

**UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA, NSUKKA.**

**FACULTY OF ARTS**

**DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND LITERARY STUDIES**

**TOPIC:**

**COMPARE AND CONTRAST JOHN WEBSTER'S "THE DUCHESS OF MALFI" AND APHA BEHN'S "THE ROVER" AS A JACOBAN REVENGE TRAGEDY AND A RESTORATION PLAY RESPECTIVELY.**

**AN ESSAY SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF  
THE REQUIREMENT FOR THE COURSE,  
ELS 214 (ENGLISH LITERATURE SURVEY: NEOCLASSICAL  
PERIOD)**

**BY**

**IKENWA STEPHEN ROWLAND**

**2015/201065**

**LECTURER: MR. ONYEKA ODOH**

**MAY, 2017**

Revenge tragedy is a dramatic form in which the dominant motive is revenge for a real or imagined injury; made popular during the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras. "The Duchess of Malfi" does not exactly follow the pattern of other, more representative plays in the subgenre; however it is surely one of the groups of similar plays that succeeded Kyd's seminal play, "The Spanish Tragedy."

Although the play's main action is only partially devoted to revenge, it is event that the wanton bloodshed, torture, use of the tool villain, omens, and the like compensates for its problematic relationship to the tradition.

As most scholars who have addressed the form note, the workings toward this revenge need not necessarily constitute the main plot, which may, instead, be concerned with developing the tragic situation which induces the revenge.

Revenge, however, must be concerned in the catastrophe and must not enter the play solely as a fifth-act deus ex machina to resolve the plot as we see in "The Duchess of Malfi."

Restoration Drama on the hand has been called a Comedy of Manners as it portrays the behaviour of a society and their way of life. While the first term, Restoration Drama, assigns a time period to this theatre, the second one defines the genre it falls in. This term was chiefly used to distinguish it from the Comedy of Humours (made famous by Ben Jonson). The Comedy of Manners satirizes the affectations peculiar to a particular social class. These affectations were often expressed through the use of stock characters. Marriage and Money were important aspects of the life of the people of that time. Restoration drama, with these themes at its forefront, was a true representation of that time. Aphra Behn's "The Rover" embodies most, if not all of these features.

In comparing both plays, one is confronted not only by the difficulty of dealing with different eras but different subgenres as well. A quick study however provides enough basis of comparison. In their treatment of marriage for instance, the dowry system among propertied classes had been in place since the sixteenth century, but at the end of the seventeenth century there were thirteen women to every ten men, and cash portions had to grow to attract worthy suitors. As the value of women fell by almost fifty percent, marriage for love, marriage by choice, became almost unthinkable. Women through marriage had evident exchange value; that is, the virgin became a commodity not only for her use-value as breeder of the legal heir but for her portion, which, through exchange, generated capital. The duchess, through the unfortunate death of her first husband came to be the heiress of a vast fortune, one that her brothers wanted to keep for themselves. The fear of losing this fortune after discovering her secret marriage to Antonio, results in her fatal death. The commodification of marriage is also a dominant theme in both parts of "The Rover." Women as shown by Willmore and his companions lived to serve one of two functions; as means of immediate sexual gratification or as a means of enriching the fortunes of the men kind enough to marry them.

In a play that partakes of revenge tragedy motifs, yet is not wholly a part of the subgenre, Webster effects two daring changes. The first of these involves the titular Duchess who becomes, contrary to the conventions of the subgenre, a focus of goodness and integrity. The second change is the elevation of the villain to the status of protagonist. Bosola, the villain, enters the play with the rare quality of complete self-knowledge against established conventions of the subgenre. Together these two changes call into question the influence of power on justice. In focussing attention on the Duchess and her goodness, Webster is one of the few playwrights who render a positive acknowledgement of a

woman's vulnerability. The Duchess is victimized by evil persons and maintains her integrity and her faith in the justice of Heaven. Webster targets the corrupt functioning of earthly justice, while maintaining a belief in the value of Christian ethics. Bosola, as protagonist, functions as an emblem of the misdirected nature of the court. His relentless pursuit of power is merely an emulation of the world around him. Certain aspects of this feature are also reflected in Aphra Behn's "The Rover." Willmore, like Bosola is as incorrigible as they come. He clearly does not attempt to hide his philandering ways, often unable to keep track of the ladies he has either promised marriage to or set up secret meetings with. Willmore acts not only as the rover but as signifier for the play's phallic logic. His name metaphorizes the trajectory of desire as he roves from bed to bed "willing more," making all satisfactions temporary and unsatisfying. Desire's subject, Willmore never disguises himself (he comes on stage holding his mask); until enriched by the courtesan Angellica Bianca, he remains in "buff" or leather military coat.

Both plays equally address the patriarchal arrangement of law and jointure. The Duchess is confronted by this set norm when her brothers insist she remain unmarried to protect this jointure because as a self-serving tactic. One she taunts by secretly marrying Antonio. When Florinda, Hellena, and Valeria don gypsy costumes-assume the guise of marginal and exotic females-to join the carnival masquerade, they do so explicitly to evade the patriarchal arrangement of law and jointure laid down by their father and legislated by their brother Pedro: Florinda shall marry a rich ancient count and Hellena shall go into a convent, thus saving their father a second dowry and simultaneously enriching Florinda.