

HOW DOES INTERPLAY BETWEEN JOHN WEBSTER'S *DUCHESS OF MALFI* SCRIPT AND SAM WANAMAKER'S CANDLELIT PLAY INFLUENCE VISUAL CULTURE AND THE AUDIENCE PERSPECTIVE?

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Abstract:

This critical essay will explore how visual culture interplays between John Webster's "Duchess of Malfi" and Sam Wanamaker's candle lit play effect the audience's perspective. While we read Webster's language that delves into themes of corruption, power, and mortality the dimly lit stage is able to bring it to life and intensifying them. By examining the way different lighting, it can interpret many things making the audience see or feel different things. This essay argues that the visual elements of Wanamaker's do more than simply compliment Webster's play but is able to heighten the psychological and emotional impact of the play, making 'The Duchess Of Malfi' on stage a more immersive experience.

Keywords: critical, Jacobean, power, corruption, visual culture,

The Duchess of Malfi by John Webster is a masterpiece of Jacobean drama, written in 1612-13 the play is full of themes of power, corruption and tragic love. Its dark atmosphere and intricate language plays with our imagination and deepens the intense atmosphere that surrounds it. However, Webster's script leaves plenty of room for directors to explore its visual potential, specifically Sam Wanamaker Playhouse. The whole performance is in a room that is only lit by candles, which offers a different interpretation from paper to real life. The contrast between Webster's written word and modern visual culture brings the play in a different and unexpected way, showcasing the power of theatrical staging, lighting and performance design that can reshape a classical piece. This analysis will critically explore how the candles enhance different themes in the play that cannot be done on Webster's written script.

Using visual culture to enhance themes:

In its original Jacobean context, The Duchess of Malfi would have been performed on stages but they wouldn't have advanced lighting technology like we do now. In the twentieth century, instead they would have to rely on the daylight. Sam Wanamaker's candle lit production deliberately replicated the environment and atmosphere but with intention.

"The dark and shadowy world in Webster's play felt right at home in the 17th-century candlelit theatre, but with one decidedly 21st-century addition. The play had creative captioning projected during the entire performance, well-designed to match the set, and timed as the actors delivered their lines. It was an interesting and beautiful example of incorporating captioning for deaf audience members that doesn't stop at simply representing

the words but added a creative element that captured the emotion as well”¹

In the written script John Webster paints a corrupt world through his descriptive language, the poetic imagery and symbolism that reflects the physiological darkness within the characters. The duchess trapped by the political system and hierarchy of society “*I am Duchess of Malfi still*”² her world is filled with uncertainty and violence.

Websters stage directions in the play only provide us minimal guidance for visual elements which leaves readers to imagination, he creates the certain atmosphere through dialogue and character dynamics such as Ferdinand’s manic outbursts , Bosola’s sinful rants. The gothic undertone is conveyed and perceived through words. But how can this be translated visually to audience to give them the most effective experience ?

The use of candles in the playhouse are able to highlight the power dynamics of the characters by controlling what the audience sees and doesn’t. With candles , they can cast selective lighting e.g., Making some parts of the stage completely lit and the other part dull. This usage of light can then reflect the characters attempt to hide their true intentions. An article by Londonsit had gone on to say their own experience of watching the play

“It’s such a small space that music and voices easily fill the room – even a whispered gasp is audible, and a bellow goes straight through you. The atmospherics created by candlelight are breath-taking, the increasing gloom during the second act makes the death, destruction and insanity even more unsettling. The pitch-black scene at the start of Act Two is particularly powerful. There’s nothing like it anywhere else in the country”³

Surveillance : A world of shadows:

One of the main themes that Webster portrays in his play is the pervasive sense of surveillance – which is both metaphorical and literal. The Duchess through the entire play is always being watched, primarily by her brothers who seek to control her and her body “*to bring her to body to despair*”⁴ The candle lit production is able to heighten this theme by creating this uncertain atmosphere , figures can be seen looming in and out of the light, this suggesting to the audience the omnipresent

threat of unseen eyes. It shows shadows that dominate the stage which creates a sense of entrapment. An article had gone on to say that “*producing The Duchess of Malfi in this theatre foregrounds seeing, spying, made spectacle. Although I sometimes felt the candelabras were raised and lowered distractingly, complete darkness was used to startling effect, as were handheld candles that lit individual faces*”⁵

In websters script he invokes imagery of darkness frequently, especially in the latter half of the play. In act 4 the Duchess imprisonment takes on a literal and psychological form, she is shown as effigies of her dead loved ones, its already dark in its textual form but Sam Wanamaker was able to bring this horrific image to life. The candlelight is able to be manipulated to what is selectively shown, making the figures look lifelike one moment and monstrous the next. This visual ambiguity mirrors the plays corruption of power, what is seen and unseen, what is real and fake, are constantly changing.

“for early modern , candles provided domestic lighting ; for us they connote history, spookiness, romance. We are unused to peering through the light that candles create from above”⁶

Light and Innocence in the face of death:

The most visually and thematically significant aspects of the Duchess of Malfi is the contrast of the Duchess power and the corruption of those who seek to control her. Websters Duchess is a figure of moral courage as she challenges the patriarchal structure that confines her “*let old wives report / I winked and chose a husband*”⁷ Sam Wanamaker’s candle lit play is able to emphasise this by using light as a symbol of Duchess defiance, especially in the face of death, with the light focusing on her figure while her surrounding is darkness can represent the forces of evil.

In staging the Duchess’s death - which is one of the plays most important moment – a candle lit setting can create a strong contrast between light and shadow, which are used to convey emotional and moral weight. In Baroque paintings, figures of saints are often depicted with a light illuminating their faces while the background fades into darkness. This visual strategy can be mirrored in the Duchess final moment, the light symbolising her superiority and dignity whilst she is being subjected to the brutal violence of her brothers “*for know, whether I am doomed to live, or die, / I can*

*do both like a prince.*⁸ The gradual extinguishing of candles could reflect the extinguishing of the Duchess life, heightening the tragedy of her fall.

By using light to focus on the Duchess in her final moments, the candle lit production shifts the audience's attention to the symbolic importance of the Duchess death as it can be seen as both personal and political act of defiance

*"They are interested in incorporating Jacobean production, and discovering how it was done by the actors carrying candles, lighting candles after dark scenes and so on. Even the Duchess of Malfi has to help light candles. This gives it an air of re-enactment, in the way that TV can no longer mention anything historical in a documentary without having a costumed thespian act it out. The Globe does it on the main stage too, but it's functional here so intrusive, not a mere decoration"*⁹

The Historical Staging Meets Modern:

Sam Wanamaker chose an artistic choice that connects the Jacobean context with modern theatrical experimentation which engages the contemporary audience more as it's an immersive and sensory experience. The lit stage places the play in a liminal space between the past and the present. The sparse lighting encourages the

audience to engage with the text and characters in a new way, a way that forces them to focus on the emotional and psychological themes rather than relying on elaborate set designs or technological effects.

Candlelight As A Critical Lens:

In Sam's Wanamaker Duchess of Malfi candle lit production, we see that the use of light becomes an active part in the narrative as its able to reinforce and emphasise central concerns such as power, mortality and more.

The lack of elaborate lighting allows the audience to focus on the more subtle elements of performance – facial expressions and movements of the characters, making the play more personal and immersive. The audience attention is able to be drawn to the smallest shifts in lighting which deepens the emotional impact of the plays tragic conclusion which cannot be seen in Webster's written version.

*"What this expose is just how spookily underlit the night sequences would have been, which makes sense of some scenes, which modern directors have found hard to stage, in which it is necessary for characters to misinterpret who or what they have seen"*¹⁰

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