



The Malcontent

John Marston

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New RSC Classics series highlights rarely performed Tudor and Jacobean plays.

The Malcontent Details

Date : Published April 1st 2003 by Nick Hern Books (first published 1605)

ISBN : 9781854596963

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Format : Paperback 128 pages

Genre : Plays, Drama, European Literature, British Literature, Literature, 17th Century, Classics

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From Reader Review The Malcontent for online ebook

Rachel says

very confusing

J says

This had such a promising start but then it dragged on, too much plot getting in the way of the story. Double crosses, triple crosses, multiple plots, double dukes, double disguises, and just far too much that by the end, I just wanted someone to die.

Sareene says

A weirdly post-modern play that was pretty funny.

Tslyklu says

Really good satire. Begins with an unrefined theatre lover hopping onstage to instruct the actors and talk about how the Trojan Horse part of the Iliad could have been bettered with some garlic, ends with the reaction of the friend to a disguised man's grand unveiling being "...we're friends of course I knew it was you". On point.

Sean says

Written shortly after the success of Hamlet, this drama mirrors it (consciously) in several significant areas, but with the heartening distinction that here the hero--who also feigns a kind of madness to disarm his foes--labors not for the damnation of those who have wronged him, but craftily preserves their lives until they can come to public repentance (which, in turn, is seen in Shakespeare: c.f. the Duke in Measure for Measure, written at about the same time).

Lauren says

Given the current political climate, I wouldn't be remotely surprised to see an uptick in stagings of Marston's masterful satiric drama on corruption and (im)morality.

Originally staged by the Children of the Chapel, in recent years theatres are again casting the play with young (usually teenage) actors in order to highlight the satire and ridiculousness of Marston's court.

The tale of a deposed duke who masquerades as a courtier to gain back his lost dukedom, *The Malcontent* revels in the debauched court of Genoa. It's also, in an odd way, a somewhat hopeful message of the human condition and our shared humanity. Highly recommended.

Mike Jensen says

Very good, slightly dated, student edition of a great play.

Willow says

So I realize this is a very famous and important play, but I didn't like it very much. The plot was confusing and it lacked any sort of climax. I am hoping that the other revenge dramas that I read this summer will redeem the genre for me.

Greg says

As stated by M.L. Wine in the introduction to the University of Nebraska Press edition, "Though it includes near-murders, virtue in distress, moral reclamations, a Machiavellian villain, and dissolute and corrupt specimens of mankind, *The Malcontent* is actually a very funny play. Malevole's game of outfoxing the villains and of underlining the moral sickness and absurdity of the flunkies who adorn the court of Genoa is at once reassuring and entertaining; a number of scenes have no direct relationship to the major action and are clearly comic; and the sheer verbal fecundity of some of the most bitter and satirical passages renders even the 'hideous imagination' of Malevole and other characters in the play hilarious." I don't think there is a better way to describe this play.

Despite the comedy in the others, I do love the bitterly sarcastic lines of Malevole the best:

"Sects, sects. I have seen seeming Piety change her robe so oft that sure none but some arch-devil can shape her a new petticoat."

"'Tis well held desperation, no zeal,
Hopeless to strive with fate. Peace! Temporize!
Hope, hope, that never forsak'st the wretch'st man,
Yet bidd'st me live and lurk in this disguise!
What, play I well the free-breath'd discontent?
Why, man, we are all philosophical monarchs
Or natural fools."

"In none but usurers and brokers; they deceive no man. Men take 'em for bloodsuckers, and so they are!
Now God deliver me from my friends!"

All in all, this is a classic play and one that would be enjoyed by any drama lover.

See my other reviews [here](#)!

Jessica says

Intriguing.

Esdaile says

The strength of this play is in the language, not the plot or characterisation or dramatic tension (although to be fair one should make judgements about plays which one has only read with caution: Shakespeare's comedies tend to look tame in print). The Malcontent closely parallels Tourneur's (if it is Tourneur) Revenger's Tragedy, which itself is in some ways a pastiche of Hamlet, so a pastiche of pastiche then. This play shares with Middleton's plays an uneasy and uncertain relationship between a high moral tone and bawdy language and puns. I am never sure whether the writer is enjoying the bawdiness and dishonestly adds the high moral sentiment, or on the contrary is preaching and feels obliged to add bawdy for the sake of popularity, or, a third possibility, is himself ambivalent, indulging in high jinks and in practically the same stroke of his hectic quill, condemning sin, at once condemning and revelling in the "sweet sheets, wax lights, bed-posts, cambric smocks, villainous curtains, arras pictures, oiled hinges, and all the tongue-tied lasciviousness witnesses of great creatures' wantonness. What salvation can you expect?" Act1 Scene Viii 36-41

Well what indeed? But is all this serious? It cannot be entirely serious, no one who writes lines like "I'll fall like a sponge into water to suck up, to suck up. Howl again. I'll go to church and come to you." is altogether serious, although the comedy is so bizarre as to be ever so slightly sinister. The clown's mask can so easily slip. We are so close to evil and bad dreams and the language of bawdy can slip into terror and nightmare. It does not but it comes close enough to brush us with the touch of impending doom: the judgement, so the writer surely believed, which awaits us all: that rebuke which cannot be gainsaid.

The play is an outpouring of the inventory of cupidity. the punning, sententiousness, invective cursing and raging never lets up. This writer likes to wear his learning on his (I imagine) perfumed and cambric sleeve: we are invited to spend happy hours chasing up a profusion of classical and dialectical references as well as what seem to be insider jokes. It never stops. The style seems to me to be South European, of what the English sometimes call "the fiery Latin temperament" and it is no surprise to learn that Marston's mother was Italian and his sources largely Italian too. This and much like it reads more like the translation of the invective of a Neopolitan housewife than anything more nearly English:

"Come down, thou ragged cur, and snarl here. I give thy dogged sullines free liberty; trot about and bespurtle whom thou pleasest." (Act1 Scene ii 10-12) All the characters seem to be very loud. Reading The Malcontent I have the impression that they are shouting at one another most of the time, like neighbours in a street in Brindisi.

Thou art an arrant knave-

Who I? I have been a sergeant man-

Thou art very poor-

As Job, an alchemist or a poet-

The duke hates thee-

As Irishmen do bum-cracks-

Thou has lost his amity-

As pleasing as maids lose their virginity-

"I wonder what religion thou art of?" asks one character and I wonder too.

I read that Marston became a priest, no doubt his sermons were popular.

This pastiche of pastiches concludes with a tour de force (is this a spoiler?) it is a revenge tragedy in which nobody dies! There are no severed heads, no bodies concealed in chests or duchesses murdered or princes poisoned or hapless suitors stabbed. Nobody is led away to execution. The Machiavellian villain Mendoza is pardoned. Is this Marston's answer to Machiavelli and does Marston share Portia's words of wisdom about mercy?

The underlying theme of this play, its Leitmotiv as it were, is not revenge after all, it is rebuke. The characters never cease rebuking one another but in the most colourful language possible. We all stand rebuked for our sins and even I John Marston am fascinated by sin while I condemn it like the proverbial rabbit before the serpent. Sin fascinates even as it repels.

But the sin is not too heinous, or is it? We are not presented with genuine suffering. Is it that the world was too full of suffering beyond words, the executions, terror, disease and horror of the time, for Marston to do more than rebuke and make fun of fallen Man?

How poor are the repetitive four letter expletives of the ragtag and bottom underclass of today when compared to the outpourings of abuse indulged in by the cacophonous protagonists of "The Malcontent".

I should like to see this performed or at least hear it performed and wonder at the rebuke meted out to all, among others Medame Maquerelle who lies in "the old Cunnycourt" for if "all is damnation, wickedness extreme and there is no faith in man" then let us all be rebuked and acknowledge that "mature discretion is the life of state". "The whore goes down with the stewards and the punk comes up with the puritan." And we take this wisdom home, the last line of this strange romp of a play:

"He that knows most, knows how much he wanteth"

Even that final rebuke is not without its ambiguity. Master Marston sir: can you not be serious without making a pun and can you never make a joke without being somehow ultimately a little serious?
