

Revenge Motive Portrayed In *The Duchess of Malfi*

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Abstract:

“The Duchess of Malfi” by Webster is Revenge play or Revenge Tragedy modeled on Seneca, the Latin playwright of the First century A.D. who invented this form. This play is considered as one of the best plays of Webster as a revenge play. This play is considered as the best tragedy after Shakespeare’s revenge tragedy. The play contains the depth of extreme violence, plotting and revenge which are the chief elements of revenge tragedy. This play contains terrifying situation from the beginning to the end. The name Revenge tragedy arose from the Senecan tradition of making revenge the motive for the action that leads to the tragedy. The Duchess of Malfi is best known for its spectacular and disturbing violence. Violence was a common part of plays in the English Renaissance. Webster’s play The Duchess of Malfi is remarkable for the inventive and grotesque ways in which the violence is depicted.

Key Words: Revenge, corruption, violence, murder, deception, misuse of power

Introduction:

Doubtlessly the action of the play seems to spring from a revenge motive. Ferdinand and cardinal seek to take revenge against their sister, the Duchess of Malfi who has brought disgrace to the royal family by marrying a person below her station and dignity. Ferdinand is particularly angry when he knows of Duchess’s and the birth of children to his sister. He must take revenge for this disgraceful and dishonorable act of the Duchess. Ferdinand waits for two years or more before he puts his plans of revenge into execution. The plan of torturing emanates from the mind of cardinal. Basola becomes the main agent of their revenge against the Duchess. He is employed to ruin the Duchess. The two brothers desire to torment the Duchess and get pleasure of inflicting pain and anguish upon their sister. After some lapse in the

course of action against the Duchess, the heart of Ferdinand gets satisfaction in tormenting and torturing the Duchess. Cardinal proceeds ahead for the gratification of his motiveless malignity. It is just to get morbid satisfaction that two brothers goad Bosola to carry on his tortuous activities against the Duchess.

The Duchess of Malfi displays both political and religious corruption. Duke Ferdinand and Cardinal represent political and religious power and both use that power to serve their own desire for revenge. While Cardinal and Ferdinand use their power to take their revenge, it is because of their power that Bosola must take revenge as well. Like many heroes of revenge tragedies, like Hamlet, Bosola cannot rely on the rule of law because the agents of that law are themselves corrupt. That is why Bosola must take revenge and kill Ferdinand and

the Cardinal. The Duchess of Malfi consists of all the elements of Revenge Tragedy. This play contains so many elements of horrors. The last two acts of the play have an abundance of them. Taking revenge and murdering people are the integral part of revenge tragedy. In this play the revenge and murders are committed differently from traditional manner. The revengeful brothers are both villains. They are the victims of fury that blinds the eyes. We have seen that there was a love affair between the Duchess and Antonio and at last they marry and they produce three children.

On hearing the news of their secret marriage and their children, the Cardinal and The Duke Ferdinand react angrily. From the beginning to the end of Act two, Scene five, we see the reaction of the two brothers for the action of their sister. They think that the Duchess has destroyed the reputation and status of their family.

The Duchess of Malfi differs in a number of ways from the traditional revenge play.

She has certainly not committed any heinous crime for which she is subjected unjustified. Her only fault is that she has married below her rank and station and her two brothers think that she has disgraced the family. It is a tradition of Elizabethan revenge tragedy to show madness on the stage. The Duke advises to torture the Duchess with the intention of turning her mad. The misuse of powers can be seen in the Cardinal's and Ferdinand's actions. They make use of their power for their own greed and interest. Cardinal abuses his powers by getting Antonio's property confiscated and by getting the Duchess and her family

banished from the state of Ancona. Ferdinand misuses his political power by ordering the death of the Duchess without any proper judgment passed by the court of law. Ferdinand later blames Bosola for the murder of the Duchess. The Duchess went against her brother's wishes and remarried. Her brothers strictly advised her to not even think about remarrying.

The central conflict of the play involves the Duchess's desire to marry for love and her brothers' desire to prevent her from remarrying.

The cruelty of Cardinal and Ferdinand towards the Duchess is evident in their threats. Cruelty is also shown in Ferdinand's wish to make her mad. He makes use of wax figure to trick the Duchess that Antonio is dead. Following this he sends various madmen to the Duchess's room to Devastate the Duchess and to make her mad. The cruelty of their actions including hiring Bosola as a spy which deprives the Duchess of her privacy. The Cardinal and Ferdinand are against the marriage of the Duchess because Antonio is of a lower social status. Bosola, also of a lower class, expresses support for their marriage.

By the end of the play, his true feelings are revealed and she agrees with the Cardinal and Ferdinand that a steward is not a good match for the Duchess. The Duchess argues that high class is not an indicator of a good man.

The play is set in the court of Malfi, Italy from 1504 to 1510. The recently widowed Duchess falls in love with Antonio, a lowly steward. Her brothers Ferdinand and Cardinal forbid her from remarrying,

seeking to defend their inheritance and desperate to evade a degrading association with their social inferior. She elopes with Antonio and bears three children before they are discovered. Ferdinand, who is lunatic and incestuous brother, threatens and disowns the Duchess. In an attempt to escape, she and Antonio concoct a story that Antonio has swindled her out of her fortune and must flee into exile. The Duchess takes Bosola into her confidence, unaware that he is Ferdinand's spy, arranges for him to deliver her jewellery to Antonio at his hiding place in Ancona. She will join them later while pretending to make a pilgrimage to a town nearby. The Cardinal hears of the plan, instructs Bosola to banish the two lovers and send soldiers to capture them. Antonio escapes with his eldest son, but the Duchess, her maid and her two younger children return to Malfi and die at the hands of Bosola's executioners, who are under Ferdinand's orders. Cardinal confesses his part in the killing of the Duchess to his mistress, Julia. Bosola overhears the Cardinal's plotting to kill him. Bosola visits

the darkened chapel to kill the Cardinal at his prayers.

Instead he mistakenly kills Antonio, who has just returned to Malfi to attempt reconciliation with the cardinal. Bosola then stabs the cardinal and Cardinal dies. In the brawl that follows, Ferdinand and Bosola stab each other to death. Antonio's elder son by the Duchess appears in the final scene and takes his place as the heir to the Malfi's fortune, despite his father's explicit wish that he should "fly the court of princess," a corrupt and increasingly deadly environment.

Conclusion:

In summing up The Duchess of Malfi is a revenge tragedy. Webster wrote this drama following the tradition of revenge tradition. He modified some of its aspects to make it unique. 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. That is why it is a perfect revenge tragedy. *The Duchess of Malfi* is considered among the greatest tragedies of English renaissance drama.

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