

Name: Akintonde, Olamilekan Praise

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Lecturer: Mr. Onyeka Odoh

Compare and Contrast John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* and Aphra Behn's *The Rover* as a Jacobean Revenge and Restoration play respectively.

Introduction

From time immemorial, events in the world have not been stable – an event is outturned and a new one comes into place. Just as we have this in our everyday life, we also have it in literature. The old periods give birth to new periods and they go to rest. Although these old periods cannot be airbrushed since their traits can still be seen in the new ones. Hence, we have the neoclassical period. From the name “Neo” we discover the word “new” and from “classical” we see the Greek and Roman literature coming into place. It is a form of rebirth of the classics.

Neoclassical literature was written between 1660 and 1798 and this period is broken down into three: the Restoration period, the Augustan period, and the Age of Johnson. It started after the death of Queen Elizabeth and beginning of James's reign.

The Neoclassical literature unlike the renaissance – which portrays man as being good – portrays man as one full of flaws. Now, going into the essay proper, we would discuss revenge tragedy and restoration play in reference to *The Duchess of Malfi* and *The Rover* respectively.

What is a revenge tragedy?

A definition need not be given before we understand what a revenge tragedy is. Ashley H. Thorndike formally established this genre in his seminal 1902 article *The Relations of Hamlet to Contemporary Revenge Plays*, which characterizes revenge tragedy “as a tragedy whose leading motive is revenge and whose main action deals with the progress of this revenge, leading to the death of the murderers and often the death of the avenger himself”. A revenge tragedy thus can also be any tragedy where revenge is, more or less, a minor part of the overall narrative rather than just a narrative's major driving force. As long as revenge is an underlying theme or motivation throughout the piece, it can be labeled as revenge tragedy. Revenge tragedy is a genre that has existed for a long time. However, its recognition only floated to the surface because of the famous and little known, playwrights that developed it. They helped

the literary world become more accustomed to the grotesque nature of the genre by revisiting dark themes, all of which involve vengeful motives. In doing so, readers have discovered a different realm in which they must confront the harsh truths of humanity.

Features of revenge tragedies

While these conventions don't apply to all plays that can be read as revenge tragedies, this list represents those things that commonly take place in the narrative of a revenge tragedy:

- The revengers are always killed
- Tool villains and accomplices that assist the revenger are killed
- The supernatural (often in the form of a ghost who urges the protagonist to enact vengeance)
- A play within a play or dumb show
- Madness or feigned madness
- Disguise or masking
- Violent murders, including decapitation and dismemberment
- Soliloquies
- A Machiavelli figure

With these characteristics listed above, *The Duchess of Malfi* will be discussed, comparing and contrasting between the play and Jacobean revenge tragedies.

The Duchess of Malfi

The recently widowed Duchess falls in love, not only does she fall in love but she does this with Antonio who is just a lowly steward. Her brothers, Ferdinand and the Cardinal instruct her not to marry out of their greed for their inheritance. They decide to hire Bosola to spy on her and while he does that, he discovers the Duchess has eloped with Antonio and borne three children secretly.

Ferdinand discovers this and threatens to disown the Duchess. She plans to escape with Antonio and chooses to confide in Bosola, unaware that he is Ferdinand's spy. The Cardinal hears of it and sends soldiers to capture them but Antonio escapes with their eldest son but the Duchess, her maid and her two younger children are taken back Malfi and are finally killed in sleep by Bosola's executioners who are under Ferdinand's orders. Bosola sees this as injustice and decides to avenge the Duchess's cause.

Antonio is mistakenly killed by Bosola – he thinking it was the Cardinal that was in the chapel. The Cardinal eventually gets stabbed and in the brawl that follows, Ferdinand and Bosola stab each other to death.

Antonio's eldest son appears in the final scene and takes his place as the heir to the Malfi fortune.

Similarities

Now, we will pick the characteristics of revenge tragedy evident in the play *The Duchess of Malfi*.

- The avengers are always killed:
Bosola who takes it upon himself to avenge the injustice that had been done to the Duchess, in the final brawl gets killed from the injury he sustains while fighting Ferdinand. Although he completes his quest for vengeance, he still loses his life at the end.
- Tool villains and accomplices that assist the revenger are killed
The Duchess's brothers Ferdinand and the Cardinal who knew about her death were also killed, not only were they killed by a stranger but they were killed by someone they hired to be of help to them. The Cardinal tries to deny that he had no hand in the death of his sister but he doesn't escape his own death since he was among the plotters.
- The supernatural
There is an introduction of the Duchess's ghost that troubles Ferdinand. Although the ghost here doesn't urge the protagonist to seek revenge, rather it comes to its killer. Ferdinand is seen to be mad since he complains of seeing the ghost of his sister.
- A play within a play or dumb show
This is a performance by madmen within a Jacobean revenge tragedy. These madmen are introduced in Act V scene II. They are brought to the Duchess by the order of Ferdinand to perform before her right before she was killed.
- Madness or feigned madness
This is a very thick attribute of Jacobean revenge tragedy. In this play, Ferdinand is considered mad and a doctor is brought to treat him. He considers himself a wolf and screams whenever he sees his sister's ghost. Since no one else in the

play could see any ghost talking to him or tormenting him, they tagged him mad and the doctor called the illness; “Lycanthropia”.

- Disguise or masking

Masking is one feature of revenge tragedy that cannot be sidelined. Most times it is done to find out something which they believe they cannot get without masking. In the play, the Duchess is made to see a corpse which they call her husband so she could be destabilized and wish for her own death. She sees this and believes and decides she has nothing more to do with her life. She is even made to kiss a ripped arm of a man they chose to call her husband.

- Violent murders, including decapitation and dismemberment

Since it’s a revenge tragedy, there has to be violent murders. The Duchess, her maid and her two children fall prey to this. They are strangled in their sleep. Even Julia was killed with a poisoned Bible because she had known everything about the death of the Duchess and her children. Dismemberment is seen where the Duchess was told to kiss a ripped off arm which she believes belongs to her husband.

- Soliloquies

We have situations in the play where a particular character thinks loud about what he/she had noticed. An example is where Bosola observes that the Duchess is pregnant but he isn’t sure;

I observe our duchess Is sick a-days, she pukes, her stomach seethes, The fins of her eyelids look most teeming blue, She wanes i'th' cheek, and waxes fat i'th'flank, And, contrary to our Italian fashion, Wears a loose-bodied gown; there's something in't. I have a trick may chance discover it, A pretty one: I have bought some apricocks, The first our spring yields-(pg25).

- Machiavelli figure

A Machiavelli figure is perceived in literature as someone who uses other “tool villains” to get what they want. He does anything and goes any mile to get what he wants. Ferdinand and the Cardinal are good examples of this. Even Bosola is not excluded. The Duchess’s brothers did everything they could do to make sure she dies, so also does Bosola do all he can to make sure he ends the lives of the Cardinal and Ferdinand – he hires Julia to get words from the Cardinal.

All the above mentioned features might not be present in every revenge tragedy but a good number of them would definitely be present.

Dissimilarities

Although the play *The Duchess of Malfi* is a very good and strong example of a revenge tragedy, it still absents a particular feature which will be seen below:

- Cannibalism
Since cannibalism has to do with a human who eats his fellow human flesh or an animal that eats the same animal of its kind then we will discover that this particular feature is not observed in this play.

Restoration play

Restoration comedy also known as comedy of manners were written and performed in the restoration period from 1660-1710. After public stage performances had been banned for 18 years by the Puritan regime, the re-opening of the theatres in 1660 signaled a renaissance of English drama. The socially diverse audiences included aristocrats, their servants and hangers-on, and a substantial middle-class segment. These comedies had wit predominant in them with satires as a driving tool.

Features of Restoration Play

Below are the things restoration play can be identified with:

- Stock characters and comedy of manners
- Satire
- A huge, passionate performance style full of direct audience address.
- Plots riddled with subplots and intrigues of every kind
- Characters drawn from A Broad Cross Section of Society
- The Love of Carnival
- Restoration of order

The Rover

The "rover" of the play's title is Willmore, a rakish naval captain, who falls in love with a young woman named Hellena, who has set out to experience love before her brother sends her to a convent. Complications arise when Angellica Bianca, a famous courtesan, falls in love with Willmore and swears revenge on him for his betrayal.

Meanwhile, Hellena's sister Florinda attempts to marry her true love, Colonel Belvile, rather than the man that her brother has selected for her. The third major plot of the play deals with the provincial Blunt, who becomes convinced that a girl has fallen in love with him, but is humiliated when she turns out to be a prostitute and a thief.

Similarities

Since the features of restoration comedy have been outlined, Aphra Behn's "The Rover" would be studied to see if those features are present:

Stock Characters and Comedy of Manners:

In comparison to other Restoration Comedies, few of the characters in *The Rover* bear personified names but many of them demonstrate recognizable "types" developed from the Italian travelling comedy troupes of the *Commedia dell'Arte*. For example, Helena is the saucy, uppity girl who provides the "bitches role" in the play. Her disguise as a boy allows the male voyeurs in the audience to see her legs: a risqué proposition in the 1600's and one that sold a lot of tickets. Florinda is the "Virginal Ingénue" character, usually a passive and swooning damsel who must be rescued. (Behn gives her a rather more backbone, however, by twice allowing her to take her fate in to her own hands, when she goes to rescue her brother from the duel, and when she decides to run away from her family to an uncertain poverty with Belvile). Frederick and Valeria are confidante characters who ease the plot along either by scheming or by allowing the main characters share their feelings. Antonio, as an Italian, is a Machiavellian villain.

A huge, passionate performance style full of direct audience address.

Restoration writers wrote for a particular stage that was so huge in scale it required direct audience address (as is found in the Prologue, the Epilogue, and in the asides and monologues of the characters). Audiences valued actors for the power of their vocal projection, the size of their gesture, the passion of their utterances and the accuracy of their social manners. In an age where witchcraft was popularly accepted, actors were believed to have such power over their imaginations as to materially alter the humours not only in their own bodies but in those of their audiences. Emotion was a purgative as effective as something obtained from a druggist, and the purpose of lyricism was that it enhanced the emotional impact of a speech. In fact, many

Restoration Comedies include a character “disappointed in love or fortune” that was written in especially to provide the extreme passion of despair (Angelica Bianca would be the model for this in *The Rover*).

Plots riddled with subplots and intrigues of every kind

This genre places the intricacy of plot above the development of character and presents a situation where an audience is enrapt in the intertwining moves and currents of a continually changing situation. The plot of *The Rover* diversifies into four separate strands, following the adventures of Blunt, of Florinda/Valeria, of Helena and of Angelica. Wilmore is the character who ties them all together. The use of conspiracy, intrigue, disguise and deceit by every character enables Behn to create a play that questions appearances while, at the same time, her Comedy of Manners style imitates appearances. As in contemporary action movies, depth of character is substituted with speed and spectacle, save for the most important lover characters.

Characters drawn from A Broad Cross Section of Society

Restoration playwrights studied the big picture of social relations by representing characters from every walk of life and every social class. In *The Rover*, we have the dregs of society in Sancho and Lucetta, the cream of the continental nobility in Antonio and Pedro, the noble exiles in the soldier heroes, the country squire in Blunt, the sophisticated courtesan in Angelica, and the three genteel sisters. Social Caste matters a great deal in every way: Belvile will not be allowed to marry Florinda because his idealism has caused him to forfeit his social status with his estates and he has no country to call his own. The moment she steps outside the gates of her father’s house, Florinda’s protected identity as a woman of the upper class is suspended and she is in physical danger of rape. What saves her the second time is Frederick’s sudden suspicion that her ownership of a diamond ring means she is “a Maid of Quality, when we only believe we ruffle a Whore”.

The Love of Carnival

The phenomenon of carnival can be traced back to the Roman Saturnalia celebrations. It has existed as a folk tradition that crosses social class boundaries throughout Medieval Europe. Anarchic popular celebrations such as the Feast of Fools inverted all the rules of society, mocking secular and religious ceremonies in comic burlesques. The religious and social tensions endemic to Charles II’s reign suggest why Carnival type “masques” would have been so popular as a Court entertainment: they offered respite from the constant public performance of being on display. Masks also became a feature of daily costume. Aristocrats often went about wearing

“vizards” in order to keep secret clandestine meetings of a personal, religious or political nature. It was considered trendy to wear them to the theatre so as to evade the public gaze; many Restoration gallants liked to heckle the stage from behind the protection of a mask. The carnival in *The Rover* starts as a simple party but ends by undermining the social hierarchy when Pedro loses control of his sisters’ destinies.

Dissimilarity

Women upholding strong decisions

The success of Restoration actresses did not reflect any new freedom for women of the common population, however, economic independence became increasingly rare for women as men encroached on professions (such as brewing, weaving and midwifery) formerly dominated by women. Led by the example of their philandering King, Restoration Society commodified women, a reality neatly captured by Behn in the image or “brand label” Angelica hangs outside her house. Behn empowers the women in the work and they are shown to be strong and able to make decisions without anybody being able to obstruct it. Hellena who is told to be a nun defies such and decides to marry Willmore; Florinda also decides to go for Belvile when her brother and father chooses differently for her.

Comparing *Duchess of Malfi* with *The Rover*

Webster’s *Duchess of Malfi* and Behn’s *The Rover* have been studied separately and their relationships with each kind of play it belongs to have been discussed. Now, we would discuss what the two plays have in common and what differences they have.

Similarities

Masking

Neoclassical plays, mostly, have the use of masks as an important thing in them. Masking here necessarily need not be the physical mask, someone might decide to play another person’s role without a physical mask in use. The gipsy masks and masquerades are used in *The Rover* together with some other occasions and the mask used to play tricks on the confined Duchess in the *Duchess of Malfi*.

Machiavellian villainy

As earlier explained, a Machiavelli figure is someone who does anything to get what he wants, he could even use someone else to get what he wants. Both plays have these figures evident in them. *The Rover* has some in the characters of Helena, Antonio, Lucetta and in the *Duchess of Malfi*, one would see characters like Bosola, Ferdinand, Cardinal.

Violence

The two plays have violence situated in them. The believe that anything you want should be gotten often lead them to trying to get them by force and this cannot be done without violence. We would see them in 2.1 and 4.1 in *The Rover* and *Duchess of Malfi* respectively.

Restoration of order

Restoration of order is seen in the end of both plays although they vary. In *The Rover*, three marriages take place at the end of the play while in *Duchess of Malfi*, Duchess's son is made to take over the dukedom.

Dissimilarities

Dumb show

We had the use of dumb show in *Duchess of Malfi* but none in *The Rover*.

Murders

Both plays have violence in them but they both do not have murder scenes in them. *Duchess of Malfi* has this feature in it but *The Rover* doesn't have this.

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