



THE DUCHESS OF MALFI AS A JACOBAN PLAY

Dr. VIVEKANAND RAO

Assistant Professor, National PG College Barahalganj, Gorakhpur, UP, India



Dr. VIVEKANAND RAO

Article Received:14/04/2020

Article Accepted: 04/05/2020

Published online: 11/05/2020

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.8.2.111](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.8.2.111)

Abstract

Drama is the form of literature that presents dialogue and performance written for theater, television, radio, and film. The article is about Jacobean revenge tragedy, or revenge play of Webster's *Duchess of Malfi*, that is a dramatic genre in which the protagonist seeks revenge for an imagined or actual injury. It flourishes during Jacobean period in the history of England. As it is supposed that the source of this revenge play is dealing with horror, and melodramatic atmosphere. The sentimentalism, horror and terror are treated in a very different way.

All the major features of the revenge play of the Jacobean Age are there in the *Duchess of Malfi* and the dramatist has proved himself as the master dramatist of the play of horror and revenge. It is one of the best revenge plays by Webster. The play has a central theme of revenge, horror and sensationalism. It has the melodramatic style and all these have made the play a supreme example of the revenge play like *Gorboduc* and *Hamlet*. The whole atmosphere of the drama is full of awe and tortures.

Key Words: Drama, Revenge Play, Jacobean, Horror and terror.

INTRODUCTION

Drama is a mode of fictional representation through dialogue and performance. ... Drama is also a type of a play written for theater, television, radio, and film. In simple words, a drama is a composition in verse or prose presenting a story in pantomime or dialogue. There are several types of dramas as comedy, Tragedy, Problem play, Revenge play etc. Comedy is a literary genre and a type of dramatic work that is amusing and satirical in its tone, mostly having a cheerful ending. The motif of this dramatic work is triumph over unpleasant circumstance by creating comic effects, resulting in a happy or successful conclusion. A tragedy is an event of great loss, usually of human life. Such an event is said to be tragic. Traditionally, the event would require "some element of moral failure, some flaw in character, or some extraordinary combination of

elements" to be tragic. Not every death is considered a tragedy. The problem play is a form of drama that emerged during the 19th century as part of the wider movement of realism in the arts. It deals with contentious social issues through debates between the characters on stage, who typically represent conflicting points of view within a realistic social context.

The revenge tragedy, or revenge play, is a dramatic genre in which the protagonist seeks revenge for an imagined or actual injury. The term, revenge tragedy, was first introduced in 1900 by A. H. Thorndike to label a class of plays written in the late Elizabethan and early Jacobean eras (circa 1580s to 1620s). The revenge tragedies of William Shakespeare and his contemporaries stemmed from Roman tragedy, in particular, Seneca's *Thyestes*. The *Duchess of Malfi* (originally published as *The Tragedy*

of the Duchess of Malfi) is a Jacobean revenge tragedy written by English dramatist John Webster in 1612–1613. ... Published in 1623, the play is loosely based on events that occurred between 1508 and 1513 surrounding Giovanna d'Aragona, Duchess of Malfi. Revenge tragedy is a theoretical genre in which the principal theme is revenge and revenge's fatal consequences. Formally established by American educator Ashley H. Thorndike in his 1902 article "The Relations of Hamlet to Contemporary Revenge Plays," a revenge tragedy documents the progress of ... John Webster: The Duchess of Malfi and Other Plays. John Webster was an English Jacobean dramatist best known for his tragedies *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*, which are often regarded as masterpieces of the early 17th century English stage.

Duchess of Malfi : 17th century Jacobean Play :

John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* (1613) is a Jacobean play and almost all the features of the age are reflected in the revenge-play. The period from 1603 to 1625 that was followed by Elizabethan Era (1558-1603) was the period of James I. In Latin "James" means "Jacobus" and thus this period is famous as Jacobean period in the history of England. Shakespeare, Beaumont, Fletcher, Jonson, Webster, Ford and Tourneur etc. were remarkable dramatists of the age. The age was an age of immorality and corruption. It is reflected in the literature. In the field of drama, horror, revenge, pathos and sentimentality, lack of creative spirit, lack of technical skill, immorality and vulgarity and loss of national-appeal are reflected very well. The two remarkable tragedies, *The White Devil* (1612) and *The Duchess of Malfi* (1613) were no exceptional by Webster.

The tone and caliber of Jacobean drama had necessarily to depend upon the tastes and aspirations of the society. G. C. Macaulay has summed up the degenerate condition of Jacobean society in these words:

"The Court of James I had lost the chivalrous aspirations of the earlier time and the moral-corruption which had been hold in check, at least to some extent, by noble ideas, had

become alarmingly prominent in the life of the upper classes of society."

As it is supposed that the source of this revenge play is dealing with horror, and melodramatic atmosphere of William Painter's *Palace of Pleasure*. It is a product of Jacobean era; therefore, the moral vision of the playwright is obvious. The sentimentalism, horror and terror are treated in a very different way. In the play, Ferdinand is The Duke of Calabria, Cardinal is his brother. They have a widow sister, The Duchess of Malfi. She is young, spirited and high-minded lady. In the words of Antonio:

"She throws upon a man so sweet a look, That it were able to raise one to a galliard...For her discourse, it is so full of rapture, You only will begin, then to be sorry..."

She has a steward (servant) and he is Antonio, whom she loves passionately. But her two brothers, Ferdinand and Cardinal, warn her not to remarry. For her remarriage will be a disgrace to the royal blood. Later Ferdinand also confesses that he warned her not to marry again so that he might inherit her property.

"What was the meanness of her match to me? Only I must confess, I had a hope Had she continued widow to have gained An infinite mass of treasure by her death."

Thereupon the Duchess marries Antonio secretly. Suspecting that the Duchess may remarry, Ferdinand and Cardinal place in her employment a spy called Bosola. He describes both the brother as:

"He and his brother are like plum-trees that grow crooked over standing pools; they are rich, and o'erladen with fruit, but none but crows, pies, and caterpillars feed on them. Could I be one of their flattering panders, I would hang on their ears like a horse-leech till I were full, and then drop off." Bosola (1.1.47-51)

He is an ex-galley-slave and villain to the last degree. Years pass and Bosola informs her brothers that she has married Antonio and has children from

him. The two brothers arrive to capture Antonio and the Duchess red-handed. So the Duchess and Antonio fly and separate from each other. Antonio escapes but the Duchess is captured. Ferdinand and Bosola then subject her to painful mental-tortures.

“You are very cold.

I fear you are not well after your travel :

Ha ! Lights ; Oh horrible !”

Finally the brothers send killer who strange her. Ferdinand goes to see her dead body. He is greatly shocked to see her lying dead. His shock takes the form of great remorse and he goes mad. Thus Retribution starts falling upon the murderers. Cardinal now wants to get rid of Bosola because later knows all about his evil against the murdered Duchess. When Bosola comes to know that Cardinal wants to kill him, he is filled with great anger and remorse. At night he kills Antonio mistaking him for Cardinal. Then he goes to Cardinal and fatally wounds him. When Cardinal cries for help, Ferdinand arrives and fatally wounds Bosola, who turn to kill Ferdinand. The play comes to an end here.

“Integrity of life is fame’s best friend, which, nobly, beyond death, shall, crown the end.”

Bosola’s internal struggle is shown in the play. On some level, he wants to be good, and rues being made into “a villain”; yet, he feels bound to Ferdinand because of the “bounty” that Ferdinand has given him, and he wants “to avoid ingratitude.” As he says:

“I would have you curse yourself now, that your bounty, Which makes men truly noble, e’er should make Me a villain. O, that to avoid ingratitude For the good deed you have done me, I must do All the ill man can invent. Thus the devil Candies all sins o’er; and what heaven terms vile, That names he complimentary.” Bosola (1.1.262-8)

To sum up the discussion of the article The Duchess of Malfi as a Jacobean play, we may say that as Doctor Faustus is a child of Renaissance, no doubt The Duchess of Malfi is a child of Jacobean age. As the age is characterized by corruption in the upper

classes of society, horror, revenge and immorality; — around all the features are there in the melodrama of revenge by the dramatist of moral-vision, Webster. The mentioned lines clear that the play is a pure Jacobean play.

Duchess of Malfi : As a Revenge Play :

The Duchess of Malfi (1613) is well-known revenge play in the history of Jacobean English Drama (1603-1625) of England by an outstanding horror playwright, John Webster. The revenge play is a type of tragedy which is centered on the subject matter of revenge and has horror, terror, sensationalism and melody of great charm. The dramatist was very much impressed by the writings of Seneca, Kyd, Sackville and Norton. The impact of Gorboduc (1561) seems paramount in the Duchess of Malfi of the dramatist. The dramatist has followed the tradition of the Jacobean writers in writing his play and this is the reason why the themes of The Duchess of Malfi and the White Devil (1612) are based on revenge and horror.

The Chief Elements of Revenge Play in The Duchess of Malfi

- a) A shocking murder has been committed and it cries out for revenge.
- b) Some persons take up revenge as a sacred duty.
- c) There is a Machiavellian villain who acting on his own behalf, or for other, causes wide-spread bloodshed.
- d) New types of tortures and horror are produced.
- e) The objects of revenge are often better than the so called avengers.
- f) Some characters grow mad or feign madness; and The imagery and language employed often suit the violence of the action.

Almost all the major features of the revenge play of the Jacobean Age are there in the Duchess of Malfi and the dramatist has proved himself as the master dramatist of the play of horror and revenge and is in the lines of Seneca, Norton, Sackville. William Henry Hudson writes in An Outline History of English Literature that :

“JOHN WEBSTER (1580 ?-1625 ?) was a dramatist of somber cast of genius and great power, though his morbid love of the violent and the horrible led him too often to sheer sensationalism. His White Devil and Duchess of Malfi contain scenes of tragic passion unrivalled outside Shakespeare.”

On the whole, The Duchess of Malfi is one of the best revenge plays by Webster. The play has a central theme of revenge, horror and sensationalism. It has the melodramatic style and all these have made the play a supreme example of the revenge play like Gorboduc and Hamlet. The whole atmosphere of the drama is full of awe and tortures.

This passage marks the transition from the Cardinal and Ferdinand’s warnings to the Duchess against marriage, to her willful decision to propose to Antonio anyway

“Shall this move me? If all my royal kindred
Lay in my way unto this marriage,
I’d make them my low footsteps; and even now,
Even in this hate, as men in some great battles,
By apprehending danger, have achieved
Almost impossible actions (I have heard soldiers say so)
So I, through frights, and threatening, will assay
This dangerous venture.”

The Duchess (1.1.332-9)

John Webster’s The Duchess of Malfi (1613) is one of the best horror plays in the history of Jacobean (1603-1625) English Literature. The horror play is a type of tragedy which has the subject matter of revenge and full of awful-scenes. The word “horror is derived from Latin word “horrere” which means “to make the hair stand on end, tremble, shudder” and it also refers : ‘murder’, ‘torture’, ‘fear’, ‘madness’, ‘terror’ and ‘frightening’. Horror is an essential element in The Duchess of Malfi by Webster. The dramatist seems very much influenced

by the writings of Seneca, Sophocles, Sackville, Norton and Kyd. Webster was profoundly interested in expressions of extremes of the human sufferings. Horror is piled on horror in the most sensational purpose in The Duchess of Malfi.

It is the charm of the writing of Webster that he has made horror the center of interest in his tragedies like the White Devil (1612) and The Duchess of Malfi. The dramatist is a master-playwright from the point of view of composing sensational plays of horror. William Henry Hudson writes in An Outline History of English Literature that:

“JOHN WEBSTER (1580 ?-1625 ?) was a dramatist of sombre cast of genius and great power, though his morbid love of the violent and the horrible led him too often to sheer sensationalism. His White Devil and Duchess of Malfi contain scenes of tragic passion unrivalled outside Shakespeare.”

As is clear by the mentioned lines that Webster’s The Duchess of Malfi is full of the scenes of murder, torture, fear, awe, and revenge; therefore, it is a horror play. The dramatist has followed the tradition of the ancient great writers of the horror play and made himself an outstanding literary figure in the field of drama of Jacobean age. He has surpassed almost all the tragedians of his era and made a remarkable contribution to the development of the play of horror.

John Webster’s The Duchess of Malfi (1613) is a sensational drama on the theme of revenge which is full of melody, horror, torture, awe and very much exciting situations or scenes. The melodrama is a type of drama of revenge and terror. According to the Webster’s Dictionary, it is “a drama with a romantic story or plot, sensational incidents, and usually including some music and song or any sensational and emotional drama”. The Duchess of Malfi is a sensational and emotional drama of horror based on the revenge theme. It is one of the best melodramas in the history of 17th century English literature by Webster.

The dramatist seems very much influenced by the writings of Seneca, Sophocles, Sackville, Norton

and Kyd. Webster was profoundly interested in expressions of extremes of the human sufferings. Horror is piled on horror in the most sensational purpose in *The Duchess of Malfi*.

It is the charm of the writing of Webster that he has made horror the center of interest in his tragedies like *The White Devil* (1612) and *The Duchess of Malfi*. The dramatist is a master-playwright from the point of view of composing sensational plays of horror. William Henry Hudson writes in *An Outline History of English Literature* that:

“JOHN WEBSTER (1580 ?-1625 ?) was a dramatist of sombre cast of genius and great power, though his morbid love of the violent and the horrible led him too often to sheer sentimentalism. His *White Devil* and *Duchess of Malfi* contain scenes of tragic passion unrivaled outside Shakespeare.”

Charles Lamb has pointed out the supreme dramatic effectiveness of the melodramatic scenes. He says :

“To move a horror skillfully, to touch a soul to the quick, to lay upon fear as much as it can bear ... this only a Webster can do”.

To conclude the discussion, we may claim that *The Duchess of Malfi* is a melodrama because it deals with the romantic and sensational story with melody in a pure voice of verse. By the apt use of the melody and horror, the dramatist has made the play an interesting sensational story. It would be right to claim that the play is one of the well-known melodramas in the history of Jacobean English Drama.

The Duchess in *The Duchess of Malfi* (1613) is the central figure of the whole story of the revenge play by an outstanding Jacobean playwright (1603-1625), John Webster. The chief female character in the story is called the heroine (*The Oxford Dictionary*), and from this point of view, the Duchess is the heroine of the drama. She is dominated character and plays an important role in the thread of the story of the drama. Without the character of Duchess, we cannot imagine the story of *The Duchess of Malfi*. To talk of the play means to talk the Duchess. As it is created by the dramatist, it is

very clear that Webster has a good art of characterization just like Shakespeare and Marlowe. For his, characters are not imaginative and supernatural; they are real human beings — the blend of good and evil.

The Duchess is the Duchess of Malfi. She has two brothers: Cardinal and Ferdinand. She is a young, beautiful widow in the beginning of the play and later becomes the beloved of Antonio and at last becomes the wife of her lover — it is the cause of her suffering and murder. She is a fine and psychological female character that is created by the greatest insight and skill of the art of characterization of the dramatist with the help of the poetic-power.

HER MERITS

- a) Duchess is the heroine of the play.
- b) She has a very beautiful and charming personality.
- c) She is pious and virtuous in her nature.
- d) She is courageous lady and does heroic actions in the play.
- e) She is an optimistic and enthusiastical lady.
- f) She has faith in both, the virtue and God.
- g) She is very loving and sacrificing-mother.
- h) She is passionate beloved and devoted wife, too.
- i) She has wit and common-sense.
- j) She has sweet or rapturous voice.
- k) She maintains her dignity of status in any situation and
- l) She is a noble and mystic lady.

Duchess is a very pretty lady and she has charm enough to attract the attention of the spectators. She has a fascinating and charming personality. She has gifted art of discourse and she is so religious and pious. Commenting on the character of Duchess, Antonio opines:

“For her discourse, it is so full of rapture,
You only will begin, then to be sorry ...”

There is undisputed fact of the character of Duchess that she is a courageous lady, she maintains her purity and spotless-nature even in the most critical situations. She is imprisoned in her own

palace by her brothers. Her brother Ferdinand meets her and creates such type of situation that is awful and terrible to the Duchess. For the brother offers a dead body's hand in place of his own. But it is the piousness and nobility of the Duchess that after the touch of the hand, she speaks:

"You are very cold

I fear you are not well after your travel:

Ha! lights: oh horrible !"

Duchess is intelligent and has wit and common sense. She could easily understand the original and real condition of any situation. As she could understand easily her brother's letter.

"Send Antonio to me,

I want his head in business."

As a mother, her importance is not of less value. The Duchess is a very loving and sacrificing mother. Knowing that she is about to die, she considers first of all about her children and husband, so she is not only a true beloved but also a sacrificing mother. She instructs Cariola to look after her children. What she says to Cariola is very pathetic and heart-touching that discloses the secret of her virtuous-character, she says :

" I pray thee look thou giv'st my little boy,

Some syrup for his cold, and let the girl

Say her prayers, ere she sleep."

HER DEMERITS

It is not easy to express the demerits in the character of the Duchess. Many readers have many views of their own. There is controversy among the critics also on the demerits of the character of the Duchess. But what is important, it is given here.

- (a) Duchess lacks control over her passions; she loves her steward (servant).
- (b) For sometimes, she has lacks of the sense of optimism and she accepts death better than life.
- (c) She is a lusty widow as her brother speaks: "Farewell, Lusty widow."

- (d) She is not a faithful sister to her brother.

As mentioned lines are the comment on the merits and demerits of the character of the Duchess, clear that she is an outstanding creation of the poetic mind of the dramatist, Webster. She is dominated character in the revenge play and the whole story of the melodrama moves around her and the character also shows the good art of characterization of the writer of the horror play. She is spotless and pious but lacks control over her passion of love.

Duchess of Malfi : As a Revenge Play of Moral Vision :

The Duchess of Malfi (1613) has a quest for moral order during the Jacobean Era (1603-1625). The dramatist's vision is moral. Webster sees life as a struggle between right and wrong or good and evil. Here, we come to one of the key facts about him. For he was a child of his age, the age was the reformation, and he conceived morality in religious terms. The vision of the life of the dramatist is on one hand religious and on the other hand moral. A very famous critic, Swinburne has pointed out that:

"There is no poet morally nobler than Webster."

As the act for the dramatist was wrong, not because it interfered with the happiness of man in this world, but because it was a sin, a breach of the Eternal Laws established by God who created man. Men to him are not the helpless sport of an indifferent fate as they were to the Greeks. The evil acts are the causes of the human tragedy. The Duchess in her heroic composition to her brothers is a symbol of life as they are the symbols of death and the play maintains a tension between the opposing forces of the life and the death. These symbolic functions of the Duchess and her brothers are arrived in the poetic imagery of their lines. Here is an example for making of the concept more clearly.

"Though in our miseries Fortune hath a part

Yet in our noble sufferings she hath none:

Contempt of pain, that we may call our own."

Lord David Cecil says that the Vth Act may be justified from the moral point of view. It is in this act

that all the evil do get due punishment. Throughout the play, we may observe that the dramatist has a quest for moral order within the disorder of the age.

To sum up the melodrama of the Jacobean age *The Duchess of Malfi*, we may say that it has a creed for moral order in the society. Webster's moral vision of the life which is based on the religion is of great importance. The whole story of the tragedy is centered on the conflict between good and evil. Such there is no poet morally nobler than Webster in the field of English drama.

Bosola speaks these lines as he is dying. There are multiple death speeches in the fifth act, but Bosola's is the final:

"We are only like dead walls, or vaulted graves, that, ruined, yields no echo. Fare you well. It may be pain, but no harm to me to die In so good a quarrel. O, this gloomy world! In what a shadow, or deep pit of darkness, Doth, womanish and fearful, mankind live!"
Bosola (5.5.96-101)

Conclusion

To conclude we can say that *The Duchess of Malfi* is a perfect revenge tragedy. There is no denying the fact that Webster raises the original theme of revenge to a higher plan. Although Webster wrote this drama following the tradition of revenge tragedy, he has modified some of its aspects to make it unique. And he is perfect enough drawing the art in his own style that makes it more acceptable to the readers to accept it as a true revenge tragedy. So, in a word we can say that it is a perfect revenge tragedy.

References

1. Drabble, Margaret, ed. (2000). "Duchess of Malfi, The". *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.
2. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Duchess_of_Malfi
3. Chandra, Sandhita. "Webster and the Social Tragedy." <https://thefablesoup.wordpress.com>. N.p., 25 Oct. 2005. Web. 5 Mar. 2017.

4. Nandini B. Pandey, "Medea's Fractured Self on the Jacobean Stage: Webster's *Duchess of Malfi* as a Case Study in Renaissance Readership", Web. 19 September 2015.
5. "The Duchess of Malfi". Drama Online. February 2017.
6. <https://www.rsc.org.uk> > the-duchess-of-malfi > plot