**1EN563 ENGLISH HONOURS DRAMA 2020**

**Notes on The Duchess of Malfi, by John Webster**

**Lecturer: Prof Catherine Addison**

**INTRODUCTION**

The Duchess of Malfi was written in the Jacobean period—in other words, during the reign of King James I, who succeeded Queen Elizabeth I as the English monarch in 1603. John Webster’s life and dramatic career overlapped with those of William Shakespeare, but he was much younger. (Shakespeare dates of birth and death are 1564-1616; Webster’s are 1580-1632.) The Duchess of Malfi was first performed in 1613, only three years before Shakespeare’s death. This means that Webster was exposed to most of Shakespeare’s plays before writing The Duchess; and it is clearly influenced by Shakespeare. Echoes of Shakespeare’s plays, particularly King Lear and other, later tragedies, are evident throughout The Duchess.

But Shakespeare was part of an earlier English Renaissance than Webster. Shakespeare was born and educated during the reign of Elizabeth, and he wrote and produced many of his plays in this Elizabethan period, too. Thus, even the bleakest of Shakespeare’s tragedies seem to envisage a slightly more hopeful world than the worlds of Webster’s plays, in which corruption, cruelty and disillusion seem to reign almost supreme. By Webster’s time the Renaissance spirit seemed to have become stagnant and the world of politics and culture to have reached a stage of decadence, or belatedness. Strange and cynical characters like the assassin Bosola would not be at home in Shakespeare’s plays. Webster is also ahead of Shakespeare in his creation of a female tragic hero in The Duchess of Malfi—a type of character that Shakespeare never really produced. The female protagonists in Shakespeare’s tragedies are always part of a pair, such as those in Antony and Cleopatra, Romeo and Juliet, Troilus and Cressida. Webster’s unnamed Duchess stands alone as protagonist of her own tragedy.

**TRAGEDY**

You have already studied some tragedy in your undergraduate English literature classes, as well as some of the Honours Drama classes this year. Oedipus the King, Antigone, The Spanish Tragedy, Macbeth, Julius Caesar, Othello, Doctor Faustus, Hamlet and King Lear are all familiar to many of you. Tragedy was in fact invented by Greek playwrights in Athens in about the sixth century BC. The most important of these were the fifth-century dramatists, Sophocles, Euripides and Aeschylus. After he had watched plays by these award-winning tragedians, the great philosopher Aristotle, who lived in the same city at the same time, theorised about tragedy in his Poetics. Even today, theorists quote from the Poetics when they are making broad claims about what tragedy is and even about what it has evolved into.

The following long quotation is the first part of the entry on ‘Tragedy’ from M. H. Abrams, 1971, A Glossary of Literary Terms (3rd edition), Madras: Macmillan, 173-174. He explains Aristotle’s theory quite clearly. Please pay particular attention to the last paragraph:

TRAGEDY. The term is broadly applied to literary, and especially to dramatic, representations of serious and important actions which turn out disastrously for the chief character. Detailed discussions of the tragic form properly begin — although they should not end — with Aristotle’s classic analysis in the Poetics. Aristotle based his theory on induction from the only examples available to him, the tragedies of Greek dramatists such as Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. In the subsequent two thousand years and more, many new and artistically effective types of serious plots ending in a catastrophe have been developed — types that Aristotle had no way of foreseeing. The innumerable attempts to stretch Aristotle’s analysis to apply to all later tragic forms serve merely to blur his critical categories and to obscure important differences among diverse types of tragic plays. When flexibly managed, however, Aristotle’s concepts apply in some part to many tragic plots, and they serve at least as a suggestive starting point for establishing the differentiae of the various non-Aristotelian modes of tragic construction.

Aristotle defined tragedy as ‘the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself,’ in the medium of poetic language, and in the manner of dramatic rather than narrative presentation, incorporating ‘incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish the catharsis of such emotions.’ Precisely how to interpret Aristotle’s catharsis— which in Greek signifies ‘purgation,’ or ‘purification,’ or both — is much disputed. On two matters, however, a number of modem commentators agree. Aristotle in the first place sets out to account for the undeniable, if extraordinary, fact that many tragic representations of suffering and defeat leave an audience feeling not depressed, but relieved, or even exalted. (One recent commentator, however, interprets Aristotle’s ‘catharsis’ as applying not to an effect on the audience, but to an element within the play itself: it signifies, he claims, the purgation of the guilt attached to the hero’s tragic act, through the demonstration by the course of the drama that the hero performed this act without knowledge of its nature. See Gerald Else, Aristotle’s Poetics, 1957, pp. 224-232, 423-447.) In the second place, Aristotle uses this distinctive effect, ‘the pleasure of pity and fear,’ as the basic way to distinguish the tragic from comic or other forms, and he regards the dramatist’s aim to produce and maximize this effect as the principle which determines both the choice of the tragic protagonist and the organization of the tragic plot.

Accordingly, Aristotle says that the tragic hero will most effectively evoke both our pity and our terror if he is neither thoroughly good nor thoroughly evil but a mixture of both; and also that the tragic effect will be stronger if the hero is ‘better than we are,’ in the sense that he is of higher moral worth. Such a man is exhibited as suffering a change in fortune from happiness to misery because of a mistaken act, to which he is led by his hamartia — his ‘error of judgment’ or, as it is often though less literally translated, his tragic flaw. (One common form of hamartia in the Greek tragedies was hubris, that ‘pride,’ or overweening self-confidence, which leads a man to disregard a divine warning or to violate a moral law.) The tragic hero accordingly moves us to pity because, since he is not an evil man, his misfortune is greater than he deserves; but he moves us also to fear, because we recognize similar possibilitiesi of error in our own lesser and fallible selves. Aristotle also grounds his analysis of ‘the very structure and incidents of the play’ on the same principle; the plot, he says, which will most effectively evoke ‘tragic pity and fear’ is one in which the events develop through complication to a catastrophe in which there occurs a sudden reversal in the hero’s fortune from happiness to disaster.

Here are some aspects of tragedy, derived from Aristotle:

1. It is a drama (play), not a narrative. (If we want to claim that a novel, for example Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart, possesses many of the features mentioned in the quotation, we must call it a ‘tragic novel’, not a ‘tragedy’.)
2. It is serious (not comedy) and of substantial length.
3. It ends badly—in catastrophe—for the main character.
4. The action or plot is the most important aspect of tragedy. This plot must be specially designed to evoke in the audience the emotions of pity and fear (or pity and terror). The plot should in fact achieve a catharsis of these emotions.
5. The character of the tragic hero is also very important. He or she should not be perfectly good or evil but a mixture of these; nevertheless, he or she should be better than we are, in terms of morality and social status. These character traits have the purpose of evoking pity and fear in the audience. The tragic hero is led by her or his hamartia (error of judgement, or fatal flaw) to bring about his or her own tragedy.

**More about Tragic Heroes**

Please reread the final paragraph of the Abrams extract as well as (e) above. You should note that a ‘tragic hero’ is not a type of ‘hero’ in the ordinary sense of that word. Many tragic heroes are not heroic at all. The term ‘tragic hero’ simply refers to the protagonist of a tragedy—the character to whom the tragedy happens.

A tragic hero is someone whom an audience can admire and yet someone with whom the audience can identify: he or she may be ‘better’ than we are but she or he is also a mixture of good and evil like all of us. Being at least in some ways a good person, the tragic hero makes us feel pity for him or her, because catastrophe overtakes her or him. But she or he is like us and so we realize that the same terrible things could happen to us, and so we as an audience feel fear.

The most significant feature of the tragic hero is hamartia. However, the catastrophe that brings the tragic hero crashing down from her/his initially fortunate situation to the disastrous position—usually death—that he or she occupies at the end is not caused only by hamartia. In order to be a tragic hero, a character must possess some inherent personality flaw and/or commit a terrible mistake (hamartia); but this character is also subject to external forces beyond his or her control. These forces can just be ‘fate’ (chance or bad luck) or the gods’ malice but they may be the deliberate work of other characters such as Iago in Othello or Goneril and Regan in King Lear).

Thus, in a tragedy we should be able to discern that a tragic hero contributes to his or her own downfall because of hamartia. Other unfortunate events or malevolent characters also contribute to this downfall. A character who suffers a catastrophe only because of unfortunate events and/or the malevolent actions of other people is not a tragic hero, but a victim. Part of many tragic heroes’ suffering is the recognition that their suffering is (partly) self-inflicted. A tragic hero always experiences psychological pain and conflict. If this tragic character dies at the end (as most tragic heroes do), death is often a relief, an ending of mental torture.

**FORMAL ASPECTS OF THE DUCHESS OF MALFI**

The Duchess Of Malfi is a play exhibiting most of the usual features of dramatic works, which include (1) setting, (2) characters, (3) story/plot, (4) spectacle, (5) themes and (6) style. Please note that spectacle is the one aspect that distinguishes the genre of drama from that of narrative. A drama or play ‘shows’ you the story rather than ‘telling’ it. An audience sees and hears what is going on on a stage as actors perform before them, enacting, not narrating the story. What the audience sees and hears—which is much more than the printed words that we read when we pick up a text—is the spectacle. Even if we are not witnessing an actual production of a play we, as readers, should try to imagine ourselves as part of an audience rather than as readers; and we should try to visualize the spectacle of a produced play on a stage as we read

**Setting**

Spatial: the Italian city-state of Amalfi (‘Malfi’), Rome, Milan, various parts of Italy.

Temporal: the sixteenth century (I.e., some time before the author’s and audience’s own (seventeenth-century) time.

**Characters**

The important characters are the Duchess herself and her two evil brothers, Duke Ferdinand and the (unnamed) Cardinal, Bosola the melancholy assassin and spy, Antonio the Duchess’s steward who becomes her husband, and Cariola, her faithful maid.

Most of the minor characters (the Cardinal’s mistress Julia, children, madmen, courtiers, an old woman) are introduced to show how widespread vice and corruption are. Exceptions to this rule are Antonio’s friend Delio, who keeps Antonio’s secret faithfully, and Count Malateste, who takes the surviving son of the Duchess and Antonio under his protection at the end.

**Story/Plot**

Much of this is extremely convoluted, especially in the last act, and reflects the later Jacobean taste for intrigue, gory death and the macabre. (A general disillusionment with the state of things had set in by the later Renaissance. Audiences and playwrights were very pessimistic about political and social corruption and had developed a taste for sensationalism, sex and violence in their dramatic entertainments. This play is in some respects a cross between a thriller and a horror story. To grasp all the events in order, students are advised to consult a plot summary such as the one displayed at:

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Duchess_of_Malfi>.

However, the plot that involves the Duchess in the first four acts is simpler than the whole. This story is of a young widow who takes a husband despite the fact that her powerful brothers have forbidden her to do this. She gives birth to several children before her brothers are sure that she has disobeyed them and then they have her tortured (psychologically) and killed by their spy, Bosola.

**Spectacle**

The spectacle of this play is at many stages very sensationalist. Extreme examples include:

Act 1: the queenly young Duchess wooing her steward.

Act 2: Bosola cursing an ugly old woman on stage as if she represents all women; the Duchess, very pregnant, temperamental and suffering from dietary cravings, rushing from the stage in labour.

Act 3: Duke Ferdinand sneaking up behind the Duchess in her bedroom and giving her a poniard (knife); a pageant of the Cardinal dressing himself up in armour and then banishing the Duchess and her children, performed in ‘dumbshow’, with music and song.

Act 4, the pageant and singing of madmen; the waxworks of a dead man’s hand and of Antonio and all the Duchess’s children dead; the arrival of ‘executioners’ with a coffin and a bell—presented as a gift to the Duchess; the death by strangling of the Duchess and then Cariola; strangled (dead) children shown on stage; Ferdinand’s infatuated viewing of the Duchess’s body.

Act 5: Julia kissing a poisoned bible and dying; a ghostly ‘echo’ from the Duchess’s grave; the bloody deaths of Bosola, Ferdinand, Antonio, the Cardinal.

**Themes**

This play is deeply imbrued with a sense of corruption and sin—and yet the Duchess is a virtuous woman. Virtue and (especially) its opposite are very much at the fore here and also the sheer danger of living at a Renaissance court. There is a focus on womanhood and female issues—the Duchess is more vulnerable than other princely characters just because she is female. She is definitely a tragic hero—unusually, for a woman—and takes her own fate into her hands in Act 1.

**Style**

Like Shakespeare’s plays, this one is in five Acts. It is mostly written in a striking, rough blank verse, absolutely bulging with metaphor and symbol. In fact, the poetry is often as sensational as the spectacle—and also the reported action, such as Ferdinand being seen walking at night with the leg of a man over his shoulder. The influence of Shakespeare is everywhere; Webster seems to have been deeply moved by King Lear’s comment about how ‘as flies to wanton boys we are to the gods; / They kill us for their sport.’ Webster’s view of the universe is more depressing and decadent than Shakespeare’s—he belonged to a younger generation, in an age in which people saw themselves as latecomers.

**Study Questions on The Duchess of Malfi**

1. To what extent does the Duchess live up to Aristotle’s requirements of a tragic hero?
2. Are any other characters in The Duchess of Malfi tragic? Choose two characters other than the Duchess who die in Acts 4 or 5, and assess how close to or distant from tragic heroes they are.
3. What is Bosola’s function in this play? Taking all of his life, feelings, actions and thoughts into account, is he a good or an evil character?
4. What kind of character is Ferdinand? What kinds of emotion does he display, and how are these represented in in the imagery of his speeches? What is his relationship with his sister? Does he change after her death?
5. What kind of character is Antonio and why does the Duchess choose him as her husband? Do you think that they make a good married pair?
6. What is Cariola’s role in the action? Is she important as an individual? How does she interact with the Duchess and Antonio? How would her death affect an audience?
7. Children are important to the Duchess. The audience sees actual children and waxworks of children on stage, and children also appear as images in the poetry of characters’ speeches. Write an essay on the function of the child both as an image and as a character in this play.