

**UNIVERSITY OF NIGERIA**

**FACULTY OF ARTS**

**DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY AND  
INTERNATIONAL STUDIES**

**(COMBINED ARTS-HIS/ELS)**

**COURSE TITLE: NEO CLASSICAL PERIOD**

**COURSE TITLE: NEO CLASSICAL PERIOD**

**COURSE CODE: ELS 214**

**TOPIC:**

**COMPARE AND CONTRAST JOHN WEBSTER'S " THE  
DUCHESS OF MALFI" AND APHRA BEHN'S "THE ROVER" AS  
A JACOBAN REVENGE TRAGEDY AND RESTORATION  
COMEDY RESPECTIVELY**

**BY**

**UCHENWOKE-EKPERECHI JOHN MBONU**

**REG NO: 2015/203001**

**LECTURER: MR. ONYEKKA ODOH**

# INTRODUCTION

The Restoration period (1660-1700) had a great influence on the life and literature of contemporary age. This period is called the Restoration period because in this period, with the restoration of monarchy, the English literary tradition was restored. In the Commonwealth period Charles-II, the son of Charles-I escaped from England to France. After the fall of Commonwealth, the people of England brought him back and made him king of England (on May 29, 1660). He remained in power till his demise in 1685 when James-II, another son of Charles-I, ascended the throne. He was a catholic and most of the people who were protestants wanted to dethrone him. In 1688 there was the Glorious Revolution (Bloodless Revolution) against him. He fled to France. William-III of France and his wife Mary, the son-in-law and daughter of James-II, came to the power.

Of course, the Restoration did not bring total peace in England. The conflict between the King and his parliament did not collapse completely. What is more remarkable in the political history of the Restoration is the growing rivalry between different factions and parties in British parliament. The events of 1649, 1660 and 1688 established decisively the supreme power of parliament to control and dictate the affairs of the land.

The restoration of monarchy in 1660 was an important event that had a wonderful impact on English life and literature. The English society, after the Restoration, was certainly diseased. It suffered from the fever of indecency, immorality, corruption and dishonesty, which rather affected notional life from political, social and even classical angles. English literature was, in no less way, affected by the new standard and the new values of life. There were a sudden break from old standards and ideals. Literature, indeed, in England, after the Restoration, seemed to have been bred and nursed by French literary ideals and patterns. It was a great age for the French authors, particularly for the French dramatists. It was under their influence that there was a new birth of comedy in England. The comedy of manners was the greatest literary force of the Restoration, and its source of inspiration was certainly the French comedy of manners. The comedies of manners of Congreve, Vanbrugh, Dryden and Wycherley were all highly popular in the age.

Restoration comedy is kind of comedy written in the Restoration Period. It identical to the comedy of manners as it also ridicules the manners and conventions, the faithlessness and intrigues of the members of the upper class

society of the Restoration Period. The comedy of manners is originated from France with Moliere's *Les Precieuses Ridicules*. This is also called artificial comedy or old comedy. In the twentieth century it was made fashionable by Noel Coward and Somerset Maugham. The characters in Restoration comedies are largely types, whose dispositions are sufficiently indicated by study of their names. Wycherley, Etherege, Congreve, Vanbrugh and Farquhar are the five famous writers of the Restoration comedy. Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer*, Congreve's *Love of Love* and *The Way of the World* and Vanbrugh's *The Provoked Wife* are bright examples of the Restoration comedy.

The comedy of manners/ The Restoration comedy is a peculiar product of the restoration era, and it reflects the very spirit of the age. It depicts faithfully the life and manners of the upper class society. This is a genre of comedy which deals with the behavior and manner of men and women living under special social codes. It depicts the relations and intrigues of men and women belonging to polished and sophisticated society. It is characterized by the ridiculous violations of social conventions and decorum by stupid characters such as would-be-wits, jealous husbands and foppish dandies. In short, this comedy is said to be the mirror of the manners of the society about which it is written.

William Congreve is one of the major dramatists of the Restoration period and "The Way of the World" is the finest flower of his genius and the best of all comedies of manners. It bears the most characteristic feature of this kind of comedy. It gives us a clear picture of the contemporary manners of the people of the upper class of London society during the restoration period. And their behavior morality, manners, affection etc are presented here in a satirical light.

William Congreve made his last comedy *The Way of the World* different from other comedies by giving it a moral in the end. He wanted to teach men and women of that society that marriage is a sacred institution based on love and sincerity.

Thus we see that the play is a remarkable comedy of manners, representing the contemporary social environment, in a splendid manner. The Restoration people did not attach much importance to the moral principle. Led by passion, they used to make love with many having no consideration for their marriage vows. There was no untapped reserve of occasional playgoers. Ten consecutive performances constituted a smash hit. This scrutinized system made playwrights to be grossly responsive to common feelings of the audience. Fashions in the drama would

change almost week by week rather than season by season, as each co-marked aristocratic ethos of his court. The socially easy going, but diverse audience included aristocrats, their servants and hangers-on, and a substantial middle-class segment. These playgoers or fun seekers were attracted to the comedies by up-to-the-minute topical writing, by crowded and bustling plots; by the introduction of the first professional. This period saw the first professional female playwrights, actors both male and female.

Charles II was an active and interested fan of the drama. Soon after his restoration, in 1660, as earlier said, he granted exclusive play-staging rights, by name, The Royal patents, to the King's Company and the Duke's Company, anchored by two middle-aged Caroline playwrights, Thomas Killigrew and William Davenant. The patentees jostled for performance rights to the hitherto generation's Jacobean and Caroline plays; which were the first requisite for economic survival before any new plays existed. Their next utmost headway was to build new, splendid patent theatres in Drury Lane and Dorset Gardens, respectively. Making effort to outsmart each other in magnificence, Killigrew and Davenant ended up with quite similar theatres, both designed by Christopher Wren, both adequately provided for music and dancing, and both fitted with moveable scenery and elaborate machines for thunder, lightning, and waves.

The dramatists of the Restoration renounced the tradition of satire, as recently embodied by Ben Jonson, and devoted themselves to the comedy of manners, which uncritically accepted the social code of the upper class.

New genres of heroic drama, pathetic drama, and Restoration comedy were born and flourished

Furthermore, the **revenge tragedy**, or **revenge play**, is a dramatic genre in which the protagonist seeks revenge for an imagined or actual injury, a case study of the changeling, Hamlet, Othello, The Rovers, the White Devil, Duchess of Malfi etc. The term, revenge tragedy, was first brought to limelight in 1900 by A.H. Thorndike to label a class of plays written in the late Elizabethan and early Jacobean eras 1580s to 1620s.

As it is, most scholars argue that the revenge tragedies of William Shakespeare and his contemporaries originated from Roman Tragedies, in particular, Seneca's *Thyestes*. Seneca's tragedies followed three main themes that include: the inconsistency of fortune -*Troades* stories of crime and the evils of murder-*Thyestes*, and plays in which poverty, chastity and simplicity are held highly *Hippolytus*.

In *Thyestes*, Seneca portrayed the evil repercussions of murder. And in order to actualize revenge on his brother, Thyestes for adultery with his wife, Atreus woos him to Argos under the cloak of a shared rule, but instead tricks him into eating the cooked flesh of his own children. Seneca's criminals -in this case Thyestes, are always deserving of their punishment unless they repent, since he believed the will to do evil is entirely in the hands of the individual, who must therefore be appropriately punished.

This ethical logic becomes complicated, however, since the revenging murder is also a crime, transforming the revenges into a criminal, and thus causing retribution on behalf of the punished.

The revenge tragedy was established on the Elizabethan stage with Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* in 1587. In this play, Hieronimo's discovery of his son Horatio's dead body leads him into a brief fit of madness, after which he discovers the identity of his son's murderers and plans his revenge through a play-within-a-play. It is during this play that he enacts his revenge, after which he inflicts himself and died. With Hieronimo's quest for justice in the face of a likely powerless state, **SPANISH TRAGEDY** credited with the thematic issues of retributive justice that would be explored as the genre gained popularity and developed on the [Elizabethan and Jacobean](#) stage. The distinction and cultural contention between public and private revenge has been considered by some to be the defining theme of not only early modern revenge tragedy but all early modern tragedy. The tension between public and private revenge, then, has also led to disputes between whether the protagonists enacting **PRIVATE REVENGE** are heroes or villains: is **HIERONIMO**, a character who seeks private revenge to gain retribution for the private murder of his son, a villain or a hero? In between!

As believed to have been staged shortly afterwards, Shakespeare's *TITUS ANDRONICUS*, is another early piece of the genre in which the dangerous streams of revenge through private justice is brought to the fore and the typical features of the genre can be found. In this play, Titus' murder of TAMORA'S eldest son in a ritual of war paved way to the rape and mutilation of his daughter LAVINIA. As

his revenge, Titus murders TAMORA'S remaining sons, bakes them into pie, and serves them to her at a feast.

It however, worth noting that one of the great contentions of the revenge tragedy is the issue of PRIVATE REVENGE VS. DIVINE REVENGE OR PUBLIC (i.e. state sanctioned) revenge. In his essay, "OF REVENGE," Francis Bacon writes: "the first wrong, it doth but offend the law; but the revenge of that wrong, putteth the Law out of Office. This is suffix to say that surely, in taking revenge, a man is but even with his Enemy or is placed on a double hellish narrow path. But in passing it over, he is Superior: For it is a prince part to Pardon."

As the genre gained popularity, playwrights explore the issue of private vs. public or state justice through the introduction of a variety of revenge characters. Again in *ANTONIO'S REVENGE*, John Marston creates a character named, Pandulpho, who borrows an idea from the *Spanish Tragedy* of the Seneca's stoic. The Seneca's stoic is not ruled by emotions but rather follows a balance of universal determinism and human freedom to avoid misfortune. In *HAMLET* also, SHAKESPEARE, explores the complexities or the double meaning of the very human desire for revenge in the face of stoic philosophy and ethics. Throughout the play, Hamlet struggles but, with fervent faith to avenge his father's murder (as has been demanded of him by his father's ghost), and only does so at the end by mischance.

Although, other play writers of the period questioned the conventions of the genre through parody reversals of generic expectations. In Thomas Middleton's *THE REVENGER'S TRAGEDY*, the revenge character, Vindice is a spiteful or ignorable man whose pleasure in the act of revenge is what seems to be his true motivation for its fulfillment.

Again. *THE ATHEIST'S TRAGEDY*, by Cyril Tourneur followed an anti-revenge plot by having Mont-ferrer's ghost explicitly order his son Charlemont not to seek revenge in order to avoid the villainy of violence.

From the foregoing, it seems that the audience of the early Restoration period was not exclusively courtly, as has sometimes receives a puny response to the offerings of the other, and new plays were urgently sought. The King's Company and the Duke's Company vied with one another for audience favor, for popular actors, and for new plays, and in this hectic climate.

Before I delved into the comparison of the both plays "*The Duchess of Malfi*" and "*The Rover*" and what makes them to be considered as a Jacobean revenge tragedies and restoration comedies, I will like to make a brief narration as per what transpires in the two plays starting with "*The Duchess of Malfi*."

*The Duchess of Malfi* is a play written by the English dramatist John Webster in 1612–13. It was first performed privately at the Black friars Theatre, then later to a larger audience at The Globe, in 1613–14.

Published in 1623, the play is based on events that occurred around 1508 and 1513. The Duchess was Giovanna d'Aragona, Duchess of Amalfi whose father, Enrico d'Aragona, Marquis of Gerace, was an illegitimate son of Ferdinand I of Naples. As in the play, she secretly married Antonio Beccadelli di Bologna who was the Duchess's steward before after the death of her first husband Alfonso I Piccolomini, Duke of Amalfi.

The play begins as a love story, with the Duchess who marries beneath her social class because of her nobility position, and against his brothers mean advice not to marry, with a hidden motive of inheriting her properties. No doubt, the Duchess, who is bent on asserting her will as a ruler and as one who sees herself of capable of achieving much, defiles' his brothers advice to marry a lesser being in the in the social ladder of the period in the person of Antonio and ends as a nightmarish tragedy as her two brothers Ferdinand, the emotional character, the physical devil in the play and Cardinal, the symbol of affectation, doomed fate, and the Machiavellian of Aragona, undertake their revenge thereby, destroying themselves in the process. Jacobean drama continued the trend of stage violence and horror set by Elizabethan tragedy, under the influence of Seneca. The complexity of some of the play's characters, particularly Bosola who represented crud but perfect violence and the Duchess, who were both a Ruler and a submissive wife to Antonio, her steward and her second husband, makes tragedies and revenge inevitable in the play. Thus, John Webster's poetic language creation of dramatist, ensure that *The Duchess of Malfi* is considered among the greatest tragedies of English renaissance drama.

On the other hand, *The Rover*, published and first produced in 1677, was Aphra Behn's most successful play. The original full title, *The Rover; or, The Banish'd Cavaliers*, indicates that the play was a tribute to the formerly exiled cavalier and newly reinstated king, Charles II. *The Rover*, is a dark comedy that mixes themes of prostitution and rape with comic buffoonery. The play expresses its author's objections to the vulnerability of women in Restoration society. Perhaps ironically,

it also appeals to the prurient interests of the audience by putting women in morally compromising situations. Based loosely on her contemporary Thomas Killigrew's 1564 *Thomaso; or, The Wanderer* (1664), Behn's play is leaner, less lewd, and more profound. Aphra Behn, a favorite of feminist literary critics, is considered to be the first woman to have made a living through her writing.

The play combines several plot lines which hinges around the capers of some English Cavaliers, who discovers themselves at Naples during the lavished and licentious carnival time. Willmore, a naval captain, is the Rover, from where the title of the play emanates.

Willmore for the first time, sees Hellena a beautiful and wealthy Spanish woman and fall in love with her. Hellena came from the noble strand of the social strata of the time, perhaps, she were to become a nun as advised by his brother Don Pedro. On the contrary, she questions his brother's will and resolves to experience love before if possible, going to the convent. No doubt, Hellena does reciprocates Willmore's love, but complication comes in the plot as were written by the playwright, when a certain Lady who goes by the name, Angelica Bianca, a famous courtesan, also falls in love with Willmore. The beginning of love tricks and disguises!

Florinda, Hellena's Elder Sister, want to marry Colonel Belvile, while her marriage has been arranged with Pedro's friend: Don Antonio, who is the Viceroy or the Governor's Son. Another strand of the play revolves around an Englishman, Mr. Blunt, who loves a whore-prostitute Lucetta, and is convinced she loves him as well. At the tail of the play, as revenge against womankind, he attempts to rape Florinda. Willmore and Hellena finally decided to get marry as Pedro his brother has no option than to accept their positions. We see another marriage that takes place with Florinda and Belvile as well.

There were other women writers before Behn, but few of them enjoyed financial success. Behn turned to her literary talent after the death of her husband, and she quickly proved her merit as well as her perseverance. Behn suffered from the biases of her time against women writers in general and women dramatists in particular. She was assumed by many of her contemporaries to be a prostitute; because of her connection to the theater and because at the time, women who sold their writing were seen as selling themselves

## COMPARISON

*The Rover* fits squarely within the conventions of the Restoration comedy genre, but Behn's genius lies in how she uses a backdrop of revelry, seduction and comedic exploits to explore themes such as the tension between matrimony and autonomy, expectations of sexual purity and the way in which female characters navigate a set of power dynamics that disadvantage them at almost every juncture. "The Rover" as a play, has all the features of Restoration comedy and desires of revenge unlike Webster's "The Duchess of Malfi" with violence and bloody revenge scenes which makes it a round Jacobean tragedy second to Shakespeare's plays.

Behn's creation of "The Rover" as a Restoration comedy has all the salient characteristics of Restoration Comedy. However, this is evidence in the prologue and the epilogue of the play performed in rhymed couplet; as it was customary of Restoration plays to have both the prologue and epilogue recited by the most popular cast.

Every Restoration comedy celebrate life, portrays the behavior of the society and their ways of life, marriage, points towards sex, love, politics, filled with wit, satirizes the ills of the society, rejects the narrow views of the puritan Age that held women bound. Like earlier pointed, Restoration plays achieves the feats of love violence, pretence or disguise but, ends with the characters resolving to re-agree.

Willmore, the hero of "The Rover", fits into the mould of typical Restoration play. He has no problem flirting with any woman of his choice. Despite his frivolous manner, Behn allows the audience to hold their interest in him by giving him genial state. His honesty regarding his makeup endears him to be closer with the audience even when they do not condone his mannerism.

Belvile, offers a perfect foil to Willmore. He genuinely loves Florinda, and their love is not marred by any notions of pretence. Furthermore, Behn's and Webster's creation of their female character were not bland figures either. And that is the typical qualities of Charles II time when women emerges from their dark

years of public hostage in a commonwealth Government led by Cromwell. These female characters, reflects concerns of championing their destiny not matter what it cost them. The women in the Puritan Age were social benchers and ambitions held, not that they never wanted to be venture into a bold venture, but the social customs and traditions of the puritan Age, makes them to resign to fate, but they reemerges in the Restoration Age to be both stronger and independent women with the desires to establish alone. These views were represented by the Widow or the Duchess, who wanted to have a family after the death of his first Husband Alfonso I Piccolomini, Duke of Malfi; by remarrying to his servant Antonio, against his two evil brother's wish Cardinal and Ferdinand; though ended up tragically. Even Julia, the wife of Castruccio and the mistress of Cardinal shows spirited will by accepting to go Cardinal, asking him why he was suddenly sad. Although, she succeeds: but not without a death prize as she was asked to kiss a poison Bible by Cardinal unknowingly.

Both Florinda and Hellena in "The Rover", rejects what their brother, Don Pedro Planned for them and chooses their own husbands, which is another features of Restoration time-self-fulfillment and desire drive. Hellena displays sheer sense of wit which is comparable to Willmore's and can be simply called the female rover of the play.

As it was common during Charles Era, *the Rover and the Duchess of Malfi*, are marked by sexual explicitness. The characters openly advocate their desires to fine match-able companions; this is arguably the abode of the Duchess vs. Antonio, Hellena vs. Willomore, Cardinal Vs Julia, Belvile Vs. Florinda .

More so, just as the debate is still ripe in the literary corridor as why *the Duchess of Malfi*, should not be consider as a complete Jacobean Revenge Tragedy because the tragic heroine, the Duchess, accepts her fate to die instead of revenging which is a grand quality of a truly Jacobean Revenge tragedy; a case study

of the Seneca's play, *the Rover*, is without the objection by some literary scholars.

But one common feature the authors were able to create were their ability to create characters portrays licentiousness of the time thereby, depicting Charles II, who came back from France after years of exile. Charles II openly flirts with his many mistresses in the court. So Aphra Behn in *the Rover* conveys this message via the setting of the carnival while, Webster does this through Cardinal, who also has mistresses.

## REVENGE

Despite the argument slightly discrediting Webster's play *the Duchess of Malfi* for not sticking strictly to all the traditional conventions led down by Seneca, the Latin playwright, as one of the pioneer of Revenge Tragedy; you cannot deny the fact that John Webster, achieved the following in *the Duchess of Malfi* as regards to the golden rules or the characteristics of a Revenge tragedy play and comedy.

The story was centre on characters of noble birth.

The narrative also involves in complex plotting like, Bosola, the Duchess, Cardinal and Ferdinand.

There were serious and mindless murders.

There was obviously a desire for revenge, though not taken by the tragic heroine.

The plots involve physical horrors such as poisoning, madness and torture.

Order was restored at the end of the play as Antonio, tells Delio to make sure that the surviving heir of the Duchess takes back the Throne.

There were the presences of supernatural elements.

Brutal human impulses were also among the essential subject matter and it turns into a complex, but often deeply thought provoking aesthetic experiences. All these highlighted points are clear characteristics of Revenge tragedy found in *the Duchess of Malfi*.

Bosola, whose character puts him in the category of the Renaissance dramatists-Restoration' 'type', 'the malcontent', is in the service of Ferdinand, acting as a spy on The Duchess. He provides a great comedy element to the play, even though he is actually disgustingly unpleasant as well as a great deal of tragic completion in the play. Bosola on the order of Ferdinand executed the families of the Duchess except the Son whom Antonio on the Advices of the Duchess escapes away with him. He mistakenly kills Antonio whom he vows to save. He also kills both Cardinal and Ferdinand, but the later who happens to be his Boss, refuses to reward him after perfecting all the ugly things that mankind could invent; and rather resorts in killing Bosola, but luck runs out of Ferdinand as Bosola hears it, hence his decision to go all out to revenge for the family of the Duchess and for justice.

As stated earlier, the Duchess two brothers, are evil beings especial the violent Ferdinand, who subjected the Duchess and her maid Julia under severe torture before she were killed. Thus, Bosola finally stabs himself and asked Delio to hand over the throne of the Duchess to living Son.

In conclusion, there is something one cannot deny the playwrights of these plays, *the Rover* and *the Duchess of Malfi* and that is their ability to create stories relevant in the social and the generic lives of their society. In other words, both plays have all the qualities of the Restoration period as a Jacobean revenge tragedy, and comedy as regards to *the Duchess of Malfi* and *the Rover* respectively. With their humor, wit, satire, play-on play, they pass a message against the affectations living and activities of their time and the silent murder of souls.