“The Duchess of Malfi” as a Jacobean Revenge Tragedy

Revenge tragedy, a kind of tragedy popular in England from the 1590s to the 1630s. The revenge tragedy has a hero whose honour has been wronged; in this play, the brothers seek revenge on the Duchess, who has done them no harm. The play holds the typical stereotype of a Jacobean Revenge Tragedy. A 'typical' Jacobean revenge tragedy contains conventions: - the play should be set into five acts as laid down by Seneca in his original rules of tragedy. There should obviously be a desire for revenge hence the term "revenge tragedy." There should be murders within a Jacobean revenge tragedy. The narrative should involve complex plotting. The story should centre on characters of noble birth. There should be Italianate or Southern European settings. The narrative should incorporate ghosts, skulls and madness. Lust should be a strong motivation. The plot should involve physical horrors, such as poisoning and torture. Order should be restored at the end of the play.

Revenge runs throughout The Duchess of Malfi. The Cardinal and Ferdinand first exact revenge on the Duchess for disobeying them and then Bosola vows to take revenge on them in turn. The play is best known for its spectacular and disturbing violence. While violence was a common part of plays in the English Renaissance, Webster's are remarkable for the inventive and grotesque ways in which that violence is depicted. This includes scenes of dark humour, such as when Ferdinand convinces the Duchess that Antonio is dead by giving what he says is Antonio's severed hand, but is actually a wax figure. It also includes scenes offensive to the sensibilities of the time, such as the Cardinal using a poisoned Bible to murder his mistress.

John Webster's 'The Duchess of Malfi' is a dark and bloody tragedy that deals with issues of political corruption, class conflict, and gender and is considered one of the great plays of the English Renaissance.
Following the Senecan model, madness is shown. In *The Duchess of Malfi*, the theme of insanity is multi-layered. According to Jacobean values, the young widowed Duchess remarries for satisfying her lust and that is what leads her to lie and to stand against all the religious tenets of her time. Also, the marriage of a high born lady is supposed to be subject to political arrangement but not to personal whim. As a governor, the Duchess is not able to succeed for preferring her personal craving for remarriage rather than her official responsibilities towards her people. In other words, she mocks the patriarchal authority by getting married of a man who belongs to low class regardless of her brother's recommendation and that is what threatens the stability of the state.

Another image of madness occurs in Ferdinand's fury. He cannot accept the fact that his twin sister has a lover in secret. This causes mental break which develops later to a horrible disease, lycanthropy. Ferdinand starts to fancy that he is a wolf then to behave accordingly. He starts even to attack his own shadow. Webster's play keeps step with traditional revenge tragedy in dealing with horror. It is qualified as a play of horror for showing unbelievable types of horror using unheard devices.

Taking revenge and murdering people are the integral part of revenge tragedy. In this drama, we find people taking revenge and are murdering others. But Webster sets his play in a different manner, the revenge and murders are committed in a different manner from the traditional manner. The revengeful brothers are both villains. In the act where the Duchess, her children, and her maid are executed many devices are used by the author for the aim of creating horror which is a common taint of Senecan revenge tragedy.

Webster also diverted from Senecan model in presenting the supernatural elements. He does not present a ghost in this play, but replaces it by the echo of the Duchess’ voice which is
employed to caution Antonio not to go to the Cardinal and to be mindful of his safety. Also, it informs Antonio that his wife has been assassinated. In presenting supernatural elements, for example, Webster deviates from the origin making replacement that he uses echo instead of a ghost for a specific purpose. By doing modification, he is able to make the play more reasonable to the audience. Webster introduces the espionage to be a new characteristic of revenge tragedy. Ferdinand, from the very beginning, employs Bosola as a spy in return for some gold coins.

“The Rover” as a Restoration Comedy play

The drama possesses an abundance of humor, sprightly wit, and farcical adventures. Although the celebration of loyalty may have been its greatest appeal for the Restoration audience, the drama is also noteworthy for its portrayal of strong-willed heroines who choose their own future and act to bring it about.

The Restoration comedies can be a window into a unique period of English history. Following the political and social turmoil of the English Civil War, the Restoration Age was characterized by a sense of loss and cultural disillusion coupled with efforts to restore social stability and cohesion. These conditions were associated with a diminishment in the influence of traditional institutions such as religion and the aristocracy and the rise of new institutions to replace them.

Also referred to as the Comedy of Manners because the chief characters are usually members of high society, the Restoration comedy tends to feature recurring types namely a graceful young rake, a faithless wife, a deceived husband, and perhaps, a charming young heroine who is to be besotted on by the rake. Finally, great emphasis is placed on witty dialogue and repartee for its own sake. Witty repartee is often operative in these plays, used as a device to
ridicule and reveal the flaws of others as well as an aid in attaining one's own goals. Wit is also a comic and clever way to woo a member of the opposite sex.

Restoration drama is not just about wordplay and intrigue; it is about spectacle, about formal visual set pieces, about cultural prestige offered by a theatre that could create these effects. These theatrical effects were destined to make the most of the opportunities offered by the new theatres established after the Restoration.

One of the features unique to Restoration comedy is the figure of the rake as romantic hero. The rake-hero is a descendant of earlier comedic male characters who were rogues, but he is a sign of the times in that during this period he supplanted the traditional romantic hero in many of the age's theatrical productions. The rake-hero exhibits a number of attitudes and characteristics such as being unmarried, cynical, and coarse but with the manners of a gentleman, witty, manipulative, and self-serving. Wilmore, the rake-hero of *The Rover*, exemplifies many of these traits, but he differs in significant ways. He too is cynical about love and is the most insightful of the characters when it comes to seeing through disguises; he recognizes Helena dressed as a boy, and gives away Belville's disguise earlier in the same scene. He refuses to buy into Angelica's self-deception and instead castigates her. Especially with Angelica, his purpose is to reveal her illusions and hypocrisy. But unlike Horner, he doesn't practice deceit to reveal it. This is probably because his goal is to have sex rather than to cuckold. Thus, the balance between sex and power in Willmore's personality leans more towards the enjoyment of sex, and his manipulation extends only to the women in service of this goal.

The character of the rake-hero is a product of Restoration society. Taking their cue from the activities and ideas that prevailed in the Restoration Court, the Restoration playwrights fashioned a character type who could be successful in an uncertain society by outwitting
others without being hampered by an outmoded morality. The audience was doubtless meant to admire Wilmore's freedom from convention. The rake's currency with the audience lessened with the change in the times, a new monarch, and changes in social and cultural values and mores.

The heroines of the play, Helena, also seems to chart the times with regard to the changing attitudes about proper female behavior and the nature of women in general. Like her rake counterpart, each heroine is to a certain extent frank about her sexual needs and desires. Helena declares to her sister that she has a healthy sexual appetite and curiosity. This acknowledgment of normal female sexual desire on the part of the playwrights indicates a shift from ideas found in earlier dramas of the century, that female expressions of sexual appetite automatically made a woman a whore. It is also a way for the heroines themselves to challenge the social limitations imposed by husbands, fathers, and brothers that parallels and competes with the rake-heroes' desire for freedom of sexual expression.

Helena exemplifies the independent and witty Restoration comic heroine, a suitable counterpart to her rake-hero. She resourcefully pursues Wilmore and wins him. Helena aspires to the control of the situations in displaying an equal ability to outwit other characters and determine plot as when she disguises herself as a boy and disrupts the relationship between Angelica and Wilmore. She also wins the battle of the sexes, played out in the arena of wit in which his aim is seduction and hers is matrimony. Yet, she cannot free herself from the social necessities of female chastity and conventional marriage. Thus, for the restoration women, increased awareness of and ability to talk about their respective situations does not translate into increased freedom to act.

In these dramatic presentations, all of these female characters seem to reflect an effort by women in Restoration society to both step up from the moral gutter and down from the
pedestal and no doubt corresponds with the slow but continuing move in Britain from a religious society with their dogmatic views on the nature of women, to a secular society. They also echo the male heroes in their desires for freedom and self-expression which may be linked to the growing popularity of middle-class values. Yet, as pointed out above, women's growing awareness of their limitations and their aspirations for more freedom in expression does not in the plays, and did not in society, translate into a change of female legal status until the following century. The problem of aspiration and limitation, as with appearance and reality, is dealt with by the female use of masks and disguises which generalizes the female experience in the play. The use of disguise allows many of the female characters to skirt societal restrictions but it also reveals how repressive their conventional roles actually are.