the dog-star Sirius.

40–3 *I have . . . them* A contradiction of the proverb that travel broadens the mind: Webster is recalling Montaigne, *Essays*, I.xxxviii, p. 119.

known many travel far for it, and yet return as arrant
knaves as they went forth, because they carried themselves
always along with them.

[Exit CARDINAL]

Are you gone? Some fellows, they say, are possessed with the
devil, but this great fellow were able to possess the greatest devil 45
and make him worse.

ANTONIO

He hath denied thee some suit?

BOSOLA

He and his brother are like plum trees that grow crooked
over standing pools: they are rich, and o'rladen with fruit, 50
but none but crows, pies and caterpillars feed on them.
Could I be one of their flatt'ring panders, I would hang on
their ears like a horse-leech till I were full, and then drop
off. I pray leave me. Who would rely upon these miserable
dependences, in expectation to be advanced tomorrow?
What creature ever fed worse than hoping Tantalus? Nor 55
ever died any man more fearfully than he that hoped for a
pardon? There are rewards for hawks and dogs when they
have done us service, but for a soldier that hazards his

41 *arrant* thorough

49 *standing* stagnant

50 *pies* magpies

51–2 *hang . . . full* I would feed them fulsome words of praise until I was sated by their fat
rewards (*horse-leech* = blood-sucker)

54 *dependences* the condition of living on promises

55 *Tantalus* The type of the disappointed man (hence the verb 'tantalise'), punished in Hades
by perpetual thirst, though up to his neck in water, and by hunger, though fruit hung
just beyond his grasp.

56 *died* (Q1b; did Q1a)

57 *pardon* (Q1b; pleadon Q1a)

dogs ed. (dogges, and Q1)

hawks and dogs In Q1 there is a space at the line-end after *hawkes, and dogges, and* whereas
the preceding and succeeding lines are printed full out right. Presumably Q1's second
and is an erroneous repetition. Lucas suggests the noun *horses* had dropped out, but type
could not have fallen out without movement – indeed disintegration – of the whole page
of type (as NCW note). The parallel in Montaigne, *Essayes*, II.xii, p. 266, is inconclusive:
it is true that the first part does refer to men serving better, and for less entreaty, 'then
wee vse vnto birdes, vnto horses, and vnto dogges' – but then follows the second: 'We
share the fruites of our prey with our dogges and hawkes, as a meede of their paine and
reward of their industry': here 'horses' are omitted.