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THE DRAMATIC TECHNIQUE OF JOHN WEBSTER:
AN INTENSIVE ANALYSIS

A Thesis
Presented to the
Department of English
and the
Faculty of the College of Graduate Studies
University of Omaha

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Bernice Lucille Derra

May, 1968

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Accepted for the faculty of the College of Graduate Studies of the University of Omaha, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts.

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For I am going into a wilderness,
Where I shall find no path, nor friendly clowes
To be my guide.

The Duchess of Malfi (I.1.404-406)

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With gratitude I acknowledge the encouragement and friendship of my major adviser, Dr. Glen A. Newkirk, the patience of my family, and the typing services of my daughter Kay.

INTRODUCTION

John Webster is not a simple writer to interpret and understand. In his own age he did not gain a great deal of prominence; the eighteenth century all but ignored him; since the Romantic Revival he has risen to rival Marlowe and Jonson for the prized position next to Shakespeare. There will always be readers who reject his literary efforts with moral distaste or aesthetic contempt. Webster has little to say to those who are cold to the poetry of language and action, or to those who look for the logic and stagecraft of an Ibsen. Even in the two plays upon which Webster's fame rests, The Duchess of Malfi and The White Devil, these readers will find things which are crude and coarse as well as, at times, disconnected and illogically-constructed materials. But for most discriminating people of literary taste, these plays offer fascination.

If Webster is to be appreciated, it is necessary to know beforehand what an Elizabethan dramatist set out to do. One must make an effort to enter into the spirit of the brutal but great age. The people who crowded the theaters in that age lived, both in and out of the theater, far more in the moment for the moment's sake than cultured classes today. They did not examine too closely the machinery of production. The first thing to realize is that they wanted great situations, ablaze with passion and poetry; scenes were the essential units. To read the Elizabethans it is necessary to ignore discrepancies of plot. What does it matter anyway? Their plays were written more for the stage than the study; their acting time went faster than ours, since there was no changing of scenery. In their simplicity they

looked untroubled on a soliloquy or an aside. In the preface to The White Devil Webster complained that it was wasted labor to write well-made and classical plays for the "uncapable multitude."

Webster's characters fill an adequate place in his plays, but it is not so much for his characters that he is remembered as for his pure poetry of word and image, his poetry of personality and atmosphere, and his poetry of a most embittered and tragic view of life. A sense of human destiny with a background of darkness and despair is the atmosphere of his two great tragedies.¹

The White Devil and The Duchess of Malfi are both impassioned dramas of amorous and political intrigue; both are set in Renaissance Italy, where to a contemporary Englishman's view anything could happen; both are marked by Webster's harsh commentary on the folly of human complacency and the vanity of human wishes; both occasionally condescend to a rude utilization of physical horror; and both remain, for all these, romantic tragedies of great vigor and power.²

Almost nothing of John Webster's life is known beyond what his writings reveal. It is almost certain that he was born not earlier than 1570 and not much later than 1580; he was probably dead by November 7, 1634, the licensing date of Heywood's Hierarchy of the Blessed Angels, which refers to him in the past tense. It is certain Webster ranked high in esteem among his contemporaries. There are records of his collaboration with Munday, Middleton, Drayton, Dekker, Heywood,

¹ John Webster, The Complete Works of John Webster, I, ed. F. L. Lucas (New York, 1937), pp. 16-39.

² Hazelton Spencer, ed. Elizabethan Plays (Boston, 1933), p. 927.

Ford, and Rowley; it seems likely that his collaboration also extended to Massinger and Fletcher. Plays written wholly by Webster are his two major tragedies, The White Devil and The Duchess of Malfi, and The Devil's Law-Case.³

This paper is concerned with presenting Webster as his critics have seen him, in the study and on the stage, and with presenting an analysis and interpretation of his two major tragedies.

³Clifford Leech, John Webster: A Critical Study (London, 1951), pp. 1-5.

CHAPTER I

JOHN WEBSTER AND HIS CRITICS

Literary and drama critics for three hundred and fifty years have given a mass of critical and opinionated views on the works of John Webster. These views range from monumental praise by Charles Lamb to caustic excoriation by William Archer. The purpose of this chapter is to examine in a general manner some of these views.

In his own time commentary on Webster is sparse. Verses by Middleton, Rowley, and Ford prefaced the 1623 edition of The Duchess of Malfi.¹ Rowley's verse was a standard salute of the time, but those of Middleton and Ford show an awareness of the merit of his plays. Another contemporary, Henry Fitzjeffrey, does not comment so favorably. He paints a sarcastic portrait of Webster printed in Certain Elegies Done by Sundry Excellent Wits (1618) where he calls Webster "crabbed" and as one who takes himself seriously and working slowly to create material which no one will understand.

The Duchess and The White Devil kept Webster's name alive during the seventeenth century.² By 1631 The White Devil had been "divers times acted by the Queenes Maiesties servants, at the Phoenix in Drury Lane" and in 1665 "by His now Majesties at the Theatre Royal."³ The title page of the first edition of The Duchess in 1623 states that the play had been acted at the Black-Friers theater. The second text was

¹ Hereafter cited as The Duchess.

² Don D. Moore, John Webster and His Critics (Baton Rouge, 1966), pp. 4-7.

³ Lucas, I, p. 4.

staged in 1640 "at the Black-Friers, by his Majesties Servants," in 1664 "by his late Majesties Servants at Black Fryers," and in 1678 "at the Dukes Theater."⁴ Both plays were staged frequently during the Restoration, but Webster's name is rarely mentioned by writers in the last part of the century.

Eighteenth century criticism almost ignored Webster. For most of the century the emphasis was on unconnected scenes with no study of the general movement or impression of the plays. His name was kept alive by a few anthologies and a brief mention by scholars. Nahum Tate's adaptation in 1707 of The White Devil was entitled Injured Love; Lewis Theobald's adaptation in 1731 of The Duchess was entitled The Fatal Secret.⁵

Webster's reputation was reestablished in the nineteenth century. Charles Lamb is generally credited with reinstating the Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists with his Specimens of English Dramatic Poets published in 1808. In revitalizing these dramatists with impressionistic criticism, he took the whole view of the Elizabethans which lent importance to his criticism.

Lamb's critical expressions are enthusiastic, personal, and impressionistic, but little more than marginalia.⁶ He catches the darkness and despair of the unity of tone which moves throughout the plays. He speaks of Webster's extraordinary imagination in creating The Duchess, and the appalling devices which ushered in the death of the Duchess:

⁴Ibid., pp. 6-7.

⁵Moore, pp. 12-20.

⁶Ibid., pp. 29-30.

waxen images, the bellman, a wild masque of mad men, and the mortification by degrees. The materials

are not the inflictions of this life, so her language seems not of this world. She has lived with horrors until she became imbued with that element. She speaks the language of despair.... To move a horror skillfully, to touch a soul to the quick, to lay upon fear as much as it can bear, to wear and weary a life till it is ready to drop and then step in with mortal instruments, to take its last forfeit; this only a Webster can do.⁷

The melancholy of dark despair in tone movement is also present in The White Devil. It has an intensity of feeling which seems to resolve itself into the atmosphere which surrounds it. This atmospheric tone movement glides and weaves itself through the tragedy but is highlighted frequently by memorable scenes such as Brachiano's death, Vittoria's trial, and Cornelia's dirge for her murdered son.

Lamb's method of criticism was to be copied by other authors. While he produced only scenes, his impressionistic comments seem to capture the spirit of the whole play. He projected the idea of Webster as a master of Gothic horror into later criticism. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries his commentary on Webster's two plays was quoted by many authors.

William Hazlitt in 1819 delivered a series of lectures at the Surrey Institute on the dramatic literature of the age of Elizabeth. He used Lamb's impressionistic approach but employed more depth; he grasped the unity of spirit, tone, and movement more than Lamb did. Together they established the place of Webster along with other Eliza-

⁷Charles Lamb, The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb, I (New York, 1913), pp. 56-57.

bethans in literary history.⁸

The first of these lectures dealt in general with the literature of the age and can aptly apply to the plays of Webster. Hazlitt says:

This literature might be accused of grossness, but not flimsiness; of extravagance, but not affectation; of want of art and refinement, but not a want of truth and nature. Our literature in a word, is Gothic and grotesque; unequal and irregular; not cast in a previous mould, nor of one uniform texture, but of great weight in the whole, and of incomparable value in the parts. It is not a thoroughfare for common places, smooth as the palm of one's hand, but full of knotty joints and jutting excrescences, rough, uneven, overgrown with brambles ... where nature keeps a good deal of the soil in her own hands.⁹

In his third lecture Hazlitt comments that The White Devil and The Duchess come closer to Shakespeare than any other play and are often direct imitations of him, both in general conception and individual expression. Webster gives sufficient scope to nature and passion with their various combinations and changeable aspects. He brings them into dramatic play by contrast and comparison, scatters them into a state of confusion, and carries both terror and pity to a painful and sometimes unjustifiable excess.

With glowing phraseology and colorful diction, Hazlitt expressed the spirit of Webster's two plays. Vittoria, in The White Devil, insulted and persecuted, "darts killing scorn and pernicious beauty at her enemies." She is fashioned "fair as the leprosy, dazzling as the lightning; she is dressed like a bride in her wrongs and her revenge. ... She speaks daggers." Cornelia's lamentation shows a masterly and

⁸ Moore, pp. 31-35.

⁹ William Hazlitt, Miscellanies, III (Philadelphia, 1848). p. 21.

original hand which portrays the "inmost folds of the human heart, the sudden turns and windings of the fondest affectations."

Again Hazlitt shows his ability to see the plays as an entity. The Duchess was not as spirited or effectual a performance as The White Devil but was distinguished by "the same kind of beauties, clad in the same terrors, and the strokes of passion were profounder." The story of The Duchess was more labored and horror is accumulated to an overpowering height. Two scenes exceed the just bounds of poetry: the madhouse to which the Duchess is condemned with the view of unsettling her reason and the interview between the Duchess and her brother where he gives her the hand of her supposed dead husband. A series of such exhibitions "obtruded upon the senses or the imagination must tend to stupify and harden rather than to exalt the fancy or meliorate the heart."¹⁰

With Lamb and Hazlitt's criticism, Webster's literary reputation was reestablished, but for some time criticism on him was not vigorous or perceptive. The journals paid more attention to him after Hazlitt's lectures, but the trend of the first half of the century was on the horrors.

Upon the production of The Duchess in the mid-nineteenth century, a new kind of Websterian criticism, a stage criticism, began. George Henry Lewes, the most famous critic of this production, insisted that a good play should have a unified plot and logical characterization. The Duchess failed to meet these qualifications. He called the play a nightmare, not a tragedy, but confessed it was good melodrama that

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 76-81.

fascinated the audience. The verse which delighted the reader failed to impress the spectator. The lack of an acceptable statement for the reasons for the Duchess' persecution, or the motives for Ferdinand's actions, annoyed him.¹¹ Lewes was not capable of appreciating the unity of tone and the great movement of the tragic vision which permeated the play.

After Charles Kingsley's outburst against Webster's morality in 1856, literary histories, cyclopedias, and dictionaries began to appear in 1871 as critics seemed more willing to pigeon-hole writers. Like Lewes, none was able to see the total tragic vision.¹² Typical is H. A. Taine in his History of English Literature where he states that toward the close of the century the stage was hurled into fury with assassinations, poisonings, tortures, and outcries of madness and rage. No passion and no suffering were too great for the dramatist. Anger was with the dramatists "a madness, ambition a frenzy, love a delirium." No one equalled Webster in creating "desperate characters, utter wretches, bitter misanthropes, in blackening and blaspheming human life, and in depicting the shameless depravity and refined ferocity of Italian manners."¹³

In the later part of the nineteenth century, Algernon Swinburne gave to Webster more lavish praise than any of his critics. Because of the tone of his writing, Swinburne placed him in the school of

¹¹ Moore, p. 44, of., The Leader, Nov. 30, 1850, quoted in Dramatic Essays, eds. William Archer and Robert Lowe, pp. 120-121.

¹² Moore, pp. 48-50.

¹³ New York, 1873, pp. 176-178.

Shakespeare rather than Shakespeare's immediate successors. Webster had a fondness for gloom and shadow which with less capable writers would have resolved into a morbid lust of horror and pain. He presented no emotion of shallow terror or suffering and never urged terror beyond its due limits. The pain and suffering, gloom and shadow melted into atmospheric darkness to hover over his tragedies. This aspect of his writing alone signified greatness, but justification for fame came from other resources too.

For Swinburne, Webster had a perfect command of language which "obeys him as a willing slave." His style has the simple and noble outlines of the great early painters of Italy. His poetry of expression only appears when forced forth by passion. It is never an ornamental adjunct, but always a necessary part of the situation. Swinburne is extravagant in praise of selected verse passages which he calls "sweet intervals of music" and "harmonious touches of expression." He quotes passages such as: "Untie your folded thoughts / And let them dangle loose as a bride's hair." These passages show grace and harmony of style which softens the tragedy. None ever went beyond him in power and beauty of words; no one could have drawn in firmer strokes the scenes of suffering which he created.

Enthusiasm carried Swinburne forward in exclamations of praise. In his dramatic art Webster's drama did not lag in the action, and he never forgot the artistic significances of the whole work. His pathos is more subtle and intense than that of any other dramatist except Shakespeare and Shelley as he had an intelligible and sad insight into

sorrow and sin.¹⁴

Typical, again, of the comments in the last part of the nineteenth century are George Saintsbury's comments in his History of Elizabethan Literature. The White Devil is one of the glorious works of the period. Its charm is the miraculous poetry in phrases and short passages. Vittoria is perfect throughout the play. The Duchess is inferior, but full of beauties. One cannot sympathize with the Duchess, despite her misfortunes, as she is neither virtuous nor a frank professor of love. Antonio is unromantic; there are unnecessary minor characters; and the fifth act is an appendix of horrors utilized without art or reason.¹⁵

J. A. Symonds, editor of Webster and Tourneur, believes the two plays lack the breadth and vision which come from a master motive, yet the reader is left with a sense of the poet's power, a recollection of some resplendent scenes, and a clear conception of the leading characters. The structure of the dramas as complete works of art fails, but the author has a great sense for dramatic situations. In the scenes of horror, his pity for the innocent saves him from unreality,¹⁶ even though he does write in the revenge play tradition of the tragedy of blood which generally excludes a feeling of sympathy or pity.¹⁷

At the end of the nineteenth century, Edmund Gosse published three books: The Jacobean Poets (1894), Seventeenth Century Studies (1883),

¹⁴"The Early English Dramatists," in New Writings by Swinburne, ed. Cecil Y. Lang (Syracuse, 1964), pp. 31-38.

¹⁵London, 1887, pp. 275-278.

¹⁶New York, 1888, pp. ix-xxii.

¹⁷Ibid., p. ix.

and A Short History of Modern English Literature (1897). While these books are certainly important ones, the sections dealing with Webster echo other writers of the period and may be summarized in a few words. The Duchess, Gosse feels, has a finer element of tragedy than exists elsewhere except in the work of Shakespeare; The White Devil has an exalted intensity of passion. Webster's ideas of stagecraft are rudimentary and spectacular. He has a splendid sense of the majesty of death, of the instability of human nature, and the evanescence and insight of destiny, but he grows weary of sustaining them. It is unfortunate that this noble poet was driven by the exigencies of fashion to write for a stage.¹⁸

The period of the last decades of the nineteenth century in the literary world is termed realism and naturalism. Most of the drama to 1870 had clung to the antiquated romanticism to which Lewes objected. The last part of the century saw the rise of the middle class, psychological theories, and mechanistic philosophies so was not the time for symbolic, poetical drama. Realism, the idea of a theater, expected well-constructed plays which mirrored the rapidly changing world.¹⁹ The realistically-minded critics wanted logic and probability. Generally, for reader or spectator, the darkness of Webster was not the general mood of the nineteenth century.²⁰

Among the important writers of Websterian criticism in the first

¹⁸ A Short History of Modern English Literature (New York, 1897), pp. 118-119.

¹⁹ Moore, p. 58.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

part of the twentieth century are W. W. Greg, E. E. Stoll, Herbert Gier-
son, C. E. Vaughn, H. D. Sykes, and C. W. Boyer. Their writings merely
repeat a great deal that had been said. So it is like a breath of fresh
air on a sultry day to have Rupert Brooke appear on the scene.

Brooke, author of John Webster and the Elizabethan Drama, antici-
pates the coming taste of the Jacobean dramatists. Webster, a remark-
able dramatist, has an unusually individual style and emotional view of
the world.²¹ The essence of his writing gives a view of the universe
which is recognizable by emotional impact rather than logical content.²²

Webster's use of satire is remarkable and gives part of the atmos-
phere to his dramas. Nearly every speech tends toward the satirical
outlook. The characters describe each other satirically and seem to
scoff at the conventional objects of satire, social follies, and crimes
with the ordinary topics: the painting of women, the unrewarding of
princes, the swaggering of blusterers, and the cowardice of pseudo-
soldiers.

Webster has a skill and fondness for comment. He is more like a
literary man trying to write for the theater than any of his contempo-
raries. Theatrically, he exhibits no unusual ability although he is
competent and sometimes powerful. It is his comments that pervade the
scene and give insight. Some gems of his which have literary merit are
Flamenco's description of Camillo and the Spanish ambassador, and Lodo-
vico's description of the Moor woman Zanche.

Webster possessed the art of playing directly on the nerves. This

²¹London, 1916, p. 117.

²²Ibid., p. 158.

is demonstrated effectively in Bosola's tortures of the Duchess and in many actions of Flameneo. Although the popular concept of Webster is one of immense gloom and preoccupation with death, his power lies more in the intense vigor of some of his scenes and the uncanny probing of his characters' emotions. In his characters one sees the "instincts at work jerking and actuating them, and emotions pouring out irregularly, unconsciously, in floods or spurts and jets, driven outward from within."²³

Generalities are scattered profusely throughout Webster's work. Toward their close his plays become a string of impassioned aphorisms. Antonio and Vittoria both die uttering warnings against the courts. Other characters alternate human cries at their own suffering with grave generalizations about life and death. These give to the spectators a vent for their confused pity and grief such as music and a chorus afford in other cases. Webster also felt the need of broad moralizing in the middle of his tragedies. Sometimes he has such characters as Bosola and Flameneo utter generalization after generalization without supplying sufficient integration with the narrative.²⁴

While other critics monotonously cite specific examples of Webster's borrowing, appearing to ignore the Elizabethan's tendency of snatching that which suited their fancy, Brooke brushes the matter aside as of no consequence. To him originality was only plagiarism from a great many. Webster reset other writers' jewels and redoubled

²³Ibid., pp. 120-123.

²⁴Ibid., p. 139.

their luster.²⁵

Brooke's interpretation of the Websterian universe is peculiarly grim. To him the nucleus of this universe involved morbidity and awfulness:

It is inhabited by people driven, like animals, and perhaps like men, only by their instincts, but more blindly and ruinously. Life there seems to flow into its forms and shapes with an irregular abnormal and horrible volume. That is ultimately the most sickly, distressing feature of Webster's characters, their foul and indestructable vitality.... They kill, love, torture one another blindly and without ceasing. A play of Webster's is full of the feverish and ghastly turmoil of a nest of maggots.... The sight of their fever is only alleviated by the permanent calm, unfriendly summits and darknesses of the background of death and doom. For that is equally a part of Webster's universe. Human beings are writhing grubs in an immense night. And the night is without stars or moon.²⁶

An amazing genius for incorporating bursts of bitterness and a brooding atmosphere of depression into his plays demonstrates Webster's literary ability. Brooke agrees with Gosse that this skill of imaginative visualization was often superfluous in a play and that his literary capability was hampered by dramatic needs.²⁷

To William Archer a well-constructed play with probability is of prime importance. His opinions, formed by cold, positive logic and objectivity, embrace only adverse criticism. A lack of imagination prevents sympathetic interpretation of Webster's tragedies. His violent objections to ~~The Duchess~~ are seen in his remarks about the structure which is clumsy, disjointed, and cumbrous and the horrors

²⁵Ibid., p. 147.

²⁶Ibid., p. 158.

²⁷Ibid., p. 80.

which are frigid and mechanical inventions, within the range of inferior workmanship.²⁸ Ten murders in the play are preposterous. There is no rational motive for murder by the Duchess' brothers. It is nonsensical to think the Duchess takes the wax figures of Antonio and the son for reality and makes no move to touch them. Any morbid schoolboy could have conceived the idea of offering a dead man's hand. It would have been more effective to have lied to her in words.²⁹ The play "has no warmth of imagination but is a work to deliberately make the flesh creep."³⁰ There is a "ramshackle looseness of structure and barbarous violence of effect."³¹ The dramatic "architecture is about as bad as it can possibly be. The poet slavishly follows the narrative of his original, where if he knew the rudiments of his business, he ought to compress and concentrate."³²

F. L. Lucas' scholarly edition of Webster's work is definitive. One is aware of a fine, unbiased critical sense in his criticism which embraces extravagant praise and some condemnation. He feels that Webster's greatest gift is his pure poetry of word and image which creates a brooding atmosphere and an embittered and tragic view of life. The gift of vividness of language and atmosphere gives life to the characters; the characters in turn lend energy and movement to the plot.³³

²⁸The Old Drama and the New (New York, 1929), p. 76.

²⁹Ibid., pp. 52-57.

³⁰Ibid., p. 61.

³¹Ibid., p. 62.

³²Ibid., p. 62.

³³Lucas, I, pp. 28-29.

In the intensity of his morbid art, there is the fascination of the grave. The significant point is not that Webster wrote of a world of disillusionment, but that he wrote about this in poetry.³⁴

The new approach to criticism, with its "reasonable classical order and morality" and its close analysis of concentrating on the past by judging its timeless appeal and values in terms of definite standards, was shaped in the twenties and thirties by T. S. Eliot and the doctrines of Scrutiny magazine.

Eliot's attention to the Elizabethan accounts for only part of the renewed interest in Webster in the twenties. The anxious and apprehensive mood of the twentieth century provides a standard for understanding Webster's tragedies as:

We in the present-day world of uncertainty and fear are more in tune with the Websterian universe than was the nineteenth century. In a world which has been torn by two world wars and where nuclear annihilation seems a terrifying possibility, we can more freely sympathize with the Duchess of Malfi in her own private Hell. Eliot's Wasteland—our twentieth century—is remarkably similar to the charnel house atmosphere of Webster.³⁵

What specifically attracted Eliot to Webster? It was his freshness of phrase, his vocabulary, his irregular verse, and his view of a disintegrating world in which nearly every virtue is missing. Eliot made use of all of these Websterian qualities in his universe of The Waste Land. Perhaps Webster's main influence comes from a borrowed atmosphere. Eliot found Webster's world not wholly filled with morbidity but with an emphasis on the sordid, the decaying, and the com-

³⁴Ibid., p. 35.

³⁵Moore, pp. 73-74.

pletely disintegrated. He borrows specifically from Webster's plays on several occasions.

Most of Eliot's writing on the Jacobean-Elizabethan dramatists were book reviews or articles in magazines. This writing sought to prove that these were our greatest ancestors whose writing appealed simultaneously to thought and feeling; furthermore, it is possible to assimilate and absorb varied experiences which may be incorporated in a new unity. Their poetry proves that it is possible to think in lyric verse.³⁶

Eliot's generalities on the Elizabethan drama are applicable to Webster's plays. The faults are due to its tendencies rather than what are ordinarily called its conventions. No single convention of Elizabethan drama, however ridiculous it may be made to appear, is unreasonable. Neither the soliloquy, the aside, the ghost, the blood-and-thunder, nor absurdity of place or time is in itself faulty or unsound. In the Elizabethan drama there has been no definite principle of what is to be postulated as a convention. The fault is not with the ghost but with the presentation of a ghost on an inappropriate plane, or with the confusion of one kind of ghost and another.³⁷

Webster fuses reality and Elizabethan convention to become "a great literary and dramatic genius directed toward chaos."³⁸ His plays possess a confused chronological order³⁹ even though he is a slow,

³⁶Ibid., pp. 101-102.

³⁷T. S. Eliot, Elizabethan Essays (New York, 1932), pp. 16-17.

³⁸Ibid., p. 15.

³⁹Ibid., p. 136.

deliberate, meticulous writer, and a conscientious artist⁴⁰ who has a gift of combining and fusing into a single phrase two or more distinct and sometimes discordant impressions.⁴¹

Eliot has given general praise to Webster, with reservations. Ian Jack and W. A. Edwards, writing for Frank Leavis' Scrutiny magazine, are anything but complimentary.

Edwards in his "revaluations" article, attacks Webster's notebook. He says that it must have been packed with sentences, images, and anecdotes, but when it comes to introducing them into the right dramatic situation he is often clumsy, and tends to make the situation to incorporate his image or essay. In phrase and single image he is often superb but rarely succeeds in writing a successful passage of verse. He assembles several images in a passage, and they remain substantial elements which do not enforce or modify each other.⁴²

In The White Devil there is pornographic interest throughout; adultery; a brother pander to his sister; an old gull comically cuckolded; a tempestuous trial for murder and incontinency, with plain speaking on both sides; and a lover's quarrel in a house for penitent whores.

The play almost exhausts the stock resources of the tragedy of blood with despots, cunning secretaries, assassins, magicians, poisoning doctors, sinister prelates, disguised avengers, executioners, and

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 120.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 159.

⁴²W. A. Edwards, "Revaluations: John Webster," Scrutiny II, No. 1 (June, 1933), 16-17.

lunatics. Curses, some fine stoic speeches, several scenes most affecting in their pathos, and miscellaneous essays on alchemists and the criminal underworld also add to the ominous atmosphere of the play.

Webster cannot say the simplest thing without giving it a sinister turn. This fascinating brooding over the morbid almost imposes some kind of unity of tone. The obsession is too much an obsession to be made the basis of any comprehensive vision of life; however, it is an obsession common in his time so he should not be credited with the supreme expression of it.

Despite Webster's efforts to shock and thrill, nothing can overcome the oppressive monotony of the tragedies. His characters live below the level of rational creatures, make no attempt to foresee the probable results of any course of action, are troubled with no scruples, doubts, or fears, suffer no remorse, and apparently never learn anything from experience. They act from animal impulse. A world "peopled with such sub-moral figures and presented without comment might be taken as an implied satire on the actual world, but there are signs that Webster himself shares the belief of Flamenco and Bosola in dying gamely despite the general mist of error."⁴³

Ian Jack's rantings against Webster are similar to those of Edwards. They see the tragedies as shocking and oppressing pieces filled with base characters, atrocities, evil, and a corrupt atmosphere. Ian Jack believes disintegration characterizes the view of life which permeates Webster's two plays. The imagery, verse texture, themes, and philosophy all point to a fundamental flaw in his insight into life, and this flaw

⁴³Ibid., pp. 20-23.

is ultimately a moral flaw.

The "Machiavellian" had a fascination for Webster and usurped the place in his thoughts instead of Degree. So there is a number of politicians in his two plays. A good example is Flamineo in The White Devil who acts as pander to his sister, contrives her husband's death, treats his mother with sub-human ferocity, and treacherously murders his brother in his mother's presence. His cynical attitude toward women proves him a courtier of a different cast from Castiglione's ideal. The atmosphere in which his characters live is that of a corrupt court where no one can save the state from chaos. For instance, in The Duchess an idea of another world is hard to visualize when the "rottenness of Analfi has been purged away." The comforting words spoken at the end of The White Devil and The Duchess carry no conviction.

If one takes evil away from Webster's world, there is nothing left. A character is evil because it is his nature to be so; he desires evil because it is his nature to do so. By concentrating on the narrow aspects of life revealed in one mood, he threw the relation of the whole out of harmony. Degree and Order were not real enough to stir his imagination. All that he could envision was a lower concept of the universe and man's place in it.⁴⁴

James Smith writing for Scrutiny, like Ian Jack, says Webster's two plays portray a world in which evil predominates, but unlike him, he upholds the plays. In The White Devil the evil world is presented

⁴⁴"The Case of John Webster," Scrutiny XVI, No. 1, (March, 1949), 38-43.

from within. The spectator senses an awakening of a concept of order so his attention is held until the end of the play where the whole evil world is destroyed with the arrival of a new ruler and a new generation. An important moral unity is imposed.⁴⁵

Muriel Bradbrook's Themes and Conventions of Elizabethan Tragedy (1935) and Una Ellis-Fermor's The Jacobean Drama (1936) present an important concept of Webster: he is dynamic, often artistically careless, and essentially non-moral in the sense that his world lacks the moral unity of Shakespeare's universe where Good substantially and positively prevails. Bradbrook's is the Webster of confused dramatic conventions who tries to fuse together naturalism and symbolism in his impure art; Ellis-Fermor's is a satiric Webster who creates a world of gray negation where there is nothing but a haze with a superimposed and meaningless moral system.

For Clifford Leech and Robert Ornstein, Webster is a writer with a tenuous moral vision. They generally maintain the thesis of Eliot and Miss Ellis-Fermor that there is a difficulty in composition and that the moral element is slight or non-existent. Gunnar Boklund in a study of The Duchess recognizes the importance of the theme of integrity of life as well as an amoral world of darkness where virtue may not thrive. Boklund's moral statement is his phrase "integrity of life."

Leech says The White Devil is in no sense a morality play.⁴⁷ De-

⁴⁵"The Tragedy of Blood," Scrutiny VIII, No. 3 (Dec., 1939), 280.

⁴⁶Moore, pp. 122-124.

⁴⁷Leech, p. 31.

spite the conventional ending with Giovanni and the Ambassador appearing to restore order in the land, there is slight indication in this play that the evil figures exist within a framework of good.⁴⁸ What comes after death may be uncertain, but there is a certainty in the recognition of evil.⁴⁹

In the world of The Duchess,

Men all go down at length, in grim equality, to the dust. All the qualities of the world are imaged in Bosola: he is melancholy, envious, unscrupulous, venal, treacherous; a spy, a torturer, ... a creature out of the night, the very dust grown self-conscious, death with a human heart. That ... is the dominant effect of the play, showing us the world as a place where men are driven towards death, where the sole value, the one possible human achievement, is a mind unbroken to the end.⁵⁰

In Webster's tragedies there are no philosophical attempts to disguise vice as virtue, says Robert Ornstein. Murder is called murder; lechery is recognized as lechery. Webster's immoralists are warned that the wages of sin are death, and they admit the justness of their fate. In The White Devil virtue does exist, but it is impotent and ultimately meaningless for the fate of the virtuous parallels that of assassins and adulterers.⁵¹ The power of the play is in its portrayal of the isolated criminal will destroying moral bounds. The blind determinism of the liberated will is the important unrecognized theme. For the villains there is no hope of redemption and no chance of moral illumination before their deaths. For Bosola, Antonio, and the others in The Duchess, the redemptive moment is possible. Some form of moral awareness comes to

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 57.

⁵⁰Ibid., pp. 88-89.

⁵¹The Moral Vision of Jacobean Tragedy (Madison, 1960), pp. 130-

them, and when they awaken too late to review their sordid past, they despair not of life itself, but of their contemptible selves.⁵²

Travis Bogard's view of Webster's world is similar to that of Ornstein and Leech. In this world there is no justice and no law of God or man to mete out punishment for evil and reward for good. Death itself is not justice but the normal course of events. Honor and revenge do not signify in the end. Death, either violent or natural, is determined by forces greater than man. Evil and good are submerged together in death, just as they are interwoven in life. The question is not one of virtue and vice. Webster's characters are forceful and important, not because of their morality, but because of their struggle. "Some lose their identities in the forces of evil. Some die in the attempt to preserve the good.... It is as if the world were an immense jungle, steaming and rotten with disease, haunted by the sudden unseen treacheries of man."⁵³ This integrated, intense world is created through tragic action which makes the plays a notable comment on life.⁵⁴

Gunnar Boklund in his study of The Duchess writes that the general pattern is not a moral one. Good and evil characters alike suffer. What governs the events is nothing but chance, independent of good and evil. The game of chance emerges so clearly that the theme of futility, as developed in the last act, is obviously of central significance.⁵⁵

⁵²Ibid., pp. 136-142.

⁵³The Tragic Satire of John Webster (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1955), p. 79.

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 148.

⁵⁵The Duchess of Malfi: Sources, Themes, Characters (Cambridge, Mass., 1962), pp. 129-132.

Under the general editorship of Clifford Leech, John Russell Brown edited The White Devil and The Duchess. He comments in his introduction to The White Devil that in Webster's world judgment seems inescapable. He portrays people who are not what they seem. Of these characters he says:

Those of virtue are not necessarily at peace in their inner conscience; those who seem careless of consequences may have felt compassion; and the white devil herself may know what sin is, and, in her ultimate access of courage, know what fear and honesty are too. Man lives in a net; if he sins directly, or by using the outward show of a virtue which he has no use for, or by failing to face the full truth about himself, some retribution must follow; he cannot deceive without bearing the consequences.... His use of language, the pulse of his verse and prose, his images, the continual choric comment, ironic, humorous, and straightforward, the sensational happenings and sudden changes in action and sentiment, all seem entirely appropriate.⁵⁶

This same kind of world is portrayed in The Duchess; the major changes are in the different character and story of the heroine.⁵⁷

Bogard, Ornstein, Leech, Ellis-Fermor, Bradbrook, and Brown have all presented Webster's dark world where there is an inoperative and meaningless moral vision. Lord David Cecil says Webster's vision is a moral one where he sees life as a struggle between right and wrong or between good and evil.

Evil in its most extreme form is more powerful than good in Webster's world. Its beauties are a "snare and a delusion; its glories are a source of disillusionment." This is not entirely a pessimistic view, for in a sense Webster does believe in the ultimate victory of

⁵⁶The White Devil (Cambridge, Mass., 1960), p. lvii.

⁵⁷The Duchess of Malfi (Cambridge, Mass., 1964), p. xxxii.

virtue. The good are only defeated on the material plane; morally they triumph. No amount of suffering corrupts them or breaks their courage. The wicked characters are never moral idiots who do not understand the magnitude of their crimes. Before they die, they are always compelled to recognize the supremacy of the Divine Law. Suffering outweighs happiness, but "heaven is just, for all the apparent horror of man's life. In the end virtue is glorified; but only beyond death."⁵⁸

Irving Ribner observes that Webster's tragedies search for moral order in the chaotic world of Jacobean skepticism. In the heroic death of his heroine in The White Devil, the preservation of her integrity of life reveals an inherent nobility in human life. This nobility is genuine and may be the basis for moral order. The moral statement in The Duchess is only in the total visionary impression of the play for it is a closely unified work, with mood, action, character, and poetry all carefully molded together as a statement of the inherent dignity of man. If the world is a chaotic one without positive direction, in which good and evil are made equal at death, man must still create his moral order by elevating and preserving the dignity of human life. The two plays do not reveal a philosophy of negation or despair, for Webster is concerned with the ability of man to survive in a confused world and maintain his human worth. This is a moral concern, for morality need not be based upon faith in divine order. Webster maintains his faith in human integrity and in the nobility to which human life can aspire and ascend in spite of the disorder, confusion, and evil which surrounds

⁵⁸ Poets and Story-Tellers (New York, 1949), pp. 29-35.

it.⁵⁹

Generally, poetic drama has not flourished on the modern stage.

Perhaps William Packard provides the reason when he says:

The proper approach to spoken poetry is not the approach based on diction, elocution, or articulation or any by-products of a speech class, but rather an intelligence and a willingness on the part of an actor to confront the text itself to find out what the poet had in mind and why he chose his particular way of saying it. This takes profound respect for the text. The actor must concern himself with the shape or form of the words he is saying and thus achieve some sort of approach to spoken poetry.⁶⁰

The actor must realize that the poet has ways of accelerating or retarding the pace of the written text and can also cause a sudden change in a dramatic character simply by shifting the use of imagery. In The Duchess Webster portrays the terrible scene of the Duchess after she has been tortured by her brothers "with such grotesque and perverse imagery that the dramatic characters really need do nothing to project the sense of absolute evil. It is already there, in the poetry."⁶¹

Nineteenth century staging of Webster's tragedies was not successful, and a survey of early twentieth century professional stagings shows that repertory companies lost sizable sums in their efforts. Audiences tittered through the years at the most tragic scenes. The survey indicates that these tragedies belong in the study, not on the stage.

The first London staging of The Duchess in the twentieth century

⁵⁹"Webster's Italian Tragedies," The Tulane Drama Review V, No. 3 (March, 1961), 106-115.

⁶⁰"Poetry in the Theatre," Trace, No. 65 (May, 1967), 293.

⁶¹Ibid., pp. 291-292.

was in November, 1919, through the auspices of the Phoenix Society. The London Times reported audience laughter at the wrong moment, yet no one smiled at the Duchess' torture. Some of the actors were "interesting."⁶² Another critic said the audience listened at length to a rendering of the whole fantastic jumble of blood and rhetoric.⁶³ T. S. Eliot wrote about seeing this 1919 production, noting that the critics blamed the failure on the inability of Webster's plays to be produced. Eliot saw the failure as a serious indictment of the modern stage with a result which was dull and ridiculous. The staging of Cathleen Nesbitt as the Duchess was unfortunate; she never let the poetry reach the audience; she was never the Duchess, only created the part.⁶⁴

In October, 1925, the Renaissance Theatre staged The White Devil with a cast headed by Cedric Hardwicke and Viola Tree. The producers made the same mistakes as those of the 1919 production and generally received the same notices.

In January, 1935, at the Embassy Theatre, Joyce Bland portrayed the Duchess and Roy Graham played a blonde, effeminate Bosola in The Duchess. This tame production, with the masque of madmen as a ballet and with amber lighting to deemphasize the horrors, lasted for two weeks. The Times stated that the actors lacked Elizabethan ferocity,

⁶² Moore, pp. 151-52, cf., Review in the London Times, Nov. 25, 1919, p. 10.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 152, cf., Review in the Spectator, Nov. 29, 1919, p. 720.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 106, cf., "The Duchess of Malfi at the Lyric," Arts and Letters, III (Winter, 1920), 37.

that something which belonged 'ineradicably to our milder age' interfered with a satisfactory production.⁶⁵

Everything seemed to go right for the staging of The Duchess at the Haymarket Theatre in April, 1945: "The actors were seemingly superb, with John Gieland giving his famous incestuous portrayal of Ferdinand; the cuts were reasonable; and tragically enough the time was right.... England was emerging from the grimmest conflict in her history." The Times reviewer called it the "most resolute" of attempts to reanimate a classic. The audience followed with a 'respectful curiosity.' The tortures were more decorative than horrible.⁶⁶ This successful production ran for several weeks at the Haymarket. Webster was reinstated.

The success of The Duchess led to a successful four month presentation of The White Devil. The Michael Benthall production, first staged in March, 1947, emphasized violence and death. The costumes were lavish; the basic set was spare with pillars serving as a backdrop. The Times suggested that its readers forget Shakespearean conventions of character development and enjoy the ruthless characters, the horrors which they practice upon each other, and the vigor and force of the language.⁶⁷

In America in 1946 an effort on Broadway to duplicate the London success of The Duchess resulted in disaster. W. H. Auden adapted the the play; George Rylands, director of the London production, attempted to duplicate his previous staging. The critics had a field-day in in-

⁶⁵Ibid., pp. 153-154, of., Review in the Times, Jan. 14, 1935, p. 10.

⁶⁶Ibid., p. 155 of., Review in the Times, April 19, 1945, p. 6.

⁶⁷Ibid., p. 156, of., Review in the Times, Mar. 3, 1947, p. 6.

venting harsh and witty attacks. In 1957 The Duchess played for two weeks at an off-Broadway theater as something of a "bloody curio."

Jack Landau's production of The White Devil at the off-Broadway Phoenix in 1955 was brief but successful. It was staged in modern dress, without scenery, with a few spotlights, and dramatized for the violence and movement of its script. Brook Atkinson called it one of the biggest shows of the year and delighted in the continual mounting of terror. The actors gave 'the ancient melodrama a good shaking up.'⁶⁸ Audience reaction to Landau's production of The Duchess at the Phoenix in 1957 lacked this enthusiasm.

As a producer-critic, Landau comments that the dominant interest of The White Devil is the dramatic conception of particular scenes, not the implied moral tone. The problem in producing it is how to combine so many electric situations in one staging. The literary value of the play is exceedingly penetrating, but it was written for the stage where the impact is greatest in portraying a nightmare world like any gangster world.⁶⁹

The Duchess was staged in London in December, 1960, by the Stratford-on-Avon company at the Aldwych Theatre. Two critics found it stimulating, and nearly all the reviewers found something good to say. The Times reviewer found fine staging and steadfast handling of the drama which was necessary to overcome a slackening of interest after the somewhat too early

⁶⁸ Ibid., pp. 156-157, cf., Review in the N. Y. Times, Mar. 3, 1955, p. 32.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 158, cf., "Elizabethan Art in a Mickey Spillane Setting," Theater Arts, XXXIX (Aug. 1955), 87.

death of the heroine. The actors held the audience fascinated before the multiple fatal stabbings and poisonings.⁷⁰ H. A. L. Craig hailed the production as 'a metaphysical melodrama' in which man does not die 'like a drugged beast.' Webster had something absolute and positive to say.⁷¹

When Moore's book was ready for the press, he appended the following in his last footnote:

As this book goes to press the Circle-in-the-Square is staging what the New York Times and Herald Tribune considered a highly effective White Devil, directed by Jack Landau. It is done in modern dress on what is for the most part a bare stage. Both reviews hailed the vivid and robust acting which helped the drama to grasp the spectator firmly.... The play opened December 6, 1965, and had run for over four months at the off-Broadway theater. It is an important production.⁷²

In the mid-twentieth century one finds Webster's reputation secure. In 1960 a theater-goer might see The Duchess at London's Aldwych Theatre and in America, in 1965, The White Devil in an off-Broadway production. By 1960 one could go to a corner drug and find on the book rack a paperback copy of The Duchess edited by Louis Wright and Virginia Lamar. There has been an excellent recent novel which is a retelling of the Duchess' story: A Dancer in Darkness by David Stacton. Hundreds of students meet Webster each year in T. S. Eliot's The Wasteland.

Varied reception of Webster by the literary and drama critics through the years has given Webster praise, praise with reservation, and execration. That he could be "all things to all men—moral, in-

⁷⁰Ibid., p. 159, of., Review in the Times, Dec. 16, 1960, p. 5.

⁷¹Ibid., p. 159, of., Review in New Statesman, Dec. 24, 1960, p. 1002.

⁷²Moore, p. 186.

moral, a great poet, a fake, gripping an audience one moment, making it laugh when it should not the next—implies a hand that might have been steadier in its grip on the quill.⁷³ He takes meticulous care in creating many scenes, but his passion for all-inclusiveness mars the whole. Webster's significance lies in his dominant theme: the nobility of human worth.⁷³

⁷³Ibid., pp. 161-167.

CHAPTER II

THE WHITE DEVIL

The White Devil or The Tragedy of Paulo Giordano Ursini, Duke of Brachiano, with the Life and Death of Vittoria Corombona¹ the Famous Venetian Courtizan was published in 1612. It was written undoubtedly sometime between 1609 and 1612; in all probability 1611-1612 is correct. Two allusions make this date seem credible. The allusion in V. iii.186² is to Sir Hugh Myddleton's New River which was begun in 1609 and completed in 1613; Perseus in III.ii.139³ comes from Jonson's Masque of Queens which was produced on February 2, 1609. Both of these allusions, however, might be later insertions. The stylistic resemblance between The White Devil and The Duchess, which was performed in 1613-1614, makes it appear that the plays were composed fairly close together.⁴

The White Devil is based on a tragedy of real life, the tragic life of Vittoria Corombona which ended in her murder on December 22, 1585. Scholars differ as to whether the facts on which Webster based his tragedy were oral or written. The play contains many minor details which seem based on the actual facts of the events between 1581

¹Variant forms: Accorambona, Corambona, Corombona, Accaramboni.

²Speaking of women's tears, Flamineo says in this allusion: "I wonder / Why wee should wish more rivers in the Cittie, / When they sell water so good cheape."

³In this allusion, Vittoria finds herself "So intangled in a cursed accusation / That my defense of force like Perseus, / Must personate masculine vertue."

⁴Lucas, I, pp. 67-69. All line references cited are from the Lucas edition.

and 1585, yet there are many departures from the facts. Some are doubtless due to dramatic adaptation, while others might be unintentional or due to ignorance. Lucas concludes that Webster's information was circumstantial and imperfect, which would suggest that his source was a full oral account rather than a written one.⁵

The White Devil, which was acted by the Queenes Men at the Red Bull theater in London, was probably produced early in 1612. The first edition is dated 1612; its preface states that the first performance had already been given in "so dull a time of winter." This limits the date to either January to March, 1612 or late November, 1612 to February, 1613.⁶ This later date is unlikely, for if the printer had received the manuscript later than mid-November, 1612, the title page would bear the date 1613, not 1612.⁷

The preface to The White Devil is enlightening; it gives insight into Webster's mind, his work, and the general critical ideas of the period. He admits to deliberate, slow writings: "To those who report I was a long time in finishing this Tragedy, I confesse I do not write with a goose-quill winged with two feathers." He is disheartened with the play's reception: it was presented in "so open and black a Theater, that it wanted (that which is the onely grace and setting out of a Tragedy) a full and understanding Auditory" which resembled "ignorant asses." Resentment is shown that he could not write a "true Dra-

⁵Ibid., pp. 85-90.

⁶A book dated 1612 might have been published as late as March 24, 1613, the last day of the old legal year which ran from March to March.

⁷Brown, The White Devil, pp. xviii-xx.

maticke Poem" in the true classical tradition replete with a heightened style, adherence to the old critical laws, and embellished with a chorus. He shows himself in the Jonson-Chapman school of classicists by the order in which he gives praise to his contemporaries: Chapman; Jonson; Beaumont and Fletcher; Shakespeare, Dekker, and Heywood.

Renaissance Italy presents the court background of the play. The first four acts occur in Rome, the fifth in Padua. The plot resolves its direction from the court setting. That it tends toward an episodic nature may be determined from a summary.

The first act consists of two scenes. The first scene establishes the court setting and introduces Lodovico who becomes an avenger in the play, only to die in torment. There is no hesitant beginning or extraneous material. Attention is commanded by Lodovico's clipped "Banish't!" in the first line. The critics who declare Webster a non-dramatist should consider again the opening line of the play. So much of atmosphere and theme is presented in that one word. Lodovico's conversation with his friends Antonelli and Gasparo in this street scene affirms the background of court intrigue, injustice, and preferment.

The second scene introduces the main characters Vittoria, Flamineo, and Duke Brachiano and presents the framework upon which the main action of the whole depends. Brachiano becomes infatuated with Vittoria. Flamineo, hoping for preferment at court through Brachiano's influence, panders his sister Vittoria to the duke's desires. With one of Webster's famous phrases "Quite lost, Flamineo!" (I.ii.3), Brachiano expresses his passion for Vittoria. Too many words are expended on the notion of cuckolding Vittoria's husband Camillo before Brachiano pours out lavish prom-

ises to Vittoria: "To keepe you great: you shall to me at once, / Be Dukedome, health, wife, children, friends, and all" (I.ii.257-258). Vittoria's mother Cornelia protests violently on the premise of morality. Vittoria is weary of her old and foolish husband and enjoys the prospect of the prestige that she will attain by associating herself with Brachiano. In relating a dream of hers to the duke, she suggests the murder of her husband and his wife Isabella. The first act deprives Vittoria of any semblance of virtuousness.

The first scene of the second act retards the action but creates an atmosphere for murder as a quarrel between Isabella and the duke ensues. Francisco's maliciousness and Brachiano's mental torture of his duchess add to this atmosphere. The brief, rapid-paced second scene, through the sensationalism of two dumb shows, accomplishes the death of Isabella by kissing a poisoned picture of Brachiano and the death of Camillo from a broken neck.

The curt, compact first scene of the third act in the antechamber of a court of justice reveals Vittoria's arrest for adultery and accomplice to murder. Virtuous Marcello blames his brother Flemingo for their sister's predicament. The scene is an introductory statement for the second one: the magnificent trial scene for Vittoria where she is sentenced to the house of convertites. In the trial scene Vittoria reveals a humanness which alters the image formed of her in act one as a lady consumed by lustfulness and treachery.

In the fourth act Francisco, Duke of Florence, sees his sister Isabella's ghosts and decides to avenge her death. To make trouble for Brachiano, Francisco writes a love-letter to Vittoria and cautions

his servant to deliver it when the duke or his followers may see it. Flamineo and Brachiano intercept and read the letter, Brachiano and Vittoria quarrel as he suspects her of unfaithfulness, and Flamineo makes arrangements for their escape. Monticelso is elected Pope. He and Francisco excommunicate Vittoria and Brachiano from the church. Lodovico, back from banishment, reveals to the Pope that he secretly loved Isabella and wishes to avenge her death.

The fifth act contains six scenes which follow each other in rapid succession, mounting toward the climax. In the first scene Francisco, disguised as the Moor Mulinassor, and Lodovico and Gasparo disguised as holy men, present themselves at Brachiano's court in Padua. In the second scene Flamineo stabs Marcello because he speaks disparagingly about Vittoria's Moor servant Zanche who is his mistress. Cornelia grieves for her son's death. Brachiano dies in the third scene from poison placed on his helmet by Lodovico. The fourth scene presents Flamineo still seeking court preferment, but Giovanni, now ruler since his father Brachiano's death, forbids him the court. Lodovico tells Francisco in scene five that he will murder Vittoria and Flamineo. Flamineo's last chance for preferment at court lies with Vittoria. In the last scene she shows nothing but contempt for him. Before he has the opportunity to kill her, Lodovico and Gasparo appear and murder Zanche, Vittoria, and then Flamineo. Giovanni approaches the ghastly scene to restore order in the realm by sentencing Francisco, Lodovico, and Gasparo.

In structuring the play, Webster centered the plot around the lives of two protagonists, Flamineo and Vittoria, without using a

double plot. Vittoria brushes her husband aside as of no importance. After making the evil choice to follow Brachiano, she remains true to him. With dignity she accepts the consequences. Her tragic story is counterpointed by Flammineo's satiric one. He is an intellectual who drifts into the court to seek a position to satisfy his ability and becomes the victim of the corruption which he practices. His commentary on the viciousness and folly of the world, and the court in particular, lends a satiric perspective to the action in Vittoria's tragic story. Without this commentary, her story might have been merely one of fascinating nonconformity.

The structure of The White Devil is episodic in nature. It resolves itself into memorable scenes such as Vittoria's trial which Harrison calls the finest trial scene in Elizabethan literature⁸; Flammineo's death scene which Ornstein feels has no equal in Jacobean tragedy for superb theatricality and dramatic impact⁹; Brachiano's death where murderers use the mask of holiness to kill; and Cornelia's lament over her murdered son which commands pity and compassion.

Of the memorable scenes, Vittoria's trial is the most glorious one in The White Devil. The spectator has formed a derogatory impression of Vittoria, but the trial scene changes this image. Her courage in confronting recriminations and her brilliant repartee in defending herself engender in the spectator a feeling of admiration—a feeling that this dazzling creature is more sinned against than sinning. Her shrewd wit and composure is captivating. She first demands that the

⁸G. B. Harrison, ed. The White Devil, (London, 1933), pp. xi-xii.

⁹Ornstein, p. 139.

lawyer not speak in Latin for "I will not have my accusations clouded, /
In a strange tongue: All this assembly / Shall heare what you can charge
me with" (III.ii.20-22). The Cardinal hurls insults at her, but scorn-
fully she flings back at him:

You are deceived,
For know that all your strickt-combined heads,
Which strike against this mine of diamonds,
Shall prove but glassen hammers, they shall breake—
These are but fained shadowes of my evils.
Terrify babes, my Lord, with painted devils,
I am past such needlesse palsy—for your names,
Of Whoore and Murrdesse they proceed from you,
As if a man should spit against the wind,
The filth returns's in's face. (III.ii.146-155)

Accusation follows accusation before the Cardinal offers a letter as
evidence that she was to meet the Duke for a rendezvous. Her retali-
ation of "condemne you me for that the Duke did love me?" (III.ii.211),
is followed by these words:

Summe up my faults I pray, and you shall finde,
That beauty and gay clothes, a merry heart,
And a good stomacke to a feast, are all,
All the poore crimes that you can charge me with:
Infaith my Lord you might go pistoll flyes,
The sport would be more noble. (III.ii.215-220)

Finally, the Cardinal pronounces a sentence upon Vittoria: confine-
ment to the house of convertites which, he explains, is a house for
penitent whores. But this does not silence the indignant Vittoria.
With haughtiness and bitter resentment, she asks: "Do the noblemen of
Rome / Erect it for their wives, that I am sent / To lodge there?" (III.
ii.278-280). She repels the Cardinal and, after speaking the following
words, sweeps out of the courtroom leaving her judges speechless:

Vit.: I will not weepe,
No I do scorne to call up one poore teare
To fawne on your injustice—beare me hence,
Unto this house of—what's your mittigating Title?

Mon.: Of convertites,
 Vit.: It shall not be a house of convertites—
 My minde shall make it honest to mee
 Then the Popes Pallace, and more peaceable
 Then my soule, though thou art a Cardinall—
 Know this, and let it somewhat raise your spight,
 Through darknesse Diamonds spred their rithest light.
 (III.ii.295-305)

Throughout the trial Vittoria has met argument with argument, sarcasm with sarcasm, and had a rebuttal for every cruel blow. In the end she will not bend or weep. Her courage remains undaunted.

While the plot is episodic in nature, the play is not as cumbersome as this might indicate. There is an element of atmosphere and relationship between characters which supplies a unity in the whole. The intensity of the memorable scenes could not appropriately be sustained throughout the tragedy. In addition to staging outstanding scenes, other techniques are used by Webster to tell his story: dumb shows, ghosts, soliloquies, asides, tales within the narrative, generalizations, and mockery.

There are two dumb shows in The White Devil. Isabella is murdered in one, Camillo in the other. Both become an integral part of the play since they are surrounded by dialogue which gives a natural transition. The spectator does not feel the dumb shows to be independent additions. The content is closely related to the rest of the scene as part of the plot is portrayed in it. Each of the shows gives an incident in two parts, the preparation for and the execution of a murder. Webster fused the dumb shows even closer with the rest of the play by having a character from the play introduce the show which is directed at the other players on the stage, not at the audience, so a play within a play is created. Each murder is watched as a

play by other characters from the tragedy. Audience sympathy is excluded by this method of presentation.

These two dumb shows, following each other rapidly, are embraced in the unfolding narrative in a brief fifty-six line scene. Webster's genius in technique quickly disposes of two people who are no longer necessary to the plot. The magician Julio, who has been bribed by Brachiano, presents the pantomimes which he has conjured. Julio remarks to Brachiano: "I'll show you by my strong-commanding Art / The circumstances that breakes your Dutchesse heart" (II.ii.22-24). In the pantomime Julio and his assistant Christopher place poison on the lips of Brachiano's picture and depart, laughing. Isabella, dressed in her nightgown, enters with Lodovico, Giovanni, and her attendants, kneels to pray, kisses the picture three times, faints, then dies and is carried away. Brachiano announces: "Excellent, then shee's dead" (II.ii.24). Before the audience has time to meditate, the conjurer says: "Now turne another way, / And view Camillo's farre more politticke fate" (II.ii.34-35). Flamineo, Marcello, and Camillo enter and a vaulting horse is brought on stage. Marcello leaves the stage, and as Camillo is about to vault, Flamineo breaks his neck. A cold, calculated murder has been committed, but Brachiano's remark merely indicates a fascination in the ingenious method employed: "Twas quaintly done" (II.ii.38). Brachiano's terse, unemotional remarks at the close of each pantomime and the swiftness of action combine to give a distancing effect which does not permit a feeling of pity in the spectator or reader.

Using ghosts was a favorite technique with the Elizabethans. The

two ghosts which appear in The White Devil are silent and are employed merely to display the power of imagination. The manner of their appearance is significant. ^{FRANCISCO} Monticelso is thinking of his sister Isabella and plotting her revenge. He tries to imagine her before him: "I'll close mine eyes, / And in a melancholicke thought I'll frame / Her figure 'fore me" (IV.i.104-105). After seeing her ghost, he says: "How strong / Imagination workes! how she can frame / Things which are not! me thinks she stands afore me" (IV.i.106-108). Flamineo is meditating on a life which has been corrupted by greatness and the court. Brachiano's ghost appears to him as the last of a series of horrors: "The disgrace / The Prince threw on me; next the pitious sight / Of my dead brother; and my Mother's dotage; / And last this terrible vision" (V.iv.138-141). Brachiano's ghost is an omen to predict approaching death; Isabella's ghost is in Francisco's mind and not a supernatural manifestation.

The Websterian soliloquy as a technique is used for descriptive purposes and to aid the development of plot by clarifying obscurities or conveying information to the audience that might not otherwise be apparent: that Brachiano's tears for Isabella are hypocritical and artificial, or that Francisco has determined upon revenge despite his remarks to the contrary. The one soliloquy in The White Devil which seems to be used for more than an expository use is when, at the sight of his mother's derangement, Flamineo says: "I have a strange thing in mee, to the which / I cannot give a name, without it bee / Compassion" (V.iv.107-109). The following soliloquy of Flamineo's is descriptive in nature:

I have liv'd
 Rictously ill, like some that live in Court,
 And sometimes, when my face was full of smiles
 Have felt the mase of conscience in my brest.
 Oft gay and honour'd robes those tortures trie,
 We thinke cag'd birds sing, when indeed they crie. (V.iv.112-117)

Asides appear to be used as a convenient technique by Webster.

The lusty Elizabethan audiences must have relished the asides that are given to Flamineo. Most are gems of revelation no matter how naive or ridiculous they might appear to the more sophisticated twentieth century audiences. The following asides add capriciousness to the atmosphere and highlight Flamineo's wit. Within Camillo's hearing, Flamineo tells Vittoria that her husband is discontent, then proceeds to praise Camillo: "A gentleman so well descended as Camillo.", with the aside revealing his thoughts: "A lousy slave that within this twenty yeares rode with the blacke guard in the Dukes earriage mongst spits and dripping-pannes" (I.ii.127-129). He continues with his praise: "An excellent scholler.", with the aside: "One that hath a head fild with calves braynes without any sage in them" (I.ii.131-132). How the Elizabethans must have loved this! Flamineo continues: "Is he not a courtly gentleman?", with the aside: "When he weares white sattin one would take him by his blacke mussel to be no other creature than a maggot" (I.ii.136-137). Next he comments to Vittoria: "You are a goodly Foile, I confess, well set out.", with the aside: "But covered with a false stone, you conterfaite dyamond" (I.ii.137-139).

Webster's asides often convey information that clarifies an issue or interprets that which might otherwise be missed by the audience. Flamineo clarifies an issue: "I will faine a madde humor for the disgrace of my sister, and that will keepe off idle questions" (III.ii.

15-17). The following two curt speeches reveal important information. Vittoria's aside is: "Are the dores lockt?" Zanche's answer is an aside: "Yes Madame" (V.vi.55-56). After Vittoria has finished relating her dream to Brachiano, Flamineo's aside interprets the meaning for the audience: "Excellent Divell. / Shee hath taught him in a dreame / To make away the Dutchesse and her husband" (I.ii.246-248).

Webster uses the relating of a simple tale by a character as a technique to emphasize an idea. Francisco tries to stir Camillo against the taunt of being called a cuckold. After establishing the circumstance that Camillo has no children, Francisco suddenly relates a story. Phoebus, called the Sunne, wished to be married. A deputation was made to Jupiter against the marriage by a thousand people of all trades saying one Sunne to throw heat was bad enough. If Phoebus were married and begat children, those children would "make fierworkes like their father" (II.i.348). Then Francisco applies this to Vittoria: "Only I will apply it to your wife, / Her issue, should not providence prevent it, / Would make both nature, time, and man repent it" (II.i.349-351). In this speech, Webster puts the interpretation of the tale into a comment by a character. He is exceedingly careful throughout the play to be sure that his text is accurately interpreted by the audience. His asides and soliloquies, and now the relating of a tale are techniques which illustrate this aspect of his writing.

Webster makes no preparation before relating his tales. They are encountered unexpectedly and are interwoven into the narrative as examples. The situation preceding the crocodile tale is this: Brachiano

and Vittoria plan to flee to Padua after her escape from prison. He reminds Vittoria to think on the title of Duchess. The tale of the crocodile is related to them by the cynical, witty Flamineo to satirize the situation. The crocodile has a worm in her teeth which the wren removes. The crocodile is glad for relief but ungrateful because the wren will talk too much and place the crocodile in an embarrassing situation. She closes her mouth to silence the wren, but the bird pecks away at her mouth. For relief she is forced to open her mouth, and the wren flies away. It must have given Flamineo a great deal of satisfaction to remind Vittoria that she was the crocodile and "Though the comparison hold not in every particular; yet observe, remember, what good the bird with the prick i' th head hath done you" (IV.ii. 239-241). As in the preceding tale, Webster offers an explanation to his audience.

Generalizations uttered by Webster's characters end most scenes but are interspersed at various other places. They tend to moralize or philosophize and are usually in the form of sententious couplets. Several examples will show their general tendency and nature. Flamineo has given images of rivers and snakes to indicate devious forms of behavior, then generalizes: "So who knowes policy and her true aspect, / Shall finde her waies winding and indirect" (I.ii.347-348). Lodovico comments upon Monticelso's greatness: "There's but three furies found in spacious hell; / But in a great mans breast three thousand dwell" (IV.iii.154-155). Flamineo expresses a desire to kill Vittoria. It is his fate to do so and his fate is like a spaniel that he cannot beat from him: "Let all that doe ill, take this precedent: / Man may

his Fate foresee, but not prevent" (V.vi.180-181). The last two lines of the play spoken by Giovanni states a moral: "Let guilty men remember their blacke deedes, / Do leane on crutches, made of slender needes" (V.vi.302-303). One becomes accustomed to encountering these omnipresent generalizations that become an integral part of the story. To some critics this is an annoying and old-fashioned technique but, nevertheless, it is Webster's style and his way of introducing a moral element into his tragedy.

Webster weaves mockery, as a technique to further hypocrisy, throughout the tragedy. Mulryne feels there is an appearance of mockery or humor to invade every serious value or impressive situation.

The most surprising hypocrisy in the play concerns the virtuous and charming Isabella who is presented in a mockery of her true self. She accepts Brachiano's repudiation of their marriage when he says: "I'll be no more lye with thee. / And this divorce shall be as truly kept, / As if the Judge had doomed it" (II.i.198-200). Fearing that the separation might bring misunderstanding between her brother and husband, Isabella acts on Francisco's return as if she had been the offender. Her words are a parody with comic exaggeration: "And this divorce shall be as truly kept, / As if in thronged Court, a thousand eares / Had heard it" (II.i.258-260). Then the absurdity of the situation is fully sensed when Isabella curses Vittoria: "To dig the strumpets eyes out, let her lye / Some twenty monethes a-dying, to cut off / Her nose and lippes, pull out her rotten teeth" (II.i.248-250). The final touch of humor comes with Francisco's remarks: "Now by my birth you are a foolish, mad, / And jealous woman" (II.i.266-267).

Flamenco's descriptions of various people embrace mockery. Doctor Julio is a "Cursed antipathy of nature--looke, his eye's bloud-shed like a needle a Chirurgion stitchoth a wound with" (II.1.303-304). The grave Spanish ambassador is described as one who "carries his face in's ruffe, as I have seene a serving-man carry glasses in a cipres hat-band, monstrous stedly for feare of breaking" (III.1.76-78). Such descriptions are bizarre and contribute to the atmosphere of the tragedy.

The extreme point to which mockery can be utilized is when Francisco in a soliloquy reflects on the writing of the drama itself. Just after he erases the figure of Isabella's ghost from his mind, he considers the whole revenge narrative:

Come, to this waighty businisse.
My Tragedy must have some mirth in't,
Else it will never passe. I am in love,
In love with Corcombona; and my suite
Thus halts to her in verse. (IV.1.122-126)

Another aspect of mockery is embodied in single words. In the trial, for instance, the words charity, uncharity, justice, and injustice are tossed about without taking root in real meaning. There is mockery when, just after Zenho reveals that Brachiano had been responsible for Isabella's death, Lodovico comments: "Why now our actions justified." (V.111.276), and Francisco adds: "Tush for Justice! / What harmes it Justice?" (V.111.277-278). Lodovico and Gasparo are surprised by Vittoria in their torturing of the dying Brachiano. The meaning of "charity" undergoes mockery as Lodovico pretends anguish: "For charitie, / For Christian charitie, avoid the chanber" (V.111.173-174).

Mockery is utilized in exaggerated degree when, after Vittoria and

Zancho discharge pistols, Flameneo pretends to be dying. This example carries mockery into the realm of the ridiculous:

O I smell soote
 Most stinking soote, the chimneis a-fire,
 My liver's purboil'd like scotch holly-bread;
 There's a plumber laying pipes in my guts, it scalds.
 (V.vi.142-145)

Immediately he rises and says: "I am not wounded: / The pistol held no bullets: 'twas a plot" (V.vi.150-151).

The ultimate in mockery is presented in Brachiano's death scene.¹⁰ Lodovico and Gasparo, disguised as holy men, use the church's Latin to perform the last rites, then as the other actors leave the stage they taunt him with: "Devill Brachiano, / Thou art damned" (V.iii.150-151).

Webster used satire to create his tragedies. In his time, reform was intended as the goal of most satiric drama. Satire, usually used in a hyperbolic manner, retained a serious ethical purpose. Exposure of misdeeds and moral abuses presumably would lead to moral regeneration. Satire was employed with the assumption that, through example, people would be led to reform.

Webster utilized satire to present his characters in The White Devil, but his ability to promote reform in them is not clear. As his characters review their lives, there is no positive idea of reform or even regret in their dying words. No reformatory action seems possible because of the thematic content. That one should shun the courts is apparent, but in the world of the play there is no one who would or could avoid the court. Even the good characters are hopelessly tied

¹⁰J. R. Mulryne "'The White Devil' and 'The Duchess of Malfi'," Jacobean Theatre, Stratford-Upon-Avon Studies, I, eds. John Russell Brown and Bernard Harris (New York, 1960), pp. 207-212.

to the court life: Cornelis, Isabella, and Marcello have tragic lives despite their virtues. Vittoria's ambition for power and Flamineo's hope for reward in courtly service would not permit them to leave the court. They sought the court life, but their virtues were destroyed by it.

Webster not only uses satire to present his characters but also utilizes it in combination with the tragic to emphasize the ugly realities of life. The White Devil is concerned with worldly corruption, but even the evil characters retain a certain amount of greatness in individualism, not in power or rank, and this cannot be destroyed. The greatness is adulterated with evil; the cause of evil is in the actions of men. Evil is an active force in the world where there is a struggle to preserve integrity. Vittoria and Flamineo achieve greatness in the end by their assertion of courage, for they meet death without whimpering or complaining. There is no greatness in this way of life for integrity of life is not an admirable way of dying. But there is a glory for mankind in the struggle and defiance amidst the ugly realities of life. The fusion of the satiric and tragic is the element which makes The White Devil a great tragedy.

The evils of courtly reward and punishment as a main theme is stated in the opening scene of the play. After having been banished from Rome as court punishment, Lodovico says: "Ha, Ha, O Democritus thy Gods / That governe the whole world! Courtly reward / And punishment" (I.i.2-4). His friends, Gasparo and Antonelli, attempt to sooth him by suggesting there is justice in his sentence because of his

wayward, inconstant, and roving life in Rome. Lodovico insists that there is no justice in his punishment as Brachiano who "by close panderism seeks to prostitute / The honour of Vittoria Corombona" (I.i. 41-42), escapes banishment from Rome. His reward for services has been banishment, but "Great men sell sheep thus, to be cut in peeces, / When first they have shorne them bare and sold their fleeces" (I.i.61-62).

The corruption of court life is made evident after Cornelia accuses the wickedness of Vittoria and Brachiano. Flameneo approves of this intrigue and reprimands his mother for interfering with his hopes for court preferment. He was humiliated as a poverty-stricken student at the university of Padua, then entered the duke's service: "I visited the Court, whence I return'd / More courteous, more lecherous by farre, / But not a suite the richer" (I.ii.318-320). It is the fault of the court that he must pander his sister to gain preferment through Brachiano. His prose statement on the scramble for courtly reward is: "Remember this you slave, when knaves come to preferment they rise as gallouses are raised i' th' low countries, one upon another's shoulders" (II.i.316-318).

Flameneo becomes a professional in seeking courtly reward. Apparently he has no affection or loyalty for Brachiano. His is self-interest. He recognizes his actions as insecure and unprofitable, but surges forward. When Marcello accuses Flameneo of procuring their sister for Brachiano, Flameneo replies that it is to the interest of himself and Vittoria to serve Brachiano. He degrades Marcello by satirically saying: "Thou art a souldier / Followest the great Duke,

feedest his victories" (III.i.38-39), but "Thou hast scarce mainten-
 ance / To keepe thee in fresh shamoyes" (III.i.46-47). In Flamineo's
 mind there is no difference between Marcello's honest occupation and
 his own dishonest actions for preferment. Any service rendered to a
 prince is folly as all depends upon the whims of a superior who might
 throw but scraps or even proclaim banishment, as in the case of Lodo-
 vico. Flamineo has no illusions about courtly reward. He predicts
 his own downfall, and his prophecy materializes.

The treachery and injustice of a prince's vengeance is seen in
 the behavior of Brachiano, Francisco, and Monticelso. Brachiano
 poisons his wife; Francisco and Monticelso are willing to ruin Vit-
 toria and Brachiano. A prince's ruthlessness is apparent when Mon-
 ticelso tells Francisco that treachery against Brachiano is better
 than open warfare: "Beare your wrongs conceal'd, / And, patient as
 the Tortoise, let this Cammell / Stalke o're your back unbruised;
 sleep with the Lyon" (IV.i.16-18), until the time is right for action.

The theme of courtly reward and punishment is developed fully in
 the fifth act. The marriage of Vittoria and Brachiano brings hope
 and elation to Flamineo: "In all the weary minutes of my life, / Day
 nere broke up till now. This marriage / Confirms me happy" (V.i.1-3).
 Elation is replaced by loathing as Brachiano enters and offers Mulin-
 assor, a new arrival at court, a pension.

The evil of the court is exhibited in a sequence of events. Mar-
 cello becomes enraged at Zanche's boast that she will marry Flamineo.
 In defending her Flamineo stabs Marcello. His dying words contribute
 the reason for murder: Vittoria and Flamineo attempt "to rise by all

dishonest means" (V.ii.23-24). Brachiano punishes Flamineo for the murder by requiring him to ask for a renewed pardon each day of his life. When Brachiano is next seen, he is calling for an armorer to tear off the helmet which Lodovico has sprinkled with poison. The great duke dies not in glory, but in torment. Both courtly punishment and courtly vengeance are evident in these actions.

The epitome and summation of the courtly reward and punishment theme is inherent in the last scenes of the play. Vittoria in her state position scorns Flamineo; Giovanni forbids him the court. It is Lodovico and Gasparo who inflict the courtly punishment by killing Vittoria and Flamineo. Vittoria's dying words are: "O happy they that never saw the Court, / Nor ever knew great men but by report" (V. vi.261-262). Flamineo dies uttering: "This busie trade of life appears most vaine" (V.vi.273). Giovanni, as prince, then inflicts courtly punishment upon those who assisted in the murders.¹¹

While the courtly reward and punishment theme is the very essence of The White Devil, the theme of revenge permeates and hovers over the tragedy. That Webster used the revenge theme is monotonously repeated by the critics. It is this aspect of his writing which has generated most of the adverse criticism, but the revenge theme was popular with the Elizabethans. For them Seneca was an excellent classic dramatist, and from him they took their revenge themes and their horrors. They seemed to be fascinated with the revelation of peculiar states of mind which lent themselves perfectly to the revenge tragedy. The Elizabe-

¹¹Bogard, pp. 119-147.

thems seemed to have had a strange love for the melancholy, and this melancholy is often associated with the desire for revenge.

The revenge theme exercised its fascination upon Webster, and he used it in various forms. The tragedy of blood is one form of the revenge tragedy which used the horrors of the Senecan plays with murder, assassinations, and mutilations. The physical horrors, embracing crime, violence, madness, and ghosts were in abundance; revenge was a frequent motive for its characters. Its popular appeal was somewhat crude but satisfied the Elizabethan audiences' craving for morbid excitement. Webster utilized this type of play with a particular development. He intensified and refined the horrors, says Tatlock. The mere bloodshed was not enough; other and more elaborate physical horrors were added, especially mental and moral horrors, inhuman wickedness, prolonged and ingenious agonies with the revelation of the victims' innermost thoughts.¹² Another Websterian development was the moral and satirical temper of the plays. The introduction of pity or compassion relieves the original darkness.¹³

The White Devil embraces the theme of revenge, particularly the revenge for honor. Flamineo's complete lack of honor is evidenced in his attitude toward his mother who pleads on the premise of honor against his actions toward his sister. Vittoria shows some regret at her mother's words, but Flamineo appears unmoved, and Brachiano de-

¹²John S. P. Tatlock, Representative English Plays (New York, 1916), pp. 585-587).

¹³Henry W. Wells, Elizabethan and Jacobean Playwrights (New York, 1939), p. 46.

clares she is mad. Brachiano becomes conscious of dishonor when he suspects Vittoria of being unfaithful to him.

A stain on family honor is presented early in the play when Cornelia laments in an aside: "My sonne the pandar; now I find our house / Sinking to ruine" (I.ii.207-208). Vittoria speaks of family honor to Brachiano: "What have I gain'd by thee but infamie? / Thou hast stained the spotlesse honour of my house" (IV.ii.110-111). Flamineo speaks of honor to Vittoria: "You are blemisht in your fame" (IV.ii.238). Marcello also considers family honor: "There are some sinnes which heaven doth duly punish, / In a whole family. This it is to rise / By all dishonest meanes" (V.ii.222-224).

Fredson Bowers sees a realistic rather than a melodramatic treatment in this revenge story. Webster has humanized his villains by creating real people with more than their share of vice; he has treated them so poetically as to arouse the sympathetic interest of the audience rather than an antagonistic one. Vittoria is intended to appeal for sympathy. Brachiano's passion for Vittoria is so genuinely felt that the love interest is removed from the level of low intrigue. Francisco is the chief revenger of the play, and Lodovico the second in importance. Francisco has reason to revenge his sister's murder; Lodovico has no just ground except his illicit love for murdered Isabella.¹⁴

The themes of courtly reward and punishment and revenge are overall themes. The theme of despair is partially inherent in the framework of the play. Some aspect of despair is experienced by almost all

¹⁴ Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy (Gloucester, Mass., 1959), pp. 180-182.

characters. Appearance and reality, as suggested in the title "White Devil," may be traced as a theme throughout the tragedy. The overwhelming power of evil in the world is thematic. Disease and decay as a conceit have roots in the tragedy. A new theme is introduced in the last part of the play: the loneliness of dying. But the overpowering theme is that of courtly reward and punishment.

Webster's manner of portraying his characters appropriately embrace his thematic presentation. His characters do not step out into the world of reality of the common man. Webster is not concerned with the trivia of their private lives, only in the appearance which they make and the effect of their actions. The analysis is left to the reader. They are presented with an undertow of feeling and a broadness of aspect—with a magnitude and expansiveness which encompass a court that rules people. When one identifies with them, it is with an unconscious reservation that they are court personalities. Yet they possess the same attributes and passions of a general populace—the same vices and virtues, strengths and weaknesses which are common to man. In his portrayal, Webster does not tell the reader or spectator about his characters. An opinion about them is gleaned by their actions, by what they say, and by what other characters say about them.

Lucas considers Webster's gift for characterization to be consummate. In this gift he is a dramatist as well as a poet with the ability of inserting suggestiveness. The great quality of the characters is that they retain some of the unexpectedness of life. They have the humanity which real people possess of sometimes saying or doing that which one does not expect from them. This adds some of the mystery of

living humanity, for real persons cannot be read like a book. Unexpectedly, the unscrupulous dying Braohiano shows concern for Vittoria, and Flamíneo's "Thou art a noble sister / I love thee now" (V.vi.240-241) is uttered shortly after he wishes to kill her. Generally, the characters are painted with a broad brush, but with an occasional delicacy of touch.¹⁵

The characters in The White Devil certainly exist as individual entities, but it is their relationships with each other which gives insight into their characters. This is particularly true of Vittoria and Flamíneo.

Lucas entertains a high opinion of the portrayal of the two protagonists: "Vittoria is as haunting as any of Shakespeare's women—more magnificent than Lady Macbeth; and Flamíneo possesses more humour and wit, a deeper cynicism even than Iago."¹⁶ The portrait of Flamíneo is one of extreme interiority in contrast to Vittoria's extreme objectivity. One knows Flamíneo through his soliloquies and Vittoria through her actions and repartee. Flamíneo is known by what goes through his mind while almost nothing is gleaned about Vittoria in this manner.

The first impression of Vittoria excludes anything radiant or commendable. All glamour is stripped from her at Camillo and the Duchess' deaths. Flamíneo calls her an "Excellent Divell" (I.ii.246); Cornelia's anguished words are: "O thou dost make my brow bend to the earth" (I.ii.269). Her magnificence in the trial scene forces

¹⁵ Lucas, I, pp. 25-27.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 27.

a confused picture of her, as with composure she passionately defends herself and enumerates her faults as "Beauty and gay clothes, a merry heart, / And a good stomacke to a feaste are all" (III.ii.216-218).¹⁷ Graham Greene declares that Vittoria was conceived as a devil but is transformed by the poetry of the trial scene into a heroine: She "speaks with the voice of angels but the devil is on the side of the angels."¹⁸

Vittoria from her first appearance until death reveals a passionate nature. Her womanliness makes her a brilliant heroine despite her ambition and ruthlessness. She recognizes her unfulfilled desires: "I am too true a woman" (V.vi.224). An undertow of surging emotions prompted action, but this action involved maliciousness which, finally, determined her fate. She is indeed the emblem of the appearance and reality theme of the play—the white devil: she displays a splendid spirit; she is magnificent in intellect and courage; but she is an adulteress and a murderess—white to the outside view, inside the black devil.

Bogard gives an all-inclusive true picture of Vittoria as an audience or reader might see her:

Vittoria Corombona is one of the fascinating characters in Jacobean drama. Devil she is, but woman too—a creature of immense capacity for evil and good together, an ingenious devil whose cleverness, come what may, is never at a loss, a woman who will fight courageously for what she holds most.

¹⁷B. J. Layman, "The White Devil: A Reinterpretation," *PMLA*, LXXVIII, No. 4, pt. 1 (September, 1959), 337-340.

¹⁸"British Dramatists," in Romance of English Literature, ed. W. J. Turner (New York, 1945) pp. 119-120.

desirable. A 'Devil in Crystal,' Brachiano calls her; 'White Devil' was Webster's term for her.... Charles Lamb's description, 'innocence—resembling boldness,' served to fasten this appellation on Vittoria. But such is the view of Vittoria from the judges' bench: in the minds of the judges, a known whore, yet one who refuses to admit her guilt, who comes before them with a proud, not a contrite heart. To be sure, Vittoria is no Magdalene.... Brachiano calls her a good woman; Flaminee finds her noble and loves her at the last. Goodness and nobility are two qualities which do not belong to the hypocrite. Nor does courage, nor fidelity, nor truth to oneself. Vittoria Corombona, despite her crimes, combines these qualities. In addition to 'hypocrite,' 'White Devil' connotes here a woman who has in herself good and evil, courage and ruthlessness, truth and guilt, faith even as an adulteress.¹⁹

Flamimeo, like Vittoria, combines courage, ambition, and ruthlessness. He is an intelligent, lonely, cold, objective character who admits just before dying: "My life was a blacke charnell" (V.vi.270), but he asks for no sympathy and displays no remorse: "Let no harsh flattering Bells resound my knell. / Strike thunder, and strike lowde to my farèwell" (V.vi.275-276). This is uttered shortly after he has told Vittoria she is noble and he loves her, and after he appeared to comfort her in her dying moments. This cynical, ruthless man did have a capacity for sympathy although he appears to have coarsened and vulgarized the very atmosphere around him. It is not by accident that Webster has him speak with animal imagery. Perhaps it is a sense of extreme waste in humanity which compels sympathy and pathos.

Flamimeo is seen by Lucas as one who embodies the cold clear intellect of Italy as seen through an Englishman's eyes—a consistent monster with only a passing twinge of pity at the sight of his mother's grief for the brother whom he has murdered. He is an engaging character who commands pity at his murder partially because he is murdered by

¹⁹Bogard, pp. 57-58.

those far below him in intelligence and ability.

Brachiano is not admired except for the splendor that surrounds a great prince in a magnificent world. He speaks little good, but speaks eloquently; he has no real greatness or goodness; he is firm and unrelenting in the sight of the world, but waxes under Vittoria's influence. Momentarily his greatness disintegrates as he quarrels with Vittoria over a misunderstanding. In the death scene "this ruthless self-seeker, who had held men's lives cheaper than cannon-balls," reveals an unexpected trait: a regard for others—"for the child he has remembered too little, for the woman he has remembered too much." Unexpectedly too, he calls to Vittoria for help. This "magnificent animal" commands pity, as did Flamineo.

Vittoria, Brachiano, and Flamineo are the characters who matter. The others are what the story requires them to be. Camillo is a "cold, callous, heartless, witless pedant," Isabella the ruined wife, and Cornelia the heartbroken mother.²⁰

The major characters are propelled by base motives. Brachiano stages two murders to satisfy his lust; the desire of Francisco and the Cardinal is vengeance; Flamineo, without shame or emotion, considers his own self-advancement even though he must pander his sister, murder his brother, and break his mother's heart. Vittoria's motives are partially hidden as Webster wishes to keep her surrounded with mysteriousness. It is still uncertain at the end whether she is the victim of men's passions or their cause, or whether she is capable of sympathy and understanding. As a contrast, Webster created three virtuous char-

²⁰ Lucas, I, pp. 94-99.

acters: Cornelia, Isabella, and Giovanni. Their function is to be the standard by which to judge the others. These three characters do no more than intensify the darkness; the two women are casual victims in a broiling world while Giovanni adds a touch of pathos.

The critics have adversely criticized Webster for inconsistencies of plot, extreme morbidity, utilization of excessive horrors, and a number of trivial aspects of his literary genius, but they have all agreed that he is a poet—even William Archer, who is Webster's most caustic critic, grudgingly admits this.

Webster's language expresses more than the content and atmosphere of the play: it blends the content into the atmosphere and all becomes an entity. The entity is turbulence; the storm of life for each character descends sometimes to a ruffled existence then ascends, embracing all the variations of an ocean surface; the tumultuous sound and fury becomes a muffled silence; but the dead silence is in the grave.

The poetic qualities are not those of the luster of a pearl, the genuine glitter of gold, but the electric spark of the diamond. His language carries an atmospheric quality of unexpectedness, of toads and deceptive jewels, of thunder and lightning, of curses and lamentations, of false appearances and deceit, of evil but some good. Where is the laughter or gaiety? Is there laughter in Flamineo's sinister "Ha, ha!"? Is there gaiety in the broiling, fuming Italian court; or in the sanctity of a home where a husband will murder a wife, or a wife suggests her husband's murder; or in the actions of a willful son and daughter who will bring insanity to a virtuous mother; or in the motives of a brother who will pander a sister and express a desire to

kill her; or in vindictiveness where a brother will murder a brother? The poetic qualities have the brilliant spark, but the spark creates the shadows, the morbid, and the sinister in the dark side of life.

Webster's particular genius is in the created tone movement which is expressed primarily by the imagery in word, phrase, or sentence. This imagery cannot be eradicated; it is interwoven so skillfully into the content that one is left in a shadow with a tragic picture, usually unconscious that this emotional response is sustained by symbols and images. Certainly, the fame that is Webster's is intrinsic in the tone movement of the whole, and this in turn is gleaned through the imagery.

Webster's imagery in phrase and sentence is complex and elaborate. In aspect the imagery is diverse including animals, various forms of nature, disease, poison, jewels, and science. Since tone movement is Webster's primary claim to fame, and since the element of tone and atmosphere are effected to an imposing degree by the imagery and symbol, the quotations will be numerous. It is through an awareness of the diction and phraseology used to create atmosphere that Webster may be appreciated and enjoyed. It is his chief tool to vividly and meaningfully color the story and present his characters.

Animal imagery predominates in The White Devil. The effect is to reduce man to a brutish level—it insinuates, degrades, dehumanizes, and corrupts. Flamineo more than any other character utilizes animals in his role as commentator on Webster's sordid world and the vileness of his characters. They are employed usually to convey a repulsive quality although sometimes, as in the images of caged birds, for helplessness. It is enlightening to reflect upon the animals which are

mentioned: birds of prey and dogs, or those which one associates with disease or fear, are favored. Muriel Bradbrook counted more than a hundred references to animals in The White Devil. The fifth act predominates in animal references where the following are mentioned: hawks, geese, fowls, quails, a screech owl, raven, partridge, peacock, eagle, robin, sparrowhawk, blackbirds, pigeons, dottralls, caged birds, sparrows; a dogfox, wolves, rats, snakes, toads, field mice, moles, caged lions; various kinds of dogs: dogs with fleas, a dog with a bottle at his tail, Aesop's dog, hounds, a dead fly-blown dog, braches, spaniels, a dogfox; worms, spiders, and a dogfish.²¹

Flamíneo uses a worm to gleefully satirize a situation and reveal the impotent Camillo's incredible foolishness. Camillo has made a generalization about the silkworm which spins better after having fasted, then gives Flamíneo a key to lock him in his chamber so that he will not enter Vittoria's room. Flamíneo's aside is: "Ha, ha, ha, thou entanglest thy selfe in thine owne worke like a silke-worme" (I. ii.196-197). To Flamíneo, the Spanish ambassador "Lookes like the claw of a blacke-bird, first salted and then broyled in a candle" (III. ii.78-79). Flamíneo seems to gravitate to the animal world for his expressions. He generalizes: "Knaves turne informers, as maggots turne to flies, you may catch gudgions with either" (III.iii.21-23). In speaking of Zanche, Flamíneo remarks in prose: "I'le tell thee, I doe love that Moore, that Witch very constrainedly: She knowes some of my villanny; I do love her, just as a man holds a wolfe by the eares. But for feare of turning on mee, and pulling out my throat, I

²¹Bradbrook, pp. 194-195.

would let her go to the Devill." (V.i.147-151). Flamineo says to Zanche, again in prose: "I'le unkennell one example for thee. Esop had a foolish dog that let go the flesh to catch the shadow. I would have Courtiers be better Diners" (V.i.166-169). He philosophizes: "Wee think cag'd birds sing, when indeed they crie" (V.iv.117), and speaks metaphorically: "Fate's a Spaniell. Wee cannot beat it from us" (V.vi.178-179).

Vittoria reminds Brachiano and Flamineo: "Your dog or hawke should be rewarded better / Then I have bin" (IV.ii.193-194). After Gasparo tells Lodovico to bind Flamineo to a pillar, Vittoria says:

O your gentle pittie:
I have seene a black-bird that would sooner fly
To a mans besome, then to stay the gripe
Of the feirce Sparrow-hawke. (V.vi.184-187)

Other characters employ animal imagery to express their thoughts. Marcello is incensed with the idea of Flamineo marrying Zanche: "I had rather she were pitcht upon a stake / In some new-seeded garden, to affright / Her fellow crows thence" (V.i.187-189). This image is one of blackness, for Zanche is a Moor. After Zanche reveals the manner in which Camillo and Isabella died, Lodovico anticipates trouble: "The bed of snakes is broke" (V.iii.256). The implication is that the snake strikes from concealment and kills by poison. Francisco speaks to Lodovico of killing Zanche: "We now, like the partridge, / Purge the disease with lawrell" (V.iii.278-279). In this comment a second image of disease is superimposed upon the animal image. It implies a mania for killing. Animal imagery is used in a cluster in Cornelia's memorable dirge for Marcello. In profound, rhymed poetry, she divulges her heartfelt anguish:

Call for the Robin-Red-brest and the wren,
 Since ore shadie groves they hover,
 And with leaves and flowres doe cover
 The friendlesse bodies of unburied men.
 Call unto his funerall Dole
 The Ante, the field-mouse, and the mole
 To reare him hillockes, that shall keepe him warme,
 And (when gay tombs are rob'd) sustaine no harme,
 But keepe the wolfe far thence, that's foe to men,
 For with his nailes hee'l dig them up agen. (V.iv.89-98)

Nature in various forms is used effectively to present imagery.

Vittoria sees a yew tree in the dream which she relates to Brachiano:

Methought I walkt about the mid of night,
 Into a Church-yard, where a goodly Eu Tree,
 Spread her large roote in ground—under that Eu,
 As I sat sadly leaning on a grave,
 Checkered with crosse-sticks, they came stealing in
 Your Dutchesse and my husband—one of them
 A picax bore, th' other a Rusty spade,
 And in rough termes they gan to challenge me,
 About this Eu. (I.ii.222-230)

Vittoria has invented the figure of the yew tree to represent the marriages of herself and Camillo, Brachiano and Isabella. Marriages represented by the yew were rooted in decay and so could not prosper. "Eu" in her dream refers to Brachiano. After exchanging words with Brachiano, Vittoria continues:

They told me my entent was to root up
 That well-growne Eu, and plant i' th steed of it
 A withered blacke-thorne, and for that they vow'd
 To bury me alive: my husband straight
 With picax gan to dig, and your fell Dutchesse
 With shovell, like a fury, voyded out
 The earth & scattered bones. (I.ii.232-236)

The yew tree image, a favorite in Elizabethan literature, is used again when Monticelso, wishing to deter Lodovico from avenging Isabella's death, says: "Or like the blacke, and melancholicke Eugh-tree, / Do'st thinke to roote thy selfe in dead mens graves. / And yet to prosper?" (IV.iii.123-125). The long roots of the yew tree, as in the previous

quotation, are posited in decay. This recalls Vittoria's fable of the yew tree in act one which is significant, for it links the beginning to the end of the play, and one murder with another.

Monticelso in the trial scene speaks of Vittoria by using impressive nature imagery. Appropriately, polarity is employed to depict the difference between appearances and reality, one of the themes of the play:

You see my Lords what goodly fruit she seemes,
Yet like those apples travellers report
To grow where Sodom and Gomora stood,
I will but touch her and you straight shall see
Sheele fall to soote and ashes. (III.ii.66-70)

Flaminceo uses the ocean and sea images to express his thoughts. He describes the policy which he, Vittoria, and Brachiano must follow to accomplish the murders of Isabella and Camillo:

Wee are engag'd to mischiefe and must on,
As Rivers to finde out the Ocean
Flow with Crooke bending beneath forced bankes,
Or as wee see to aspire some mountaines top,
The way ascends not straight, but Imitates
The subtle fouldings of a Winters snake. II.ii.341-346)

In this passage, "subtle" implies deceit and the snake implies a killer. Other instances of Flaminceo's use of the sea image are: "The Sea's more rough and raging than calme rivers, / But nor so sweet nor wholesome. A quiet woman / Is a still water under a greet bridge" (IV.ii.181-183), and "Seas doe laugh, shew white, when Rocks are neere" (V.vi.251).

Webster seems fond of the storm image to express turbulence. There is an emotional response to the word "storm." Brachiano is provoked with Cornelia: "Uncharitable woman, thy rash tongue / Hath rais'd a fearefull and prodigious storme" (I.ii.328-329). Monticelso says to Lodovico: "O, thou'rt a foule black cloud, and thou do'st threat / A

violent storme" (IV.iii.102-103). Lodovico's reply: "Stormes are isth aire, my Lord; / I am too low to storme" (IV.iii.103-104). Vittoria's dying words are profound as she thinks about life after death: "My soule, like to a ship in a blacke storme, / Is driven I know not whither" (V.vi.248-249). Closely allied with the storm image are Flamineo's words when he truly seems moved by Vittoria's death: "I am in a mist" (V.vi.260). The effectiveness of these images, as well as most of Webster's images, is inherent in their brevity and conciseness, and injected in exactly the right place to create a picture, or a mood, or a description, or a conceit. There is usually no preparation for the image; it is the unexpectedness which brings the reader to attention.

Abundant disease images are atmospheric and permeate Webster's world. They suggest, as in the following examples, the abnormal and unhealthy, the ulcerated and mangy. Speaking of jealousy, Flamineo says: "They that have the yellow Jaundice, thinke all objects they looke on to be yellow" (I.ii.108-109). He generalizes: "Treasons tongue hath a villanous palsy" (III.ii.317) and "Let those that have disease run" (IV.ii.54). Vittoria gives an exemplum of a misdeed: "I had a limbe corrupted to an ulcer, / But I have cut it off" (IV.ii.122-123). In satirizing the "perfum'd Gallants" about town, Flamineo scoffs: "They have a certaine spice of the disease, / For they that sleep with dogs; shall rise with fleas" (V.i.162-163).

Profuse imagery involving poison, as in the disease image, pervades the atmosphere in The White Devil where it undermines, corrupts, blemishes, and destroys. Poison kills because it is not seen or even suspected, or before its effects are visible. The poison conceit is an

integral part of the play, and the action contains two notable poisonings. It expresses the polarities of fair show and foul truth, one of Webster's themes. Cornelia's fair garden deceived for it had poisoned herbs (I.ii.265). Brachiano voiced disapproval to Francisco: "Spit thy poison" (II.i.72). The doctor would "poyson a kisse" (II.i.297-298). Monticelso says a whore was "In mans nostrill / Poison'd per-fumes" (III.ii.84-85), and Vittoria takes "from all beasts, and from all mineralls / Their deadly poison" (III.ii.107-108). Flamineo upholds Vittoria to Monticelso, but Vittoria is skeptical: "I decerne poison, / Under your gilded pills" (III.ii.198-199). Flamineo scorns Lodovico upon his return to Rome: "The God of Melancholie turne thy gall to poison" (III.iii.62). Poisoned Brachiano speaks the horrible truth that his love was poison for Vittoria when he says to her: "Do not kisse me, for I shall poyson thee" (V.iii.27). Lodovico taunts the dying Brachiano: "O you slave! / You that were held the famous Pollititian; / Whose art was poison" (V.iii.154-156). This great, influential courtier Brachiano made a false appearance; the foul truth: his art was poison.

Jewels are sometimes used for imagery, particularly the diamond. Significantly, they are used associatively with the heroine. Monticelso in the trial scene refers to Vittoria as a counterfeit jewel (III.ii.145). To this remark Vittoria retorts: "For know that all your strickt-combined heads, / Which strike against this mine of diamonds, / Shall prove but glassen hammers, they shall breake" (III.ii.147-149). She again speaks with a diamond image: "Know this and let it somewhat raise your spight, / Through darknesse Diamonds spred their rithest

light" (III.ii.304-305). Brachiano, doubting Vittoria's faithfulness, calls her a devil in crystal (IV.ii.89). The devil in Vittoria is again contrasted to her dazzling beauty by using a glittering jewel.

The critics sometimes compare Donne to Webster. His scientific imagery resembles that of Donne. Flamineo's impression of Camillo is: "A guilder that hath his braynes perisht with quicke-silver" (I.ii.26-27). Cornelia reminds Brachiano that "The lives of Princes should like dyals move" (I.ii.279). Flamineo remarks to the English ambassador: "Here they sell justice with those weights they press men to death with" (III.iii.26-27). Brachiano is infatuated with Vittoria: "How lovelie art thou now! Thy loose thoughts / Scatter like quicke-silver, I was bewitch'd" (IV.ii.101-102). The use of the scientific image illustrates Webster's versatility in the use of the image. These images, as well as his other images, are woven into the fabric of his canvas but, unlike the other cited images, do not project the atmosphere of the tragedy.

The symbol is associative with imagery. Irving Ribner dwells on The White Devil as a symbolic drama with allegorical dimensions. Flamineo symbolizes death: "You are, I take it the gravemaker" (V.iv.74), says his sorrowful mother. How right she was, for he kills Camillo and his brother and instigates action which leads to Brachiano's death. His courage in dying teaches others how to die. For him death is the only certainty in a deceptive world and in this world he represents negation of order and harmony. Defiant Vittoria represents life. She is symbolic of beauty which destroys: she is as beautiful as she is evil. Her integrity of life is a source of pride, and this is the paradox. What greatness is hers is the dramatic symbol of the paradox which

won for her, and the title of the play, the appellation of "white devil."²² Cornelia represents morality—the ordinary decency of a respectable family. Isabella portrays fidelity; her murder is accomplished because she is devoted to her husband.²³ Each evil in the play is a symbol of death.²⁴ The play itself is a dramatic symbol of moral confusion.²⁵

Some general statements may be made about Webster's language. Profuse imagery dominates and overwhelms. An image is often prepared by a related image briefly phrased; after the image has reached its climax, the pulse drops, and there is often a generalized aphorism. The pulse of utterance alternately rushes, hesitates, then reduplicates. Sustained poetic utterance is negligible: the long speeches are either deliberate descriptions, which are often in prose and epigrammatic in nature, or established pieces like a statement made in a law court or the telling of a dream or a tale. The dialogue is choppy, rugged, and complex—the vocabulary unexpected, various, and sensuously evocative. The excellent poetic expressions tend to implant themselves in the memory, disregarding the dramatic element.

The verse is of an uneven, ruffled type and basically a blank verse which is not quite scannable, but often exceedingly successful. The irregularity in the blank verse was probably deliberate since this type of verse is appropriate for the speaking voice in drama.

²²Ribner, pp. 107-111.

²³Harrison, p. xi.

²⁴Bogard, p. 147.

²⁵Ribner, p. 107.

While blank verse is the general pattern in The White Devil, various devices were used to alter the meter to adapt it to the changing mood which Webster wished to express. Whether this machinery was conscious or not, some of these devices are: enjambement of the end-stopped line; slipping easily from poetry into prose; employment of caesuras; a free substitution of other feet for the basic iambus; use of tetrameters or shorter lines; and a sparing use of rhyme.

The enjambement of the normally end-stopped line is frequently used. Much of the charm and effectiveness of Webster's poetry is effected by the running of the voice, without an instant's pause, from the end of one line to the beginning of the next. The following example illustrates this:

The pistols held no bullets: 'twas a plot
 To prove your kindnesse to mee; and I live
 To punish your ingratitude—I know
 One time or other you would finde a way
 To give me a strong potion—O Men
 That lye upon your death-beds, and are haunted
 With howling wives, neere trust them, they'le re-marry
 Ere the worme pierce your winding sheete: ere the Spider
 Make a thinne curtaine for your Epitaphes. (V.vi.151-159)

Webster continually and constantly slides easily from poetry into prose. In the above quotation, the poetry, in the same speech, slips into prose. The continuation of Flamineo's speech: "How cunning you are to discharge! Do you practice at the Artillery yard? Trust a woman? never, never; Brachiano bee my precedent: we lay our soules to pawne to the Deville for a little pleasure, and a woman makes the bill of sale. That ever man should marry!" (V.vi.160-164).

The author incessantly utilized the caesura to suit his needs. In the above quotation, caesuras are used in all but three lines. In-

numerable examples might be given which are similar to Flamineo's dying speech:

My life was a blacke charell: // I have caught
 An everlasting could. // I have lost my voice
 Most irrecoverably: // Farewell glorious villaines. (V.vi.270-272)

The following quotation is typical of Webster's ruffled poetry and illustrates several devices to add variety to the regular blank verse:

'Tis good / I ap/prehēnd it
 To kill / ones selfe / is meate / that we / must take
 Like pills / not chew'd / but quick/ly swal/low it—
 The smart / a'th wound / or weake/nesse of / the hand
 May else / bring treb/ble tōrments. (V.vi.76-80)

The above first and fifth lines are trimeter instead of pentameter lines, which varies the meter. The second, third, and fourth lines are regular pentameter lines with two variations in the iambic pulse. The last foot in the first and fifth lines is probably meant to be emphibrachic rather than an iambic foot with a feminine ending. It is likely that Webster had no definite intent as to how the line should scan, and the matter is unimportant. He was conscious of the rhythm of the speaking voice so his intent would deter to these variations from the iambic pulse. However, a definite pattern in the passage is apparent: the first and fifth lines are identical in metrical and rhythmical pattern and the other three lines repetitious in meter and rhythm.

Other substitutions than the amphibrach for the iambus is often utilized. The one most commonly used is the anapest. The following illustrates this usage:

For my part, / I have payd
 All my debts, / so if I / should chance / to fall
 My Cred/itours / fall nōt / with mee. (V.v.3-5)

The use of tetrameters or even shorter lines are often used, and commonly in short, curt dialogues:

- Vit: What, // are you drop't?
 Fla: I am mixt / with Earth / already. // As you / are Noble
 Performe / your vowes, / and brave/ly fol/low mee.
 Vit: Whither— // to hell?
 Zan: To most / assured / damnation
 Vit: O thou / most curs/ed devill.
 Zan: Thou art caught—
 Vit: In thine own / Engine, // I tread / the fire out
 That would / have been / my ruin. (V.vi.120-126)

There is considerable variation in line length and the nature of the metrical foot in the above passage. The first, fourth, and sixth lines are dimeters; the second and third pentameters; the fifth and ninth trimeters; the eighth a tetrameter; and the seventh a monometer. This is also a typical example of the substituting of other metrical feet for the iambic: the anapestic, trochaic, dactylic, and amphibrachic. These variations produce a conversational dialogue which might be termed either poetic prose or prosaic poetry.

The sententious rhymed couplet is employed by Webster to end most of his scenes. Some critics feel the rhyming is too much of a contrast to his uneven verse. Nevertheless, he utilizes it consistently to summarize, philosophize, or moralize. Otherwise, almost no rhyming is to be found except in Cornelia's funeral dirge.

Webster's poetic language is one of the glories of Jacobean drama, but it has not portrayed a glorious world. However, it was a world with which his audience could identify, for the contemporaneous story upon which he based his play had its roots in the tragedy that occurred

approximately twenty-five years prior to the play's first production. It is concerned with political ethics and the behavior in a realistically depicted court society and one which they could identify with their own English court. For in their actual court, many men were seeking and receiving office as a reward for services amid the turmoil in the court of their king, James I.

CHAPTER III
THE DUCHESS OF MALFI

The Tragedy of the Dutchesse of Malfi was published in 1623 and reprinted in 1640, 1664, 1678, and 1708. The title page of the first publication reads: "The perfect and exact Copy, with diverse things Printed, that the length of the play would not beare in the Presentment." The play was produced before December, 1614 when William Ostler, who acted the part of Antonio, died. The title page announced that it had been presented "privately, at the Black-Friers; and publicly at the Globe" by the King's men. The title page of the 1640 printing states that the play was "Approvedly well acted at the Black-Friers; the 1664 edition as "Acted by his late Majesties Servants at Black Fryers with great applause, Thirty Years since. And now acted by his Highness the Duke of York's Servants"; the 1678 issue as "Acted At the Dukes Theater"; and the 1708 edition as "Now Acted at the Queen's Theatre in the Hay-Market, By Her Majesties Company of Comedians."¹

The story of The Duchess, based on historical fact, was told by Matteo Bandello as a first literary account. The Frenchman Francois de Belleforest translated and enlarged it to four times its original length for his second volume of Histories Tragiques. William Painter translated Belleforest's account into English for his second volume of Palace of Plessure. Gunner Boklund, who made an intensive source-study, concludes that Painter's version was Webster's primary source,

¹Leech, pp. 4-5.

and Sir Philip Sidney's Arcadia and Giraldo Cinthio's The Famous History of Herodotus were secondary sources.² Another important source was Webster's own The White Devil. For him, creation often involved borrowing and repetition: in his two great tragedies, both localized at an Italian court with a central heroine, scenes echo each other and are two versions of a single subject. In some respects The Duchess is a retelling of his first tragedy, while in other respects it is a continuation.

From the first moment of the play, as in The White Devil, one is conditioned to think in terms of court life. The first act contains one long scene staged in the palace of the Duchess at Amalfi, Italy. The courtier Delio welcomes his good friend Antonio home from France. Antonio praised the King of France for purging his court of "infamous persons." No time is lost in introducing the main characters. Antonio says of that exceedingly baffling and demonical character Bosola:

Here Comes Bosola.

The only Court-Gall: yet I observe his rayling
Is not for simple love of Piety:
Indeeds he rayles at those things which he wants,
Would be as leacherous, covetous, or proud,
Bloody, or envious, of any man,
If he had meanes to be so; Here's the Cardinall. (I.i.24-29)

Bosola remains apart from Delio and Antonio, reminding the Cardinal as he enters that he suffered imprisonment while in his service and yet does not have his reward, but "I will thrive some way: black-birds fatten best in hard weather: why not I in these dogge days?" (I.i.39-40). Next, the audience is introduced to the Cardinal and his brother Ferdinand, Duke of Calabria, as Bosola, using Webster's famed

²Boklund, pp. 1-36.

imagery, describes these unseamy characters to Antonio and Delio: "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 feed on them" (I.i.50-53).

After Bosola leaves, Delio and Antonio's conversation discloses that Bosola spent seven years in prison for a murder "suborn'd" by the Cardinal. Bosola's "foule mellancholly" is festering under non-reward.

Ferdinand enters. His comments reveal that Antonio is Master of the Duchess' household and distinguished in horsemanship, then Antonio describes Ferdinand, the Cardinal, and the Duchess. The Cardinal is "a mellancholly Church-man; / The Spring in his face is nothing but the Ingendering of / Toades" (I.i.158-160); Ferdinand has a "turbulent Nature / What appears in him mirth, is merely outside" (I.i.168-170), and he "doombes men to death, by information, / Rewards, by heare-say" (I.i.178-179); and their sister "the right noble Duchesse" has a "sweete countenance" and "her dayes are practis'd in such noble vertue" that she should be an example to all ladies (I.i.191-209).

Webster has used an ingenious method of introducing his main characters: Antonio and Delio as commentators have presented Bosola, the Cardinal, Ferdinand, and the Duchess. Furthermore, a picture of a virtuous reigning Duchess in a corrupt court is depicted.

In the remainder of the first act, Ferdinand and the Cardinal defy their sister to remarry and place Bosola in her household in the position of provisorship of horses to spy upon her. The Duchesse dis-

regards her brothers' demands and requests Antonio to marry her. With her maid Cariola concealed behind an arras as witness, they are married in a self-conducted wedding ceremony which the Duchess justifies in the words "How can the church force more?" (I.i.458). The love scene, a magnificent display of mutual affection, has a touch of delicacy, but Cariola distrusts this clandestine marriage.

A son is born to the Duchess in the second act. Bosola finds the child's horoscope which Antonio has dropped. He hastens to convey the news of the child's birth by letter to the Duchess' brothers in Rome. The Cardinal receives the shock stoically, but Ferdinand displays the first indication of the madness which will later consume him. He raves and rants, declaring that he will not be content until his sister is destroyed. The Cardinal calls his brother a wild tempest but is concerned that their royal blood of Aragon and Castile be tainted. The subplot is introduced in this act: the Cardinal flagrantly lusts after his mistress Julia, wife of the old court gull Castruchio.

In the third act, Ferdinand and Delio visit the court in Amalfi. Antonio confides to Delio that the Duchess has had another son and a daughter and the "common rabble," not aware of her marriage, are calling her a strumpet. Determined to discover the father of her children, Ferdinand enters the Duchess' bedroom with a key which Bosola has obtained for him. She confesses her marriage but refuses to reveal Antonio's name. Ferdinand condemns her as a vile woman and relates a tale with the moral that reputation can never be regained, once lost. The frightened Duchess hastily conceives a plan: she accuses Antonio within her servants' hearing of falsifying her accounts, then banishes

him from Amalfi. This gives Antonio an excuse to flee to Acona to await her arrival there. The Duchess makes the mistake of confiding her secret to Bosola who suggests that, to avert suspicion, she go to Acona by way of the Shrine of Loretto so that the journey might appear to be a religious pilgrimage. He then hastens to report this news to Ferdinand and the Cardinal in Rome. Meanwhile, wars make it necessary that the Cardinal become a soldier, and at the Shrine of Loretto, where the lovers meet, the Cardinal participates in two ceremonies: his own installation as a soldier and the formal banishment from Acona of Antonio, the Duchess, and their children. Antonio flees with their eldest son to Milan; the Duchess is arrested and returned by Bosola to her palace as a prisoner.

Horrors run rampant in the fourth act, a feature which places Webster in the mainstream of the Senecan dramatists. Because Ferdinand has vowed never to see his sister again, he approaches her in the dark and presents her with a severed hand with a ring upon it, pretending that it is Antonio's. Next, he reveals to her wax figures of Antonio and their children. Bosola, objecting to this diabolical torment, would have him give her beads and a prayer book. But Ferdinand proceeds with his revenge by having madmen appear in a masque with the purpose of unsettling her reason. Bosola offers comfort to the Duchess but proceeds as Ferdinand's instrument in murder. He appears before the Duchess in the garb of a tomb maker. Executioners enter the stage with a coffin, cords, and a bell. She kneels to accept death as a blessing. In contrast Cariola dies lying, biting, and scratching, while the strangled children are brought to the stage. Immediately

after the deaths, both Bosola and Ferdinand begin to have pangs of conscience. Just as Flameneo lamented his sister's death in The White Devil, Ferdinand is consumed with remorse as in anguish he recalls that she is his twin and says: "Cover her face: Mine eyes dazzle: she di'd yong" (IV.ii.281). He blames Bosola for proceeding with the murder and refuses to reward him. The action has reached its climax with the Duchess' death. In this act, episode was built upon episode to produce, both dramatically and structurally, the finest act in either of Webster's major tragedies.

So that the Duchess' spirit will reign over the last act and preserve the unity of the play, Webster has used an echo technique. As Antonio and Delio listen to the hollow, haunting words of the echo's warning as it resounds from the wall of an ancient abbey in the hills, Antonio feels the voice is his wife's cautioning him to "be mindfull of they safety" (V.iii.40). The subplot is resolved in this act, Julia, sensually infatuated with Bosola, agrees to wheedle the Cardinal's guilty secret from him. With Bosola concealed behind a traverse, the Cardinal confesses his guilt: by his appointment the Duchess and her two children were murdered. Weary of his mistress Julia, he has her kiss a poisoned prayer book. Bosola approaches the churchman, accuses him of having plotted the Duchess' murder, and asks for his reward. When a reward is denied, Bosola decides to join Antonio in avenging the Duchess' death. In the night, all plans miscarry. Bosola mistakingly stabs Antonio who has gone to the Cardinal to seek reconciliation. Ferdinand, deranged because of remorse for his sister's murder, appears on the scene to stab the Cardinal and

Bosola; before Bosola dies, he stabs Ferdinand. As in The White Devil, Webster introduces an element of hope in the closing moments of the play: Delio presents the son of Antonio and the Duchess to an amazed court "to establish this yong hopefull Gentleman / In's mother's right" (V.v.137-138).

While the structure of this story tends toward the episodic, Bosola weaves and blends the atmosphere and the threads of the plot throughout the play to produce a unity. This is perceived by considering Bosola's role in each act. Structurally, each act represents a separate phase of the story in which Bosola has a vital part: the first act shows the brothers opposing a second marriage for their sister, Bosola entering the service of both the Duchess and her brothers, and the marriage; in the second act a son is born and the news is relayed by Bosola to the brothers in Rome; Bosola hovers over act three as Ferdinand accuses his sister of villainess, Antonio flees, and the Duchess is imprisoned; the fourth act accomplishes the Duchess' death as planned by Bosola and reveals its effect upon Ferdinand and Bosola; all of the major characters die in the fifth act, but it is Bosola who weaves the plot element.

The subplot concerning the Cardinal and his mistress Julia is a good example of Webster's meticulous planning of the play's structure but could have been omitted as far as the narrative is concerned. Actually, it clutters the story with an unnecessary character, and the fifth act would be less jumbled with one less issue to be resolved. However, Julia is an elaboration of the central conceit of the tragedy and serves as a foil to the Duchess. Both are forward in their

approach: the Duchess in proposing marriage to Antonio, and Julia in lusting after the Cardinal and Bosola; both devise scenes with a hidden witness: the Duchess has Cariola hide behind an arras to be a witness to her marriage, and Julia has Bosola conceal himself behind a curtain to overhear the Cardinal declare his guilt; both meet their death by what they do: the Duchess by marrying Antonio, and Julia for lusting after the Cardinal. Otherwise, they are polar opposites where Julia's story offers a comic parallelism. Delio uses contemptuous remarks to Julia; the Marquis of Pescara calls her a strumpet; when she lusts after Bosola, he merely uses her to glean information from the Cardinal; and the Cardinal sees her as his "lingering consumption." Attitudes toward the Duchess contrast to those of Julia. Antonio refers to the Duchess' saintliness and never relaxes in his admiration; Cariola is devoted to her; Bosola admires her fortitude; and Ferdinand is derailed by remorse for causing her death. Julia meets death scratching and biting, the Duchess in quiet and dignified resignation. By offering Julia's story of comic parallelism, there is an awareness that, despite the deceitfulness involved in the Duchess' secret marriage, she acts within the range of normal sexual passion. The subplot reveals ingenious planning, but disunity in total effect evolves from lack of sufficient integration.

Careful planning appears also in the setting of The Duchess. From an audience or reader's viewpoint, the locales are easily envisioned. The first and fourth acts, restricted to Amalfi, are associative with the Duchess' life: her court, her marriage, the birth of her children, her imprisonment and death. Only briefly in the third

not is she seen outside her palace when she hastens to join Antonio in his flight. Until the fifth act, Ferdinand and the Cardinal are at Rome unless visiting their sister in Amalfi. Any audience would experience a strong sense of place with a mention of Rome, the seat of world power, which would represent to them the power which the brothers could command. The veering between Amalfi and other Italian locales in the second and third acts creates a feeling of conflict between the Duchess and her brothers; the introduction of Loretto and Milan projects an idea of flight as opposed to the sense of stability of place in Amalfi and Rome. The last act produces the effect of dispersal of locality although actually centered in several distinct places in Milan. The echo scene and the various murders might have occurred in any locale. The atmosphere and an involvement in plot incidents remove one from any sense of place until Giovanni appears to restore order in the land "in's Mothers right" (V.v.138).

The chronological time element flows smoothly and unhesitatingly throughout the narrative. An awareness of the passing of time is gleaned through the birth of the children. The marriage in the first act, followed by the son's birth in the second act, establishes an approximate passage of nine months' time between these acts. The abrupt announcement in the third act of two more children indicates a time lapse of approximately two years. It is this time element which the realistically-minded critics attack as an absurdity, for logically the brothers would not delay for two years to proceed with their revenge. When staged, this is actually unobtrusive with no impression of delay or incongruous lag in actions: the audience can without dif-

ficuity envision the ominous silence of the brothers in Rome and the routine life of the Duchess in Amalfi. Any indication of passing of time thereafter is no longer than it would take to journey from Amalfi to Milan, or from Rome to Amalfi.

Webster duplicates the techniques utilized in The White Devil in narrating the Duchess' story. The asides, the soliloquies, the relating of a tale as an exemplum, the dumb show, the revenge apparatus, the ever-present sententious couplets for philosophical or morality emphasis are employed in the same manner in The Duchess, so need no reiteration here. One variation deserves some amplification: the ingenious invention of an echo replaces the ghosts of his earlier tragedy. Confronted with preserving the unity of the drama after the climatic fourth act with the Duchess' death, Webster creates a Gothic romantic scene where a dolorous echo reverberates from the Duchess' grave in the hills with an intimation of the mysterious powers of the supernatural. The Duchess is dead, but her spirit hovers over the last act to reduce the stature of the main characters and enable Webster to dispose of them quickly. Their deaths occur as a matter of course, a mere extermination, but serve a thematic purpose. The court has been purged of evil, and the Duchess' spirit of greatness is transferred to her son who is made sovereign ruler in her stead.

The main theme of courtly reward and punishment in The White Devil becomes a secondary and continuing theme in The Duchess. Variations of this theme run throughout The Duchess from Antonio's opening remarks in the first act concerning the ideal French court until the end of the play with Antonio's dying request: "And let my Scene, flie

the courts of Princes." The theme of social evil, which in The White Devil is called courtly reward and punishment, in The Duchess is revealed in the larger aspect of a dying universe—a dying by degrees and finally sinking into a disease and rot. The theme of natural evil predominates and is central to the play where there is a reality in the process of natural decay. Bosola characterizes this idea when he savagely attacks mankind:

Observe my meditation now:
 What thing is in this outward forme of man
 To be believ'd? we account it ominous,
 If Nature doe produce a Colt, or Lambe,
 A Fawne, or Goate, in any limbe resembling
 A Man; and flye from't as a prodegy.
 Man stands amaz'd to see his deformity,
 In any other Creature but himselfe.
 But in our owne flesh, though we beare diseases
 Which have their true names onely tane from beasts,
 As the most ulcerous Woolfe, and swinish Meazeall;
 Though we are eaten up of lice, and wormes,
 And though continually we beare about us
 A rotten and dead body, we delight
 To hide it in rich tissey—all our feare,
 (Nay all our terrour) is, least our Phisition
 Should put us in the ground, to be made sweete. (II.i.45-61)

Bogard sees this theme of natural evil divided into three parts and treated concurrently in the play: the bestiality of man; the conception of the rotting body accompanied by images of sexuality and of widespread corruption; and the dignity of death.³ The theme is presented primarily by utilizing the image: images of animals, degeneration, disease, rot, corruption, and death hover over the tragedy.

Other themes, almost identical to those in The White Devil, weave themselves throughout the tragedy: the revenge theme with all of its macabre paraphernalia, that of appearance and reality, death, disease

³Bogard, pp. 131-134.

and decay, poison, integrity of life, retribution, and futility.

What should be considered an implication, rather than a theme, involves the contemporary ideas on remarriage and secret and unequal marriages. Frank Wedsworth feels that a Jacobean audience would not unhesitatingly and without qualification have condemned the Duchess for remarrying or for marrying beneath herself,⁴ as Leech suggests.⁵ Webster's attitude toward the remarriage is opposite to what Leech assumes it to have been. For Webster, the Duchess' motives for remarrying are respectable, involving love, not lust; although Antonio was not of noble birth, he was an acceptable husband. Actually, in the play the significance of the marriage is not whether it was socially improper for the Duchess to marry beneath her but that, as a sovereign prince, her secret marriage prevented her from fulfilling her duty to her small realm. She was not just a widow of high rank marrying beneath her. In the first act Antonio praises the French court and implies a need to purge the English court, but nowhere in the play is there an indication that the Duchess pondered upon the duties of her court. She is treated by Webster as an individual, not a sovereign ruler. Her marriage does not contribute to Amalfi's stability.

Another implication in The Duchess is that of incest. A strong case for an incestuous feeling on Ferdinand's part may be made. The

⁴"Webster's Duchess of Malfi in the Light of Some Contemporary Ideas on Marriage and Remarriage," Philological Quarterly, XXV, No. 4 (Oct., 1956), 396-407.

⁵For comments on remarriage, secret and unequal marriages in Webster's time, see Clifford Leech ed., The Duchess of Malfi, Barrons's Studies in English Literature, No. 8 (Great Neck, N. Y., 1963), 51-57.

cause of his raving and ranting against his sister's remarriage is possibly more than a desire for preservation of family integrity or an inheritance issue. He cannot explain his rage though he searches to find a reason. He calls his sister a "lusty widow" (I.i.381), and a sexual jealousy could undoubtedly cause him to say with vehemency, when he learns of her marriage, that he would "dippe the sheets they lie in, in pitch and sulphur, / Wrap them in't and then light them like a match" (II.v.90-91), or "I would have their bodies / Burn't in a coale-pit" (II.v.87-88). Perhaps he identifies with her husband and is therefore slow in seeking the name of the father of her children, and slow in accomplishing his death, for he cannot kill himself. This slowness in acting, his gross words to his sister, his excessive rage, and finally his insanity favor a sexual jealousy.

Various aspects of fate and chance thread their way through The Duchess. It is a blind, ruthless, callous fate which sweeps humans onward with a force which cannot be withstood, the good and evil together. The unfortunate deaths of the righteous characters, the Duchess, Antonio, and their children, like those of Isabella and Marcello in The White Devil, testify to this.

Fate and chance encompass the lives of the main characters. The Duchess has been imprisoned but:

I am acquainted with sad misery,
As the tan'd galley-slave is with his Oare,
Necessity make me suffer constantly,
And costome makes it easie. (IV.ii.30-33)

Her misery is established, so is sad. She is inured to an inescapable pain but has gained fortitude through suffering. The image of the galley slave suggests the survival of the strongest. Her courage and

nobility of spirit had not been broken. Earlier, when she turned, expecting to see her husband in her bedchamber and instead encountered Ferdinand, she sensed danger: "'Tis welcome: / For know whether I am doom'd to live, or die, / I can do both like a Prince" (III.ii.77-79). She has not forgotten the dignity which a state position should command. Boccia is mystified with this endurance and acceptance of fate: "She seems / Rather to welcome the end of misery / Than shun it" (IV. i.4-6). The mystic echo would have Antonio fly his fate (V.iii.44), and Antonio would accept his fate, for after hearing of the death of his wife and children he exclaims: "I would not now / Wish my wounds balm'd nor heal'd: for I have no use / To put my life to" (V.iv.73-75). There is a determinism, not within the compass of human understanding, which embraces the unfortunate circumstances surrounding the characters.

Fortune's wheel or blind chance is so influential that it may even challenge the stars for "we are merely the Starres tennis-balls (stroke, and banded / Which way please them)" (V.iv.63-64). Delio fears his dear friend Antonio is in danger: "Antonio is betray'd: how fearfully / Shows his ambition now, (unfortunate Fortune)!" (II.iv. 105-106). When a troop of armed men confront the Duchess at Lorette, it is her fate to be so accosted:

O, they are welcome:
When Fortunes wheel is over-charg'd with Princes,
The weight makes it move swift. I would have my ruine
Be sudden: I am your adventure, am I not? (III.v.111-114)

Later when she is imprisoned, she attributes her misery to fate and paints a tragic picture: "Fortune seems only to have her eye sight, / To behold my Tragedy" (IV.ii.37-38). In bidding farewell to Delio,

Antonio stresses the power of fortune: "Though in our miseries, Fortune have a part, / Yet, in our noble sufferings, she hath none— / Contempt of paine, that we may call our owne" (V.iii.70-72).

The Duchess is filled with omens which might be interpreted as a work of fate or chance. The Duchess dreams that her diamond coronet of state was changed to pearls; Antonio interprets the pearls to signify her tears (III.v.19-24). The Duchess, Antonio, and Cariola have been jesting; the Duchess cannot recall when they have been so happy, but this mirth can only be momentary for "my hair tangles" (III.ii.61). Antonio's name is blotted on the paper by his bleeding nose: "One that were superstitious, would count / This ominous; When it merely comes by chance" (II.iii.59-60).

The power of a curse is usually superstitious with an atmosphere of the sinister and indefinable about it. Muriel Bradbrook feels the curse and superstition is associative with fate and chance. The Duchess curses a power that is beyond the earthly, and beyond Ferdinand and the Cardinal, when she converses with Bosola:

Duchess: I would thou wert hang'd for the horrible curse
Thou has given me; I shall shortly grow one of the
miracles of pittie; I'll go pray; No, I'll go curse;

Bosola: Oh, fy!

Duchess: I could curse the Starres.

Bosola: O fearefull!

Duchess: And those three sayling seasons of the yeare into
a Russian winter; may the world
To its final chaos.

Bosola: Lock you, the Starres shine still;

Duchess: Oh, but you remember, my curse hath a great way to
go. (IV.1.110-122)

The Duchess realizes a curse could be hereditary and since her children were "borne accurs'd; / Curses shall be their first language" (III.v.137-138). Ferdinand infers a hereditary curse when he

says of the Duchess: "Damne her, that body of hers" (IV.1.146).

A vow spoken with imprecation may constitute a curse as Ferdinand's vow never to see his sister again. He utilizes this in a cruel deception when he offers his sister the wax hand of her husband. This rebounds upon himself, for the sight of her dead face unnerves him and the curse is lycanthropy which was recognized as a diabolical possession.

The superstition extends to witchcraft.⁶ There is an admonition in Ferdinand's words to the Duchess:

You live in a ranke posture here, i'th Court—
 There is a kind of honney-dew, thats deadly:
 'Twill poyson your fame; look to't: be not cunning:
 For they whose faces doe belye their hearts,
 Are Witches. (I.1.340-344)

The Cardinal says Ferdinand's rage is like that conveyed by witches through the air on violent whirlwinds (II.v.65-67). Ferdinand says of the Duchess: "The witchcraft lies in her rancke blood" (III.1.94), while the Duchess says of Ferdinand: "What witch-craft doth he practice, that he hath left / A dead-mans hand here?" (IV.1.65-66).

The element of fate and chance, inherent in the plot, suggests a supernatural governance and predestination and sometimes the Senecan element of fatality and doom. The omens and superstitions do not lend themselves to plot development but produce atmospheric uneasiness.

In creating his characters, Webster contrasts them and manipulates them to reflect upon each other. The reputable and uprighteous Duchess and Antonio are in contrast to the diabolical and revengeful

⁶ Muriel C. Bradbrook, "Fate and Chance in "The Duchess of Malfi"," Shakespeare's Contemporaries eds. Max Bluestone and Norman Rabkin (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1961), pp. 211-219.

brothers and to the contemptible Cardinal and Julia. Antonio is contrasted to Bosola, the Duchess to Julia, and Ferdinand to his sister. Bosola vacillates between the ruthlessness of the brothers and the virtuousness of the Duchess and Antonio. The brothers are Machiavellian in a political sense as well as in pursuit of evil to satisfy their cause, but are contrasted to each other. Antonio and the Duchess are not Machiavellian in a political sense. They are spirited but lack the initiative to defend themselves against evil—their passivity is not that of the stupid or unintelligent, but that of a martyr. In presenting the characters, the author molds Ferdinand and the Cardinal to represent church and state in his court setting, the minor characters to broaden the court scene, Bosola to represent the Jacobean malcontent with an obsession for court preferment, and the Duchess to denote a reigning sovereign. The element which makes the play a tragedy is that Webster created a weak political partner for the Duchess. She stands alone against the power of Rome and the maliciousness of a diseased society.

The Duchess at the initial part of the play is a proud, sensuous, young widow—a sovereign secure in her social position at court. Gracious, self-possessed, but willful, she is not easily swayed by her dictatorial brothers. Her social position and breeding occasion her to tactfully avoid conflict with her brothers. Cariola wonders whether the spirit of greatness or of womanliness reign most in her—and this is her inner conflict. Her spirit of womanliness predominates when her love for her husband is given precedence over her court duties, or when she says she will fly to pieces like an over-charged

cannon. The womanly fears are aroused as she curses the stars. The madmen dance for her and womanliness speaks: "Nothing but noyse, and folly / Can keepe me in my right wits, whereas reason / And silence, make me starke mad" (IV.ii.6-8). Adversity has persistently pursued this charming, spirited lady until she is in a state of numbness, but not for long. The spirit of greatness triumphs over the spirit of womanliness; after Bosola tells her she is a "box of worm seed" she asserts: "I am Duchess of Malfy still" (IV.ii.139). With this final affirmation of greatness, and having eluded madness, she evinces strength and power by kneeling submissively to accept death. She has preserved what Bogard calls her integrity of life; she is the same proud, intelligent, passionate woman who said to Antonio: "This is flesh, and blood, (Sir,) / 'Tis not the figure out in Allablaster" (I.1.519-520). By being divested of her obvious greatness, she has proved herself great.

With Antonio, the idealist, honesty is a passion and "ambition is a great mans madnes" (I.1.483). He has "long served vertue, / and nev'r tane wages of her" (I.1.504-505). He is rarely prominent on the stage although, technically, he is the protagonist. His heroic qualities run counter to the traditional Renaissance presentation of a dramatic protagonist. This excellent horseman and soldier withdraws from any decisive action against the brothers to protect his wife as an individual or a sovereign. Rather, he seeks reconciliation with the Cardinal and in so doing, causes his own death. Finally, he is overcome with melancholy and resignation: "Pleasure of life, what is't? onely the good houres / Of an Ague: neerely a preparative to rest"

(V.iv.78-79). As a parallel to Vittoria's dying words in The White Devil, "O happy they that never saw the court" (V.vi.261), Antonio's last words reflect thoughts of his son: "And let my soone, flie the Courts of Princes" (V.iv.84).

Ferdinand, a tyrannical Machiavellian, stages frenzied outbursts of anger at his sister's wilfulness and agonized remorse at her death. He is impulsive and turbulent in nature, yet dies uttering a generalization: "Whether we fall by ambition, blood, or lust / Like Diamonds, we are cut by our own dust" (V.v.91-92). His evil power produces an impression of murkiness which hovers with an atmospheric viciousness over much of the play. Certainly, this duke is not cast in the mold of Castiglione's courtier. Rather, he is what the plot requires him to be: an example of the type of courtier who should be purged from the court in the Jacobean world.

The Cardinal, the perfect Machiavellian and "melancholy churchman," with a cool, calculated reason is more cunning and ruthless than his brother because of a greater self-discipline. This churchman-soldier, reserved, unemotional, and sometimes insolent, appears conscienceless, fearless, and impressive as long as he remains in Rome. It is the unscrupulous Bosola who involves him in the main action of the play where he is reduced to being puzzled by a question about hell, and in imagination sees in his fish pond a "thing, arm'd with a rake" which seems to strike at him. Again Webster utilizes the element of the unexpected as the Cardinal, the last character in the play that one might expect to confess having a guilty conscience, says: "How tedious is a guilty conscience," (V.v.1-7), and when dying asks to be

"lay'd by and never thought of" (V.v.113). Bosola, the character who always seems to be lurking near a scene to comment upon it, utters an apt and thematic statement about this pathetic personage: "Thy Greatness was onely outward" (V.v.56). For the purpose of the plot, the Cardinal represents the corruption in the church and court in Webster's diseased and disintegrating world.

Bosola, an inconsistent, complex, vacillating villain, lacks conviction. The masked tomb maker, bellman, and executioner, at last lifts the mask from his face to become penitent, compassionate, and remorseful and the chief avenger of the play by avenging the brother revengers. His moral conversion is short-lived as he reverts to the cutthroat who, like Flamineo in The White Devil, dies "in a mist" uttering:

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 a shadow, or deepe pit of darknesse,
Doth (womanish, and fearefull) mankind live!
Let worthy mindes nere stagger in distrust
To suffer death, or shame, for what is just—
Mine is another voyage. (V.v.121-129)

Bosola is of utmost importance to the plot, both thematically and atmospherically; he is the link between the characters and exemplifies the corruption of human life.

Webster has presented his characters through the imagery in his language more than by any other element. His language is basically that of The White Devil, so to avoid duplication of statement, only the imagery aspect of the language will be considered in The Duchess. It is important, as it is vital to the atmospheric and thematic ele-

ments of the play.

Webster repeats his themes again and again in his images and figures in action. He uses innumerable variations with these figures to reveal a magnificent show and inner corruption, the difference between appearance and reality, aspects of fortune and fate, and hope that looks so fair but deludes so utterly. These themes combine with the somber, dusky atmosphere to produce a tragic narrative.

A motif of hidden corruption and disease pervade the play. At the onset, as mentioned earlier in the chapter, hidden corruption is evidenced in the descriptions of Bosola and the brothers. But an idea of treachery, poison, and slow corruption works not only in the individual, but also in the state as Bosola says of the brothers, who represent the state: "Who would relie upon these miserable dependances, in expectation to be advanced tomorrow?" (I.i.56-57). The court promises and deludes for Bosola says "places in the Court, are like beds in the hospitall, where this mans head lies at that mans foote, and so lower, and lower" (I.i.67-69). There is an implication here too, that fate plays its part in an individual's life.

The Cardinal and Ferdinand in a series of figures hint to the Duchess of the dangers of her remarrying. They warn her against the court, which is a "ranke posture" where a honeydew will poison and faces belie hearts, and where "hypocrisie is woven of a fine small thred" (I.i.340-347); they warn her to live not "like the irregular Crab, / Which though't goes backward, thinkes that it goes right, / Because it goes its owne way" (I.i.355-357). This again is the appearance and reality metaphor expressed with profound, curtly phrased

imagery.

Webster frequently employs repulsive images, as is perhaps appropriate to depict the diseased and corrupt. Ferdinand attempts to again corrupt Bosola, who has already served seven years in the galleys for murder, by obtaining a position for him in the Duchess' household so that he may spy upon her. As provisor of horses, Bosola comments: "Say then that my corruption / Grew out of horse-dooing" (I.i.312-313), and later in offering the pregnant Duchess apricots, she is to eat the fruit that the gardener "did ripen with horse-dung" (I.i.150). Her pregnancy is a corruption for herself, the court, and society. Again, it is the fiendish Bosola who employs offensive imagery as he describes the Old Lady's closet as one which contains "the fat of Serpents; spawne of Snakes, Jewes spittle, and their yong childrens ordoures--All of these for the face; I would sooner eate a dead pidgeon, taken from the soles of the fete of one sick of the plague, then kisse one of you fasting" (II.ii.38-41). Mankind, Bosola feels, has disease taken from the "ulcerous Woolfe, and swinish Meageall" and is eaten up by lice and worms (II.ii.54-57). As in The White Devil, Webster incessantly and effectively utilizes animal imagery to depict man's animal nature.

In a few compressed images arranged in a series, Webster demonstrates the contemptible brothers' power and baseness. They have just learned of the Duchess' pilgrimage to the shrine at Loretto. The author employs his favorite method of describing his characters through a spectator: Silvio says the Cardinal "lifts up's nose, like a fowle Porpise before / A storme," and Delio says Ferdinand laughs "like a

deadly Cannon, / That lightens ere it smoakes" (III.iii.64-68). Next, Pescara says of these courtiers in a figure which embraces the central idea of the play: "These are your true pangues of death, / The pangues of life, that struggle with great states-men" (III.iii.78-79). Irony is then pursued by Webster, for the Duchess by allowing herself to feign a pilgrimage has angered her brother. Although both are murderers, they regard this as an unpardonable sin; this signifies that their religion is external, a showy demonstration with no depth. There is irony again as Ferdinand says: "That damnes her: He thinkes her fault and beauty / Blended together, shew like leaproisie— / The whiter, the fowler"(III.iii.74-76). He recognizes her whiteness but imagines it is evil: this plies the appearance and reality theme. When the duke calls Antonio "a slave, that onely smell'd of ynke, and coumpters, / And nev'r in's life, look'd like a Gentleman" (III.iii.67-88), he misjudges Antonio by his appearance and also shows the attitude of courtiers toward the middle-class. As illustrated in these images, Webster has used a favorite technique of heaping image upon image to draw a picture or create an atmosphere.

The Pope has appointed the Cardinal as general of his army. He journeys to Loretto to lay aside his church vestments and receive those of the military. A glorious hymn is sung to his honor: triumphant conquest is to crown his head and blessings pour down showers (III.iv.24-25). After this display, another ritual is celebrated in a dumb show where the Cardinal rips the wedding ring from the Duchess' finger, banishes her and her family from Acona, and seizes her properties in the name of the Pope. Surely, there is disease in the whole realm.

This is a thematic image in action blended with the verbal image.

The fourth act is devoted exclusively to the events leading progressively to the Duchess' death. Among the many images, a few are gems of ingenuity. After the Duchess curses the stars, Bosola points to reality by saying, "Looke you, the Starres shine still" (IV.i.120). The stars in the heavens are indifferent to her plight. One of the verbal glories of the play is Bosola's riposte to the Duchess' question about her identity: "Thou art a box of worne-seede, at best, but a salvatory of greene mummery: what's this flesh? a little curded milke, plantasticall puffed-paste: our bodies are weaker then those paper prisons boyes use to keep flies in: more contemptible" (IV.ii.123-126). Her body will produce worms, and the flesh be mummified. The flesh is disintegrated and chalky white like the milk which is curded. The body is a prison, weak like a paper bag, and contemptible since it is to "preserve earthewormes"; the soul in the body is like a "larke in a cage," (IV.ii.127-128) confined and frail. Webster then borrows a generalization from The White Devil to polish his image: "Glories (like glowe-wormes) afarre off shine bright,) / But lock'd to neere, have neither heate, nor light" (IV.ii.141-142). The appearance and reality theme is present. The Duchess' beautiful body is a box of worm seed while her glories are obscure. This is preliminary to Bosola's dirge which implies that the Duchess has joined the throng of fools where their lives are "a general mist of error, / Their death, a hideous storme of terror" (IV.ii.190-191), and to the climax of the play with Ferdinand's famous line, uttered when he sees his dead sister: "Cover her face: Mine eyes dazzell: she di'd yong"

(IV.ii.281).

The dying Antonio utters a thematic generalization of futility and false hopes: "In all our Quests of Greatnes / (Like wanton Boyes, whose pastime is their care) / We follow after bubbles, blowne in th' ayre"(V.iv.75-77); and Bosola has had false hopes too, for he "that was an actor in the maine of all, / Much 'gainst mine owne good nature, yet i'th end / Neglected" (V.v.106-108), dies "in a most" (V.v.118). With elegant imagery, Delio echoes the impressions of the others and exclaims in summation: "These wretched eminent things / Leave no more fame behind 'em, then should one / Fall in a frost, and leave his print in snow" (V.v.138-140).

Webster was consistent in developing his elaborate imagery throughout the play. It blends and weaves the thematic and atmospheric into the fabric of the characters' lives and into the structure of the story to create the entity of The Duchess. There has been a reconsideration of the themes of The White Devil: the preference at court, appearance and reality, retribution, futility, and evil in a decessed society. The unity of mood creates the story of darkness in a dark world where man is reduced to a near animal state. The superb tone movement forec̄s the story to be more than merely sketching a moral from the unfortunate marriage of an attractive young widow of nobility. Instead, The Duchess is one of the triumphs in the dramatic world in Renaissance England.

CONCLUSION

John Webster's achievement as a poetic dramatist is exhibited in two powerful tragedies, The Duchess of Malfi and The White Devil. They search for a moral order in the chaotic society of Jacobean skepticism. In The White Devil, the heroic death of the heroine leaves the impression that there is dignity in human worth in a world apparently without values; in The Duchess, the death of the heroine implies a nobility in human life which may be a basis for moral order. They do not reveal a philosophy of negation but rather the ability of man to survive and aspire in a world gone awry and to maintain his human worth in the face of adversity. Civil malady within a state is purged violently and leaves a hope that virtue will conquer. This is the whole view of the plays which must receive the greatest emphasis, for in neither tragedy is the heroine central to the intrigue. The characters are not as important in their dramatic roles as the main design of the plays which lets the tone movement of despair and futility and darkness represent a society.

Literary historians monotonously repeat how both plays stem from the neo-Senecan revenge tragedy in which there is a revenge for honor. They harp on the rude employment of mental and physical horrors and of the multiple slayings. But the revenge theme, abounding in crime, violence, madness, horrors, and death was popular with the Jacobeans. The use of such equipment depicts the world of contradictions, ambition, melancholy, and despair—the futility of hope or of a dream. Opinion will always vary on how disturbing these effects are. One does not have to accept the grotesquery of Webster's art in order to appreciate

the tragedies. Their essence may be independent of this aspect. The horrors may seem childish or absurd or sometimes unnecessary, but when this becomes closely related to the central emphasis of the tragedies, a maturity is revealed. That Webster wrote within the tragedy of blood might seem unfortunate to a twentieth century society; it was wholly acceptable to a Jacobean audience, and one must remember that he did write for this audience. Considered in the light of his own time and the carefully developed techniques and conscientious workmanship which developed the tragedies, the accusations seem to lack justification.

In both tragedies there is much repetition in situation. Each portrays an Italian court setting with Machiavellian intrigue involving imaginative intensity; each involves two brothers savagely avenging the honor of a sister; each has its roots in an Italian novelle which depicts the defiance of a brave and beautiful woman; each employs an impressionistic rather than a psychological approach; and chance rather than the divine seems to govern the world of the plays. In a court atmosphere of ambition, jealousy, deceit, and lust these terrible tales unfold under a dark sky, but with occasional flashes of lightning.

In evaluating the two plays, the critics describe The White Devil as inferior to The Duchess although Lucas, Saintsbury, and Hazlitt indicate a preference for the former. Proponents for The White Devil consider it to be the more spectacular and vigorous drama with the characters more sharply rendered, and in contrast to The Duchess, the play rushes to a spectacular and supremely theatrical conclusion. The

Duchess is less challenging where much of the exuberance of The White Devil is replaced by a more leisurely manner. To those who signify a preference for The Duchess, there is a more emotional depth, a more coherent and profound interpretation of experience, and a depth of vision that penetrates the surface violence to illuminate the underlying pattern and meaning of man's fate. It is stimulating to speculate about which of the plays Webster would have said with Lodovico: "I limb'd this night-peece and it was my best" (The White Devil, V.vi. 299).

The plays have an ethical and allegorical dimension and in themselves are symbols of moral confusion. Flamineo in The White Devil is central to the story. By delivering death and instigating the action leading to death, he represents death. To him morality is impossible as he seeks to prosper by deliberately cultivating the immoral. He represents the negation of order in the universe; he mirrors the confusion in Webster's dark world and his tragic vision. His evil actions destroy him so the impression is one of waste in human life. Flamineo never learns that life can afford a basis for morality even in a chaotic world. Bosola who is central to the story in The Duchess shows that redemption is possible. He learned from the Duchess that life can offer a basis for morality. He repeats the function of Flamineo in The White Devil by illuminating the evils of the world. But it is he who helps the Duchess to overcome her despair and arouse her spirit of greatness. He reminds her that the stars still shine so not all is darkness. Her tortures are symbolic of the pain in the human life, and the diabolical Bosola finally becomes a symbol of the comfort which she

will merit in heaven. By identifying himself with her brothers, he was like Flamenco, a symbol of death, but toward the end, that of hope. The last act shows the way of life of the Aragonian brothers is that of damnation. Complete disintegration of man to the animal state is symbolized in Ferdinand's lycanthropy. Bosola's transformation by the Duchess' influence makes him refute the brothers' evil influence, seek for a value in life, and thus become a symbol of justice to restore order. The Duchess has been purged of pride and with a view of heaven humbly accepts death. Vittoria and Flamenco fail to achieve recognition in the same degree but enough to repudiate the darkness of the world where they have sought greatness. Both acknowledge wickedness and both die "in a mist." Like the Duchess they die denying self rather than asserting it. The world in which they die is not a meaningless one. Each play ends in a couplet which states a moral lesson: Giovanni of The White Devil, after ordering the removal of the dead bodies, and thus symbolically purging the world of evil, warns: "Let guilty men remember their blacke deedes, / Do leane on crutches, made of slender reedes"; Delio of The Duchess wishes to make noble use of the various deaths by making great men Lords of truth for "integrity of life, is fames best friend, / Which noblely (beyond Death) shall crowne the end."

The characters in both dramas are seen morally, religiously, and politically through the English eyes of the Elizabethan Reformation. They trace the outer patterns of men struggling with one another, deemphasizing the individual aspects, but are related to the actions of men everywhere. The essence of the characters is the stuff of life itself,

and they speak today as in Webster's day. The twentieth century objects to a lack of psychological motivation; Lucas says they are painted with a broad brush. The characters in The White Devil are more sharply defined than in The Duchess: Flamineo is more powerful than Bosola, Vittoria than the Duchess, and Brachiano than Antonio. The courtier brothers in both tragedies are individualists, and with the exception of Marcello, competently portray Webster's tragic world. The minor characters are effectively rendered: the sorrowing mother Cornelia, innocent Marcello, faithful Isabella, Moor Zanche, the maid Cariola, virtuous Delio, and the mistress Julia. The two most original characters are what the critics choose to call choral figures. Flamineo, the finest of all Webster's creations, assumes no great part in the action but provides the magnificent satirical comment; Bosola serves the same purpose in The Duchess but is vacillating and not so intensely or positively created. They are both the forgotten men of the Renaissance with no security or hope. Both cast a cloud of melancholy over the tragedies and speak a large proportion of the lines which are the most poetic, although frequently in prose. They are the connecting link between the characters and weave the threads of the plot. The characters in both dramas are as Bosola says: "We are merely the Starres tennys-balls (stroke and banded / Which way please them)" (V.iv.64-65).

Webster's style was a perfect medium for a dramatic satirist, for he composed a rugged, uneven verse mingled with prose to express his scorn for the barbarity of life itself. His bold superb imagery, sometimes crude and coarse, is in perfect harmony with the unharmonious

versification. The animated, disorderly verse has the rhythm of the speaking voice and embodies a sense of disordered activity. One can read his dark philosophy through the magnificent imagery which is interwoven with the concept of the tragedies. The function of the imagery is the function of the entire dramas. The range and interplay of mood, thought, and imagery creates richness and variety and keep death, disease, insanity, and other forces which destroy men's bodies and souls before the minds of the audience. His style embraces a beauty of phraseology, sententious epigrammatic terseness, concentrated morbid splendor in poetic language, a command of the turbulent emotions of horror and pathos, and highly dramatic and condensed moments. Certainly, the glories of the verse are Webster's initial claim to fame.

Traditionally regarded as the greatest tragic dramatist next to Shakespeare, Webster is an impressive rather than a dexterous playwright. It is difficult to evaluate his dramas since they are not securely in the theatrical repertory. The modern reader is schooled to the literary world of psychological and social complexities and is generally estranged from Elizabethan traditions. To some critics he is a creator of ill-constructed plays flooded with atrocities while to others he is a remarkable dramatist with an unusually individualistic style. Certainly, the poet and dramatist struggle against each other. Perhaps the style is too compressed for the stage; there is no time to pause and consider the concentrated verbal utterance for the audience must rush forward with the surging narrative. To appreciate fully the poetry, one needs time to digest the intricacies of

the imagery and phraseology. It is probably unfortunate that this superb poet felt compelled to write for the stage, yet he is a competent dramatist revealing many flashes of dramatic ingenuity.

In the mid-twentieth century one finds Webster's reputation secure. In 1960 a theater-goer might view The Duchess at London's Aldwych Theater and in America, in 1965, The White Devil in an off-broadway production. Perhaps the time is ripe to again revitalize Webster's fame, for the twentieth century society should find him congenial. He painted a dark world with a lack of values, and certainly our world is one struggling with social and political evils. It appears that an audience could disregard the sophistication of the century's well-constructed play, approach the dramas with a kind of naïveté, forget the illogical plot development, submit to the movement of the whole, and discover Webster's one-dimensional dark and tragic world which Bosola describes:

Oh this gloomy world,
In what a shadow, or deepe pit of darknesse,
Doth (womanish, and fearefull) mankind live!
The Duchess (V.v.124-126)

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