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THE INFLUENCE OF MACHIAVELLI AND SHAKESPEARE IN JOHN WEBSTER'S THE DUCHESS OF MALFI

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ABSTRACT

John Webster, the great Elizabethan dramatist was little admired during his life time. The Elizabethans failed to appraise his genius as a dramatist and after his death he fell for nearly two hundred years into the lap of oblivion to be brought back into the limelight by the criticism of such distinguished critics as Lamb, Swinburne, Rupert Brooke, who popularised his works and established his claim to be recognised as a great dramatist of Elizabethan age. But now the tide has turned in Webster's favour and he is recognised today not as a dramatist who carried forward the revenge theme in drama but as a great poet, and above all, a great moralist, who held aloft the moral vision of life at a time when the dramatists of the age were piling horror and glorifying murder into a fine art. This tragedy THE DUCHESS OF MALFI, the revenge is further degraded and the moral motive of the dramatist come to the forefront. There are some influences of other Elizabethan authors. In this journal we can thrash out the influences of Shakespeare and Machiavelli in the tragedy, The duchess of malfi.

THE MACHIAVELLIAN NOTE IN THE PLAY

Niccolo Machiavelli was a statesman who flourished in Florence during the years 1469-1527. His book the *PRINCE* was the most popular work of the time and had wide influence. His doctrine may be thus summarized:

- (1) One should not allow oneself to be hampered by any kind of moral considerations in the pursuit of his worldly ends.
- (2) Cruelty, violence and deceit are the means to power.

- (3) One must be guided by one's will and not by one's conscience.

- (4) One should be ruthless in the pursuit of one's ends, and

- (5) The supreme power that rules the world is satanic and not moral.

Marlowe was the first English dramatist who felt the influence of Machiavelli and expresses the Machiavelli spirit in his *Jew of Malta*. His influence continued to grow on the English stage and shaped the character of bosola has got Machiavelli elements in him, yet with a slight difference. He is a

Machiavellian with an articulate conscience. A brief review of his career will bring out the truth of his statement.

Bosola wants to rise high and acquire worldly wealth and power. He, therefore, thinks that he must attach himself to some great man and do whatever he orders --good or bad--and acquire power and pelf with his help. So he committed a murder at the instigation of the cardinal but was not properly rewarded. He had to remain in the galleys for seven years and the cardinal did not care for him. He continued to haunt the cardinal who in the opening of the play secures for him a job at the court of the Duchess of Malfi. Thus he does not hesitate to do the wicked work of a spy for the fulfillment of his worldly aims. Yet it may be pointed out that he feels the prick of conscience at every stage, though he does not listen to its voice till a very late stage in his career. When he is offered gold and the job of a spy by Ferdinand as a means to "a higher place" he remarks:

"Take your devils which hell calls angels; these curs'd gifts would make you a corrupter, me an impudent traitor. And, should I take these, they'd take me (to) hell."

Thus we see that his conscience is vocal but he does not listen to its voice. Realizing very well that he will have to act the part of "a villain", he accepts the job because he is ready to use even crooked means to rise in life. After this we find him continuing unabashed in the path of villainy and crime. He not only works as a spy, but also cruelly murders the Duchess, her children, and her maid-servant, Cariola.

Thus like a Machiavellian, he uses cruelty, violence and deceit as the means to power and place, and is ruthless in the pursuit of his ends. But even during this career of crime his conscience pricks him. For example, when the Duchess is tortured by the Duke, by leaving a dead man's hand in her hand and by showing the wax-images of Antonio and his children. Bosola asks the Duke why he does so and advises him:

"Faith, end here, And go no farther in your cruelty".

Yet despite these pricks of conscience, he continues in his career of torture and murder.

"And much of the cruelest torture, it must be noted, is of Bosola's own imagining; for it is almost certainly he who must be accounted responsible for the terrible fantasies of the tomb-maker and bellman, and for the horrible solemnities of the coffin and the strangler's cords."

This is so because he is guided by his will to power and not by his conscience. He suppresses the voice of conscience. But he feels that he should not appear before her in his own shape. When he is asked to meet the Duchess again he tells Ferdinand,

"Never in mine own shape: That's forfeited by my intelligence, and this last cruel lie. When you send me next, the business shall be comfort."

Immediately after the murder of the Duchess and her children, he demands his reward from Ferdinand but gets nothing. Not only this but he is also threatened with punishment for the murder he has committed. The Duke tells him,

"See like a bloody fool, Thou'st forfeited thy life, and thou shall die for it."

This ingratitude of the Duke hurts Bosola and he repents for having murdered the Duchess. When he finds that she has some life left in her he says,

"She stris; here's life. Return, fair soul, from darkness and lead mine, out of this sensible hell".

But the Duchess is dead and Bosola can only repent. He weeps but it is all useless now. But his conscience has been fully awakened. So he decides to arrange for a suitable burial for the Duchess, and then go to Milan to help and save Antonio.

He goes to Rome, and asks the Cardinal to reward him but he is again disappointed. The Cardinal wants him to murder Antonio if he wants a reward from him. He pretends to accept his offer but all the time plots to murder him. Ultimately, he kills the Cardinal and the Duke and is himself killed by the Duke. He dies with the following words:

"Fare you well ! It may be pain, but no harm, to me to die in so good a quarrel.... Let worthy minds ne'er stagger is distrust, to suffer death or shame for what is just."

So we may conclude that Bosola is a Machiavellian villain with a conscience. Had circumstances been more favorable, he would have been a good man instead of a villain.

Machiavelli's influence on Webster is also seen in the character of the Cardinal who has been called the most consummate ' politician ' or Machiavellian of the Elizabethan stage. He is ruthless in the pursuit of his aims and can commit murders in cold blood. As Bosola puts it he can bear murder extremely well; he has no conscience to trouble him. He is not unhinged as is Ferdinand by the murder of the Duchess. However, it should be noted that unlike Machiavelli, Webster does not regard the governance of the world as Satanic. In his view the world order is essentially moral, and heaven is the ultimate reward of a life lived virtuously. In his plays, virtue may suffer, but evil never escapes unpunished.

SHAKESPEAREAN REMINISCENCES IN THE PLAY

The Duchess recalls Desdemona and Cariola, her woman, Emilia in Othello. Bosola, the monster, the tool of the two brothers, is modeled on Iago. The anger of Ferdinand, the criminal brother against Bosola, after the murder he himself has

ordered, is like that of King John against Hubert when he believes him to have put Arthur to death. The remorse of the other brother, the Cardinal who can no longer pray, is a parallel to that of Claudius in Hamlet. Every such comparison would merely show up Webster's extreme inferiority, were it not that he substitutes for the psychology at which Shakespeare principally aims, a search for the pathos inherent in situations and even the material effects. It is this search which is proper to melodrama. Webster has a strange power of evoking shudders. His means are sometimes the more effective for their simplicity. The Duchess, compelled by fear of her brothers to keep her marriage secret, is discovered in her chamber conversing with her husband, Antonio, her heart filled with joy and love. Antonio, leaves her without knowledge; she continues to speak, thinking, he hears her but her listener is now one of the brothers she fears, to whom she thus betrays herself. Webster watches the play, feels a catch at his heart, as he perceives her error while she is still unaware of it. The impulse is to cry out to her to beware. Some of Webster's devices are however, much less innocent than this one. The avenging brothers revel in macabre inventions to torture their poor victim: one of them, feigning to her his hand, leaves a severed hand in her grasp; she is shown wax figures which represent the murder of her husband and children; the inmates of a madhouse are let loose in her palace.

POETRY OF MELANCHOLY IN THE PLAY

It is the poetry of melancholy and death which dominates the whole tragedy. Webster is a true poet, the author of some of the most beautiful songs of the Renaissance, and throughout, in the very web of his style, are images, funeral in mood, with the breath of graveyards upon them. More than this, the play contains the character of the Duchess. At first although her love endears her. She is not original, but she is transfigured by persecution and becomes in her despair a lofty and solemn figure. Throughout her cruel trails she never fails to ennoble the tragedy by the sombre poetry of her speech. Her reason is proof against all the assaults upon her. Cariola, her woman struggles and cries out when she is faced with death, but death cannot make the Duchess tremble. So beautiful and so noble does she remain in death that the brother, who has ordered her murder, cannot bear to see her face:

"Cover her face, mine eyes dazzle, she died young."
It is by the poetry that one best remembers *The Duchess of Malfi*. It is a graver, sweeter utterance than the vigorous dramatic verse of the earlier play; there are few of the sudden flashes of inspired speech that burst from Brachiano and Vittoria. Often the tone seems rather elegiac than tensely dramatic. It would

be hard to match elsewhere the plainative sigh of the Duchess:

*"O, that it were possible we might
But hold some two days' conference with the
dead
From them I should I learn somewhat, I am sure,
I never shall know here."*

In *The White Devil* life is something to be enjoyed to the full and fought for to the bitter end; in *The Duchess of Malfi*. Bosola, the fatal bell man, utters the poet's final conclusion on life:

*"A long war disturb'd your mind
here your perfect peace is sign'd
of what is 't fools make such vein keeping?
sin their conception, their birth weeping,
their life a general mist of error.
their death a hideous storm of terror."*

Too much a pit of pessimism had sunk the light hearted drama of earlier Elizabethan days.

BLENDING OF TRAGEDY WITH PATHOS, PITY AND HORROR IN THE PLAY

"Ever since Lamb wrote in praise of them, Vittoria Corombona and the Duchess of Malfi have been universally accepted as among the first Master pieces of the Elizabethan Drama. They show a closer study of Shakespeare's work than is to be found in any other Dramatist of his time; and they show also a nearer approach to his spirit. There is in both plays in blending of Tragedy with Pathos, of Pity with Terror, that has never been surpassed, and perhaps not even equalled by Shakespeare himself. Besides this we find in them that death of reflection, combining profound humanity with intense imagination, which is the surest mark of a great dramatic poet, and, the reason, is the highest quality of Shakespeare."

FER: Is she dead?

BOS: She is what you'd have her. But here begin your pity. (Showing the bodies of the strangled children). Alas. How have these offended?

FER: The death of young wolves is never to be pitied.

BOS: Fix your eyes here. (Showing the body of the Duchess.)

FER: Constantly.

BOS: Do you not weep?

*"Other sins only: murder shrieks out;
the element of water moistens the earth,
But blood flies upward and believes the heavens*

FER: Cover her face; mine eyes dazzle; she died young.

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