

An Echo of Chaos

A Search for Order in John Webster



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To The Title Page

Lo, *Death* invested in a Roab of *Ermine*,
Triumphant sits, embellished with *Vermine*,
upon a Pile of dead men's *Skulls*; her Throne,
Pell mell subduing all, and sparing none.
A scrutinous *judgment* will the *Type* rescent,
You may imagine, 'Tis *DEATH*'s Parliament.
upon the *World* it's pow'rfull *Foot* doth tread,
For, all the world, or is, or shall be *dead*.
One *hand* the *Scepter*, t' other holds our *Mirroure*,
In courtesie to shew poor *flesh* its errour:
If *men* forget themselves, *It* tells'em home,
They're *Dust* and *Ashes*, all to *this* must come.
O view their *fate* herein, some will forbear,
who *wave* all thought of *Death* as too severe:
But know, *Death*'s (through't be *unknown* how nic)
A *Point*, on which depends *ETERNITY*,
Either to live *Crown'd* with perpetual Blisse,
Or howl, *tormented* in *Hell*'s dark *Abysse*.
With *winged haste* our brittle *lives* do pass,
As runs the gliding *Sand* I'th' *Hour-glass*.

If more you would, continue on you *Look*
No more on the *Title*, but the *Book*.

M. de La Serre

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Chapter 1

Last of the Elizabethans

*Crown Him a Poet, whom nor Rome, nor Greece,
Transcend in all theirs, for a Master-peece :
In which, whiles words and matter change, and Men
Act one another ; Hee, from whose cleare Pen
They All tooke life, To memory hath lent
A lasting Fame, to raise his Monument.*

John Ford
Dedication to John Webster
The Duchess of Malfi

Antonio

In seeking to reduce both State and People
To a fix'd Order, there judicious King
Begins at home: Quits first his Royall Pallace
Of flattering Sicophants, of dissolute,
And infamous persons, which he sweetly termes
His Masters Master-peece (the worke of Heaven)
Considring duely, that a Princes Court
Is like a common Fountaine, whence should flow
Pure silver-droppes in generall: But if't chance
Some curs'd example poyson't neere the head,
"Death, and diseases through the whole land spread.
And what is't makes this blessed government,
But a most provident Councill, who dare freely
Informe him the corruption of the times?
Though some oth'Court hold it presumption
To instruct Princes what they ought to doe,
It is a noble duety to informe them
What they ought to fore-see
(*The Duchess of Malfi*, I.i.5-23)¹

1.1 From Kyd to Webster – The Culmination of an Era

This opening scene, from *The Duchess of Malfi*, incorporates a vast number of intertextual references to earlier plays together with echoes of societal commentaries. Echoes of power and the game of power and order might be said to constitute some of the most central themes in both of Webster's two Italian tragedies. Identifying these elements, alongside a theoretical and methodological approach to the concept of play-text, might reveal the workings of Webster's artistic games of power. One can also see how Webster breaks from the old ways of structure, language and performative complexity. I would argue that in Webster the multiplicity of dramatic

¹ The quotations from John Webster are all from *The Works of John Webster* ed. David Gunby, David Carnegie and Antony Hammond, Cambridge University Press, 1995-2007. This edition has been used because of it being the authority on Webster with the original old spelling. Although this is the most recent edition of Webster, F.L. Lucas's edition from 1927 will be used throughout the thesis, especially Lucas's excellent notes to the texts. I will consult the original facsimiles from Early English Books Online to compare the editions with regards to the original scene directions as well as title pages and other marginalia.

structures within the complexity of ideas and comments on the fictive events in the plays constitute a powerful approach to exploring ideological and religious conflicts in Webster's own time. Gunnar Boklund concludes that Webster's purpose is to show a "world without a centre," further asserting that it is "a world where mankind is abandoned, without foothold on an earth where the moral law does not apply, without real hope in a heaven that allows this predicament to prevail" (179-180). The tragedies are also powerful comments on much of Jacobean society, comments that, by being situated in a foreign country but also within a contemporary timeframe, challenge ideological and religious ideas as well as the conventional theatrical structure.

In a historical frame, Webster might be said to deserve the title the Last of the Elizabethans. This can be seen both in terms of his being one of the last playwrights of the Elizabethan era, and in that his ideas of politics, and religion, as well as his performative and structural ideas, changed into the radical and explicit political forms which were to become the new order in drama. Rupert Brooke has been of great importance to the study of Webster, both because of his very personal engagement and his poetic approach. His study *John Webster and the Elizabethan Drama* is a very early critical text on Webster; in this book he also describes Webster as being one of the "last Elizabethans". Brooke comments on Webster and his contemporaries asserting that his:

powerful personality coloured what he wrote, and yet these two plays are more representative than any that had led to them, of the period behind them. The stream swept straight on from Marston and Tourneur to Webster. With him the sinister waves, if they lost something of their strange iridescence, won greater gloom and profundity. After him they plunged into the depths of the earth. He stands in his loneliness, first of that long line of "last Elizabethans." As the edge of a cliff seems higher than the rest from the sheer descent in front of it, Webster, the Webster of these two plays, appears even mistier and grander than he really is, because he is the last of Earth, looking out over a sea of saccharine (74-75).

The elements incorporated within Antonio's opening speech in *The Duchess of Malfi* are a forewarning of what is to be Webster's way of showing the

prescribed order of being in the Elizabethan society and that its chaotic state has become subject to misrule and political diseases. Webster's plays could be said to introduce a form of seriousness, which might be said to differ from the earlier forms of seriousness seen on stage in the plays of many of his predecessors. In Webster, there is a stronger feeling of discomfort and despair, one that is not resolved at the end of his plays. In a time where the stage was an arena of debate and conflict, Webster's use of intricate plot structure and political ideas had an immense impact on the cultural elite who, as I argue later, were the ideal audience for Webster's plays. The theatre itself was under continuous attack from both Puritans and scholars claiming that acting was in itself blasphemous, or at best, the producer of light, insubstantial trifles. The elements of the following study include the question of the nature of the play-text, and the act of engaging in, as opposed to reading a play. In the history of Webster's plays this question becomes even more pressing and pivotal to the understanding of the plays as both printed play-texts and performed texts with certain semiotic echoes of performed power, as I explore later in this chapter and the chapter that follows.

Webster's two Italian plays are revenge plays in the way that they apply some of the classic elements of revenge genre. However, his new application on this form, through structural diversity of multiple plots and lack of resolution endings, opens up to the contemporary radical climate in both politics and art. Webster's predecessors were familiar with the revenge structure in drama. This specific motif arrived in Renaissance drama from the Roman re-writings of the ancient Greek tragedies, such as Seneca's *Thyestes* and *Agamemnon*. In *The Spanish Tragedy*, Thomas Kyd can be said to have introduced the modern revenge drama to English society, and in so doing perhaps also introduced a different method of societal commentary, through mimesis on stage. The importance of this play is discussed by Arthur Freeman:

If the play precedes *The Jew of Malta* and *The Massacre at Paris* it contains the first Machiavellian villain; if it precedes *John a Kent and John a Cumber* it contains the earliest play-within-play; and if it precedes *Titus Andronicus* it may also be styled the first modern revenge tragedy. Given a date before 1587 and *Tamburlaine*, one might incontrovertibly call Kyd's play the first extant modern tragedy, without qualification (*The Spanish Tragedy*, xiii).

The concept of mimesis in Renaissance literary criticism was much debated in terms of the idea of fiction as opposed to reality. From the ancient Greeks, through Latin translations, the Renaissance intellectuals read Aristotle's *Poetics*, which states that mimesis is an imitation of an action. What then becomes an important question is how, or if, an imitation of a series of actions, that constitutes a play, may express moral knowledge or a moral order. According to Sir Philip Sidney, commenting on 'poesy,' it,

therefore, is an art of imitation, for so Aristotle termeth it in the word *mimēsis*, that is to say, a representing, counterfeiting or figuring forth – to speak metaphorically, a speaking picture – with this end: to teach and delight (Sidney, 10).

Sidney argues for the notion of delight in knowledge acquired from a representation of action, which is linked to Aristotle's idea of catharsis through fear and pity. In a dramatic performance the imitation of an action is by itself an action. The immediacy of the performed action of a "speaking picture" calls forth the strongest feelings of fear and pity, due to its direct communication with the recipients of the moral message.

The immediacy of the action set in contemporary time and place, seen together with Webster's mimetically realistic notions of chaos and uncertainty, is made clear by Jonathan Dollimore in his study *Radical Tragedy*. Dollimore states that "in the Renaissance a revival of mimetic realism in art coincided with new-found anxieties over the very nature of reality itself" (70). Dollimore explores this further by discussing the attack on literature and drama during the Renaissance: "To the charge that literature, as fiction, involves falsity the apologists responded by stressing its mimetic function; the further charge that such literature inevitably inclined towards obscenity and blasphemy was met by advancing its didactic purpose" (71). In this discussion, Thomas Heywood, in his *An Apology for Actors*, justifies the didactic purpose by proclaiming that plays

are writ with this in ayme, and carryed with this methode, to teach their subjects obedience to their King, to show the people the vntimely ends of such as haue moued tumults, commotions, and insurrections, to present them with the flourishing estate of such as live obedience, exhorting them to allegiance, dehorting them from traytorous and fellonious stragagems. (56)

The idea of having a play with an aim to teach is in strong connection with what Aristotle asserted that drama should do; namely to teach the audience morality. The memory of the folk drama was present in people's minds during the Renaissance and one could perhaps align the thoughts of moral teachings with these plays as well. Here one could look to the mystery and morality plays that had as their purpose, through Biblical stories and beliefs, to bring moral standards to the people outside the ritualistic and ceremonial church. The ritual aspect of everyday life is also an important influence with regards to the constructed theatricality of the established. I will not discuss this type of rituals at length as this thesis will focus on the established stage. The tradition of emphasising moral undertones is seen in plays throughout the Renaissance, albeit with varied focal points.

With Webster, this is almost turned on its head. By creating characters and plots that are by no means pure and morally good, he imitates real life in such a manner that he shows life's and man's darkest sides. The idea of chaos in Webster is perhaps best perceived in his development of intrigues and greyscale characters without any clear definition of the dichotomy of good and evil. His characters might be said to include several sets of white devils. In Lucas' commentary to *The White Devil* he explains the title by stating that a white devil is "a devil disguised under a fair outside" (Lucas, vol.I 193). It is also interesting that political enemies of the state were often dubbed "devils," as mentioned by Alan Haynes below. In Brachiano's cry of disillusionment we see the same idea, "Your beautie! ô, ten thousand curses on't. | How long have I beheld the devill in christall?" (IV,ii,84-85). It is by taking the idea of revenge to its utmost extreme that Webster reveals the chaos of the world in full. The states of chaos and directionlessness themselves constitute a moral question. Seen in conjunction with the religious-political state of being in England, where one was regarded as immoral and un-English as well as traitor to the Crown if one were Catholic or thought to be. If one did not take sides, this moral question becomes imperative.

Discussions surrounding the act of revenge were imbedded into almost every aspect of social discourse of the time. The act of revenge itself was a violation of the law, since by taking revenge on someone the law was set aside for personal vendetta. It was also an act in direct conflict

with the Church and God: by avenging a wrongful deed God's judgement is set aside, and morality is exchanged for emotions of hate. By referring to Biblical law, the Church's attitude towards on revenge was crystal clear: "Recompence to no man euyl for euyl" and "auenge not your selues, but geue place vnto wrath: for it is wrytte, Vengeance is myne: I will repaye, sayth the Lord."² The chaotic elements in Webster's plays also reflect these concerns and conflicts in their artistic expression. Accordingly Sturgess talks about the rule-breaking art-form of Mannerism that might be seen in Webster's breaking of dramatic rules.³ His immensely complicated plots and character compositions add to the overall tone a sense of chaos and fragmentation of society. By reading these elements in conjunction with religious and ideological ideas one may focus on the political aspects of the two tragedies alongside real events in contemporary England and Europe.

The political drama, as displayed in the initial dialogue between Delio and Antonio, is manifested in earlier plays such as Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, in which the war between Spain and Portugal is of immense importance. Marlowe's *Edward II* and *The Massacre at Paris* are two plays that create much political tension with regards to both foreign and domestic events. Shakespeare's *Richard II* and *Richard III*, among many of his plays, challenge more contemporary political problems, such as the idea of Monarchy and historical figures as symbols for the contemporary political. Ben Jonson's *Sejanus* is a very powerful play with strong political statements, and it also introduces the dangerous mob as a political figure. The shift in the ending scene of this play gives another aspect to the collective moral in which a fierce mob brutally slaughters a political leader and all of his family as a consequence of a **the** pursuit of personal power. After Sejanus has been demoted and his plan of overthrowing the emperor is revealed he leaves the senate and Ternentius reports to the remaining senators Sejanus' fate "by the rude multitude":

who not content
With what the forward justice of the state
Officiously had done, with violent rage
Have rent it limb from limb. A thousand heads,

² Romans 12:17-19, from the *Geneva Bible* (1557).

³ Sturgess, Keith, *Jacobean Private Theatre*, London, Routledge, 1987, pp.5-8.

A thousand hands, ten thousand tongues, and voices,
Employed at once in several acts of malice!
(*Sejanus*, V. 798-803)

Looking at different villainous characters from Kyd to Webster, a strong element of Machiavellianism the act of being cunning and manipulative in order to gain power or influence, is evident throughout. The vengeful character in many of the pre-Websterian plays is portrayed much along the lines of the English interpretation of Machiavelli's *The Prince* and *The Discourses*, in which the ideology and goal are power and control. His *Il Principe* (*The Prince*, 1513) was printed in Italian in England by John Wolfe in 1584, but its contents were thought so dangerous that they were not translated into English until 1640. His other major work, *I Discorsi* (*Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livius*, 1513-17) was translated into English in 1636. The availability of Machiavelli to Webster might be seen in the light of his studies at the Inns of Court. Since this was the seat of power and political discussions it is reasonable to conclude that Webster knew Machiavelli by word of mouth, but might also have read the texts in the original Italian. Machiavelli's *Art of War* was available in translation by Peter Whitehorne, a student at Gray's Inn, as early as in 1562. In my discussion later in this thesis, of Machiavelli and Websterian characters, I will focus on the pursuit of power and control through means of intrigue and conspiracies by means of political performative echoes in Webster's stage language. What we see in Antonio's speech above is the coming intrigue, which will colour the rest of the play. The Machiavellian villain is introduced by the characters Bosola and the Cardinal, who, in many ways, mirror the power pair Lord Burleigh and Walsingham.

The initial speech by Antonio also questions the ideology of the monarchy and the role of the King and his men. The question of commenting on serious matters on the stage and in fiction was also something Francis Bacon discussed in both his essays and in *De Augmentis*:

Dramaticall, or Representative Poesy, which brings the World upon the stage, is of excellent use, if it were not abused. For the Instructions, and Corruptions of the Stage may be great; but the corruptions in this kind abound; the Discipline is altogether neglected in our times. For

although in moderne Commonwealths, *Stage-Plaies* be but esteemed a sport or pastime, unlesse it draw from the Satyre and be mordant; yet the care of the Ancients was that it should instruct the minds of men unto virtue (*Of the Advancement*, 107).

Bacon's influence on Webster could perhaps be seen in that it "was a lawyer's training that produced the new style of essayist. Bacon's first collection appeared in the same year that John Webster appeared at the Middle Temple" (Bradbrook, 45). Bradbrook continues by describing the practice of the law as "involving an art of performance," this being "fenced and safe guarded by ritual and ceremony" (45). Webster lived and studied at the Middle Temple in London. This was one of the Inns of Court where the study of the law was one of the major activities, along with literary, artistic and other forms of cultural engagements. The influence Webster had from this place and the people of knowledge who visited the Inns was of no small matter. The Inns were administered as a university college, and large assemblies, such as Privy Council meetings and theatre performances, were not uncommon. With these meetings Webster defined his audience and his initial meeting with drama. Among his friends here were John Marston and John Ford. Bradbrook's outline of Webster's life at the Court Inns describes the relationship between them:

Marston's general dramatic style deeply influenced Webster, as Webster in turn influenced Ford. The three dramatists – Marston, Webster, Ford – are closely linked in a way which illuminates the greatest plays, and their significant works follow from common membership of a Society where literature was diligently cultivated. (28)

The audience at these gatherings where, for the most part, learned men who knew the literary connotations as well as the political and ideological references both to classical and modern history. Andrew Gurr discusses these "learned ears" of the audience and the playwrights' use of political allusions with special emphasis on Webster:

If Webster used Horace in a consciously divisive way to differentiate the learned elite from the many-headed commoners as he seems to have done at the end of *The Duchess of Malfi*, the likelihood is that every allusion

to a classical author and every one of the Latin quotations in *The White Devil* would have been designed on the one hand to flatter the educated and on the other to distinguish those few from the many, hearers from spectators (*Playgoing*, 117).

By separating the learned from the common, while also being aware of the difference in hearer and spectator, Webster was able to compose plays of immense complexity in dramatic and character structure, as well as in ideological radicalism. This was also because of the influence he had absorbed at the Inns of Court. On surface he created spectacular shows with death and sex, but underneath these spectacles he implemented deeply disturbing comments through both classical and juridical terminology and allusions.

The friendship with Marston contributed much to Webster's view on the shocking and the tragic. Bradbrook discusses this in the following terms:

Using familiar and noble sentiments in new and shocking contexts, Marston attacks the follies of London itself (the pride of ambassadors, a contemporary issue in 1604), and its religious hypocrisies. This, the gravest undertone in whole piece, makes it not inconceivable that the author of such virulent satire should renounce the theatre for the pulpit and take holy orders (43).

The act of acting and the idea of theatricality are evident in the whole situation of Marston; the Church and the theatre might be seen as two aspects of society not very far from each other. The influence from the Inns of Court is evident in most of the aspects in Marston, Webster and Ford, from the use of juridical language and rituals to the awareness of political life in the city. Kathryn R. Finin-Farber states that:

The spectacles enacted on the early modern stage often reflect the highly litigious society from which they emerge: the drama of this period is full of legal representations, frequently written by men who were themselves trained at the Inns of Court. John Webster is one such figure, and critics have seen parallels between his representation of Vittoria's arraignment in *The White Devil* and the contemporary trials of such diverse figures as Sir Walter Raleigh and Lady Penelope Rich (219).

Farber also argues, “the stage does not merely reflect contemporary issues but itself enacts ideological contestation” (219).

B.W. Beckinsale gives a brief account on the shift in the political and educational thought in his biography on Lord Burleigh. He asserts that “a cultural revolution was beginning, by which the gentleman was acquiring an education equivalent to that of the clerk,” (14) and the new standards in court life and in the conduct of government required men with the classical education prescribed by the humanists. What we see in this is the centralization of courtly and urban education. The Inns of Court became the cultural, intellectual, political, and social centre for the new generation of courtiers, politicians and dramatists. Some exceptions, like Marlowe and Chapman, occurred amongst the scholarly and urban, but the tendency towards an education from the Inns is seen more and more. It was at the Inns that many of the Privy Council meetings were held, and many of the most important people in Elizabethan and Jacobean London lived in or frequented at the Inns.

The study of the socio-historical frame of Webster gives emphasis to the elements of his dramatic composition. The moral view as well as the judicial could be seen in the plays in the form of opposing dramaturgical actions. The language of Webster suggests an awareness of audience involvement in state affairs, the use of a language strongly coloured by contemporary power jargon giving strength to a social commentary on stage both publicly and privately. In the light of Finin-Farber’s statement above, and the historical background leading up to Webster’s plays, it is reasonable to assert that both in topical and artistic contents Webster is the culmination of the Elizabethan drama and dramatic era. The echoes of conflict and chaos are heard as echoes of the Duchess’s voice from beyond the grave.

1.2 From Text to Stage and Back – Dramatic Structure in Webster

There are some terms that should be addressed before entering the discussion on the properties of the printed and the performed texts, namely the act of reading as opposed to the act of engaging in a performance of a play. The lack of a sufficiently accurate term, for the complete experience of actively sitting in a theatre while a play is performed, limits the ability to discuss in more correct terms the interrelationship between the audience and the actors as well as the play. The word ‘audience’ suggests the act of listening passively, although there is an active participation between the audience and the performer. I will call this active participation ‘engaging’ in a performance, since it is only in an active participation that all the layers of language and text become fully understandable and interpretable. The history and dramatic structure of Webster’s plays should, then, be discussed at some length here as these touch upon one of the most debated theoretical problems regarding text and identification. A theoretic approach to the marginalia of Webster’s plays offers a way of reading the plays in such a manner that I would argue for a close relationship between the play’s intricate plot structure and character development and an intended audience. By reading additional material such as title pages and lists of *dramatis personae*, the reading of the plays becomes a matter of combining the different forms of languages of power and social criticism. A discussion of what is to be considered as part of the play-text with regards to the Renaissance is here of interest, since the production process of the plays and certain paratexts should be part of the play-text.

Viewing print and performance as not mutually exclusive, their relationship to each other helps develop the two forms as complementary to each other. Gurr argues for the importance of the stage and its location, by comparing several title pages and their reference to specific stage performances.⁴ Lukas Erne states that, “Webster’s apology for the play’s appearance in print reveals a double-edged attitude – neither anti-theatrical nor hostile to print, blind to the virtues of neither medium” (77). According

⁴ Gurr, Andrew, *Playgoing in Shakespeare’s London*, Cambridge, 2004, pp.69-85.

to Manfred Pfister, the dramatic text is divided into two layers: “one layer comprises the spoken dialogue that takes place between the dramatic figures. Whilst the other refers to the verbal text segments that are not reproduced on stage in spoken form.” He describes the second category as including “the title of the play, the inscriptions, dedications and prefaces, the dramatis personae, announcements of act and scene, stage directions, whether applicable to scenery or action, and the identification of the speaker of a particular speech” (13-14).

In trying to define what to include in the different readings of Webster’s plays, the definition of text and play becomes important. Here it is important to differentiate between the printed play-text and the performative play-text. There is a radical difference between a reading of a play printed on a physical page to engaging in a performance of the self-same play. I will come back to the performative aspect of the play-text later in the thesis.

The “To The Reader”, in *The White Devil*, together with the dedications both from Webster’s friends – such as John Ford – and Webster’s own dedication to George Hardin Baron Barkeley in *The Duchess of Malfi*, are interesting with regards to the history of the play and its audience. As this was written by Webster himself, reading this preface as an integrated component of equals in dramatic importance, both the intentional aim, seen in the unusually direct involvement by Webster in the printing process as well as the direct address to the reader of the play, become elements of the text as a constructed whole of equal parts. I would argue that this preface should be read as a part of the play’s impact as much as the play’s dramatic expression. The list of segments, which constitute the second layer of dramatic text according to Pfister, might, I would argue, have been incomplete in the understanding and definition of the dramatic texts by Webster.

An important question when discussing the plays of Webster is what should be included as part of the text. As I have tried to establish above, a formalistic approach would be too narrow since the printing process should be included as well as the non-dramatical elements, such as scene directions and title pages. To identify the elements of socio-historical significance a New Historical method of approach would be valuable. The significance of such texts could be seen in relationship to the importance of the printed text and the print culture. The social relations are seen as more materially obvious in their

impact on society. Jan R. Veenstra comments on Greenblatt's terms 'social energy' and 'Poetics of Culture' in a very concise and enlightened way:

Poetics of culture seeks to reveal the relationship between texts and their sociohistorical contexts. Cultural Poetics assumes that texts not only document the social forces that inform and constitute history and society but also feature prominently in the social process themselves which fashion both individual identity and the sociohistorical situation (174).

Greenblatt furthers Foucault's argument on social discourses and their mutual dependency by arguing for the importance of social energies to the creation of art.⁵ The social energy and socio-historical forces, which, in Greenblatt's New Historicism method are the driving force of all activity within a society, are all on an equal level of interpretation and influence. One of the problems with this approach is that there is no limit to what might be considered an important part of any given text. One could stretch the elements of plausible interpretable texts even further by introducing the language of the stage and the semiotics of a performance. With this approach, the process of a play's objectification into a textual object valid for interpretation becomes a part of the socio-historical frame and of the play itself. With regards to Webster, I would argue, the plays will profit from including the non-dramatic elements of the published text as direct parts of the plays themselves. If one reads "To The Reader" in *The White Devil* it opens up the possibilities of including the stage performance and the historical context surrounding this performance. Adopting this type of combined theoretical and methodical approach to both of Webster's plays, and defining a possible theatre audience, more of the intertextual and interhistorical references imbedded in the play-text will be made visible.

The history of *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi* might very well be read through the prefaces to the plays in concordance with the information available regarding the playhouses in which they were first performed. The title page of the plays is also of interest, especially with reference to the significance of the performances and the play as printed text.

5 Greenblatt, Stephen, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England*, pp. 1-21.

The title page⁶ to *The White Devil* might be read in light of the typographical elements and their functional placement on the page. The title, with its subtitle, covers most of the page with the following words “The White Divel, | Or, The Tragedy of *Paulo Giordano* | *Ursini*, Duke of *Brachiano*, | With | The Life and Death of *Vittoria* | *Corombona* the famous | Venetian Curtizan.” The title pages to most of the Renaissance plays give reference to a first performance, which was often a way of establishing provenance of the text, as if the performance of the play was the way of giving the play its worth. An interesting aspect of the title page to *The White Devil* is the typographical placing and size of the information regarding the first performance. Often, both the company and the place of first performance was mentioned in the opening title, but in the first edition printed by Nicholas Okes, only the following words mention the stage history of the play: “*Acted by the Queenes Maiesties Seruants.*” By also placing this at the very last line, and in much smaller print than the rest of title text, bears witness to the harsh criticism Webster himself gave this performance.

The White Devil was first performed at the Red Bull theatre, which, as opposed to Blackfriars, in which *The Duchess of Malfi* initially was performed, was a public outdoor theatre. Bradbrook describes the typical scenes and audience at the Red Bull in the following manner:

The Red Bull Theatre was given all kinds of spectacle : fireworks, big built-up displays. It was a sort of poor man’s Lord Mayor’s Show, as the Lord Mayor’s Show was a sort of poor Man’s Court masque, and as James’s Court masques were a sort of poor man’s copy of the Medici’s festivities at Florence (120).

Alexander Leggatt, in *Jacobean Public Theatre*, cites *The Two Merry Milkmaids*, a Red Bull play from around 1619, as containing the Red Bull formula:

This day we entreat all that are hither come,
To expect no noise of guns, trumpets, nor drum,
Nor sword and target; but to hear sense and words,
Fitting the matter that the scene affords.
So that the stage being reform’d, and free
From the loud clamours it was wont to be,

6 Fig. 1

Turmoil'd with battles; you I hope will cease
Your daily tumults, and with us wish peace.

For we have in't a conjurer, a devil,
And a clown too; but I fear the evil,
In which perhaps unwisely we may fail,
Of wanting squibs and crackers at their tail (22).

Leggatt talks further about *The White Devil* and the Red Bull, in his chapter "The failure of *The White Devil*," and blames this, as did Webster in his "To The Reader", on the lack of sophistication in the audience and the intricacy of the visual language. When Leggatt tries to argue why it failed, he starts by asking why the Red Bull company was offered the play and why they accepted it. He states further that the play is

Complex, sophisticated and satiric, it seems an incongruous fit with the rest of the repertoire. Yet there are aspects of it that might at first glance have made it seem suitable, or at least worth risking. Its combination of spectacle and lurid violence would align it with plays like *Lust's Dominion* and *The Devil's Charter*; the popular tradition was not at all chaste wives and jolly shoemakers (124).

The attack on the audience is significant both in this, and especially by Webster himself when he states in the "To The Reader" that,

Onely since it was acted, in so dull a time of Winter, presented in so open and blacke a Theater, that it wanted (that which is the onely grace and setting out of a Tragedy) full and understanding Auditory: and that since that time I have noted, most of the people that come to that Play-house, resemble those ignorant asses (who visiting Stationers shoppes their use is not to inquire for good bookes, but new bookes) I present it to the generall veiw with this confidence.

Nec rhoncos metues maligniorum,
Nec scombris tunicas dabis molestas (A2^r, 4-12).⁷

⁷ 'You [the poet's book] will not fear the sneers of the malicious, nor supply wrappers for mackerel' (Martial IV,86).

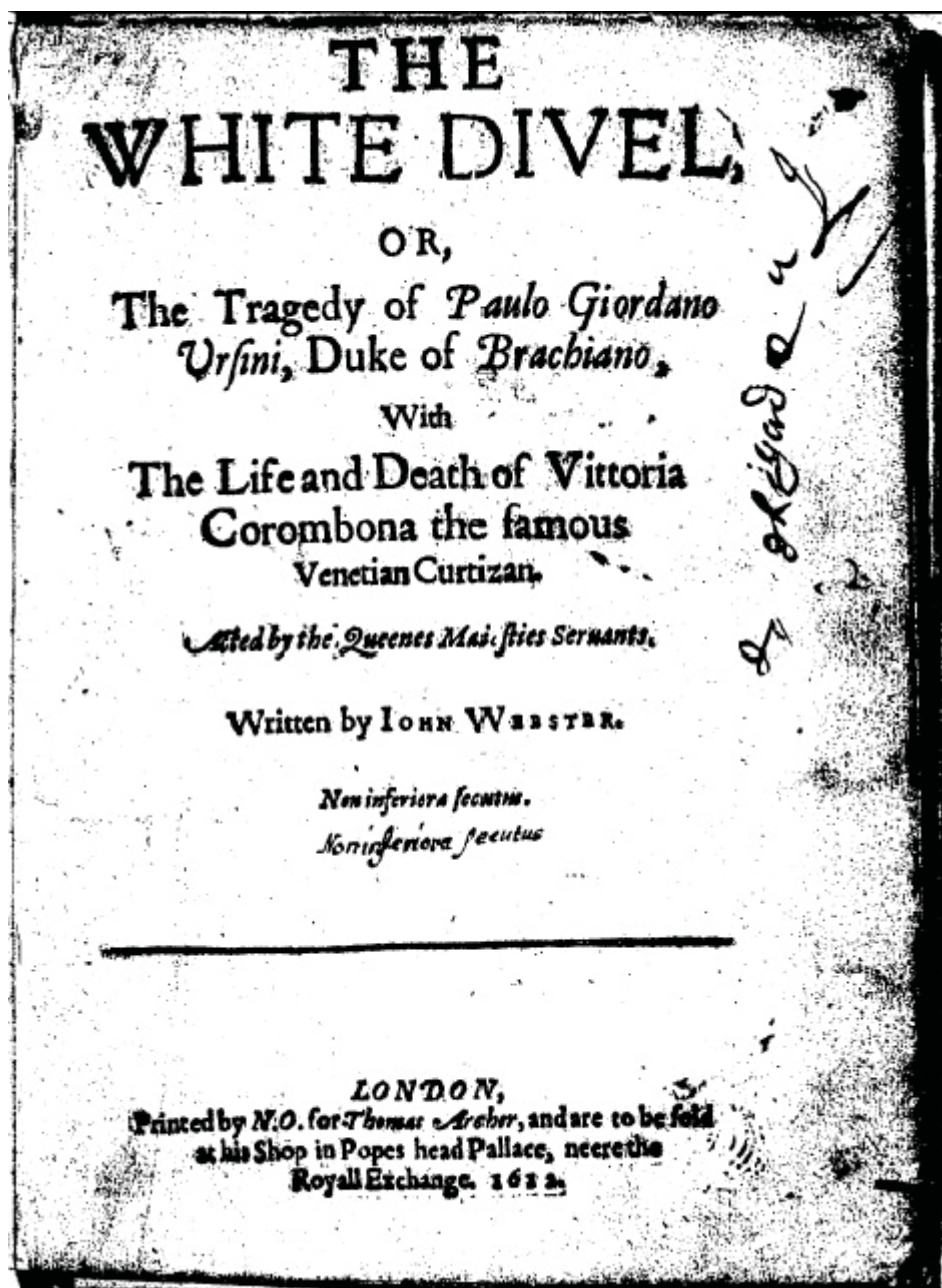


Fig. 1.
Title page, John Webster *The White Devil*
London, Printed by Nicholas Okes for Thomas Archer,
1612.

THE
TRAGEDY
OF THE DUCHESS
Of Malfy.

As it was Presented, primarily, at the Black-
Friars, and publicly at the Globe, By the
Kings Maiesties Seruants.

The perfect and exact Coppy, with diuerse
things Printed, that the length of the Play would
not be in the Press cut.

Written by John Webster.

Printed by Nicholas Okes, for John Waterson.

J. Waterson

LONDON:

Printed by NICHOLAS OKES, at the
WATER-SIDE, and are to be sold at the
 signe of the Crowne, in Pauls
Church-yard, 1623.

Fig. 2.
Title page, John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*
London, Printed by Nicholas Okes for John Waterson
1623.

This shows, not only why, according to Leggatt, it failed, but it also indicates that Webster was writing the play with a specific kind of audience in mind.

With Webster's second play *The Duchess of Malfi* the history of the play's performance and textual history is completely different from *White Devil*. With this play Webster got the audience he wished for. As the title page testifies⁸, the typographical placement of the self-authorising performance history is much more visible as a result of a larger font and its placement high on the page with the following words: "As it was Presented priuatly, at the Black- | Friers; and publiquely at the Globe, By the | Kings Maiesties Seruants." It is also interesting to note that Webster clearly distinguishes between the performed version of the play and the printed version. He saw to it that printed on the same title page was the claim that this is "The Perfect and exact Coppy, with diuerse | things Printed, that the length of the Play would | not beare in the Presentment." What this preface shows is the self-awareness of the play as a non-static dynamic entity; it changes according to its audience and intended readership. Yet another paratextual occurrence with this play is both significant to the printing history of Renaissance plays, and also to the stage history and the historical background to the play, and that is the list of "The Actors Names". This is the first instance in English of the publication of a list of actors assigned to specific roles. In David Carnegie's "Theatrical introduction" to *The Duchess of Malfi* in the most recent Cambridge edition there is a comment on this, and on the most important actors in the comment that "the King's Men evidently recognized Bosola as a role fit for one of their leading players" (432). This was John Lowin who, by 1614, was an established actor of forty years. Carnegie describes Lowin as an actor who "seems to have specialized in roles calling for bluff outspokenness," and that he presumably played roles like Falstaff, Sir Epicure Mammon and Henry VIII. The respectable and somewhat older Richard Burbage played Ferdinand. He had earlier played many leading roles such as Hamlet, Lear, Othello, Hierronimo and Malevole. Carnegie's note to the list argues that

placing Bosola at the head of the list, higher than his rank and status would usually place him in a *dramatis personae*, may be an indication

8 Fig. 2

of Webster's view of Bosola's importance to the play's structure. This can be supported by adding that other principle characters such as Antonio and Delio come higher in the list than the dramatically less important but socially superior Marquis of Pescara or Count Malesteste (443n26).

Watching the play performed on stage and the experience of reading a play in book form are two completely different types of communication, with two uniquely different languages. The language of the stage and the performative impact of a play and how this, in turn, will influence and open up for several new layers of reference will be the main focus in chapter 3. I will here point out some of the theoretical arguments that might support the analysis later.

The commonplace statement by Jaques in Shakespeare's *As You Like It* that "All the world's a stage", is vitally instructive in this context:

And all the men and women merely players.
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts
(II.vii.138-141),

The theatricality of the socio-historical frame world is imitated and enacted in the theatre by the creation of the represented. The self-conscious theatricality of imitating society on stage might be seen to be exploited by the Inns of Court's revels, coming to a culmination in Shakespeare and Webster. By imitating life upon the stage, the reality of life becomes a mirroring of something real into something fictional. The fictional becomes real when placed and experienced in a frame of a mirror of the simulacrum. In the theatre, the setting is in itself a mimetic representation of society with all its classes and all its faces of life. The theatre is a miniature "Theatrum Orbis Terrarum" as well as "Theatre of the Empire of Great Britain"⁹. The setting outside of the real world results in the theatre's creation of its own representation of the external world. In the theatre the audience becomes onlookers of themselves as passive, yet, in this constructed reality, active

⁹ The titles are from Ortelius (1570) and Speed (1611). This is also discussed by Stuart Sillars in *The Illustrated Shakespeare, 1709-1875*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming October 2008. p.33

participants in the act of commenting and acting. By directly being aware of the importance of the stage as having an appropriate audience for the right play, Webster is also aware of the implications a play might have on the audience, if presented to the right one. Sturges opens his discussion on “The Audience of the Jacobean Private Theatre”, from *Jacobean Private Theatre*, by relating that

A theatre performance is a social event. In writing the script, the playwright seeks to serve his audience as well as his muse, and the business of acting is only completed by the act of spectating. The play lies in the experience of the audience and to understand the play we must anatomise that audience as far as records allow (11).

By reading the plays of Webster alongside his “To The Reader” and epilogue, as well as the induction to Marston’s *Malcontent*, we might anatomise the intended audience for whom Webster wanted to create a stage of contemporary comment, as well as to “teach and delight.” As mentioned above, the “learned ears” of Webster’s intended audience might also be the intended audience for Webster’s publication of the self-same plays. By taking into account *The Devil’s Law Case*, Webster includes an address “To The Judicious Reader”, which suggests an awareness of an intellectual elite both as audience and readers. It is also interesting to compare the two plays with regards to their non-dramatic preface. In *The White Devil*, as mentioned, the “To The Reader” is a rather harsh critique pointed towards the Red Bull and the initial audience, but it is also a tribute to his predecessors and their importance to him and his work. The awareness of the textuality of the printed play is more evident in Webster than in any of the other Renaissance playwrights. He concludes his “To The Reader” with a plea:

Wishing what I write may be read by their light:
protesting, that, in the strength of mine own
judgement, I know them so worthy, that though I
rest silent in my own work, yet to most of theirs I
dare (without flattery) fix that of Martial:

Non norunt, haec monumenta mori (A2^v, 40).¹⁰

10 “These monuments do not know death”, Martial, X.ii.12.

The play-text, being a combination of dramatic text, paratexts and the stage history suggested by the title pages, suggest a historical analysis of the two Italian plays on the basis of Webster's historical setting. By performing a combination of theoretical and methodological analysis of these plays, and comparing language and form, as well as the political and religious notions within the historical frames of Webster's time, certain sets of echoes might emerge and further open up to a fuller understanding of the impact of societal influence.

1.3 The Quest for a Moral Order –The Old Order

The quest for moral order in Webster, be it political or religious, can be assumed of the pre-Websterian era. In Thomas Cranmer's *An Exhortation Concerning Good Order and Obedience*, from 1559, it is stated that "Almighty God hath created and appointed all things in heaven, earth and waters in a most excellent and perfect order" (93), and stretches this order to the political world of Elizabeth I:

God hath sent us his high gift, our most sovereign Lady Queen Elizabeth, with godly, wise and honourable council, with other superiors and inferiors in a beautiful order, and goodly. (Aughterson, 93)

This order of the law and the order of humanity play important roles in the development of the order of being and the order of man. The plays are in themselves a quest for order in a society that is in chaos and turmoil. The idea of society and the rules by which it is governed is questioned by Webster with corrupted power figures and arbitrariness of structure of the characters

Misrule, represented by the fools of earlier Elizabethan plays, such as those in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Twelfth Night*, and *Hamlet*, opens up for the fool the possibility of commenting on society and its flaws. The order in these plays is inverted and the bestiality

of man is explored. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the metamorphosis of Bottom and the misrule of Puck give the fool in Elizabethan drama the structural function of commentator.¹¹ At the end of these plays order is restored, the structure of society and its rules turn back into the old order. In Webster the order has changed. Order is lost and there is no divine intervention that can create a new order; only through death and destruction might a new order spring forth.

Dollimore cites Raymond Williams and John Fekete when defining the academic quest for the crisis in the structure of Jacobean drama; it is thus called 'a problem of *order*' and 'a *telos* of harmonic integration' (5). When looking for order in Webster's plays it seems the harmony of society is effaced by a problem of chaos. The political strife between those who were marked as un-English and those who were said to be the true English was a question of faith transposed into politics. Webster's use of intrigues, plots, and counterplots at court might be seen in light of Elizabethan and Jacobean Court life, and the construction of some of his characters bears a striking resemblance to some of the most influential persons at the time. *A Courtier in an Age of Terror* is the subtitle to Derek Wilson's biography of Sir Francis Walsingham, and in the preface he describes the middle years of Elizabeth's reign in the following way:

State-sponsored terrorism, hit men paid to eliminate heads of state, mobs fired up by hate-shrieking 'holy' men, fanatics ready to espouse martyrdom in the hope of heavenly reward, asylum-seekers, internment camps, the clash of totally irreconcilable ideologies. The list is familiar to us but as well as highlighting some of the problems of twenty-first-century Britain, it also offers an accurate picture of England 1570-90.
(ix)

During the priest-hunt the convictions were made in a political language. Being a Catholic and a Jesuit priest was not a question of religious belonging but a political offence of high treason. Lord Burleigh, in a treaty he called *The Execution of Justice in England* discusses the immanent problem of

¹¹ For more on the discussion on Bottom and Puck and the darker shades of misrule see Vinje, John W. "Fuseli's Bottom and the Barberini Faun." *Notes and Queries* 54.3 (2007): 283-85. Briggs, Katharine M., *The Anatomy of Puck: An Examination of Fairy Beliefs among Shakespeare's Contemporaries and Successors*, London, Routledge, 1959, Yates, Frances, *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age*, London, Routledge, 2003.

Catholics as political traitors rather than religious missionaries:

It hath bene in all ages and in all countries, a common vfrage of all offenders for the most part both great and small, to make defence of their lewd and vnlawfull facts by vntruthes and by colouring and couering their deedes (were they neuer so vile) with pretences of som other causes of contratie operations or effectes : to the intent not onely to auoid punishment or shame, but to continue, vphold (& prosecute their wicked attempts, to ý full satisfaction of their disordered and malicious appetites (4).

Several people contributed to creating the political and religious ideological foundation of Elizabethan and Jacobean England as seen in Burleigh. Among them were Elizabeth's first secretary of state William Cecil Lord Burleigh, Sir Francis Walsingham, and Robert Cecil¹² who was also James's advisor and secretary of state. The theatricality of politics, including everything from cunningly planned intrigues at court to the grand parades and processions of Elizabeth and James as spectacles of power, was so ingrained in Renaissance life and the forming of the political climate that the stage became a vital part of politics as well as religion.

In Antonio's opening speech, the question of morality might be read in the comment on the action taken by the French king in order to rid his court of "dissolute and infamous people," as well as "flatt'ring sycophants". In the interregnum¹³ between Elizabeth I and James I, conspiracy and the morality of the players involved in James's accession to the throne became a pressing matter. The internal intrigues, which were the result of an enormous power struggle between different ideological and religious factions, contributed directly to James' accession to the throne.

The political climate during Elizabeth's reign, as well as the interregnum and the initial years of James's reign, then, was much under the influence of chaos and intrigue. The foundation of the Secret Service is perhaps one of the most important events in the political game played to

12 Robert Cecil was the younger son of William Cecil. I will use the title Lord Burleigh for William Cecil to distinguish between the two Cecils.

13 According to Leanda de Lisle in, *After Elizabeth: The Rise of James of Scotland and the Struggle for the Throne of England*, it is described a period of great unrest and uncertainty immediately after the death of Elizabeth, even though she had named James her successor with a nod, there were not an overall agreement of this throughout the country. In lack of a better term I will use de Lisle's term interregnum to denote this period.

such perfection by Walsingham and Cecil. The act of spying and the act of recruiting spies in order to gain political and, to a degree military, power, is clearly seen in several plays from this period. This might be said to reach completeness in Webster, whose complexity of characters and plot mirror acutely the game played in England as well as in the rest of Europe.

The ideological outline of the new rules of the political game might perhaps best be attributed to one man, Niccolo Machiavelli. As Felix Raab states in his book *The English Face of Machiavelli*: “as far as the modern world is concerned, Machiavelli invented politics” (1). Later Raab explains:

In England also, political relationships had become more complex, particularly with the advent of the Tudor's. Here also the contradictions between the theory and the practice of politics were becoming more and more apparent (27).

The close link between religion and politics has always been a major part of every society. The conflict between religion and politics in England in Early Modern era was perhaps first discernible during Henry VIII. Because of Martin Luther, John Calvin and the Reformation of England and Europe, the order of power had been disturbed. The conflict regarding both earthly and divine power became a question of faith and loyalty. Alan Haynes describes this specific conflict and its participants thus:

Revulsion in England against Rome and its agents was at its height as the spy masters in the Privy Council took control of policy implementation, and convinced Elizabeth, who enjoyed exercising visible power, that no other way was safe. It was not a runaway despotism, but opponents with grievances of whatever kind quickly became enemies and they were then characteristically labelled ‘devils’ (xiii).

The staging of political events in order to gain control and power was in strong correlation with the idea of visual power and spectacles. The representation of power in the use of spectacles was seen in events such as the Essex rebellion in which Shakespeare's *Richard II* was used directly as a political statement. Stephen Greenblatt touches upon the Essex rebellion and the influence of the power of theatre. He comments on the Queen's as

well as the opposition's position towards the theatre,

The Queen enjoyed and protected the theater; against moralists who charged that it was a corrupting and seditious force, she evidently sided with those who replied that it released social tensions, inculcated valuable moral lessons, and occupied with harmless diversion those who might otherwise conspire against legitimate authority (2252).

The search for a moral order in society is much reflected in Webster's use of the well known revenge tragedy form, which functions, in many ways, as a comment on social behaviour and on political events and conflicts. This is in much in the same tradition as the ancient Greek and Roman tragedies. According to Aristotle's *Poetics* "tragedy is the imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and possessing in magnitude" (Aristotle, 50). Francis Bacon's view on revenge was one of great discomfort: "Revenge is a kind of wild justice; which the more man's nature runs to it, the more ought law to weed it out" (Bacon, *Works*, 347). Revenge, in Bacon's eyes, was in complete opposition to the secular law defined by man, but Bacon also argued that the act of revenge was inasmuch in opposition to sacred laws of the church and the morality defined by God.

For as for the first wrong, it doth but offend the law; but the revenge of that wrong putteth the law out of office. Certainly, in taking revenge, a man is but even with his enemy; but in passing it over, he is superior; for it is a prince's part to pardon (Bacon, 347).

Webster's respect for a just law is also seen in his frequent use of court scenes, although his respect is only directed towards a belief in a law of justice that is not present in the society he portrays. The court scenes do not apply a justified law, but the established law, which is the law Webster ridicules and displays as corrupt and rotten. The characters, who might be said to be on the darkest end of the grey scale, are put to a form of justice, but by characters almost as dark as those being judged. Even though this might be said to be the case in Webster's two plays, it is also possible to dispute this in the discussion of Webster's quest for a moral order, which I discuss at further length later in this thesis.

By using the revenge tragedy motif, Webster invokes some of the deepest moral issues both in drama history and in political and religious life. His predecessors' use of the same model enhances the power, which Webster invokes, and, thus, makes available for him all the previous force imbedded within the vast spectre of plays. Bradbrook comments on morality and the idea of wisdom by asserting that: "Worldly wisdom constructed an idiom which lent itself to the theatre, whose language is so much more complex than words on a page, being sharpened to define what lies below the surface of life" (45). The revenge play is a moral statement in itself; it challenges all the moral standards in society both towards man, state and religion. Revenge is taken against someone who has wronged either the revenger in person, or indirectly through family or loved ones. John Kerrigan describes the two different types of tragic figures:

Most tragic protagonists are responsible for how they suffer. More than rats in traps, tennis-balls bandied by the stars, they help create the circumstances in which events unfold. Recognition of their role in the making of what afflicts them is a large part of what makes their catastrophes. A revenger's position is different. His predicament is imposed on him, and to know this is part of his plight. Injured by another, or urged towards vengeance by a raped mistress or murdered father, he is forced to adopt a role. His qualities colour the drama of which he is part; tragedy can mourn the waste which follows from the narrowing down his personality to the bare demands of action; but for as long as he remains a revenger the proportions of the acts he engages in are determined by an injury he never gave or a request he did not make (12).

The bond between ideology and religion and the use of staged political and religious events might be seen in close connection with the conflict that is seen in both of Webster's plays. In Webster, the political actors in society are taken from both the Church and the Court. The political game, as laid out by Machiavelli, is in many ways dependent on a tension between power elites. In Raab this thought of ideology, in conflict with the religious aspect of politics, is explained as being the cause of a lack of a separate secular political thought:

The bond of scholastic political thought was strong enough to hold together in men's minds the complex model of Christian society in a God-ordained universe, despite the evidence of events, which were often difficult to reconcile with such a model. Secondly, men lacked the ideological apparatus to formulate a theory of political realism (26).

In England, the attitude towards Italians was much in accord with the overall feeling of threat from Catholics, so that being a Catholic in England was to be un-English. It was treasonous to be Catholic since this meant that one believed the Pope to be God's highest anointed servant on Earth, thus being the highest political figure. The hunt for Catholics in England was like a witch-hunt. Priests were captured and put to trial for high treason and condemned to death. The Jesuit mission in England stated that their mission was to rescue souls back to God and not overturn the monarchy, though this was exactly what they were thought by Anglicans to do. By situating the revenge tragedies in Italy these echoes of Catholicism are heard throughout. Upon comparing a number of revenge tragedies, one notices that many of them are situated in Italy. In Thomas Nashe's *The Unfortunate Traveller* Italians were said to influence a young master so that "it makes him kiss his hand like an ape, cringe his neck like a starveling, and play at heypass, repass come aloft, when he salutes a man" (345). The blasphemous act of being Catholic is driven to the extreme as Nashe describes the visitor to Italy bringing back "the art of atheism, the art of epicurising, the art of whoring, the art of poisoning, the art of sodomitry." As a final description Nashe asserts the view Webster adapts in his plays:

It is now a privy note amongst the better sort of men, when they would set a singular mark or brand on a notorious villain, to say he hath been in Italy. (345)

The comments made by Nashe here seem to be reflected in Webster's description of the French court in Antonio's speech. But by presenting it as a stage play in England the immediacy to the Jacobean and Elizabethan court is much stronger than it is in Nashe's travel tale. By imitating certain familiar characters at court on stage, Webster is able to comment on the

political situation in England without directly and indecorously discussing the English court. The morality of Webster's character are also coloured by the setting of the play in Italy. Nashe ends his description by placing them outside of England as this opens up the possibility of making them more immoral and more villainous since they, both as Catholics and Italians, are seen as un-English. Later in *The White Devil* Antonio gives another remark on his visit to France: "I visited the court, whence I return'd | More courteous, more lecherous by far" (I.ii.315-316). Dollimore's comment on Antonio and Nashe here is that:

Nashe elicits from the language an ironic quality in meaning similar to Webster's, and his way of qualifying 'courtier' with 'lecher' sufficiently resembles Webster's 'more courteous, more lecherous' to be yet another instance of the latter's borrowing. (But if it is, it is also another instance of the way Webster transforms his sources; where Nashe's irony is pondered, Webster's is startlingly incisive). (26)

By casting Catholic cardinals as some of the chief villains, within both the temporal and ecclesiastical plane, the plays comment on the morality of the Catholic Church, as well as the political establishment.

Irving Ribner, in his study *Jacobean Tragedy: The Quest for Moral Order*, comments on the character development in Webster's contemporary playwright Cyril Tourneur. Ribner asserts, "in Tourneur's tragedies the evil characters outnumber by far the virtuous ones, and their evil is so complete and all-embracing as to leave no room for compensating virtues of any kind; they are shocking in the absoluteness of their depravity" (74). This type of evil in the pre-Websterian tragedies is also seen in the plays of Marston. Both Marston and Tourneur's moral order is absolute. Ribner argues further on the socio-historical frame of Webster by asserting that Webster's plays "are an agonized search for moral order in the uncertain and chaotic world of the Jacobean scepticism by a dramatist who can no longer accept without question the postulates of order and degree so dear to the Elizabethans" (97).

Webster's quest for an order is displayed through echoes of the uncertainty of society as much as a contorted image of traditional rituals and spectacles. The movement from a static representation of divine order in the

emblematic scenes of medieval drama to a more dynamic representation of an echo of societal chaos is present in Webster's plays. The Renaissance aspect, as well as the contemporary aspect, gives way to an understanding of the theatricality of the established order and the transgression into decay and fall. As a major source for Webster, William Painter's translation of the prose version of *The Duchess of Malfi* postulates the old order of social behaviour and position. The hierarchy of social position must be upheld, if not, chaos will emerge resulting in death. Webster's knowledge of an enormous amount of source material makes it possible to engage in what might be the problem of order in society.

The following chapters will include a socio-historical analysis of Webster's plays in relationship within a contemporary political, religious and legal discourse. With a combined performative and textual analysis of socially constructed rituals this study will aim at revealing the satiric and moral aspects and thrusts in Webster's plays.

Chapter 2

New Order of Kings

*Yet it cannot be called virtue to kill one's
fellow-citizen, to betray one's friends, to
be treacherous, merciless and irreligious;
power may be gained by acting in such ways,
but not glory.*
The Prince, "Chapter VIII"

*Although employing deceit in every action is detestable,
in waging a war it is, nevertheless, a laudable and glorious
thing.*
Discourses, "Chapter IX"

Niccolo Machiavelli

Bosola Some fellowes (they say) are possessed with the divell, but this great fellow, were able to possesse the greatest Divell, and make him worse.

Antonio He hath denied thee some suit?

Bosola He and his brother, are like Plum-trees (that grow crooked over standing-pooles) they are rich, and ore-laden with Fruite, but none but Crowes, Pyes, and Catter-pillers feede on them: Could I be one of their flattering Panders, I would hang on their eares like a horse-leach, till I were full, and then droppe off: I pray leave me.
(*The Duchess of Malfi* I.i.45-55)

2.1 Queen Elizabeth I as the Order Supreme

In Elizabethan England, religion and politics were inseparable. In this time of uncertainty and unrest chaos lurked in the shadows, threatening the power of the established order. The staging of this power was as important as the power itself. Several of the openings of the scenes in both *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi* are crowded with stately processions or grand rituals of passage, such as the instatement of a pope (*The White Devil*, IV.iii) and the transformation of the cardinal into a warrior (*The Duchess of Malfi*, III.iv). These spectacles were familiar to the Elizabethan audiences, but in the world of Webster these displays are not grand and orderly. Instead they seem to suggest a world of corruption and a contorted moral order. As the empty rhetoric of the lawyers in the court scenes show the inadequacy of the law, the grandeur of the power spectacle is overshadowed by the corruption of its participants in Webster's cunning display of misrule. Queen Elizabeth I's political power created a picture of the monarch as divine and pure, the Virgin Queen. This is perhaps best exemplified by Edmund Spenser's *Fairy Queene*, which was one of personalities of the Queen's two bodies: the human (body natural) and the monarch (body political). In a play by Webster's friend and later collaborator Thomas Dekker, *The Pleasant Comedy of Old Fortunatus*, the opening prologue at court describes the divine

appearance of Elizabeth by naming her Gloriana, Cynthiam Delphæbe and Astraea (A2^v). The divine order of Elizabeth is the collective of all these; the prologue proclaims that “yet all those names make but one celestial body, as all those loves meet to create but one soul” (A2^v). As the title page of this play informs the reader, it was played before the Queen at Christmas of 1600, most possibly as a part of the Inns of Court revels. In the struggle for monarchic power, King James I’s accession overturned the entire idea of political thought, as well as the political setting.

For the Elizabethans the monarchy and state power was an order of Divine Right. Queen Elizabeth, as Frances Yates has argued, was the return to a classic golden age “for the royal supremacy over both church and state – the key-stone of the whole Tudor position – owed its sanction to the tradition of a sacred empire” (*Astraea*, 39). For Webster, the golden age has turned into the iron age of Ovid:

In no part good and tractable as former ages past.
For when that of this wicked age once opened was the vein,
Therein all mischief rushed forth. Then faith and truth were fain,
And honest shame, to hide their heads; for whom stepped stoutly in
Craft, treason, violence envy, pride and wicked lust to win.
(*Metamorphoses*, Book 1, L.144-148)

Queen Elizabeth’s and King James’ speeches may serve as interesting comparative sources to the juridical echoes of Monarchic order in Webster. The strife between Catholicism and the Anglican Church was a political drama as much as it was a religious one, in which the language of the justice system was of vital importance. Elizabeth, when discussing the significance of Mary Queen of Scots in one of her speeches to the House of Lords, avoids all religious terms and focuses on the political. Everything was termed as legal matters: “I will tell you the cause of the manner of my proceedings with the Scottish queen and why I did not deal by the course of the common law of the realm.” Her relationship with the lawyers and judges is then addressed: “But you, my masters of the law, are so fine – you regard so much the words, syllables, and letters thereof more than the true sense and the meaning indeed – that oftentimes you make the same seem absurd” (Elizabeth I, 188). In the court transcripts of the Jesuit and Catholic cases

the verdict is based on political threats rather than religious ones. The use of this political language of power suggests a corruption of the court similar to what Webster displays in his court scenes.

In *The Queen's Two Bodies*, Marie Axton discusses the duality of the state and man as seen in the theatricality of Queen Elizabeth's two-fold role as both human and monarch. Elizabeth was married to her kingdom, state, church and order was defined her.¹ By creating the illusion, or perception of being the virgin queen and the mother to her people, Elizabeth incorporated the idea of divine right. She was not only the head of state but also the head of the church. It was seen as both treason and blasphemy to act against the queen's will. The legal theorist and fellow at the Middle Temple, Edmund Plowden, initiated the discussion upon the two-fold nature of the monarch. Plowden comments on the two as being that of the body natural and the body politic. The body natural has "the imbecillity of infancie" but the body politic is "utterly void of such imperfections" (133: K3^r).² Elizabeth's marriage to the state and the duality of power, as well as the Divine order of her being is, thus, described by Plowden in the supremacy of the body politic. Plowden claims that, "when both bodies remain in one person, all the bodies shall have the properties, qualities, and degrees of the body politic, which is the most worthy" (133: K3^r).

The idea of order of being in Renaissance England and in the political and religious thought as a whole in Europe might be seen in Thomas Elyot's *The Booke named the Governour*. His idea of order is the same as that seen in many of the religious texts from the Middle Ages as well as others from the early English period. In this order, God is the creator of all that is good, and order in the universe was looked upon as divine and indisputably good: "who can denie but that all thyng in heuen and erthe is gouerned by one god, by one perpetuall ordre, by one prouidence?" (fol.8^v). This same order is also seen in *An exhortation concerning Good order and Obedience* from 1559 in which the order of religion and politics is described through the acts of God: "Almighty God hath created and appointed all things in heaven, earth and

1 The medieval question of the state and religious duality in the monarch leading up to the Renaissance equivalent is also discussed by Kantorowicz in *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology*.

2 The report on juridical matters was initially published in French as *Les comen-taries ou les reportes de Edmund Plowden* in 1571, and later translated into English.

waters in a most excellent and perfect order” (Aughterson, 93). This order is seen through the divine order of man and his parts: “And man himself also hath all his parts, both within and without, as: soul, heart, mind, memory, understanding, reason, speech withal and singular corporal members of his body in a profitable, necessary and pleasant order” (ibid.). The monarch is, thus, the embodiment of the divine order. Elizabeth I was described as such in this exhortation: “God hath sent us his high gift, our most dear sovereign Lady Queen Elizabeth, with godly, wise and honourable council, with other superiors and inferiors in a beautiful order and godly” (ibid.).

With James I, the king’s two bodies and the Divine Will and Right to rule were over. Thomas Elyot warns about the fall of order where the inevitable outcome: “more ouer take away ordre from all thynges what shulde than remayne? Certes nothyng finally, except some man wolde imagine eftsones Chaos” (*Governour*, fol.3^v). The political, as well as legal and moral order of things had changed. Webster fuses this new notion of kingship with the structural changeability of the arts. The political and moral order, which had governed the traditional conventions of style and action, crumbled under the weight of the lack of order seen through Webster’s eyes.

What we see in both *The Duchess of Malfi* and *The White Devil*, with regards to the theatricality of the plotters and leeches, are the spectacles power of and how the use of counter plots and power plays, which are turned against those who craves power outside the moral order of Webster. Even though the Aristotelic tragic tradition states that there should be a form of catharsis at the end, the resolution is only half hearted, since the order is only restored to the old order that is rotten as stated by Bosola’s words in act I scene i.

Axton discusses the Inns of Court and their display and staging of political criticism by referring to the Revels and Masques at the Inns, such as the *Old Fortunatus* by Dekker. The significance of these might be seen in their political and religious awareness of contemporary disputes. At these revels most of the political elite of Elizabethan England were present; among them even Elizabeth herself was at times witness to these spectacles. The actors at these revels were the young students of law, including Marston, Webster and Ford. Axton states that a “mutual involvement of audience and

entertainers in the government of England encouraged Inns of Court men to use plays as analogies for political situations created by eminent members of the audience”(Axton, 2).

Queen Elizabeth’s supremacy as the definition of order is what held the society together, since the duality of power – secular and ecclesiastical – was combined in the monarch; the order was divine in nature. By being situated in the end of Elizabeth’s reign through to the accession of James I, Webster challenges the declining order by referring and echoing the old order. Through the language of Elizabeth’s speeches Webster invokes the divinity and purity of ideological and theological unity.

2.2 The Church and Divine Order

In the governmental order of power, the Reformation was one of the most pivotal events in the creation of a new order. When the King was given the position recently occupied by the Pope in Rome, he, and his governmental underlings, became God’s representatives on earth. Opposing the law of the King, meant, then, to oppose the law of God. The argument was that, since the King was ordained by God, he acted out God’s will, thus, religion and ideology were inseparable. With the Reformation the Pope was created an enemy of the state. This resulted in an attack on the Catholics in England. To be a Catholic meant, then, to blaspheme against God, since the Catholic Church did not recognise the King as God’s supreme representative on earth

The divine right to rule and the position of an anointed monarch are both crucial to the understanding of the order of which Webster seems to oppose in his characters of power. In Shakespeare’s *Richard II* King Richard’s proclamation of the divine right ironically foretells his downfall:

Not all the water in the rough rude sea
Can wash the balm off from an anointed king;
The breath of worldly men cannot depose
The deputy elected by the Lord.
(III.ii.54-56)

The introduction to *Richard II* in the latest Arden edition discusses the performance of this play and its political significance by referring to the Essex production of the play, after which Elizabeth remarked to William Lambarde “I am Richard II. Know ye not that?” in 1601 (5). Greenblatt, in his introduction to *The Power of Forms in the Renaissance*, comments on this and the influence of the theatre: “there were some in the Essex faction who saw in the theater the power to subvert, or rather the power to wrest legitimation from the established ruler and confer it on another” (2252). The religious aspect of the monarch was so important to the political climate in Europe, especially after the reformation, which split Europe into two parts. In *An apology or answer in defence of the Church of England*, John Jewel, Bishop of Salisbury, shows a great concern for this. The struggle between factions, both within the church itself, but also between church and state rocks the very foundation of the order of society. Jewel’s description of the situation might serve to pinpoint Webster’s own:

we nowe are diuided into contrary factions and opinions and could neuer agree by any meanes among our selues; That we ar wicked mē, and make war after the maner of y Giants (as the fable is) against God himselfe; and do liue altogether wout care or reuerence of God; That we do despise al good dedes, and use no discipline of virtue, maintaine no lawes, no customes, no equite, no iustice, no right (Jewel, 1562, A5’).

Richard Hooker asserts, with regards to man’s wielding of power through the upheaval of civil laws rooted in Divine right and Ecclesiastical law, that

The nature of man beeing much more delighted to bee led then drawne, doth many times stubbornely resist authoritie when to perswasio it easily yeeldeth. Wher vpon the wisest Law-makers haue endeoured alwise that those lawes might seeme most resonable which they would most inviolably kept. A law simply commaunding or forbidding is but dead in comparison of that which expresseth the reason where fore it doth the one or the other (*A learned sermon of the nature of Pride*, A2’).

Hooker’s focus on secular Law, as deriving from a religious origin, has biblical roots in the Geneva Bible. Regarding the Law there can, in the New

Testament be read: “For as many as haue sinned without the Lawe, shall perish also without the Lawe: and as many as haue sinned in the Lawe, shall be iudged by the Lawe” (Romans II.12). The relationship between state and church is challenged in Webster by him displaying the laws and order of the ecclesiastical through means of irony. Hooker’s statement on the importance of substance in the writing and upholding of the laws is construed by Webster in arcane and empty spectacles.

At the Temple Church and the Inns of Court, the controversy between Hooker and Walter Travers also influenced both ecclesiastical and secular laws. Travers’s discussion on justice and the laws of the Church, in his *Declaration* from 1580, is much of the same old order Webster displays being in ruins. Travers declares that, “for policie, gouernment, and good lawes, are in a city or common wealth whatsoeuer, as the helme is to the ship, the wrest to the instrument, order to an armie, & as the soule is to the bodie” (B1^r). Webster’s display of order and justice as the soul of society echoes Travers who concludes:

hereof it cometh that we see now euery where so manie townes fallen to ruine, and lying like the dead carkasies of the cities, which sometymes they haue beene, baccuse that by changing their old gouernment, litle and litle at the last their whole estate was list, and went awaie as the soule from the bodie (B1^r – B2^v).

Webster’s quest for a new world and moral order can be seen in his structural breaks and the changing development of characters and plot. Pairing this with Webster’s notion of the corruptive nature of society, one may hear Hooker’s words echoed throughout, the combination creating a force of political radicalism.

Observing traces of this conflict in the plays written during the English Renaissance we might notice the geographical placement of certain types of drama. Specifically we see that most of the revenge tragedies are situated in Italy, the centre of the world’s Catholicism. The moral dimension of this is seen in that the act of revenge was seen as blasphemous. Italy, for playwrights, was not only seditious, but it was also a chaos of political orders. In his introduction to the Revels edition of *The Duchess of Malfi* John Russel Brown points out that the initial speech by Antonio was used

by Webster to “nail his play to the affairs of England in his own time” (5). He goes on to assert that “it is only the first in a series of alterations whereby he makes events and characters in Italy at the beginning of the previous century relevant to the lives and concerns of his audience.” The significance of the placing of both of the plays in Italy and in the previous century (or at least not in an environment familiar to most Englishmen) is, as Brown says of great importance. Brown writes, “As in *The White Devil*, the foreign subject-matter allows representation of matters which, if shown within an English or contemporary setting, would have had the play banned and its author imprisoned” (ibid.). The new order, both in art and science, had sprung out from Italy; the new political order and philosophy was next. In Webster the search for moral order might almost be said to result in chaos, in what Irving Ribner calls the culmination into an anti-climax. He states further that “Webster’s tragedies are a search for moral order in the uncertain and chaotic world of Jacobean skepticism [sic], an age which could no longer accept without question the postulates of order and degree so dear to the Elizabethans” (106). The horror of the scenes mirrors the horror of the Old Order, and its disappearance might, then, be tied in with the horror that the characters in Webster witness.

By making these tragedies in Italy Webster cements the English view on Italy as degenerated and paradise of filth. Even France was seen in this way, especially after the St. Bartholomew’s Massacre. The Bishop of London wrote to Lord Burleigh “These evil times trouble all good men’s heads and make their hearts ache, fearing that this barbarous treachery will not cease in France but will reach over to us. Neither fear we the mangling of our body, but we sore dread the hurt of our head [the Queen] for therein consisteth our life and safety... The citizens of London in these dangerous days had need prudently to be deal withal” (Qtd. in Read, 87). The result of the massacre of the Huguenots made great waves in the literary as well as the political circles of England. Most prominent was Christopher Marlowe’s play *The Massacre at Paris*, which was numerous times performed in London.³ We see in this the intense relationship between the two different religions, and also the order of power had become the order of religions. After the Gunpowder Plot James I delivered a speech to the Parliament with as much fire and brimstone as possible:

³ Cf. Chambers, *Elizabethan Stage* and Bentley, *The Jacobean and Caroline Stage*, as well as Andrew Gurr *The Shakespearean Stage 1574-1642*, p.104

For although it cannot be denied, That it was the onely blinde superstition of their errors in Religion, that led them to this desperate deuice; yet doth it not follow, That all professing that *Romish* religion were guiltie of the same. For as it is threw, That no other sect of heretiques, not excepting *Turke, Iew,* nor *Pagan,* no not euen those of *Calicute,* who adore the deuill, did euer maintaine by the grounds of their religion, That is was lawfull, or rather meritorious (as the *Romish* Catholickes call it) to murder Princes or people for quarrel of Religion (James I, 285).

Echoes of Burleigh are evident in the form of justice proclaimed by James. Burleigh described the Catholic movement in England and the Catholics themselves as people “with seditious writings, and very many of late with publique infamous libels, ful of despitefull vile termes and poysoned lyes, altogether to upholde the foresaide antichristian and tyrannous warrant of the Popes Bull” (*The Execution of Justice in England*, A3^v). He continued his allegations by stating that:

some of Priesthood, some of other inferior orders, with titles of Seminaries for some of the meaner sort, & of Iesuites for the stagers and ranker sort & such like, but yet so warely they crept into the land, as none brought the marks of their priesthood with them, but in diuerse corners of her Maiesties Dominions these Seminaries or seedemen and Iesuites bringing with them certeine Romish trash, as of their hallowed Ware, their Agnus dei, many kinde of Beades, and such like, haue as tillage men laboured secretly to perswade the people to allowe of the Popes foresaid Bulles and warrantes, and of his absolute authoritie ouer all Princes and Countries (A4^v).

Echoes of these descriptions are evident in the character development in Webster, especially in the Cardinals, but also in Bosola may traces of this be noticed. Being the cardinal’s henchman he is without morals and without remorse; his lust for power and wealth is proclaimed very early on. By describing the cardinal and his brother as “Plum-trees (that grow crooked over standing pooles)” he asserts that “Could I be one of their flattering Panders, I would hang in their eares like a horse-leach” (I.i.49-54). The morality of Bosola is only restored at the very end, although his past haunts him still, and his life is lost.

In both of the plays Webster's cardinals have an extremely theatrical power. Two of the most visually and thematically salient scenes in the plays indicate a strong presence of the cardinals. In *The White Devil*, for instance, there is the court scene in which Vittoria is condemned to "a house of convertites," which is described as "A house of penitent whoores" (III. ii.266). This entire scene is the culmination of the ecclesiastical interference in state matters. With the Cardinal's double role, acting both as accuser and judge (both in the temporal and sacral plane), the circle of power is complete. The two brothers of power in the play, the Cardinal and Duke Ferdinand, could be seen as very developed characters of immense diversity and self-consciousness, as well as symbols of the double power of church and state in one family. In this duality of power and the manner in which the two entities are described and manifested, the state and church as equals could be seen in relation to the splitting of the order of which Elizabeth was supreme. The cardinal is described by Antonio both in appearance and attitude:

Antonio: Some such flashes superficially hang on him, for forme: but observe his inward Character : he is a mellancholly Churchman : The Spring in his face, is nothing but the Ingendring of Toades: where he is jealous of any man, he laies worse plots for them, than ever was impos'd on *Hercules* : for he strewes in his way Flatter[er]s, Panders, Intelligencers, Atheists, and a thousand such politicall Monsters : he should have beene a Pope : but in stead of coming to it by the primitive decensie of the church, he did bestow bribes, so largely, and so impudently, as if he would have carried it away without heavens knowledge. Some good he hath done. (*The Duchess of Malfi*, I.i.157-167)

The description of the cardinal here is one of political commentary very much in a form of a Catholic and clerical displeasure. The connection to political involvement by a cardinal is present in both of Webster's plays, and might be seen to be coloured by a strict belief in a form of absolute law and

order. There is, however, not a clear presence of such a belief in Webster's world, as power and the inseparability of church and state have created a rotten immoral society. He argues, through his corrupt characters, that the laws in society are in tumult and the absence of order is forthcoming. The Cardinal in *The Duchess of Malfi* is described by Bosola, in relationship to the devil; "Some fellowes (they say) are possessed with the divell, but this great fellow, were able to possesse the greatest Divell, and make him worse" (I.i.44-46). The description here has some levels of reference outside the mere attack on the cardinal himself. The link to John Donne and his description of the Jesuit General Ignatius Loyola might also be present, as pointed out by Dent. Donne said of the Jesuit General that he was "so indued with the Diuell, that he was able to tempt, and not onely that, but (as they say) even to possesse the Diuell" (*Ignatius his Conclaue*, 15). In Webster's *New Character* the description of the Jesuit is in much the same tone, "There is no Disease in Christendome, that may so properly be call'd The Kings Evill. To conclude, would you know him beyond Sea? In his Seminary, hee's a Foxe; but in the Inquisition, a Lyon Rampant (483)." The reference to the fox and the lion suggest also a Machiavellian source as will be discussed below.

This comparison is rather extreme, since it connects the Cardinal and his corruptibility and fall from grace with the Jesuit mission, and especially the founder of the mission. This was in a time where the priest-hunt was almost as widespread as the witch-hunt, especially during the reign of James I. Yet another comparison between the Catholic priest-hunt and the nature of witches is expressed by Bosola when employed in the service of Ferdinand pressed on by the Cardinal: "It seemes you would create me | One of your familiars." Which Bosola describes as being "a very quaint invisible Divell, in flesh: | An Intelligencer" (*The Duchess of Malfi*, I.i.246-248). Following the description of the cardinal, Antonio goes on to describe Ferdinand:

Ant. The Duke there? a most perverse, and turbulent Nature—
 What appears in him mirth, is merely outside,
 If he laugh hartely, it is to laugh
 All honesty out of fashion.
Del. Twins?

Ant. In qualitie:
He speakes with others Tongues, and heares mens suits,
With others Eares: will seeme to sleepe o'th bench
Onely to intrap offenders, in their answeres;
Doombes men to death, by information,
Rewardes, by heare-say.
(I.i.157-165)

By these descriptions the introduction to the social infrastructure of corruptness and intimidation is almost complete. In *The White Devil* Cardinal Monticelso assists his friend Francisco in acquiring “notorious offenders” to his service. Francisco directly approaches Monticelso for this information with prior intelligence of his own: “It is reported you possesse a booke | Wherein you have quoted, by intelligence, | The names of all notorious offenders | Lurking about the Citty” (IV.I.29-32). Again, in Monticelso’s replied answer to this, Webster ties the clergy with demonic relationships:

Sir I do:
And some there are which call it my blacke booke:
Well may the title hold: for though it teach not
The Art of conjuring, yet in it lurke,
The names of many devils.
(IV.I.32-36)

The influence of religious disputes and ecclesiastical law in Webster is evident in his specific echo of the order they represent and the language that could be extricated from the many publications during Webster’s lifetime. With the religious and ideological turbulence regarding the multitude of factions of the late Elizabethan and early Jacobean era society witnessed a decline in stability and unity of order. Webster’s corrupt and cynical characters display this uncertainty of social stability in a fashion that also suggests a close relationship with the legal, religious and stately teachings of the Italian philosopher Niccolo Machiavelli.

2.3 Webster and Machiavelli

Machiavellian themes and characterisations are most evident throughout both of Webster's plays with regards to an overall ideological movement as well as in the allegorical language of political figures. The Machiavellian figure in Elizabethan drama was visible almost from the beginning. In Marlowe, the Machiavel figure had his own prologue in *The Jew of Malta*, in which he proclaims that "I am Machevill" and goes on to further his position on the law by referring to the draconian laws, which "were writ in blood" (I.i.5). Webster's direct reference to Machiavelli is in *The White Devil*, with the death of Brachiano and the words of Flamineo:

Those are found waightie strokes which come from th'hand,
But those are killing strokes which come from th'head.
O the rare trickes of a Machiavillian!
Hee doth not come like the grosse plodding slave
And buffet you to death: No, my quiaint knave –
Hee tickles you to death; makes you die laughing;
As if you had swallow'd downe a pound of saffron.
You see the feat—'tis practis'd in a trice—
To teach Court-honestie it jumpes on Ice.
(V.iii.194-202)

The new moral order in the political game of power and the influence it had on dramatic composition of characters and plot structure is evident in Webster's plays. The echo of political and religious notions in speeches and proclamations all over Europe might be seen in the dramatic language of Webster. The main influence on the political power language was Machiavelli. The fact that Machiavelli's works were not translated until the 1640's suggests the instability of state matters. His ideological ideas of both state and church changed the course of politics. Edmund Wilson asserts the complexity of a socio-historical setting and an understanding of the text in relationship with this. He argues, "For one thing, it is usually true in works of the highest order that the purport is not a simple message, but a complex vision of things, which itself is not explicit but implicit." Wilson furthers his argument with, "the reader who does not grasp them artistically,

but is merely looking for simple social morals, is certain to be hopelessly confused” (Wilson, 1248-1249). Elyot’s *The Governour* discusses a form of political theory of the day in strict connection to an order. Elyot states that “where all thyng is commune, there lacketh ordre; and where ordre lacketh, there all thyng is odious and uncomly” (fol.6^v). Webster’s lack of belief in a positive world order could be seen as an echo of Elyot’s view of a world without order as a result of conflict and egocentrism and in the end chaos. Elyot describes this by asserting that:

where there is any lacke of ordre nedes must be perpetuall conflicte: and in thynges subiecte to Nature nothyng of hym selfe onely may be norisshed; but whan he hath destroyed that where hith he dothe participate by the ordre of his creation, he hum selfe of necessite must than perissh, wherof ensueth the uniuersall dissolution (Elyot, fol.3^v).

In *The English Face of Machiavelli* Felix Raab comments on political theory in the Renaissance as “not yet recognized as an autonomous activity” and further argues that “when we consider Tudor ‘political’ thought we must look beyond the limits of what *we* regard as political, and reckon with much that we would now call ‘religious’ thought” (9). It is in this line of thinking that we see the Renaissance rule of Kings, and the Divine Right. Raab ties this together with what he terms Divine Will.

Tudor Englishmen, when they thought about their society, agreed, on the whole, that it was essentially an expression of Divine Will. About the manifestation of that Divine Will in specific instances, there could be (and there was) an infinity of argument (ibid.).

The argument against this Divine Will and the Divine Right of Kings is the most prominent in the discussion of Machiavelli’s influence on the new political system. Raab continues with the statement that, “Recurring complaints of Italians that Italy had become the cockpit of Europe seen not unreasonable” (26). John E. Law describes the renaissance rulers and their position in society, which in Webster – as well as the situation developing in England at the turn of the century – might be said to illustrate the failure of this said ruler, by stating that he is no longer

a prince in the feudal sense but is rather, as Machiavelli and other political thinkers in the classical tradition saw him, an independent ruler relying on his own wits and resources rather than on his superiors or divinely allocated position in a pyramidal society (1).

In Raab, this idea of ideology in conflict with the religious aspect of politics is explained as being the cause of a lack of clear definition of a non-theological political system:

The bond of scholastic political thought was strong enough to hold together in men's minds the complex model of Christian society in a God-ordained universe, despite the evidence of events, which were often difficult to reconcile with such a model. Secondly, men lacked the ideological apparatus to formulate a theory of political realism (26).

Not having a clear distinction or separation between church ideology and state ideology and power, politics becomes something that is complicated by the fact that religion and ideology have such strong bonds with the past that a new order of realpolitik must be fought for. Religion's role in the state is discussed by Machiavelli in his *Discourses*:

The rulers of a republic or a kingdom must, therefore, uphold the foundations of the religion they profess; and having done this, they will find it an easy matter for them to maintain a devout republic and, as a consequence, one that is good and united. They must also encourage and support all those things that arise in favour of this religion, even those they judge to be false, and the more they have to do so, the more prudent they are and the more knowledgeable about natural phenomena. (54)

Machiavelli indicates that when religion and the politics of state are so inseparable, the lust for power becomes the corruption and downfall of them both.

The significance of the prologue in *The Jew of Malta* might be seen in the change of thought with regards to the political system and political involvement upon the stage. This is represented by a move from the old order of Divine right and holy order of state to an order in which the Monarch is the defining principle where one must mend the state in

order to mend society and its people. In Webster this could be linked to his experience at the Inns and the decline of monarchic and state power. The corruption seen in the plays could be said to show that power was the main goal for Webster's contemporaries at the Inns, something that was made possible by the decline of moral standards. Seen in concordance with the uncertainty and instability of state power at the time of James' rule, as well as the final years of Elizabeth's, it is clear that the Machiavellian system and ideas of more or less professional Princes and politicians might have been an appealing thought.

The moral aspect in this new political theorem consequently changed the way morality was thought of and how the political world of power in itself might constitute a moral dilemma. Webster's self-conscious use of the inherent conflict of the religious and the political is arguably most visible in the characterization of the Cardinals and the dukes. The imagery in which many of Webster's characters are described is predominately a combination of beasts and hunting. This type of metaphors might, in turn, be seen as a visualization of the Machiavellian creed from *The Prince* that the ruler must act as part man and part beast. Machiavelli uses the political animals the fox and the lion, one is cunning the other strong. "One must be a fox in order to recognize traps, and a lion to frighten off wolves" (61). This ethical system of cynicism and predatory in *The Prince* suggests, through the animalistic metaphors of the wolf, the aggression needed to uphold an order of state and power.

The imagery of the wolf is seen in numerous religious and political texts throughout history. In the Bible the wolf is the agent of the devil and the devil is named the Wolf of Hell. They are seen as persecutors who attack the 'flocks' of the faithful. Ferdinand, in *The Duchess of Malfi*, has been driven insane by his own act of murder, but he has also been metamorphosed into a beast. Not into the political beast of Machiavelli, however, but rather into this perhaps most mythically evil animal. In the opening scene of *The White Devil* we are confronted with the very first reference to the wolf. In Lodovico's speech the reference to the wolf is in relationship to the enemies of Lodovico:

Fortune's a right whore:
If she give ought, she deals it in small parcels,

That she may take away all at one swoop.
This 'tis to have enemies, God quite them.
Your wolf no longer seems to be a wolf
Than when she's hungry.
(I.i.2-9)

The enemy is described as being a wolf, as in Machiavelli, but with regards to Lodovico. It is he who really is the enemy of the state. The revenge is acted out by the renegade Lodovico. The play opens and ends with Lodovico, which gives him the opportunity of giving the play its twisted poetic justice. A further use of the wolf imagery is seen in the court scene after the exit of Brachiano:

Monticelso Your Champions gon.
Vittoria The wolfe may prey the better.
(*The White Devil*, III.ii. 187-189)

In *The Duchess of Malfi* the imagery of the wolf is in close relationship with the Machiavellian description. The stately power in the play might be said to belong to Duke Ferdinand, but alas, this power is so corrupted and so twisted, as described by Bosola, that he no longer incorporates the powers of the fox and the lion.

The mentioning of the Machiavellian metaphor of the lion and the fox was also made by Francis Bacon in *The Advancement of Learning* from 1605. It is likely that Webster knew of this work. Bacon's description is as follows:

So in the fable, that *Achilles* was brought up under *Chyron* the *Centaure*, who was part man, & part a beast, expounded Ingenuously, but corruptly by Machiauell, that it it belongeth to the education and discipline of Princes, to knowe as well how to play the part of the Lyon, in violence, and the Foxe in guile, as of the man in vertue and Iustice.
(Book 2, p.19)

The power of the established order, as Webster displays, is on failing ground. The weight of the empty rhetoric is on the shoulders of the power elite.

Let guilty man remember their blacke deedes
Do leane on crutches made of slender reedes.
(V.iv.295-296)

These, Giovanni's last words and the last words of the play, stand as a monument to the way in which everything is headed. They also echo the words spoken by the character Revenge in Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* after Antonio's urge of retribution "Let him be dragged through boiling Acheron, | And there live, dying still in endless flames, | Blaspheming gods and all their holy names" (IV.v.42-44). Further:

Then haste we down to meet thy friends and foes:
To place thy friends in ease, the rest in woes.
For here, though death hath end their misery,
I'll there begin their endless tragedy (IV.v.45-48).

In Kyd, the order of the afterlife, of which the character of revenge, and also in *Hamlet*, the character of Fortinbras incorporates, is the function of hope, of which there is none in Webster.

Machiavellianism's major influence on Webster is seen in the understanding of the political allegories and ideas developed by Machiavelli. Since both *The Prince* and *The Discourses* were banned in England in Webster's time, and did not exist in any translated version, it is reasonable to suggest that Webster knew Italian and read these in the original or had extensive knowledge of their contents. The more common use of the animal imagery of the lion and wolf, as seen in Shakespeare, is that of a metaphor for time – lion was seen as the present, wolf as the past and the dog as the future – when Webster disregards the classical tradition of the allegory the Machiavellian ideology becomes more evident. The new political order presented by Machiavelli is seen as a movement from the divine order represented by Elizabeth to the irony of James and the fall of monarchic order only two years after the first English translation of Machiavelli in 1640.

2.4 The new order of King James

During the reign of King James, the divine order seen in Elizabeth faded, and civil unrest became clearer than ever. The monarchic right had been broken with the lack of a rightful heir; King James's accession was made possible through the means of political plots that started long before the death of Elizabeth. Webster's ironic display of figures of power and the corrupt nature of both church and legal court suggest a society on the boundaries of chaos.

In Webster's *The White Devil* the characterization of Monticelso mirrors all the faults James warns the judges about. In a speech of 1603 James defines two orders of judges

And as to the persons of my Subjects which are of that profession, I must diuide them into two rankes Clerickes and Layickes; for the part of the Layickes, certainly I euer thought them farre more excusable then the other sort, because that sort of Religion containeth such an ignorant, doubtfull, and implicit kinde of faith in the Layickes grounded vpon their Church. (*James I*, 1928, 275)

The echo of this could be seen in Webster's own definition of the "reverend judge" in *New Characters*. This judge

Is one that desires to have his greatnesse, onely measured by his goodnesse. [...] He hates to wrong any man; neither hope, nor despaire of preferment can draw him to such an exigent (Vol. 3. 477).

King James I's initial speech to Parliament concerning the judges would, then, have been of interest to Webster. The origin of law and judgment through divine law and divine will is for James a pivotal argument for the intertwining of state and religion. James's idea of order is expressed through his description of the judges:

I can say none otherwise to you, than as Ezekias the good king of *Juda* said to their Judges, *Remember that the Thrones that you sit on are Gods, and neither yours nor mine*: And that as you must be answerable to mee, so must both you and I be answerable to GOD, for the due execution of our Offices (302-303).

The impact of this view is almost as blasting as his 1605 speech after the Gunpowder plot. Even though James had strong feelings towards the Catholics, he discusses at length compassion towards different religions as well as how God is the supreme ruler of kings, in several of his speeches. Here, however, James describes the Catholic clergy in less than flattering terms: “their point of doctrine is that arrogant and Supreme of Head the Pope, where be he not onely claimes to bee spirituall head of all Christians, but also to haue an Imperiall ciuill power ouer all Kings and Emperors, dethroning and decrowning Princes with his Foot as pleaseth him, and dispensing and disposing of all kingdomes and Empires at his appetite” (275). The influence of James’s juridical rhetoric may be seen in Webster’s characterization of his lawyers and judges, such as Monticelso.

The order of the law and Webster’s focus on the misrule of societal legal and political arenas could also be seen existing in the structural elements of drama as art. Christina Luckyj argues with reference to Flamineo that he is “a scurrilous pander and cynical malcontent, at first seems more suited to the role of comic manipulator than that of tragic hero” (Webster, 2006, xv). She argues further that with the tragedy of Flamineo “Webster fuses the old-fashioned *de casibus* idea of tragedy (as human will confronting implacable destiny) with a more modern, Jacobean notion of human will confronting a corrupt society (a notion inherited from the revenge tragedy)” (xvi). The order and conventions of the tragedy structure, it could be argued, are discernible in characters such as Flamineo and Bosola. By constantly negotiating with established sets of conventions in the Revenge tragedy, and constantly expanding these, Webster integrates the different elements of misrule his plays from being the driving force of structural components into spectacles of horror and shock. Flamineo’s outburst of description concerning almost all the elements in the plays is perhaps the perfect illustration of this. As the opening word of Lodovico, Flamineo’s “Proofe!” is as much an echoing as is “Banisht?”

Flamineo: Proofe! ‘twas corruption.
O Gold, what a God art thou! and
ô man, what devill art thou to be
tempted by that cursed Minerall! Yo[n]
diversivolent Lawyer; marke him,

knaves turne informers, as maggots
turn flies, you may catch gudgions with
either. A Cardinall; would hee would
heare mee, theres nothing so holie but
money will corrupt and putrifie it, like
vittell under the line (III.iii.19-26).

All is doomed and rotten; corruption is present both in the nonsensical words of the lawyer and the devilishness of the cloth. The cynic lust for power in the characters echoes that of the Machiavellian ideology.

The link to political show in Webster, to the display of political performances in contemporary England, is evident in his self-aware use of the impure art and misrule. Webster's characters follow this same rule of moral ambivalence. What we see in the example above is the conflict between the moral truth and conventions regarding the order of moral realism. Keith Sturges holds that in:

Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* there is a continuous exercise in grotesque art and the cultivation of 'horrid' laughter learned from Marston. This is the highest reach of mannerist tragedy; the heroic notes of conventional tragedy have gone, for a pervasive irony forbids or deflates them; and we are left with a species of melodrama which mixes farce and sentiment in a challenging way (7).

The mannerist structure, the breaking of classical traditions and conventions, could, then, be seen in Webster as also completing the image he creates on stage of the world without the same hope as seen in Tourneur and Marston as well as Shakespeare.

In Webster, much of this might be seen in both the structure and the development of the characters. Lionel Trilling observed that

There are artists who contain a large part of the dialectic within themselves, their meaning and their power lying in their contradictions; they contain within themselves, it may be said, the very essence of culture (20-21).

Griffin comments on this passage by claiming that: "John Webster was one of these, as both strengths and weakness attest. The poetry of his tragedy

comes out of his having tapped, briefly, the central problem of his age, the problem of ‘anarchic will’” (4). The anarchic will is an applicable term as this again might be seen in relation to the opposing will of the flexible villain and the grey-scale characters with diverse sets of moral beliefs. The divine right could, in both Webster and his contemporaries, be linked to the idea of Aristotelian prescriptive character structure. By opposing the Aristotelian elements of fate, characters will develop according to their own individual will, thus moving towards a political change, with scepticism towards rights to rule and Divine Will. The latter is paired with the order of man’s place in society. When man and state are combined, what is good for man must also be good for the state. Machiavelli inverts this order so that the state becomes the seat of good, thus making it possible to justify the means with the outcome.

One of the most important, as well as radical, changes to the political system and political game, which was a consequence to James’s accession, was the collapse of the ‘Divine right to rule’. This resulted in a secularization of the monarchy, which in turn culminated with the execution of Charles I.

In January 1649 an English King was brought to trial on a charge of abusing the trust placed in him by his subjects, was convicted, and was publicly and ceremoniously beheaded, after which the Monarchy was abolished and a Republic proclaimed. Nothing like it had ever happened in European history before. For a thousand years Englishmen had been in the habit of murdering tiresome or inconvenient kings—the most recent examples being Richard II, Richard III, and Edward V—but never before had an anointed king been formally brought to book (Lawrence Stone, “History a la Mode”).

The position and responsibility of the judge is, as James declares, to be answerable to both the monarch and to God. There is a moral aspect to the temporal judgement, since the judges are also judged. The description of Duke Ferdinand’s relationship with the law is rather revealing, as it reads: “Then the Law to him | Is like a fowle black cob-web, to a Spider — | He makes it his dwelling, and a prison | To entangle those shall feede him” (I.i.169-184). This is seen in the miniature trial in the following dialogue between Ferdinand and Bosola:

Ferdinand: By what authority did'st thou execute
This bloody sentence?

Bosola: By yours.

Ferdinand: Mine? Was I her Judge?
Did any ceremoniall forme of Law,
Dooe her to not-Being? Did a compleat Jury
Deliver her conviction up I'th Court?
Where shalt thou find this Judgement registerd
Unlesse in hell? See: like a bloody foole
Th'hast forfeyed thy life, and thou shalt die for't.

Bosola: The Office of Justice is perverted quite
When one Thiefe hangs another
(*The Duchess of Malfi*, IV,ii,285-294)

The echoes from the Raleigh trial in 1603 are evident. Bosola's despair over the lack of a just court is almost the same as Raleigh's: "If you proceed to condemn me by bare inferences, without an oath, without a subscription, without witnesses, upon a paper accusation, you try me by the Spanish inquisition" (Jardine, 418).

In the initial dialogue between Vittoria and the lawyer Webster exhibits a mockery of courtly jargon through the superfluous use of Latin phrases, empty rhetoric and court procedures:

Monticelso At your pleasure Sir.

Fall to your plea.

Lawyer *Domine Iudex converte oculos in hanc pestem
mulierum corruptissimam.*⁴

Vittoria Whats he?

Francisco A Lawyer, that pleads against you.

Vit. Pray my Lord, Let him speake his usuall tongue

Ile make no answeere else.

Fra. Why you understand lattin

Vit. I do Sir, but amongst this auditory

Which come to heare my cause, the halfe or more

May bee ignorant in't.

(*The White Devil*, III,ii,10-19)

Vittoria challenges the doctrine of the court for its excessive use of Latin, even though she clearly understands this it. It is the audience present she

⁴ 'Lord Judge, turn your eyes upon this plague, the most corrupted of women.'

is concerned about. Further, in the lawyer's opening statement he is again interrupted by Vittoria:

Law. Most literate Judges, please your Lordships,
So to connive your Judgements to the view
Of this debaushd and diversivolent woman
Who such a blacke concatenation
Of mischiefe hath effected, that to exterpe
The memory of't, must be consummation
Of her and her projections

Vit. What's all this?

Law. Hould your peace.

Exhorbitant sinnes must have exulceration.

Vit. Surely my Lords this lawier here hath swallowed

Some Poticaryes bils, or proclamations.

And how the hard and undegestable wordes,

Come up like stones wee use give Haukes for phisicke.

(III.ii.29-41)

The rhetoric of the lawyer's arguments is based on the nonsensical words as well as the excessive use of Latin. In creating a fool's trial, the fools being the lawyer and the judge, Webster gets his revenge on one of the most influential people at the Middle Temple with regards to Webster view on justice, Francis Bacon. Bacon was a corrupt lawyer in the Essex trial who turned on the matter after the accession of James. In the both the Essex trial and Sir Walter Raleigh's trial Robert Cecil was present and legal advisor. Cecil was, called 'the devil' by his contemporaries, and through these trials Webster witnessed the lack of justice in the justice system. The Raleigh trial could be considered as a direct source for some of Vittoria's lines. In the trial transcript, written by Webster's friend Sir Thomas Overbury, Raleigh's response to the attorney general's accusations regarding treason are much in the same manner as Vittoria's: "Mr Attorney, I pray you to whom, or to what end speak you all this?" (Jardine, 407). Reference is also made by the Attorney General to Raleigh's secrecy and "Machiavellian policy" (408).

The manipulation of the law through rhetorical nonsense and lack of order becomes the Machiavellian ideology in practice. The new order of King James is that of societal unrest and lack of a centre. Webster's

movement through ironic spectacles of familiar displays of power, such as the grand processions, religious ceremonies and legal trials mirrors, as well as challenges, the supremacy of the established old order. The echoes of Elizabeth's and James's speeches suggest a shift in the order of society. By confronting religious disputes of law and different factions Webster comments on the chaos of religion and the corruptive nature of these by making his cardinals some of the most unreliable, corrupt and Machiavellian in the plays. The movement in the plays from the orderly processions to the chaotic scenes of extreme violence in both plays exemplify the order of which Webster comments upon.

Chapter 3

Watching the Jacobeans

*The world's a Theater, the earth a Stage,
Which God, and nature doth with Actors fill,
Kings haue their entrance in due equipage,
And some there parts play well and others ill.*

*He that denies then Theaters should be,
He may as well deny a world to me.*

Thomas Heywood *An Apology for Actors*
"The Author to his Book"

Bosola You shall find me ready.
 Oh poor Antonio, though nothing be so needful
 To thy estate as pity, yet I find
 Nothing so dangerous. I must look to my footing;
 In such slippery ice-pavements men had need
 To be frost-nailed well, they may break their necks else.
 The precedent's here afore me: how this man
 Bears up in blood, seems fearless! Why, 'tis well:
 Security some men call the suburbs of hell,
 Only a dead wall between. Well, good Antonio,
 I'll seek thee into safety from the reach
 Of these most cruel biters that have got
 Some of thy blood already. It may be
 I'll join with thee in a most just revenge:
 The weakest arm is strong enough that strikes
 With the sword of justice. – Still methinks the Duchess
 Haunts me! There there, 'tis nothing but my melancholy.
 O penitence, let me truly taste thy cup,
 That throws men down, only to raise them up.
 (*Duchess of Malfi*, V.ii.321-340)

3.1 The Established Order – Performing the Power

Heywood's proclamation of the commonplace "The world's a Theater, the Earth a Stage" invites to a study that incorporates the socio-historical frames of Elizabethan and Jacobean theatricality, how the theatre both influences and was influenced by the space in which it was situated. Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, discusses the act of acting and the nature of the play in Hamlet's own words:

Suit the action to the word, the word to the action,
 with this special observance – that you o'erstep not the
 modesty of nature. For anything so o'erdone is from the
 purpose of playing whose end, both at the first and now,
 was and is to hold as 'twere the mirror up to Nature to
 show virtue her feature, Scorn her own image, and the
 very age and body of the time his form and pressure
 (*Hamlet*, III.ii.17-24).

The act of performance in several of the scenes in Webster's plays might act upon the discourses of society and the tradition of composition and textual reference. When comparing the playhouse conventions as well as the scenic and theatrical devices on the Jacobean stage with the intertextual and hypermedial texts surrounding the dramatic text, the process of a text becoming a text might be seen to resemble the process of a play becoming a play. Womack argues that the socio-historical theatricality of ceremonial practice and the "repeated public rehearsal of this scenario not only draws on ceremonial images, but also arguably serves ceremonial functions, negotiating risk points, exorcising the spectres of violence, loss and change" (56). In his forthcoming book Stuart Sillars criticises the act of authenticating a performative entity, "the very process of authenticating a performative entity in a finite material form is a logical contradiction: if the live drama is to be verified, it must surely only achieve this through live presentation" (32). He argues further that "a clearer way is to see performance and print as separate embodiments of a shared fable" (ibid.). Martin Meisel discusses the nature of the play world and the active part of the audience in the engagement of the play, stating that the

transformation of the stage into the play world is not a one-way transaction, nor is it a cerebral exercise, all logical inference. However skeletal the means employed in text and production, and even where these are deliberately anti-illusionistic – that is, where the stage is supposed to remain the stage – the work of definition and transformation is accomplished for the most part by evocation, and by enlisting the audience in what is really a joint enterprise (15).

By studying the theatricality of Webster's socio-historical background, the theatre and the theatricality of the stage emerge, not only as reflections of the spectacles in society, but also displaying Webster's vision of how the theatre might show the chaos of society.

Jeanette Dillon argues that "we may describe the stage, then, as the 'authenticity factor' behind the playtext in performance-oriented criticism" (75). She argues further on the role of the author in such studies: "the opposition they set up between the author and the theater makes the author into a kind of bogeyman, a demonized object of rejection, while the stage becomes, in imagination, anything and everything the author is not" (76).

The Greek dramatic tradition and structure was laid out by Aristotle's *Poetics*, tragedy is, thus, composed of "six constituent elements." These are:

Plot, Character, Language, Thought, Spectacle, and Melody. Of these elements, two [Language and Melody] are the *media* in which they effect the imitation, one [Spectacle] is the *manner*, and three [Plot, Character, Thought] are the *objects* they imitate: and besides these there are no other parts (51).

Webster's knowledge of Latin might suggest that he could also have known some of the Latin translations that circulated in Europe since Giorgio Valla's in 1498. He might also have read or at least known about the numerous critical texts on *The Poetics*.¹

The theatricality of society and the spectacle of power mirror the stage as much as the rituals of society are mirrored upon the theatre scene. Socio-historical frames and tradition depend on each other to uphold an illusion of power through rhetoric and grand displays. The spectacles presented by Webster show the emptiness of the power presented on the theatre of life. The misrule of order and the ironic statement of these spectacles, when performed on stage thus become powerful representations of what Greenblatt terms "Symbolic Acquisition" – "a social practice or other mode of social energy ... transferred to the stage by means of representation" and "Acquisition through Simulation" – "the actor simulates what is already understood to be a theatrical representation" – (*Shakespearean Negotiation*, 10). Greenblatt asserts that these dramatic displays both in society and upon the stage are in "the senses of the inquisitorial process as theatre culminates in a revelation of the ultimate roles, the truth in which all partial representations find their meaning and ground" (78). The simulation of an action goes both ways, the established order performs the play of power by adapting dramatic frame to political, religious and legal arenas.

In Ancient Rome, as in Ancient Greece, politics was a discipline of rhetoric and convincing through the means of acting. The order of Webster's

1 Tigerstedt, E.N., "Observations on the Reception of the Aristotelian Poetics in the Latin West", *Studies in the Renaissance*, 15, 1968, 7-24, and Carroll, M. "Aristotle on the Art of Poetry", *The American Journal of Philology*, 32.1, 1911, 85-91.

society is thrown into chaos by having become empty in terms of rhetoric and spectacles. The rhetoric is antiquated and the spectacles are shadows of active power. When stripping the iconic power of Church rituals by the misrule of order, and having the sacrament of confession contorted into a brutal scene of execution, Webster opens up to the real chaos of reality. Order as art, rules in society, hierarchical order of place and power dominated the English Renaissance in such a manner that the theatrical game for power became a game not only at the Royal court, but the dominant factor of the social stage in all aspects of the established power. The theatricality of power during James becomes an empty stage since the established order is only a flattering image of constructed power. In *Basilikon Doron* from 1603, King James describes the function of the king in society as being that of a player king. Thus, watching society through the stage upon which it is performed. He proclaims that:

For Kings being publike persons, by reason of their office and authoritie, are as it were set (as it was sayd of old) vpon a publike stage, in the sight of all the people; where all the beholders eyes are attentuelie bent, to looke and pry in the least circumstance of their secretest driftes (A2^v).

Dollimore argues for the ironic use of socio-historical order and settings by the inversion of familiar words and phrases, arguing that “throughout Jacobean tragedy words like ‘courteous’ are forced into double and antithetical senses, becoming the pivotal points of an inversion working in terms of an interrogative irony” (26). Another such example seen in Webster is in the words “cousin” and “cozen”. The inversion of order is not only seen in the language of the text, but also in the meta-ridicule of theatrical language. When a non-action scene is presented as a written page the action of non-action is absolute. On stage, the function of such a scene becomes a forceful tableau of emblematic insight and connotations. The non-action of not engaging in a scene, but rather creating an iconic frame is in Webster used to emphasise either the corruption by a passive presence, such as the courting scene in *The White Devil*, or to confirm an action through overhearing, such as the marriage scene in *The Duchess of Malfi*. The indication of this form of performance as text might be seen in

connection to the chaotic scene of events in both the Inns of Court and as a social commentary on the superficial actions taking place at the Royal Court. A play that deals with this on an even more direct plane is Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Here, the issue of action might be said to be one of the overall themes of the play.

What might be seen in Webster are some clear statements of rebellion and a new radical belief in another set of rules. In Marie Axton's *The Queen's Two Bodies*, a description by Nicholas Bacon of the Christmas revels at the Inns of Court tells of the election of a Lord of Misrule and a miniature kingdom that consisted of the young students at the Inns of Court:

The Readers and Benchers at a Parliament or Pension held before Christmas ... appoint and choose certain of the house to be Officers, and bear certain rules in the house during the said time, which Officers for the most part are such, as are exercised in the King's Highness house, and other Noble men, and this done onely to the intent, that they should in time to come know how to use themselves. In this Christmas time, they have all manner of pastimes, as singing and dancing; and in some of the houses ordinarily they have some interlude or Tragedy played by the Gentlemen of the same house, the ground and matter whereof, is devised by some of the Gentlemen of the house (6).

Dramatic engagement on the political stage was an important exercise for lawyers in training. In plays such as *Macbeth*, *Richard II* and *Richard III* as well as perhaps *Hamlet*, the divine right to rule and the right to oppose the ruling monarch has, according to the old order, been seen as dangerous and treacherous. By creating scenes of forced abdication of political radicalism, the performative power of the stage becomes more visible. As described by Axton, the political revels at the Inns of Court had to be performed with utmost discretion:

The Proclamation of 16 May 1559 prohibited plays dealing with matters of religion and also with the 'gouvernaunce of the estate of the common weale'. It affirmed that religion and government were 'no meete matters to be wrytten or treated vpon, but by menne of auctoritie, lerning and wisdom', nor could they be shown before any audience, but 'grave and discrete persons'. The Inns' plays apparently met both requirements. With gravity and discretion these gentlemen

dramatized their dangerous matter in such a way that their loyalty to the monarch seemed never to be in question. In developing their own distinctive kind of political criticism (which should not be mistaken for the offensive or treasonously personal criticism) they made a typically legalistic distinction between the private and public capacities of the monarch (12).

The dramatic tradition of political plays, as seen in the Inns of Court, and the elitist audience open up for an understanding of Webster's works as being of a specific character.

Atilla Kiss mentions the transition from the medieval static visual imagery to the more dynamic theatricality of the Renaissance briefly by stating that the

transition from purely religious drama and emblematic interlude into literary drama and theatricality is part of a semiotic transformation in which the favourite metaphor of medieval epistemology, the "*book of life*", gives way to the Renaissance metaphor of the "*theater of the world*" (25).

The significance of the emblematic imagery of the "*book of life*" is still seen in the framed spectacles of the Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre. The non-action of an emblematic scene lies in its static nature. The spiritual aspect of the tableaux could still be seen in the theatricality of the Church and the mirroring of this in the Elizabethan and Jacobean dramas. The nature of these, however, was also, as in Webster, in the form of irony displaying the decline of the church order.

In both of Webster's tragedies, I would argue, one of the key underlying concepts is the act of action and the act of non-action. The action of taking no action is in itself an action. The moral concepts presented in the two tragedies through the characters and their motivations are seen as a cause of an action in either direction. The performance on stage and the written text offer different approaches to the complex system of symbols indicating an action. On stage the action of passive overhearing or overlooking an event taking place is a direct and deliberate action.

The nature of the dramatic spectacles was of a spiritual way as worship to Dionysus and other deities as well as being bound up with the

political forms of democratic Athens.² In Medieval England, as far up as to the early Tudors, the spiritual and political significance of drama performed was a vital part of society. In them the perfect order of Creation played itself out on stage. William Tydeman's introduction to medieval drama discusses the essential features of the faith in Anglo-Norman time as including

the submerged narrative of the spiritual relation of the New to the Old Testament, which found compelling expression in the Fall-Redemption-Doomsday structure of the mystery cycles. Equally arresting was the perpetual struggle between the forces of good and evil for possession of the soul, naturally coupled with the urgent imperatives implied in the facts of death and an imminent eternal afterlife in heaven and hell, which give shape to the morality plays (Beadle, 2).

Peter Womack discusses the relationship between the ceremonial conventions of the church and the theatrical spectacle of the stage. He states that "Conventionally, the playhouse was hung with black drapes for tragedies, just as houses and churches were hung with black for funerals: the tragic theatre was as it were a house in mourning, the performance a solemn enactment of the idea of death" (56). He goes on to describe this in terms of social rites:

In such a visual context, it is striking that the action of a tragedy, often, is precisely a rite of passage, bringing an old state of things to conclusion and ending with the new ruler, fuller of sorrow and hope, following the protagonist's body as it is carried off the stage (56).

The significance of theatre performances with regards to Elizabethan and Jacobean plays is seen in numerous instances of non-dramatic texts from the period. In *Theatrum Redivivum* Richard Baker, defending the theatre from the attack of William Prynne's *Histriomastix*,³ states that "A Play read, hath not half the pleasure of a play Acted: for through it have the pleasure of *ingenious Speeches*, yet it wants the pleasure of *Gracefull action*" (D2^v).

2 Wilson, Peter. "Powers of horror and laughter: The great age of drama", *Literature in the Greek world*, ed. Oliver Taplin, Oxford, 2001, pp.70ff.

3 Even though the published date for Baker's response to Prynne is set to 1662 the most likely date is somewhere in the mid 1630's. For more details regarding the dating of this see Graves, T.S., "A Neglected Work of Pre-Restoration Criticism", *The Modern Language Review*, 10.3. (Jul., 1915), pp. 377-378.

H.T. Price comments on the importance of the action in Webster's plays by stating that Webster "gives us figure in action and figure in language. These he fuses so intimately as to make the one entire figure" (719). He goes on to argue that in "*The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi* a figure is usually one of a series of figures, all of which are focused on the same control point. The verbal images dovetail into one another exactly as they closely parallel the figure in action, rising and falling with it, inseparable from it" (719). Even though this might be said to be true with regards to the verbal imagery, the fusing of action, non-action and visual imagery are all part of the languages of Webster.

Lukas Erne comments on Webster's statements in his address in *The Devil's Law Case*, "Webster's apology for the play's appearance in print reveals a double-edged attitude – neither anti-theatrical nor hostile to print, blind to the virtues of neither medium" (77). In *An Apologie For Actors* Thomas Heywood argues that

A Description is only a shadow receiued by the eare but nor perceiued by the eye : so liuely portrature is meerey a forme seene by the eye, but can neither shew action, passion, motion, or any other gesture, to mououe the spirits of the beholder to admiration (24).

In, *New Characters*, Webster's own study of character development – a study initiated by Webster's friend Thomas Overbury as *Characters*, and finished by Webster after the trial and death of Overbury – the significance and role of the theatre and the actor are dwelled upon. He comments on "An Excellent Actor" thus: "Sit in a full Theatre, and you will thinke you see so many lines drawne from the circumference of so many eares, whiles the *Actor* is the *Center*" (vol.3.20: M5^v). He goes on to state that "By his action he fortifies morall precepts with example; for what we see him personate, we thinke truely done before us" (M6^r). Again in his "To the Juditious Reader" from *The Devil's Law Case* Webster comments on the action of the stage:

A great part of the grace (I confesse) lay in Action; yet can no Action ever be gracious, where the decency of the Language, and Ingenious structure of the Scæne, arrive not to make up a perfect Harmony. What I have fayl'd of this, You that have approved my other Workes, (when you have read this) tax me of (vol.2. 78, 12-15).

In scenes such as the courting scene in *The White Devil* and the marriage scene in *The Duchesse of Malfi* the action of the scene is displayed through its non-action of emblematic significance. The action of non-action is seen, like in *Hamlet*, in the choices taken by deliberately taking no action.

By looking at ritualistic theatricality in Webster's plays and comparing these with the echoes of power presented upon the stage, the power of the scenes and the radicalism of these scenic performances become important in an understanding of the theatrical and socio-historical significance of Webster's plays. The performative echoes from the medieval plays are also a pathway from the old order of static imagery to the destructive and futile world order in Webster's stagings. Webster, for the published edition of *The White Devil*, inserted an epilogue. Here he states that "For the action of the play, 'twas generally well, and I dare affirme, with the Joint testimony of some of their owne quality (for the true imitation of life, without striving to make nature a monster), the best that ever became them" (V. vi. 302-306). Webster's epilogue and homage to the players of the performance give emphasis to the theatrical aspect of the play. In order to fully understand the relationship between Webster's sources and the impact the spectacle of performance, both in terms of spectators and audience, the ritualistic aspect of Webster's plays should be studied. The following two subchapters will look at specific scenes and contemporary notions of theatricality and ritual sources in order to clarify the influences on the plays.

3.2 The White Devil

The scenic performance of *The White Devil* could be interpreted through scene semiotics and socio-historical setting in the light of ritualistic ceremonies. The different scenes in *The White Devil* offer a multitude of Webster's views on the political and religious backgrounds of society. We see in the many silent, emblematic scenes, such as the courting scene of Vittoria and Brachiano and the dumb show scenes, that echoes from Morality

plays are certainly present. Albeit, the order of justice and truth from the Medieval Hall plays and the belief in a moral order based on the teachings of the Church are gone. The old order of moral beliefs are questioned and abandoned by ironic ritual displays.

In act I, scene ii, the opening scene directions and speeches describe Vittoria's blazing entrance lighting up the entire scene. This mirrors the processions of Elizabeth I and James I as grand theatrical displays of power and order.⁴ William Leahy discusses the significance of the triumphal processions of Elizabeth and their relationship with theatricality, he asserts that, "while it is quite clear that processions were indeed, among other things, public relations exercises" (2). He argues further with reference to the pageants that "the traditions of the pageants are twofold: in one sense it is purely spectacle, but in another it may be a spectacle combined with a narrative of a conflict, which is dramatic only because the conflict is seen as symbolic of human experience" (6). Webster's display of processions and symbolic value could be said to be tied up with the concept of the dichotomy of light and darkness as representatives for moral order as well as traditional aspects of good and evil. In the initial stage procession the scene opens with Vittoria's proclamation:

Vittoria Unto my Lord the Duke,
The best of wellcome. More lights, attend the Duke.
(I.ii.1-2)

And at the end of the scene Flamineo turns the spectacle around:

Flamineo You put out all your torches and depart.
(I.ii.9)

The scene is flooded with light in an enormous spectacle contrasting with the previous scene both in visually display and as in the tone of plot and characterization. The importance of light and darkness in Webster's two plays is immense. Many of his scenes rely heavily on the impression of

⁴ The courtly progresses and processions of Elizabeth and James are in detail studied in *The Progresses and Public Processions of Queen Elizabeth* (1823) and *The Progresses and Public Processions of James I* (1828), by John Nichols.

light and darkness in order to emphasise character and setting. This scene is suddenly flooded with light when Vittoria and her entourage enters the scene, but is immediately darkened when Vittoria leaves and Flamineo and Brachiano engage in plotting the wooing of Vittoria. This might be said to mirror the ironic use of flooded light in *Hamlet* when Claudius, after being exposed, demands “more light”.⁵ By applying the image and effect of the triumphal procession of Elizabeth and James, Webster is able to give an ironic spectacle of anti-action. The act of processions is a display of power rather than an actual use of power. By transposing this action upon stage and having characters that are no longer in a direct position of power the act of a mimic triumphal procession becomes an ironic act of anti-action. At the end of the trial scene Vittoria exclaims, as she is escorted off to the convent, “Through darknesse Diamonds spred their ritcheſt light” (III.ii.294:F2^v), which further the distorted dichotomy of moral order through the allegorical representation of light and darkness.

The emblematic morality setting in *The White Devil* also alludes to the symbolic imageries in the Emblemata books, which were widely circulated in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, the most famous being those of Cesare Ripa and Geoffrey Whitney.⁶ In Whitney, the emblem most relevant to *The White Devil*, more specifically the courting scene of Brachiano and Vittoria (I.ii), is the emblem of Hercules between Virtue and Vice (40, F1^v). Whitney tells about the struggle between Virtue and Vice over Hercules, in which Virtue convinced Hercules. The significance of the emblem books to the theatre tradition is very strong within the frame of Webster’s spectacles. The emblem books couples up with the liturgical imageries and tableaux of the prescriptive moral teachings of the Church. Catherine Belsey comments on this emblematic tradition, which might be said to echo the old order of strict moral concepts:

Emblem books use picture and text to propose an *interpretation* of a *concept* (opportunity, constancy), or the *relationship between concepts* (truth and error, wisdom and experience). In this they are the direct heirs

⁵ *Elizabethan Lighting Effects and the Conventions of Indoor and Outdoor Theatrical Illumination* by R.B. Graves discusses the lighting at both the Red Bull and Blackfriars with emphasis on the overall function of lighting.

⁶ Ripa, Cesare, *Iconologia*, Roma, 1593, and Whitney, Geoffrey, *Choice of Emblems and Other Devises*, Leyden 1586.

of the medieval allegorical tradition. On the medieval stage the spectacle of Mankind flanked by Good and Bad Angels constitutes a “speaking picture” and its interpretation, an emblem of the human condition, divided between good and evil impulses. In this sense emblematic drama employs a mode of representation which is radically different from the realist quest for lifelike imagery (116).

The emblematic spectacle of the courting scene between Brachiano and Vittoria opens with the scene direction in which the visual is brought forth and the characters are positioned.

*Zanche brings out a Carpet, Spreads it, and layes on it two
faire Cushions.*

Enter Cornelia (B4^v)

The composition of this scene would perhaps be visualized by three separate components with the lovers as a centre piece flanked by Zanche and Flamineo as a pair on one side, and Cornelia in the shadows on the other. As a note to this scene direction, Luckyj argues, “Brachiano’s courtly vows are thus immediately counterbalanced by the overtly sexual nature of lover’s [Brachiano and Vittoria] encounter,” The mirroring of morality plays lies in the possible framing of the scene by Vice and Virtue. A more recent image for Webster would be the illustrations of the pageant stage for the royal entry of Mary Tudor into Paris in 1514.⁷ Here, the royal couple is placed between the allegorical figures of Justice and Truth. The emblematic function of the scene immediately shows forth the tone and characterization of the scene.

Cornelia’s appearance as morality could be visualized by the cross she is wearing. Cornelia is mentioned indirectly by Marcello, in dialogue, to be wearing a crucifix in V.ii.12: “Was not this Crucifix my fathers?” Marcello also recalls an event, which give a visual description of Flamineo, “I have heard you say, giving my brother sucke, | Hee tooke the Crucifix betweene his hands, | And broke a limbe off.”

Gunnar Boklund comments on the character Flamineo in his study *The Sources of “The White Devil,”* that he is in “constant command of himself and consequently, in his own eyes and in spite of the limitations set

⁷ British Library MS Cotton Vespasian B. ii, f. 15r, and British Library MS Cotton Vespasian B. ii, f. 13r. See fig. 3 – 4.



Fig. 3
 MS. Cotton Vespasian B. II, f.13,
 Author, Gringore, Pierre
 Publ. Paris, 1514



Fig.4
 MS. Cotton Vespasian B. II, f.15,
 Author, Gringore, Pierre
 Publ. Paris, 1514

by his station in life, also the situation” (158). Again we see, displayed on stage, a form of direction driven force in an ironic setting of power. Boklund asserts that “in a play of plotting and counter-plotting he is the consummate manipulator, not of events – for his resources are insufficient – but of men” (158). The significance of the crucifix in the courting scene is, I would argue, to emphasise the old and archaic order of the Catholic faith. Cornelia’s apocalyptic outburst bears witness to Webster’s contorted representation of virtue:

Cornelia Woe to light hearts; they still forerun our fall.

Flamineo What fury rais’d thee up? Away, away.

Cornelia What make you heare my Lord this dead of night?

(I.ii.251-253)

The focus on the dichotomy of light and darkness in this scene is echoed throughout the entire play. Irvin Ribner argues on the moral aspect of *The White Devil* and its contorted mirroring as being “a dramatic symbol of moral confusion, the impossibility of distinguishing appearance from reality in a world which evil wears always the mask of virtue and virtue the mask of evil” (99).

The emblematic function and echo of the courting scene could be discussed further in connection to the two dumb shows in II.ii. Carey opens up the discussion on the Renaissance dumb show by commenting on the layers of performance:

The Renaissance dumb show within a text is a pantomimed play within a play in which audience members watch the play performed within a frame; then, within that frame, they witness yet another play. The dumb show by its very nature builds layers of hypermediation into the performance (Carey, 73).

Webster’s dumb shows are remarkable because of their form of involvement in the action of the act itself. In the early Inns of Court play by Thomas Sackville and Thomas Norton *Gorboduc* from 1565, the dumb shows open each act with an out-of-act emblematic function. By coupling the Renaissance dumb show with the medieval drama and the *tableaux vivants* from medieval pageantry, Carey argues that the effect of the spectacle “appeals to the eye” as well as “utilizing magnificent costumes, props, and special effects”

(75). Dieter Mehl, in his study on the Elizabethan dumb show,⁸ discusses this desire for spectacle, seen especially among the audience at the Red Bull. The spectacle was sought-after in all aspects of performance, secular, spiritual, and popular. We see this in the annals of the court masques, royal entries (such as the above mentioned processions) and city pageants. Mehl's description of the Renaissance dumb show sheds light on the relationship between the dumb shows and the emblems, as discussed by Belsey above. Mehl asserts that in

a discussion of the various influences, which affected the development of the dumb show mention must also be made to the emblems whose technique is remarkably similar to that of the early dumb shows and reveals the same liking for puzzles and allegories as do the pantomimes and pageants. They were used to illustrate an abstract idea or moral lesson in the form of a mythological or allegorical scene accompanied by a short motto (13-14).

In both dumb shows the idea of action and non-action are of interest with regards to the difference between a stage representation and the textual representation. Action without speech in the stage representation emphasises the action aspect because of the absolutism of action. When the same scene is read, the action could be seen as non-action because of the lack of speech. The action on stage is more controlled by movement, but also by static action of presence. The textual representation, on the other hand, is more speech driven. The static movements in a textual representation are more in the nature of non-action than if the same were to be performed on stage. The dumb shows, thus, could be seen as both the absolutism of action in the theatrical representation, and the absolutism of non-action in the textual representation.

The dumb shows are introduced to Brachiano and the audience through the conjurer in a most ritualistic manner, which echoes the description of witchcraft in contemporary inquisitorial pamphlets:

Conjurer Thei'd make men thinke the divell were fast and loose,
With speaking fustian Lattine. Pray sit downe,

⁸ Dieter Mehl, *The Elizabethan Dumb Show: the History of a Dramatic Convention* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966).

Put on this night-cap sir: 'tis charm'd; and now
I'll shew you by my strong-commending Art
The circumstance that breakes your Dutchesse heart.

The charmed cap is later, ironically, mirrored in the poisoned helmet that ends Brachiano's life in almost the same manner as Isabella's. Immediately after the conjuror's introduction the first dumb show commences:

Enter suspiciously Julio and Christophero, they draw a curtaine wher Brachian's picture is, they put on spectacles of glass, which cover their eyes and noses, and they burne perfumnes afore the picture, and wash the lips of the picture, that done, quenching the fire, and putting off their spectacles they depart laughing.

Enter Isabella in her night-gowne as to bed-ward, with lights after her, Count Lodovico, Giovanni, Guid-Antonio and others waighting on her; shee kneeles downe as to prayers, then drawes the curtaine of the picture, doe's three reverences to it, and kisses it thrice, she faints and will not suffer them to come nere it, dies, sorrow exprest in Giovanni and in Count Lodovico, shees conveid out solemnly. (II.ii.23.1-12)

The love scene, which is what the performance done by Isabella initially is, thus, by Webster, contorted into a death scene. The dichotomy of love and death could in this dumb show be paired with the dichotomy of light and darkness. In the fusion of the love and death scenes references to both *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* might be seen. The death scene of the lovers in *Romeo and Juliet* is a fusion of several death and love scenes, as this initially suggests a death scene transforming into a love scene, but ending in a tragic death scene. In the story of Pyramus and Thisbe, the love scene also becomes a death scene through tragic circumstances.

Nigel Llewellyn states that "some have seen Renaissance tomb imagery as illustrating the gradual stirring into consciousness of their docile medieval forebears: in fact, more relevant is the radical post-Reformation theology of death" (37). Further, he argues that, "in early modern England, monuments taught onlookers lessons about death, glossed by political and theological theory" (ibid.). This theatre of death is often represented with a curtain functioning as a framework and a stage where the figure of the dead is placed in a position according to that which was most significant in the person's life.

One might also see the figure in an allegorical posture, which forms the symbolic language of the tomb. The spatial spectacle here is founded on the history of dramatic spectacle deriving from the late Middle ages, especially the Italian “death chamber”; “a small room veiled by curtains which were pulled back by angels revealing the image of the deceased within” (Cohen, 32). The worship of the dead serves as a memento mori and as an honour to the history of the past. It could also yet again be reversed by reading the funeral monuments in the same manner as the dumb show scene might suggest. In terms of performative language of contextualized rituals the first scene is perhaps of most immediate interest. When looking at this first dumb show of the double dumb show scene, the spectacle might be said to mirror the theatre of death seen in the churches of the day. The metatheatrical structure of church ceremonies is composed of elements of theatricality; the object of worship constitutes a reversed audience by being the passive part in the ceremony performed by the congregation. In creating a liturgical space of execution, Webster, thus, comments on the morality and finitude of the power of the Church spectacle. The reversal of the ritual of commemoration into an execution scene is repeated in Brachiano’s death scene.

The second dumb show is introduced by the conjuror in the following manner:

Conjuror Now turne another way,
And view *Camillo*’s farre more politicke fate:
Strike louder musicke from this charmed ground,
To yield, as fits the act, a Tragicke sound.

Then the Second dumb immediately follows:

Enter Flamineo, Marcello, Camillo, with foure more as Captaines,
they drinke healths and dance, a vaulting horse is brought into the
roome, Marcello and two more whisper’d out of the roome, while
Flamineo and Camillo strip themselves into their shirts, as to
vault, complement who shall beginne, as Camillo is about to vault,
Flamineo pitcheth him upon his necke, and with the help of the rest,
wriths his necke about, seeme’s to see if it be broke, and layes him
foulded double as ’twere under the horse, makes shewes to call for

helpe, Marcello comes in, laments, sends for the Cardinall and the Duke, who come forth with armed men, wonder at the act, commend the bodie to be carried home, apprehend Flamineo, Marcello, and the rest, and go as 'twere to apprehend Vittoria.
(II.ii.37.1-12: D4^v – E1^r)

The extreme violence of this murder echoes the murder of the Duke in Tourneur's *The Revenger's Tragedy*. Vindice, after tricking the duke into kissing the poisoned skull, forces the duke down to the floor and makes him witness the incestuous encounter between his wife and his bastard son. Vindice silences the duke and exclaims:

Nay faith, we'll have you hushed now with thy dagger.
Nail down his tongue, and mine shall keep possession
About his heart; if he but gasps he dies,
We dread not death to quittance injuries. Brother,
If he but winks, not brooking the foul object
Let our two other hands tear up his lids
And make his eyes, like comets, shine through blood.
(III.vi.192-198)

The scene predicts the violent execution scene of Vittoria and Zanche. Vittoria's bravery is seen, in much the same valour as in the trial scene, to be of a very outgoing nature. Lodovico acts as a self proclaimed judge of justice and seeks revenge for the murders committed in the dumb shows. When faced with the oncoming death Vittoria shows forth her bravery:

Lodovico Thou dost tremble,
Mee thinkes feare should dissolve thee into ayre.
Vittoria O thou art deceiv'd, I am to true a woman:
Conceit can never kill me: Ill tell the what,
I will not in my death shed one base teare,
Or if look pale, for want of blood, not feare.
(V.vi.217-222)

As a performative spectacle of wonder, *The White Devil* challenges the boundaries of scenic possibilities as well as the traditions of rituals imbedded in both the dumb shows. Katherine M. Carey discusses the two

dumb shows in terms of distance within the frame of the theatre space in which “the action of the dumb show, mimed in silence, offers both the power of gesture over dialogue, and an aesthetic” (74). She furthers the argument by stating that “As art mirrors the society in which it is created, so *The White Devil* mirrors Jacobean fear and corruption, family relations, and absolute power” (75). The silence and non-action of Brachiano give even more emphasis to the extremeness of the show, as Carey argues, “silence coupled with the excessively violent nature of the dumb shows in *The White Devil* promotes the hypermediate nature of this frame within the frame” (76). As a character whose only act in the scene is that of a voyeur, his action is that of reaction. Carey describes this scene by arguing that “Webster’s voyeuristic dumb shows allow the audience to be hypermediate – watching both murders occur while at the same time observing Brachiano’s reaction, two frames within one theatrical frame” (74).

In the revenge scene of the play, V.iii, the ironic use of Catholic Church rites is taken to the level of extreme directness. The spectacle of the Brachiano’s death scene is a contorted mirroring of a Roman Ritual last rite scene. In the courting scene of I.ii Cornelia’s crucifix might say to symbolize the old order of divine moral virtue and justice, the presence of the crucifix in Brachiano’s death scene becomes the reverse and ironic icon of an empty and corrupt order. Elizabeth Williamson’s study on the domestication of religious objects discusses this irony:

The falseness of the revengers, who hide their true intentions by donning the clothing and gestures of Capuchin monks, thus mirrors the falseness that Protestants perceived as being at the heart of the Catholic faith, and the actors playing Lodovico and Gasparo become even more “false” when their characters take on deceptive roles within the fiction of the play. Construed in this light, the revengers’ crucifix is nothing more than an element of their false show. Emptied of its sacrality, and used satirically as a weapon against Catholicism, the crucifix’s function in the scene seems to directly mirror its function in *The White Devil* as a whole (478).

In seeing Brachiano’s execution scene in relation to execution scene of Isabella, the ironic echoes from Catholic liturgical ceremonies are presented

in a reversed emblematic way in order to display the empty power of the Church as an established order. The corruption of justice and government is evident throughout by the same display of reversed order of icons of power. Cornelia and Lodovico are the foremost representatives of a fallen order. Cornelia's decline into madness and Lodovico's self-proclaimed executioner of justice are Webster's monsters of society.

3.3 The Duchess of Malfi

In the opening speech by Antonio (I.i.1-23), life and scandals at court are commented upon. Echoes from early Jacobean court politics in this speech are remarked upon by Alastair Bellany in his study *The Politics of Court Scandal in Early Modern England* in which he opens his first chapter with this speech. He cites Eliot's famous diagnosis of Webster as a writer "much possessed by death," who "saw the skull beneath the skin" and that "Eliot made no note of the fictional stage upon which Webster choreographed his most chilling *danses macabres*. He did not add that Webster's fascination with death was also a fascination with the court of princes" (3). He comments further by comparing the echoes of the court lives:

The men who hold political power in Amalfi – the duchess's brothers, Duke Ferdinand and the cardinal – are murderous wretches, liars and hypocrites, who will die tortured by visions of ghosts, brushed by the wings of madness. Webster's court is riddled with plots and spies, stained by disordered sexuality, dogged by slander and rumour. It is a world in moral chaos, a world where to kiss a Bible when taking an oath is to risk ingesting poison (3).

The Royal Court is involved in a game for power and controls it by means of carefully planned spectacles. By introducing these themes at this stage the presence of Machiavelli is seen from the very start of the play. The order of government and idea of power in the two plays mirror much of Machiavelli's thoughts and ideas from *The Prince* and *The Discourses* as discussed in chapter 2 above. By playing this scene much in the manner of the "arras scene" in *Hamlet* the opposite forces become more clearly visible and the game of politics and power is introduced right at the start of the

play. The same feeling of distress, which is seen in the opening scene of *Hamlet*, might also be seen in Antonio's words "Death and diseases through the whole land spread" (I.i.15) echoing Marcellus's "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" (I.iv.90). The political significance of this statement is not easily ignored, and the visual representation of the rottenness on stage is seen, as I will discuss, throughout the play. By this proclamation on stage, the setting at court and the political commentary might be said to have a great impact on both the audience and the readers of the play. In the initial speech by Bosola, the two brothers are described in allegories that point towards corruption and foulness:

He, and his brother, are like Plum-trees (that grow crooked over standing-pooles) : they are rich, and ore-laden with fruite, but none but Crowes, Pyes, and Catter-pillers feede on them: Could I be on their flattring Panders, I would hang on their eares like a horse-leach, till I were full, and then droppe off (I.i.48-51).

The imagery Bosola uses, such as "horse-leech," bear witness of the moral order by which Bosola lives, sucking "blood," power and influence. The speech suggests that it is Bosola himself who wishes to be this leech upon the brothers, but the it also echoes some of the imagery used by Elizabeth I and her Parliament. In Elizabeth's speech to the Parliament January 28 1563 she stated: "As I trust you likewise do not forget that by me you were delivered whilst you were hanging on the bough ready to fall into the mud – yea, to be drowned in the dung" (72). The use of the word "dung" by Elizabeth was in this context meant to denote Catholicism and Papal jurisdiction under Mary Tudor.⁹ The spectacle of death and decay within the frame of Webster's focus on the chaos of society and the rottenness of the institutions of power might be seen as manifested scenic spectacle in the dumb show of the Cardinal.

The incorporation of the dumb shows in *The White Devil*, into the action of the plays itself is in *The Duchess of Malfi* drawn to an even higher level of inclusiveness. The transformation of the Cardinal of Aragon from being a part of the clergy into that of a soldier is a vital part of the scene as

9 Cf. Elizabeth, *Speeches*, p.72n6

this is performed in the same manner as a strict religious ritual. The mockery of the stiff and confusing ritualistic behaviour of the Roman Church might be seen in the character of the Cardinal especially in his attempt to be in control by performing the transformation in social position.

*Here the Ceremony of the Cardinalls enstalment, in the habit of a
Souldier: perform'd in delivering up his Crosse, Hat, Robes, and
Ring, at the Shrine; and investing him with Sword, Helmet, Sheild
and Spurs
(III.iv.6.1-3)*

The transformation of the Cardinal could be seen in theatrical terms as an almost empty spectacle of self-proclaimed power. The corruption of the Cardinal is seen in this scene in form of the tomb image and transformation rite of the passing of death. The Cardinal's transformation scene is in many ways a ritualistic mirror of social change. The Cardinal, whose darkest vice and driving force is power and social status, is giving up his symbols of ecclesial office for the secular. The symbols of the church might, thus, be seen as a barrier for the individual's path to more power. The transformation, as seen in the highly theatre prop laden scene, is from a judge in canon law and a representative for God in the ecclesiastical court to become an executioner of war, thus making him an active judge of lives in the secular realm instead of the sacred. As a manipulator of people and events in the narrative of the play, the Cardinal's on-stage function as a shadowy figure of passive executioner could be seen in his outward appearance. Antonio's description of him is similar to appearance of Deflores from Middleton's *The Changeling*, in which he is by Beatrice-Joanna described thus: "This ominous ill-fac'd fellow more disturbs me, Then all my other passions" (II.i.52-53) and "The villain's fixt – Thou standing toad-pool" (II.i.57). By Antonio the Cardinal is described in the following way:

Antonio Some such flashes superficially hang on him, for
forme: but observe his inward Character: he is a mellancholly
Church-man: The Spring in his face, is nothing but the
ingendering of Toades.
(I.i.146-148:B3^v)

The image from medieval transi tombs might be recalled here to give a frame to the rottenness of the Cardinal. Cohen describes these tombs as memento mori effigies which were depicted in numerous ways, such as “a figure completely swathed in a shroud, as an emaciated corpse with protruding intestines, as a shrivelled body whit skin drawn taut across its bony frame” (1-2). The transformation scene, thus, also represents a spectacle of passing, and further alludes to the figure of the effigies of the funeral monuments. Bosola’s comment directed towards Ferdinand and the rottenness of the two brothers are in many ways a describing image on the iconic scene of the state of transformational rites of the Cardinal:

Your brother, and your selfe, are worthy men;
 You have a paire of hearts, are hollow Graves,
 Rotten, and rotting others: and your vengeance,
 (Like two chain’d bullets) still goes arme in arme.
 You may be Brothers: for treason, like the plague,
 Doth take much in a blood: I stand like one
 That long hath ta’ne a sweet, and golden dreame:
 I am angry with my selfe, now that I wake.
 (IV,ii,304-312)

The grave methaphor in Bosola’s speech is later echoed in the Duchess’s execution scene, and the ironic spectacle of the confession ritual and the last rite.

The frequent use of, and significance of the word “jewel” throughout the play, such as in the first act, plays together with the representation of iconic symbols contorted by Webster’s mirroring of a false order of power. Ferdinand, speaking of an off-stage contest of “tilting at the ring,” asks:

Who tooke the Ring oftneft?
Silvio Antonio Bologna (my lord.)
Ferdinand Our Sister Duchess’ great Master of her
 Household? Give him the Jewell
 (I.i.90-93)

The ring in *The Duchess of Malfi* is a reccuring element both with sexual connotations, but also with specific reference to state, church and juridical matters.

Elizabeth herself, in *The Golden Speech*, from November 30th 1601, that last speech she gave to the Parliament, also used jewels to describe her most precious feelings: “There is no jewel, be it of never so rich a price, which I set before this jewel – I mean your loves” (Elizabeth I, 337). The betrothal of Elizabeth to England incorporates all the established orders, and is a symbolic display of purity and commitment to present and control the theatricality of power.

The same symbolic imagery of the jewel in both *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi* has often been discussed in sexual terms, especially the imagery regarding the transformation of Ferdinand as well as the symbolic use of rings and jewels.¹⁰ In *The White Devil*, the sexual imagery is played out on stage and in the dialogue in a much more direct way during the emblematic courting scene with Flamineo as aside commentor:

Brachiano What valew is this Jewell?
Vittoria Tis the ornament
 Of a weak fortune.
Bracchiano In sooth ile have it; nay I will but change
 My Jewell for your Jewell.
Flamineo Excellent,
 His Jewell for youe Jewell, well put in Duke.
Brachiano Nay let me see you weare it.
Vittoria Heare sir.
Brachiano Nay lower, you shall wear my Jewell lower.
Flamineo That’s better, she must wear his Jewell lower.
 (I.ii.211-218)

In this scene, as described above, the visual display of virtue and vice is seen in an emblematic representation. The ring as a virtuous symbol of betrothal and love is played out on stage very forcefully in the marriage scene between the Duchess and Antonio.

Dutchesse Fye, fie, what’s all this?
 One of your eyes is blood-shot, use my Ring to’t,

¹⁰ Some studies on the imagery in Webster are: Berry, Ralph, *The Art of John Webster*, London, 1972, Goodwyn, Floyd Lowell, *Image Pattern and Moral Vision in John Webster*, Salzburg, 1977, McLeod, Susan H. *Dramatic Imagery in the Plays of John Webster*, Salzburg, 1977, and Schuman, Samuel, *The Theatre of Fine Devices*, Salzburg, 1982.

They say 'tis very soveraigne 'twas my wedding Ring,
And I did vow never to part with it,
But to my second husband.
(I.i.289-393)

The ring is here the action that conceals the marriage, which has been validated by the *per verba de presenti*. The ring, thus, becomes the active ritual and the confirmation of marriage through the *per actio de presenti* the kissing of the hand that seals the marriage, but the hand is a dead man's hand, thus creating the image of a marriage to death. The darkness of the act itself and the imagery it contains is mirrored yet again in the prison cell scene in which Ferdinand gives the duchess the dead hand to kiss. The act of action as opposed to the passive act of overhearing is important to the whole idea of mirroring the acts of state and church. In the Cardinal's transformation scene, the ring could be said to hold the same symbolic value of marriage, although, with the reverse effect of Queen Elizabeth's.

In the language of Bosola, the search for an order in the chaos of amorality is by far the most elusive since his character is one of the most incomprehensible in the play. His allegories and hints of deep insight in the mysteries of the world are seen in his many speeches. The imageries and his physical representation of henchman in the shadows is seen in that his presence is almost always in the dark, or at night. The spatiality of darkness and the prison settings are discussed by Bosola in the confession scene after the madmen. Bosola's opening words to the Duchess are the grimmest words in the play by far: "I am come to make thy tombe" (IV.ii.109). He then puts forth the description of the Duchess:

Thou art a box of worm-seed, at best, but a salvatory
of green mummy. What's this flesh? A little cruded
milk, fantastical puff paste: our bodies are weaker than
those paper prisons boys use to keep flies in – more
contemptible, since ours is to preserve earth worms.
Didst thou ever see a lark in a cage? Such is the soul in
the body: this world is like her little turf of grass, and the
heaven o'er our heads like her looking-glass, only gives
us a miserable knowledge of the small compass of our
prison (IV.ii.119-126).

The visual image painted by Bosola, of both the enclosed space of the dungeon and the darkness of the mental prison, in which the Duchess is placed, describes the notion of lack of freedom. The reference to darkness and imprisonment echoes the Jesuit hunt during the Elizabethan reign. Jesuit priests, such as Edmund Campion, hiding in small, dark rooms inside the walls of the big houses of Catholic nobility were, when found imprisoned in the even darker, claustrophobic cells of the Tower, most famous of which was the infamous ‘Little Ease’, a cell that “desperately restricted movement to little more than a twitch.”¹¹ Perhaps even closer to Webster’s circle of friends was Overbury and Raleigh, both imprisoned in the tower and victims of a corrupt legal court.¹² Raleigh was imprisoned in the Tower for thirteen years before his execution.

As in *The White Devil*, the focus and significance of the dichotomy of light and darkness is in *The Duchess of Malfi* paramount to the study of the performance. The opening scene in *The White Devil*, as discussed above, is flooded with light, but the wanting of light is equally important in the scenes of *The Duchess of Malfi*. The ironic use of lighting and talks of light is represented throughout the play. The opposite pair of the Duchess and her twin brother Ferdinand could be seen in the dichotomy of light and darkness in the way they are portrayed on stage and in the manner in which the scenes requires different form of lighting equipment. R. B. Graves discusses the importance of lighting in the latter play with special emphasis on the wax-figure scene and the dead-man’s-hand scene. He describes the use of lamps, specifically the dark lantern, to indicate either day and night or light and darkness:

But again, we may miss the distinction between a normal lantern and a “dark lantern,” such as Bosola carries in act 2, scene 3, of *The Duchess of Malfi*. Dark lanterns gave off no light at all until a small door was opened in the otherwise opaque shield. They were a favorite of thieves and highwaymen engaged in surreptitious nighttime adventures. Bosola’s dark lantern thus fits his sinister actions well (he calls it his “falce-friend”) and colors our response to Antonio at the end of the play when he, too, resorts to using a “darke Lanthorne” in his attempt to meet with the Cardinal (Graves, *Lighting*, 22).

11 Haynes, Alan, *The Elizabethan Secret Service*, Berkshire, 2000, p.43.a

12 Jardine, David, *The Lives and Criminal Trials of Celebrated Men*, Philadelphia, 1835, and William Cobbett, *State Trials*, London, 1809.

The scenic lighting of the stage, as Graves describes, could be used, even at an open theatre such as the Globe, to represent darkness and night. The scene in which this would be most visible is the dungeon scene with the wax figures and the dead man's hand.

It is Bosola who introduces and describes the nature of the scene as being in the dark:

Bosola Your elder brother the Lord *Ferdinand*
Is come to visite you: and send you word
'Cause once he rashly made a solemne vowe
Never to see you more; he comes I'th' night:
And prayes you (gently) neither Torch, nor Taper
Shine in your Chamber: he will kisse your hand,
And reconcile himselfe: but, fro your vowe,
He dares not see you.
(IV.i.21-28)

The dichotomy of light and darkness is the main focus of the scene in terms of performance and power of spectacle. The duchess opens the scene with the words "Take hence the light" followed by Ferdinand's "This darkenes suites you well." Again, in Ferdinand's feigned concern the excess of light is his explanation "It had bin well, | Could you have liv'd thus alwayes: for indeed | You were too much i'th' light" (39-41). When Ferdinand offers his sister the hand to kiss and give the Duchess the dead man's hand, she realizes it and exclaims "Hah? Lights: oh horrible!", after which the scene is truly flooded with light with Ferdinand's exited words "Let her have light enough" (52). The use of light in this scene amplifies the importance of the symbolic meaning of light a spectacular element, but also how Webster inverts light into chaotic darkness with the enlightenment of the reality of the decayed state. The emptiness of the holy light of the glories is described by Bosola in the confession scene: "Glories (like glowe-wormes) a farre off, shine bright, | But look'd to neere, have neither heate, nor light" (IV. ii.133-134).

Just prior to the strangulation of the Duchess, Bosola delivers a speech as the Bell-man (IV.ii.165-182). Lucas comments on this by asserting that: "The bellman's bell, like the passing-bell in churches, was probably meant

in origin to drive away the evil spirits that lie in wait for the departing soul; later, to invite also the prayer of the faithful” (185). This speech creates an ironic spectacle of the church ritual of confession and last rite, again Webster has invoked the power of misrule. The spectacle is not performed by a priest but by the executioner, the angel of death. Bosola makes it quite clear that his mission as a tomb maker is to “flatter the dead, not the living.” Thus he holds up the mirror that reflects the reality of death and not the polished version of life. The speech delivered in a sermon-like manner by Bosola is the final act of irony and the misrule of church rituals. A note in the Cambridge edition points out that the speech is “at once the concluding song in the Duchess’s marriage masque and the hortatory speech of the ‘common Bell-man’” (650). The total irony of this speech comes to its fullest potential in its grim spectacle of the setting and the character involvement on stage. By having Bosola dressed, as Lodovico and Gasparoe in *The White Devil*, the scene directions in the 1623 edition says “Bosola (like and old man)” (IV.ii:K1^r), the irony of a church ceremony has a more potent display.

The Duchess’s death scene has enormous significance both through textual echoes and through its scenic power.

What would it pleasure me to have my throat cut
 With diamonds, or to be smothered
 With cassia, or to be shot to death with pearls?
 I know death hath ten thousand several doors
 For men to take their exits; and ‘tis found
 They go on such strange geometrical hinge,
 You may open them both ways –
 (IV.ii.206-211)

As an execution scene, the violence of strangulation is very direct and the language in this speech mirrors the language of Elizabeth’s *Golden Speech*:

But I perceive they dealt with me like physicians who, ministering a drug, make it more acceptable by giving it a good aromatical savor; or when they give pills, do gild them all over. I have ever used to set the Last Judgement Day before my eyes and so to rule as I shall be judged, to answer before a higher Judge (339).

Again the echo of the socio-historical background is visible in Webster, but it is not only the printed language of text that here is presented on stage; the moral language of order through death is seen in both Elizabeth and the Duchess. Only through an overturn of the old order through death may the new order of moral and power be restored. The divine power of order seen in Webster's predecessors through the reversal of the misrule of power almost by divine right and divine law is in Webster replaced by the law of nature and the act of death as the path to balance.

Chapter 4

Order in Chaos

*The greater Honor and authoritie man
haue in this World, and the greater
their estimation is, the more sensible
and notorious are the faultes by them
committed, and greater is their slaunder.*

(V2^v)

William Painter *Palace of Pleasure*
"The Duchesse of Malfi"

Antonio I doe love these auncient ruynes:
We never tread upon them, but we set
Our foote upon some reverend Historiy,
And questionles, here in this open Court
(Which now lies naked to the injuries
Of stormy weather) some men lye Enterr'd
Lov'd the Church so well, and gave so largely to't,
They thought it should have canopide their Bones
Till Doomes-day: But all things have their end:
Churches, and Citties (which have diseases like to men)
Must have like death that we have.
(*The Duchess of Malfi*, V.iii.9-19)

Like Diamonds we are Cut with our own Dust

In Painter's translation of the prose version of *The Duchess of Malfi*, the plot centres on the marriage between the duchess and her master of the household Antonio. The tragedy unfolds and both Antonio and the duchess are murdered. The story concludes with a warning most fitting to the rule of the old order of social hierarchy:

You see the miserable discourse of a Pricesse loue, that was not very wyse, and a Gentleman that had forgotten his estate, which ought to serue for a lookinge Glasse to them which bee ouer hardy in making Enterprises, and doe not measure their Ability wyth the greatnesse of their Attemptes (195: CC3^r).

The extensive use of allegories of rotteness and decay in the plays suggest that even though there is a new order springing from the dead of the old, it is still rotten, as it has been rooted in decayed soil. The idea of order, and the fall into chaos, is in Webster seen as the most serious attack on society and the established polity. Webster's development of the original prose version reflects the movement, not only from the medieval order of social status, but in direct political statements confronting the establishment and old order. The movement from the divine order of the medieval dramas to the contorted image in late Elizabethan and Jacobean drama is seen in the irony and misrule of theatricality.

Thomas Elyot warns about the fall of order as the inevitable outcome: “more ouer take away ordre from all thynges what shulde than remayne? Certes nothyng finally, except some man wolde imagine eftsones Chaos” (*Governour*, fol.3^v). Cranmer professes the same fear should the order be broken: “for where there is no order there reigneth all abuse, carnal liberty, enormity, sin, and babylonian confusion” (S1^v). He continues his description of the chaos, which follows:

Take away kings, princes, rulers, magistrates, iudges and such estates of God’s order, no man shall ride or go by the highway unrobbed; no man shall sleep in his own house or bed unkilld; no man shall keep his wife, children and possessions in quietness; all things shall be common and there must needs follow mischief and utter destruction, both of souls, bodies, goods and commonwealths (S1^v).

The laws of church and state create an order of justification, but when comparing these laws to the frequent use of heroic villains in the revenge tragedies from Kyd to Webster to Ford, the idea of chaos is more evident. The old order suggests an order in which the laws of the divine formed the laws of society and that the heavenly judge was the ultimate creator and judge.

The supreme manifestation of old order in Renaissance England was Queen Elizabeth I. The centre of power and order lay in the stability of the monarch, and Divine Right to rule and idea of a universal order were created by God. Webster’s ironic representation of this order and the fading faith in a divine order challenges this old order of state and church power. Two documents of importance cemented the order of Elizabeth: the Act of Supremacy of 1559 and the Act of Uniformity. The first arrogated ecclesiastical authority to the monarch, and the latter set the order of prayer to be used in the English Book of Common Prayer. These are of vital importance in the effort to understand the relationship between Church, Government, Court of Law and the theatre. The theatricality of society is perhaps foremost seen in its spectacles of grandeur. The processions and rituals of society are in the Jacobean dramas of Marston, Tourneur, Webster and Ford made into empty spectacles and corrupted order.

After the death of Elizabeth and succession of James there was a collapse in the belief in the divine right theory, Griffin suggests that this “left a vacuum into which flowed the myth of the Machiavellian politician, appearing temporarily to represent the whole truth about men and power” (2). Webster’s knowledge of the Machiavellian order and political theory is seen both in his application of Machiavellian characteristics of cynicism and villainy and in his metaphoric images of the fox, lion and the wolf. Webster’s view of order and chaos suggests that not only must a new order emerge from the ruins of the old, but chaos must first engulf all so that death might create a new order. With Machiavelli, the ruin is the creation of the new:

Anyone who becomes a prince either of a city or a state, especially when his foundations are weak and does not wish to give either a republican or a monarchical form to civil life, will find the best remedy he possesses for holding on to that principality is, if he is a new prince, to create everything in that state anew. He must build new cities, destroy those already built (*Discourses*, 80).

Ernst Cassirer describes the Machiavellian doctrine by indicating that “the sharp knife of Machiavelli’s thought has cut off all the threads by which in former generations the state was fastened to the organic whole of human existence.” Furthermore, he states that “the political world has lost its connection not only with religion or metaphysics but also with all the other forms of man’s ethical and cultural life. It stands alone – in an empty space” (174). Webster’s development of political and juridical speeches fills this space opened up by Machiavelli. It is the empty space and the political awareness that contribute to the power of the theatre.

In a discussion of religious changes throughout the English Renaissance certain aspects should perhaps also be included such as the pre-reformation theatre as well as the changes made under and after the Reformation. The ritualistic ceremonies of the church both influence and are influenced by theatricality, order of the divine and church power is upheld with symbolic displays; in Webster, these are seen as archaic and empty. Webster’s spectacle of empty rhetoric emphasises the idea that ideology loses the power of persuasion through a lack of substance, only the empty space of chaos remains.

The relationship between literature and religious sermons as well as political declarations is seen in their echoes in plays from the period. They open up to an understanding of a society with which playwrights such as Webster and Shakespeare were familiar. Richard Hooker, master of Temple Church, along with among others Thomas Cranmer and Matthew Parker partook in the reformation of the Church of England. Hooker's *Of the Lawes of Ecclesiastical Politie* echoes through many of the plays in Renaissance England and creates a consensus as much as an innovative dogma. The ritualistic and ceremonial power of the church, as well as the radically new order of the different factions, is exploited by the Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights in such a way that the power of the theatre becomes dangerous.

The power of the theatre lies in its ability, through its kings, clowns and spectacles of power to display truth in society. Bosola's comment on the state of judgement and justice suggests the movement into chaos. This is seen after the execution of the Duchess, in Bosola's address to Ferdinand:

when thou kill'st thy sister,
Thou tookst from Justice her most equall balance,
And left her naught but her sword (V.v.38-40).

By again tracing the different aspects of drama and its development from the early medieval plays to the Restoration, echoes of society might be audible in the same way. Traces of the stage and theatricality should then be visible in the development of state and church, in studies of art, architecture, as well as literariness in socio-historical texts and rituals.

The study of such rituals as part of the language and echoes of power and order could further the scope of a study of the development of the early modern play and stage. By looking at the function of laws read through state trials, and comparing them with writings concerning the idea of justice, and then looking at how the display and rhetoric of justice might play itself out on stage, one might get a more complete picture of how the laws were received. Engaging in the theatricality of life through all the ritualistic scenes and spectacles carefully arranged by the established power meant that by changing the way imagery and words were applied, the rituals of

society changed as well. The act of acting as seen upon a stage could be even more potent when expressed in a static movement. The irony of a court procession of triumph is seen in Webster when the scene is emptied of light and people, and only the corrupt villains are left plotting. When stripped of all its contents of meaning and power, the spectacle of state and church power is only an empty stage.

The moral doctrines developed in religious, philosophical and political texts throughout history are transfused into the plays and might be seen to offer a new set of interpretable moral symbols. The plays themselves, when played out on stage for the masses, both for the socially privileged – such as the audience at Blackfriars – and for the more common man in Renaissance London – such as the audience at the Red Bull and the Globe – give way to view the theatricality of society and the power of the stage as a pivotal factor of change. By distinguishing the different kinds of audience in Webster’s two plays, as well as other Elizabethan and Jacobean plays, one might find some connective order in which specific types of symbolism are applied. The importance of the Inns of Court as a centre for politics, legal, religious and artistic development might be seen in Webster’s specific use of legal terminology and insight in the order of society. It is also interesting to notice that the translations of Machiavelli’s works into English were all done by Inns of Court fellows, which could suggest a widened relationship between English and continental ideas and exchanges.

Stephen Greenblatt asserts that “plays are made up of multiple exchanges, and the exchanges are multiplied over time, since to the transactions through which the work first acquired social energy are added supplementary transactions through which the works renews its power in changed circumstances” (Greenblatt, 1988: 20). The economic language Greenblatt engages in could be said to reduce art and the status of the theatre to a passive observer of society, only acting as a machine that produces artefacts of the social energies. Webster is a creator of direct commentary upon art. I would argue that the theatre was everything but a simple mirror. In *Shakespearean Negotiations*, Greenblatt opens with “the desire to speak with the dead” (1), here he opens up to look at history through art. The interrelationship between social theatricality and stage rituals gives way to a broader view on history. The importance of ritual to theatricality and

the development of drama through everyday rituals could also be seen in the development of the theatricality of the established order of societal power and constructed rituals as theatre. The commonplace phrase “the world is a stage” is mentioned as a burden by the duchess “I account this world a tedious Theatre | For I doe play a part in’t ’gainst my will” (IV.i.82-83).

The monologue by Antonio, cited at the beginning of this chapter, shows Webster’s struggle for a radically new form of social order. Antonio sees society in turmoil, the old order of morality and justice has been corrupted, the rottenness of all that is within is part of the overall imagery in both of Webster’s tragedies. With Bosola’s dying words the figure of moral change describes the ruinous world:

We are onely like dead wals, or vaulted graves,
That ruin’d, yeildes no eccho : Fare you well,
It may be paine, but no harme to me to die,
In so good a quarrell: Oh this gloomy world,
In what shadow, or deepe pit of darknesse,
Doth (womanish, and fearefull) mankind live?
(*The Duchess of Malfi*, V.v.96-101)

The hopelessness in Bosola’s world reflects Webster’s society and the moral order and the movement towards chaos is seen in both the plays. One might hear an echo from Vindice in *The Revenger’s Tragedy*:

Why does not heaven turn back, or with a frown
Undo the world? – why does not earth start up,
And strike the sins that tread upon’t?
(II.i.254-6)

At the end of this play, Vindice receives justice by his own hand, though it is explained that it is Divine Justice and Divine Will that in the end is the ultimate justice. This belief in a divine justice is absent from Webster since the faith in God and justice of the Church and state is as corrupt as the society itself. Also, in Vindice’s line: “When the bad bleeds, then is the tragedy good” (*The Revenger’s Tragedy*, III.v.205), but who would then survive in the Websterian world in which all are ‘bad’?

The ironic use of order created by Webster opens up to the hopelessness of man's decay. In Antonio's words: "Churches, and Citties (which have diseases like to men) | Must have like death that we have." One might compare this with Tourneur's description of London and the purposelessness of life in a world that is without hope and overshadowed with death:

Now in this Towne were many sundrie sorts of people of all ages; as Old and young, and middle age: men, women and children: which did eate, and drinke, and make a noyse, and die...they were Creatures that serued the time, followed Shaddowes, fitted humours, hoped of Fortune, and found, what? I cannot tell you (Tourneur, 1929: 275).

Through the closing of the theatre the power of the spectacle and theatre become most visible. The act of action, and the display of action, as I have argued, is the real power Webster wields. The political, clerical, and legal establishments of society is based on active power, but again, the grand parades, the rituals of passing, and the trials of the law are rooted in displays, they perform in order to maintain position of order. When the foundation of this order is corrupted and rotten, the spectacles become empty stages.

The puritans' view on the theatre was expressed by William Prynne's aggressive attack on the stage only fourteen years prior to the act that banned them. On the title page of Prynne's grand work the *Histrionomastix*, the outline of his view is laid forth,

That popular Stage-playes (the very Pompes of the Divell which we renounce in Babtisme, if we beleeeve in the Fathers) are sinfull, heatehenish, lewde, ungodly Spectacles, and most pernicious Corruptions
(titlepage).

Then, in 1647, after the histrionic execution of Charles I in 1642, Parliament wrote the ordinance for supression of all stage plays. This act gave leave to

pull downe and demolish, or cause or procure to be pulled downe and demolished all Stage-Galleries, Seates, and Boxes, erected or used, or which shall be erected and used for the acting, or playing, or seeing acted or plaied, such Stage-Playes, Interludes, and Playes aforesaid, within the said City of London and Liberties thereof, and other places within their respective jurisdictions.

The act of closing the theatres is as much a state spectacle as any other spectacle of power. It was an act of active power that confirmed the power of the theatre, and confirmed Webster's world of a chaotic world order.

*“Integrity of life, is fames best friend,
Which noblely (beyond Death) shall crowne the end.”*

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