

Examining Performance Space and Darkness in  
Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* and Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*

## *Introduction*

The role that space plays in the theatre is particularly impactful on a play's ability to communicate ideas and stories with the audience. While many of these effects are quite subconscious, this idea holds equally as true during the Early Modern Period as it does today. When an audience sets foot into a theatre space, they are not only transported to a new world through the words and performances of the actors, but additionally through the environment established and created by the theatre itself.

Early Modern theatre is generally known for not utilizing scenery the way that contemporary theatre does, but it was still equally proficient at establishing tone and the world of the plays. These theatres were constructed and decorated with the ambiguousness and versatility in mind. The lack of scenic design forced audiences to suspend their disbelief and create images in their minds as to what the settings might have looked like. This mindset immediately drew audiences into the action of the play.

In a carnivalistic play such as *Twelfth Night*, there is a very specific tone that generally is established by the play. There is a certain festive spirit about it due to its affiliation with the religious holiday. The characters are vibrant, and the plot is full of wit and mischief. However, there is a certain darkness that this play presents concerning the treatment of Malvolio. Originally performed in the Court, this play was written with an intimate setting in mind. Shakespeare certainly wrote *Twelfth Night* with a specific audience in mind, dropping witty jokes about trials and the same of ignorance, but he also wrote with space in mind. There are direct references to the hall in which this play was first staged within the text. What is remarkable

about this play; however, is its ability to be universally appealing outside of its initially intended space and audience.

Similarly, Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* was arguably also written with the indoor theatre space of The Blackfriars in mind. It has been argued that the technical requirements of this play clearly favor the offerings of an indoor space. Additionally, the intimate and private themes of this play also lend themselves towards an indoor space. Webster's use of the technical and aesthetic offerings of The Blackfriars are apparent in his text; however, *The Duchess of Malfi* was also famously staged at The Globe. The question as to how this play might have transferred between spaces is quite troubling with regards to some technical requirements concerning darkness. Versatility is a feature that many Jacobean dramas were required to possess, and this play is no exception.

A thematic similarity between these two plays is their use of psychological torture as a plot device. Utilized quite differently throughout these two plays, audience acceptance and responses to these plots also varied greatly. In the case of both plays, darkness is a literal and metaphorical tool used to manipulate and victimize these characters. In *Twelfth Night*, the audience is encouraged to jeer at Malvolio's humiliation. In *The Duchess of Malfi*, psychological torture takes on a far more intimate and dark meaning. There is no sense of comedic purpose behind the treatment of the Duchess. The treatment of Malvolio is far more public than the abuse that the Duchess suffers. This juxtaposition is not merely limited to the public or private nature of their abuse, but it is rooted in the playwrights' artistic intention behind these narratives.

## *Twelfth Night at Middle Temple*

First performed at Middle Temple on the second of February 1602, Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* is well-known for its larger-than-life characters and incessant pranks. Such a bold and boisterous play would generally be thought to be suitable for an outdoor theatre space; however, that is not the case. Written to be performed in the court, there are many hints in the text that inform us about how this play might have been staged and received by its first audience. This play is certainly a product of its space, as clearly hinted at in the text through architectural allusions.

Middle Temple was one of the four Inns of Court in London. The Inns of Court were established in the Middle Ages as an institution for the study of English law.<sup>1</sup> Entertainment, particularly theatre, was commonly staged in the Hall around Christmas and Candlemass. Made up of law students and other legal professionals, the general audience at a performance at Middle Temple would have been highly educated. A surviving diary entry by a trainee barrister, John Manningham, is an incredibly important primary source concerning the audience's reception of this play:

At our feast we had a play called 'Twelve Night, or what you will'; much like the Comedy of Errors or Menechmi in Plautus, but most like and near to that in Italian called Inganni. A good practice in it to make the steward believe his lady widow was in love with him, by counterfeiting a letter as from his lady, in general terms, telling him what she liked best in him, and prescribing his gesture in smiling, his apparel, etc., and then when he came to practice, making believe they took him to be mad.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Inns of Court," Encyclopedia Britannica

<sup>2</sup> Burbage Richard, and Shakespeare William "John Manningham's Diary: Earliest Mention of Twelfth Night and a Shakespeare Anecdote"

Manningham's response to the play draws attention to Malvolio's mistreatment, and places that plot line above that of Viola's. His use of "good practice" implies that Malvolio's abuse was received quite well and found to be rather humorous, this is in stark contrast to how this plot is received today. Contemporary audiences have found the psychological torture of Malvolio to be difficult to grapple with tonally, it is quite dark subject matter which stands in stark contrast with the rest of the play's mischief. This diary entry is quite telling as to how we may begin to understand the thought process behind this scene and how it was received in the Early Modern Period.

### ***The Duchess of Malfi at the Blackfriars***

John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* was first staged by the King's Men in 1614 at the Blackfriars Theatre. This intimate and psychological drama is ideal for an indoor theatre setting but was also staged at The Globe just a few years later. Named for the thirteenth century Dominican priory, the Blackfriars was a famous indoor theatre space, and home to the King's Men by 1608. *The Duchess of Malfi* is often regarded as the "last great tragedy of the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras," due to its success and popularity.<sup>3</sup> Thematically, this is an incredibly intimate play dealing with issues such as love, death, and suffering, which makes it particularly conducive to an indoor playing space. Generally speaking, indoor theatres have a subconscious way of making theatre feel more private and intimate.

### ***Twelfth Night Act IV, Scene II***

The treatment of Malvolio in *Twelfth Night* stands in stark contrast to the jovial tones throughout most of the play. This discussion has been quite prevalent in contemporary

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<sup>3</sup> "The Duchess of Malfi," Encyclopedia Britannica

conversations concerning *Twelfth Night*. In *Twelfth Night's "Notorious Abuse" of Malvolio*, Hobgood once again draws attention back to John Manningham's diary. Manningham's interest in Malvolio's "madness" entirely overshadows the "main" plot lines. Hobgood highlights his use of the phrase "good practice" and how it presents valuable information as to the audience's reception of the Malvolio plot. Due to its debut performance at the Middle Temple Hall, it is important to note that the audience was made up of highly educated and elite members of society. In addition to the anticipated differences in social attitudes in the Early Modern period in comparison with contemporary conventions, there is a certain level of socio-political "savviness" that a Middle Temple audience would have possessed. Performing for Candlemass at Middle Temple was an excellent opportunity for tailor-made jokes pertaining to legal proceedings and those who might have been in attendance.

Akrigg in "Twelfth Night at the Middle Temple" discusses how the play was "tailor-made" for the space based on specific humor utilized throughout act four, scene two, and references to the architecture of Middle Temple Hall. Through debunking the myth that *Twelfth Night* might have first been performed at Whitehall, Akrigg draws on Elizabethan architectural history to clarify the play's performance history. The clearest reference to literal space is in act four, scene two, when Feste says to Malvolio:

FESTE  
Why it hath bay windows transparent as barricadoes,  
and the clearstores toward the south north are as  
lustrous as ebony; and yet complainest thou of  
obstruction?  
(*Twelfth Night* IV.ii, 36-39)

The reference to "bay windows" is particularly notable because it confirms the hall to have a "double oriel" style. Whitehall was constructed in the "single oriel" style, meaning it only

had one window. Middle Temple Hall is in the “double oriel” style and was regarded for having a “great window,” a feature in which Shakespeare found worthy of referencing in *Twelfth Night*.<sup>4</sup> By directly referencing the literal space for the performance, Shakespeare was setting the stage for further metatheatrical references in upcoming text. Were this play to be staged in a different space, the architectural references would not necessarily be confusing or irrelevant, they would merely lose a single layer of context not integral to the plot. Since Early Modern theatre was characteristically representational when it came to scenic design, that reference would generally be brushed past without a second thought. It becomes a device to paint an image of the room, instead of a literal description of the great hall the performance is occurring within.

Additionally, it is notable that Feste mentions these famous windows because it stands in stark contrast to what the tortured Malvolio is saying. Manningham’s entry concerning the play highlights the audience’s inclination towards Malvolio’s psychological spiral. The audience was quite taken with the plot to punish Malvolio for his ambition to rise in status by wooing Olivia. They were made to laugh at Malvolio’s expense due to his absurd and deranged behavior. In act four, scene two, Malvolio says that the room he has been imprisoned in is as “dark as hell,” insulting the “great windows” of Middle Temple Hall. This only adds to the audience’s amusement with Malvolio’s torture. Continuing just a few lines down, the gaslighting of Malvolio continues to directly cater to an audience of learned men:

MALVOLIO

I am not mad, Sir Topas: I say to you, this house is dark.

FESTE

Madman, thou errest: I say, there is no darkness  
but ignorance; in which thou art more puzzled than  
the Egyptians in their fog.

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<sup>4</sup> G.P.V. Akrigg, “Twelfth Night at the Middle Temple,” *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 422.

MALVOLIO

I say, this house is as dark as ignorance, though  
ignorance were as dark as hell;  
(*Twelfth Night* IV.ii, 40-47)

Akrigg ascertains that this jest would have been received rather enthusiastically by the learned men in the house, since they “regarded themselves as nothing if not learned, and here was this miserable Malvolio not only declaring their fine hall ‘dark as Hell’ but ‘dark as ignorance.’”<sup>5</sup> Finally, Shakespeare makes a direct reference to legal proceedings:

MALVOLIO

I say, there  
was never man thus abused. I am no more mad than you  
are: make the trial of it in any constant question.  
(*Twelfth Night* IV.ii, 47-49)

It is no wonder that Manningham’s diary entry focuses on Malvolio’s plot, instead of some of the more primary plot lines. The treatment and characterization of Malvolio’s character was directly catered to the sensibilities of a Middle Temple audience. This perhaps helps to clarify a disconnect that modern audiences have found with this particular plot line.

With regards to psychological torture, it is apparent that Malvolio is highly concerned with the darkness of the room that he is being kept in. He continuously refers to the “hideous darkness” that he is engulfed by. In the case of Malvolio, the darkness is used as a means to literally keep Malvolio in the dark about the reality of the events surrounding him. As previously discussed by Akrigg, there is a layer of poetic irony regarding the darkness, or lack thereof, due

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<sup>5</sup> Akrigg, “*Twelfth Night* at the Middle Temple,” 422.

to literal windows in the space; however, darkness is also used literally by the other players on stage. Maria has Feste disguise himself as Sir Topas in order to further dupe Malvolio, but in a later moment of metatheatrical awareness Maria says:

MARIA  
Thou mightst have done this without thy beard and  
gown: he sees thee not.  
(*Twelfth Night* IV.ii, 64-65)

This further confirms Malvolio's sheer inability to recognize the prank that is being pulled at his expense and draws attention back to the literal space of the performance. Numerous stagings of *Twelfth Night* have portrayed Malvolio's torment in various ways, some including the use of blindfolds. While there are no specifications in the text as to how Malvolio should appear on stage, his inability to see allows for him to be further duped by Feste. In the case of Malvolio, darkness is used as a tool to further deprive and blind him from the truth. Darkness is being used as a manner of gaslighting.

### ***The Duchess of Malfi, Act IV, Scene I***

*The Duchess of Malfi* was written under far more standard conventions when it came to a debut venue. Not being commissioned for the court, it was written with traditional Jacobean theatre spaces in mind. In "*The Duchess of Malfi* at the Globe and Blackfriars," Graves discusses in depth how it is improbable that Webster wrote *The Duchess of Malfi* merely with the Blackfriars in mind. He attributes this to a study in lighting practices in the period:

The largely ungovernable stage lighting of the era underscores the important, but missing evidence of the acting and confirms indirectly that the staging at the public and private theaters may not have been so different in regard to an aspect of stage production which one might have assumed would define the principal difference between them.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> R.B. Graves, "The Duchess of Malfi at the Globe and Blackfriars," *Renaissance Drama*, 209.

While the Blackfriars was not a private theatre per-se, the conventions of an indoor theatre and its audiences differed from the accessibility of an outdoor space such as The Globe. That being said, it is undeniable the subconscious aesthetic and emotional effects that these different theatrical spaces had on performances.

*The Duchess of Malfi* is a dark and intimate tragedy, dealing with very personal and intimate familial issues. The Duchess endures significant psychological torture at the hand of her brother, Ferdinand. Act four, scene one is particularly gruesome. The infamous “dead man’s hand” scene has posed a question for scholars for generations: how was darkness accomplished effectively on stage? Under the pretense of intending to make amends, Ferdinand has come to speak with his sister, but has requested that they speak in the dark. She orders the lights to be taken out:

DUCHESS  
Take hence the lights; he's come.  
(*The Duchess of Malfi*, IV.i 28)

Graves argues that the effect of darkness on stage for this upcoming scene might have been accomplished through a more representative action of removing a few lights from the stage, but not darkening it entirely. He suggests that the “theatrical point of ‘Put out the light’ resided more in the poetry and acting than in the lighting.”<sup>7</sup> Contextually, the Duchess is also ordering lights to be removed from the stage, probably by servants.

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<sup>7</sup> Graves, “The Duchess of Malfi at the Globe and Blackfriars,” 208.

On a more poetic level, what follows next in the scene is Ferdinand drawing on the metaphor of the Duchess as a beacon of light. Throughout the action of the play, she serves as this metaphorical source of light and hope, while her brothers fester in darkness and corruption. Ferdinand confronts this idea and claims she belongs in the darkness:

FERDINAND  
This darkness suits you well.

DUCHESS  
I would ask you pardon.

FERDINAND  
You have it;  
For I account it the honorabl'st revenge,  
Where I may kill, to pardon.  
(The Duchess of Malfi, IV.i 29-32)

By extinguishing the literal light in the room, Ferdinand hopes to metaphorically extinguish her inner light. He goes on:

FERDINAND  
It had been well,  
Could you have liv'd thus always; for indeed,  
You were too much i'th' light- but no more;  
(The Duchess of Malfi, IV.i, 39-41)

At this point, things take a sharp and gruesome turn. Ferdinand uses the lack of literal light to play a horrible trick on the Duchess:

FERDINAND  
I come to seal my peace with you. Here's a hand,  
  
*Gives her a dead man's hand.*  
  
To which you have vow'd much love; the ring upon't  
You gave.

DUCHESS

I affectionately kiss it.

FERDINAND

Pray do, and bury the print of it in your heart.  
I will leave this ring with you, for a love-token;  
And the hand, as sure as the ring; and do not doubt  
But you shall have the heart too: when you need a friend,  
Send it to him that ow'd it: you shall see  
Whether he can aid you.

DUCHESS

You are very cold:  
I fear you are not well after your travel.  
Ha! lights! O, horrible!

FERDINAND

Let her have lights enough.  
(The Duchess of Malfi, IV.i, 42-53)

At this point, the lights are brought back in for the Duchess to “see” the severed hand that Ferdinand has given her. Some scholars have argued that this scene might have been staged in total darkness at the Blackfriars. It is believed that the total darkness would have allowed the audience to experience a similar level of shock and horror as that with the Duchess; however, much is lost from a performance perspective when the audience does not get to witness the Duchess’ reactions. Total darkness would not have been feasible in an outdoor theatre, and Graves argues that there is truly no way of knowing if total darkness was even achievable at the Blackfriars.<sup>8</sup> Graves speculates, from a staging perspective, that the indoor and outdoor productions of *The Duchess of Malfi* might not have been that different, further supporting the idea that the removal of lights was probably a symbolic removal accomplished by a few actors exiting with lights, and later re-entering with them as directed.

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<sup>8</sup> Graves, “The Duchess of Malfi at the Globe and Blackfriars,” 196.

Proximity is another difference between the two theatres. In an indoor space like the Blackfriars, the audience would have felt closer to the action of the play, compared to in an outdoor space. Additionally, an indoor space theatre a more intense feeling of thematic intimacy. Thematically, the play calls for a more private tone. Almost all the action in *The Duchess of Malfi* occurs behind closed doors. This is not to say that the play would not have “worked” at The Globe, but it is arguably better suited for an indoor space. Graves believes that *The Duchess of Malfi* is an important contextual study when it comes to understanding the overlap between performance in different spaces:

“I take IV. i of *The Duchess of Malfi* to be a crucial instance of how we may use a knowledge of stage conditions to understand the performance and effect of an Elizabethan drama - crucial not only because of the importance of the scene in the play but because the play itself stands just at the presumed shift from "public-theater" to "private- theater" sensibility, from exclusively natural to mixed natural and artificial illumination.”<sup>9</sup>

He goes on to discuss some of the dangers that accompany the school of thought that supports major differences between indoor and outdoor productions. He acknowledges that playwrights like Webster were aware of the necessity to make their plays “playable” in different spaces if they were to achieve versatility and further success. Regardless of literal differences that might have existed between the two venues’ performances of the same plays, there is a certain subconscious effect that space has on the audience. The text, blocking, and cast might be the same; however, theatre and its effects are fluid. No two performances will ever be perfectly identical and there are uncontrollable and subconscious factors that will affect a performance. Space does affect performance conventions, therefore an indoor performance of *The Duchess of*

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<sup>9</sup> Graves, “*The Duchess of Malfi at the Globe and Blackfriars*,” 207.

*Malfi* would certainly differ from an outdoor one, regardless of how identical of a production they were.

### **Conclusion**

While it is difficult to confidently say that all playwrights wrote with specific performance spaces in mind, there are examples of plays that directly cater to their anticipated venues. It is difficult to overlook the direct references made to the Middle Temple Hall in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. This is a unique example of a piece of theatre with a specific audience in mind. What makes this play exceptionally impressive, is its ability to translate universally regardless of this initially intended audience. Shakespeare's awareness of space in this play is remarkable; however, it does not lose anything substantial if performed elsewhere.

Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* offers an interesting case study into the universality of the performances of Early Modern plays. Playwrights needed to be mindful of the different performance spaces that would potentially house their plays. The success of a play could be greatly hindered if it was not playable in both indoor and outdoor spaces; therefore, they had to take required special effects into consideration while writing. While previously believed to require complete darkness, *The Duchess of Malfi* could have posed a significant dilemma for an outdoor production. This idea calls into question as to whether or not total darkness was truly a requirement, or even an option, for plays such as this. A severe lack of stage directions creates a bit of a problem, but often times there are hints in the text as to how these effects might have been achieved. While there may be a lack of stage directions in these texts, the dialogue itself often serves as a directorial voice when it comes to staging. The impact that space can have on performance may be hard to quantify, but its affect is undeniable. While Early Modern theatre

practices might not be identical to today's theatrical practices, its ability to communicate messages and tell stories remains the same.

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