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Fate and Free Will in the White Devil and the Duchess of Malfi

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**FATE AND FREE WILL IN THE WHITE DEVIL
AND THE DUCHESS OF MALFI**

by

Robert Edward Cahill

**A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School
of Loyola University in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts**

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LIFE

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Were John Webster's merit as a playwright measured by the amount of critical controversy his works have caused, he might well lay claim to a high place in the history of English Letters. For over three centuries, friends and foes of the Jacobean playwright have lashed or laurelled him with a vehemence hardly equalled in the annals of dramatic criticism. Thomas Middleton, Webster's friend and contemporary dramatist, predicted in his verse preface to the 1623 edition of The Duchess of Malfi:

In this Thou imitat'st one Rich and Wise,
That sees His Goode Deedes done before he dies;
As He by Workes, Thou by this Worke of Fame.
Hast well provided for thy Living Name.¹

If subsequent critics have been less favorable, they have at least borne out this prophecy by keeping Webster's name and fame alive.

Webster's critics have not hesitated to use strong words in praise or blame of his dramas. Swinburne compares him favorably to Aeschylus, Dante, and Shakespeare, while Charles Kingsley considers him the exponent of a "vicious" art which is not likely to be of use to mankind. For Ward he is a genius of "commanding originality," while Stoll maintains that Webster leaned

¹Thomas Middleton, "On the just Worth of that Well Deserver, Mr. John Webster, and Upon his Maisterpeece of Tragedy," reprinted by F. L. Lucas ed., The Complete Works of John Webster (London, 1928), II, 27. This edition will be designated simply as Works.

heavily upon the past, and Shaw emphasizes his criticism of Webster's characterization with the comparison to men of wax, "Tussaud laureate." The poetry of Webster's lines, which Lucas lauds, is "hideous cacophony" to Archer's ears.²

The subject of such diverse criticism, it would seem, cannot but prompt further investigation. All the facets of the dramatist's art cannot be held up to view, however, in a short treatise, and so some selection must be made. The present thesis, then, will prescind from the form of Webster's dramas, his poetic gifts and techniques, and explore the dramatic content or matter. It will attempt to weigh Webster anew by examining the core of his tragic view, his presentation of the cause of tragic action. Therefore there will be no attempt made to resolve the difference of opinion between Lucas and Archer over the worth of his poetic diction, nor to decide in favor of either Stoll or Ward with regard to his originality. Rather, this thesis will examine whether or not Webster's tragedies truly represent human experience. It will be Webster's view of man, and more particularly his characters and the cause of their tragic downfall that will be investigated, with a view to determining whether or not he deserves to be ranked with such keen observers of mankind as Aeschylus, Dante and Shakespeare, or whether his art is "vicious," as Kingsley has maintained.³

²A. C. Swinburne, The Age of Shakespeare (London, 1908), p. 15; Charles Kingsley and George Bernard Shaw, cited in Works, I, 15; A. W. Ward, A History of English Dramatic Literature, (London, 1899), p. 51; Works, p. 28; W. A. Archer, The Old Drama and the New, (Boston, 1923), p. 29.

³Lucas, Works, I, 15.

A dramatist's view of man must eventually include some belief with regard to man's freedom, or lack of freedom, in choosing his own destiny. The core of any dramatist's tragic philosophy will be his concept of fate and free will. Again Webster causes critical controversy, for, to cite, but two of the many opinions, B. Ifor Evans maintains that Webster's characters are ruled by "a certain brutal force . . . as if life itself were governed by chance not reason," while Ward upholds free choice in Webster's dramas, extolling the poet's "true insight into human nature."⁴

The present thesis, then, chiefly by reference to the two great tragedies of Webster, The White Devil and The Duchess of Malfi, will examine the arguments in favor of fatalism and free will in his dramatic philosophy. Its aim is to prove that Webster's tragic world is one in which the downfall of heroes and heroines is the result of their own decisions and not of an overwhelming force beyond their comprehension or control, that his world, clouded in mists though it be, is one primarily of reason and not of chance.

Since an understanding of an individual's philosophy is always rendered more simple by adverting to the dominant ideas of his age and the philosophy of his contemporaries, the chapter which follows will be devoted to a consideration of fate and free will in tragedy, especially in view of the Elizabethan and Jacobean background. We shall then have some more definite criteria for judging Webster in the light of his era and his art. With their background

⁴B. Ifor Evans, A Short History of English Drama (London, 1948), p. 95; Adolphus Ward, Dramatic Literature, III, 63.

clearly in view, consideration of The White Devil and The Duchess of Malfi will, it is hoped, be more accurate and stimulating.

CHAPTER II

FATE IN WEBSTER'S BACKGROUND FOR TRAGEDY

Before turning to Webster's immediate background in tragic philosophy, some consideration of fate and free will and the role they play in dramatic action may prove useful. If a clear definition of fatalism and freedom as they concern the dramatist is made, a more accurate judgment of Webster will be possible.

"Tragedy is an imitation of action and of life."¹ Understanding action as moral and intellectual as well as physical, we perceive that the focal point of tragedy is actually the nature of man. The tragic situation will arise from some conflict between man and his universe, or within man between his higher and lower natures. For the Christian humanist, this lack of harmony and, therefore, the basis for tragedy, is original sin, "man's first disobedience." While denying that original sin vitiated human nature as such, the Christian recognizes the difficulty with which man must labor to restore the right order of things. "In a word, we have to account not only for the presence, but also the intensity of the tragic element so deeply interwoven in every human destiny. . . . From the day when his heart was alienated from God, when his interior powers were dislocated because he no longer loved God above

¹Aristotle, Poetics, 6, 1449b, quoted from Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art, ed. S. H. Butcher, 4th ed. (New York, 1951), p. 24.

all things, when his eyes were blinded to the light that lit up all things with all their meaning—then, for him, all things fell apart into disunity and disorientation, each reverted to its brute value and became pliable to any and every human end."² Regardless of his acceptance of the Christian view of original sin and its consequences the dramatist is faced with the reality of man as imperfect and in conflict in a divided world.

Man's situation lends itself to two dramatic possibilities for tragic action. First, because his intellect has been weakened, he can be the unwitting dupe of forces beyond his comprehension, forces which operate by some insuperable necessity beyond his control. Such forces can be given, and in the history of drama have been given, various names: Fate, Fortune, society, biological necessity, the Life Force. On the other hand, because his view of life is less clear, his will may be diverted from the true good which leads to human happiness to choose something, which, under the appearance of good, will lead him to destruction.³ Thus we have the alternate dramatic possibility of choice as opposed to fate. Butcher puts it thus: "On the one hand¹ fate, the fate of the hero, is determined by forces outside the control of the human will. A mere error of judgment, due to the inherent limitations of human knowledge brings about the tragic downfall; on the other hand, character and passion determine destiny, and the individual, by an act of the will enters upon a con-

²Jean Mouroux, The Meaning of Man (New York, 1948), p. 15.

³Cf. St. Thomas, S.T., I-II, 17, 1 ad 3, tr. Dom Thomas Verner Moore, The Driving Forces of Human Nature (New York, 1948), p. 331, "The root of liberty is in the will as subject; but, as cause it is in the reason. For on this account can the will be inclined to many things, because reason has various concepts of the good. And therefore philosophers define choice as the free judgment of reason."

flict where the forces are chiefly moral."⁴ In examining Webster then we must determine whether the downfall of his heroes and heroines is due to "a mere error of judgment," or whether "character and passion determine destiny."

There is perhaps danger of oversimplification in the foregoing distinction. Most great tragedies blend elements of mere error and moral guilt, fate and freedom. As Clifford Leech remarks, "The tragic picture of the universe postulates a limited free will."⁵ The question, then, will be to determine by what free will is limited. Fatalistic tragedy will be limited by some internal or external necessity, as in some of the ancient Greek drama and most of O'Neill's modern plays. Free will tragedy will present a will limited by the force of passions too frequently indulged—avarice, lust, or ambition, such as in Macbeth. The test of the fatalism or freedom of a particular play will then be the question: By what is free will limited?

Webster's more remote background was the medieval concept of tragedy which had its roots in Christian theology. Freedom and fate are harmonized in the poetry of Chaucer and others by portraying man as free until he sins. After sin he becomes subject to Fate. The classic example of this tragic philosophy is Troilus and Criseyde.⁶ The medievals departed from strict Christian

⁴Butcher, pp. 323-324.

⁵Clifford Leech, Shakespeare's Tragedies (London, 1950), p. 16.

⁶D. Robertson, "Chaucerian Tragedy," ELH, XIX, (March 1952), 1-37.

theology⁷ in placing man, after sin, in a position of coercion from without, from Fortune, rather than from within, from his weakened will which had developed a fondness for sin. Echoes of the medieval view are heard in Elizabethan drama, notably Macbeth.⁸

The Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, considered from the aspect of tragic philosophy, may be divided into three periods.⁹ The first, from the beginning of Elizabeth's reign to the century's end, reflects confidence, patriotism, and love of life generally, and in particular human freedom and majesty. The second, which ends in 1610, is characterized by melancholy and spiritual defeat, the mood presaged by Marlowe and deepened by the social and political unrest that followed upon the death of Elizabeth and the accession of James I. From 1611 until the end of James I's reign, a slow return to an equilibrium between the bravado of the first period and the despair of the second takes place. Webster's plays are dated within the years of this second period, the period of melancholy and spiritual darkness.

The dramatists who preceded Webster in the first period inherited a world-view whose general characteristics were the philosophy of the schoolmen.¹⁰

⁷Cf. St. Bernard, Sermon in Canticles, 81, 7 and 9, tr. Mouroux, Meaning of Man, p. 174: "Man alone of mortals can resist the constraining power of nature, and he alone among earthly creatures is therefore free. . . . But even he becomes subject to coercion when he falls into sin. This coercion is not from nature, but from his own free will. . . . I know not in what wicked yet wonderful way, the will when turned to evil by sin imposes a constraint upon itself; so that on the one hand such constraint, since it is voluntary, cannot excuse the will, and so on the other the will is unable to resist."

⁸Una Ellis-Fermor, Jacobean Drama, 3rd. ed. (London, 1953), p. 11.

⁹Ibid., 1.

¹⁰R. M. W. Tillyard, The Elizabethan World Picture (London, 1948), p. 12.

With the coming of the Renaissance to England, a deeper interest in the nature of man was introduced, without at the same time upsetting the general picture of God-man relations. The early effect of the Renaissance in England was to reaffirm the conviction that the universe was one of law and order, not brute force, and that man was its central figure, free in the exercise of reason and will. The drama, in spite of pagan and fatalistic notes, was built upon the foundation of Christian humanism. It was a universe of growth and cooperation with God, with a corresponding simple psychology.¹¹ A complete study of the philosophy of the period has led Professor Wells to conclude "that the ethics of the dramatists is in large part medieval. . . . The seven deadly sins, the view of the world of good and evil men, of the absolute good or evil of any action, of strict personal responsibility, and of a virtually feudal loyalty to existing orders of society, dominate the ethical and philosophical thought of the drama."¹²

As the Elizabethan reign drew to a close, however, the hold of the medieval heritage upon the drama rapidly relaxed.¹³ Sixteen hundred and eleven is generally given as the date which marks the transition between the theatre dominated by medieval philosophy and the theatre of Renaissance thought. The chief characteristic of the second dramatic period, during which Webster's plays were produced, has been described as "the withdrawal of the light of the

¹¹Alfred Harbage, Shakespeare and the Rival Traditions (New York, 1952), p. 135. See also Hardin Craig, The Enchanted Glass (London, 1950), pp. 113-138, for a good treatment of this point.

¹²Henry W. Wells, Elizabethan and Jacobean Playwrights (New York, 1939), p. 260.

¹³Ibid., 254.

spirit from within a world it had once inhabited entire."¹⁴ Largely because of this divorce of religion from daily life, and especially from the drama, sin became for the dramatists more "man's inhumanity to man" than his violation of divine decree. Passions in dramatic characters give more evidence of animal instinct than of character in conflict, than of moral values under attack.¹⁵ Such was the situation in which John Webster found the drama when he began to work upon The White Devil.

The developments which brought about the change evidenced above and which were influential in the shaping of Webster's philosophy can be reduced to three major categories for the purposes at hand: (1) the political theories of Machiavelli, as they were translated into Elizabethan England; (2) Senecan stoicism, as understood by the followers of Kyd and Marlowe; (3) and the physio-psychology of the Renaissance. Senecan stoicism, as well as humoral psychology, was an influence for fatalism in the drama. On the other hand the pseudo-Machiavellian political concepts of Elizabethan drama bolstered the remnants of the medieval heritage in favor of free will. Enough has been said about the Christian heritage. The following paragraphs will outline the influence of the other three elements upon tragic philosophy.

For Webster and his contemporaries, Niccolo Machiavelli was a synonym for evil, the exponent of every vice.¹⁶ In transmission to Elizabethan England his pragmatic materialism had assumed a cynical solipsism quite foreign to the

¹⁴Ellis-Fermor, p. 25. See the entire chapter for a complete analysis of the effects of religious dissensions upon the drama.

¹⁵H. J. C. Grierson, Cross-Currents in English Literature of the 17th Century (London, 1929), p. 103.

¹⁶E. M. W. Tillyard, Elizabethan World Picture, p. 34.

original philosophy expounded by the author of The Prince. While the Elizabethan, as Tillyard's study indicates, looked with horror on such a materialistic conception of the universe, he was nonetheless intrigued by the daring of pseudo-Machiavellian ideas. Much like the average American of the gangster era, the Elizabethan was curious about the evil he condemned and he enjoyed reading about it. Eventually the public conscience under the unsettled conditions of the interregnum would reap the harvest of its Machiavellian interest. The Gunpowder Plot in 1605 "took the form for public and private men alike of a sense of impending fate, of a state of affairs so unstable that great and sustained effort was for a time suspended and a sense of the futurity of man's achievement set in."¹⁷ In a word, the Renaissance had boomeranged. In such a world the possibility of pseudo-Machiavellian villains did not seem too remote.

The Machiavellian doctrine had gone hand in hand with the development of revenge tragedy in England. Revenge, private as well as public, waxed strong in Tudor England, and its appearance upon the stage was welcomed as a legitimate motive for dramatic action.¹⁸ Stoll has outlined two schools of revenge tragedy, one which looks to Kyd and The Spanish Tragedy as its prototype and another which descends from Marlowe.¹⁹ The chief distinction between the two types is that Kydian revenge tragedy utilizes the Machiavellian villain, while Marlowe and his school attempt to portray the Machiavellian as hero. The un-

¹⁷Ellis-Fermor, p. 2. Cf. also Clifford Leech, Shakespearean Tragedy (London, 1950), p. 31, for application of the general unrest and Machiavellian spirit echoed in Troilus and Cressida which expresses "the weakening of faith in human nature . . . the consummate expression of an anarchic vision."

¹⁸Fredson Thayer Bowers, Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy (Princeton, 1940), pp. 1-61.

¹⁹E. E. Stoll, John Webster (Boston, 1905), pp. 13-45.

rest of the age, the disillusionment with Elizabethan prosperity, coupled with Marlowe's influence brought to Jacobean dramatists a current of expression already channelled toward despair.²⁰ The pseudo-Machiavellian doctrine, by underlining the concept of man as capable of the most foul inhumanities to obtain what he desired, was a force in favor of free will in dramatic theory. The indomitable will of a Tamburlaine, the cunning of a Vendice, bolstered the medieval concept of good and evil, if it ignored at the same time the relation of good and evil to Divine Justice.

The Machiavellian villain was accompanied into English drama by Senecan stoicism. Translated into English between 1559 and 1581, Seneca's plays provided a theme for Kyd and other early dramatists, but the stoic philosophy and atmosphere did not become part and parcel of English tragedy until much later. By the year 1600 "tragedy outside of certain of Shakespeare's, accepts with protesting wonder or with stoical resolution of the 'wearisome condition of Humanity.'"²¹ Jacobean drama, and Webster in particular, is noted for preoccupation with death and the vanity of human achievement. The effect of the disillusionment in England was stoicism, which "when it became the vogue, wrought changes

²⁰See Ellis-Fermor, p. 2, for a complete study of Marlowe's relation to the later playwrights. The concluding remarks of the treatment provide an adequate summary: "Marlowe's keen spiritual sense sees through the delusion of prosperity that intoxicates his contemporaries as a whole and anticipates that mood of spiritual defeat and despair which . . . becomes the center of the later tragic mood. And this position is reached by Marlowe through one section of his experience that is, in its turn, the epitome of an experience that touched a large number of the Jacobean dramatists after him, his exploration of the system of Machiavelli." Cf. Lucas, Works, I, 36-38, for relation of Machiavellian theories to other dramatists of the period.

²¹Ellis-Fermor, p. 19.

in man's opinion as to his ethical situation, since his chance for success became less and his individual responsibility correspondingly less. . . . Man's nature, rather than man, was to be condemned, for man's nature was capable of exaltation only if it was conceived of as godlike."²² Stoicism, then, became a factor in Elizabethan thinking which favored fate and minimized free will.

Closely allied to the stoicism that crept into English philosophy, was the humoral, or physio-psychology of the Renaissance. The importance of Galen's doctrine of the humors and passions began to be realized about 1600, and employed in thinking about those issues with which drama concerns itself. "The various influences of this psychological point of view constitute the greatest single difference between the Aristotelianism of those who wrote before the turn of the century and the Stoicism of those who wrote afterwards, or specifically, between the Elizabethan dramatists and the Jacobean dramatists."²³

The key to this psychology was the doctrine of the humors, or fluids which existed in the body. The ideal man had the four humors, sanguine, choleric, melancholy, and phlegmatic, in a strict ratio of four parts of the first, to three of the second, to two of the third, to one of the last.²⁴ Physical and psychic disturbances were due to extreme disproportion of the humors, while ordinary personality and physical differences indicated slight variations in

²²Hardin Craig, "Ethics in the Jacobean Drama," The Parrott Presentation Volume: Essays in Dramatic Literature, ed. Hardin Craig, (London, 1935), p. 28. Cf. also Hardin Craig, The Enchanted Glass, p. 116.

²³Ibid., p. 28.

²⁴John W. Draper, Humors and Shakespeare's Characters (Durham, North Carolina, 1945), pp. 11-20.

proportions. Passions were determined by the humors predominant in the individual physiology. Excess of choler in the body fluids made a man prone to violence. On the other hand, the passions once indulged would create an additional amount of the humoral fluid involved, making the individual more prone to that same passion.²⁵

This psychological theory of the humors allowed for free will insofar as man by regulating his diet, place of residence, hours of rest, etc., might control to a great extent his physiology.²⁶ It is not difficult to see, however, how the door was opened for despair over biological determinism. As Craig remarks, "A man's character became, so to speak, an accident rather than a property. Man and man under passion were different machines."²⁷ Sufficient study has been made with regard to the influence of humoral psychology upon Shakespeare's characterisations to prove that the drama had been invaded by these ideas.²⁸

It would be wrong to assume that determinism became the warcry of the dramatists. As one critic has observed, "The emphasis was on the reality of a pattern of proper adjustment. . . . In Elizabethan times we seldom encounter professed determinism; but we observe in some quarters the attendant narrowing of the focus of attention to self, and decreased faith in the educability of

²⁵Lawrence Babb, The Elizabethan Malady (Lansing, 1951, p. 10.

²⁶Draper, Humors & Shakespeare, p. 116. Cf. also Burton, The Anatomy of Melancholy, I, 272-277. ed. A. R. Shillito (London, 1926).

²⁷Hardin Craig, Enchanted Glass, p. 116.

²⁸Cf. H. J. C. Grierson, Cross-Currents in English Literature of the 17th Century (London, 1929), and Draper, Humors and Shakespeare.

man."²⁹ The interest in Galenic psychology led to a cultivation of melancholia as a scholarly virtue, and gave birth to the malcontent as a dramatic type.

Webster makes use of the malcontent in both his plays; *Flamíneo* and *Bosola* are generally considered the best examples of the type in Jacobean drama. In general the malcontent was taciturn, a lover of solitude, and tormented by fears and sorrows.³⁰ Babb divides the malcontents of Elizabethan life and literature into four species: the melancholy traveler, the villain, the cynic, and the scholar.³¹ The first three find application in Webster's characters and will be much in evidence in a later chapter of this study. The popularity of the malcontent as a type has been variously ascribed to such developments as the disdain of scholarship, the rise of Plato's philosophy and the concomitant view of man as a prisoner of his body, and the discoveries of the new science.³² Regardless of the cause, we find characters in drama quite removed from the majestic defiance of Marlowe or not of the resolute decisiveness of the early Shakespearean drama. Greatness comes to the Jacobean tragic hero only through the ability to suffer. Men are victims in a world where there is no relationship between deserts and rewards, in which the gods seem indifferent to human suffering.³³

²⁹ Alfred Harbage, *Shakespeare and the Rival Traditions* (New York, 1952), p. 157.

³⁰ Babb, *Elizabethan Malady*, p. 185.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

³² Cf. Clifford Leech, *Shakespeare's Tragedies* (London, 1950), pp. 104-105; and Babb, *Elizabethan Malady*, p. 185.

³³ Leech, *Shakespeare's Tragedies*, p. 106.

Renaissance psychology, therefore, with its malcontents and dominating passions must be added to the list of forces which led to a fatalistic viewpoint in Jacobean drama. In spite of the fact that this psychology allowed for free will, historically its effect upon Renaissance Englishmen was to increase the sense of spiritual defeat and despair brought on by other social and political factors.³⁴

Webster's world of conflicting ideas included, then, Aristotelian and medieval philosophy with their strange allies, the Machiavellian villains and heroes, and these ideas tended to emphasize free will. The Jacobean world also included the fatalistic forces of humoral psychology and stoicism.

Webster was a man of his age, engaged in daily converse with the other playwrights and actors of his time. He contributed the study, "An Excellent Actor," to Overbury's Characters, a group of sketches which uses humoral psychology in describing stock types. The other ideas current in Jacobean England were certainly not foreign to him. The study of his plays will give further evidence of his knowledge of psychology and stoic doctrine. Yet, the chapters to come will attempt to prove that Webster was on the side of the forces of free will, that he believed man to be the master of his own fate.

³⁴Grierson, Cross-Currents, p. 104.

CHAPTER III

FATE AND FREEDOM IN THE WHITE DEVIL

Webster's critics have not focused their attention upon the problem of fatalism or free will, as such, in considering his dramatic philosophy.¹ Many of them, however, have indicated an opinion upon a much debated point in Webster criticism, and one which is closely allied to the fatalism-freedom question: Webster's ethical or moral purpose. Naturally enough, those who argue for a moral, or, more accurately, a moralizing Webster have seemed to favor a free will interpretation of his dramatic strategy, while those who promote Webster as a "genius of chaos" a protagonist of despair, seem to ally themselves with the fatalistic view.

Historically, Websterian criticism of the last hundred years can be divided into three periods. The first, from Charles Lamb to the outbreak of the first World War, is a period of critics who either praise or blame Webster insofar as they see in him a dramatist who condemns his age or who "Immorally holds up a stoic philosophy as the only answer to life's riddles. This period includes such critics as Gosse, James Russell Lowell, E. E. Stoll, Swinburne,

¹Despite the wealth of Webster criticism, fatalism and free will are specifically treated in but one article: M. C. Bradbrook, "Two Notes Upon Webster: Fate and Chance in The Duchess of Malfi and Some Parallels between the Conspiracy of Byron and The Duchess of Malfi," MLR, XLII (July 1947), 281-294.

and Schelling.² Of these, Lowell alone finds in Webster "crime as a spectacle and not as a means for looking into our hearts."³ The others all put Webster upon a pedestal just a bit lower than Shakespeare's and find in him a champion of human nature in its darker moments. For them Webster painted the horrors of his age to drive men back to sanity.⁴ In so doing he presumed free will.

The second period of Webster criticism was inaugurated by Rupert Brooke with his study, John Webster and the Elizabethan Drama, which appeared in 1916. For Brooke and for T. S. Eliot who followed him Webster's greatness lies in the fact that he prescinded from the moral order; any weakness in his dramaturgy lies in lapses into moralising. Brooke's famous description of the atmosphere of a Websterian drama bears repetition as it indicates how this new approach to Webster made way for a fatalistic interpretation of the plays.

The world called Webster is a peculiar one. It is inhabited by people driven like animals, and perhaps like men, only by 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 and distressing feature of Webster's characters, their foul and indestructible vitality. It fills one with the repulsion one feels at the unending sculless energy that heaves and pulses through the lowest forms of life. They kill, love and 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. . . . Human beings are writhing grubs in an immense night. And the night is without stars or moon. But it has sometimes a certain quietude in its darkness, but not very much.⁶

²Edmund Gosse, Seventeenth Century Studies (London, 1883); James Russell Lowell, The Old English Drama (New York, 1893); E. E. Stoll, John Webster (Boston, 1905); A. C. Swinburne, The Age of Shakespeare (London, 1908); Felix Schelling, English Drama (New York, 1914).

³Lowell, Old English Drama, p. 61.

⁴Schelling, English Drama, p. 116

⁵Rupert Brooke, John Webster and the Elizabethan Drama (London, 1916).

⁶Ibid., pp. 160-161.

Brooke's concept of Webster was attacked by William Archer in 1923 and defended the following year by T. S. Eliot who reiterated the view of Webster as a "dramatic genius directed toward chaos."⁷ F. L. Lucas continued this interpretation with its tendency toward a fatalistic analysis of the dramatic action and compared Webster to the Brontes and his atmosphere to that of Wuthering Heights.⁸

Recent Webster criticism has seen in the view of Brooke and Eliot the interpolation of the disillusionment that followed upon the first World War. While it may be argued that that period of recent history had many resemblances to the Jacobean period, the critics of the third period have swung away from the interpretation of Brooke as "too romantic."⁹ Critics of the third period include Una Ellis-Fermor, Muriel Bradbrook, David Cecil, Clifford Leech, and most recently, Travis Bogard.¹⁰ With them the pendulum has swung back toward an interpretation of Webster as a moral critic of his age and of the world he portrays in his drama. "His purpose seems to be to create, as

⁷"Four Elizabethan Dramatists," 1924, reprinted in Selected Essays, 2nd ed. (New York, 1950), p. 98.

⁸"And the passion for unbowed courage in the face of doom, the passion for passion itself. . . these in turn Webster might have thrilled to meet again on the black moorlands of Wuthering Heights." F. L. Lucas, Works, I, 46.

⁹David Cecil, Poets and Story-Tellers (New York, 1949), p. 29.

¹⁰Una Ellis-Fermor, Jacobean Drama, 3rd ed. (London, 1953); M. C. Bradbrook, Themes and Conventions of Elizabethan Tragedy (Cambridge, 1935), and "Two Notes Upon Webster: Fate and Chance in the Duchess of Malfi," MLR, 42 (July 1947), pp. 281-294; David Cecil, Poets and Story-Tellers (New York, 1949); Clifford Leech, John Webster (London, 1951); and Travis Bogard, The Tragic Satire of John Webster (Los Angeles, 1955).

rapidly as is consistent with fullness and depth, a picture of the world in which his characters move; a world created of their thoughts and of the deeds which are the outcome of their thoughts."¹¹ Muriel Bradbrook and David Cecil have been the only critics to discuss free will. The former has seen in Webster a reflection of medieval tragic theory: the characters remain free until their tragic decision to have what they will puts them under the influence of fate.¹² Cecil argues for the presence of moral guilt throughout the tragic action. "His wickedest characters are never moral idiots who do not understand the enormity of their crimes. They may profess to disbelieve in virtue and pour contempt upon scruple, but it is against the instinctive promptings of their natures. Before they die they are always forced to recognize the supremacy of the Divine Law, against which they have offended."¹³

Travis Bogard has accented the satire of Webster as the key to an interpretation of his moral purpose. For him Webster's moral is "integrity of life." Yet "in Webster's use of satire an instrument of morality becomes a work of vice, with the result that evil appears to absorb the good. Its omnipotence perverts all positive ethical counsel. Its omnipresence makes it impossible for positive moral action to arise."¹⁴ For Bogard, Webster despite his attempts to be ethical, was overcome by the power of evil, and his characters reflect this absorption. Bogard would seem to argue that, while Webster wanted to make

¹¹Ellis-Fermor, p. 190.

¹²M. C. Bradbrook, MLR, XLII, 285.

¹³Cecil, Poets and Story-Tellers, p. 33

¹⁴Bogard, Tragic Satire of Webster, p. 131.

men free, the power of evil in his view of life made them subject to fate.

Other recent critics have expressed opinions that would seem to give rise to a fatalistic interpretation; among these are John Gassner and B. Ifor Evans.⁵ Thus the third and most recent period of Webster criticism, though predominately filled with comments which favor a free will interpretation, still includes those who would seem to favor a heavy-handed fate.

The critical review of the preceding pages has been prefaced to this chapter in order to give the reader some orientation before proceeding to an analysis of The White Devil. Obviously we cannot look to the critics, for any accord or agreement in regard to our problem. What evidence they have in support of their positions is from the plays themselves and so it is to the plays that we must turn to determine the role of fate and free will in Webster's philosophy of tragedy.

Since Webster's dramas combine elements of fate and free will these shall be considered in their turn with respect to The White Devil, the arguments for a fatalistic interpretation first, then the free will evidence.

The White Devil has been called the greatest of the villain plays. Finished somewhere between 1609 and 1612, it represents the welding together of the Kydian and Marlovian revenge themes.¹⁶ The heroine, Vittoria Corombona, displays much of the strength of the Machiavellian villain but not half so much as her adversaries. The attraction of the play has always rested upon

¹⁵"... humanity's anguish and evil alone capture his interest."—John Gassner, Masters of the Drama (New York, 1940), p. 260; "cruel, passionate, irrational, fierce...."—B. Ifor Evans, Short History of English Drama (London, 1948), p. 93.

¹⁶Bowers, Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy (Princeton, 1940), p. 48.

the "species of strange fascination, such as is only too often exercised by heartless pride,"¹⁷ which is the essence of the defiant Vittoria.

The fatalistic arguments in the play can be reduced to three headings: the passionate natures of the principals, which have led some to argue that there is no moral guilt involved when passion is so strong as to be irresistible;¹⁸ the malcontent and melancholy expressed chiefly by Flamineo and Lodovico; and the stoical acceptance of death and fate by the principal characters.

The arguments for overwhelming passion stem from the simple "Quite lost, Flamineo,"¹⁹ which Brachiano utters as Vittoria enters the play. There is a wealth of meaning in his utterance. Not only is he quite lost to her through the passion of his love, but, because of this love, doom will befall them all. In response to Brachiano's fears that Vittoria has not noticed and will not respond to his love, her brother Flamineo assures him that her coyness is but a device to increase the intensity of his desire.

Flamineo O they are politticks,
They know our desire is increased by the difficultie of enjoying; whereas
Satiety is a blunt, weary and drowsie passion— (W.D. I.ii. 20-22.)

Again, Camillo, Vittoria's weak-witted husband, in spite of his dullness cannot but note that Brachiano is unusually agitated and suspects his designs upon Vittoria.

Camillo The Duke your maister visits me—I thanke him,
And I perceave how like an earnest bowler

¹⁷A. W. Ward, History of English Literature, III (London, 1899), 57.

¹⁸Bradbrook, Themes and Conventions, p. 188.

¹⁹The White Devil I.ii. 3. This and subsequent references are from F. L. Lucas, ed., The Complete Works of John Webster 4 vols., (London, 1927).

Hee very passionatelic leanes that way,
He should have his boules runne,

Flamenco I Hope you do not think—

Camillo That noble men boules bootie. Faith his cheeke
Hath a most excellent Bias, it would faine
Jumpe with my mistress. (W.D. I.ii. 61-68.)

The play upon the terms from bowling helps to further the idea that Brachiano is not just mildly interested in Vittoria. "Bias" was a weighting of the ball which caused it to curve, compensating for a tendency in the bowler to throw to right or left or, since the bowling referred to is bowling-on-the-green, compensating for a curve in the terrain. Brachiano then has a passion, which like a weight, directs his desires to Vittoria. Further evidence of the all-consuming nature of his passion is his blindness to the presence of Camillo, and his lack of circumspection while others are present. The impression is heightened when the lovers are finally alone.

Brachiano Give credit: I could wish time would stand still
And never end this interview, this hower,
But all delight doth it selfe soon'st devour.

.....
Loose me not Madam, for if you forego me
I am lost eternalic. (W.D. I.ii. 192-194; 197-198.)

Humoral psychology enters the picture with Brachiano's reference to his "flegmaticke Duchesse" (W.D. I.ii.252), and his promise to protect Vittoria from "the feavers of a jealous husband" (W.D. I.ii.251). Brachiano continues to display a psychologist's bent when he informs his wife's kindred that she will come running back to him: ". . .let her have her humor/ Some halfe daies journey will bring down her stomacke,/ And then she'le turne in post" (W.D. II.i. 273-275). Alone, these instances can hardly support the view that he sees himself and others as slaves to the whims of humor. An additional comment in the vein of humoral psychology is made by Isabella's brother, Francis-

co, as he and his uncle, Cardinal Monticelso, attempt to dissuade Brachiano from his desire for Vittoria. Francisco remarks, "When Stagges grow melancholike you'le find the season" (W.D. II.i. 98), which would seem to indicate that he feels it impossible to cope with Brachiano's lust as a factor beyond human control.

The quarrel scene between Vittoria and Brachiano, which takes place in the House of Convertites to which Vittoria has been consigned after her trial for Camillo's death, also affords an occasion for Flameneo to comment upon Brachiano's passionate nature: "Best natures doe commit the grossest faultes, / When they're giv'n ore to jealousy; as best wine / Dying makes strongest vinegar" (W.D. IV.ii. 178-180).

The final arguments for biological determinism are found in Brachiano's death agony:

Brachiano Oh I am gone already: the infection
Flies to the braine and heart. O thou strong heart
There's such a covenant 'twene the world and it,
They're loathe to break. (W.D. V.iii. 13-16).

and in his final passionate cry, "Vittoria, Vittoria," (W.D. V.iii. 170) uttered in spite of the attempts of the pseudo-friars, Lodovico and Gasparo, to instill in him a terror of the world beyond. If ever, it might be argued, a man through sheer terror might be inclined to give up his sinful love and choose repentance, it would be then. But Brachiano's passion endures to death. So much for the overweening passions of Brachiano. The evidence does not seem to support any real claim for Swinburne's remark: "Thus and not otherwise it was, thus and not otherwise it must have been."²⁰ Perhaps Vittoria will furnish

²⁰Swinburne, Age of Shakespeare, p. 15.

this evidence.

Vittoria first expresses her belief that this love is too strong not to be consummated when she speaks to her horrified mother. "I do protest if any chast deniall / If any thing but bloud could have allayed / His long suite to me. . . . (W.D. I.ii. 283-285). Again, in defending herself at court she argues:

Vittoria: Condemne you me for that the Duke did love mee?
So may you blame some faire and christall river
For that some melancholike man distracted
Hath drown'd himselfe in't. (W.D. III.ii. 211-214.)

But this, taken in context, cannot be anything but hypocrisy.²¹ The final and most telling argument for fatalism is Vittoria's dying comment, "O my greatest sinne lay in my blood, / Now my blood pales for't" (W.D. V.vi. 240-241). Taken alone, it might seem that this remark shifts the blame from personal choice to excessive humors.

Turning to another facet of humoral psychology within the play we have malcontents, Flamineo and Lodovico, and Francisco who is also from time to time a victim of melancholia. To what extent these characters are motivated by melancholia remains a critical question since they combine the contrary characteristics of malcontent and Machiavellian villains. As Travis Bogard puts it, "With Webster the leading figures are more complicated, because Machiavellian and Senecan qualities combine in the same person: Flamineo is in his actions for Brachiano a Machiavel; yet he is also a man who distrusts

²¹For detailed analysis of the use of "crystal" in connection with hypocrisy in the play, and its relation to the adjective "white" (as in "white devil"), see Lucas, I, 193-194.

worldly possessions and honors. . . .²² Upon discovering his mother, half out of her mind as she tends the corpse of the brother Flamineo has slain, Flamineo lapses into meditation and twice speaks of fate:

Flamineo I have a strange thing in mee, to th' which
I cannot give a name, without it bee
Compassion—I pray thee leave mee.
This night Ile know the utmost of my fate,
Ile bee resolv'd what my rich sister meanes
T'assigne mee for my service: I have lived
Riotously 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,
"Wee thinke cag'd birds sing, when indeed they crie,
Ha! I can stand thee, Nearer, nearer yet.

Enter Brachiano's Ghost

What a mockerie hath death made of thee! thou look'st sad.
In what place art thou? In yon starrie gallerie.
Or in the cursed dungeon? No? not speake?
Pray, Sir, resolve mee, what religions best
For a man to die in? or is it in your knowledge
To answer mee how long I have to live?
That's the most necessarrie question.

.
This is beyond melancholie. I doe dare my fate
To doe its worst. (W.D. V.iv. 107-125; 137-138.)

In this soliloquy Flamineo bears out Stoll's criticism, "Now the villain is uppermost, now the moralist."²³ For coupled with his doubt and despair is the attitude, "This is beyond melancholie. I doe dare my fate / To doe its worst," with which he plunges once more into his villainy.

Flamineo also offers evidence for the theory that Webster is following to some extent the medieval idea of free characters who become subject to fate after allying themselves with evil. The words, "I have lived riotously. . ."

²²Bogard, Tragic Satire of Webster, pp. 37-38.

²³E. E. Stoll, John Webster, p. 124.

suggest self-reproach that might be construed as indicative of an original free choice. Yet, earlier in the play, Flamineo responds to Cornelia's reproach. "What? because we are poore / Shall we be vitious?" (W.D. I.ii. 307-308), with a defense of his evil life, in which he places the blame for his villainy upon the fact of their poverty and the environment to which he has been subjected. He concludes with "Go, go, / Complaine unto my great Lord Cardinall, / Yet maybe he will justifie the act" (W.D. I.ii. 333-335). With these words he would seem to argue that even the Church would justify his base actions under the circumstances.

All things considered, Flamineo does not seem to argue conclusively for a fatalistic interpretation of the play. Nor does Lodovico, the other malcontent, who dies defying "the worst of fate" (W.D. V.vi. 281). Even he is concerned with justifying the murder of Brachiano, seeking to soothe a troubled conscience (W.D. V.iii. 276).

The final source of argument for a fatalistic interpretation and by far the strongest is the stoicism which is introduced at the outset of the play and which is most evident as the characters meet death. Lodovico introduces the chronicle of courtly vanity with the invocation:

Lodovico Ha, Ha, O Democritus, thy Gods
That governe the whole world! Courtly reward
And punishment. Fortune's a right whore.
If she give ought, she deals it in smal percells
That she may take away all at one swope. (W.D. I.i. 2-6.)

and many of the characters seem to imply that the only way to live is to expect fortune to reclaim all she has given.

Flamineo, masquerading as a mourner (W.D. III.iii. 1-2), offers this solace:

Flamineo Wee indure the strokes like anvilles or hard steele
Till paine it selfe make us no paine to feele.

and in dying exclaims:

Flaminceo Fate's a Spaniell,
 Let all that doe ill, take this precedunt
Man may his fate foresee but not prevent
And of all Axiomes this shall winne the prize
 'Tis better to be fortunate than wise. (W.D. V.vi. 178-182.)

and again:

Flaminceo Prosperity doth bewitch men seeming cleere,
 But seas doe laugh, shew white, when Rocks are neere.
 Wee cease to grieve, cease to be fortunes slaves,
 Nay cease to dye by dying.

 I doe not looke
 Who went before, nor who shall follow mee;
 Now, at my selfe I will begin and end.
 While we looke up to heaven wee confound
 Knowledge with knowledge. O I am in a mist.
 (W.D. V.vi. 250-253; 256-260.)

Here is a strong argument for a fatalistic interpretation. Man cannot hope to know what lies beyond. His knowledge of his evil and of the world is a refutation to Divine Revelation, is productive of nothing but despair. He is in a mist.

Can we equate Flaminceo with Webster and say that his dying soliloquy is Webster's philosophy? Rather it would seem, in context, Webster's picture of what ought not happen to man. After all, Flaminceo is a villain. Even this poor soul has the light to see the evil of his ways for his last words are, "Tis well yet there's some goodnesse in my death / My life was a black charnell" (W.D. V.vi. 269-270).

In summary, then, the strongest arguments for fatalism in the play seem to be the strong passions of Brachiano and Vittoria, and the melancholy and stoicism of Flaminceo. Alone and out of context, they offer some reason for a fatalistic view. In the light of the arguments for free choice as the cause

of the suffering and downfall of the principals, the fatalistic evidence does not seem very strong.

The principal arguments for free will are: first, the deliberation and Machiavellian stratagems of the characters; secondly, the sense of guilt, personal and mutual recriminations of the principals coupled with the chorus-like damnations by minor character and the allusions to Christian moral ideals and sanctions.

First consider the deliberation with which Vittoria sets in motion the action of the play. There is the rather cruel pleasure with which she cooperates with Flamineo in the gulling of Camillo (W.D. I.ii. 123-191), and most particularly the subtlety with which she induces Brachiano to murder the Duchess and Camillo. Through the stratagem of a dream, she convinces him they are not safe while Isabella and Camillo live. So carefully constructed is her conversation (W.D. I.ii. 221-240) that there is no room for doubt of her premeditation. Vittoria has not been ravished! This affair has been well thought out. As Flamineo well remarks, "Excellent Divell / Shee Hath taught him in a dreame To make away his Dutchesse and her husband" (W.D. I.ii. 246-248).

It might be interjected here that Flamineo's use of "Divell" brings up the relevance of the title of the play in getting at Webster's conception of Vittoria. From the usage of the day²⁴ it is commonly accepted that Webster meant to portray a hypocrite. If Vittoria displays hypocrisy, it can only be in protesting her innocence, or in claiming that nothing but "bloud could have

²⁴Lucas, I, 193-194. This connotation of "white" is rare in English usage. Cf. The Oxford Dictionary (A New Dictionary of the English Language) ed. James Murray, (Oxford, 1928), I, pt. 2, 73. This usage seems to have been most frequent c.1612, Webster's heyday.

allayed his long suite." In other words, she is a hypocrite if she blame any thing but her own free will for the evils she brings about.

Flameneo also evinces true Machiavellian deliberation as he sets about hastening the tragic action: "This face of mine / I'll arme and fortifie with lusty wine, / Gainst shame and blushing" (W.D. I.ii. 323-325). And again: "We are ingaged to mischief and must on" (W.D. I.ii. 341).

Francisco and Monticelso are excellent arguments for premeditated evil. As Flameneo remarks upon Brachiano's death at the hands of Francisco's henchmen:

Flameneo Those are found waightie strokes which come from the hand,
But those are killing strokes which come from the head.
O the rare tricks of a Machivillian!
Hee doth not come like a grosse plodding slave
And buffet you to death. (W.D. V.iii. 194-198.)

Francisco himself has argued for the necessity of reason over passion in plotting against one's enemies: "He that deals all by strength, his wit is shallow: / When a man's head goes through each limb shall follow" (W.D. IV.i. 135-136). That Francisco is not devoid of conscience is also abundantly evident from his attempt to laugh off justice when Ludovico seeks for justification for their murder of Brachiano:

Francisco Tush for Justice!
What harmes it Justice? we now like the partridge
Purge the disease with lawrell: for the fame
Shall crowne the enterprise and quit the shame. (W.D. V.iii. 277-280.)

Monticelso gives abundant evidence of a soul who knows that he is committing evil. When speaking as a churchman he gives sage spiritual advice to those who plot revenge and bloodshed (W.D. II.i. 99 ff., and IV.iii. 120). Yet he aids and abets the plans of Lodovico for the murder of Brachiano. It is in-

deed difficult to see anything but strong will at work in the Cardinal's actions.

The strongest evidence for free will comes, however, not from the Machiavellian plotting of the characters, but from the expression of guilt with which they condemn their lives. In the quarrel scene between Vittoria and Brachiano, in which he laments the murder of his duchess and she, her yielding to him, guilt is evident.

Brachiano That hand, that cursed hand, which I have wearied
With dotting kisses! O my sweet Dutchesse
How lovelie art thou now! (To Vittoria) Thy loose thoughts
Scatter like quick silver, I was bewitch'd;
For all the world speaks ill of thee.

Vittoria No matter
Ile so live now Ile make that world recant
And change her speeches. You did name your Dutchess.

Brachiano Whose death God pardon.

Vittoria Whose death God revenge.
On thee most Godlesse Duke.

Flamino Now for two whirlwindes.

Vittoria What have I gained by thee but infamie?
Thou hast stained the spotlesse honor of mine house.

.....
I had a limbe corrupted to an ulcer,
But I have cut it off; and Ile goe
Weeping to heaven on crutches. For your giftes
I will return them all; and I doe wish
That I could make you full Executor
Of all my sinnes. . . . (W.D. IV.ii. 100-110; 122-127.)

Here in the heat of argument all hypocrisy is dropped for the moment. We see two people aware of their guilt, aware of a God who can and will punish them, and aware of the need for pardon. Surely, were they the tools of fate, they would blame fate here and not each other and themselves.

Flamino also unveils, for the moment, his knowledge of the sinfulness of their deeds.

Vittoria Hence you Pandar.
Flaminceo Pandar! Am I the author of your sinne?
Vittoria Yes, Hee's a base theif that a theif lets in.
(W.D. IV.ii. 138-140.)

In dying both Brachiano and Vittoria express a sense of guilt, if not repentance. Brachiano cries: "Indeed I am to blame / For did you ever heare the duskie raven / Chide blackness?" (W.D. V.iii. 86-88); and Flaminceo is consoled by Vittoria with the thought that he shall not go alone into the other world:

Flaminceo O the waies darke and horrid! I cannot see,
Shall I have no company?

Vittoria O yes thy sinnes,
Do runne before thee to fetch fire from hell,
To light thee thither.

Flaminceo O I smell soote, (W.D. V.vi.139-142.)

As remorse for the moment fills his soul Flaminceo the malcontent and melancholy man cries out, "Thers nothing of so infinite vexation as mans own thoughts" (V.vi. 205). In return he consoles Vittoria with the thought that there are other women who have lived evilly. Her fault is that she had not the art to hide her vice. Vittoria's remark, "my greatest sinne lay in my blood," while used as an argument for fate, or biological determinism at least, can also be construed for free will. For after all, she does say, "my sinne."

The final evidence for a free will interpretation, and the most conclusive, comes from the comments of the chorus-like figures Cornelia and Giovanni, and Marcello, the innocent sufferers in a world of evil. Cornelia, mother of Vittoria, upbraids Brachiano with the language of morality when she discovers the lovers in her home:

Cornelia Where is thy Dutchesse now, adulterous Duke?
Thou little dreamed'st this night shee is come to Rome.

Flamineo How? come to Rome—
Vittoria The Dutchesse—
Brachiano She had bene better—
Cornelia The lives of Princes should like dyals move,
 Whose regular example is so strong,
 They make the times by them go right or wrong. (W.D. I.ii. 275-281.)

Cornelia's remark to Flamineo has already been mentioned: What? because we are poore, / Shall we be vitious"? (W.D. I.ii. 307-308). Most striking for its contrast to the sentiments of the villains is the defense Cornelia affords Flamineo after he has slain his brother. She hopes to gain time for him, that he may be able to repent.

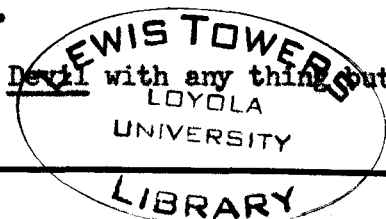
Cornelia The God of heaven forgive thee. Do'st wonder
 I pray for thee? Ile tell thee what's the reason,
 I have scarce breathe to number twentie minutes;
 Ide not spend that in cursing. Fare thee well,
 Halfe of thy selfe lies there: and maist thou live
 To fill an howre glasse with his mouldered ashes,
 To tell how thou shouldst spend the time to come
 In blest repentance. (W.D. V.ii. 52-59.)

Marcello himself in dying expresses the conviction that his death is but heaven's punishment, since there "are some sinnes which heaven doth duly punish in a whole family" (W.D. V.ii. 22). Earlier Marcello had tried in vain to warn Flamineo from his evil course with an exhortation to virtue, remarking that intrigue works like an infection in the soul (W.D. III.i. 60-64).

The most conclusive chorus clue to Webster's intent is furnished by young Giovanni, son of Isabella and Brachiano, who alone remains of all that noble house at the conclusion of the play. He provides the final moral judgment upon the play, and it would seem upon life, with the couplet:

Let guilty men remember their blacke deedes
 Do leane on crutches, made of slender reedes.

It is difficult to see how we can leave The White Devil with any thing but a



conviction that there was guilt, and that manifold, on the part of hero, heroine, and villains.

To conclude the arguments for free will, the few references to a Christian concept of final judgment and the presence of Satan in the world might be added. While Webster's plays prescind, as do the other Elizabethan and Jacobean dramas, from Christian moral argument as such, these few references are worth noting. First Isabella, after Brachiano informs her of his desire for separation, says:

Isabella O my unkind Lord may your sins find mercy,
As I upon a woeful widowed bed,
Shall pray for you, if not to turne your eyes
Upon your wretched wife, and hopeful sonne,
Yet this that in time you'll fix them upon heaven. (W.D. II.i. 212-216.)

Then Vittoria, in quite another vein, curses Monticelso:

Vittoria That the last day of judgement may so find you,
And leave you the same devill you were before. (W.D. III.ii. 290-291.)

And, finally, in her concern for Flamineo's eternal welfare, she urges him to repentance:

Vittoria Do you meane to die indeed?
Flamineo With as much pleasure
As ere my father gat me.
Vittoria Are you turned an Atheist? will you turne your body,
Which is the goodly place of your soule
To the soules slaughter house? O the cursed Devill
Which doth present us with all other sinnes
Thrice candied ore: Despair with gaule and stibium,
Yet we carouse it off; aside Cry out for helpe—
Makes us forsake that which was made for Man,
The world, to sinke to that was made for devils,
Eternall darkenesse. (W.D. V.vi. 57-65.)

In summary, then, the arguments for free will as the cause of the tragic decisions and downfall in The White Devil are chiefly as follows: the premeditation and deliberation of the characters, especially the Machiavellian villains,

the knowledge of guilt expressed by those sinning and those sinned against, and the references to Christian concepts of repentance and eternal punishment.

It must be admitted that in selecting the arguments for fate and free will and reproducing them to some extent out of context, there is danger of neglecting the impression which the play as a whole conveys. A masterpiece of art is more than the sum of all its parts. The unity of the whole conveys an impression sometimes difficult to trace through analysis of the individual constituents of that whole. It may be asked then: Does The White Devil, as a single undivided whole, convey an impression of fatalism or of free choice? The answer seems to be in favor of free choice. The central theme of the play seems to be: What is the use of an evil life? Or more particularly: What is the use of a courtly life? Vittoria's final words convey this impression:

O Happy they that never saw the Court,
Nor ever knew great Man but by report. (W.D. V.vi. 261-262.)

Here we disagree with Travis Bogard who claims that the "central question of the tragedies is not, therefore, What is good and what is evil, but What is the use of life?"²⁵ While it is true that Webster is not seeking to discern the norms of morality that should guide the great, his attention to the responsibility of great men who "make the times by them go right or wrong" is obvious throughout. So not, What is the use of life? but What is the use of an evil life? would seem to be a more accurate wording for his central theme.

The sense of guilt, the condemnations of the chorus-like characters, as has been said before, give to the impression created by the play as a whole the note of moral judgment which a purely fatalistic drama lacks. While it is true

²⁵ Travis Bogard, Tragic Satire of Webster, pp. 41-42.

that Webster has sprinkled his drama with the fatalistic elements of Renaissance psychology and stoicism, taken in context in the play they seem rather to be held up to mockery as the veils of hypocrisy, the veils of a "white devil," than to be held up as an explanation of the driving forces of human resistance to good or evil. It is significant that the characters who form accurate moral judgments throughout the play are either the very young or the old, whose innocence and wisdom may be said to express Webster's mind more clearly than the contradictory statements of the turbulent principals.

Interesting and instructive as The White Devil may be, Webster's tragic philosophy cannot be fully judged until the play which is his masterpiece has been examined. The following Chapter will extend the search for Webster's view of man to The Duchess of Malfi. More complex in motivation and structure than The White Devil, the story of the Duchess and her unfortunate love may offer more diverse testimony for both fate and freedom.

CHAPTER IV

FATE AND FREEDOM IN THE DUCHESS OF MALFI

The Duchess of Malfi presents a tragic situation quite different from that which her sister tragedy, The White Devil, offers to its audience. The chief difference between the two plays is that The Duchess of Malfi is concerned with the tragic fate of a relatively innocent heroine, a woman far removed from the Machiavellian dynamism of Vittoria Corombona. The very fact that the Duchess is made an object of our sympathy from the outset, has prompted some critics to object that the drama is not true tragedy because the central characters are guilty of no true tragic flaw. The only "evil" action of which the Duchess seems to be guilty is the social breach of marrying someone beneath her station. This at least seems to be the case at first examination. That the Duchess and Antonio are guilty of a crime more serious will be shown later in this chapter.

Another cause of critical unrest over The Duchess of Malfi is the construction of the play. The Duchess dies in the fourth act, leaving her play to go on to its bitter conclusion without her. This has led some critics to doubt that Webster intended her to be the chief figure in his drama and to suggest that Bosola is the central character of the play.¹ This problem need not concern us here except insofar as it makes the sentiments expressed by the characters concerned more or less representative of Webster's own opinion to-

¹See Charles Williams, Introduction to Sylvan Press Edition of The Duchess of Malfi (London, 1948), p. xv, for discussion of these opinions.

wards fate and free will. The most satisfactory resolution of this difficulty would seem to be that of Leech and others,² namely, that Antonio and the Duchess together represent the central tragic character, the protagonist, and that, granted some structural weakness in the development of the plot, the fifth act rounds off the downfall of the Duchess by completing the destruction of her loved ones. In discussing the play in this chapter, this interpretation will be presumed, and the Duchess and Antonio will be considered the critical characters to be analysed.

The arguments for a fatalistic interpretation of the play are much the same as those offered by The White Devil: the pessimism of the melancholy and the malcontent, the presence of stoic philosophy, and the new ingredient, astrology and allied superstition. The arguments for free will are also much the same: the spirit of the Machiavellian villains, the sense of guilt manifested by the principals and chorus-like characters, and the background of Christian moral teaching and sanctions. Again it should be noted that, in considering the evidence for fatalism or freedom in this play, the "guilt" examined differs from the strict moral guilt met with in The White Devil. The tragic action in The Duchess of Malfi is based upon the failure of the Duchess and Antonio to realize that they cannot hope to outwit the Aragonian brethren. Their fault is that they believe, because their love seems pure and right to them, that it will be so accepted by her brothers. As with Vittoria, the moral is: What is the value of courtly life? but this time from another aspect. The Duchess and Antonio are taught that the good as well as the evil are doomed in Machiavellian society, a society in which only those who remain passive, who stand back to let

²Clifford Leach, John Webster (London, 1951), p. 65.

the others fight it out, have any chance for survival.

Bosola is the chief argument for Fate in the play. Like Flamineo he is torn between the Machiavellian villain within himself and the malcontent. As Antonio points out early in the first act:

Antonio This foule melancholly
Will poison all his goodnesse, for (i'le tell you)
If too immoderate sleepe be truly sayd
To be an inward rust unto the soule;
It then doth follow want of action
Breeds all blacke male-contents, and their close rearing
(like mothes in cloath) doth hurt for want of wearing. (D.M. I.i. 77-83).

Again the humoral psychology offers a possible explanation of Bosola's future actions. He has been denied preferment and sits idle, giving black thoughts a chance to have their way with him. Is it his fault, or beyond his control?

Another villain, the Cardinal, is also analyzed by the amateur psychologist, Antonio, with the following description:

Antonio but observe his inward character: he is a mellancholly Churchman: The Spring in his face, is nothing but the Ingendring of Toades: where he is jealous of any man, he laies worse plots for them, then ever was impos'd on Hercules: for he strewes in his way Flatterers, Panders, Intelligencers, Atheists, and a thousand such politicall monsters: he should have been Pope: but in stead of coming to it by the primitive decensie of the church, he did bestow bribes, so largely and so impudently, as if he would have carried it away without heaven's knowledge. Some good he hath done.

Delio You have given too much of him. (D.M. I.i. 158-168.)

It may be argued that Antonio seems to impute the faults of the Cardinal more to his melancholy nature than to any real evil intent. The charitable comment, "Some good he hath done," also argues for an easy judgment of the Cardinal.

Humoral psychology also colors the scene (II.v.) in which the Cardinal and Ferdinand are informed of their sister's violation of their prohibitions to her

remarriage.

Ferdinand Rubarbe, oh, for rubarbe
To purge this choller—here's the cursed day
To prompt my memory, and here it shall sticke
Till of her bleeding heart, I make a sponge
To wipe it out.

Cardinal Why doe you make yourself
So wild a tempest?

.....
How idly shewes this rage! —which carries you,
As men conveyed by witches, through the ayre
On violent whirle-windes—this intemperate noyce
Fityly resembles deafe-mens shrill discourse,
Who talks aloud, thinking all other men
To have their imperfection.

Ferdinand Have not you,
My palsey?

Cardinal Yes—I can be angry
Without this rupture—there is not in nature
A thing, that makes man so deforma'd so beastly
As doth intemperate anger: chide yourself—
You have divers men, who never yet exprest
Their strong desire of rest, but by unrest,
By vexing of themselves: Come put your selfe
In tune.

Ferdinand So—I will only study to seeme
The thing I am not: I could kill her now,
In you, or in my selfe, for I do thinke
It is some sinne in us, Heaven doth revenge
By her.

Cardinal Are you starke mad? (D.M. II.v. 20-26; 65-87.)

Here, the Cardinal is not the melancholy man, but the defender of reason and will. He seems to argue that Ferdinand is capable of self control, while Ferdinand denies this assumption with the words, "I will only study to seeme the thing I am not."

Another application of the determinism of humoral psychology is possible from the attitude some of the characters voice about the nature of woman. H. J. C. Grierson has noted with regard to some of Shakespeare's heroines that "they appear as creatures of pure instinct who shun what is degrading, not be-

cause it is wrong, but because it is alien to their nature and undergo sacrifice, not from principle but from physio-psychological necessity."³ Something of the same may be argued for The Duchess of Malfi. Her brother, the Cardinal, observes:

Cardinal Curs'd creature
 Unequall nature, to place woman's heart
 So farre upon the left side!
Berdinand Foolish men,
 That ere will trust their honour in a Barke
 Made of so slight, weak bull-rushe, as is woman,
 Apt every minnit to sinke it! (D.M. II.vi. 43-49.)

and Cariola, her servant, remarks:

Whether the spirit of greatnes, or of woman
 Raigns most in her, I know not, but it shewes
 A fearefull madnes. I owe her much of pittie. (D.M. I.i. 576-578.)

In answer to the deterministic arguments that the lines which have been quoted seem to imply, it may be briefly interjected here that aside from being scanty they are far from conclusive. As has been observed in treating The White Devil, we cannot be sure that Webster intends these remarks to be his observations upon life and nature. They are spoken chiefly by the villains of the piece. It seems more likely that, in the light of the free will arguments, they but amplify the character of villainy.

"In The Duchess of Malfi there is a show of interest in astrology, which did not appear in The White Devil." Since it has always had direct relation to fate and freedom, astrology might prove a fatalistic trump in the present study.

The most extended use of astrology in the play is Antonio's casting of a

³H. J. C. Grierson, Cross-Currents in English Literature of the Seventeenth Century (London, 1929), p. 117.

horoscope for his first born. Upon meeting Bosola in the garden, Antonio, horoscope in hand, pretends the paper contains the stars' formula for the discovery of the jewels the Duchess has lost. Ominously his nose begins to bleed at this falsification and Antonio leaves in confusion. Bosola picks up the horoscope and reads:

The Lord of the first house, being combust in the ascendent, signifies short life; and Mars being in a human signe, joyn'd to the taile of the dragon, in the eighth house, doth threaten, a violent death; Caetera non scrutantur. (D.M. II.iii. 77-80.)

The argument for fatalism here falls quite short. For this child is the only one of the Duchess's family who does not die in the course of the play by violence or natural causes.

The stars appear again when the Duchess in her desolation cries:

Duchess I could curse the Starres.
Bosola O fearefull!
Duchess And those three smyling seasons of the yeere
 Into a Russian winter: may the world
 Into its first Chaos.
Bosola Look you the Starres still shine:
Duchess Oh, but you must remember, my curse hath a great,
 way to goe: (D.M. IV.i. 115-122.)

Here Bosola seems to argue that the stars do affect human destiny, and the Duchess seems to retort that life is the more cruel because such distant power does affect our lives. But again the argument is not very conclusive.

The final astrological reference comes from Bosola, who seems to have been converted to astrology since Act Four:

Bosola We are meerey the starres tennys-balls (strokee, and banded
 Which way please them) (D.M. V.iv. 63-64.)

Here, in the closing moments of the play, is a rather strong argument for fatalism. Yet, a few minutes later, the same Bosola advises those who attend

his dying breath:

Bosola Let worthy minds nere stagger in distrust
To suffer death, or shame for what is just. (D.M. V.v. 127-128.)

which in context argues for the possibility of the just man to save himself from ignominious fate. How reconcile the sentiments of Bosola? The sequel seems to leave room for arguing medieval tragic view, namely that the just man can be independent of Fate, while the sinner puts himself under Fate's power.

There is additional confusion in The Duchess of Malfi over the worth of superstition. Delio, who plays a chorus role throughout the play, offers an excellent bit of advice to the superstitious Antonio early in the play:

Delio Tis but the shadow of your feare, no more:
How superstitiously we mind our evils!
The throwing downe salt, or crossing of a Hare;
Bleeding at nose, the stumbling of a horse:
Or singing of a Criket, are of powre
To daunt a whole man in us: Sir fare you well: (D.M. II.ii. 79-84.)

Shortly after this advice, Antonio's nose does begin to bleed and, as has been mentioned, it is the cause of Bosola's coming into possession of the horoscope and the knowledge that the Duchess has a son. Antonio himself is inclined to regard the nosebleed as mere chance (D.M. II.iii. 58-60). Regardless of his common sense approach, it does presage evil.

Superstition comes into play again when Cariola objects to the Duchess's proposed journey to Loreto which, under the guise of a pilgrimage, is really an attempt to elude the wrath of the Aragonian brethren:

Cariola In my opinion
She were better to progresse to the bathes at Leuca
Or go visit the Spaw
In Germany, for (if you beleeve me)
I do not like this jesting with religion,
This faigned pilgrimage.

Duchess Thou art a superstitious foole,
Prepare us instantly for our depature. (D.M. III.11. 361-368.)

Again the superstitious soul proves prophetic. The pilgrimage, or pseudo-pilgrimage, turns out to be the occasion of the Duchess's undoing.

These instances of superstition and the prophetic character of the superstitious personages seem but weak arguments for fatalism. Rather, especially with respect to the pilgrimage incident, they seem to argue for the dramatic "guilt" of the principals who in these instances hasten once more toward their destruction, disregarding the solicitous advice of friends for the counsel of traitors. The Duchess's dismissal of Cariola's fears is an example of the hubris, or blinding pride, which will be further treated in the discussion of the free will arguments.

The final evidence of fatalism comes from stoic philosophy displayed in this play as in The White Devil. The Duchess of Malfi, however, because its principal characters are less violent, less creatures of hot passion, does not provide the same calibre of death soliloquies nor the same depths of despair.

The first fatalistic hint comes from Ferdinand. He has discovered his sister speaking to herself of Antonio and their love. He flies into a rage:

Ferdinand Oh most imperfect light of humane reason,
That mak'st us so unhappy, to foreses
What we can least prevent: (D.M. III.11. 90-92.)

It may be argued that Ferdinand has certainly endeavored to prevent this turn of events, and that it is not really fate but the free will of the Duchess which has caused the undoing of his desires. Still, there is a note of frustration, of despair, in these lines which might argue for a fatalistic interpretation.

It is Antonio whose last moments are the source of comments which seem to argue that fate cannot be escaped. He and Delio approach the palace of the Aragonian brethren unaware that since Antonio's separation from the Duchess during their flight she has been captured and killed. Antonio contemplates a reconciliation with the Cardinal and Ferdinand. As they pause on the palace grounds Antonio engages in colloquy with an echo which proceeds from the grave of his murdered wife:

Antonio But all things have their end:
Churches and Citties (which have diseases like to men)
Must have like death that we have.

Echo Like death that we have.

Delio Now the Echo hath caught you:

Antonio It groan'd (me thought) and gave
A very deadly Accent?

Echo Deadly Accent.

.
.

Delio Come lets walke farther from't:
I would not have you go to th' Cardinalls to-night:
Doe not.

Echo Doe not.

Delio Be mindfull of thy safety,

Echo Be mindfull of thy safety.

Antonio Necessity compels me:
Make seruteny throughout the passages
Of your owne life; you'll find it impossible
To flye your fate.

Echo O flye your fate.

Delio Hark the dead stones seem to have pittie on you
And give you good counsell.

Antonio Echo, I will not talk with thee;
For thou art a dead Thing.

.
Antonio Come: I'll be out of this Ague;
For thus, is not indeed to live:
It is a mockery, and abuse of life---
I will not henceforth save my selfe by halves.
Loose, all, or nothing.

.
Antonio How ever, fare you well:
Though in our miseries, Fortune have a part,
Yet, in our noble suffrings she hath none---
Contempt of paine, that we may call our owne. (D.M. V.iii. 19-25; 39-50;
59-63.)

Here Antonio argues against prudence on the score that death is inevitable: some necessity compels him to seek an open meeting with the enemy, and the only way to flee Fortune's heavy hand is to embrace the issue and not flee from it. Later, after Bosola has mistaken him for the Cardinal and stabbed him in the dark, the dying Antonio adds the further stoic salute to death:

. In all our Quest of Greatnes
 (Like wanton Boyes, whose pastime is their care)
 We follow after bubbles, blowne in the ayre.
 Pleasure of life, what is't? onely the good hours
 Of an Ague: meerely a preparative to rest,
 To endure vexation: I doe not aske
 The process of my death: onely commend me
 To Delio. (D.M. V.iv. 77-82.)

Yet, even in these stoic statements, there is some hint of self-recrimination, evidence that not merely fate but Antonio has been at fault. He speaks of his great weakness; temporising. He blames himself when he remarks, "I will not henceforth save my selfe by halves." With the words, "In all our Quest of Greatness . . . ," he hints at guilt, his ambition to raise himself by marriage to a higher station in life. The remark, however, which cancels much of the fatalism of previous statements made by Antonio is his dying sentence, "And let my Sonne, flie the Courts of Princes." It has been said above that the central theme of both plays concerns the value of a courtly life. Antonio's last gasp seems to argue that the evil of courtly society, which results from man's free will but which man is free to avoid, has been the cause of his tragedy. It is a father's dying legacy to his son, this order to flee the court. Antonio does not say, "Let My Sonne, resigne himself to Fate."

Bosola offers the last fatalistic argument in the drama when his turn comes to meet death:

Bosola 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 feareful) mankind live. (D.M. V.v. 123-126.)

Unlike his counterpart, Flamineo, Bosola's dying words express little of self-pity in spite of the fact that he has been dealt with far more unjustly. His repentance was more sincere than Flamineo's, and his death more brave.

So much for the fatalistic elements in The Duchess of Malfi. As with their counterparts of The White Devil, the fatalistic arguments in the present play are far from conclusive. They are sufficient to raise the problem of fate and free will, but no more. Briefly summarized they are as follows: the argument from biological determinism which rises from melancholy, and distrust of feminine nature expressed by some characters; the astrological argument, which sees in the references to the stars an attempt to put man's destiny in the heavens; and superstition, which also offers an explanation for events apart from man's free will. Stoic philosophy with its inherent fatalism is also in evidence in the play.

The arguments on the side of free will as the source of the tragic downfall are much the same as those found in The White Devil. We find the Machiavellian villains once more, with their deliberate and elaborate schemes, and the self-accusations and condemnations which give rise to a knowledge of guilt on the part of the characters. Their guilt in turn argues for a tragic fault, a free will source for the tragic downfall.

The villains of the present play are much more complex than those of The White Devil. For the purpose of this thesis, their complexity, including as it does the conscience problems of Ferdinand, his brother the Cardinal and their creature Bosola, is an advantage. The conclusion is forced upon us by

the insanity of Ferdinand and by the repentance of Bosola that free will has been operative.

Ferdinand expresses quite clearly the Machiavellian defense of free will when Bosola attempts to excuse the Duchess' remarriage by the suggestion she was bewitched:

Ferdinand Away, these are mere gulleries, horred things
 Invented by some cheating mounte-banks
 To abuse us: Do you thinke that hearbes, or charmes
 Can force the will? Some trialls have been made
 In this foolish practice; but the ingredients
 Were lenative poysons, such as are of force to
 To make the patient mad; and straight the witch
 Swears (by equivocation) they are in love.
 The witch-craft lies in her rancke-blood. (D.M. III.i. 82-90.)

The ingenious, if overly horrible, devices with which Ferdinand seeks to drive his sister mad (D.M. IV.i.) are further proof, coupled with his remarks, that a strong will is at work. His displeasure with the indirect torture (through Bosola) of his sister is made manifest by his remark, "I will no longer study in the book / Of another's heart" (D.M. IV.i. 19-20). He must to the torture himself! Still feeling that he has cause for revenge he justifies to some extent what would otherwise seem a madman's torments. He tells his sister, she suffers at his hands because "I account it the honorabl'st revenge / Where I may kill, to pardon" (D.M. V.i. 39-40). That his pardon is worse than death reflects the subtlety of his cruelty, and the strength of his will; for, as the dialogue proceeds, it becomes obvious that only tremendous will could overcome the emotions of pity that his sister's situation calls forth. Pity comes, but too late, with the memorable line uttered by Ferdinand as he views his sister's lifeless form, "Cover her face: Mine eyes dassell: she di'd yong" (D.M. IV.ii. 281).

After Ferdinand leaves the forefront of villainy, the Cardinal takes over. His is the plot for Antonio's destruction. His cunning is more deliberate and keen than was his brother's (D.M. V.ii. 130-150). His handling of the death and secret burial of his mistress Julia also bears weighty evidence of his deliberate and wilful malice (D.M. V.ii. 270-370), as does his contriving of the murder of Ferdinand. It is this last, this fratricide, which brings the first words of remorse to the Cardinal's lips:

Cardinal O, my Conscience!
I would pray now: but the Divell takes away my heart
For having any confidence in prayer. (D.M. V.iv. 30-32.)

But he swiftly reverts to his Machiavellian type:

About this houre, I appeinted Bosola
To fetch the body: when he hath serv'd my turne
He dies. (D.M. V.iv. 33-36.)

Bosola, the last and most complex of the Machiavellians in the play offers more contrast than the pity of Ferdinand or the conscience pangs of the Cardinal. However much he may lack probability as a character, Bosola does offer a fine example of the Machiavellian-malcontent combination. Antonio introduces us to him with the observation that he is more Machiavell than malcontent:

Antonio Here comes Bosola
The onely Court-Call: yet I observe his rayling
Is not for simple love of Piety:
Indeede he rayles at those things which he wants,
Would be as leacherous, covetous, or proud,
Bloody or envious, as any man
If he had meanes to be so: Here's the Cardinall. (D.M. I.i. 23-29.)

We are informed by Delio that Bosola has been convicted of murder. His willingness that trade, in spite of the fact that he had been sent to the galleys for a previous crime, is borne out by the alacrity with which he accepts his new position in the Duchess's household. To Ferdinand who has duped his sister into

taking him on, Bosola cynically retorts:

Bosola What follows? Never rained such showres as these
Without thunderbolts i'the taile of them; whose throat must I cut?

Ferdinand Your inclination to shed blood rides post
Before my occasion to use you. I give you that to live
I' th Court, here; and observe the Duchesse,

.....
Bosola Take your Devils

Which Hell calls Angels: these cursed gifts would make
You a corrupter and me an impudent traitor,
And I should take these, they'd take me to Hell.

Ferdinand, Sir, I'll take nothing from you, that I have given:
There is a place, that I procur'd for you
This morning: (the Provisor-ship o'th' horse)--
Have you heard on't?

Bosola Noe.

Ferdinand 'Tis yours, is't not worth thanks?

Bosola I would have you curse yourselfe now, that your bounty
(Which makes men truly noble) ere should make
Me a villaine: oh, that to avoid ingratitude
For the good deed you have done me, I must doe
All the ill man can invent: Thus the Divell
Candies o'er: and what Heaven termes vile.
That names he complementall.

Ferdinand Be your selfe:

Keepe your old garbe of melancholy: 'twill expresse
You envy those that stand above your reach,

Yet strive not to come neere them. (D.M. I.i. 265-269; 285-305.)

Bosola's slight case of scruples seems all too easily overcome by the announce-
ment that he has been given the Provisorship of Horse. Be that as it may, the
speech does express a recognition of the bribe as a temptation, of the intrigue
as evil, and of moral values in general.

Bosola again offers evidence of his knowledge of moral values and of the
court's denial of them as he lectures Castrushio on the virtues of a courtier
(D.M. II.i. 1-23). Throughout the same scenes he continues in the role of
melancholy admonitor, first toward the old lady, with a discourse upon the
transient nature of beauty, and then, in a cynical attack upon wisdom, in the
presence of Antonio and Delio:

Bosola Oh, Sir, the opinion of wisdom is a foule tetter that runs all over a mans body: if simplicity direct us have no evill, it directs us to be happy being: For the subtlest folly proceeds from the subtlest wisdom: let me be simply honest.

(D.M. II.1. 81-84.)

In spite of his knowledge of the folly of evil, Bosola continues on toward the Duchess's and his own destruction—not however without expressing his own conviction of the evil and guilt of the Machiavellians:

Bosola A Politician is the divells quilted anvil.
He fashions all sinnes on him, and the blowes
Are never heard. (D.M. III.ii. 371-373.)

The evidence, then, for clear knowledge of evil on the part of the Machiavellians in The Duchess of Malfi is abundant. They recognize their designs to be evil, and freely undertake them. Their destruction is more than merited. The complex character of Bosola gives rise at times to the impression that he is torn between good and evil, and that he pursues his evil course somewhat blindly. We are, nevertheless, presented with the temptation, rejection, and acceptance of Ferdinand's offer in Act I, scene 2, as evidence of free decision.

The character who is most akin to the ancient chorus in The Duchess of Malfi is Delio, friend of Antonio and rival of the Cardinal for the love of Julia. He represents the audience, inquiring of Antonio in the opening scene of the play the nature and degree of the principals. After Antonio has agreed to secret marriage with the Duchess, he echoes the hopes of the audience by advising Antonio, first as to methods of concealment, and later by trying to prevent him from an open meeting with the Aragonian brethren. Throughout there is a note of desperation in his advice, much like the fear the audience feels, as if he were certain that this can come to no good end, because the laws of the court have been violated. His most significant lines for the question at hand

are:

Delio They passe through whirle-pooles, and deepe woes doe shun
Who the event weigh, ere the action's done. (D.M. II.iv. 107-108.)

Later he speaks even more clearly:

Delio I have ever thought
Nature doth nothing so great, for great men,
As when she's pleas'd to make them Lords of truth:
"Integrity of Life, is fames best friend,
Which nobly (beyond Death) shall crowne the end." (D.M. V.v. 142-146.)

The first quotation sums up, very well indeed, the tragic guilt of Antonio and the Duchess. Their love is not lust, but it is ill-timed and ill-begotten. They have not weighed the consequences of their violation of the Cardinal's and Ferdinand's injunctions upon the Duchess not to remarry. Their second fault is summed up in the second quote, the closing words of the play: They have not been Lords of Truth, but have rather tried to deceive and conceal their union. When Antonio finally decides to come out in the open, it is too late.

Cariola, the Duchess's maid-in-waiting, also serves as a chorus for her mistress' actions. She too sums up the conflict of drama, the struggle between true love and loyalty to the demands of rank.

Cariola Whether the spirit of greatnes, or of woman
Raigne most in her, I know not, but it shewes
A fearful madnes. I owe her much of pittie. (D.M. I.i. 576-578.)

American critics have perhaps more difficulty understanding this basic conflict of the play, the conflict between love and duty. It has been rendered more meaningful, however, in recent years when events in the life of an English princess, much publicized in the world press, have reminded us that such a conflict can, and still does, exist in our highly democratic society. Cariola

focuses attention upon this aspect of the Duchess' guilt. Cariola, too, voices the sentiments of the audience as she reminds the Duchess' murderers that their crime is one that will merit damnation. (D.M. IV.ii. 248-270.) Husky that she is, she nevertheless displays the most keen perception of social and moral codes exhibited in the play.

Scene four of the third Act is also devoted to commentary upon the tragic action. It takes place at Loreto and the only speakers are pilgrims who marvel and gossip at the events taking place. The question of the Duchess's guilt is the prime consideration.

First Pilgrim Here's a strange turn of state--who would have thought
So great a Lady, would have matched her selfe
Unto so meane a person? yet the Cardinall
Beares himselfe much too cruell. (D.M. III.iv. 25-28.)

There is here reiteration of the idea that the Duchess was deserting duty through her union with Antonio. The "yet" of line 27 is significant insofar as it implies she is deserving of punishment, even if the present punishment is too cruel.

The basis for the guilt of the Duchess is laid in Act I, scene 1, when Ferdinand and the Cardinal forbid her to remarry. The motivation for this injunction is, and remains, rather obscure throughout the play. There is, however, no lack of firmness or of threats in the presentation of the Aragonian brothers' command. The Duchess is made well aware of the fact that she will have to pay dearly if she disobeys them. Some mention is made, by way of motivation, of the fact that she is a widow, has known man and therefore must observe a chaste widowhood. There is some confusion here since the Cardinal seems to imply the possibility of an eventual remarriage after a suitable

mourning, whereas Ferdinand seems to reject the idea of marriage entirely (W.D. I.i. 320-380).⁴ At any rate, they leave the Duchess with this cheery reminder:

Ferdinand You are my sister,
This was my Fathers poyniard: doe you see,
I'll'd be loth to see't looks rusty, 'cause 'twas his. (D.M. I.i. 369-371)

After her brothers depart, the Duchess makes it clear that she will not be deterred from her aim of having Antonio:

Duchess Shall this move me? if all my royall kindred
Lay in my way into this marriage:
I'll'd make them my low foote-steps: (D.M. I.i. 382-384.)

That she is aware of the consequences is equally obvious from her appeal to Cariola:

Duchess Wish me good speed
For I am going into a wilderness,
Where I shall find nor path, nor friendly clewe
To be my guide— (D.M. I.i. 403-406.)

Both these statements argue conclusively against the opinion that the Duchess is led blindly, or is unaware of the rashness of her act.

She proceeds to woo the reluctant Antonio with a force and vigor which, in spite of the general mildness of her character, are reminiscent of her counterpart, Vittoria. "The more we consider the Duchess, the more hints of guilt seem to appear. There is even a strange parallel between the wooing

The Jacobean audience no doubt was more in sympathy with the idea of a permanent widowhood. As late as 1703, the widow was exhorted by Puritan divines to remain a mourner. Cf. Jeremy Taylor, The Rule and Exercises of Holy Living, 19th ed. (London, 1703), p. 74. The social code of the Puritans was beginning to be felt in Webster's day, and some see in this demand of the Aragonian brethren an attempt on Webster's part to align Puritan morality with Machiavellain strategy. See Una-Ellis-Fermor, The Jacobean Drama (London, 1953), p. 29.

scene . . . and the scene in V,2, where Julia, the rank whore, proclaims her passion for Bosola . . .: in both cases, a woman's triumph leading to her destruction. It is difficult to resist the idea that Julia is meant to provide a comment on the behaviour of the Duchess: they are sisters, Webster hints, in their passions and in their consequent actions."⁵

The guilt and free action of Antonio is established in the same scene when, while resisting the obvious intentions of the Duchess, he gives an eloquent discourse on ambition:

Antonio Ambition (Madam) is a great mans madnes,
That is not kept in chains, and close-pent-rooms,
But in faire lightsome lodgings, and is girt
With the wild noyce of pratling visitants,
Which makes it lunatique beyond all cure—
Conceive not I am so stupid, but I ayme
Whereto your favours tend: But he's a foole
That (being a-cold) would thrust his hands i'th' fire
To warme them. (D.M. I.i. 483-491.)

Here the crucial point of the drama is emphasized for the first time, and by Antonio. He is aware that, for one of his rank, happiness with the Duchess is impossible. Yet he yields to this "lunacy."

Antonio gives further evidence of a guilty conscience as he aids in concealing the birth of their first child:

The Great are like the Base; nay they are the same,
When they seeke shamefull waies, to avoid shame. (D.M. II.iii. 68-69.)

After the climax in the dramatic actions, the scene at Loreto, the downfall of the Duchess and Antonio become increasingly apparent. The Duchess at first rebels at the thought of the injustice of the persecution. Antonio is less conscious of injustice. His conscience troubles him and he sees in their

⁵Leech, p. 75.

suffering "Heaven's hand." While chafing at the severity of the brothers' retribution, he gives evidence of the fact that he feels there has been some fault on his part: "Heaven fashioned us of nothing: and we strive//to bring our selves to nothing" (D.M. III. v. 97-98). Certainly the strivings of Antonio and his Duchess have all conspired to bring them to nothing.

Further evidence of guilt is the Duchess's request for pardon of Ferdinand (D.M. IV.i. 36). This, however, is quickly changed to curses when she realises that he has not come to make peace but to torment her. Her torture and death serve to blind the audience somewhat to the fact of her dramatic guilt, for the punishment far outweighs the crime. Bosola, however, reminds us that she is worthy of some punishment and penance as he pleads with Ferdinand to mitigate the severity of his wrath:

Bosola Faith, and here:
And go no farther in your cruelty—
Send her a penitentiall garment, to put on,
Next to her delicate skinne, and furnish her
With beades and prayer bookes.

Ferdinand Damne her, that body of hers,
While that my blood ran pure in't, was worth more
Than that which thou would comfort, (call'd a soule). (D.M. IV.i. 141-149.)

The last scene of the play is filled with sentiments of guilt and remorse of conscience. The Cardinal moans, "How tedious is a guilty conscience!" (D.M. V.v. 4). Bosola accuses the Cardinal of upsetting the balance of justice in murdering his sister, a balance that can only be righted by his murder (D.M. V.v. 50-55). Ferdinand regains his sanity to point the accusing finger at all the characters of the play:

Ferdinand My sister, oh! my sister, there's the cause on't.
Whether we fall by ambition, blood or lust,
Like Diamonds, we are cut with our own dust. (D.M. V.v. 90-92.)

Antonio's ambition, the bloody anger of the Aragonian brethren, and the desire of the Duchess have indeed combined to produce tragedy.

So ends the tragedy at Malfi. The arguments for free will as the cause of the tragic action and downfall in The Duchess of Malfi can be briefly summarized. First, the characters deliberate before undertaking the actions that bring about the tragedy; secondly, the chorus-like condemnations of less involved characters, and the general atmosphere of guilt, both social and moral, create in the reader or viewer, a basis for moral judgment. Indeed, only the children of the Duchess and her Antonio seem completely free of guilt and unworthy of reprehension. Perhaps no better conclusion can be penned to the study of the play than Delio's:

They passe through whirle-pooles and deep woes do shun,
Who the event weigh, ere the action's done. (D.M. V.V. 142-146.)

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION: WEBSTER'S TRAGIC WORLD

Webster's two great tragedies have been considered separately. It may prove of some use toward capturing the "common denominator" of Webster's tragic art to compare and contrast them by way of conclusion.

Of contrasts, the most striking is the difference in the two plays that results from having morally culpable protagonists in The White Devil, and relatively innocent, but socially culpable protagonists in The Duchess of Malfi. Yet, in spite of this fact, dramatically speaking the Duchess seems more guilty than Vittoria. For Vittoria is tempted by a powerful Duke, the Duchess by her minister; Vittoria is gulling a relatively simple husband, who almost begs to be cuckolded, while the Duchess is rash enough to attempt to deceive her powerful and violent brothers. This results in the strange paradox of the less guilty Duchess seeming the more guilty, especially when one compares the weak-kneed Antonio to the passionate Duke, Brachiano.

Despite similarities of type, Bosola is much more than a "repentant Flamineo." He sees, as Flamineo does not see, the beauty of goodness. He hears, much more than Flamineo, the voice of conscience.

Both plays follow a pattern of freedom and deliberation and carefully laid threats before the tragic action, before Vittoria and Brachiano plan the dual murders of their spouses, and before the Duchess rushes into marriage with

Antonio. After the tragic decision has been made, much as in the medieval tragic view, the freedom of the principals seems limited by the chain of events set into motion by their decisions. In other words, there is no turning back. From the time of their decision, then, they may be said to be under the control of a self-inflicted fate.

Another point, already well labored in discussing the individual plays, is that the courtly life takes on much of the blame for the tragic situation. "Fly the Courts of Princes," is the oft heard refrain. It is as if these people, were they born to some other station, might have led happy peaceful lives. This is indeed a note of fatalism. But again it is counteracted by the idea that these people create and re-create the situations which make the life of the court what it is. They plot the murders, they foster the ambitions, lusts, and jealousies, and hence are guilty of their crimes. While Webster's moral may be: Thank God you are not a Prince!, he does not seem to argue that the Princes are incapable of acting otherwise. Rather, as with most tragedy, his tragic art seems to draw upon the bow of circumstance, i.e. Courtly life provides the opportunities for a man's weakness to become manifest. Courtly life offers the temptations which weak human nature finds so hard to resist. Webster chooses the Court as the arena of the passions because it is there they find outlet on a grand scale.

Taking the history of the period into account, it is not difficult to see why Webster did so. The unrest of the early years of James I's reign, the disillusion with the monarchy, all contributed to a dim view of the court. His attack was not so much upon human nature as upon the world that Webster saw about him. His plays, through their criticism, point the way to a better life,

if somewhat vaguely. As Gosse points out, there are always those characters in his plays who learn from the tragedy to fly the Court: Giovanni in The White Devil and Delio in The Duchess of Malfi.¹ This is what Stoll argues for in saying that "the greatest contribution of Webster to characterization is a stern, true, moral sense."² For, if it be moral, stern, and true, to point out that one's world has gone awry, Webster was indeed a moralist.

One critic seems close to the truth in saying that Webster though enamored of his villains for their "largeness of character," still points the way to our condemnation of them.³ Especially in The Duchess of Malfi does he seem to sigh for a world of justice. Melancholy for him is usually "out of season," as though the malcontents have had their day and have been proved untrustworthy guides to the future.

Webster is not, however, as Lord Cecil would have him, a Calvinist on a rampage.⁴ To point to him as the predecessor of Milton, or the apostle of original sin, is to overlook the "mists," with which his characters are plagued, or to forget that while "they look up to heaven they confound knowledge with knowledge." Moral, Webster may be, but he is certainly not an apostle.

Out of the darkness of his age and his plays, Webster slowly emerges, a soul troubled and uncertain, believing that man is capable of building a better world, but feeling that perhaps the only sure solution is "integrity of life,"

¹Edmund Gosse, 17th Century Studies (New York, 1897), p. 50.

²E. E. Stoll, John Webster (New York, 1905), p. 128.

³Una Ellis-Fermor, The Jacobean Drama (London, 1953), p. 172.

⁴David Cecil, Poets and Story-Tellers (New York, 1949), p. 35.

being true to one's nature and dying in the cause of justice.

Clifford Leech has suggested that the Jacobean tragic spirit grew out of the chaos of the period:

Standing between a belief in natural order and a growing perception of chaos, between the Renaissance enthusiasm for living and an ever-darkening disillusion, between the twin poles of Fate and Chance, of predestination and free will, they went through mental experiences of a peculiar intensity, knew the darkness and the terror all the more keenly for the light that still remained in a diminishing fragment of the heavens. And because their feelings were so deeply stirred by the contradictions of their experience, they were led to the writing of tragic literature.⁵

In general, it may be argued that Webster's plays are basically an echo of the old order, medieval philosophy and free will. They reflect, however, the problems that bothered the Renaissance mind. Just as Webster and his contemporaries had been formed spiritually by the old philosophy and were now experiencing some spiritual confusion over the increase of seeming arguments for fatalism, so his characters reflect that confusion. Basically men of free will, masters of their fate, they yet face a world that they cannot fully comprehend. To come back to it again, "they confuse knowledge with knowledge." The common denominator, so to speak, the key to Webster's characters is this: His characters are free men in a frightening new world.

Travis Bogard has developed at length the differences between the Shakespearean and Websterian tragic views.⁶ The basic difference is that, while Shakespeare remains clearly within the framework of medieval Christianity and theology—guilt and punishment—Webster offers tragedy based upon an interweaving of guilts, greater and less. While Shakespeare concentrates upon an indi-

⁵Clifford Leech, John Webster (London, 1953), p. 44.

⁶Travis Bogard, The Tragic Satire of John Webster (Los Angeles, 1955), pp. 78-90

vidual, Webster portrays a society riddled by evil.

The source of Webster's power lies in his scope, the magnitude with which he views the tragic scene. Whereas we come from Shakespeare impressed by the rise and fall of an individual, we return from Webster's world marvelling at the upheaval of whole dynasties. Shakespeare takes us within man and examines the cause of tragedy, Webster is content to display the effects. This is what makes the determining of Webster's philosophy of fate and free will more difficult.

Since Webster is concerned with the effects of tragedy, it will not be out of place to make some mention of the success of his effort. Aristotle described the tragic effect as a purging of the emotions through pity and fear. Butcher in his commentary expands this to include the idea of awe, "awe at the greatness of the issues thus unfolded, and with the moral inevitableness of the result. In this sense of awe, the emotions of pity and fear are blended."⁷ An equilibrium is set up of forces which repel and attract, so that while, on the one hand, we would turn away in fear, on the other we remain attentive, unable to divert our glance from the portrayal of the nobility of human nature under stress.

Although both types of tragedy—that based on fatalism and that based on free will—achieve this effect of awe to some extent there is some difference in the degree of pity and fear produced by each of the two types. Free will tragedy draws more upon fear, for we can make the same fatal choice; fatalistic

⁷S. H. Butcher, Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art, 4th ed. (New York, 1951), p. 263.

tragedy engenders more of pity. Here is further proof that Webster's tragedies have more of free will and less of fatalism. For, granted the violent and oft-times improbable world which Webster creates, we can see in Brachiano and Vittoria, in Antonio and his Duchess, echoes of all the men and women past and present, and of ourselves. While there is pity, especially for the Duchess, in the two dramas, the magnificence of his people as they meet their destruction lifts them beyond pity and onto the higher plain of awe. We are led to conclude as we watch these strong characters at the moment of death, that they could never have been led completely without their own permission to the brink of chaos.

Witness The White Devil. Awe grips us throughout the series of crises into which Vittoria is thrown: her trial, the lovers' quarrel with Brachiano, her death. The culmination of this impression of her strength and greatness comes with her defiance at death:

Lodovico Thou dost tremble.

Vittoria O thou art deceived, I am too true a woman.

Conceit can never kill me: ile tell thee what

I will not in my death shed one base teare,

Or if looke pale, for want of blood not feare. (W.D. V.vi. 223-227.)

It is difficult to pity someone who shows such strength.

The Duchess, too, offers occasion for awe at the moment of her death. In spite of the horrors of her imprisonment, all calculated to break her spirit, she cries out in triumph: "I am Duchesse of Malfy still" (D.M. IV.ii.132). Her death is equally composed and courageous.

Webster's ability to lift his drama out of the mere melodramatic, his feel for tragedy, is largely due to his poetic gifts. While this thesis has expressly prescinded from the form of his tragic art and concerned itself with

the matter of his philosophy, it would be well to bear in mind Lucas's warning: "To criticise him without a taste for poetry is to be like a deaf man judging Wagner."⁸

The power of Webster, then is a combination of his poetic gift and his insight into the nobility and basic dignity of human nature. His drama is concerned with the imperfect state of man, the problem of evil, and implicitly with original sin. His men, brought low perhaps by the weight of too much intrigue and horror, are men nonetheless. True of him is Moody Prior's comment upon all the Jacobean: "There is something bold and courageous about their attempt to encompass the wide range between the splendour and degradation of human life."⁹

If Webster is vague in indicating an exit from the chaos of the world he creates, he remains true to the humanistic conception of 'showing the ability and nobility of man in his divided world. The poet of those who recognize in themselves the seeds of evil, Webster offers a clear view into human passion and the catastrophes it can engender. Webster's world is not for the idealist.

The value of Webster's tragic view of life lies, then, in its scope and magnificence. Here men and women move, not mincingly with measured step, but with majestic instancy. "Indeed Webster is a true tragic poet: one who, facing the most dreadful and baffling facts of human experience in all their unmitigated horror, yet transmutes them by the depth and grandeur of his vision into a thing of glory. This the rarest sort of poet and the greatest."¹⁰

⁸F. L. Lucas, The Complete Works of John Webster (London, 1928), p. 29.

⁹Moody E. Prior, The Language of Tragedy, (New York, 1947), pp. 119-135.

¹⁰David Cecil, Poets and Story-Tellers, p. 43.

To summarize and bring to a close this thesis, the following conclusions seem legitimate from our study of John Webster and his plays: first, while his plays contain expressions of doubt in the ability of man to be master of his destiny, the over-all impression created by his dramas is that man, regardless of the darkness and confusion that surround him, is free and capable of a greatness of soul that can be and often is heroic; second, that Webster's tragic view is of value to mankind precisely because it shows the dauntless courage and vitality of human nature even when beset by darkness and evil.

"In the final analysis, Webster is like Shakespeare a master of pity and terror--in brief, a true tragedian."¹¹

¹¹John Gassner, Masters of the Drama (New York, 1940), p. 260.

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APPROVAL SHEET

The thesis submitted by Mr. Robert Edward Cahill, S.J., has been read and approved by three members of the Department of English.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content, form, and mechanical accuracy.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

May 15, 1957
Date

J.P. Nannon, S.J.
Signature of Adviser