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PRESENCE OF WITCHES AND WITCHCRAFT IN *THE DUCHESS OF MALFI*,  
A JACOBAN PLAY

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Abstract

Jacobean plays depict dark humor, sarcasm, violence and bloodshed. They are filled with images and symbols associated with witchcraft and magic. However, using witchcraft in drama had many layers and dimensions and served other purposes of the dramatist. Anyone who was rebellious, tyrannical or questioned status-quo was termed as witch. Also, persons who were cunning, scheming and fraud were labelled as witches. Presence of witches, ghosts and witchcraft was a common and popular concept in Jacobean drama. Some examples are Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, and *Othello*, John Webster's *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*, and Ben Jonson's *Masque of Queens*. The present paper seeks to analyse the use of images and symbols of witchcraft in John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*.

**Keywords:** Jacobean drama, witchcraft, magic, appearance, sorcery, trueself.

Jacobean writers have an overwhelming sense of human limitations, of man as a physical creature subject to disease, the effects of time, and death, whose achievements are illusory or merely transitory, and who seems incapable of perceiving truth or achieving harmony and fulfillment. Jacobean tragedies are dark in mood and questioning in spirit. Webster, like other Jacobean dramatists, is concerned with problems of knowing and perceiving truth. The Jacobean mood is epitomized in *The Duchess of Malfi*. It is by date a Jacobean play; in mood it is also unequivocally Jacobean. Its central concern with change and the process of human corruption, with its emphasis upon sex; the probing and questioning nature of its analysis of human character and action; the dramatist's ironic vision, and his technique of presenting scenes of sensational horror and evoking

grim laughter at the same time; all these features make it a characteristic play of its period.

Amongst the many peculiar traits of the Jacobean era was an absolute fascination with witchcraft and magic. It was at this time that the accusations of demonic possession and magic in English society led to dozens of trials, arrests and even executions. Anyone who behaved in non-conventional ways, especially against the status-quo, was labelled as practicing witchcraft or magic. In literature, depiction of witches and ghosts increased manifold during this time. In theatrical representation, witchcraft did not always refer to real witches. Anyone who was tyrannical, rebellious, or questioned the status-quo, was termed as a witch. Moreover, if a person was a fraud, impostor, or did cruel gruesome activity was also associated with witches. The plays are not in any real sense

about witchcraft; they are really about dishonesty and tyranny, unconventional behavior or good and bad rules. For example, the association of witchcraft and tyranny is clearly established in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.

In *The Duchess of Malfi*, Bosola takes analogies from witchcraft and uses these references to disparage human aspirations. In Act 2 scene 1 of the play, he argues with the Old lady over makeup and cosmetics. His comments reveal his hatred towards artificial beauty and cosmetics, which symbolizes hiding one's true self and using false means to impress others. The intensity of his dislike for fake beauty is revealed when he says he would prefer to eat a pigeon which died of the plague rather than kiss such women. Using cosmetics to hide your genuine and honest face is likened to being a witch who is usually associated with hiding her true self and nature. Witches are said to be ugly looking, which is symbolic of their inner ugly and cruel selves. They use magic to appear beautiful so as to trick others into believing they are beautiful and good and thus trap their prey. Similarly, evil and ugly women were considered to use cosmetics to appear pretty on the surface so that they could impress or bewitch others, especially desirable men. The dichotomy of outward beauty vs inner beauty or appearance vs reality comes into play here. There is an abrasive brilliance in his derogatory remarks: for example, a face cream made of 'fat of serpents, spawn of snakes, Jews' spittle and their young children's ordure'.

Throughout the play, Ferdinand is associated with witchcraft. For instance, in act 2 scene 5, when he gets angry, the Cardinal asks him not to behave like a man who has been "convey'd by witches". Later in the play, he plans to torture Duchess and her husband in cruel ways. He says, "I would have their bodies / Burnt in a coal-pit... Or dip the sheets they lie in, in pitch or sulphur." He also plans "I'll find scorpions to string my whips. And fix her in a general eclipse." This kind of cruel torture is usually associated with witches who supposedly enjoy torturing their prisoners. This cruel planning reveals how Ferdinand thinks and behaves like a witch. He not only imprisons duchess but tries various

gruesome things to torture her. Witches are said to enjoy torturing as did Ferdinand.

Further, in Act 3 scene 1, Bosola suspects that some kind of sorcery or witchcraft has been practised on the Duchess. Otherwise an aristocratic and intelligent lady like her wouldn't have fallen in love with a man of low class and rank with whom she can't even acknowledge her relationship openly. When Ferdinand asks Bosola if he really believes in the magic of potions and charms, Bosola replies, "most certainly". This response from an intelligent, witty and reasonable man shows the mood of the age and proves that belief in magic and witchcraft was a popular idea. Moreover, in Act 3, scene 2, when Ferdinand confronts the Duchess about her secret marriage and children, he denounces the loving couple, calls her husband a lecher, and the Duchess is likened to a witch. It was popular in those days to label a rebellious or unconventional woman as a witch, "Lechery did consult with witchery".

Witchcraft was a common theme discussed in Jacobean plays. Shakespeare's *Othello* is one such play. Brabantio accuses Othello of using magic to bewitch Desdemona. He cannot understand how otherwise Desdemona, who showed no interest in marriage to young and handsome Venetians, could be attracted to black Othello, and for Brabantio, the only explanation must be that he had used magic charms on her. Brabantio's sense of Othello's otherness is very strong here, he states that if this relationship is approved, the result will be that the Venetian state will be ruled by 'Bond slaves and pagans'. The remark implicitly stresses that Othello is not originally a white, Christian Venetian and attention is drawn to his pagan origins by Brabantio to make his charge of witchcraft more credible. For seventeenth-century Englishmen, black was the devil's colour, and paganism was associated with magic, witchcraft and practices which were devilish. Brabantio thus accuses Othello of practising forbidden arts, a charge which is in contrast with Othello's honesty and nobility.

Whispering secretly is an act of being alert and attentive in order to hide some critical information. This trait of hiding or withholding

information is commonly associated with witches. In Act 3, scene 3, when Bosola visits Rome to inform Ferdinand and the Cardinal about the identity of the Duchess' husband, he whispers it to them. Delio, Pescara, and others standing at a distance observe that it is something very important, and Delio comments, "In such a deformed silence, witches whisper their charms". Gunby argues that, through imagery as well as action, the demonic motives of Ferdinand and the Cardinal are revealed, with, in the case of Ferdinand, a three-layered set of motives, with images of fire and storm signifying anger, lust, and (with the addition of references to devils and witchcraft) the demonic. Witches are commonly considered associated with cruelty, trickery, and torture. That's what Ferdinand does in Act 4, scene 1. He asks the Duchess to kiss his hand as a gesture of reconciliation between them. Apparently, he tricks her into kissing a dead man's hand in the dark. Realizing this, the Duchess wonders "What witchcraft doth he practice, that he hath left // A dead man's hand here?"

Cardinal and Ferdinand, through their actions, dialogues and behavior are subtly related to witches. They are corrupt and scheming and like witches can go to any length for fulfilling ambition. The Jacobean believed that the witches used certain parts of different animals for performing witchcraft. Thus, Webster connects Ferdinand and the Cardinal with an image series of animals, poison, and witchcraft which are associated throughout the play. Their appearance, habit of hiding things, planning conspiracy, spying on others, trying to control others, using people for their benefit, treating them like objects, association with night and darkness, with the suggestions of evil practice and deception is emphasised by the playwright. It was popularly believed that night was the time when the devil was chiefly at work and witchcraft was practiced. Webster subtly connects Ferdinand with the night and darkness. Also, the night setting gives more credibility to the association of Ferdinand with the devil.

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