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*The paper examines wit as a major, informing and thematically important literary element that enables the readers to penetrate into the deeper realms of imagination and interpretation. The meaning of the term 'wit' has changed a lot during the years both in critical and dictionary usage. Therefore, various conceptions of wit from the diachronic perspective are presented and its types in the theatrical discourse are examined. In the discourse of drama wit is generally divided into two main forms: 'repartee' and 'quip'. As repartee it is used to display ones agility or mental superiority over another character in the dialogue taking a form of a verbal contest. As quip it can act as a sharp stroke of wit to announce the speaker's original opinion or observation. However, both types of wit invoke cleverness as the most important component of a witty utterance. The interest of the authors is particularly directed towards the role of social wit in John Webster's drama 'The Duchess of Malfi' (1613). This Jacobean drama is often considered the dramatic masterpiece of the early seventeenth-century English stage. The paper aims to reveal the complexity of a witty dramatic discourse by analyzing its technique, contexts and contest characteristics through the examination of witty instances formed in the drama. It gives an exploration of the social context and mechanism of the formation of a witty utterance that has a high social value as it is in Webster's play where wit serves to convey the language of contest, often resulting in aggression, open mockery, exposing moral corruption and social injustice.*

*KEY WORDS: Jacobean drama, dramatic discourse, literary wit, context, language of contest, social climate, quip, repartee.*

The Jacobean era (1603–1625) deserves special attention for providing dramas of wit resulting in the complex development of the English language. The establishment of the private theatre marks an important turn in the history of early modern English drama. The audience of the court, which became the centre of cultural life, was more refined and sophisticated. Noble intellectuals did not appreciate amateur literary attempts and promoted their favourite authors instead. As the playgoers were widely-read, the language of drama invoked new conventions, which encouraged the dramatists to refine the English language

through the discourse of wit impregnated with intellectual complexity. Consequently, wit became one of the principal projections of theatrical discourse developed by the leading English playwrights: William Shakespeare (1564–1616), Ben Jonson (1572–1637), Francis Beaumont (1584–1616) and John Fletcher (1579–1625). Yet, among them John Webster (c. 1580–c. 1634) stood out for brilliantly inventive conceits, expanded metaphors and keen-witted quotations. The Websterian stylistic peculiarities are especially evident in his most powerful drama *The Duchess of Malfi* (1613), which is often considered the dramatic masterpiece of the early seventeenth century English stage. Even today, after four hundred years from its composition, it is known as the most frequently performed drama of all non-Shakespearean plays from the early modern period. This five-act play is an elaborate work with a captivating plot, sharp turns of action and provocative employment of language. What concerns the latter, it is important to stress that a contemporary reader is challenged to participate in an intricate process of decoding the Jacobean witty schemes to fully enjoy the dense linguistic labyrinths of dramatic expression.

Although the drama of wit is central in the theatrical culture of the Jacobean England, the critical inquiry from the discursive perspective of wit has been rather limited, even more so in the case of John Webster's plays. Thus, this paper offers one of the rare attempts to explore the dramatic discourse by focusing on literary wit in order to reveal the complexity of witty expression.

The term *wit* has undergone several changes in meaning. Consider how Clive Staples Lewis (1898–1963) describes it in his book *Studies in Words*:

“Its early life was happy and free from complications. It then acquired a sense which brought into full play the distinction between the word's and speaker's meanings. It also suffered the worst fate any word has to fear; it became the fashionable term of approval among the critics. This made it a prey to tactical definitions of a more than usually unscrupulous type, and in the heat of controversy there was some danger of its becoming a mere rallying-cry, semantically null. Meanwhile, however, popular usage was irresistibly at work in a different direction; in the end those ‘who speak only to be understood’ rescued it from the critics and fixed it the useful meaning it bears today. The chequered story has—what is rare in such matters – a happy ending” (Lewis 1967: 86).

In Old English, the verb *witan* meant *to be aware of* or *conscious of*, *to know* or *to understand* derived from the noun *wita* which denotes *a sage, philosopher* or *a wise man*<sup>1</sup>. Primarily, the definition of wit is concerned with the matter of human faculty of sense and understanding. The *Glossary of Literary Terms* informs that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries wit “stood for ingenuity in literary invention, and especially for the ability to develop brilliant, surprising, and paradoxical figures of speech” (Abrams,

<sup>1</sup> Old English Dictionary Online: [http://home.comcast.net/~modean52/oeme\\_dictionaries.htm](http://home.comcast.net/~modean52/oeme_dictionaries.htm)

Harpham 2012: 420). *The Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* claims that “during the Renaissance period it [wit] meant ‘intelligence’ or ‘wisdom’, thus intellectual capacity; even, perhaps, ‘genius’” (Cuddon 2012: 985). An English Renaissance scholar and writer Roger Ascham (1515–1568) praised the quickness of wit which in his opinion was of divine nature: “a singular gift of God, and so most rare amongst men” (Ascham 2010: 103). The intellectual fashions of the time were illustrated by the famous prose works *Euphues: The Anatomy of Wit* (1578) and *Euphues and His England* (1589) composed by John Lyly (c.1553–1606) who took wit so superstitiously that he was afraid to have “committed idolatry against wisdom” (Lyly 2004: 16). Lyly’s romances set a fashion for an extreme rhetorical mannerism that came to be known as *euphuism*, i.e. “an ornately florid, precious and mazy style of writing” (Cuddon 2012: 96). In a similar manner, Sir Philip Sidney (1554–1586) viewed wit as a poet’s capacity for literary invention, as it is “our erected wit that maketh us to know what perfection is” (Sidney 2002: 108). During the seventeenth century, wit was associated with fancy, dexterity of thought and imagination (Cuddon 2012: 985). Rationalizing about human knowledge in his *Essay Concerning Humane Understanding* (1689) John Locke (1632–1704) maintained that “wit lying most in the assemblage of ideas, and putting those together with quickness and variety, wherein can be found any resemblance or incongruity, thereby to make up pleasant pictures and agreeable visions in the fancy” (Locke 2006: 99).

During the years the meaning of wit was discussed by many writers and philosophers thus creating multiple and often overlapping approaches. T. S. Eliot (1888–1965) regarded John Donne (1572–1631) and Andrew Marvell (1621–1678) as witty authors for they managed to combine wit with seriousness (Eliot 1996: 128). The Metaphysical School of Poetry, otherwise known as Donne’s generation, thought that the term *wit* could “embrace the notions of intelligence, cleverness, ingenuity, and the swift motions of fancy” (Nisbet 2005: 615).

Yet, “for the generations of Dryden, Pope and Addison ‘true wit’ required judgment” (Ibid.: 616). A similar approach is emphasized by Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan* (1651) where when discussing the human virtues, commonly viewed as intellectual, he proposes that “Judgement without Fancy is Wit, but Fancy without Judgement not” (Hobbes 2009: 33). Joseph Addison (1672–1719) implements another notion of wit by concentrating on the element of surprise. In his opinion, it is not enough to merely compare the obvious ideas in order to make a witty statement: “every Resemblance of Ideas is not that which we call Wit, unless it be such a one that gives Delight and Surprise to the Reader: these two Properties seem essential to Wit, more particularly the last of them. In order therefore that the Resemblance in the Ideas be Wit, it is necessary that the Ideas should not lie too near one another in the Nature of things: for where the Likeness is obvious, it gives no Surprise” (Addison 1998: 190).

In the nineteenth century and even recent studies wit is often treated as synonymous with humour. As it is defined in *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*, “wit is the ability to combine words, ideas, etc., to produce a clever type of humour” (Hornby 1995: 1370). In general, it is thought to belong to the same level as humour since both seem to complement each other. However, the seventeenth century treatments of wit focused less

on humorous effects. Rather, they considered the intellectual and linguistic properties of wit<sup>2</sup>: humour generally refers to a broad emotional atmosphere or mood, while wit mostly reflects intellectual originality, ingenuity and mental acuity. Therefore, in this paper the discourse of wit will not be regarded as a type of humour. The theoretical fragments extended above lead to the following workable definition to be applied in the analysis of wit in John Webster's drama *The Duchess of Malfi*: summing up what has been already stated, wit is distinguished as a verbal expression directly connected with the human faculty of sense. It is always swift, brief, eloquent, ingenious and inventive in its very nature favouring incongruous congruity, symmetrical asymmetry, shocking surprise and fostering pleasurable effects with regard to intellectual and imaginative delight.

From the theatrical perspective, two main forms of wit can be distinguished: *repartee* and *quip* (Abrams, Harpham 2012: 381). The English term *repartee* was borrowed from French; to be more precise, from the language of fencing where it meant the ritualized exchange of blows during a contest. It was first recorded in the early seventeenth century as a noun that originated from the verb *repartir* meaning 'to go again' and hence 'to reply promptly' (Ibid.: 418). Soon it acquired the meaning of "a spontaneous and witty comment that hits the spot after it has bounced back on a previous argument" (Blanchard, Leven 2007: 68). *A Glossary of Literary Terms* defines it as the term which signifies "a contest of wit, in which each person tries to cap the remark of the other, or turn it to his own advantage" (Abrams, Harpham 2012: 240). As J. T. Shipley claims, such contests of wit have a longstanding tradition and date back to the Classical eclogues of Theocritus and Vergil composed as manifestations of "a pastoral contest between shepherds for the prize of rustic song" (Shipley 2007: 148). The term coming from fencing discourse proposes the idea that wit may be as deadly weapon as a spear. As Paul Freeman warns, "wit can have a deadly aim and it is possible to prick a large pretense with a small pin" (Freeman 2009: 18). Repartee could also be compared to the foil of a fencing master, since wit should be agile, nimble yet elegant, requiring quick perception and response. The person in hold of it should be capable to control his/her emotional state in order to find out the right words to demonstrate witty finesse.

The contests of wit were held on several levels. Firstly, as a courtly dispute to showcase the power over the interlocutor or audience by displaying skills of verbalization. In repartee, such art was of vital importance, otherwise one would confront raillery in court. Thus, wit became a way of life. Secondly, the contest could be seen in an exchange of witty utterances between writers or poets to demonstrate their ingenuity (cf. Blanchard, Leven 2007: 68). Michelle O'Callaghan expands this idea in her analysis of the Jacobean verses which "often take the form of a contest of wit that serves to set up an internal hierarchy within the group that is a microcosm of a wider social hierarchy" (O'Callaghan 2000: 39). It shows that even social hierarchy could be restructured by means of wit. Indeed, in the discussed period, the faculty of sharp reasoning was vital in order to survive and advance in social life.

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<sup>2</sup> *Wit as a Tool of Poetic Communication*: cf. <http://professorevans.info/wit-as-a-tool-of-poetic-communication>

Another type of wit is called *quip*. It is understood as a clever observation or witty saying which descends into a sarcastic commentary or remark. Consider John Lyly's explanation given in his play *Campaspe* (1632):

PSYLLUS: <...> why, what's a quip?

MANES: We great girders call it a short saying of a sharp wit, with a bitter sense in a sweet word.

PSYLLUS: How canst thou thus divine, divide, define, dispute, and all on the sudden?

MANES: Wit will have his swing; I am bewitched, inspired, inflamed, infected.<sup>3</sup>

This type of witty expression is related with a special occasion or particular situation. Contrary to repartee, which requires the interlocutor to make a counter-statement in order his/her rival could parry a blow and realize a witty retort, quip is viewed as more specialized wit where more information and mental flexibility are required to appreciate it. And as the potential for wit is directly proportional to the number and kinds of familiar situations which can be alluded to as a background for establishing resemblances, this type of wit exists among the members of a small group and is rather hermetic in character. To quote William Hazlitt, "wit is a test of what is truth according to public opinion and common sense"<sup>4</sup>. Both repartee and quip invoke cleverness as the most important component of witty utterance.

Both types of wit can be observed in John Webster's drama *The Duchess of Malfi*. The action of the play takes place at the court of Malfi in Italy. Recently widowed Duchess of Malfi falls in love with her lowly steward Antonio. Though her brothers Ferdinand and Cardinal forbid her from remarrying as they do not wish to share the inheritance, the Duchess gets secretly married and bears several children before the secret is revealed. The brothers arrange plans to revenge and destroy their sister. They invoke a spy Bosola who helps them to torture the Duchess morally and physically and finally kill her. Nevertheless, at the end of the play, Bosola manages to come to his senses, he regrets killing the Duchess and turns against the brothers who receive what they deserved. Since Websterian drama exposes moral corruption and restless pursuit for social justice, wit becomes a mental and imaginative ability to produce utterances that acquire high social value. To quote Bruce Michelson, "wit is a weapon of ridicule, best used in enforcing separations between the lofty and the low - in a cultural moment when lofty and low were much clearer categories than they might be now" (Michelson 2000: 19). Thus, the producers of wit are involved in an open competition for social power seeking to maximize their gains while protecting

<sup>3</sup> English Prose Drama Full-Text Database: <http://www.lettrs.indiana.edu/cgi-bin/eposed/eposed-idx?coll=eposed;idno=P1.0159>

<sup>4</sup> Hazlitt, W. (1818). *On Wit and Humour* at: <https://humorinamerica.wordpress.com/2012/09/20/in-the-archives-william-hazlitt-on-wit-and-humour-1818/>



their status. An interesting contest of words is depicted in the episode where the Duchess pleads her brother Ferdinand for understanding after he finds out about her secret marriage with Antonio. She begs Ferdinand to be lenient and meet her husband. The Duchess lyrically compares herself after marriage with the bird that is flying with spread wings thus expressing her wit and at the same time implying that it is too late to do anything about her marriage now as she has been married for some time already. Consider:

DUCHESS: *Happily, not to your liking, but for that,  
Alas, your shears do come untimely now  
To clip the bird's wings, that's already flown.  
Will you see my husband?*

FERDINAND: *Yes,  
If I could change eyes with a basilisk.*  
(Act III, Scene ii: 97–103)

Ferdinand replies in what would seem a fast consent to his sister's wish. In his repartee the author employs the image of the mythical creature Basilisk that is also called a king revealing the royal similarity to Ferdinand. Yet most of all he admires his exceptional powers and uses them to create a sharp and twisted answer: "The basilisk is usually described as a crested snake, and sometimes as a cock with a snake's tail. It is called the king (*regulus*) of the serpents because its Greek name *basiliscus* means "little king"; its odor is said to kill snakes. Fire coming from the basilisk's mouth kills birds, and its glance will kill a man"<sup>5</sup>. Thus, Ferdinand would agree to see Antonio just so that he could kill him with his glance. Though, the Duchess might be taken a back by such repartee, the other personage Bosola foresees Ferdinand's evil spirit faster and strikes a fast repartee to his tempting offer and bribing. When Bosola is asked to act as intelligencer, he answers:

FERDINAND: [giving him money] *There's gold.*  
BOSOLA: *So,  
What follows? Never rain'd such showers as these  
Without thunderbolts i' th' tail of them. Whose throat must I cut?*  
(Act I, Scene ii: 240–244)

Being a cunning person himself Bosola is well aware that he would not be given money by knavish brothers unless he had to conduct one of their dark plots. Thus, he enquires in an ingenious way by invoking mythical implication. He alludes to the Classical myth in which Zeus impregnated Danae by falling into her lap disguised as a golden shower. Here gold offered by Ferdinand is paralleled to the mythical golden shower. Moreover, god Zeus was also known for bringing lightning and thunder. According to the myth, Danae was "imprisoned by her father, Acrisius, to prevent the fulfilment of a prophecy that she would give

<sup>5</sup> The Medieval Bestiary: Basilisk: <http://www.bestiary.ca/beasts/beat265.htm>



birth to a son who would kill him. However, because of divine intervention by god Zeus, Acrisiu's actions were in vain. The son of Danae and Zeus, Perseus, killed his grandfather fulfilling the prophecy" (Littleton 2005: 162). Thus, Bosola is cleverly predicting that this "shower of gold" must be followed by some deadly deed. Both examples of the repartee reveal the playwright's imagination involving mythical context and specific savour of wit that demonstrates a habit of the Jacobean reasoning and expression which is also evident in quips.

In the beginning of the play courtier Antonio who has just returned from a long stay in France gives his impressions about this foreign country. He invokes a highly creative metaphor to introduce the social climate of France and Italy. Antonio praises the behaviour of the prince in France and idealises his court but then turns to criticizing Italy's courtly corruption and makes the following interesting comparison:

ANTONIO: *Considering duly that a prince's court  
Is like a common fountain whence should flow  
Pure silver drops in general, but if't chance  
Some curs'd example poison't near the head,  
Death and diseases through the whole land spread.*  
(Act I, Scene i: 11–15)<sup>6</sup>

In this quip Webster skilfully compares the court to the public fountain that is used by regular people stressing the importance of the ruler's rightful decisions. If somebody poisons the fountain's water at its "head" the entire flowing water becomes dangerous. The ruler being the Head of the Kingdom is wittily compared to the head of the fountain. Thus, it is suggested that the ruler's behaviour, either good or evil, inevitably influences the wellbeing of the entire country. It is important to stress that by introducing the social context the playwright reveals the problem of corruption in the Italian court of Malfi where two Aragonian brothers Ferdinand and Cardinal reign.

In the same act of the play Bosola complains to Antonio about the Cardinal and his brother Ferdinand and makes a cynical commentary by drawing a parallel between the brothers and the plum-trees. Webster combines two independent ideas by finding an unexpected resemblance which is the fruit of his imaginative mind. At the same time, this passage is very informative to the reader as it affords a valuable source for understanding the social situation of the Jacobean court. Consider:

BOSOLA: *He and his brother are like plum-trees that grow crooked  
over standing-pools; they are rich and o'erladen with fruit, but none  
but crows, pies, and caterpillars feed on them.  
Could I be one of their flattering panders, I  
Would hang on their ears like a horseleech, till I were full, and  
Then drop off.  
Who would rely upon these miserable dependences, in expectation to  
Be advanced tomorrow? What creature ever fed worse than hoping*

<sup>6</sup> This and other *The Duchess of Malfi* quotations are taken from the project Gutenberg site available at: <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/2232/pg2232.html>

*Tantalus? Nor ever died any man more fearfully than he that hoped  
For a pardon. (Act I, Scene i: 47–57)*

This elaborate conceit combining two at the first reading dissimilar images in an original and witty way makes a strong effect on the reader who is excited by confronting such a shocking comparison. The image of the plum-tree growing over “standing-pools” (line 48) here representing Ferdinand and the Cardinal evokes the gruesome and repulsive atmosphere, especially when followed by the animalistic images of crows, pies and caterpillars feeding on their fruit. The plum-trees are crooked, hence, deformed and showing symptoms of pest or malady which discloses the ill spirit of two brothers and the manner they rule the state. Moreover, the image of the standing water in the pool intensifies the mentioned effect. Since the plum-trees are growing near foul water, such water causing environmental hazard as it is the feeding ground for various bacteria and parasites that transmit disease. The image of the standing-pool presents an obvious contrast to the image of the fountain flowing with the “pure silver drops” in Antonio’s remark and intensifies the idea that Cardinal and Ferdinand are indeed the evil, immoral vectors who contaminate the society which is represented by the images of crows, pies and caterpillars.

Webster’s witty parallel also echoes the insight of a Greek philosopher Diogenes Laertius found in the *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers* (1925) where he compares the dissolute to “fig-trees growing upon a cliff: whose fruit is not enjoyed by any man, but is eaten by ravens and vultures” (Laertius 1925: 61). The Jacobean author proposes a similar idea by introducing a different plant yet stressing that the brothers have nothing good to offer to the society as they are just like fruit well-laden trees feeding on putrid and poisonous standing water. Nobody wants to eat such fruit except for “crows, pies and caterpillars”. These scavengers and parasites represent the courtiers. They are the “flattering panders” who oil their tongues into the rulers’ ears with sweet talk just so that they could gain some benefit. Their hypocritical whispering praises into the ear is well reflected through the image of the ugly horseleeches that hang like grotesque earrings to suck the blood until they are full and drop off just like the overripe plums. On the visual level, the parallel between the dark plums and fed horse-leeches is very inventive. Corruption is stressed in both cases. Corruption feeding on corruption—the courtiers (“panders”) feed on the corrupted blood of the Duchess brothers. As Bosola is low-born he is entirely dependent on the patronage of the nobility for material success he also questions whether he should become one of the brothers’ sycophants. Yet, the author does not express it directly but examines the class relations in a highly stratified society through witty discourse. Webster’s endeavour to show wit in the discussed passage has an intense effect. Here the images of overfed caterpillars and horseleeches evoke a feeling of disgust. The playwright paints the picture of the plum-trees with thick vegetation that is so eagerly devoured by the parasites and vultures. Here animalistic imagery is inventively and logically combined with plant imagery. Consider Miller’s claim: “Humans, albeit flattering panders, become horseleeches, who state themselves to death falling like overripe plums down into the ooze. And the imaginistic circle comes full round when the horseleech dropping off like a plum from its host turns plums into figurative horseleeches that leech from the tree.

The passage, however, does not pretend to be a description of nature but of corrupt and vicious humans. Surfeit and gross feeding, sucking blood, leech-infested ponds, these are tropes for moral and social corruption” (Miller 1997: 43).

The offered grotesque movement is labyrinthically dynamic: the Duchess’s brothers → plum-trees fed on polluted water; courtiers (panders) → horseleeches sucking the corrupted blood of the brothers represented by plum-trees. Horseleeches are paralleled with plums – the poisoned harvest. Bosola seems to be torn between an acute awareness of the social and moral deficiencies of the patronage system and longing to advance socially. He also envisions himself as a horse-leech sucking the brothers’ blood while hanging on their ears and falling off when he is fed up. Full with human blood the leeches resemble the plums in shape and colour, moreover, the plum trees grow over standing-pools and leeches dwell in stagnant water. The dynamics of the discussed astonishing wit reaches its culmination with the movement of falling down in which the plums and the leeches get mixed together. This extract also reveals Bosola’s double nature—his loathing of the courtiers and courtly atmosphere in general and his striving to achieve a higher status and share the prosperity. Though the possibility to flourish under the Cardinal and Ferdinand is tempting enough and in a way blinding, Bosola quickly rejects the temptation by identifying himself with the Greek mythical figure Tantalus who tries to deceive gods by inviting them to feast and serving his own son Pelops whom he has killed and boiled. Gods foresee Tantalus’ plan, restore Pelops to life and punish his father by casting him into the Underworld where he is condemned to eternal hunger and thirst as he has to stand in a lake whose waters rise, but as soon as he wants to take a gulp the lake recedes. Just like the trees that grow at Tantalus’ reach bearing fruits that he can never taste since the branches are lifted up immediately by the wind when he tries to reach them (Kirk 2005: 48–49). Thus, Bosola reveals his desperation for the brothers’ favour that is difficult to achieve and get socially advanced but at the same time he understands the danger of selling himself out to the enemies who will backfire on him once he fulfils their foul orders. This extract from the drama stresses the corruption of the court which is the epicentre of all the rigours. The grotesque image of the parasitic horseleech acquires an ironical turn when followed by the image of the horse-dung in the episode where Bosola agrees to be Ferdinand’s spy. Consider:

BOSOLA: *What’s my place?  
The provisorship o’ the horse? Say, then, my corruption,  
Grew out of horse-dung: I am your creature.* (Act I, Scene ii: 192–194)

Corrupted by Ferdinand, Bosola gets a job as an ostler in the Duchess’ household. At the same time his duties involve spying on her. Here Webster inventively evokes witty imagery to warn the readers against the possible danger waiting for the Duchess when Bosola is offering her to try some apricots. However, the Duchess misses the seriousness of his wit and takes it for a mere joke:

BOSOLA: *I forgot to tell you, the knave gardener,  
Only to raise his profit by them the sooner,*

*Did ripen them in horse-dung.*

DUCHESS: *O, you jest.* (Act II, Scene i: 97–100)

Moreover, the image of the horse is also found at the end of the play when Bosola accomplishes the brothers' orders and kills their sister. While the Cardinal seems to regret about such a decision rethinking what has happened and blaming his brother, Ferdinand celebrates his sister's death as the peak of his control and power. However, soon he starts acting strange by imitating a werewolf-like behaviour: going to the cemetery at night, digging the ground and constantly raving. On one of such occasions delirious Ferdinand compares himself to a horse and begs: "give me some wet hay, I am broken winded" (Act 5, Scene v, line 65). Webster scatters his images to develop the idea of concealed corruption. The combination of the witty expressions containing the same imagery at the beginning and the end of the play is powerfully unifying.

Other concerns highlighting the social situation are those of social class and relations between the classes. Greedy of fame, Ferdinand imposes his strict orders of conduct that result in creating conflicting situations. He warns his courtiers that they should submit to the prince's authority thus showing loyalty to their lord. Consider:

RODERIGO and GRISOLAN: *Ha, ha, ha!*

FERDINAND: *Why do you laugh? Methinks you that are courtiers*

*Should be my touchwood, take fire when I give fire;*

*That is, not laugh but when I laugh, were the subject never so witty.* (Act I, Scene ii: 118–121)

Hence the courtiers are likened to the kindling wood that is used to start a fire. It is suggested that they can consider the topic witty only after Ferdinand decides that it is so. In another act of the play he makes a quick repartee to the courtier's question and compares himself to an eagle. Being the Head of the State Ferdinand envisions himself as the noblest among other courtiers, as an eagle among the common birds, and finds no equals to himself:

MALATESTTE: *Why doth your lordship love this solitariness?*

FERDINAND: *Eagles commonly fly alone, they are crows,*

*Daws, and starlings that flock together.* (Act V, Scene ii: 29–31)

Bosola, on the other hand, demonstrates a delightful wit by making a remark that glory may deceitfully be thought to be eternal. Yet the glory that is achieved on selfish principles will sooner or later result in shame. Again the pitch of intensity is produced by comparing glories to the glow-worms. Thus, glow-worms shine, yet only at a distance, similarly humans may sparkle in outward glory and splendour, but inwardly may be sinful and corrupted.

BOSOLA: *Glories, like glow-worms afar off shine bright,  
But look'd to near, have neither heat nor light.* (Act IV, Scene ii: 135–136)

The given analysis shows that John Webster is a remarkable dramatist with an unusually individual style and emotional perception of the world. The tragically macabre vision of human nature that is evoked in his plays to instigate the shocking reactions in the reader helps to reveal the truth about people that is often uncomfortable to be known. *The Duchess of Malfi* composed more than four hundred years ago remains relevant because of its witty discourse that is not a minor decorative element of the Jacobean epoch but a deliberate, elaborative, complex and imaginative projection of the author. Thus, literary wit turns to be a medium of the collective knowledge that withstands the flow of time and is able to affect the ever changing human comprehension. It plays a critical role in the formulation, transmission and conservation of cultural beliefs, values and wisdom. Wit is amalgamated with a particular context and its true value is discovered through the analysis of the specific tendencies and manners of the particular period, which enables the readers to penetrate into the depths of the Jacobean imagination and meaning formation. The characteristics of the Jacobean era are registered and articulated in John Webster's witty discourse that brings the readers to a better understanding of the dramatic situation with regard to social environment and reinforces the peculiarities of the seventeenth century communication. No doubt, wit requires a developed taste and those who have it are rewarded with gaining knowledge through intellectual and imaginative delight.

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## **JOHNO WEBSTERIO DRAMA *MALFIO HERCOGIENĖS TRAGEDIJA*: SĄMOJO KONTEKSTAI IR IŠŠŪKIAI**

### **Santrauka**

Anglų karaliaus Jokūbo I laikų literatūra itin pasižymi dramomis, kurioms būdinga sudėtinga sąmojo kalba. Intelektualūs žiūrovai, t. y. karaliaus dvaro elitas pageidavo tik aukščiausio lygio pjesių. Kadangi scenos dekoracijos tais laikais vis dar buvo ganėtinai neekspresyvios, pjesių autoriams ir toliau teko pasikliauti meninio žodžio galia bei sąmojinga iškalba siekiant sukurti patrauklų dramaturginį įvykį. Pjesės tapo itin išraiškingos kalbiniu požiūriu ir intelektualiai sudėtingos. Sąmojis įsigalėjo kaip vienas centrinių dramos teksto elementų.

Straipsnyje analizuojamas XVII amžiaus sąmojo apraiškos Johno Websterio dramoje *Malfio hercogienės tragedija* (1613). Tai viena žinomiausių to laiko pjesių ir dažniausiai statoma drama šiuolaikinio teatro scenose, žinoma, išskyrus Šekspyro pjeses. Pabrėžtina, kad pjesėje sąmojis – ne atskira stilistinė figūra ar dekoratyvinė detalė, ji kuria sudėtingą, išplėtotą dramos kalbos audinį, atveriantį skaitytojui gilesnius vaizduotės ir reikšmės sluoksnius. Sąmojis demonstruoja paradoksaliai simetrišką minties asimetriją ir intelektinės ir / ar vaizdinės nederinės dermę. Aptariama sąmojo sąvokos kaita, rūšys, kalbos sudėtingumas ir meninė vertė, analizuojami sąmojo kontekstai. Gilinamasi į XVII amžiaus socialinį kontekstą ir Websterio sąmojo, turinčio socialinę vertę (t. y. perteikiančio moralinės korupcijos bei socialinės nelygybės temas), formavimo mechanizmą, leidžiantį pademonstruoti varžytuvių kalbos specifiką, nukreiptą į agresiją ir atvirą pašaipą, išryškinančias slepiamą moralinę korupciją ir socialinę neteisybę.

*REIKŠMINIAI ŽODŽIAI*: karaliaus Jokūbo I laikų drama, dramos diskursas, literatūrinis sąmojis, kontekstas, konkuravimo kalba, socialinis klimatas, sąmojinga pastaba, sąmojingas atsakas.



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DRAMAT JOHNA WEBSTERA *THE DUCHESS OF MALFI*: KONTEKSTY I WALKA NA DOWCIPY**Streszczenie**

W literaturze epoki jakobińskiej (1603–1625) szczególnie wyróżniają się dramaty charakteryzujące się skomplikowanym językiem dowcipu. Wykształcona publiczność, tj. elita dworska, życzyła sobie jedynie sztuk na najwyższym poziomie. Ponieważ dekoracje sceniczne w owych czasach były jeszcze nie dość ekspresyjne, autorzy sztuk musieli zaufać w potęgę swojego słowa i dowcipną elokwencję po to, by stworzyć atrakcyjne wydarzenie dramaturgiczne. Sztuki stały się niezwykle sugestywne pod względem językowym i skomplikowane intelektualnie. Dowcip stał się jednym z głównych elementów tekstu dramatycznego. W niniejszym artykule przeanalizowano przejawy dowcipu w XVII-wiecznym dramacie Johna Webstera „Księżna d’Amalfi” (*The Duchess of Malfi*, 1613). Jest to jedna z najlepiej znanych sztuk owego okresu i najczęściej wystawiany dramat na współczesnych scenach teatralnych, oczywiście za wyjątkiem sztuk Szekspira. Autorki chcą podkreślić, że stosowany w sztuce dowcip nie jest osobną figurą stylistyczną czy elementem dekoracyjnym, lecz stanowi skomplikowaną, rozwiniętą tkankę języka dramatu, otwierającą przed czytelnikiem głębsze pokłady wyobraźni i znaczeń. Dowcip ukazuje paradoksalnie symetryczną asymetrię myśli i ład intelektualnego i/lub wizualnego nieładu. Omówiono zmianę pojęcia dowcipu, różne jego rodzaje, ukazano złożoność i wartość artystyczną języka dowcipu, przeanalizowano konteksty, w jakich dowcip występuje. Starano się wniknąć w XVII-wieczny kontekst społeczny i mechanizm tworzenia Websterowskiego dowcipu, mającego wartość społeczną (tj. przedstawiającego tematy korupcji moralnej i nierówności społecznej), pozwalającego oddać specyfikę języka rywalizacji, skierowaną na agresję i jawną kpinę, które uwydatniają skrywaną korupcję moralną i niesprawiedliwość społeczną.

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