

REV-00

## SELF-LEARNING MATERIAL



# MA ENGLISH

**MEN 103 : ENGLISH DRAMA I: THE AGE OF SHAKESPEARE**

**w.e.f Academic Session: 2024-25**



**CENTRE FOR DISTANCE AND ONLINE EDUCATION**  
**UNIVERSITY OF SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY MEGHALAYA**

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Accredited 'A' Grade by NAAC

Techno City, 9th Mile, Baridua, Ri-Bhoi, Meghalaya, 793101

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# **Master of Arts in English (MEN)**

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Self-Learning Material

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**Authored by:**

Maitrayee Sarma

Dr. Gayatri Das

Dr. Mehsina Sabnam

**Edited by:** Dikshita Das

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## COURSE INTRODUCTION

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This is the third paper of MA English Programme of First semester. In this paper, the age of Shakespeare, is explained, spanning the late 16th and early 17th centuries. It was marked by renaissance in literature, theatre, and the arts, with Shakespeare standing as one of its foremost figures. His works reflected the spirit of the times, grappling with timeless themes of love, power, ambition, and the human condition. This period saw England rise as a global power, exploration of new lands, and the flowering of English language and literature, leaving a mark on Western culture that endures to this day.

**Unit 1** will inform the learner about Christopher Marlowe, a contemporary of Shakespeare, who was a pioneering figure in English Renaissance literature. His works, such as "Doctor Faustus" and "Tamburlaine the Great," broke new ground in both style and substance. Marlowe's plays explored themes of ambition, power, and the limits of human knowledge, often through complex and morally ambiguous characters. His poetic language and dramatic flair influenced the development of English drama, paving the way for Shakespeare and later playwrights. Marlowe's life was as intriguing as his works, marked by controversy and speculation, adding to his mystique as a literary figure of the Elizabethan age.

**Unit 2** will inform the learners about William Shakespeare, often regarded as the greatest playwright and poet in the English language, lived during the late 16th and early 17th centuries. His works, which include 38 plays, 154 sonnets, and two long narrative poems, are celebrated for their profound insight into human nature, intricate language, and universal themes such as love, power, ambition, and the passage of time. Shakespeare's plays, such as "Hamlet," "Macbeth," and "Romeo and Juliet," continue to be performed and studied worldwide, highlighting his enduring influence on literature and theater. Despite limited biographical information, his genius shines through in the richness and complexity of his characters and narratives, making him a timeless icon of creativity and artistic achievement.

**Unit 3** will inform the learner about Ben Jonson, a contemporary of William Shakespeare, who was a significant playwright, poet, and literary critic in the Jacobean era. Known for his sharp wit and satirical flair, Jonson's works often explored themes of ambition, morality, and social hierarchy. His plays, such as "Volpone" and "The Alchemist," are noted for their intricate plots, vivid characters, and clever wordplay. Jonson's contribution to English literature also includes his role in the development of the comedy of humors, a theatrical style that focused on exaggerated character traits for comic effect. His literary prowess and critical insight influenced his peers and successors, leaving a lasting impact on the dramatic landscape of his time.

**Unit 4** will help the learners to learn about John Webster who was a prominent English playwright of the Jacobean era, known for his dark and macabre tragedies. His most famous work, "The Duchess of Malfi," is renowned for its exploration of themes such as power, corruption, and the consequences of ambition. Webster's plays are characterized by their intense emotional depth, complex characters, and poetic language. He often depicted characters struggling against fate or their own flaws, creating a sense of impending doom and tragedy. Webster's contribution to English drama lies in his ability to weave together psychological depth with dramatic tension, influencing later playwrights and leaving a lasting impact on the genre of Jacobean tragedy.

Thus in this paper, learners will be able to know about the different dramatist around the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods. These writers have contributed greatly to English Drama and their famous works have been explained in this paper to understand their writing style and the techniques they applied during that time to become successful.

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**UNIT 1: DOCTOR FAUSTUS BY CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE**

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**UNIT STRUCTURE**

- 1.1 Learning Objectives
- 1.2 Introduction
  - 1.2.1 The elusive life of Christopher Marlowe
  - 1.2.2 Understanding Elizabethan tragedy
- 1.3 Doctor Faustus
- 1.4 Sources of the play
- 1.5 Act-wise summary of the play
- 1.6 Analysis
- 1.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.8 Further Reading
- 1.9 Answer to Check your Progress
- 1.10 Model Questions

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**1.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

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After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- a) Form an idea about Elizabethan drama, particularly the performance of tragedy
- b) Understand the significance of Christopher Marlowe's works in Elizabethan theatre, and his contribution to the development of English drama
- c) Understand the form and major themes of *Doctor Faustus*, the ways in which it was influenced by earlier tradition and the ways in which it managed to influence works that came

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**1.2 INTRODUCTION**

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**1.2.1 The elusive life of Christopher Marlowe**

**Christopher “Kit” Marlowe** (1564-93) had a short but illustrious career as a dramatist, and is widely regarded as one of the greatest names in Elizabethan drama, if not in English drama. His life and works have often warranted comparisons with his more famous and widely

recognized contemporary playwright, William Shakespeare. Together with contemporaries Robert Greene, Thomas Nashe, John Lyly, Thomas Lodge and George Peele, Marlowe is also part of what George Saintsbury termed “The University Wits”, as a reference to their educational background in the prestigious universities at Cambridge and Oxford. The University Wits, including Marlowe, brought a spirit of intellectual inquiry onto the Elizabethan stage, particularly through their exploration of tragic themes and heroic figures.

Marlowe was in Cambridge at Corpus Christie College from 1580 to 1587. His life after university is shrouded with mystery, with grand tales that range from alleged atheism and sexual debauchery to service as one of Her Majesty’s spies. The interest in Marlowe’s personal life was also fuelled by his mysterious death in a bar brawl at the young age of 32. Despite the irregularities of his biographical record and the mystery that shrouds his activities, through his plays we see a brilliant mind shaped clearly by diverse and erudite reading.

Marlowe's literary career spanned less than six years. In that short time, writing for the theatre, he emerged as one of the first great author of drama written in blank verse. Works such as *Tamburlaine the Great*, *The Jew of Malta*, and *Doctor Faustus* firmly established him as one of the finest writing talents from the golden age of English literature that occurred during the Renaissance.

### **1.2.2 Understanding Elizabethan tragedy**

Elizabethan drama, particularly tragedy, grew out of a need to unshackle the hold that the church had over drama. Before the advent of Elizabethan Age, drama meant morality plays and mystery plays that were performed within church premises and had a strong theological basis. In contrast, Elizabethan drama explored more secular themes, and inspired by Renaissance humanism, explored aspects of individual existence beyond what was dictated by scripture. The Elizabethan Age, strictly speaking, refers to the reign of the period of the reign of Queen Elizabeth I who ruled for a period of almost 50 years from 1558-1603. However, the term Elizabethan is also often used loosely to refer to the 16th and 17th centuries, including the time following the monarch’s death. This was a period of relative peace that followed an extended period of political instability and religious conflict between the Protestants and the Catholics. The Elizabethan Age was also marked by rapid development of English commerce, maritime power and an emerging English nationalist consciousness marked by intellectual coherence and social order. The relative tranquillity of this period allowed for rapid growth in new forms of arts and culture, and this percolated down to drama as well.



The earliest inspiration for the English tragedy were the Latin plays of Seneca. It was the retributive revenge motive, belief in fortune or chance, stage declamation and soliloquy of the Senecan plays that made the plays of Thomas Kyd, Marlowe and Shakespeare extremely popular with the Elizabethan audiences. The basic question Elizabethan tragedy raises is a relational one - between man and nature, nature in the larger sense of a cosmic force external to man, and nature embedded in the human condition. The Renaissance which brought a keen awareness of the infinite human potentialities makes this question a very poignant one for the Elizabethans. How does or should man relate himself to the forces within himself and to those external to him in the environment? The orthodox Christianity skirted the issue under the obligation imposed on man to obey the moral laws stipulated by it. Could the moral law be at variance with the natural law evolved by the same author of moral law--God?

It is important to note here that Elizabethan drama was determined by the dictates of popular taste as much as, if not more, than classical traditions. At the time in which Marlowe was writing, Elizabethan drama was already a highly sophisticated art form, with a dedicated audience that demanded diversity and entertainment. All these factors came together to determine the kind of plays that were produced in this period.

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### **1.3 DOCTOR FAUSTUS**

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"Doctor Faustus" is a tragedy written by Christopher Marlowe, first performed around 1592. The play follows the story of Dr. Faustus, a brilliant scholar who becomes disillusioned with traditional knowledge and seeks ultimate power and knowledge through necromancy. He makes a pact with the devil, Mephistopheles, exchanging his soul for 24 years of service from Mephistopheles and access to supernatural abilities.

As Faustus indulges in his newfound powers, he alternates between moments of remorse and defiance, but ultimately faces the consequences of his choices. Despite warnings from scholars and the Good Angel, Faustus rejects repentance and is dragged to hell by demons at the end of the play, fulfilling the terms of his pact.

"Doctor Faustus" explores themes of ambition, the limits of human knowledge, the conflict between good and evil, and the consequences of making deals with the devil. It is a seminal work in English Renaissance drama, known for its poetic language, dramatic intensity, and complex portrayal of its tragic protagonist.

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## 1.4 SOURCES OF THE PLAY

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Like most of Marlowe's plays, the exact date in which *Doctor Faustus* was written remains unclear. However, the earliest performances of the plays are between 1594-1598. *Doctor Faustus* was written for the Admiral's Men and was staged in 1588. Its first Quarto edition was published in 1604. Several reprints of this Quarto appeared subsequently with some interpolations. However, in 1616, an enlarged edition of the play was published containing many comic scenes absent in the 1604 edition. Contemporary editions of *Doctor Faustus* depend on both the 1604 and 1616 versions of the play.

*Doctor Faustus* traces its origin to the German legend of Faust, which has existed in multiple forms and version, and was notably narrative in the prose text *Historia von D. Fausten* (1587). The tale follows the life of a sorcerer who makes a deal with the devil in pursuit of eternal knowledge, but for which he ends up paying for with eternal damnation. The story is believed to be based on the life of a charlatan scholar in the University of Heidelberg, who died around 1541, after a long career of scholarly pretension and dubious intellectual pursuits. The ending to the story of this historical Faust is unclear, but the fact that his story captured the popular imagination of the time is indicative of the sociocultural context of 16th century Germany. In an age of growing uncertainty, the fear of the devil gripped the imagination, and particularly, the legend found credence in the belief that the devil enlarges his kingdom by luring weak-willed men like Faust. This period also saw the rise in popularity in writings on witchcraft and black magic that inspired the legend to develop from a story about a pious seeker of God's blessings to one about an evil genius who made a pact with the devil.

The English translation of the Faust book titled *The History of the Damnable Life and Deserved Death of Doctor John Faustus* is undoubtedly the primary source for Marlowe's play, but there are many important interventions made in this text that are important to note. The English text, unlike the German text, focuses more heavily on the magical powers of Faustus. It also adds details about cosmology, and expands the sections that describe Faust's travels. Marlowe's play follows the English text in content, but its form is more similar to that of the tradition of morality plays. The performance of morality plays, which were allegorical dramas that personified moral attributes, was a big part of Christian education that sought to instill in all believers the fear of God's wrath.

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## 1.5 ACT-WISE SUMMARY OF THE PLAY

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### ACT I

Doctor John Faustus is introduced by the chorus, which explains that his story is not a sweeping tale of warfare or love at court. It is the tale of a man of lowly birth who in later years is raised by a kinsman while attending school in Wertenberg. The young man proves to be a brilliant religious scholar but, out of his hubris, turns away from traditional areas of study to explore necromancy, or black magic, which he finds after dismissing books on law, medicine, religion, one by one. The power and authority promised by mastering this art appeals to Faustus and in spite of warnings from the Good Angel that appears, he resolves to study magic. He engages his German friends Valdes and Cornelius to teach him all the basics he needs to know about the "damned art" of necromancy. Sometime later, in a demonstration of his conjuring skills, Faustus summons up the devil Mephistophilis—"an unhappy spirit that fell with Lucifer," the prince of devils, when God threw him out of heaven. Mephistophilis explains that by dabbling in magic, Faustus risks corruption of his soul. He then warns of the torments of hell that await him if he allies himself with Lucifer. Undaunted, Faustus sends the devil back to his master with an offer: the soul of Faustus in exchange for 24 years of service from Mephistophilis.

### ACT 2

Mephistophilis returns to Faustus with the news that Lucifer has agreed to the deal, provided Faustus will write and sign the deed for his soul in blood. Faustus proceeds as instructed, but the moment it is done, the words *Homo fuge* appear like a brand on his arm. Latin for "Fly, O man!" they seem to be a warning. Unsettled, Faustus tries to imagine where he could run—certainly not to God, who would throw him into hell for what he has done. To distract Faustus and strengthen his determination, Mephistophilis showers him with rich gifts and devilish entertainment and then provides all the books Faustus desires on spells and incantations. A while later, Faustus wavers in his decision and considers renouncing magic and repenting. Then, recalling that he is most certainly damned already, he hardens his heart and begins questioning Mephistophilis on the nature and movement of heavenly bodies. However, when he asks, "Who made the world?" the devil refuses to answer, stirring up Faustus's doubts once more. Just as the doctor calls upon Christ to save his soul, Lucifer appears, accompanied by Belzebub, his companion prince in hell. To draw Faustus back from

the brink of repentance, they appeal to his thirst for knowledge and enthrall him with a display of the Seven Deadly Sins.

### **ACT 3**

Faustus has studied diligently and now uses his dark powers to travel to Rome, where he visits the pope. Bidding Mephistophilis to make him invisible, he harasses the pope as he entertains guests, flinging fireworks among them, stealing food and drink, and boxing the pope's ears.

### **ACT 4**

In the years that follow, Faustus travels throughout Europe, appearing at the courts of kings and earning an impressive reputation for wit and knowledge of the black arts. Eventually Emperor Carolus the Fifth invites Faustus to his court and begs him to conjure up Alexander the Great. While the emperor is duly impressed by the feat, a knight mocks the doctor's skill. In retaliation Faustus gives him a pair of horns on his head, a sure sign that the knight has been cuckolded by his wife. Continuing his travels, Faustus performs further feats of magic, including a dishonest and cruel prank on a horse-courser (a dealer in horses). Later, he entertains the duke and duchess of Vanholt at court by producing grapes in winter.

### **ACT 5**

As the final act opens, Faustus is conjuring beautiful Helen of Troy for a group of admiring scholars. However, the 24 years allotted to the doomed doctor are winding down, and soon it will be time to forfeit his soul. An old man appears and begs him to repent and ask God's forgiveness. Though briefly tempted, Faustus instead reaffirms his vow to Lucifer in blood. Then, to fortify his resolve, Faustus asks Mephistophilis to summon back Helen of Troy to be his lover. During his final hours, Faustus reveals his fate to three fellow scholars. They implore him to call on God for help, but Faustus insists it is too late. He has rejected God, blasphemed, and been in a pact with Lucifer for too long to expect mercy. Faustus begs the scholars to leave him and is alone when the clock strikes eleven. In mounting terror and despair, Faustus begs Lucifer to spare him or for Earth to bury him and hide him from the wrath of God. But Faustus's destiny is fixed. The clock strikes twelve, and Lucifer's minions appear in order to drag the doctor's soul off to hell.

**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

- a. **What is the full name of the protagonist in "Doctor Faustus"?**
- b. **Who is Mephistopheles in the play?**
- c. **What language does Doctor Faustus use to conjure Mephistopheles?**
- d. **What does Faustus receive in exchange for his soul?**
- e. **Who warns Faustus about the consequences of his pact with the devil?**
- f. **How does Faustus die at the end of the play?**

**1.6 ANALYSIS**

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Despite its incorporation of the tradition of morality plays, particularly the introduction of the characters of Good and Bad Angels, Marlowe's play is not explicitly didactic. What distinguishes Marlowe's hero from his prototype is the nature of his ambition. Marlowe's Faustus seeks power rather than knowledge; a Godlike power that will enable him to rule over life and death, accompanied by political power that will help him control the affairs of the state. Marlowe treats his hero's journey with more fascination than horror. At the heart of Marlowe's play is the question of free will and determinism, that was being hotly debated by the intellectuals of the time.

Elizabethan drama repeatedly portrays the struggles of a remarkable individual against implacable, impersonal forces, wherein the gravity of the struggle overshadows the question of victory. The protagonists can be heroes even when they are not traditionally heroic or victorious, because the defeat of their ambitions (however tainted by blasphemy or selfishness) reflects a frustration common to the human psyche and heightened by the often contradictory messages of Renaissance humanism. The aspiring mind of Faustus confronts the restraints of conventional Christian morality and the banal facts of the physical universe; Macbeth, one of the most intensely subjective characters ever created, confronts literal prophesy, recorded history and cyclical nature. Robert Watson in his essay *A Theory of Renaissance Tragedy: Dr Faustus* writes:

“Though no single paradigm can accurately describe the range of Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedies, a remarkable number of the memorable heroes are destroyed by some version of this confrontation between the desiring personal imagination and the relentless machinery of power, whether social, natural, or divine...Renewed human innovation and exploration were constantly running up against the stubbornness and mysteriousness of

physical nature; thematically, *Doctor Faustus* was over determined by its surrounding culture....Worldly pleasure and individual identity—both increasingly valued in this period were never far from destruction by the plagues of the time, bubonic and otherwise.”

What Marlowe attempts in *Doctor Faustus* is a tragic vision of heroic human possibilities. "*Yet art thou still but Faustus, and a man*" whereas his power should reach out "*as far as doth the mind of man*" (Act 1 Scene i 22). Faustus aims:

*“All things that move between the quiet poles  
 Shall be at lily command.  
 Emperors and kings  
 Are but obey'd their several provinces.  
 Nor can they raise the wind or rend the clouds;”* 7 (Act I, Scene i, 55-56)

In the opening soliloquy of Scene 1 of Act 2, Faustus defines his own tragedy

*“Now, Faustus, must  
 Thou needs be darnn'd and canst thou not be sav'd.  
 Despair in God, and trust in Belzebub:  
 Now go not backward: no, Faustus, be resolute:  
 Why waver'st thou? O, something soundeth in mine ears,  
 'Abjure this magic, turn to God again!  
 Ay and Faustus will turn to God again.  
 To God? He loves thee not;  
 The god thou serv'st is thine own appetite.. .  
 Wherein is fix'd the love of Belzebub:  
 To him I'll build an altar and a chruch,  
 And offer lukewarm blood of new born babes", i, 1- 15)*

Faustus's rebellion is a desperate one for it loses more than it gains. But Faustus "is resolved" and shall "never repent". He sees no reason either to "die" or to "basely despair". For all its deprivation, his human condition has its own promise:

*Have not I made blind Homer sing to me  
 Of Alexander's love, and Oenon's death?  
 And hath not he, that built the walls of Thebes,  
 With ravishing sound of his melodious harp,  
 Made music with my Mephostophilis? (11, ii, 25-30)*

Even Christ cannot save Faustus, as Lucifer says, as His "justness" precludes those like Faustus who are assertive of their worth. Faustus belongs to Lucifer who championed a similar protest against God earlier and experiences heavenly deprivation but pursues his freedom. Act 2 unfolds the total tragedy of D Faustus. Both Act I and 2 dramatize the rigour and tenacity of Faustus's rebellion against his own rootedness in orthodox religion. and against his deeply cherished heavenly joys and against his frustrating sense of their

deprivation. However, while Faustus's rebellion is heroic in its assertion of the human spirit, the course of Faustus rebellion through the third and the fourth acts is totally unheroic. Faustus seeks and Mephistophilis plans, rather a series of comic indulgences mainly to distract the former's mind from the tormenting religious awareness. Faustus has no choice but to delude and delight himself in trivial and vicious pleasures. He tells Mephistopheles:

*"Sweet Mephistophilis, thou pleasest me;*

*Whilst I am here on earth, let me be cloyed  
With all things that delight the heart of man,  
My four and twenty years of liberty  
I'll spend in pleasure and in dalliance"* (III, 1 58-62)

"Pleasure" and "dalliance" become the course of Faustian revolt - pomp and display in the courts of Europe, vengeful illumination of the papal court in Rome. As a scholar set to question the divine omniscience, in the beginning of the play, Faustus sought indulgent knowledge and half-truths. Now, a confirmed rebel, Faustus remains a voluptuary. Marlowe did not draw the rebellious Faustus heroically but his point was that his act of rebellion, whatever may be the course of it, against God is immeasurably heroic, for few would dare such a rebellion.

As Faustus demonstrates, knowledge without the moral guidance of wisdom can be used for good or evil. He looks to the forbidden knowledge of necromancy, the practice of speaking to the spirits of dead people, to fulfil his desire to know more than traditional sources of knowledge can teach him. He is further seduced by the power and wealth magic promises. His desire to push the boundaries of human knowledge is without guiding wisdom. Nor does he acquire wisdom along the way. His grand boasts of all he will do with his newly acquired dark knowledge of magic fizzle into mean-spirited pranks and self-serving tricks to gain fame and money. He discovers no universally applicable truth. He is never wise enough to heed the council of the Good Angel, the old man, or even Mephistophilis. When devils at last cart him off to his doom, he has a head full of facts and information. Further, as Faustus reaches his rebellious or tragic death in Act V, the nature of his death and the attendant torment bespeaks a magnificent tragedy, if not that of a magnificent tragic hero:

*But Faustus' offence can ne'er be pardoned: the serpent that tempted Eve ... may be saved,  
but not Faustus Gush forth blood instead of tears!"* (V, ii, 4 1-42)

Mephistophilis makes it clear in his descriptions of hell's torments that defying God is the road to eternal suffering. However, the Good Angel and the old man make it equally clear that Faustus can save himself if he will repent and accept God's mercy. As he tries to decide

between damnation (sticking to his deal with the devil) or accepting the "gift ... of eternal life" (by showing proper repentance to God), Faustus is forced to question his character and motivations, often at the expense of his lust for power and his fantasy of his own superiority. Yet once he has sealed the deal with Lucifer, Faustus audaciously continues down the path to his damnation. He seems committed to his doom, ultimately unwilling or unable to alter his chosen course. Faustus' tragic death also presents an example of the ambivalence of destiny and free will in determining our lives.

Marlowe suggests that Faustus may have a choice. On numerous occasions in the play, he considers the possibility of asking God to forgive his sins, allowing him to change his spiritual path from damnation to one of salvation. The Good Angel, the Bad Angel, Mephistophilis, the old man, and other characters chime in to encourage him to save himself or give in and go to hell. Faustus himself goes back and forth, until it is too late. The question remains: is Faustus helplessly driven by destiny or doomed by his own poorly exercised free will? Marlowe provides no definitive answer but weaves the two possibilities into his play. However, to believe that Faustus has no choice denies the more pitiable aspects of his character. The doctor's intelligence, skepticism, and deeply human desire for knowledge incite choices and actions that anger heaven and fate him to be destroyed.

#### **CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

- g. What does Faustus seek beyond traditional knowledge?**
- h. According to Robert Watson, what is a common theme in Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedies?**
- i. How does Faustus intend to spend his twenty-four years of power?**
- j. What is Faustus's initial motivation for delving into necromancy?**
- k. What is Faustus ultimately unable to do, despite his aspirations?**

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### **1.7 LET US SUM UP**

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In this unit, you were introduced to the main features of Elizabethan tragedy, and the factors that went into the emergence of the form. Through an in-depth discussion of Christopher Marlowe, and in particular his play Doctor Faustus, you also learned how Elizabethan tragedy was influenced by Renaissance humanism, and how it explored more secular ways of discussing themes of destiny and free will.



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## 1.8 FURTHER READING

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T.B. Tomlinson. *A Study of Elizabethan and Jacobean Tragedy* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1964

Cliffrord, Leech. *Marlowe: A Collection of Essays: Twentieth Century Views*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1964

C.L. Barber. "The form of Faustus' fortunes good and bad" *Drama Review* 8,4 1963-64. Pp.92-100.

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## 1.9 ANSWER TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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- a. Doctor Faustus. (His first name is not specified in the play.)
- b. Mephistopheles is a devil and servant of Lucifer who enters into a pact with Doctor Faustus.
- c. Doctor Faustus uses Latin to conjure Mephistopheles.
- d. Faustus receives twenty-four years of power and service from Mephistopheles.
- e. The Good Angel and the Old Man warn Faustus about the consequences of his pact.
- f. Faustus dies when demons drag him to hell, fulfilling the terms of his pact with Lucifer.
- g. Faustus seeks God-like power that will enable him to control life and death, along with political power to influence state affairs.
- h. The confrontation between individual ambition and the relentless forces of social, natural, or divine power.
- i. Faustus plans to indulge in pleasure and luxury, exploring all things that delight the human heart.
- j. Faustus seeks forbidden knowledge and power without moral guidance or wisdom.
- k. Faustus is unable to repent and accept God's mercy, sealing his tragic fate of damnation.

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## 1.10 MODEL QUESTIONS

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1. Discuss the emergence of Elizabethan tragedy
2. Why is Faustus' fate deemed a tragedy? Discuss
3. Explore the function of the Good Angel and the Bad Angel in Doctor Faustus
4. What is Marlowe's position in the debate between destiny versus free will? Discuss with reference to Doctor Faustus
5. Discuss the role played by Mephistopheles in the fall of Faustus.

6. Analyze the character of Doctor Faustus in Marlowe's play. How does Faustus evolve throughout the course of the play, and what are the key factors that contribute to his tragic downfall? Discuss Faustus's motivations, internal conflicts, and the moral implications of his actions. Support your answer with specific examples from the text.
7. Discuss the theme of knowledge and power in "Doctor Faustus." How does Faustus's quest for knowledge and mastery over the natural and supernatural realms lead to his eventual damnation? Explore the consequences of Faustus's pursuit of forbidden knowledge and the portrayal of intellectual ambition in the play. Use textual evidence to support your argument.
8. Explore the role of the supernatural in shaping the narrative and thematic elements of "Doctor Faustus." How does Marlowe use supernatural elements such as Mephistopheles, demons, and magic to underscore Faustus's tragic journey? Discuss the symbolic significance of these supernatural entities and their impact on Faustus's moral and spiritual decline. Provide detailed examples from the play to illustrate your points.

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**UNIT 2.1 WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE: HAMLET**

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**UNIT STRUCTURE**

- 2.1.1 Learning Objectives
- 2.1.2 Introduction
- 2.1.3 About the author
- 2.1.4 Hamlet text analysis
- 2.1.5 The themes in the play
- 2.1.6 Let us sum up
- 2.1.7 Further Reading
- 2.1.8 Answers to Check your Progress
- 2.1.9 Model Questions

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**2.1.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

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The aim of this unit is to provide required information which will enable better understanding of the play. After, reading this unit you will be able to

- Appreciate how themes and motifs are relevant to the study of a text;
- Acquire an understanding of the text of the play
- Relate to Hamlet's tragic flaw, his inability to act decisively. The play highlights the consequences of procrastination and the importance of taking timely action.
- Understand family relationships, particularly Hamlet's relationship with his mother Gertrude and his love interest Ophelia, reveal the complexities of familial love, betrayal, and loyalty.

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**2.1.2 INTRODUCTION**

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The character of Hamlet has inspired varied and complex reaction among its audience as well as critics and scholars so much that the play has often found to have acquired a life of its own, a life outside the context of the play. Before we can go on to understand the meaning we must understand how a number of related issues such as when the play was published, written or performed; the sources that Shakespeare drew upon to construct his plays. Shakespeare's plays have come down to us in many versions and the most authentic and reliable texts of his plays almost always need to be determined or reconstructed by scholars. We have to learn to understand how this determination is achieved.

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### **2.1.3 ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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William Shakespeare was born at Stratford-on-Avon, 1564. Shakespeare married early and left Stratford for London in 1586 where he resided till 1609. He joined an actor company and there, subsequently developed an interest in the Globe theatre, Southwark. His own dramatic writings were done between 1591 and 1612. Shakespeare is credited with 37 plays altogether of which only 16 were published before his death-and he wrote a memorable series of sonnets. The last five years of his life were spent at Stratford, where he died 1616.

In his plays, Shakespeare reveals to himself the development of his mind. It is out of place to consider autobiographical details when we are dealing in his dramas with the fortunes, thoughts and expressions of other personages. But by the general character and tendency of the dramas themselves, we mark out that there is a definite development of Shakespeare's mind.

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### **2.1.4 HAMLET TEXT ANALYSIS**

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#### **ACT 1**

The play begins at Elsinore Castle in Denmark one night. The ghost of the former king, Hamlet, is seen, but refuses to speak to any of the soldiers on guard duty. At the royal court, Prince Hamlet (the dead king's son) shows disgust at his uncle, Claudius, who is king, having taken the throne after Hamlet's father, Claudius' brother, died. Hamlet also resents his mother, Gertrude – who, not long after Hamlet Senior's death, remarried to Claudius. Claudius gives the young man Laertes, the son of the influential courtier Polonius, leave to return to France to study there. At the same time, Claudius and Gertrude entreat Hamlet not to return to his studies in Germany, at the University of Wittenberg. Hamlet agrees to remain at court. Laertes, leaves Denmark for France, bidding his sister Ophelia farewell. He tells her not to take Hamlet's expressions of affection too seriously, because – even if Hamlet is keen on her – he is not free to marry whom he wishes, being a prince. Polonius turns up and gives his son some advice before Laertes leaves; Polonius then reiterates Laertes' advice to Ophelia about Hamlet, commanding his daughter to stay away from Hamlet. Hamlet's friend Horatio tells Hamlet about the Ghost, and Hamlet visits the battlements with his friend. The Ghost reappears – and this time, he speaks to Hamlet in private, telling him that he is the prince's dead father and that he was murdered (with poison in the ear, while he lay asleep in his orchard) by none other than Claudius, his own brother. He tells his son to avenge his murder by killing Claudius, the man who murdered the king

and seized his throne for himself. However, he tells Hamlet not to kill Gertrude but to ‘leave her to heaven’ (i.e. God’s judgment). Hamlet swears Horatio and the guards to secrecy about the Ghost. Hamlet has vowed to avenge his father’s murder, but he has doubts over the truth of what he’s seen. Was the ghost really his father? Might it not have been some demon, sent to trick him into committing murder? Claudius may disgust Hamlet already, but murdering his uncle just because he married Hamlet’s mum seems a little extreme. But if Claudius *did* murder Hamlet’s father, then Hamlet will gladly avenge him. But how can Hamlet ascertain whether the Ghost really was his father, and that the murder story is true? To buy himself some time, Hamlet tells Horatio that he has decided to ‘put an antic disposition on’: i.e., to pretend to be mad, so Claudius won’t question his scheming behavior because he’ll simply believe the prince is just being eccentric in general.

## ACT II

Polonius sends Reynaldo off to spy on his son, Laertes, in France. His daughter Ophelia approaches him, distressed, to report Hamlet’s strange behavior in her presence. Polonius is certain that Hamlet’s odd behavior springs from his love for Ophelia, so he rushes off to tell the King and Queen, Claudius and Gertrude, about it. Claudius and Gertrude welcome Hamlet’s childhood friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, to court and charge them with talking to Hamlet to try to find out what’s the matter with him. Polonius arrives and tells the King and Queen that Hamlet is mad with love for Ophelia, and produces a love letter Hamlet wrote to her as proof. As Hamlet approaches, Polonius hatches a plan: he will talk to Hamlet while the King and Queen listen in secret from behind an arras (tapestry). Sure enough, Hamlet talks in riddles to Polonius, who then leaves, convinced he is right about the cause of Hamlet’s madness. Hamlet talks to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who tell him that the actors are on their way to court. Hamlet is suspicious that his friends were sent for by Claudius and Gertrude to spy on him (as indeed they were); he confides to his old friends that he is not necessarily really mad; he implies he’s putting it on and still has his wits about him. The actors arrive, and Polonius returns, prompting Hamlet to start answering him with cryptic responses again, to keep up the act of being mad. To determine Claudius’ guilt, Hamlet turns detective and devises a plan to try to get Claudius to reveal his crime, inadvertently. Hamlet persuades the actors to perform a play, *The Murder of Gonzago*, including some specially inserted lines he has written – in which a brother murders the king and marries the king’s widow. Hamlet’s thinking is that, when Claudius witnesses his own crime enacted before him

on the stage, he will be so shocked and overcome with guilt that his reaction will reveal that he's the king's murderer.

### ACT III

Claudius and Gertrude ask Rosencrantz and Guildenstern what they made of Hamlet's behavior, and then the King and Queen, along with Polonius, hide so they can observe Hamlet talking with Ophelia. At one point, in an aside, Claudius talks of his 'conscience', providing the audience with the clearest sign that he is indeed guilty of murdering Old Hamlet. This is significant because one of the main reasons Hamlet is being cautious about exacting revenge is that he's having doubts about whether the Ghost was really his father or not (and therefore whether it spoke truth to him). But we, the audience, know that Claudius almost certainly *is* guilty. After he has meditated aloud about the afterlife, suicide, and the ways in which thinking deeply about things can make one less prompt to act (the famous 'To be or not to be' soliloquy), Hamlet speaks with Ophelia. He tells her he never loved her, and orders her to go to a nunnery because women do nothing but breed men who are sinners. Ophelia is convinced Hamlet is mad for love, but Claudius believes something else is driving Hamlet's behavior, and resolves to send Hamlet to England, ostensibly on a diplomatic mission to get the tribute (payment) England owes Denmark. Sure enough, Claudius responds to the performance of *The Murder of Gonzago* (or, as Hamlet calls this play-within-a-play, *The Mousetrap*) by exclaiming and then walking out, and in doing so he convinces Hamlet that he is indeed guilty and the Ghost is right. Now Hamlet can proceed with his plan to murder him. However, after the play, he catches Claudius at prayer, and doesn't want to murder him as he prays because, if Claudius killed while speaking to God, he will be sent straight to heaven, regardless of his sins. So instead, Hamlet visits Gertrude, his mother, in her chamber, and denounces her for marrying Claudius so soon after Old Hamlet's death. The Ghost appears (visible only to Hamlet: Gertrude believes her son to be mad and that the Ghost is 'the very coinage of [his] brain'), and spurs Hamlet on. Hearing a sound behind the arras or tapestry, Hamlet lashes out with his sword, stabbing the figure behind, believing it to be Claudius. Unbeknownst to Hamlet, it is Polonius, having concealed himself there to spy on the prince. Polonius dies.

### ACT IV

Claudius asks Hamlet where Polonius is and Hamlet jokes about where he's hid the body. Claudius dispatches Hamlet to England – ostensibly on a diplomatic mission, but in reality

the King has arranged to have Hamlet murdered when he arrives in England. However, Hamlet realizes this, escapes, has Rosencrantz and Guildenstern killed, and returns to Denmark. Laertes returns from France, thinking Claudius was responsible for Polonius' death. Claudius puts him right, and arranges for Laertes to fight Hamlet using a poisoned sword; with a chalice full of poisoned wine prepared for Hamlet should the sword fail. As they are plotting, Gertrude comes in with the news that Polonius' death has precipitated Ophelia's slide into madness and, now, her suicide: Ophelia has drowned herself.

## ACT V

Laertes and Hamlet fight in Ophelia's open grave, and then Hamlet challenges Laertes to a duel at court. Unbeknown to Hamlet, and as agreed with Claudius earlier on, Laertes will fight with a poisoned sword. However, during the confusion of the duel, Hamlet and Laertes end up switching swords so both men are mortally wounded by the poisoned blade. Gertrude, in making a toast to her son and being unaware that the chalice of wine is poisoned, drinks the deadly wine. Laertes, as he lies dying, confesses to Hamlet that Claudius hatched the plan involving the poisoned sword and wine, and Hamlet stabs Claudius with the poisoned sword, forcing him to drink the wine for good measure too – thus finally avenging his father's murder. Hamlet dies, giving Fortinbras, the Prince of Norway, his dying vote as the new ruler of Denmark. Fortinbras arrives to take control of Denmark now the Danish royal family has been wiped out, and Horatio prepares to tell him the whole story.

### CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

- a. Who is the protagonist of the play "Hamlet"?
- b. What is Hamlet's tragic flaw in the play?
- c. Which character speaks the famous soliloquy beginning with "To be, or not to be"?
- d. What is the relationship between Hamlet and Claudius?
- e. How does Hamlet's father, King Hamlet, die?
- f. What is the name of Hamlet's love interest in the play?
- g. What country is the setting for the play "Hamlet"?

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## 2.1.5 THE THEMES IN THE PLAY

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### The Theme of Revenge in Hamlet

There are two young men bent on avenging their father's death in this play. Hamlet and Laertes are both on the same mission, and while Hamlet is pondering his approach to the

problem Laertes is hot on his heels, determined to kill him as Hamlet has killed his father, Polonius. This is, therefore, a double revenge story. Shakespeare examines the practice of revenge by having two entirely different approaches to it – the hot-headed abandon of Laertes and the philosophical, cautious approach by Hamlet. The two strands run parallel – invoking comparisons, each one throwing light on the other – until the young men’s duel and both their deaths. The revenge theme feeds into the religious element of the play as Hamlet is conflicted by his Christian aversion to killing someone and his duty to avenge his father’s death, whereas it is not a consideration for Laertes, whose duty is clear to him, and he acts on it immediately.

### **The Theme of Corruption**

Corruption is a major concern in this play. The text is saturated with images of corruption, in several forms – decay, death, poison. From the very first moments of the play the images start and set the atmosphere of corruption which is going to grow as Shakespeare explores this theme. The tone is set when Marcellus says, ‘Something is rotten in the state of Denmark,’ after seeing the ghost of Hamlet’s father. What Shakespeare is doing here, and in using the image structure of corruption, is addressing the broadly held view that a nation’s health is connected to the legitimacy of its king. Here we have the ghost of a murdered king, and his murderer – a decidedly illegitimate king – is sitting on his throne. All through the play, Hamlet is preoccupied with rot and corruption – both of the body and the soul, reflecting the way in which society is destroyed by the corruption of its inner institutions – in this case, the court, which is the government. Decay, rot and mould are always in Hamlet’s mind, and his language is full of those images – ‘an unweeded garden that grows to seed – things rank and gross possess it,’ and countless images of death and disease. He hides Polonius’ body in a place where it will decay rapidly and stink out the castle. It’s an image of the corruption in secret places that is going to contaminate the whole country.

### **The Theme of Religion**

Religion has an impact on the actions of the characters in this play. Hamlet’s ‘to be or not to be’ soliloquy outlines his religious thinking on the subject of suicide. He declines to kill Claudius while he is praying for fear of sending him to heaven when he should be going to hell. Hamlet believes, too, that ‘there is a destiny that shapes our ends.’ One of the most important things of all in this play is the Christian idea of making a sacrifice to achieve healing. Hamlet is Christ-like in his handling of the crisis. The court is rotten with corruption



and the people in it are almost all involved in plotting and scheming against others. Hamlet's way of dealing with it is to wait and watch as all the perpetrators fall into their own traps – 'hauled by their own petards,' as he puts it. All he has to do is be ready – like Christ. 'The readiness is all,' he says. And then, all around him, the corruption collapses in on itself and the court is purified. Like Christ, though, he has to be sacrificed to achieve that, and he is, leaving a scene of renewal and hope.

### **The Theme of Politics**

*Hamlet* is a political drama. Hamlet's uncle has murdered his father, the king. He has subsequently done Hamlet out of his right of succession and become king. Hamlet's mother has married the king while the rest of the palace is engaged in palatial intrigues, leading to wider conspiracies and murders. The king, Claudius, determined to safeguard his position in the face of the threat Hamlet presents, plots in several ways to kill Hamlet. Polonius plots against Hamlet to ingratiate himself with Claudius. Characters, including Hamlet's mother, Gertrude, spy on each other. This is all to do with power and the quest to achieve and hold it.

### **The Theme of Appearance and Reality**

This is a major theme in every one of Shakespeare's plays. The text of *Hamlet* is saturated with references to the gap that exists between how things seem to be and how they really are. Very little in this play is really as it seems. That is bound to be so in a play in which there are so many murderous plots and schemes by those who, on the surface, strive to appear innocent, like Claudius, who, behind his charismatic smile, is a damned villain. He is, as Hamlet puts it, a 'smiling villain.' Although Ophelia loves Hamlet she pretends to spurn his affections. Hamlet pretends to be mad so that he can explore the ghost's assertion that Claudius killed him. All the characters, in one way or another, are hiding their true intentions. What makes this theme particularly interesting and different in this play is that as the play develops the gap between appearance and reality narrows by the characters becoming more like the masks they are using than any reality that may lie behind that so the identities they have assumed eventually become their realities.

### **The Theme of Women**

For much of the play, Hamlet is in a state of agitation. It is when he is talking to either of the two female characters that he is most agitated – so much so that he is driven to violence against them. He cares about both but does not trust either. He feels his mother, Gertrude, has

let him down by her ‘o’er hasty marriage’ to Claudius. To him, it means that she didn’t really love his father. In the case of Ophelia, he is suspicious that she is part of the palace plot against him. Both women die in this play. Ophelia is driven mad by the treatment she receives from the three men – Claudius, Polonius and Hamlet – and takes her own life. Gertrude’s death is more complex because it raises the question: how far is she responsible for the corruption that Hamlet has to deal with? Whilst the play features the meeting and falling in love of the two main protagonists, to say that love is a theme of *Romeo and Juliet* is an oversimplification. Rather, Shakespeare structures *Romeo and Juliet* around several contrasting ideas, with a number of themes expressed as opposites. To say that the tension between love and hate is a major theme in *Romeo and Juliet* gets us closer to what the play is about. These – and other – opposing ideas reverberate with each other and are intertwined through the text.

#### **CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

- h. What major theme in "Hamlet" is illustrated by the differing approaches of Hamlet and Laertes towards revenge?**
- i. According to the analysis, what symbolic phrase from "Hamlet" reflects the pervasive theme of corruption in the play?**
- j. How does religion influence Hamlet's actions in the play, as discussed in the analysis?**
- k. What aspect of "Hamlet" makes it a political drama, as mentioned in the analysis?**

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#### **2.1.6 LET US SUM UP**

Hamlet continues to captivate audiences and scholars due to its profound exploration of the human condition. Its rich symbolism, complex characters, and moral dilemmas make it a masterpiece of world literature, inviting continuous analysis and reflection. In essence, Hamlet remains a profound exploration of human psychology, political intrigue, and moral complexity, leaving room for endless interpretations and discussions. Its enduring appeal lies in its ability to provoke deep introspection and contemplation among readers and audiences across generations.

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#### **2.1.7 FURTHER READING**

- A.C. Bradley. *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, and Macbeth*. New York and London: Penguin, 1991.

- T.S. Eliot, ed. Frank Kermode. *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*. New York: Harvest Books, 1975.
- William Shakespeare, ed. Cyrus Hoy. *Hamlet* (Norton Critical Editions). New York: Norton, 1992.

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### 2.1.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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- a. Prince Hamlet, son of the late King Hamlet.
- b. Hamlet's tragic flaw is his indecision or inability to act decisively.
- c. Hamlet speaks the soliloquy "To be, or not to be" in Act 3, Scene 1.
- d. Claudius is Hamlet's uncle and also his stepfather, having married Hamlet's mother, Queen Gertrude.
- e. King Hamlet is murdered by his brother Claudius, who then takes the throne.
- f. Hamlet's love interest is Ophelia, daughter of Polonius.
- g. The play is set in Denmark, primarily at the royal court in Elsinore Castle.
- h. The theme of revenge is highlighted through Hamlet's philosophical hesitation and Laertes' impulsive pursuit of vengeance.
- i. The phrase "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark," spoken by Marcellus, encapsulates the pervasive theme of corruption in the play.
- j. Hamlet's Christian beliefs influence his moral decisions, such as his hesitation to kill Claudius while he prays, fearing Claudius would go to heaven instead of hell.
- k. The play is characterized as a political drama due to its focus on power struggles, succession disputes, and political intrigues within the royal court.

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### 2.1.9 MODEL QUESTIONS

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1. Critically examine Hamlet as a revenge tragedy, bringing out its superiority over the conventional plays in this genre.
2. Despite its melodramatic elements, Hamlet is a work of artistic construction. Discuss
3. Analysis the time-scheme in Hamlet. Was Shakespeare justified in his use of this 'double' time?
4. Examine Hamlet as a tragic hero.
5. What is the part played by Fate & Destiny in Hamlet?

6. Discuss the theme of madness in *Hamlet*. How does Shakespeare use the motif of insanity to explore deeper psychological and thematic concerns in the play? Support your answer with specific examples from the text.
7. Examine the role of women in *Hamlet*. How do characters like Gertrude and Ophelia contribute to the development of the play's themes, particularly regarding power, patriarchy, and morality?
8. Analyze the character of Hamlet. What are his major strengths and weaknesses as a tragic hero? How do these attributes contribute to his ultimate fate in the play?
9. Discuss the significance of the ghost in *Hamlet*. How does the appearance of King Hamlet's ghost drive the plot forward and shape the actions and decisions of other characters?
10. Explore the theme of revenge in *Hamlet*. How does Shakespeare portray revenge as both a motivator and a destructive force throughout the play? Consider different characters' approaches to revenge and their consequences.
11. Discuss the significance of the play-within-a-play (the Mousetrap) in *Hamlet*. How does this theatrical device contribute to the exploration of truth, deception, and moral ambiguity within the play?
12. Analyze the use of imagery and symbolism in *Hamlet*. How do elements such as disease, corruption, and the natural world serve to enhance the play's themes and deepen its characters' motivations?

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## UNIT 2.2: A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

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### UNIT STRUCTURE

- 2.2.1 Learning Objectives
- 2.2.2 Introduction
- 2.2.3 Act wise Summary
- 2.2.4 Themes of the play
- 2.2.5 Let us sum up
- 2.2.6 Further Reading
- 2.2.7 Answers to Check your Progress
- 2.2.8 Model Questions

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### 2.2.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- Understand the play and its ending which covers several separate layers which is grouped together.
- To look into all the acts and study the themes. The magic which brings about many of the most bizarre and hilarious situations in the play.
- Analyse deeply the Dreams or visions which take up so much of the enactment time of the play.
- Understand the theme of love's difficulty is often explored through the motif of love out of balance—that is, romantic situations in which a disparity or inequality interferes with the harmony of a relationship.

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### 2.2.2 INTRODUCTION

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*A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a comedy in five acts by William Shakespeare. Its multilayered examination of love and its vagaries, has long been one of the most popular of Shakespeare's plays. Theseus, duke of Athens conquered Hippolyta, the Amazon queen, and is about to marry her. Meanwhile, two lovers, Hermia and Lysander, seek refuge in the

forest near Athens as Hermia's father demanded her to marry Demetrius. With a hope to win Demetrius's favour, Helena tells him their whereabouts and follows him to the forest, where he goes in search of Hermia. The forest is also full of fairies who have come for the Duke's wedding. Oberon, the king of the fairies, quarrels with his queen, Titania, and bids his mischievous servant Puck to drop magic juice into her eyes as she sleeps. His intent is to punish her for her disobedience by causing her to fall hopelessly in love with whatever person or creature she happens to see when she awakes. Noting that the human lovers in the forest are also at odds, he orders Puck to drop the love juice into Demetrius's eyes so that Demetrius's one-time affection for Helena will be restored. Because the two young Athenian men look much alike, however, Puck mistakenly administers the love juice to Lysander, who then happens to see Helena when he awakes. He falls hopelessly in love with her. Now both young men are in love with Helena. Neither of the two falls in love with the poor deserted Hermia. This situation does not make Helena happier. She comes to the conclusion that they are all making fun of her. Hermia and Helena fall out over this contretemps, while the young men have become fierce and even would-be murderous rivals of one another for Helena.

In the same woods a group of artisans are rehearsing an entertainment for the Duke's wedding. The ever playful, Puck gives one of the "mechanicals," Nick Bottom, an ass's head; when Titania awakens, she falls in love with Bottom. After much general confusion and comic misunderstanding, Oberon's magic restores Titania and the four lovers to their original states. The Duke invites the two couples to join him and Hippolyta in a triple wedding. The wedding celebration features Bottom's troupe in a comically inept performance of their play, *The Most Lamentable Comedy and Most Cruel Death of Pyramus and Thisbe*, which turns out to be a parody of the perilous encounters the various lovers have experienced in the forest and somehow managed to survive.

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### **2.2.3 ACT WISE SUMMARY**

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#### **ACT I**

From the outset, Shakespeare subtly portrays the lovers as a group out of balance, a motif that creates tension throughout the play. For the sake of symmetry, the audience wants the four lovers to form two couples; instead, both men love Hermia, leaving Helena out of the equation. The women are thus in nonparallel situations, adding to the sense of structural imbalance. By establishing the fact that Demetrius once loved Helena, Shakespeare suggests the possibility of a harmonious resolution to this love tangle: if

Demetrius could only be made to love Helena again, then all would be well. By the end of the play, the fairies' intervention effects just such an outcome, and all *does* become well, though it is worth noting that the restoration of Demetrius's love for Helena is the result of magic rather than a natural reawakening of his feelings.

The most important motif in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and one of the most important literary techniques Shakespeare uses throughout the play, is that of contrast. The three main groups of characters are all vastly different from one another, and the styles, moods, and structures of their respective subplots also differ. It is by incorporating these contrasting realms into a single story that Shakespeare creates the play's dreamlike atmosphere. Almost diametrically opposite the beautiful, serious, and love-struck young nobles are the clumsy, ridiculous, and deeply confused craftsmen, around whom many of the play's most comical scenes are centered.

## **ACT II**

Act II serves two main functions: it introduces the fairies and their realm, and it initiates the romantic confusion that eventually help restore the balance of love. The fairies, whom Shakespeare bases heavily on characters familiar from English folklore, are among the most memorable and delightful characters in the play. They speak in lilting rhymes infused with gorgeous poetic imagery. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a play dominated by the presence of doubles, and the fairies are designed to contrast heavily with the young lovers and the craftsmen. Whereas the lovers are earnest and serious, Puck and the other pixies are merry and full of laughter; whereas the craftsmen are bumbling, earthy, and engage in methodical labor, the fairies are delicate, airy, and indulge in effortless magic and enchantment.

The conflict between Oberon and Titania imports into the fairy realm the motif of love being out of balance. As with the Athenian lovers, the eventual resolution of the tension between the two occurs only by means of magic. Though the craftsmen do not experience romantic confusion about one another, Bottom becomes involved in an accidental romance with Titania in Act III, and in Act V two craftsmen portray the lovers Pyramus and Thisbe, who commit suicide after misinterpreting events.

## **ACT III**

The confusion in Act III continues to heighten, as the Athenian lovers and the fairies occupy the stage simultaneously, often without seeing each other. The comedy is at

its silliest, and the characters are at their most extreme: Helena and Hermia nearly come to blows as a result of their physical insecurities, and Lysander and Demetrius actually try to have a duel. The plot is at its most chaotic, and, though there is no real climax in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the action is at its most intense. With the falling action of Acts IV and V, however, matters will sort themselves out quickly and order will be restored.

Like Act III, scene i, Act III, scene ii serves a mainly developmental role in the plot structure of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, focusing on the increasing confusion among the four Athenian lovers. Now that both men have been magically induced to switch their love from Hermia to Helena, the vanities and insecurities of both women become far more pronounced. Helena's low self-esteem prevents her from believing that either man could really be in love with her. Hermia, who is used to having both men fawn on her, has her vanity stung by the fact that they are suddenly cold and indifferent toward her. She reveals a latent insecurity about her short stature when she assumes that Helena has used her height to win Lysander's love, and her quick temper is revealed in Helena's fear that Hermia will attack her. The men's exaggerated masculine aggression leads them to vow to protect Helena from the dreaded Hermia—a ridiculous state of affairs given that they are two armed men whereas Hermia is a tiny, unarmed woman. Their aggression betrays Helena, however, as the men refocus it on their competition for her love.

The potion is responsible for the confusion of the lovers' situation; thus, Shakespeare links the theme of magic to the motif of imbalanced love, which dominates the scene. Had the love potion never been brought into play, the Athenian lovers would still be tangled in their romanticism, but they would all understand it, whereas the fairies' meddling has left both Hermia and Helena unable to comprehend the situation. Additionally, Puck's magical ventriloquism is what prevents Lysander and Demetrius from killing each other at the end of the scene. Thus, magic both brings about their mutual hostility and resolves it.

## **ACT IV**

Barely 300 lines long, Act IV is the shortest and most transitional of *A Midsummer Night's Dream's* five acts. The first three serve respectively to introduce the characters, establish the comic situation, and develop the comedy; Act IV ends the conflict and leads to the happy ending in Act V. What is most remarkable, perhaps, is the speed with which the conflict is resolved and the farce comes to an end; despite the ubiquity of chaos in Act III, all that is necessary to resolve matters is a bit of potion on Lysander's eyelids and Oberon's forgiveness of his wife. The climactic moment between Titania and Oberon,



during which she agrees to give him the Indian boy, is not even shown onstage but is merely described.

Though Demetrius's love of Helena is a by-product of the magic potion rather than an expression of his natural feelings, love has been put into balance, allowing for a traditional marriage ending. As is often the case with Shakespeare, the dramatic situation is closely tied to the circumstances of the external environment; just as the conflict is ending and a semblance of order is restored among the characters, the sun comes up. There is no real climax in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; rather, as soon as the scenario has progressed to a suitable degree of complication and hilarity, Shakespeare simply invokes the fairies' magic to dispel all conflict. As the sun comes up, the reappearance of Theseus and Hippolyta, who symbolize the power and structure of the outside world, begins to dispel the magical dream of the play.

Theseus and Hippolyta are extremely important figures both at its beginning and at its end, but they disappear entirely during the main action in the magical forest. The duke and his Amazon bride are romanticized in the play, but they belong solely to the nonmagical waking world, where they remain wholly in control of their own feelings and actions. An important element of the dream realm, as the lovers come to realize upon waking in a daze, is that one is in control of neither oneself nor one's surroundings. In this way, the forest and fairies contribute to the lovers' sense of their experience as a dream, even though the action happens largely while they are awake.

This brief comic scene returns the focus of the play to the subplot of the Athenian craftsmen. Structurally, Act IV, scene ii represents something of a new beginning for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: the main conflict of the play has been resolved, but rather than ending with the weddings of the lovers, as is customary in an Elizabethan comedy (the weddings do not even occur onstage here), Shakespeare chooses to include an extended epilogue devoted to sheer comedy. The epilogue takes up all of Act V and centers around the craftsmen's performance of *Pyramus and Thisbe* for the Athenian crowd. Act IV, scene ii transfers the focus of the play from magic and unbalanced love to a play-within-a-play, in which the themes of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, not too heavy to begin with, are recycled into a form so ridiculous and garbled that the play draws to a wholly untroubled conclusion. Though the preceding events of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* have been far from tragic, many of the characters have experienced unpleasant emotions, such as jealousy, lovesickness, and insecurity. Act IV, scene ii makes a basic transition from sadness to joy as Bottom's return transforms his fellow craftsmen's sorrow and confusion into delight and eagerness. It is no coincidence that Bottom's reappearance occurs almost

simultaneously with the audience being told that the lovers have been married. Just as the marriages dispel the romantic angst of the play, so does Bottom's return dispel the worry of his comrades. Similarly, the arrival in the forest of Theseus and Hippolyta, representatives of order, coincides with the Athenian lovers' waking from their chaotic, dreamlike romp of the previous night.

## ACT V

The structure of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is somewhat compacted in that the first four acts contain all of the play's main action, with the height of conflict occurring in Act III and a happy turn of events resembling a conclusion in Act IV. Act V serves as a kind of joyful comic epilogue to the rest of the play, focusing on the craftsmen's hilariously bungling efforts to present their play and on the noble Athenians' good-natured jesting during the craftsmen's performance. The heady tragedy of *Pyramus and Thisbe* becomes comical in the hands of the craftsmen. The bearded Flute's portrayal of the maiden Thisbe as well as the melodramatic and nonsensical language of the play strips the performance of any seriousness or profound meaning.

The story of Pyramus and Thisbe, which comes from an ancient Babylonian legend often reworked in European mythology, would have been familiar to educated members of Shakespeare's audiences. The story likely influenced *Romeo and Juliet*, although Shakespeare also pulled elements from other versions of the Romeo and Juliet tale. In both stories, two young lovers from feuding families communicate under cover of darkness; both male lovers erroneously think their beloveds dead and commit suicide, and both females do likewise when they find their lovers dead.

Insofar as the fifth act of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has thematic significance (the main purpose of the play-within-a-play is to provide comic enjoyment), it is that the Pyramus and Thisbe story revisits the themes of romantic hardship and confusion that run through the main action of the play. Pyramus and Thisbe are kept apart by parental will, just as Lysander and Hermia were; their tragic end results from misinterpretation—Pyramus takes Thisbe's bloody mantle as proof that she is dead, which recalls, to some extent, Puck's mistaking of Lysander for Demetrius (as well as Titania's misconception of Bottom as a beautiful lover). In this way, the play-within-a-play lightheartedly satirizes the anguish that earlier plagued the Athenian lovers.

Given the title *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, it is no surprise that one of the main themes of the play is dreams, particularly as they relate to darkness and love. When

morning comes, ending the magical night in the forest, the lovers begin to suspect that their experience in the woods was merely a dream. Theseus suggests as much to Hippolyta, who finds it strange that all the young lovers would have had the *same* dream. In the famous final speech of the play, Puck turns this idea outward, recommending that if audience members did not enjoy the play, they should assume that they have simply been dreaming throughout. This suggestion captures perfectly the delicate, insubstantial nature of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: just as the fairies mended their mischief by sorting out the romantic confusion of the young lovers, Puck accounts for the whimsical nature of the play by explaining it as a manifestation of the subconscious.

### **CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

- a. Who is the King of the Fairies in the play?**
- b. Which character famously declares, "The course of true love never did run smooth"?**
- c. What flower's juice is used as a love potion in the play?**
- d. Who is the character known for being transformed into an ass by Puck?**
- e. In which mythical setting does most of the play take place?**
- f. Who orchestrates the confusion among the lovers by using magical interventions?**

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### **2.2.4 THEMES OF THE PLAY**

#### **Magic**

The fairies' magic, which brings about many of the most bizarre and hilarious situations in the play, is another element central to the fantastic atmosphere of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Shakespeare uses magic both to embody the almost supernatural power of love (symbolized by the love potion) and to create a surreal world. Although the misuse of magic causes chaos, as when Puck mistakenly applies the love potion to Lysander's eyelids, magic ultimately resolves the play's tensions by restoring love to balance among the quartet of Athenian youths. Additionally, the ease with which Puck uses magic to his own ends, as when he reshapes Bottom's head into that of an ass and recreates the voices of Lysander and Demetrius, stands in contrast to the laboriousness and gracelessness of the craftsmen's attempt to stage their play.

## Dreams

As the title suggests, dreams are an important theme in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; they are linked to the bizarre, magical mishaps in the forest. Hippolyta's first words in the play evidence the prevalence of dreams and various characters mention dreams throughout. The theme of dreaming recurs predominantly when characters attempt to explain bizarre events in which these characters are involved: "I have had a dream, past the wit of man to say what / dream it was. Man is but an ass if he go about t'expound this dream," Bottom says, unable to fathom the magical happenings that have affected him as anything but the result of slumber.

Shakespeare is also interested in the actual workings of dreams, in how events occur without explanation, time loses its normal sense of flow, and the impossible occurs as a matter of course; he seeks to recreate this environment in the play through the intervention of the fairies in the magical forest. At the end of the play, Puck extends the idea of dreams to the audience members themselves, saying that, if they have been offended by the play, they should remember it as nothing more than a dream. This sense of illusion and gauzy fragility is crucial to the atmosphere of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, as it helps render the play a fantastical experience rather than a heavy drama.

## Love's Difficulty

"The course of true love never did run smooth," comments Lysander, articulating one of *A Midsummer Night's Dream's* most important themes—that of the difficulty of love (I.i.134). Though most of the conflict in the play stems from the troubles of romance, and though the play involves a number of romantic elements, it is not truly a love story; it distances the audience from the emotions of the characters in order to poke fun at the torments and afflictions that those in love suffer. The tone of the play is so lighthearted that the audience never doubts that things will end happily, and it is therefore free to enjoy the comedy without being caught up in the tension of an uncertain outcome.

The theme of love's difficulty is often explored through the motif of love out of balance—that is, romantic situations in which a disparity or inequality interferes with the harmony of a relationship. The prime instance of this imbalance is the asymmetrical love among the four young Athenians: Hermia loves Lysander, Lysander loves Hermia, Helena loves Demetrius, and Demetrius loves Hermia instead of Helena—a simple numeric imbalance in which two men love the same woman, leaving one woman with too many suitors and one with too few. The play has strong potential for a traditional

outcome, and the plot is in many ways based on a quest for internal balance; that is, when the lovers' tangle resolves itself into symmetrical pairings, the traditional happy ending will have been achieved. Somewhat similarly, in the relationship between Titania and Oberon, an imbalance arises out of the fact that Oberon's coveting of Titania's Indian boy outweighs his love for her. Later, Titania's passion for the ass-headed Bottom represents an imbalance of appearance and nature: Titania is beautiful and graceful, while Bottom is clumsy and grotesque.

#### **CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

- g. What role does magic play in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, according to the passage?**
- h. How does Shakespeare use dreams as a theme in the play?**
- i. According to Lysander, what is a recurring theme in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*?**
- j. What does the passage suggest about the tone of the play?**
- k. How does the play explore the theme of love's imbalance?**

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#### **2.2.5 LET US SUM UP**

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We see that wisdom and sensibility comes out of the foolishness and mockery that prevails at every level of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Lysander and Demetrius learn to differentiate between infatuation and true love. This wisdom brings itself as the positive element at the end of the play.

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#### **2.2.6 FURTHER READING**

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- The Norton Shakespeare, Ed. Stephen Greenblatt. W.W. Norton and Company, Inc. 1997.
- Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England. University of California Press. 1988.
- Shakespeare Reproduced, Eds. Jean Howard and Marion O'Conner. Methuen. 1987.

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#### **2.2.7 ANSWER TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

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- a. Oberon
- b. Lysander
- c. Love-in-idleness (or Violet)

- d. Bottom
- e. Athens (and the nearby forest)
- f. Puck (or Robin Goodfellow)
- g. Magic in the play symbolizes the supernatural power of love and creates a surreal atmosphere. It resolves conflicts by restoring love among the Athenian youths.
- h. Dreams in the play are linked to the bizarre events in the magical forest. Characters mention dreams when trying to explain the strange occurrences, highlighting the play's fantastical elements.
- i. Lysander comments that "the course of true love never did run smooth." This reflects the play's exploration of the difficulty and complications of romantic relationships.
- j. The passage suggests that the play maintains a lighthearted tone despite the conflicts arising from romantic troubles. The audience is assured of a happy ending, allowing them to enjoy the comedic elements without tension.
- k. The play explores love's imbalance through asymmetrical relationships among the four young Athenians: Hermia loves Lysander, Lysander loves Hermia, Helena loves Demetrius, and Demetrius loves Hermia. This disparity creates tension and comedic situations in the play.

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### 2.2.8 MODEL QUESTIONS

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1. Write a brief note on the play *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.
2. Explain the confusion of the lovers. How was it to be straightened out?
3. What is the role of dreams in the play? Elaborate.
4. Discuss the theme of love in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. How does Shakespeare explore different facets of love through the interactions of characters like Hermia, Lysander, Helena, and Demetrius?
5. In what ways does Shakespeare use the motif of dreams and dreaming in the play? Analyze how dreams function as a narrative device and as a reflection of the characters' desires and anxieties.
6. Compare and contrast the characters of Oberon and Titania. How do their motivations and actions drive the plot of the play, particularly in relation to the human characters?
7. Examine the role and significance of the mechanicals (Bottom and his companions)

- in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. How do they contribute to the comedic elements of the play and its overall themes?
8. Discuss the portrayal of gender roles and expectations in the play. How do characters like Hermia, Helena, and Titania challenge or conform to societal norms of their time?
  9. Analyze the role of magic and the supernatural in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. How does Shakespeare use these elements to explore themes of power, manipulation, and transformation?
  10. Explore the theme of illusion versus reality in the play. How do the various misunderstandings and transformations (both literal and metaphorical) blur the lines between what is real and what is imagined?
  11. What is the significance of the play-within-a-play (the mechanicals' performance of "Pyramus and Thisbe")? How does it contribute to the overall structure and themes of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*?
  12. Discuss the portrayal of friendship and loyalty among the characters in the play. How do friendships evolve and change throughout the course of the play, and what role do they play in resolving conflicts?
  13. Evaluate the role of Puck (Robin Goodfellow) in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. How does Puck serve as both a catalyst for the events of the play and as a commentator on the action?

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## UNIT 3: VOLPONE

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### UNIT STRUCTURE

- 3.1 Learning Objectives
- 3.2 Introduction
- 3.3 About the Author
- 3.4 Act wise Summary
- 3.5 Themes
- 3.6 Let us sum up
- 3.7 Further Reading
- 3.8 Answers to Check your Progress
- 3.9 Model questions

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### 3.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- Understand that Volpone is a play which is a savage satire on human capacity vigorously worked out within the alien framework of the ancient Roman custom of captatio.
- Look into all the acts and study the important themes.
- Understand the meaning of satire and its use in the play.

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### 3.2 INTRODUCTION

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*Volpone* is among the greatest comedies of the Jacobean period that never failed to appeal to audiences whenever it was staged- from its first performance in 1605 to its revivals in England and America in the twentieth century. One of the seven deadly sins is the target of Jonson's satire places which places the play in a category different from his 'humour' comedies, through greed is certainly the dominant 'humour' of the play. The Jonsonian nomenclature typical of the characters of the 'humour' comedies is here exclusively associated with beats and birds of prey, implying a certain dehumanization by greed; while it underscores the inhumanity of the characters as well as the moral deformity of the world they move in.



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### 3.3 ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Ben Jonson (1572-1637) stands as a towering figure of English literature, renowned for his wit, satire, and mastery of the dramatic form. Born in London, Jonson's upbringing in a working-class family instilled in him a practical outlook on life that would later influence his writing. Educated at Westminster School, he briefly served as a bricklayer before joining the military, experiences that shaped his robust and often earthy style.

Jonson's literary career blossomed during the vibrant Elizabethan and Jacobean eras, where he became a central figure in London's literary circles. His plays, such as "Volpone," "The Alchemist," and "Bartholomew Fair," are celebrated for their sharp satire, intricate plots, and vivid characters. Unlike his contemporaries, Jonson was meticulous in his craft, advocating for classical principles of unity and decorum in drama.

Beyond his plays, Jonson was a prolific poet, known for his lyricism and keen observations of human nature. His works, including "To Penshurst" and "Song: To Celia," exhibit a versatility that spanned from lofty odes to bawdy jests. Jonson's literary output earned him patronage from the royal court, including King James I, and cemented his legacy as one of the foremost writers of the English Renaissance.

Despite acclaim, Jonson's life was marked by personal challenges, including financial struggles and occasional controversies. His robust personality and uncompromising principles often led to clashes with peers and authorities. Nevertheless, Jonson's legacy endures not only for his literary achievements but also for his profound influence on subsequent generations of writers, who continue to draw inspiration from his wit, wisdom, and enduring craftsmanship.

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### 3.4 ACT WISE SUMMARY

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#### ACT I

Act I presents a whole hierarchy of parasites. While the deformed dependants of Volpone's household represent the lower class of parasites, Mosca who later prides himself on his inborn parasitic talents, is the cleverest being the architect of a series of iniquitous plots. Volpone who fleeces the would-be inheritors of his ill-gotten wealth by his valetudinarian imposture is himself a parasite as much as 'the contriver of all harms' while the repulsive legacy hunters driven by their ruling passion of greed are all in their different ways encircling Volpone with their parasitic tentacles. As Volpone fools and fleeces by his monstrous imposture, Mosca provides delight by the comic irony of his

words as he deals with each legacy hunter-pouring sarcasm on lawyers by derisive encomium on the profession, painting the very senility of Corbaccio by describing the imaginary decrepitude of his patron, prompting Corvino to abuse Volpone whom he has come to praise and insinuating a possible sharing of the 'gallant wife' of the jealous merchant who has suggested a conspiratorial partnership in wealth. The hyperbolic tone of patron and parasite suggests an intensity of action and the verve with which Jonson's characters plunge into the activities of the moment- a zest that is underscored by their comic commentary that reminds us of the Chorus of the Greek plays during the interval between the departure of one visitor and the arrival of the next.

## ACT II

The second act introduces the protagonist of the sub-plot -Sir Politic Would-be, a silly English aristocrat travelling abroad observing men, manners and cities. His pretentious, statesman-like airs, his pride in the 'engines' of his own invention and his claims to cleverness are a contrast to his hero-worship of mountebanks which serves to bring out the essential fatuity of his mind. His constant dread of getting trapped in some sinister plot renders him all the more ludicrous. The dialogue between Sir Politic and Peregrine affords the dramatist the opportunity to prepare the audience for the mountebank's performance that is to follow. Through the device of Volpone's con, Jonson makes his satiric commentary on greed, using dramatic irony, situational irony, verbal irony, and repetition. As Mosca points out to Volpone before Voltore's entrance, "if you died today, What large return would come of all his ventures." It is sound strategy, if Volpone is really ill. But since Volpone is not ill (and since we know this) the behavior of each character seems ridiculous. Like the thief who is the victim of thieving, each character attempts to deceive themselves into money, by pretending they care about Volpone's health, but they are instead deceived out of their own. And we know they are allying, because though each character reiterates the same well wishes, they also celebrate being named his heir or, like Corbaccio, express approval over his long list of worsening "symptoms." It is clear that their concern is not that Volpone gets better, but that he gets worse; and what is amusing is that their hypocrisy is being exposed (at least to the audience) by someone even more adept at lying than they are.

Volpone and Mosca are conscious, too, of the "moral" aspect of their game; and they emerge, by contrast to the three legacy hunters, as eminently likable. They are no worse than the legacy hunters; if Volpone is deceitful and immoral in his pursuit of personal

gratification, then no less so are they; and if Mosca is servile and obsequious toward Volpone, well, they are too. And Volpone and Mosca are better, in that their motivations are purer; not money for money's sake, but money for the sake of pleasure, or for the sake of the pleasure of getting it—they both enjoy their machinations immensely. The repetition of would-be heirs, from different walks of life (lawyer, merchant, nobleman), indicate that greed is a characteristic of the society as whole; again, Volpone is valorized because he is the only honest about his greed.

Volpone and Mosca are also both conscious of the various ironies of the game, and comment upon them. Volpone remarks on the situational irony of Corbaccio's attempt to become his heir when Corbaccio is in fact the one who is near death. And Mosca's speech to Voltore about how much Volpone admires the "legal profession" is an example of verbal irony, in that Mosca gives a speech in praise of lawyers which actually insults them, as the things Volpone supposedly "admires" are essentially the ability to deceive and equivocate; it is also dramatic irony because Voltore doesn't know that Volpone is a deceiver himself and therefore would probably admire this deceitfulness. This consciousness draws us closer to Volpone and Mosca, because we share it too; it makes us their co-conspirators, as does the frequent use of *asides*, or comments made directly to the audience, which set up a conspiring atmosphere between the characters and the play's spectators (when Corbaccio offers a pill to help Volpone "sleep", Volpone says aside "Aye, his last sleep, if he would take it. Volpone and Mosca play the role of a "fool", by Nano's definition, well. They too, make a living from their wit, and their way with words. They also possess (and share with us) an outsider's viewpoint on society; the knowledge that Volpone is not, in fact, ill, separates both them and us from Corvino, Corbaccio, and Voltore. And, like the fool, they do not harm the people they mock; the three prospective heirs are not made impoverished by their deceit, and no innocents are hurt.

### **ACT III**

In the street, Mosca delivers a soliloquy in which he expresses his joy at the success of his plot. He calls himself a "subtle snake" (3.1.6) and talks of falling in love with himself. He delights in being a parasite because he believes that thus he is not of this world. He elaborates on the true art of parasitism, which is not merely begging for money, but rather manipulating people. This skill, he says, must be natural, for it cannot be learned. The themes of Parasitism and Animalization dominate Mosca's soliloquy. Indeed, Mosca refers to himself as a "subtle snake" (3.1.6) and talks derogatorily of other parasites who

have only "court-dog tricks" (3.1.20) and can only "lick away a moth" (3.1.22). This opening scene of Act Three is one of the only in the play in which Mosca shows his true self. In nearly every other scene of the play, Mosca feigns his emotions for the sake of deception. However, in this scene, there is no one for whom Mosca can pretend. Thus, his happiness here is real. That his genuine happiness stems from the deception of others proves that he is utterly despicable.

In Act 3 scene i, Mosca makes the case for natural-born parasites being the world's true movers and shakers and other parasites being their zanies, or servants. His use of the word "zanies" (3.1.33) draws a parallel to the mountebank scene in which Volpone refers to Nano as a "zany" (2.2.28). What's more, by helping to set up the stage on which Volpone plays the mountebank, Mosca himself is serving as a zany, which, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is one who attends on a mountebank. This opening scene of Act Three, then, marks a turning point of the play - the beginning of Mosca and Volpone's role reversal. That is, in 2.2, Mosca was the zany and Volpone the lead parasite, but by 3.1, Mosca has shown himself to be the true parasite, making Volpone the zany.

Bonario represents one of the more righteous characters in the play. Though Sir Politic has good intentions, he is too misguided for his own good. Still, here we see that even Bonario is capable of being duped by Mosca. Apparently, Bonario's weakness is his fear of losing his father's approval. In this scene, Mosca also reveals that he is of menial birth. This fact becomes important in 5.12 when the Avocatori are handing out punishments. Volpone's love of theater is again apparent at the opening of this scene. Lady Would-be's entrance confirms that Jonson adheres to Aristotle's Unity of Time. In 1.5, Mosca had told Lady Would-be to return in three hours' time. Now, in 3.3, she has.

Volpone and Lady Would-be's exchange is both humorous and meaningful. The comedy of the situation centers around its dramatic irony. Once again, the audience knows something that one of the characters doesn't. In this case, Lady Would-be is unaware that Volpone is referring to her when he talks of a "strange fury" (3.3.41). In terms of deeper meaning, this scene is another display of the dangers of obliviousness. Like her husband, Lady Would-be suffers from an inability to closely observe her situation. Using Volpone to mock her, Jonson is attempting to show his countrymen how ridiculous and disadvantageous it is to have Lady Would-be's lackluster powers of perception.

Corvino's entrance marks the first kink in Mosca's plan. So far, Mosca's every move

has had its desired effect. However, Corvino has come to the house earlier than Mosca expected. Hence his comment "you are come too soon" (3.7.1). As a result, Mosca is forced to hide Bonario in the gallery so that he won't hear Mosca's dealings with Corvino.

In 3.7, Corvino and Celia's interaction is primarily an expression of sadomasochistic desire. As in 2.5, Corvino threatens Celia with gruesome bodily harm if she does not comply with his wishes. However, in contrast to 2.5, Celia is no longer distressed by his threats. In fact, she welcomes them, offering to drink poison and eat burning coals if it might please Corvino. In Elizabethan theater, the language of sadomasochism was often coupled with the language of love. In the case of Corvino and Celia, the last shred of romance is trumped by greed. Though Celia offers herself up to him, saying "I am your martyr" (3.7.107), Corvino cannot bring himself to sacrifice his reputation or his potential fortune. Just before he leaves her, Corvino declares in frustration, "'Sdeath! if she would but speak to him, / And save my reputation, 'twere somewhat;  
/ But spitefully to effect my utter ruin!" (3.7.122-4)

Considering her sadomasochistic desire, Celia's innocence, at least as she professes it, is debatable. However, her righteousness is assured by her argument with Corvino in which she begs him not to ignore heaven and the saints. By taking the side of piety, Celia prefigures herself for redemption, both in the context of Christianity and in the context of the play. In the courthouse scene, Jonson chooses to save Celia from punishment because she has proven her commitment to honor and righteousness here in 3.7. Likewise, Bonario is preserved for his determination to do right, as evidenced by his rescue of Celia in 3.7. The scene 3.7, then, serves as a proving ground for the upstanding characters in the play.

In these scenes, Volpone and Mosca begin to accelerate toward their downfall. Mosca, the former master puppeteer, is increasingly losing control of the play's action. The appearance of Corbaccio and Voltore at the same time marks the second kink in Mosca's plan. At this point, he is only barely managing to appease the "clients." These scenes mark the beginning of the end. In these scenes, Volpone and Mosca begin to accelerate toward their downfall. Mosca, the former master puppeteer, is increasingly losing control of the play's action. The appearance of Corbaccio and Voltore at the same time marks the second kink in Mosca's plan. At this point, he is only barely managing to appease the "clients." These scenes mark the beginning of the end.

#### **ACT IV**

The moral satire of the play becomes somewhat submerged in the Fourth Act, as considerations of plot and tone become more important. Jonson frames the intense confrontation between Volpone, Celia, and Bonario with humorous scenes involving the Politic Would-bes. These scenes help keep the tone of the play somewhat light. We have further development of Sir Politic's character in IV.i; he is not only now vain, he is also greedy. But he is greedy in a completely non-threatening way, and his plans are laughably far-fetched. In a way, he is a very sympathetic character, and he is always the one who pays the greatest price (in ridicule) for his vanity, such as when he has Peregrine read his journal for the day, one of the funniest sections of the play. Only someone with a great degree of self-obsession would record such gems as "I threw three beans over the threshold" and then "at St. Mark's, I urined," and to then expect others to find it interesting. But he doesn't seem to mind, because he doesn't seem to know, that people find his behavior ridiculous.

The Fourth Act is marked by Volpone's near complete disappearance for the play; Mosca takes his place as the driving force behind the plot. Though Mosca has been central throughout the entire play, in the Fourth Act he truly becomes an independent character, arranging to have Lady Politic Would-be testify against Celia. Volpone's absence in the Act can be seen as a symbol of the growing distance between him and the audience; with his attempted rape, he gives up his claim to our sympathy, and this is symbolized by temporarily giving up his place in the play. Mosca fills the vacuum left by Volpone's absence; and his sidekick role is in turn taken up by Voltore. This shift in the focus of the play emphasizes Mosca's independence from Volpone; Mosca now can carry the plot by himself. And this increased independence from Volpone, in terms of the ability to drive the play forward, foreshadows the play's next Act, where Mosca will actually try to usurp Volpone's role in society. Mosca and Voltore's triumph over Celia and Bonario in *The Scrutineo* represents the triumph of stagecraft over truth. We can think of the *Scrutineo* as the stage on which they operate. The *Scrutineo* was the Venetian Senate-building; the Senate was the head governing body of the Venetian state.

As already discussed, the Venetian state was a symbol of decadence and deceit; and the *Scrutineo*, as its center of power, would have had a very strong association with illusion and deceit. Furthermore, it is easy to imagine the scene being staged in such a way that the audience in the theatre (watching *Volpone*) could become part of the audience at the *Scrutineo*, thus making the audience direct spectators of the drama unfolding between the characters, and turning the *Scrutineo* into an actual theatre, with real patrons.

The way Voltore and Mosca go about creating their illusion has similarities with the

way playwrights go about creating theirs, using words and images in a dramatic manner. They do not simply tell a lie; they tell a story. Voltore weaves a tale for the Senate full of characters one might expect to find in a sensationalistic play; the treacherous wife (Celia), the murderous, deceitful, son (Bonario), the innocent, betrayed husband (Corvino) and the deceived father (Corbaccio). Corvino's frequent interjections of salacious details about Celia- "these eyes/Have seen her glued unto that piece of cedar / That fine well- timbered gallant" increases the dramatic tension of the scene, which culminates in a couple of surprising "plot twists": Lady Politic Would-be's condemnation of Celia and Volpone's sudden arrival, looking ill and impotent.

The objections of Bonario and Celia are incorporated into Voltore's narrative, much like the villain into the plot of a play; Voltore uses verbal irony, a device Jonson loved, to ridicule Bonario's suggestion that Volpone be tested for deceit: "Best try him, then, with goads or burning irons; /Put him to the strappado: I have heard, / The rack hath cured the gout." Bonario's comment is framed as just the type of thing a murderous, sick individual like him would say— just the type of dialogue that he would speak. The audience of this play within the play is composed of the four Avocatori, and their increasing anger mirrors our increasing anger; except that we know their anger is based on false beliefs. When one judge observes that "'tis a pity two such prodigies should live," his statement is an example of dramatic irony. He intends to refer to Celia and Bonario, but *we* know that the statement much better describes Volpone and Mosca.

A careful reader would note, however, that in feeling angry at Volpone and Mosca, we are being drawn into a certain reality in much the same way that the four judges are— through images and words, arranged in a dramatic manner, good characters vying against evil ones, drawing our sympathy, making us involved in their struggle. It could make us very suspicious of the exercise of drama as a whole. Drama seems based on the very same methods of deceit used by Voltore and Mosca. But to say that Voltore and Mosca are dramatists is not to say that all dramatists are like Voltore and Mosca. Jonson, after all, acknowledges in his dedication that many dramatic poets rely on sensationalism to sell their plays, plays that harm the moral good of society. This scene can be viewed as an exercise in how to spot this sensationalism, how to differentiate between the good play and the bad play; plays that deceive and confuse; and plays, like Jonson's, that aim to tell the truth.

As already discussed, the Venetian state was a symbol of decadence and deceit; and the Scrutineo, as its center of power, would have had a very strong association with illusion and deceit. Furthermore, it is easy to imagine the scene being staged in such a way

that the audience in the theatre (watching *Volpone*) could become part of the audience at the Scrutineo, thus making the audience direct spectators of the drama unfolding between the characters, and turning the Scrutineo into an actual theatre, with real patrons.

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the truth.

### CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

- a. Who is the protagonist of the play *Volpone*?
- b. What is the setting of *Volpone*?
- c. Which character pretends to be gravely ill to deceive others and gain their wealth?
- d. Who is Volpone's cunning servant who aids him in his schemes?
- e. Which character is a wealthy merchant duped into believing he will inherit Volpone's fortune?
- f. Who is the wife of Corvino, manipulated by Volpone and Mosca in their schemes?
- g. What crime are Volpone and Mosca ultimately accused of at the end of the play?

### ACT V

The intention of Jonson throughout the play has been to satirize greed in all its forms. At first, Volpone was the instrument of Jonson's satire; he turned the greed of the legacy hunters against itself, creating a situation where greed resulted in not only a complete loss of dignity on the part of the legacy hunters but also, ironically, the loss of the very thing they were seeking to gain: money. But now, Volpone has succumbed to his own form of greed; greed driven by his private desires and appetites for Celia. Because of this, he has defamed two innocent characters, Celia and Bonario. In the moral universe of Jonson's comedy, this transgression cannot go unpunished or uncommented upon; Celia and Bonario were guilty of nothing except dullness; their imprisonment is, to put it simply, "not funny". So Volpone is no longer the instrument of Jonson's satire. In fact, he is now made the target of it, and the attack proceeds, again, through irony.

A central motif in the final act is that of the disguise-made-reality; Volpone has convinced so many people of his lies that his falsehoods now come to stand in the public sphere as truth, with terrible consequences for Volpone. Volpone wishes to be done with his con-game clearly indicates his wish to be done with his con-game, but we receive indications that it will not be so simple, that the lies Volpone has told are too powerful and too widely accepted to simply disappear. He returns from the senate complaining of cramps and aches that roughly coincide with those he has been imitating; the "cramp" and the "palsy," which he had mocked Corbaccio for succumbing to in Act I. These may be indications of a guilty conscience; but they also stand as a metaphor for the way in which

Volpone has successfully blurred the line between lies and reality. Again, we can use the metaphor of stagecraft here: in Act IV, Volpone crosses boundary between the "stage" (Volpone's private life) and "reality" (the public realm of the Scrutineo), by carrying his "play" into the world and appearing sick in public. Ironically, it is at this moment that Volpone impulsively decides to kill himself off, and he does it using the medium of the playwright, the written word (the will).

*So when Volpone thinks he is writing himself out of his deceitful game, his "play," he is actually writing himself out of reality altogether. The "exit from reality" occurs when Volpone goes behind the arras, he for a moment becomes a member of the audience of Volpone, the drama written by Ben Jonson; in other words, he is a spectator, not a participant, in his own life. Mosca, at this stage, assumes Volpone's role both as the center of the play's action and as its (admittedly dubious) moral voice; it is he who scolds each legacy hunter in turn for their hypocrisy. Volpone delights-almost sadistically—in the vindictiveness with which Mosca reminds each character of the callous and immoral acts they committed in the pursuit of Volpone's treasure. But the irony of the situation is encapsulated by Volpone's statement "Rare, Mosca! How his villainy..."*

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Peregine's final scene with Sir Politic is in one sense pure farce, intended to make us laugh. But it also foreshadows more serious events about to occur in the play's main plot, events central to the play's moral satire and didactic purpose. Sir Politic disguises

himself in front of the Mercatori, just as Volpone will disguise himself in front of the Avocatori during the final scene. Politic's "unveiling" to the Mercatori will be echoed in Volpone's own unveiling. And both characters are the victims of an ironic reversal of fortune; whereas Volpone is disinherited by the same trickery he used to disinherit others, Politic will now become "talk for ordinaries," the butt of one of the many gossipy tales he himself is so fond of telling. As we know Jonson likes to identify characters with animals, the choice of tortoise seems particularly apt, being a slow, dim-witted animal, not nearly as attractive as a Fox. And whereas Volpone will manage a Pyrrhic victory by exposing Mosca's deception, Politic is merely jumped upon and abused by the Mercatori.

Peregrine plays a parallel role to Mosca in the subplot, turning Sir Politic's machinations against himself; but Peregrine is portrayed sympathetically. Whereas Mosca is eventually shamed in front of the Mercatori, and made to pay the harshest punishment than that handed out to Volpone. Politic's situation is a farce, however, both because of the complete loss of dignity and humiliation to which he is subjected, and the fact that this loss of dignity is not in any real way harmful. But this is appropriate; in fact, if it results in him leaving Venice, it may very well be beneficial for him. Volpone's will not be so lucky; Jonson's satire will be much more harsh with him, his tone more severe. We can see that this is appropriate; Sir Politic has not, in fact, done harm to anyone, whereas Volpone has endangered the lives of two innocent people.

This scene also identifies Politic's place within the beast-fable that has been an undertone throughout the play. If we remember from Act One, we have a Fox (Volpone), circled by a Fly (Mosca), and three carrion birds<sup>7</sup>—the vulture (Voltore), the crow (Corvino) and the raven (Corbaccio). Politic, on the other hand, is a tortoise: a slow, dim-witted animal who carries its house on its back. Similarly, Politic is dim-witted, slow and English, no matter how hard he tries to be Venetian. He is thus a symbol of someone out of his element; amongst the cunning and carnivorous creatures of the main plot, the tortoise is no match, and will eventually retreat back into its shell, as Sir Politic seems ready to do at the end of the play. Thus, though Sir Politic is an object of fun, he is also an object of sympathy, especially for the English audiences of the play. Contrast this to the treatment the Venetians Volpone and Mosca will receive, and we begin to suspect that Sir Politic's "English-ness" gives him a preferential status; as the character the audience probably identifies most closely with (by virtue of his nationality), he is portrayed as something of an innocent; it is the foreigners who are viewed as intentionally evil, and worthy of punishment.

The issue of social class had been treated indirectly in the play through the character

of Mosca, forced to be Volpone's parasite due to his poverty; but Jonson deals with it explicitly here. The Elizabethans had a fairly rigid conception of social class, certainly by today's standards. Volpone remarks it is a pity that Mosca was not a born a *clarissimo*, because he plays the part so well; Mosca replies aside that he may very well keep his "made one" (V.v.4), turning Volpone's comment into a piece of dramatic irony. Mosca puns on the word "made", hoping to be a self- "made" man, and achieving it through "manufacture" and "fabrication", two other senses of the word "made". This implies that Mosca's social status is now fake, artificial. So Volpone's lies have resulted in the destabilization of the social order. This destabilization is reinforced by the anger Voltore express about being dispossessed by "a parasite! A slave!" (V.vii.1), talking to himself as he walks along the street, seemingly obsessed by it, almost driven to insanity. It is symbolized by Volpone's own decision to effectively trade in his identity as a nobleman for one as a *commandadore*, all for the sake of the pleasure of taunting someone for having failed to inherit an estate- ironic (situationally), because he loses that very same estate in the process.

In the Elizabethan world-view, the social order embodied in the class system is fundamentally linked to the order of the universe, making any destabilization in the class system profoundly disturbing and in need of rectification. But the attitude of the play towards class more complex and potentially contradictory; after all, the people mainly upset by Mosca's inheritance are the legacy hunters, who are morally dubious; and Mosca behaves no differently than any of the characters of a higher class level than him. In short, it is difficult to determine whether Jonson endorses the Elizabethan idea of class, or actually criticizes it. Further indications will be given in the play's final scenes; an essay written on this question would be a challenging but interesting one.

The way Jonson metes out punishment to his characters bears a resemblance to one of Lady Politic's less favorite Italian poets: Dante Alighieri (III.iv). The greedy Corbaccio has his estate taken away from him, Corvino, who behaves like an ass during the entire play, is metaphorically transformed into one, and Volpone, who pretended to be bedridden in order to satisfy his insatiable lusts, will now be bedridden permanently, still unable to satisfy his desires for Celia (or anything else for that matter). This fitting of the punishment to the crime in a poetic, imaginative way is similar to Dante's device of *contrapasso* which he employs in *Inferno* (Hell), book one of his *Divine Comedy*. The punishments there, and here, are meant to capture the inner essence of the crime itself; in other words, Volpone's greed for pleasure and self- gratification made him a prisoner of his desires, bound to be frustrated in his attempts to achieve them, long before he was ever

put into chains. The judge, after administering these punishments, emphasizes their didactic purpose: "Take heart, and love to study 'em" (V.xii.150), he says of the punishments, and his comparison of vices to "beasts"(151) brings to mind the "fable" aspect of Volpone, congruent with the idea that the judge is giving us a tidy, neat moral to the story.

However, there are some problems with the ending of *Volpone*, which may serve to contradict the moral message that Jonson has fairly straightforwardly pursued up until now. There is the problem of the protagonist. This is a comedy, and protagonists in comedies should generally end up happily. The only characters who in fact end up happy are Celia and Bonario; but these characters are comparatively thin; we invest much less emotion in them than we do in Volpone, who seems a much more reasonable choice for protagonist. But then the ending is very severe for a comedy, because we are not really given full-blooded characters to sympathize with, *and* cheer on to a happy resolution. Such harshness is mandated by Jonson's purpose in writing the play, which was not only to entertain but also to educate. Though Jonson allows Volpone and Mosca the spotlight for most of the play, the final scene is meant to tell us that however interesting they may be, and however sympathetic they may appear, they are still worthy of the punishment they will eventually find. Volpone appears especially sympathetic towards the end of the play, when the only person he trusts betrays him. And he does manage the redeeming act of revealing himself, and thus saving Bonario and Celia, though this may be motivated more by a desire to get back at Mosca or to reassert his own identity as from any moral motivations. We can say that it in fact strengthens the moral message of the play that a sympathetic character gets punished for his vice, because our sympathy makes us identify with Volpone, and search for that vice within ourselves. But the unmitigated catastrophe of the situation for Volpone—he is going to jail for the rest of his life—has been said to give the play tragic undertones.

Another problem arises with the judges themselves. They are given the job of handing out the punishments at the end of the play, distribution Jonson's poetic justice. But Jonson satirizes them thoroughly in their treatment of Mosca. While they think Mosca has money, they treat him with the utmost respect and courtesy, and one judge hopes to marry his daughter to him. But as soon as it turns out that he has none, he is subjected to the worst punishment of any offender, "for being of no birth or blood" (V.xii.112). The 3rd judge becomes the victim of *dramatic irony* when he says that Volpone should be "taught [how] to bear himself/ Towards a person of his [an equal or higher] rank" (V.xii.79–80). Rank assumes supreme importance at this stage of the play; but rank seems

to be ultimately determined by money. Because of his harsh punishment and his conflict with Volpone in the final scene, Mosca is a chief candidate for the play's antagonist; but the behavior of the judges does not refute, but in fact confirms, Mosca's contention, in Act Three, that the "wise" world is "nothing but parasites". While the judges believe that they can possibly gain wealth from him, they treat him kindly; as soon as it is clear they cannot, they abuse him. Jonson's problem with the judges becomes clear; he wants his play to affirm the values cherished by Celia and Bonario, those of honor and religiosity. He desires his use of irony to be *stable*, irony employed against a certain set of values—those of Volpone (see Act I.i)—in favor of the values of Celia and Bonario; it is a conservative form of irony, in that it harkens back to an older idea of virtue, and attacks the modern ideas of Volpone.

Keep in mind that the Venetian state, as Jonson portrays it (and we know this closely mirrored his view of English society at the time) was run through with parasitism from top to bottom; everyone was a Mosca, in Jonson's eyes, or at least everyone who had influence, even symbols of wisdom such as the judges. But an ending where Celia and Bonario are punished and Volpone and Mosca escape free would have been contrary to the play's didactic purpose; showing virtue losing out to vice doesn't make virtue seem the more favorable option of the two. So Jonson is forced to compromise his unremittingly negative portrait of Venetian society in order to accommodate his need to have Celia and Bonario win out at the end. This compromise may explain a dissatisfaction produced by the ending, its feeling of being too artificial, and not "of a piece" with the rest of the play.

#### **CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

- h. What literary technique does Jonson employ to emphasize Sir Politic's downfall in the subplot?**
- i. How does Jonson use animal symbolism in Volpone to characterize the main characters?**
- j. According to the play's moral framework, what poetic justice does Jonson enact on Volpone?**
- k. What does Jonson suggest about social class in Volpone?**
- l. Why does Jonson's treatment of the judges in the final scene add to the play's satire?**

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### 3.5 THEMES

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One of the most important themes in *Volpone* is avarice, which refers to greed that extends not only to money and material possessions but also to power and status. From the very beginning of the play, we observe that each character seeks to attain the objects of his desire without any consideration of the consequences of such a pursuit to himself or others. Thus, in spite of being a nobleman, Volpone himself attempts to dupe the three legacy hunters and revels in being able to outwit them in a stratagem that is driven by the greed for money. The absurd levels to which Corvino, Corbaccio and Voltore are willing to debase themselves in their misplaced hope of inheriting Volpone's fortune reveals the risks to which one stands exposed if he chooses to blindly follow material desires without applying reason or good sense to such an enterprise. In a comedic parallel to the main plot, the sub-plot involving Sir and Lady Politic Would-Be also becomes a dramatic device for representing the pitfalls of uncritical ambition and greed. Thus, while Lady Politic is ridiculous and pathetic in her attempt to ingratiate herself with Volpone, going even to the extent of offering sexual favours in the hope of inheriting his property, her husband's pretensions to social grace are hilarious in the way they cause him to fall prey to Peregrine's trick. While Volpone and Mosca offer brilliantly satirical commentary on the gullibility of such foolish characters, they are themselves also driven by the same forceful greed that they mock in their victims. Volpone's reckless indulgence in sensual pleasures – food, wealth, entertainment, sex – remains comical to the extent that it propels the dramatic action through a series of amusing situations and exposes the follies in the characters that surround him. But when he pursues his sensual instincts to the point of committing sexual violence on Celia, the situation no longer remains merely comical but turns dangerous as the ugly face of avarice is exposed. Similarly, when Mosca decides to double-cross Volpone in order to gain custody over half of his property, priding himself on his cunning and using intrigue as a means of self-promotion just like his master, it is greed that fuels his actions and ultimately becomes both their undoing. Volpone's own words, "What a rare punishment/Is avarice to itself", ultimately turn into an ironic comment on his own actions in the final dramatic reversal of his fortunes.

Closely aligned with the theme of avarice are the themes of disguise, ignorance, appearance and reality. The action of the play unfolds through a series of intrigues based on disguises, which are mostly orchestrated by Volpone and Mosca to get the better off their dupes. Thus, the primary ploy through which the characters are brought together is Volpone's disguise of being a rich man on his deathbed. This in turn motivates the fortune hunters to feign loyalty and generosity towards Volpone and exposes them to financial

ruin. The dramatic tension is built here by setting up an opposition between two sets of characters, both pretending to be what they are not and using deception as a means of satisfying their greed. While Volpone's disguise as a mountebank functions as a highly entertaining episode in his successful deception of Celia, things turn threatening when he gives up his disguise of being old and ailing and tries to force himself upon her. The tension between appearance and reality also manifests itself in more serious ways when Bonario and Celia, the only two truly virtuous characters in the play, are very easily charged with promiscuity and murderous intent through the machinations of Mosca. The underlying theme of the miscarriage of justice is one that emerges as a potentially tragic outcome of the comical game of disguise and deception that Volpone and Mosca have been playing. In fact, abstract notions like honour, conscience and chastity, which Celia invokes in her pleas to Volpone, seem to have very little currency in a social context where even the gatekeepers of law and justice seem to be just as gullible and susceptible to false appearances as the subjects whose interests they are in charge of safeguarding. The ignorance and lack of self-knowledge that in minor characters like Sir Politic Would-Be is simply a comical character trait becomes potentially threatening and ultimately self-destructive in characters like Volpone and Mosca as both carry their game too far in their proud self-confidence in their own wits and their relentless pursuit of material goals. In an instance of poetic justice, the very force that ensured the duo's success throughout the play – their combined intelligence and greed – also pulls them apart and becomes the final cause of their ruin. The play implicitly examines the lack of trust and loyalty in interpersonal relationships in a social context where the only means and index of success and happiness seems to be the self-serving achievement of material pleasure. Thus, be it Corvino's wild insecurity about his wife's faithfulness or Lady Politic Would-Be's ridiculous doubts about her husband's, Corbaccio's willingness to disinherit his son or Corvino's to sell Celia's body for his own profit, Mosca's double-crossing ways of climbing up the social ladder or Volpone's relentless exploitation of other people's weaknesses and ignorance, the play presents the picture of a society where everyone seems to be motivated by a selfish desire for personal gain.

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### 3.6 LET US SUM UP

We see that thematically, the play *Volpone* is all about greed. Every action of the characters Volpone, Mosca, Voltore, Corbaccio, and Corvino is motivated by greed. From the opening of the play, the theme of greed is clear. Volpone is shown praising his gold using religious imagery. Class relations in *Volpone* as a reflection of early 17th century social and economic structures in England.

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### 3.7 FURTHER READING

- Barish, Jonas A. *The Double Plot in 'Volpone.'* Modern Philology 51 (1953): 83-92.

- Marchitell, Howard. *Desire and Domination in Volpone*. Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900 31 (1991): 287-308.
- Jonson, Ben. *Volpone*. Ed. J. D. Rea. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1919.
- Jonson, Ben. *Volpone and Other Plays*. Ed. Michael Jamieson. New York: Penguin Books, 1966.

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### **3.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

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- a. Volpone
- b. Venice, Italy
- c. Volpone
- d. Mosca
- e. Voltore
- f. Celia
- g. Fraud or attempted murder (accept either).
- h. Jonson uses dramatic irony to underscore Sir Politic's humiliation when he is exposed in front of the Mercatori.
- i. Jonson likens Volpone to a fox (cunning and sly), Mosca to a fly (parasitic and opportunistic), and Sir Politic to a tortoise (slow-witted and out of place).
- j. Volpone's punishment is fittingly ironic: after feigning illness and manipulating others, he ends up bedridden and unable to achieve his desires.
- k. Jonson critiques the rigidity and hypocrisy of social class, showing how characters like Mosca manipulate their way into higher echelons while traditional elites suffer ironic fates.
- l. Jonson satirizes the judges' hypocrisy by showing their respect for wealth and rank over justice, contrasting them sharply with the virtuous characters like Celia and Bonario.

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### **3.9 MODEL QUESTIONS**

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1. Write a brief note on the play *Volpone*.
2. Who is Volpone? Discuss.
3. What is the dramatic significance of the animal names of Volpone, Mosca, and the three birds of prey?

4. Discuss the theme of deception in "Volpone." How do characters like Volpone, Mosca, and others use deceit to achieve their goals? Provide examples from the play to support your answer.
5. Examine the character of Volpone. How does Jonson present him as a complex figure, blending elements of cunning intelligence and moral corruption? What does Volpone's behavior reveal about the play's exploration of greed and ambition?
6. Compare and contrast the relationships between Volpone and Mosca, and Volpone and the legacy hunters (Corbaccio, Corvino, Voltore). How do these relationships evolve throughout the play, and what do they reveal about Jonson's views on human nature and greed?
7. Discuss the role of women in "Volpone." How characters like Celia and Lady are Would-be portrayed, and what functions do they serve in the thematic exploration of desire and deception in the play?
8. Analyze the satirical elements in "Volpone." How does Jonson use satire to critique the social and moral values of his time? Focus on specific scenes or characters to illustrate your points.
9. Explore the theme of justice in "Volpone." How is justice depicted in the play, especially in relation to the characters' actions and motivations? Does Jonson ultimately suggest that justice prevails, or is it undermined by human greed and manipulation?
10. Examine the significance of the play's setting in Venice. How does Venice as a backdrop contribute to the themes of disguise, deception, and intrigue in "Volpone"?
11. Discuss the role of disguise and impersonation in "Volpone." How do characters like Volpone and Mosca use disguise to manipulate others, and what does Jonson suggest about the nature of identity and appearance versus reality in the play?
12. Analyze the ending of "Volpone." How does Jonson resolve the conflicts and themes of the play in the final act? What does the fate of the characters, particularly Volpone and Mosca, suggest about the consequences of their actions?
13. Consider the significance of language and wordplay in "Volpone." How does Jonson use language, including puns and wit, to develop characters and advance the plot? Discuss the role of verbal trickery in relation to the themes of deception and manipulation in the play.

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**UNIT 4 JOHN WEBSTER : THE DUTCHESS OF MALFI**

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**UNIT STRUCTURE**

- 4.1 Learning Objectives
- 4.2 Introduction
- 4.3 About the author John Webster (1578 – 1632)
- 4.4 Dutchess of Malfi text analysis
- 4.5 Themes of Dutchess of Malfi
- 4.6 Summary of Dutchess of Malfi
- 4.7 Let us sum up
- 4.8 Further Reading
- 4.9 Answer to Check your Progress
- 4.10 Model Questions

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**4.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

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After learning this unit you will be able to understand:

- You will be able to feel like morality and ethics hurt you way more than they help you.
- You will be able to understand two key themes in the play which are corruption and class.
- This play that is filled with death and suffering.

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**4.2 INTRODUCTION**

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The Duchess of Malfi (1623) is a play by playwright John Webster. It follows the Duchess of Amalfi as she is spied on, tortured, and eventually murdered by her brothers for disobeying them. The play is inspired by real events that occurred in Italy in the early 1500s. *The Duchess of Malfi* is a revenge tragedy. Giovanna d'Aragona was the real-life Duchess of Amalfi, and was widowed at the early age of 19 in 1498. She fell in love with her steward, Antonio of Bologna, and married him in secret, bearing him three children before her brothers discovered the truth and supposedly murdered her for it.

From this perspective, the play's title contains the two things most central to the play's antagonist's atrocious behavior: the land of Amalfi and the Duchess herself. The play's full title, *The Tragedy of the Duchess of Malfi*, presents an interesting conundrum as to what type of tragedy befalls and to whom. The *Duchess of Malfi* summary ends with intense violence. The Cardinal murders his mistress after confessing his crime. Finally, Bosola kills the Cardinal but he and Ferdinand kill each other.

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### **4.3 ABOUT THE AUTHOR JOHN WEBSTER (1578 – 1632)**

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John Webster (1578 – 1632) was an English Jacobean dramatist best known for his tragedies *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*, which are often seen as masterpieces of the early 17th-century English stage. His life and career overlapped with Shakespeare's.

Webster's life is obscure and the dates of his birth and death are not known. His father, a carriage maker also named John Webster, married a blacksmith's daughter named Elizabeth Coates on 4 November 1577 and it is likely that Webster was born not long after, in or near London. The family lived in St Sepulchre's parish. His father John and uncle Edward were Freemen of the Merchant Taylors' Company and Webster attended Merchant Taylors' School in Suffolk Lane, London. On 1 August 1598, "John Webster, lately of the New Inn" was admitted to the Middle Temple, one of the Inns of Court; in view of the legal interests evident in his dramatic work, this may be the playwright. Webster married 17-year-old Sara Peniall on 18 March 1605 at St Mary's Church, Islington. A special licence was needed to permit a wedding in Lent, as Sara was seven months pregnant. Their first child, John Webster III, was baptised at the parish of St Dunstan-in-the-West on 8 March 1606. Bequests in the will of a neighbour who died in 1617, indicate that other children were born to him.

Most of what is otherwise known of him relates to his theatrical activities. Webster was still writing plays in the mid-1620s, but Thomas Heywood's *Hierarchie of the Blessed Angels* (licensed 7 November 1634) speaks of him in the past tense, implying he was then dead.

There is no known portrait of Webster. By 1602, Webster was working with teams of playwrights on history plays, most of which were never printed. They included a tragedy, *Caesar's Fall* (written with Michael Drayton, Thomas Dekker, Thomas Middleton and Anthony Munday), and a collaboration with Dekker, *Christmas Comes but Once a Year* (1602). With Dekker he also wrote *Sir Thomas Wyatt*, which was printed in 1607 and had probably been first performed in 1602. He worked with Dekker again on two city comedies, *Westward Ho* in 1604 and *Northward Ho* in 1605. Also in 1604, he adapted John Marston's *The Malcontent* for staging by the King's Men.

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### **4.4 DUTCHESS OF MALFI TEXT ANALYSIS**

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

avoid a degrading association with a social inferior. Suspicious of her, they hire Bosola to spy on her. She elopes with Antonio and bears him three children secretly. Bosola eventually discovers that the Duchess is pregnant but does not know who the father is.

Ferdinand, shown by now to be a depraved lunatic, 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, and 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 nearby town. The Cardinal hears of the plan, instructs Bosola to banish the two lovers, and sends soldiers to capture them. Antonio escapes with their eldest son, but the Duchess, her maid, and her two younger children are returned to Malfi and die at the hands of Bosola's executioners, who are under Ferdinand's orders. This experience leads Bosola to turn against the brothers, and he decides to take up the cause of "revenge for the Duchess of Malfi" (5.2).

The Cardinal confesses his part in the killing of the Duchess to his mistress, Julia, then murders her with a poisoned Bible. Bosola overhears the Cardinal plotting to kill him, so he visits the darkened chapel to kill the Cardinal at his prayers. Instead, he mistakenly kills Antonio, who has just returned to Malfi to attempt a reconciliation with the Cardinal. Bosola then stabs the Cardinal, who 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 fortune. The son's decision is in spite of his father's explicit wish that he "fly the court of princes", a corrupt and increasingly deadly environment.

The conclusion is controversial for some readers because they find reason to believe the inheriting son is not the rightful heir of the Duchess. The play briefly mentions a son who is the product of her first marriage and would therefore have a stronger claim to the duchy. Other scholars believe the mention of a prior son is just a careless error in the text.

### **Summary**

The *Duchess of Malfi* revolves around the life of the Duchess. Furthermore, the Duchess is a young widow and she begins to love Antonio. Moreover, Antonio is a lower-class man. Duke Ferdinand and the Cardinal are the brothers of the Duchess. Furthermore, these brothers are evil and disapprove of Antonio. However, their marriage takes place in secret. Also, they have three children.

The Duchess and Antonio try to escape the danger. Antonio and their eldest child are successful in escaping. However, Bosola, the servant of the Duchess, betrays her.

Consequently, she and the other two children face execution. Bosola turns against Ferdinand and the Cardinal due to this injustice. He then decides to take revenge. The Duchess of Malfi summary ends with intense violence. The Cardinal murders his mistress after confessing his crime. Finally, Bosola kills the Cardinal but he and Ferdinand kill each other.

The Duchess of Malfi summary takes place in Italy. One of the most important The Duchess of Malfi characters is the Duchess herself. This play takes place in sixteenth-century Malfi. The Duchess is a young widow and has two brothers. These two brothers are Ferdinand and the Cardinal. These brothers visit their sister. Antonio is a lower-class man who manages the household.

Before leaving the Duchess, her brother Ferdinand asks Bosola to spy on her. This spying was to ensure that she does not marry and remains chaste. Showing reluctance at first, Bosola agrees to spy for Ferdinand. Ferdinand and the Cardinal tell their sister that remarriage is not proper. She insists that she will not remarry. However, she sets a plan to propose to Antonio after her brothers left. Consequently, she and Antonio end up marrying. Nine months later the Duchess is pregnant. Bosola tries to prove himself by providing her with apricots. There was this belief that apricots can induce labour. The Duchess becomes sick after consuming those apricots.

Bosola writes a letter to the Duchess's brothers informing them about the child. The brothers become incensed after learning this news. Ferdinand grows quite angry while the Cardinal maintains his calm. Ferdinand, however, refuses to take action until he knows the father's identity.

Antonio and the Duchess later had two more children. Ferdinand surprises the Duchess and she tells him about her marriage. Moreover, Ferdinand warns her not to reveal the name of her lover or else terrible violence would result.

The Duchess makes a false accusation that Antony had stolen from her. Most noteworthy, her aim behind this was to protect Antony. Consequently, the banishing of Antony takes place to Ancona.

Out of town, Bosola receives a threatening letter from Ferdinand. As a result, the Duchess asks Antonio to leave her along with the oldest child. Soon afterwards, the Duchess and the children became captives.

Now things turn ugly in the end. Ferdinand tortures the Duchess who is now a captive. Bosola asks Ferdinand to stop his torture, but to no success. Ferdinand then sends executioners to strangle the Duchess. Her children also meet their death. Bosola then decides to take revenge. The cardinal also kills his mistress after revealing his murder involvement.

The *Duchess of Malfi* summary themes take a dark turn towards the end. Bosola is successful in killing the Cardinal. However, both Bosola and Ferdinand later kill one another. At the end, Antonio and the oldest son return and the son becomes heir to Malfi.

### **ACT 1**

Antonio Bologna, who has recently returned to Malfi from France, describes to his friend Delio the workings of the French court. The melancholy malcontent Daniel de Bosola enters and is spurned by his former employer, the Cardinal. After Ferdinand, the Cardinal's brother, banters with the courtiers, Antonio delivers a speech of enthusiastic admiration in praise of the Duchess of Malfi, a young and attractive widow. The Duchess's two brothers, Ferdinand and the Cardinal, both deliver a stern admonition to the Duchess of Malfi not to marry again, and Ferdinand engages Daniel de Bosola as his spy to monitor the Duchess's marital status. The Duchess, however, soon reveals she is in love with Antonio, her steward. In defiance of her brothers' orders, the couple celebrates a chamber wedding, with the maid Cariola as their witness.

### **ACT 2**

Nine months later, Daniel de Bosola arrives at the court with some apricots to test whether or not the Duchess of Malfi is pregnant. The Duchess experiences a sharp reaction to the fruit and withdraws. Antonio orders all the courtiers to remain in their own quarters, owing to a disturbance and theft at the palace. Cariola tells him the Duchess has given birth to a son. In semi-darkness, Bosola and Antonio Bologna exchange aggressive insults. Departing, Antonio accidentally drops a piece of paper on which he has cast his newborn son's horoscope. Retrieving it, Bosola vows to inform the Duchess's brothers that Antonio is the child's father. Meanwhile, in Rome, the Cardinal entertains his mistress Julia, who is the courtier Castruccio's wife. The Cardinal and Ferdinand receive Bosola's letter revealing the birth of a son to the Duchess, and Ferdinand explodes with rage.

### **ACT 3**

Two years have passed. Ferdinand proposes the Duchess of Malfi marry Count Malatesta, but the Duchess dismisses this suggestion. Ferdinand then secures from Daniel de Bosola a skeleton key for the door of the Duchess's bedchamber. In the following scene he covertly enters the chamber and threatens the Duchess. Agitated, the Duchess bids Antonio Bologna to flee to Ancona. To explain his sudden departure she fabricates a story that he has cheated on his accounts. Taking Bosola into her confidence, she confesses she has had three



children with Antonio. He suggests she pretend she is going on a pilgrimage to the shrine at Loreto, located near Ancona. When she and the children arrive at Loreto, a dumb show, or pantomime, dramatizes the installation of the Cardinal as a military commander, as well as the banishment of Antonio, the Duchess, and their children by the state of Ancona—all arranged by the Cardinal. The Duchess and Antonio bid each other a sad farewell, with Antonio headed now to Milan. Bosola arrests the Duchess, who is now to be held in prison at her brothers' orders.

#### **ACT 4**

Angered by the Duchess of Malfi's fortitude in prison, Ferdinand arranges to meet with her in total darkness, for he has sworn never to see her again. He presents her with a dead man's hand, implying it is the limb of Antonio Bologna. Then Daniel de Bosola brings up the lights and draws back a curtain, revealing a collection of wax figures that simulate Antonio and the children in death. Ferdinand continues with his sadistic campaign to drive the Duchess to madness and despair. From the local hospital he assembles a group of madmen, who jabber at the Duchess but fail to drive her mad. Bosola now enters, disguised as an old tomb-maker. Accompanied by executioners, he orders the deaths of the Duchess, Cariola, and the Duchess's children by strangling. Ferdinand enters to survey the slaughter. His bizarre reactions hint he is sliding into insanity. Meanwhile, Bosola experiences a wave of pity and remorse.

#### **ACT 5**

The Cardinal uses his influence to strip Antonio Bologna of some of his land, and Antonio makes plans to confront the corrupt prelate, or church official. Meanwhile, Ferdinand has begun to suffer from lycanthropy, a disease that has him believing he is a wolf. The Cardinal pretends to Daniel de Bosola not to know about the Duchess of Malfi's death. He commissions Bosola to track down Antonio in Milan and murder him. Julia and Bosola flirt with each other, but Julia, of whom the Cardinal has wearied, is soon disposed of when the Cardinal orders her to kiss a poisoned Bible. Near the Duchess's grave, Antonio and Delio hear the ominous forebodings of an echo from a ghostly voice. In a fast-moving scene, full of confusion, Bosola accidentally stabs Antonio, whom he mistakes for the Cardinal. In the play's final scene Bosola delivers death blows to the Cardinal and Ferdinand and is himself wounded mortally. In his dying speech he exclaims that mankind exists in a "deep pit of darkness."

### CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

- a. Who is the titular character in *\*The Duchess of Malfi\**?
- b. What is the relationship between the Duchess and her brothers?
- c. What is the fate of the Duchess's first husband?
- d. What happens to the Duchess's children at the end of the play?
- e. What role does Bosola play in the tragedy of the Duchess?

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### 4.5 THEMES OF DUTCHESS OF MALFI

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#### **Corruption:**

Corruption is rife in *The Duchess of Malfi*. Webster particularly showcases this through the character of the Cardinal. He is known as such because he is a Cardinal in the Catholic Church, a position in which one is expected to be upstanding and moral. However, the Cardinal has little regard for morals, behaving how he likes instead of how he should. For example, he engages in an affair with a married woman and then murders her when she discovers his and Ferdinand's plot against their sister. He kills his lover by making her kiss a secretly poisoned Bible.

The Bible represents moral goodness in the Cardinal's faith. Webster's use of it as a murder weapon emphasises how corrupt the Cardinal has become. He is acutely aware of his corruption, doing everything he can to hide it and protect his reputation. He even intends to betray Bosola, who has been consistently loyal to him throughout all their underhand dealings. The below quote, said by Bosola, exemplifies the Cardinal's personality.

Some fellows, they say, are possessed with the devil, but this great fellow were able to possess the greatest devil and make him worse. (Act 1)

#### **Class:**

Class also plays a significant role in *The Duchess of Malfi*. Other than betraying her brothers' wishes, one of the key reasons why the Duchess's marriage to Antonio is so scandalous is because of their class difference. The Duchess is from the upper echelons of society, while Antonio is a lower-class man who is in the Duchess's employment.

This dynamic emphasises the different worlds they come from. Regardless, the two fall in love, marry and have children. Webster makes it clear that Antonio truly loves and

respects the Duchess; he is not marrying her for her money or status. This contrasts sharply with how the Duchess's brothers see her. They care more for her inheritance than for her.

The Duchess of Malfi's position on class issues is evident from the way in which the Duchess and Antonio's situation is portrayed. They are shown to be the victims of the cruelty of others and come to a tragic end. Their surviving son enters at the end of the play with hopes to one day take his mother's position.

Because of his lower-class father, many in Webster's society would have judged this boy unfit to inherit his mother's political power and wealth. Instead, Webster purposefully ends the play with this boy, presenting him as a potential saviour in a tragic world.

#### **CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

- f. How does Webster illustrate the Cardinal's corruption in *The Duchess of Malfi*?**
- g. What role does class difference play in the marriage of the Duchess and Antonio?**
- h. How does Antonio's character differ from the Duchess's brothers in their attitudes toward the Duchess?**
- i. What is significant about the ending of *The Duchess of Malfi* in relation to the Duchess's surviving son?**

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#### **4.6 LET US SUM UP**

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In this unit, we have explored "The Duchess of Malfi" as a tragic play which has been written by John Webster and first performed in 1613. It tells the story of the Duchess, a young widow who secretly marries her steward, Antonio, against the wishes of her brothers, Ferdinand and the Cardinal. The brothers, driven by jealousy and a desire for her wealth, conspire to punish her. They eventually succeed in having her murdered, along with her children, with themes of corruption, power, and the struggle for autonomy running throughout the narrative. The play is known for its complex characters and dark, atmospheric tone, typical of Jacobean revenge tragedy.

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#### **4.7 FURTHER READING**

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- Boklund, Gunnar. *The Duchess of Malfi: Sources, Themes, Characters*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962.
  - Oakes, Elizabeth. "The Duchess of Malfi as a Tragedy of Identity." *Studies in Philology* 96.1 (1999): 51. Academic Search Premier. Web. 27 Jan. 2012.
  - Webster, John. *The Duchess of Malfi*. Dover Publications, 1999.
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**4.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

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- a. The Duchess of Malfi is the title character, whose real name is Giovanna.
- b. The Duchess's brothers, Ferdinand and the Cardinal, are her twin siblings.
- c. The Duchess's first husband, who is never named in the play, is deceased before the events of the play begin.
- d. The Duchess's children are sent away to Ancona for safety by Antonio, and their fate beyond that is left ambiguous.
- e. Bosola starts as a spy for Ferdinand and the Cardinal but ultimately becomes an instrument of revenge, leading to the tragic downfall of the Duchess.
- f. Webster depicts the Cardinal's corruption through his affair with a married woman and his use of a poisoned Bible to murder her.
- g. The Duchess's marriage to Antonio is scandalous primarily due to their class difference; she is of noble birth, while he is of lower social standing.
- h. Antonio genuinely loves and respects the Duchess, in contrast to her brothers who view her primarily as a means to control her wealth and inheritance.
- i. The play ends with the Duchess's son, symbolizing hope for the future despite his lower-class heritage, challenging societal expectations of inheritance and power.

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**4.9 MODEL QUESTIONS**

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1. How would you describe Ferdinand's relationship with the Duchess?
2. A considerable amount of time passes between the events at the end of Act 2 and the action at the opening of Act. Why does Ferdinand wait so long to act on his knowledge?
3. How is the Duchess killed? How would you characterize the way in which she meets her death?
4. How does Ferdinand respond to the death of the Duchess?
5. What is the purpose of all the references to witchcraft and lycanthropy in the play?
6. How is the revenge plot resolved at the end of the play?
7. Discuss the theme of power and corruption in John Webster's "The Duchess of Malfi." How do characters like Ferdinand and the Cardinal exemplify these themes? Provide examples from the play to support your analysis.
8. Examine the role of revenge in "The Duchess of Malfi." How does Webster depict the consequences of revenge through characters such as Bosola and Ferdinand? Discuss the motivations behind their actions and the impact on other characters in the play.

9. Analyse the character of the Duchess in John Webster's "The Duchess of Malfi." How does her defiance of patriarchal authority and pursuit of personal autonomy contribute to the tragic events of the play? Explore her relationships with other characters and the consequences of her actions.

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