Note

I regret the considerable number of typing errors which still remain in this work. Though large sections have been retyped, it is still far from satisfactory. In particular, my paragraphing has often not been followed, especially on p. 9 & p. 212, pp. 81-82, 106-111, 136-137, and 164-176. Occasionally the last line comes too close to the bottom of the page, or to the footnotes, and pp. 71-135 have been typed in one and a half spacing.

Errors.

1. 6th. line, read melodrama for meadrama.
2. 11th. line of quotation, read commended for commanded.
3. 6th. line from foot of page, read...
4. 33a. In quotation, read excited for excited.
5. 56. 9th. line, read jest for jest.
6. 154. There is a line missed out from the quotation after the 6th. line, read

"melancholy Churchman: The Spring in his..."
In fact, read "Shakespeare" for "Shakespeare in Philology."

In line before second quotation read "seal" for "seal."

5th line, read "attributing" for "attributing.

In the two references, the John Middelton Murray, the last name should be spelled without an 'a'.

The last reference on the page is of course the note named the "November" not the "Blake" etc.

The edition of Archer referred to was W. Archer, "The Old Drama and the New London," William Heinemann Ltd., 1923.

Judith Blake,

December 22, 1966.
WEBSTER'S CHARACTERISATION AND THE PROBLEM OF JUDGEMENT.
In this thesis I have confined my study mainly to the two greatest of Webster's plays, *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*, and have not dealt in detail with those problems generally discussed in connection with Webster, such as the use of horror and other techniques commonly associated with melodrama, the inclusion of fables and sententiae which may seem to hinder the dramatic movement of the plays, and the apparent faults in structure which so often come under critical attack. While not attempting to defend these dramatic faults, I hope it will be clear from my analysis of the characters and themes of the tragedies that such flaws are not merely the product of careless craftsmanship, but arise from the inevitable strain between Webster's vision and the conventions with which he worked.

I have attempted an interpretation of the characters and their relation to the dark world against which Webster places them, which I hope will demonstrate not only the complexity and subtlety of Webster's characterisation, and something of his individual method, but the close connection of this method of characterisation with the final meaning of the plays, and particularly with the demonstration of that theme which underlies both *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi* - the problem of judgement in a world so confused
and evil as presented in the two great tragedies.

Note

Throughout this study, when comparing Cyril Tourneur's dramatic work to Webster's, I have followed Allardyce Nicoll's attribution of The Revengers Tragedy to Tourneur.

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* * *

iv
**LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS:**

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<tr>
<td>ed. Grosart</td>
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Haste therefore eche degree,
To welcome destiny:
Heaven is our heritage,
Earth but a players stage,
Mount wee unto the sky.
I am sick, I must dye:
Lord have mercy on us.

Theoretically at least, the world picture of the
Elizabethan was, as Tillyard observes,¹ that of a divinely
ordered universe. The following passage, from An Exhorta-
tion Concerning Good Order, and Obedience to Rulers and
Magistrates, describes the ordered universe, of which
English society was considered a part.

Almighty God hath created and appointed all
things in heaven, earth, and waters, in a most
excellent and perfect order. In heaven he hath
appointed distinct and several orders and states
of archangels and angels. In earth he hath
assigned and appointed kings, princes, with other
governors under them, in all good and necessary
order. The water above is kept, and raineth down
in due time and season. The sun, moon, stars,
rainbow, thunder, lightning, clouds, and all birds
of the air, do keep their order. The earth, trees,
seeds, plants, herbs, corn, grass, and all manner
of beasts, keep themselves in their order. All
the parts of the whole year, as winter, summer,
months, nights, and days, continue in their order.
All kinds of fishes in the sea, rivers, and waters;
with all fountains, springs; yea, the seas
themselves, keep their comely course and order.
And man himself also hath all his parts both within

¹ E.M.W. Tillyard, The Elizabethan World Picture,
London, 1943, p.3.
and without; as soul, heart, mind, memory, understanding, reason, speech, with all and singular corporal members of his body, in a profitable, necessary, and pleasant order. Every degree of people in their vocation, calling, and office, hath appointed to them their duty and order: some are in high degree, some in low; some kings and princes, some inferiors and subjects; priests and laymen, masters and servants, fathers and children, husbands and wives, rich and poor; and every one have need of other.  

The whole of creation was ordered into degrees of being by a supreme creator. The division of society into ranks and classes was considered to have been part of God's plan for the universe. Harrison heads the fifth chapter of Book II of his *Description of England*, 'Of Degrees of people in the Commonwealth of England', dividing the people into four sorts, according to rank,

We in England diuide our people commonlie into foure sorts, as gentlemen, citizens or burgesses, yeomen, and artificers or laborers.  

and Sir Thomas Elyot wrote

Hath not he set degrees and astates in all his glorious workes?

The normal society was one which was stable, unchanging, and within which each man confined himself to the limits set by his own rank or class.

This whole system of degree was imaged in the idea of 'the Chain of Being', which perfectly expressed the

2 Harrison, Book II, ch. v., p. 105.
3 *The boke named the Governour*, London, 1907, p.3.
4 Tillyard, ch. iv.
greatness, order and unity of creation. It stretched from the angels to the lowliest inanimate object, and man was the highest point of earthly creation, the meeting point on the chain between material and divine. Everything in the universe was included simultaneously within this system of order, and each part of the whole was seen as having some connection with the other. The whole universe was bound together from highest to lowest. So a parallel in the condition of the lives of men might be found in the behaviour of the very stars themselves — the domestic situation could be reflected in the cosmic, the cosmic in the domestic.¹ Many such analogies are to be found in the literature of the time.

The heavens themselves, the planets, and this centre, Observe degree, priority, and place; Insisture, course, proportion, season, form; Office, and custom, in all line of order:²

In Elizabethan literature there are many references to the four elements, and Tillyard sees such references as having the imaginative function of linking the activities of man with the business of the cosmos, to show events 'not merely happening but as happening in conjunction with so much else'.³ In the mind of the Elizabethan, there was probably a strong sense of 'belonging' to the universe, of being a

¹ Tillyard, p.8.  
² Troilus and Cressida, I.iii, 85-88.  
³ Tillyard, p.59.
distinct part of a great and ordered system, with a definite function to perform, a definite purpose to one's existence.

The theory of Degree and Order permeated the social thought of the age, which had been inherited, with few changes, (at least in theory) from that of mediaeval times. The ideal was a kingdom which should be like a well-ordered family.\(^1\) Acceptance of rank and corresponding vocation was stressed, and men were expected to work together for the good of the community rather than for individual profit. Of course this may not have been held to always in practice, but still, theoretically, such ideas formed the basis of accepted social theory. This insistence on the primary importance of the public good only began to fade in the seventeenth century. It had sprung from the actual conditions of life in the small communities of the Middle Ages, and was confirmed by the traditional teaching of the Church.

The system of Degree and Order was at the basis of the whole social, economic, political and theological system. Belief in the Ordered World picture was almost taken for granted by the Elizabethan - it was what everyone believed, or at least thought they believed, almost with an unthinking acceptance. Hooker, who transmitted theology to the general educated public of his day, has an elaborate account of the

\(^1\) Knights, p.143.
Often it appears in didactic prose—we have seen it already in the Homilies and in Elyot's *The Governour*. Ulysses' speech on degree is perhaps the best known of all the non-didactic examples, but the idea is implied in many other Shakespearian plays, perhaps in all of them.  

The homily quoted earlier was read in churches throughout England, so that the ideas behind it must have been part of an almost unconscious knowledge of the people, the basis of the whole system of thought with which they grew up, and which directed their thinking, and their way of looking at the universe.

So the Elizabethans expected a coherent universe, and within the framework of this universe, they had an explanation for almost everything. For instance, the apparent meaningless destruction which was wrought by the stars, responsible for the turns of fortune which beset man, could be explained within the scheme of the Ordered World. The stars, when first created, worked for man's good, but the Fall was responsible for a change whereby the Divine Creator set them against one another in their influence on earthly things; so that the havoc of fortune which resulted could be seen as an ordered punishment for sin.  

Nature was regarded as being fundamentally purposive. In the first chapter of

1 Of the Lawes of Ecclesiastical Polity, Book I, ch.iii.
3 Tillyard, p.49.
The Governour, Elyot gives an account of the theory of order, and Tillyard points out that it has this prominent place because order is the condition of all that follows in the book — for it would be of no use to educate the magistrate without the assurance of a coherent universe in which he could do his proper work.

This was the position of the whole Elizabethan world — it hung dangerously on the conceptions of Order and Degree, which underlay all things. They seemed the necessary assumptions for the working of the whole universe. Everything was tightly plotted into the one scheme — making a universe which was almost completely coherent, and a man whose life was informed with purpose. Without this scheme, without this coherent universe, that sense of purpose, to what avail would be any good action? The world would be without meaning, and man himself without direction. The Exhortation Concerning Good order continues

For, where there is no right order, there reigneth all abuse, carnal liberty, enormity, sin, and Babylonical confusions. Take away kings, princes, rulers, magistrates, judges, and such estates of God's order; ... and there must needs follow all mischief and utter destruction both of souls, bodies, goods, and commonwealths.  

1 Tillyard, p.9. 
F.P. Wilson writes, of that Christian universe, that

To disbelieve in that age would indeed have brought chaos not only to the individual man but to the universe in which he lived.¹

And beneath the apparent security of the Elizabethan world picture, there was always this fear. It is present in the background of Ulysses' speech, so that the best known expression of the theory of order is also an expression of fear for its possible crumbling.

₀, when degree is shak'd, Which is the ladder to all high designs, The enterprise is sick! How could communities, Degrees in schools, and brotherhoods in cities, Peaceful commerce from dividable shores, The primogenity and due of birth, Prerogative of age, crowns, sceptres, laurels, But by degree, stand in authentic place? Take but degree away, untune that string, And, hark! what discord follows;²

The Ordered Universe hung upon these theories, and if they should be upset, chaos would follow; a complete chaos, such as there was before creation, a darkness over all the universe.

² Troilus and Cressida, I.iii, 101-110.
...take away ordre from all thynges what shulde than remayne? Certes nothynge finally, except some man wolde imagine eftsones Chaos:

(i)

In the seventeenth century, the chaos did come. Almost all the concepts underlying the ordered world were challenged, and visibly shaken, if not destroyed. It was a period of great change, all the more disturbing since it followed a period of reasonable stability. The death of Elizabeth herself came as a great shock to the nation, seeming to epitomise the changes which were beginning to make themselves felt by that time. Dekker, in The Wonderful Year, describes 'the general terror that her death bred':

...The report of her death (like a thunderclap) was able to kill thousands, it tooke away hearts from millions: for hauing brought vp (euen vnder her wing) a nation that was almost begotten and borne vnder her; that neuer shouted any other Aue than for her name, neuer sawe the face of any Prince but her selfe, neuer vnderstooode what that strange outlandish word Change signified: how was it possible, but that her sicknes should throw abroad an universall feare, and her death an astonishment? She was the Courtiers treasure, therefore he had cause to mourn: the Lawyers sword of justice, he might well faint: the Merchants patronesse, he had reason to looke pale: The Citizens mother, he might best lament: the Shepherds Goddesse and should not he droope?

One by one the great statesmen who had helped fashion and rule Elizabethan England also died, and there were no successors to match them. It seemed as though an age was passing away, and the era which was coming into being was regarded with apprehension and distrust.

In the latter half of the sixteenth century the new Capitalist society was beginning to form, and the old traditions, the concepts which for generations had been the bases of society, were undermined.

The strict divisions between the ordered degrees of society began to break down. The Court of Augmentations disposed of some of the land released by the suppression of the monasteries through sales and leases to the newly rising gentry, who thus began to acquire property. The rising prices and new standards of luxury which often forced the noble classes to sell land emphasised this trend. Such a transfer of land between classes would have been unheard of in an earlier age. To the traditionalists it may have seemed that the concept of Degree was being threatened. There are many references to upstarts in the work of the satirists, and in the drama also.

It was the greatest blessing ever happened to women; when Farmers' sons agreed, and met again, to wash their hands, and come vp Gentlemen; the common-wealth has flourished ever since; lands that were mead by the Rod, that labors spar'd, Taylors ride downe, and measure 'em by the yeard; Faire trees, those comely fore-tops of the Field, are cut to maintain head-tires — much untold.¹

The importance of money was greatly increased. The old restrictions on usury broke down before the practical need for capital. Harrison includes usury, along with the rising prices and increased copyhold fines, as one of 'three things are grown to be verie grievous' in England.² Yet this was only one instance where the old morally based social customs gave way in the face of the practical demands of a changing society. Harrison sees avarice reigning in the Church, and in the universities, where bribery shuts out the sons of the poor from advancement.³ In his Of the True greatness of the Kingdom of Britain, Bacon writes

... no man can be ignorant of the idolatry that is generally committed in these degenerate times to money, as if it could do all things public and private.⁴

And Nashe, in Christ's Tears over Jerusalem, exclaims

In the days of Salomon, gold and silver bare no price. In these our days, (which are the days of Sattan) nought but they beare any price.⁵

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¹ The Revengers Tragedy, II, i, 239-247.
² Harrison, Book II, ch.xii, p.241.
³ ibid., ch.III, p.77.
⁵ Works, ed. Mckerrow, II, p.162.
With the increase in the importance of money came the higher standards of luxury. James' court, with its wild extravagance and excess, set the pattern which the nobles, and even the citizens did their best to follow.

... now does fresh blood leape into the cheekes of the Courtier: the Souldier now hangs vp his armor ... Now the thriftie Citizen casts beyond the Moone, and seeing the golden age returned into the world againe, resolues to worship no Saint but money.\(^1\)

Harrison notices the increase in luxury, the nobles exceeding in number and variety of dishes, and in the 'fantastical folly' of their dress, and, as a traditionalist, he looks back to the times when Englishmen were content with a simpler way of life.\(^2\)

Competition began to move economic life, and the old idea of an economy where a man put the public good before his own private gain, at least theoretically, began to fade. The economic world was becoming one where each man strove for his own good at the expense of others.

This onelie I know, that euerie function and severall vocation striueth with other, which of them should haue all the water of commoditie run into hir owne cesterne.\(^3\)

There were many complaints against the 'new men' - for the changing society produced men eager for social advancement and money, who gave no thought to the old principles on which dealings between men had been based for centuries, no thought

3 ibid., ch. v, p.132.
to their fellow members of society. A character like Massinger's Sir Giles Overreach was no doubt based on a type which was becoming all too well known in the society of the time.

There is much in contemporary literature of the gulling of young heirs, and the tactics of usurers and professional tricksters. In The White Devil, the Cardinal shows Fransisco his Black Book

and these following leaves,

For base rogues that undo young Gentlemen
By taking up commodities: for politic bankrupts:
That share with scriveners for their good reportage:¹

Harrison mentions the swarms of idle serving men who insinuate themselves with young noblemen newly come to their lands, and waste their estates.²

The old sense of community, in this new half capitalist world, was vanishing. Not only was the new spirit of ruthlessness and self-seeking evident in the economic sphere, but in the life of the court as well. Here there was a ruthless and heart-breaking struggle for advancement. Bacon's struggle for preferment testifies to this, and there is similar evidence in the memoirs of other courtiers of the period.

¹ IV. ii. 52-61.
² Book II, ch. v, p.135.
Sir James Harington writes in his Brief Notes and Remembrances:

I have spent my time, my fortune, and almost my honesty, to but false hopes, false friends, and shallow praise...¹

In many such plaints the note of weariness and disillusion reminds one at once of the speeches of such seekers after preferment as Bosola and Flamineo. Broken promises, false hopes, poverty and disillusion were their inevitable lot. Such a world is reflected in the background of Webster's plays. Bosola says:

Who wold relie upon these miserable dependences, in expectation to be advanc'd tomorrow? What creature ever fed worse, then hoping Tantalus?...

... For places in the Court, are but like beds in the hospitall, where this mans head lies at that mans foote, and so lower, and lower.²

The politic manœuvres of the unscrupulous became a common target in the satires, pamphlets, and drama. Though we must allow for the exaggeration and the rhetoric of the satirists and the writers of homilies, still, to the sensitive man the changes in society may have suggested a vision of confusion and corruption. To Webster, and other dramatists of the period, the collapse and confusion of moral values was a matter of deep imaginative concern. Everything seemed to be dissolving. In the place of the old community, there had

¹ quoted by Knights, p.327.
² The Duchess of Malfi, I.i. 56-69.
emerged a world where no man could trust another.

When the guest trembles at his hosts swart looke,
The sonne, doth feare his stepdame, that hath tooke
His mothers place for lust, the twin-borne brother
Malignes his mate, that first came from his mother.¹

This is the dark world of The Revengers Tragedy, the politic world of Webster's plays.

But behind the ruthlessness, the corruption, the self-seeking of these individuals, and behind the riot and luxury of the new society, what lay? Some perhaps were not compelled wholly by greed or avarice in itself, but were forced on by the pressure of being virtually directionless in a changing world. The sense of purpose had suddenly vanished. The ties which had bound men together, and given them purpose, seemed to be disappearing with the old ordered world. Each man finds himself alone, to shape out his own vision of the world, to direct his own life, to carve out his own career. Man's essential aloneness is realised most vividly in this period —

I doe not looke
Who went before, nor who shall follow mee;
Noe, at my selfe I will begin and end.²

There seemed no security anywhere, nor any stable part of society to which a man could feel that he belonged.³

2 The White Devil, V.vi. 256-258.
To the confusion caused by the great social and economic changes was added an intellectual confusion which they partly caused, with their implication of the collapse of the ordered world. For what had become of the Great Chain of Being, the divinely ordered degrees of existence, when the Ordered Universe was so obviously falling to pieces before their very eyes? The principles of religion and morality had been closely associated with the picture of the Ordered World, and so its disruption seemed to shake the whole system of belief.¹

The new astronomical discoveries contributed to the upsetting of the elaborate structure of the universe,² though these would perhaps be less immediate in effect than the actual social disintegration which surrounded men. The new scientific discoveries might merely reinforce or confirm the suspicion of disintegration. The response to the discoveries of Copernicus and Galileo probably varied with the differing temperaments of men. Aubrey, in his life of Edward Davenant, emphasises that he was a most learned man, 'well versed in all kinds of learning', most strongly inclined towards

² Galileo's discoveries disturbed the traditional universe—the area of decay, previously limited to the sublunary regions, was extended into the heavens, previously considered immutable. The parts of the old system of knowledge were so interlocked that disorder in one part meant disorganisation in most fields of knowledge.
mathematics, and a divine. 'I remember when I was a young Oxford scholar', Aubrey writes, 'that he could not endure to hear of the New (Cartesian, etc.) Philosophy; "for", said he, "if a new philosophy is brought in, a new divinity will shortly follow" (or "come next"): and he was right.

Other men, perhaps, were not so troubled by the new discoveries. Robert Burton, in his *Digression of Air*, places the conflicting astronomies side by side, with their contradictions, and smiles at their confusion. He sees all the contention with objectivity, even amusement.

...In the meantime, the world is tossed in a blanket amongst them, they hoist the earth up and down like a ball, make it stand and go at their pleasures:

Many seventeenth century men of intelligence and education, were no doubt able, like Burton, to hold the contradictions in their minds, and speculate on the diversity, without undue alarm. For others the new philosophy put 'all in doubt', striking as it did upon minds already occupied with the too obvious signs of disorder in the world around them. For both the thinker and practical man there was evidence enough of confusion.

Margaret Wiley, in *The Subtle Knot*, writes that by the time of the late Renaissance in England there no longer existed, either in the scientific world or in the soul of man, an infallible authority which should silence all controversy. The Renaissance man, once the first fine enthusiasm for the new learning had subsided, discovered that the very axis

---

of his universe had slipped, and his minor uncertainties were overlaid by the doubt that there was any sure foundation for human knowledge, in science or ethics or religion.¹

There were those whose bafflement at the confused universe led to a kind of melancholy, an intellectual disillusion. Perhaps, as G. B. Harrison suggests in his essay on Elizabethan melancholy, such a purely intellectual melancholy was partly caused by 'a zest for inquiry which found no satisfaction in anything the learned could offer'.² And Nashe points out that 'Some by over-studying come to be discontent and dogged.'³ Flamino spent years at the university, and one remembers also that Bosola was known for his apparently intense and sterile search for some knowledge —

SIL. What's that Bosola?
DEL. I knew him in Padua - a fantastisticall scholler, Like such, who studdy to know how many knots Was in Hercules club, of what colour Achilles beard was, Or whether Hector were not troubled with the toothach - He hath studdied himselfe halfe blear-i'd, to know The true semitry of Caesars nose by a shooting-horne, And this he did To gaine the name of a speculative man.⁴

The vain search for a meaning which could not be found is reflected here. Men came to 'confound knowledge with knowledge', and felt themselves 'in a mist'. 'Wisdom, mere

¹ p.121.
² Nicholas Breton, Melancholike Humours, ed. G. B. Harrison, (with an essay on Elizabethan Melancholy), London, 1929 p.70.
³ Nashe, Christ's Tears over Jerusalem, Works, ed. Mckerrow II, p.130.
⁴ The Duchess of Malfi, III, iii. 49-57.
theoretical knowledge, is to no avail in the world of Webster's plays.

The figure of the malcontent, emerging from such a background, became familiar in contemporary literature. It was difficult to find preferment in either church or state, and there were many men fitted by their education for places higher than those they could ever hope to gain. They were continually forced to see others less capable or qualified than they, achieving success because they were favourites of the king, or had influence with the favourites. So many able men, many scholars especially, were thwarted, and became bitter.

Many of the malcontents were from the universities. Bacon notes, in his essay on sedition, the dangers that can occur to the state when 'more are bred scholars than preferments can take off'. Many of these men could find no place in the new social system, and became discontented and disillusioned. In The Revengers Tragedy, Lussurioso is well aware that discontent and want is 'the best clay to mould a villain of'; hiring his second villain, he is delighted to find that he is a man 'in whom much melancholy dwells,' for

Hee being of black condition, suitable
To want and ill content, hope of preferment
Will grinde him to an Edge. ²

---

2 The Revengers Tragedy, IV. i. 80-82.
Bacon remarks that

Ambitious men... if they be checked in their desires they become secretly discontent, and look upon men and matters with an evil eye.\(^1\)

One cannot read the literature of the time without being aware of these men standing in the background.

Nashe writes, in *Christ's Tears Over Jerusalem*, that 'the court is the true kingdom of discontent'.\(^2\) So indeed it seems when one turns to Webster, where the court is the centre of all the illusion and false hope which torture the Websterian people throughout their lives — Antonio's concealed ambition, Flamineo's and Bosola's desperate seeking of preferment, Brachiano's and Vittoria's illusory hope of happiness. Beneath the vicious battle for preferment there is an emptiness and a hopelessness. At the end of *The White Devil* all the characters' hopes crumble to nothing — the promise of gain for which they commit themselves to evil proves, in the end, to be deceptive, and the characters die, still in a mist of confusion, purposeless and alone.

**Prosperity doth bewitch men seeming cleere,**
*But seas do laugh, shew white, when Rocks are neere.*
*Wee cease to greive, cease to be fortunes slaves,*
*May cease to dye by dying.*\(^3\)

Vittoria cries, as she is dying

---

1 'Of Ambition', ibid., p.113.
O happy they that never saw the Court,¹
Nor ever knew great Man but by report.²

and Flamineo

Farewell glorious villaines,
This busie trade of life appears most vaine,
Since rest breeds rest, where all seeke paine by paine.²

Perhaps Webster's greatest achievement is in his
skilful delineation of the malcontent turned villain, a
study of response to chaos to which he brought a deep in-
sight, a surprisingly modern psychology and a dry compassion.

¹ The White Devil, V. vi. 261-262.
² ibid., V. vi. 272-274.
The malcontents in the Jacobean plays, at moments when their melancholy is emphasised (for instance, when Flamineo feigns a mad distraction over the disgrace of his sister) often engage in speeches of social criticism, castigating the corruption and vice of the age. This seems to be a function associated with the melancholy or discontented man.

FLA. Proofs! twas corruption. O Gold, What a God are thou! and o man, what a devill are thou to be tempted by that cursed Minerall! Yon diversivolent Lawyer; marque him, knaves turne informers, as maggots turne to flies, you may catch gudgeons with either. A Cardinal; would hee would hear mee, there's nothing so holie but mony will corrupt and putrifie it, like vittel under the line...

Religion; oh how it is commendled with policie. The first bloudshed in the world happened about religion. Would I were a Jew!

... if there were Jewes enough, so many Christians would not turne usurers; if Priests enough, one should not have sixe Benefices; and if gentlemen enough, so many earlie mushromes, whose best growth sprang from a dunghill, should not aspire to gentilitie...

And Vendice, acting out the part of the melancholic man before Lussurioso, speaks of the corruption of the law, and the avarice which burns in most men. 2

There were many whose disgust at the corruption which seemed to permeate society gave them a dissillusioned outlook on the world. Often their reaction against it is violent and bitter - this is the attitude of Marston in The Scourge of Villainie, and of Tourneur in The Revengers Tragedy. A spirit of pure loathing runs through Vendice's opening address in that play. Many writers of the period

1 The White Devil, III. iii. 19-25.
2 The Revengers Tragedy, IV. ii. 53ff.
share to some extent this feeling. The world of the satirists is a dark one. Nashe's picture of London by night

If God (as in Esay) shold aske our watch-man the deuill... what seest thou in London by night? he would answer ... I see reveuling, dauncing, and banqueting till midnight. I see a number of wiues cockolding their husbandes, vnder pretence of going to their next neighbours labour. I see Gentlewoemen baking in their painting on their faces by the fire, and burning out many punds of Candle in pinning their treble rebaters, when they will not bestow the snuffe of a light on looking on anie good booke. I see theft, murder, and conspiracie, following their business verie closelie.¹

reminds one immediately of such passages in The Revengers Tragedy as Vendice's apostrophe to Night:

Now tis full sea a bed ouer the world;
There's iugling of all sides; some that were Maids
E'en at Sunset are now perhaps i'th Toale-booke;
This woman in immodest thin apparel
Lets in her friend by water, here a Dame
Cunning, nayles lether-hindges to a dore,
To auiod proclamation.
Now cuckolds are quoyning, apace, apace.²

The sense of corruption was intensified because, although the stability of the old world and the theories on which it had been based seemed shaken, and partly destroyed, men had not yet been able to adjust themselves to the new world which was coming into being. The majority of men, whatever they

2 The Revengers Tragedy, II. ii. 152-159.
may have done in practice, still held to the old theories and standards of judgement with which they had grown up. Though society had changed much, the old ideas were still, for the majority of people, almost a habit of mind, and the standards of the old world were still regarded as 'normal'.

Yet this application of the old standards to a world wholly changed, where they had often become meaningless and irrelevant, produced, in the satirists and some of the dramatists, a vision of evil and confusion. The world seemed so completely corrupt, so vastly changed, that it seemed as if it had been metamorphosed. The universe seemed to have been twisted out of joint, it was so utterly transformed. Even a poor writer like Churchyard voices this feeling:

Gay golden robes, and garments pownced out,
Silke laide on silke, and stiched ore the same:
Great loss and play, and keeping reuell route,
With grosser knackes, I list not now to name,
Hath hy abuse, brought world cleane out of frame...

Indeed it seemed that it was not only the world which had undergone a transformation, but the nature of man himself.

In the Seventh Satire, Marston gives a picture of the Transformed World, suffused with the idea that man had himself been metamorphosed into something less than man – he who had once been placed next to the angels on the old chain of being:

1 Knights, p. 164.
That lustre wherewith Nature's nature decked
Our intellectuaall part, that glosse is soyled
With stayning spots of vile impietie
And muddy durt of sensualitie
These are not men, but Apparitions...

Mah had been transformed by the 'Rank inundation of luxuriously' so that he became little more than an animal.

Thou brutish world, that in all vilenes drown'd
Hath lost thy soule, for naught but shades I see,
Resemblances of men inhabite thee.

He is continually linked with the beasts, from whom he had been most importantly separated in the old scale of being. Again we remember Webster's plays, where the imagery of beasts also appears. And behind these tirades against man, the frequent use of animal imagery, there lies a deep sense of loss, in both the satirists and the dramatists. So much abuse as Flamineo heaps upon man can only come from this - a consciousness of the loss of greatness in man, of an essential fineness which is marred and destroyed.

It is Tourneur who most fully voices this sense of a Transformed World. It is felt very strongly in the poem The Transformed Metamorphosis. Again there is the familiar dark world of chaos and blackness, and one is made aware of the poet's horror at being faced with such a world.

Who puts a flaming torch into my hand,
And bids me charity see where I stand?

1 The Scourge of Villainie, VII. 9-13, Poems, ed. A. Davenport, p. 140.
2 ibid., VII. 140-142, Davenport, p. 144.
The imagery is of gall, fog, and night, and the loss of harmony. Obscure and inferior though the poem may be, its imagery yet strives to express such a position as the seventeenth century man may have found himself in; with the sensitive awareness of chaos, and the overwhelming terror of being directionless in the midst of it.

O who, O who had metamorphosed
My sense? and plutoniz'd my heau'nly shape?

O who affrights me with blacke horrors gape?
Who tells me that the azure-colour'd sky
Is now transform'd to hel's enuironie.1

It is the same picture of a world out of joint as reappears in The Revengers Tragedy - in stanza five of the poem the poet sees that it is night at noon, as it will be also in the tragedy. Both imagery and vision will reappear there, the same world where objects no longer perform their natural functions. Faced with this confusion, the poet cries

Daz'led with object's contrarieties,
With opposites of sad confused woe,
Or els transpiercing: ayre-clear brightnes, loe:
My eies, whether they be, or dimm'd or cleare,
Clearely discerne a Transformation neare. 2

And it is again the transformation of all good to evil:

Black Auarice, makes sale of Holines,
And steeming luxurie doth broach her lust;
Red-tyrranizing wrath doth soules oppresse,
And tankred Enuie falsifies all trust.3

1 The Transformed Metamorphosis, Prologue, 22-23. 
2 ibid., Prologue, 38-42
3 ibid, 64-67
Though Tourneur finishes the poem with a return to light and harmony, there are only a few lines in this vein, and the prevailing impression, as with *The Revengers Tragedy*, is one of blackness and confusion.

*O see the world, all is by heav'n rejected,*¹

The world of *The Revengers Tragedy* is itself the Transformed World. In the first bitter speech of Vendice's, as he stands on the darkened stage, watching the torchlit procession of revellers, the polarity of the imagery is evident, the opposites which now, in this twisted and unnatural world, go together naturally.

*O that marrow-lesse age,*
Should stuffe the hollow Bones with damnd desires,
And stead of heate kindle infernall fires,
Within the spend-thrift veynes of a drye Duke,
A parcht and iuecleese luxur. *O God!* one
That has scarce bloud inough to liue vpon.
And hee to ryot it like a sonne and heyre?  
*I. i. 5-11*

The word 'unnatural' is itself used continually throughout the play - as if everything in the world is perverted from its natural function and put to unnatural use.

Continually there are night scenes, scenes of darkness, illuminiated only by the *flickering* and artificial torchlight of the revellers. So Spurio says, appearing in the confusion when the duke is almost murdered mistakenly by Lussurioso

¹ *The Transformed Metamorphosis*, 559.
Throughout the play there are poem-like speeches on the nature of the age, and the life of the court, coming after the scenes of action, as if to sum up the events we have seen, and comment on the nature of that world in which such things can happen. Spurio, the bastard son of the Duke, speaks, after his seduction by the Duchess, of the hour of his conception, an hour of darkness and revels:

Faith, if the truth were knowne, I was begot
After some gluttonous dinner, some stirring dish
Was my first father; when deep healths went round,
And Ladies cheekes were painted red with Wine,
Their tongues, as short and nimble as their heeles
Uttering words sweet and thick; and when they rise,
Were merrily disposed to fall agen,
In such a wispring and with-drawing houre,
Was I stolne softle;  

I. ii. 200-209

Antonio's speech, describing the night on which his wife was raped, sketches in a similar background.

last reuelling night,
When Torch-light made an artificial noone
About the Court, some Courtiers in the maske,
Putting on better faces than their owne,
Being full of frawde and flattery:

I. iv. 32-36

The picture is of a world where nothing is natural. The courtiers with their torchlight and revels, attempt to make it 'noon at night'. They wear faces other than their own, keeping their corruption cynically masked:
O howre of Incest!
Any kin now, next to the Rim ath sister
Is mans meate in these days, and in the morning
When they are vp and drest, and their maske on,
Who can perceiue this? saue that eternall eye,
That see's through flesh and all,
I. iii. 70-75

The theme of the transformation of the world from
good to evil is at the heart of this strictly patterned play.
The plot and the manoevrings of the characterisation both
demonstrate the nature of the transformed, unnatural world, in
which all good is in the process of change to evil. The
imagery of transformation, of good being melted away for gold
or lust, is constant throughout the play. Vendice's dead
mistress was beautiful enough to

Ha' made a Vsurers son
Melt all his patrimony in a kisse,
I. i. 29-30

And Vendice, acting out his part as pandar, convinces
Lussurioso that he knows the way of the world

I haue beene witnesse
To the surrenders of a thousand virgins,
And not so little,
I haue seen patrimonyes washt a peices
Fruit-feilds turnd into bastards,
And in a world of Acres,
Not so much dust due to the heire t'was left too
As would well grauel a petition!
I. iii. 54-61

Bribery, another example of the conversion of good to evil,
is mentioned frequently. The Duchess attempts to bribe
Spurio with jewels in order to seduce him. The brothers
attempt to bribe and plot the rescue of the younger son from
goal.

The theme of transformation is evident even in the
presentation of Vendice himself. When he first dons his disguise, Tourneur makes a point of emphasising it, stressing that he is becoming part of the present age:

And therefore ile put on that knaue for once,
And be a right man then, a man ath Time,
I. i. 101-102

At first his acting of this part may be quite conscious, but Tourneur wishes to demonstrate that even such a one as Vendice may become caught up in the evil of the age. There is an insistence on his complete transformation, even if, at first, it is only on the superficial level of a mere physical disguise.

Ven. What, brother? am I farre inough from myselfe?
Hip. As if another man had heen sent whole
Into the world, and none wist how he came.
I. iii. 1-3

And Hippolito goes on to say:

I should take him for Time,
He is so neere kinne to this present minute.
I. iii. 28-29

It is pressed into the consciousness of the audience and reader that Vendice is to be regarded somewhat differently from the moment he dons his disguise. His being akin to the present, in Tourneur's view of the present age, can bode only evil.

The degeneration through involvement in evil which does come to Vendice is not really an analysis of a character's response to the corruption of the society around him, as we will have with Flamineo, for instance; rather it is string-pulling for the benefit of the thesis of the play.
Hippolito's

Brother we loose our selues.

IV. ii. 225

is an indication that they are becoming caught up in the corruption. And in Act V, scene i, Vendice's ecstasies about revenge show a definite degeneration. His murders are no longer merely revenge for a dead mistress and father, but a desire to kill all who may be connected in some way with the duke. He has developed a lust for intrigue, and for the thrills offered by the ingeniously planned murder.

The transformation theme is evident again in the temptation of Castiza. Lussurioso bribes the disguised Vendice to try to transform Castiza's honesty into avarice:

> Her honor, which she call her chastity
> And bring it into expence, for honesty
> Is like a stock of money layd to sleepe,

I. iii. 128-130

Gratiana's arbitrary changes of character are also caused by Tourneur's manoeuvring in order to make his thesis plain. So Gratiana declares that the riches of all the world could not hire her to the task of prostituting her own daughter. Then, after a few tempting speeches from Vendice, she is hired. This change follows not with a logic of character but from a rigorous logic of thought - demonstrating what we may expect from degenerate man and the world of corruption. From the background generalisations, Tourneur will work to the particular instances, not worrying about consistency of characterisation.
Gratiana's transformation, though unnatural, is, it is suggested, part of the very nature of the unnatural and transformed world.

The world descends into such base borne evils
That forty Angells can make fourscore diuills,
II. i. 100-101

The imagery of transformation, this time of Castiza's honour into riches, reappears

No, I would raise my state vpon her brest
And call her eyes my Tennants, I would count
My yearely maintenance upon her cheeks:
II. i. 107-109

And Castiza's remark upon Gratiana's treachery leaves us in no doubt that we are to interpret it as being symptomatic of the disorder of the world:

The worlds so changd, one shape into another,
It is a wise childe now that knowes her mother.
II. i. 187-188

Continually, the evil of the present world is emphasised. Poverty and honesty go naturally together. Money alone has power, and it is at the root of all the transformation. Gratiano is referred to constantly as being 'unnatural', and so as being in tune with the age.

The climax of the theme of metamorphosis comes in the scene in Act III at the unsunned lodge, 'where-in tis night at noone'.¹ Here lies the central irony of the play, for all the frenzied rush and struggle, evil and plotting is

¹ The very opposite, one notes, to the courtiers' world, where it is 'noone at night!'
negated by death, the living body itself being transformed into dust.

Do's the Silke-worme expend her yellow labours For thee? for thee dos she vndoe herselfe? Are lord-ships sold to maintaine Lady-ships For the poore benefit of a bewitching minute? Why dos yon fellow falsify hie-waies And put his life between the Iudges lippes, To refine such a thing, keepes horse and men To beate their valours for her? Surely wee're all made people...

III. v. 75-83

Death, the skull which Vendice has held throughout the play, negates the point of the revellers' existence. And Tourneur holds it triumphantly before them.
This very irony, this triumph of Tourneur's, is a measure of the difference between his attitude to the Transformed World, and that of Webster's. Tourneur stands more with the satirists than with Webster. They, like him, view the corruption, the evil, the incredible confusion, with horror, and rejecting its contradictions, assert the traditional morality. Nashe, for instance, speaks of the gluttony, the fantastically extravagant dressing, and, like Tourneur, he holds the spectre of death up to the revellers as a warning, almost triumphantly, with the descriptions of the rotting body in the ground, the usual remarks on the frailty of life.

O, what is beauty more than a wind-blowne bladder, that it should forget whereto it is borne?1

And he urges contrition, failing to recognise the contradictions present in the new world, failing to see the inadequacy of the old standards.

1 Christ's Tears Over Jerusalem, Works, ed. Mckerrow, II, p. 139.
Dekker's attitude is similar, holding death before the sinners, telling of the transitory nature of the life of pleasure. The satirists are on the whole partly medaieval in outlook, clinging to the old way of thinking, the traditional standards of judgement which now can have no real relevance. The satirists and Tourneur are moralistic, Webster is analytic. Tourneur wishes to demonstrate man's evil, Webster to investigate it. Tourneur therefore can use his characters almost as puppets, but Webster tries to analyse the evil of men through a study of the actions and hidden motivations of individual men.

Essentially, their attitudes are different. There is a hatred and viciousness about Vendice's tirades on the age.

O the thought of that
Turnes my absued heart-strings into fret.
I. i. 15-16

It is an intense, half baffled reaction, akin to that already noted in The Transformed Metamorphosis. Yet Vendice's speeches come, not, as is the case with Flamineo, from what we feel is a tormented awareness of evil which is part of the characterisation;
but from the dramatist, pulling the strings of his thesis puppets. It is a general moral fury rather than the portrait of a personal dilemma in the character himself.

Tourneur emphasises the lust, the depravity of the creatures of his court, but he is absolute in his rejection of their vices. He does not see them, as Webster does, clinging to their intrigues because there is nothing else which they may have to give them direction in the surrounding confusion. Motive, to Tourneur, to the kind of play he was writing, was irrelevant. He emphasises the pleasure, the lascivious enjoyment of the revellers' lives.

Banquets abroad by Torch-light, Musics, sports, II. i. 25

a pleasure which is foreign to Webster, who sees beneath the life of the court only suffering and fear, and fragility of hope:

Wee cease to greive, cease to be fortunes slaves, Nay cease to dye by dying.¹

Though Tourneur may prove the revellers' lives hollow, snatching life from them, there is no tragedy in this - only a moral point to be made. Our response to the scene where, in the unsunned lodge, Tourneur shows that all the pleasure which the characters seek is negated by death, is very different from our feeling at the end of The White Devil, when we see suddenly that the hopes for which the characters have wasted themselves

¹ The White Devil, V. vi. 252-253.
have come to nothing, and that they were half aware of this
doom from the start.

Tourneur's characters are not granted the self
awareness that could turn their confounding into tragedy.
If he sees anything beneath the apparent pleasure of their
lives, he does not draw our attention to it. His characters
are dancing and laughing, all unconscious; like the figures
in the old Dances of Death.¹

A comparison of the two dramatists' use of the
convention of disguise gives an insight into the differences
of attitude found in their plays. Antonio, in The Revengers
Tragedy, mentions the characters in the masque 'putting on
faces better than their own', and there is continual reference
to the revellers, the evil-doers, as being masked. Tourneur
uses the disguise merely as another symbol of artificiality
and unnaturalness, a reinforcing of the main theme of trans-
formation. In Webster the disguise is not so much an outward
disguise, as an inward one, an acting out of a certain part
through the character's life, a part which may not be true to
his own nature, but which may give some promise of security in
a wildly confused world, even though such a part is acted out
at the price of one's own inner integrity. So Bosola becomes

¹ See L. G. Salinger, 'Tourneur and the Tragedy of Revenge',
Pelican Guide to English Literature, ed. Boris Ford,
an intelligencer against the dictates of his better nature, and Flamineo a pandar. Their disguise could almost be called a moral disguise - it is a much more profound use of the convention than we have with Tourneur, showing as it does a deep psychological insight. With Tourneur the use of the convention is more superficial; he makes no attempt to penetrate beneath the surface of the evil, to analyse, to find motive and reason. He merely applies the old standards of judgement and finds that the world he presents is corrupt.

Tourneur's vision is narrow, intense, and the traditional standards of judgement are absolute. This is reflected in the characterisation, where the evil characters are wholly evil, and the good mere symbols of virtue. Webster lets us see the limitations of his 'virtuous' characters, of Cornelia and her traditional morality - indeed that is part of the motive behind her presentation. And he lets us see the possibilities for quite another type of person than that which the good character may present on the surface - for instance, he hints that Isabella is perhaps, beneath the surface, not so completely sweet and gentle as she may first appear. The same is true of Webster's villains, we may see in them still, despite the evil of their actions, a potentiality for good, a fineness of sensibility.

1 See Chapter VI.
But Tourneur's characters have none of this complexity. Gastiza is a mere mouthpiece for the positive value which Tourneur wishes to place against the terror of the dark world; and his villains are committed to evil, without any sense of their own doom. So one gets an impression of a race of people who cannot stop themselves from rushing to a damnation which is seen as being their own fault. There is no sense of any capacity in the characters to seek any other course of action. They are symbols of the rottenness of society, and as such are swept to their doom. In a way, it is an impersonal vision.

From the beginning, the doom hangs over the revellers:

Oh keepe thy day, houre, minute, I beseech,
For those thou hast determined:
I. i. 45-46

Death is a warning, a threat; Vendice holding up the skull and saying:

Advance thee, O thou terror to fat folkes,
To have their costly three-pilte flesh wore off
As bare as this -
I. i. 49-51

The doom is not something which places the characters in such a position that one may have sympathy; it is not a force against which they impotently struggle, no dark thing which crushes them and is itself responsible for much of the evil and suffering. Rather it is they who tempt their doom with their own vice, and the doom seems to be seen in the light of
vengeance of some just power outside the world of man, for the evil are punished, and the good let free.

The rush, the hurry of the revellers, the fast pace of the plot

hurry, hurry, hurry.

I, to the Diuill. II. i. 228-229

all intensify this movement towards doom. Yet compare it with The White Devil, where the overhanging doom is also plain from the start - there the characters are not wholly responsible. The Websterian characters cannot 'do good when they had a mind to it', because of the evil nature of the universe which will thwart them. Tourneur's characters, however, are never allowed that capacity for good, or for the unexpected action. Sin and virtue are the two opposed forces, the black and the white, and there is nothing in between.

Our sympathies are not engaged by these symbols of man's degeneracy, we watch them impartially, and wait for the confounding which seems promised. In the unsunned lodge scene, where death is held over them in triumph, there is no compassion.

Who now bids twenty pound a night, prepares Musick, perfumes, sweete-meates? all are husht, Thous maist lie chast now: it were fine me thinkes, To haue thee seene at Revells, forgetfull feasts, And uncleane Brothells; sure, 'twould fright the sinner And make him a good coward: put a Reveller Out off his Antick amble, And cloye an Epicure with empty dishes.

III. v. 91-98

The whole vision springs from a sensitive response to the world of change and corruption, yet it is a response which
seeks to apply the old standards of judgement, and in doing so only intensifies the evil and horror.

Tourneur's attitude to the new age is one of disapproval. He ignores contradictions which perhaps he sees as 'l'd with objects contrarieties....

and clutches at the old values, without trying to find a new basis for judgement, as Webster does. He only contrasts the present time with the former, simpler, uncorrupted age, as the satirists did. The present age is equated with all that is evil. The scene where Antonio's wife is discovered is a symbolic and heavy picture of the fate of good in the world. Again the comparison with Webster's treatment of the same theme in the life of the Duchess of Malfi shows the limitations of Tourneur's vision. He holds to the old values, ignoring his doubts, or else unaware of the fact that these values cannot stand in the new world, that there can be no return to the older, more stable order.

So, as an assertion of order and morality, there appear in the final scenes of the play, incidents which spring from what could only be regarded as the intervention of a Divine Providence: the thunder which resounds, the blazing star which appears as the new Duke and his nobles prepare for the banquet, the conversion of Gratiana¹, and finally Vendice's conversion has a supernatural origin.

¹ Notice the imagery of this scene, recalling the Christian imagery for divine grace, suggesting that Gratiana's conversion has a supernatural origin.
own self revealing.

Unlike Webster, Tourneur does not explore man's position in the Transformed World, rather he restates the traditional idea of wilful sin and deserved punishment by a just God. Webster investigates the confusion, stripping away the appearances of virtue and evil to show what may remain stable - Tourneur merely castigates the evil of the present age, and place the Divine order against it.

Yet the divine intervention comes uneasily into the play. After the magnificent evocation of evil, it is unconvincing, and the contrivance is obvious. The Divine Order is not part of the world which we have been shown in the play - and there are signs that not all is well. Antonio, who is planning to rule for heaven, is yet unjust to the innocent lord, and his motives for executing Vendice are those of the cut-throat world.

You, that would murder him would murder me. 
V. iii. 148

It is an uneasy conclusion, and though Antonio may exclaim:

Just is the Lawe aboue 
V. iii. 132

it seems indeed that the law is well and truly above - it has no connection with the world of evil so vividly shown to us, and its intervention to end the play and solve the insolvable is arbitrary and unsatisfying.

1 The Revengers Tragedy, V. iii. 93-108.
With Webster the Transformation of the World is more taken for granted — his attitude to the disintegration of the old traditions is not merely disapproving and moralising as is Tourneur's. Webster sees the inadequacy of the old standards of judgement which Tourneur uses. When he emphasises the finality of death, it is not with Tourneur's half triumph, showing that here is punishment for wrong-doers, here the hollow goal of all their evil. Death is seen rather as a release from the pain of living.

Webster probes into the corruption and confusion, to see what is stable, what is real and left to hold to in the midst of all change. Unlike the satirists and Tourneur, he does not see man as entirely blameworthy; he penetrates deep into the contradictions, seeing how some inexorable law of the universe, though it may insist upon good, yet will itself destroy the good which it impossibly demands. Because of the evil of the present universe, anyone of virtue or simplicity is destroyed. Hence the Duchess of Malfi, who tries to keep to 'the path of simple virtue' as closely as she may in a society so opposed to such a course, is destroyed, not so much by any flaw in her own character, as by one in the very nature of the universe in which she is compelled to live. It is a world gone corrupt and mad, and she is the one sane and simple person within it, and as such she must perish. It is not the destruction of the old traditions, and the transformation of
the world, which Webster laments. In him the change is accepted as part of a new, though terrible order, one of confusion and shifting planes of reality. So Webster can use this world for his background, while attempting to penetrate beneath to see if there is anything which can remain constant in such a world. That which concerns him is the impossibility, in such a world, of distinguishing the real from the unreal, the appearance from the reality. He seeks to find what is real, both in the nature of the universe, and the nature of man, and he seeks to find it through an analysis of character. His interest in the Transformed World is analytical, not moral.

Webster finds no solution to the chaos or confusion, as Tourneur may seek to do with his return to the old traditions, with the intervention of a divine order. He keeps to the human sphere - his ghosts bring no hope of an eternal order, or anything beyond death, any God or supreme power which may intervene to see that justice is done on earth. They merely stand silently and watch the living struggling, in sadness and foreboding. Isabella appears, hardly distinguishable from Francisco's imagination, and departs without a word. The Duchess haunts the doomed characters in Act V of the later play - or perhaps it is merely their imagination, sensing their doom approaching, feeling their guilt. The presentation of the supernatural in Webster is always subtle, leaving the possible interpretation that the ghosts are merely
figments of the characters' imaginations, appearing as they do at moments of crisis and heightened sensitivity. Brachinao's ghost merely stands silent and shows the skull which lies beneath the roots of flowers. He throws the fatal earth upon Flamineo.

The confusion, chaos, evil, is the condition of the world, it is suggested, and the mind is warped. The return of order with Giovanni at the end of The White Devil is perfunctory, perhaps even deliberately ironic in its effect. Order may not be restored in a universe whose very nature is disorder, though there may be some hope of gaining it within the human soul, though even this is not assured until The Duchess of Malfi. The ending of the latter play suggests that if any victory is ever to be gained, it is only in integrity to oneself unto death, a death which wins peace after the torments of life. The characters can attain only an inner moral victory, a self-knowledge and a courage, and even that much is rare. The madmen's song in The Duchess of Malfi is that of all tortured humanity, and their speeches reflect the confusion and horror of the world which has moulded them.

So the world against which Webster places his characters, is, as Tourneur's world was, the Transformed World; but whereas Tourneur stresses the evil and degeneracy of men, 

1 See p.126
Webster, though he lays due emphasis on corruption, tends to stress the uncertainty and the suffering with which man is faced. He shows the illusion and deception which is as much a part of the universe itself, as it is a part of the nature of man. And when we come to deal with Webster's characterisation, we will see that one of his chief interests in the presentation of character is the dichotomy of appearance and reality, the difference between the inner self of each character and the mask, which, for a variety of reasons, he will put over his true self. So Webster seeks to discover what is most real about each character. And in drawing in the background against which he is to place his characters he shows the same preoccupation with discovering what is real beneath all the shifting appearances and illusory hopes of court life.

Oh this gloomy world,
In what a shadow, or deep pit of darkness,
Both (womanish, and fearfull) mankind live!

The opening scene of The White Devil, as Clifford Leech has remarked,\(^1\) sets the tone for the whole play. At once the background is there before us - the world without justice, where truth is sold for bribes, a world where the individual is at the mercy of Fortune, and of the 'great men', where everything is uncertain. Lodovico's friends may tell him of the crimes of which he is guilty, but this is irrelevant to him, as he is aware that to escape punishment one requires only greatness of rank and power of riches to bribe.

This is the world's almes; pray make use of it.

In the ruthlessness of Brachiano, the schemeing of the Duke and Cardinal, we are shown a world which seems to merit all Flamino's bitterness and rejection, all his cynicism. That note of disillusion which is peculiar to the play is sounded as Lodovico viciously repudiates the stoic

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1 John Webster, London, 1951, p.35.
comforts which Antonelli offers

ANT. Wee see that Trees beare no such pleasante fruite There where they grew first, as where they are new set Perfumes, the more they are chaf'd, the more they render Their pleasing sents; and so affliction Expresseth vertue, fully, whether trew, Or ells adulterate. Lod. Leave your painted comforts, I'll make Italian cut-works in their guts, If ever I returne.

I. i. 45-52

Then we see Flamineo prostituting his sister - it is a world where the old ties of husband and wife, sister and brother, are meaningless; where any principle seems merely an illusion, anything beyond the immediate clutching at power and wealth and lust seems only foolish. Flamineo speaks on lovers' oaths,

Lovers oaths are like Marriners prayers, uttered in extremity; but when the tempest is o're, and that the vessel leaves tumbling, they fall from protesting to drinking

V. i. 170-172

and his words suggest a world where only the moment prompts the emotion, which does not last beyond the moment. There is no faith.

The deception and dissembling throughout the world is insisted upon, both in the imagery and the action. Flamineo gulls Camillo into leaving his wife for the night so that Brachiano may have her, while at the same time he is pretending to help Camillo to become reconciled with Vittoria. Isabella pretends to her brothers that it was she who suggested the divorce between them. The brothers make Camillo sea-captain only to be rid of him, so as to blacken Brachiano in
Camillo's absence. And in the trial scene, though Vittoria is guilty, she is not yet so black as the brothers would paint her for their own purposes. They have no desire to attain truth or justice, but only to defame Vittoria publicly. Brachiano pretends friendship with Francisco, just before the news comes of Isabella's death, though she was murdered at his instigation. Flamineo feigns a 'mad humour' for his sister's disgrace, which may hide some real emotion which he feels about her sentence, and in his encounter with Lodovico he assumes a mock melancholy, which, ironically, covers his own true deep-rooted melancholy, so that one can never be sure where the pretence ends, and the reality begins.

In Act IV Scene iii, the Cardinal warns Lodovico (who is about to aid Francisco to execute revenge on Brachiano) that he disapproves of any plans to murder Brachiano, though he himself has been encouraging Francisco to seek revenge.

Aime like a cunning fowler, close one eie
That you the better may your game espy.

IV. i. 22-23

And Francisco, seeing Lodovico's hesitation, sends money to him in the name of the Cardinal. Lodovico is taken in, and

1 Lodovico wants suffrage from the Cardinal, and is anxious not to displease him, though he pretends that his hesitation is caused by the fact that the act is damnable.
gives a speech on the deceptions of the great, which, ironically, is true, even if in this one case the Cardinal has not bribed.

O the Art,
The modest forme of greatnesse that do sit,
Like Brides at wedding dinners, with their looks turn'd
From the least wanton jests, their puling stomacke
Sicke of the modesty, when their thoughts are loose...
Even acting of those hot and lustfull sports
Are to ensue about midnight: such his cunning!

IV. iii. 145-151

In such a world of intrigue and cross intrigue, where no man is himself, and every man pretends to be what he is not, who can be certain of the truth of any situation? Flamineo says of the great men, the politicians:

O they have wrought their purpose cunningly as if they would not seeme to doe it of malice. In this a Polititian imitates the devill, as the devill imitates a Canon. Wheresoever he comes to doe mischiefe, the comes with his backside towards you.

III. iii. 13-17

The imagery reinforces the impression of corruption which we receive from the action. The imagery of beasts, of poison, disease and devils is frequent, and there are the images of trees; growing, withering, strangled by vines and parasites, rooted in the graves of dead men.

Or like the blacke, and melancolicke Eugh-tree,
Dost thinke to roote thy selfe in dead mens graves,
And yet to prosper?

IV. iii. 123-125

Images of parasites occur throughout the play, images of vines and clinging mistletoe, suggesting this aspect of the

characters' lives, their grasping and clinging, their frantic pursuit of power and gain. Flamineo speaks to Marcello, describing man's futility -

But as we seldom find the mistle-towe
Sacred to physicke on the builder Oke,
Without a Mandrake by it; so in our quest of gain...

III. i. 52-54

And Francisco uses the image again, referring to Brachiano and Vittoria

Like mistle-towe on seare Elmes spent by weather,
Let him cleave to her, and both rot together.

II. i. 393-394

The deception of the court world is also reinforced by the imagery - for example, in Act I, scene ii, where Camillo is being gullied by Flamineo, there is the image of the perspective glass, which gives a false appearance to whatever is viewed through it.

I have seen a pair of spectacles fashioned with such perspective art, that lay downe but one twelve-pence ath' bord twill appeare as if there were twenty - now should you wear a pair of these spectacles, and see your wife tying her shoe, you would imagine twenty hands were taking up of your wives clothes, and this would put you into a horrible causelesse fury -

I. ii. 100-106

In the world of The White Devil the characters are so used to deception that they can mistake not only the false for what is true, but may think that some quite genuine action is mere dissembling. Brachiano, in the scene in the House of Convertites, is not only tricked by the fake letter of Francisco's; but thinks that Vittoria's quite genuine
protestations of innocence are mere trickery.

Through the trial scene this imagery of deception reappears - so Monticelso suggests that Vittoria is not all that she may appear:

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

III. ii. 66-70

The imagery of falsity and deception appears also in Tourneur's plays. He uses it to show the moral confusion in the world, but with this difference from Webster; that Tourneur shows the confusion only to condemn it

The worlds so changd, one shape into another,
It is a wise childe now that knowes her mother.

RT II. i. 187-188

whereas Webster uses it also to show the very impossibility of judging in such a world.

The traditional values cannot stand in a world such as Webster presents us with. They have no relevance there. They become themselves suspect, merging into grey rather than remaining white. This is made clear in the presentation of Isabella, Marcello and Cornelia. Marcello's and Cornelia's moralisings have no relevance at all to the bitterness of Flamineo's life, the harshness of the politic world. They make us, like Flamineo, impatient, aware of their narrowness, their lack of understanding, their inadequacy.

And these 'vertuous' characters are suspect -
Marcello is always self-righteously proclaiming his virtue. He loudly disapproves of Flamino's working for Brachiano, but when fortune seems to turn and his sister is married to the Duke, he turns to the service of the man he has hated and despised. So perhaps there is some element of self-seeking in him also. Isabella makes a great show of her goodness and is intolerant of others' failings. Yet she dissembles to Brachiano, denying that she has been intriguing with her brother. Perhaps indeed he has cause to hate her. She is a sly little thing.

In the final act of the play their response to the world around them, which is not so much a response as a withdrawal, a refusal to face real issues, is shown for what it is. Into the scene with Flamino, Zanche and Francisco, Cornelia enters, screeching shrewishly and she strikes the Moorish girl.

Is this your pearch, you haggard? fly to'th stewes. V. i. 178

And Marcello, in his righteousness, kicks her.

MAR. You're a strumpet. An impudent one. FLA. Why do you kicke her? Say - Do you thinke that she's like a walnut-tree? Must she be cudgel'd ere shee beare good fruits? V. i. 182-185

When he hears that there is talk of some kind of relationship between Zanche and his brother, he says, intolerably
I had rather she were pitcht upon a stake 
In some new-seeded garden, to affright 
Her fellow crowes thence. 

V. i. 187-189

It is impossible to like him, to approve his attitude, or Cornelia's. There viciousness is evident here, and has been suggested throughout the play.

In the scene before his death, Marcello asks his mother to tell him the story of Plamineo's breaking of the crucifix, in the manner of a child asking for a favourite bed-time story. It is as if he never tires of hearing of Plamineo's evil, or of speaking of it himself. His words after he is mortally wounded by his brother are almost triumphant

O mother now remember what I told, 
Of breaking off the Crucifix: 

V. ii. 20-21

He sees his own death as a punishment on the whole family for the sins of his brother. Marcello confounds one - he has not really faced the world around him, and he goes to his death with a pitiful self-righteousness. It is, we feel finally, as Plamineo has said

You're a boy, a fool... 

V. i. 189

His righteousness has also been an illusion.

In Cornelia's response to her son's death is the final collapse of their morality - the escapism, the complete inability to face the reality of death, the complete dissolution of all her former moralisings when she is finally
faced with death.

Let mee come to him; give mee him as hee is, if he be turn'd to earth; let mee but give him one heartie kisse, and you shall put us both into one coffin: fetch a looking-glasse, see if his breath will not staine it; or pull out some feathers from my pillow, and lay them to his lippes - Will you loose him for a little pains-taking?  

V. ii. 35-41

So the traditional values are tried, and found inadequate. Cornelia finally dissolves into a most pitiful kind of madness.

It is a universe which seems on the verge of falling to pieces. It offers no direction, no purpose, no certainty, to the men who are within it; only terror in their aloneness and purposelessness of life, and their unknowing in the face of death. Brachiano's distraction, as he falls victim to the poison, images this world, and the feeling of disintegration. Here, as in the scene with the madmen in The Duchess of Malfi, is the very anatomy of a diseased society;

LOD. Hee's fall'n into a strange distraction. Hee talkes of Battailes and Monopolies, Levying of taxes, and from that descends To the most brain-sicke language. His minde fastens On twentie severall objects, which confound Deepe Sence with follie.

BRA. Away, you have abus'd me. You have conveyd coyne forth our territories; Bought and sold offices; oppres'd the poore, And I nere dreampt on't. Make up your accountes; Ile now bee mine owne Steward. FLA. Sir, have patience.

BRA. Indeed I am to blame. For did you ever heare the duskie raven Chide blacknesse? Or wasn't ever knowne, the divill Railde against cloven creatures? VIT. O my lord.
BRA. Let me have some quailes to supper.
FLA. Sir, you shal.
BRA. No: some fried dog-fish. Your Quailes feed on poison -
That old dog-fox, that Polititian Florence -
Ile forswear hunting and turne dog-killer;
Rare! Ile bee friends with him. for mark you, sir, one dog
Still sets another a-barking: peace, peace,
Yonder's a fine slave come in now. FLA. Where?
BRA. Why, there.
In a blew bonnet, and a paire of breeches
With a great cod-peece. ha, ha, ha!
Looke you his codpeece is stucke full of pinnes
With pearles o'th head of them. Do you know him?
FLA. No, my lord. BRA. Why 'tis the Devill,
I know him by a great rose he weares on's shooe
To hid his cloven foot. Ile dispute with him.
He's a rare linguist. VIT. My Lord heer's nothing.
V. iii. 69-106

'My Lord heer's nothing' - this is what Webster seems to say with deep compassion, to his characters, as they struggle after the goals which they have fashioned to give some meaning to their lives. There is nothing for them despite all their desperation, all their rush and trampling upon one another. The hope of human happiness is completely illusionary. There is no happiness or satisfaction or security ever for these people. Even when they seem to glimpse a little happiness, their expectations are most inevitably thwarted. Nothing is certain.

Let all that belong to Great men remember th' ould wives tradition, to be like the Lyons ith Tower on Candlemas day, to mourn if the Sunne shine, fo feare of the pittifull remainder of winter to come.

This is the world of The White Devil, and it is against this background that we must see Webster's characters.
The relationship of the characters to the background world is particularly important in Webster's plays, the response of the characters to the Transformed World is an essential part of their characterisation.

In such a world, in the corruption of 'these bad times', what does any crime signify one way or the other? Lodovico says of his murders

'Las they were flea-bytinges:
Why tooke they not my head then?

When we see Flamineo and Vittoria in the next scene, we remember that this is the world in which they must live, and in such a world the standards of judgement may not be as clear or as steady as they would be in a less vicious universe. The background of corruption, and the presence of an overhanging fate, qualifies the apparent evil of the characters.

The scenes which appear throughout the play demonstrating the corruption and deceit of the world have been called 'images in action', yet though the half representative nature of such a scene has been noted, its function as a kind of counterpoint against the actions of the main characters has been overlooked. The presentation of such a background helps to establish the ironic and tragic perspective through which we must view the characters, seeing

1 For example, such a scene as Act IV, scene iii. See p.44.
them as more tragic than blameable. Vittoria may be an adulteress, but her husband is unworthy of her, and we sense, moreover, a strange hopelessness about her, as if there was nothing else that she could do. Flamineo is a pandar, but the pressures of living in the Transformed World have sunk him to this. Though Vittoria agrees to Brachiano's wooing and so apparently goes her own way to evil, yet it is also strangely inevitable. She may be wrong to turn to Brachiano, yet the action was 'fxt with nayles of dyamonds to inevitable necessitie'. Flamineo prostitutes his sister and sells himself, yet in his speeches near death there is again the recognition that nothing else could have happened.

Man may his Fate forsee, but not prevent.

V. vi. 181
The critics have diverged widely in their interpretations of Webster's characters. The response to such creations as Vittoria or Ferdinand are enormously varied.

Miss Bradbrooke thinks that Plamineo is inconsistent:

There is no consistent impression of Plamineo. The various aspects of his character are neither polarised nor reconciled.

J. R. Browne admits his consistency, but sees it as lying itself in a mercurial nature. The dispute over Vittoria is well known. Dr. Jack exclaims that

Vittoria is dishonourable: Webster simply makes her behave as if she were honourable...

Charles Lamb speaks of her 'innocence-resembling boldness' and Miss Bradbrooke notices that 'there is ... a subordinate side of Vittoria which is innocent'.

Even in the case of the minor characters there seems to be some amount of confusion. Clifford Leech, surprisingly enough, sees the Cardinal Monticelso as belonging with the good characters in The White Devil, in 'his more arid way' rather than with the villains, while others accept him as a straight out Machiavellian. There is even dissention over such a minor figure as Giovanni - Lucas is quite won over by him, while Brown stresses the hesitancy

1 Themes and Conventions of Elizabethan Tragedy, p. 193.
2 J. R. Brown, WD, p.xlix.
5 Themes and Conventions of Elizabethan Tragedy, p.187.
6 C. Leech, John Webster, London, 1951, p.56.
which we may indeed feel over the little gentleman's virtues. 'Does he really have 'his uncle's villainous look already?'

We may find on a closer study of the characters, especially as we see them in relation to the background world of the plays, that the source of the confusion may lie in Webster's own methods of characterisation, and in what he tries to achieve through his study of character. There are several ways in which the impression of a character may be built up. We may see it in what the characters actually say and in what they do, and in what other people in the play say about them. But with Webster's characterisation, what the characters themselves say may be, on the surface, little guide. It may indeed be strangely deceptive. Similarly, their actions may give little indication of their true natures, unless we have learned to read beneath the surface to the motivating current of thought and emotion. For in presenting his characters Webster is concerned with showing the impossibility, in such a confused world, of arriving at a true estimation of any person, of distinguishing the truth from what is false, the appearance from the reality in the fronts which such characters present to the world. The lives of those people whom Webster

1 Brown, WD, p.lviii.
presents to us are filled with pretences. Brown, describing the difficulties in the structure of *The White Devil*, those features of style which demand the close attention of both audience and reader, writes:

The very title *The White Devil* offers a clue, suggesting that the play presents some person or persons who are not what they seem... those that live in the court may be deceitful, as they smile they may be murdering, as they sing they may be weeping. To recognise their deceit a minute and determined searching may be necessary.¹

We cannot judge Webster's characters from their outward appearances, cannot accept the first implications of their actions and speeches, for they may be, in a sense, disguised. Pursued by the fear of being without purpose or security in the disordered world they may seize at ambition or avarice or passion as an object for moral disguise.

The lives of Plamineo, Bosola, Vittoria, even Ferdinand and the later Cardinal are, in a sense, parts which they play. The commit themselves to lives which may run against the grain of their inner integrity, losing their truth to self for the price of some measure of security. So Bosola becomes an intelligencer against the dictates of his better nature, and Plamineo a pandar, and Vittoria takes Brachiano as lover, not because of lust or viciousness, but because of the conditions of the life she must live, the determining uncertainty and fear.

Again, we may learn something of a character from what other say about him, but in Webster this also is a poor guide. The common reputation of a character is little indication of his true nature. Webster emphasises this in his characterisation of Vittoria, and in such scenes as that where the courtiers slander Antonio now that he is supposedly in disfavour. To demonstrate the difficulties involved in correctly interpreting the actions and words of any person, Webster will surround his characters with a maze of appearances, including their common reputation, and the mistaken opinions of others.

Webster's characters are, in a sense, disguised characters. But it is not the physical disguise of the old dramatic convention; much more subtly, it is in the nature of an inner moral disguise.

There be some whose lives are, as if they perpetually played upon a stage, disguised to all others, open only to themselves. But perpetual dissimulation is painful...

But the lives of Webster's characters are not even open to themselves. Their dissimulation is painful to them. To lose their integrity, their truth to their own natures, is to lose the one value left in the transformed world, and to ensure that they will die 'in a mist'. Yet the realisation of their guilt, of their futility, which comes with the

1 The Duchess of Malfi, III, ii.
2 Bacon, Essays, (quoted by J. R. Brown, DM, p.xlix.)
breaking of their illusions, they cannot bear, so they pretend, as Flamineo does, still seeking reward even after the revelation of his mother's madness, or lose themselves, like Ferdinand in his insanity.

I find in an old diary: 'I think all happiness depends on the energy to assume the mask of some other life, on a rebirth as something not oneself, something created in a moment and perpetually renewed; in playing a game like that of a child where one loses the infinite pain of self realisation in a grotesque or solemn painted face put on that one might hide from the horror of judgement... Perhaps all the sins and energies of the world are but the world's flight from an infinite blinding beam...'

So Webster's characters scatter from the light.

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CHAPTER IV:
THE CHARACTERS AND THEME OF THE WHITE DEVIL

(i)

Reare up's head, reare up's head, his bleeding inward will kill him.

The character of Flamineo is one of the most important, and perhaps the most complex in *The White Devil*. Yet he seems also to be one of the least understood characters in Jacobean Tragedy. There is a tendency to see his character as inconsistent, composed of opposites which cannot be reconciled. Miss Bradbrook's criticism is typical of the response to this most complex character:

> He has only one soliloquy; and here his melancholy seems genuine...

> I have liv'd riotously ill...

> V. iv. 112 ff.

This mood cannot be reconciled with his earlier character. Flamineo is largely an author's mouthpiece; but he is not a formulated character like Vendice.

> There is no consistent impression of Flamineo. The various aspects of his character are neither polarised nor reconciled. ¹

One cannot assume, however, without a close analysis of the character concerned, that a dramatist with Webster's powers of characterisation would give us a main tragic figure a character of whom we have no consistent impression. We must

¹ *Themes and Conventions of Elizabethan Tragedy*, pp.192-193
look beneath the apparently inconsistent actions and speeches of Flamineo, and see if there is any consistent motivation. Perhaps the apparent contradictions we may see spring from the fact that Webster is here presenting a character who is not himself an integrated person.

The first words which Flamineo speaks in the play are addressed to Brachiano:

Pursew your noble wishes, I am prompt
As lightning to your service, o my Lord!
I. ii. 4-5

So we see him first as a pandar, quick to prostitute his own sister for his personal advancement, while at the same time despising both her and Brachiano for what he regards as their unquenchable lust. He is involved in the murder of Vittoria's husband Camillo, and in the height of his own confusion and desperation kills Marcello, his brother, so bringing his mother to madness. Then, his hopes for performance fading, he determines to redeem all with his sister's riches, or to murder her, but he himself meets death at the hands of the revengers, led by Lodovico.

Our attitude to Flamineo, however, is not so simple and clear-cut as this brief summary might imply. It is not simply an attitude of condemnation. Flamineo is the most intelligent, the wittiest, the sharpest of vision and the most sensitive of the characters in the play. He can sum up a person in a string of brilliant images, as in his description of the Spanish ambassador at the beginning of
Act III:

He carries his face in's ruffe, as I have seen a serving-man carry glasses in a cipres hat-band, monstrous stedly, for feare of breaking - He lookes like the claw of a blacke-bird, first salted and then broyled in a candle. III. i. 76-79

He shows to advantage even in such scenes as the gulling of Camillo, where the husband is shown as such a fool that admiration naturally turns to the contrasted brilliance of Flamineo and Vittoria.

One of the most important methods of characterisation which Webster uses is that of frequent character contrast - in various ways, throughout the play, Flamineo's response to the world about him is contrasted to that of Marcello and the other virtuous characters, Lodovico, Brachiano, and even Vittoria.

Brachiano is heavier and duller beside him, saying, for instance, when Flamineo tells him of Vittoria's yielding to his suit:

'Wee are happie above thought, because 'bove merrit. I. ii. 16

His shallow pretences surely justify Flamineo's cynical and faintly contemptuous reply:

'bove merit! wee may now talke feely: 'bove merrit! What ist you doubt? Her coynesse? Thats but the superfcies of lust most women have.... I. ii. 17-19

What indeed has merit to do with it? Flamineo is at least free from such pretences as those in which the duke engages.
He is also, unlike Brachiano, intensely aware of evil. He seems to stand slightly back, observing the rottenness, and commenting on it, aware to a degree that the other characters are not. In the scene in the House of Convertites, where the lovers quarrel, he sees Vittoria seemingly playing to Brachiano, and anticipates the reconciliation. His 'O no uther for God's sake', indicates a level of cynicism deeper than Brachiano or Vittoria could ever reach. Though the reconciliation should please him, bringing as it does his hope of reward closer, there is a weariness in the words of cynical advice he offers to Brachiano, and as he watches the lovers come together again, his disgust is plain.

Stop her mouth, with a sweet kisse, my Lord
So - now the tide's turned the vessel's come about.
Hec's a sweet armefull. 0, wee curl'd-haird men
Are still most kind to women. This is well
BRA. That you should chide thus!
FLA. 0, sir, your little chimnies
Doe ever cast most smoke! I swet for you.
Couple together with as deepe a silence,
As did the Grecians in their wodden horse.
IV. ii. 195-203

In such scenes of character contrast as this, Flamineo's essential loneliness is intensified - because he sees more than the others, he is separated from them. The fact remains that Flamineo's vision, like Hamlet's, though cold and negative, is in part true. For Brachiano, and perhaps even Vittoria, are murderers, and Vittoria will not

finally die for Brachiano, but makes a mockery of devotion in order to save herself from death.

Flamineo is one of those people who are cursed by being too much aware, too sensitive to the discords in the universe. Faced with the evil of human nature, he loses all idealism. Hamlet's cynicism placed him in opposition to the comparative normality of the world around, but Flamineo's places him in accord with the world of evil. Margaret Wiley, in The Subtle Knot, speaks of the valuable kind of scepticism which accepts doubt about the foundations of the intellectual universe as a necessary stage in the process of finding truth. Such a scepticism is found in Donne's third Satire. But for Flamineo there is no such acceptance of recurring doubt. For him the world is wholly evil - he is drunk on 'wormwood water'. He has the deepest cynicism, like Hamlet's, but it does not come on him suddenly after an experience similar to that of Hamlet; rather it is the fruit of a long and dreary period of experience and observation - 'in all the wearie minutes of my life...'

The bitter poverty of Flamineo's youth is presented in the dialogue with Cornelia. There is a sense of the slow and withering disillusionment and subsequent corruption, and

2 The Subtle Knot, ch. iii.
of the growth of Flamineo's pride and bitterness.

You brought me up,
At Padua I confess, where I protest
For want of means, the University judge me,
I have been faile to heele my Tutor's stockings
At least seven years: Consenting with a beard
Made me a Graduate—then to this Duke's service—
I visited the Court, when I return'd
More courteous, more lecherous by far,
But not a suite the richer; and shall I
Having a path so open and so free
To my preferment, still retain your milke
In my pale forehead? no this face of mine
I'll arme and fortifie with lustie wine,
'Gainst shame and blushing.

I. ii. 312-325

So there is in Flamineo some sense of good which he had to
consciously overcome. He is presented as a man who saw no
possible alternative to his decided course of action as
creature to the great men. With a conviction of the rotten-
ness of the world, the falsity of human love, or lust, and
his knowledge of the policy of great men and the cut-throat
battle for preferment, he feels that in such a world he can
do nothing but seek his own advancement; anything else would
be a pretence and an illusion. He feels that his actions are
justified by the nature of his environment. His is the
dilemma of the too sensitive and intelligent man set in the
world of transformed values.

The traditional morality, represented by Cornelia,
Marcello, and Isabella is not enough for a man of Flamineo's
mind and temper. Isabella's virtue is possible only for an
Isabella, not for a man with Flamineo's tragic awareness of
all the contradictions life offers to such a way of behaviour.
Webster deliberately weakens the effect of his 'virtuous' characters, as we have seen.\(^1\) Cornelia's interruptions to the love scene of Vittoria and Brachiano seem harsh and jarring.\(^2\) She brings to our notice values which have no relevance to the world which Vittoria, Brachiano, and Flamineo inhabit. Her words to the latter

> What? because we are poore,  
> Shall we be vitious?  

I. ii. 307-308

cannot stand against his worldly cynicism, the withering bitterness of his arguments. Flamineo's exchange with Marcello shows further the impossibility of the old values.

> FLA. Heare me,  
And thus when we have even powred ourselves,  
Into great fights, for their ambition  
Or idle spleene, how shall we find reward?  
But as we seldom find the mistle-towe  
Sacred to physicke on the builder Oke,  
Without a mandrake by it, so in our quest of gaine.  
Alas the poorest of their forc'd dislikes  
At a limbe proffers, but at heart it strikes:  
This is lamented doctrine.  
MAR. Come, come.  
> FLA. When age shall turne thee,  
White as a blooming hawthorn...  
> MAR. I'le interrupt you.  
For love of vertue beare an honest heart,  
And stride over every politicke respect,  
Which where they most advance, they most infect.  
Were I your father, as I am your brother,  
I should not be ambitious to leave you  
A better patrimony.  
FLA. I'le think on't.  
III. i. 46-65

Marcello's words sound flat and harsh, and his perception is limited. His sentiments are stock ones, and he strikes upon us as being one of those people who have never painfully

1 See p. 50.  
worked out their own opinions in the terms of the world around them, but who have accepted traditional ideas as truth, and closed their minds to contradictory experience. Marcello is not tormented, like Flamineo, by too much awareness. There are many more things in the universe of The White Devil, than can be explained by Marcello's philosophy, or Cornelia's either, for that matter. Marcello's words have a validity for himself, as he possesses the staid and solid kind of character which enables him to maintain his 'virtue' in an evil world; but they have no validity for the more brilliant mind of his brother. Marcello is admirable perhaps, (though even that is debatable), but he is not human, and not, (at least intellectually) a part of the world around him. The vision of Marcello and Cornelia is narrow - they make no concessions, and do not accept excuses and exceptions, and modification of their ideas by experience. Flamineo's contrast to such characters qualifies our response to his apparent evil.

Both Flamineo and Marcello, then, are committed, each to his separate path, and both go down to death. It is ironic that the fate Flamineo predicts for his brother overtakes himself. Perhaps he knows it will. Despite his intelligence, Flamineo is no match for fate.

Even at the end of the first act we are presented with Flamineo as a man who, despite intelligence, sensitivity,
and a family noted for their virtue, has determined on the path of evil.

Wee are engag'd to mischief, and must on.
As rivers to finde out the Ocean
Flow with crooke bendings beneath forced bankes;
Or as we see to aspire some mountaines top,
The way ascends not straight, but Imitates
The subtle foldings of a Winters snake,
So who knowes policy and her true aspect,
Shall finde her waies winding and indirect.

I. ii. 341-348

The tragedy of Flamineo is that he never finds or knows exactly what he is looking for, and can only put preferment in the place of the missing values. The ocean, the mountain top for which he strives are the wrong ones, but he cannot know this, and must take preferment for his goal because there seems no other.

That he is uncertain of his decision is evident not only in the lines

Oft gay and honour'd robes those tortures trie,
Wee thinke cag'd birds sing, when indeed they crie.

V. iv. 116-117

but in his actions and speeches throughout the play. A comparison of Flamineo's character with that of Lodovico, a true Machiavel, helps in gaining a greater understanding of him. Lodovico is a deliberate foil to Flamineo, like him in a few aspects, but contrasting in many more. Both men are committed to evil, both are swept to a similar doom—but there the comparison ends. Lodovico has a whole-hearted acceptance of the evil of the world, and of himself, which
Flamineo never attains. In his first appearance, in Act I, scene i, cursing Fortune, there is not so much the bitterness and weariness of Flamineo's reaction to his lot, but rather there is anger. He knows that this is the way of the world, but is furious that he has been banished while others who have more influence than he have been successful in bribing the authorities. It is not the corruption itself which angers him, but the fact that he has not benefited from the corruption. There is no tortured awareness of evil, as with Flamineo. When his followers remind him of the atrocities for which he has been banished, he brushes them aside:

ANT. Jeast upon you,
And say that you were begotten in an Earthquake,
You have ruin'd such fair Lordships. LOD. Very good,
This well goes with two buckets, I must tend
The powring out of eather. GAS. Worse than these,
You have acted certaine Murders here in Rome,
Bloody and full of horror. LOD. 'Las they were
flea-bytinges:

Why tooke they not my head then?
I.i.26-33.

His conscience is easy, he has no half hidden depths like Flamineo.

Again, a true villain like Lodovico doesn't feel the urge to comment continuously on the evil round him. It is only Flamineo, who expected something finer, who cannot accept with the ease of a Lodovico that evil should be the natural order of the universe, who must talk constantly of it. What may appear in him to be a Machiavellian delight in the extremes of evil, is in fact a feverish desire to find that everything is as evil as he has judged, perhaps because he is uncertain of the very basis of his judgement. He seeks to reduce everything he sees, so that it will reflect the state of his own mind. Family ties are as nothing; honour, justice and virtue are bought and sold,
and human love is only lust. Man is merely an animal driven by the force of his own desires. In the first scene in which he appears, he uses the contemptuous imagery of commercial dealing to apply to his pandering of Vittoria.

I have dealt already with her chamber-maid Zanche the More, and she is wondrous proud To be the agent for so high a spirit.


So much abuse as Flamineo heaps on men throughout the play can only come from one who has expected much more. There is a sense of loss of the essential fineness of man throughout The White Devil, and it is conveyed largely through the speeches of Flamineo. The extremity of his mental torment is shown in his meeting with the doctor in Act II, scene i. The disgust in Flamineo's words is evident, and his desperate perversity in embracing the loathed man. It is a strange, pretended delight in the depths of evil, a delight all the more heightened by the element of disgust. There is much that we can tell from the language alone - the swift, yet jerky movement of the speech, suggesting the current of suppressed emotion beneath, the deliberate loathsomeness of the imagery, the strange high tone which indicates the near hysteria of the wit.

O thou cursed antipathy to nature - looke, his eye's bloudshed like a needle a Chirurgeon stitcheth a wound with - let me embrace thee toad, and love thee o thou abominable lothesme gargarisme, that will fetch up lungs, lights, heart, and liver by scruples.

II.1. 303-307.

Here Flamineo's aloneness is most poigniant, for Brachiano is laughing at his wit, and the doctor says

Your secretary is merry my Lord.

I.ii.302.
But it is a moment of desperation for Flamineo — he is drunk on wormwood water. '... his bleeding inward will kill him,' Cornelia says of the dead Marcello, but the words apply as well to Flamineo. Again in this scene we see how Webster unfolds the character through his contrast to the others on the stage. We feel the sensitivity, the desperation of Flamineo the more clearly for the very dullness, the blunted perception of Brachiano and the Doctor.

In Act III, scene iii there is another contrast, an encounter between Lodovico and Flamineo, the true Machiavel and the pretended one. Webster draws our attention to it, Marcello saying:

Marke this strange encounter.

Flamineo is here, of course, feigning his 'mad humour', but in such scenes the malcontents of Jacobean drama often reveal truths which may lie under the surface at other times. Flamineo vows that he and Lodovico will never part until all evil-doers and malcontents learn 'to scorne that world which life of meanes deprives'. Flamineo's is the perceptive mind which is able to dissect the corruption of the world, and to see a solution, but to know at the same time that men are such that they will never be able to accept this solution, never have the strength to carry out the necessary course of action. Flamineo knows this, just as he knows cynically that Lodovico will break his word should fortune turn his way. So there is an expectant cynicism in his making the pact with Lodovico in the first place. As with the embracing of the doctor, it is a desperate, and bitterly ironical gesture. When the pact is broken he says

I do not greatly wonder you do breake: Your Lordship learn't long since.

III.iii.114-115.
Though Flamineo's commitment to evil is a decision of his own, it is still in part an act, an aping of the actions of great men. Flamineo, in a sense, goes through the motions of being a Machiavellian. Despite his contempt for the pretences of the other characters, his whole course of life is a pretence, if a desperate, and in the circumstances, an inevitable one. He must have some course of action to give his life direction. Here he is contrasted with Bosola, who can see two courses of action open to him, one of which he knows is just. He takes the course of evil because he is too weak to give over his security. Flamineo could not see anything else to do. Yet, his actions do not come naturally to him, as Lodovico's do, and he is always himself half aware of the element of feigning and mockery.

But this allows my varying of shapes, Knaves do grow great by being great mens apes. 

His intense awareness of evil is at times akin to a sense of guilt. Notice the situation in the trial scene where the Cardinal is passing sentence:

MON. ...heare your sentence - you are confin'd Unto a house of convertites and your baud - FLA. (aside) Who I? MON. The Moore. FLA. (aside) O I am a sound man againe. 

He is quick to anger whenever his sister is called a whore, either by Lodovico (at the end of Act III) or by Brachiano (in the quarrel scene in Act IV). And when Vittoria accuses him of being a pandar he reacts sharply:

FLA. Pandar! Am I the author of your sinne? but she replies:

Yes: Hee's a base theif that a theif lets in. 

In his facing of Brachiano he says

As in this world there are degrees
of evils:
So in this world there are degrees of devils.
You'r a great Duke; I your poore secretarie.
IV.ii. 60-62.

He has contempt for Brachiano's actions, but he does not seem to realise the extent of his own involvement in corruption and murder. He doesn't yet see his guilt for the evil he did in aping 'great men', and considers his actions as excused by the prevailing degeneration of the society in which he acts. Part of the revelation which is thrust upon him in Act V is the realisation of his own evil in the murder of Marcello and the madness of his mother.

Flamineo has a strange kind of detachment, as if nothing can really reach his emotions, as if he cannot feel himself alive in the way that Brachiano and Vittoria live. Much has been said of his coldness and objectivity, but there seems to be about him some element of an inability to participate in the world, as others do. Perhaps it is his cynicism, his overawareness of the futility of any ideal or action, which paralyses him, preventing him from being touched deeply by any experience. This quality of his character is emphasised by the deliberate contrast with Vittoria, a contrast all the more telling because of their essential kinship in intelligence and sensitivity. She too is aware of futility, yet she has not lost the capacity to be alive, perhaps because she is an intuitive rather than an analytical creature. Flamineo's reflections throughout the play show the continual torment which his analytical mind gives him, preventing him from any real action. The same paralysis of action through the mind's

1See, for instance, Lucas, Works, I, p. 98 and Bogard, p. 61.
2See p. 88
torment is there in a much more extreme degree in Ferdinand, as we shall see.

Because of his disillusion, and subsequent bitterness, there is a reaction in Flamineo. He will not be hurt again, though perhaps he does not decide this consciously. His sensitivity has endured too much, he partly closes over.

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

III.iii. 1-2.

So there is a withdrawal from personal experience, a cynical observation of the lives of others, often with a defensive attempt to reduce them. In Act I scene ii he speaks of love -

-I my selfe have loved a lady and peursued
her with a great deale of under-age protestation,
whom some three or four gallants that have enjoyed
would with all their harts have bin glad to have
bin rid of: Tis just like a summer bird-cage in a
garden, the birds that are without despaire to get
in, and the birds that are within despaire and are in
a consumption for feare they shall never get out:

I.ii.38-44.

It is somewhat like Iago’s incapacity to feel real love.

Yet he feels that something is wrong with him, that he does not have his share in life’s actions and emotions, like his sister or her lover, none of its fulness reaches him. So he throws himself into desperate acts.

Throughout the play he searches for some kind of experience which will really touch him, throwing himself into strange actions such as the braving of Lodovico, the facing of Brachiano, and even the murder of Marcello. In a way he tests life, tries it out, even as it makes trial of him. Even his death is an experience to be tasted, in the hope that it will bring to him some feeling or revelation that was absent from the rest of his life. Clifford Leech, who has an excellent account of this aspect of Flamineo’s character, writes that ’Flamineo is inquisitive about
the universe, as if he cannot quite believe in it.¹ This detachment of Flamineo's, this inability to feel, is one of the things preventing his realisation of his involvement in evil. He seems distanced from the effects of his own actions, as if he is only a spectator of his own life as well as of others. In the final act of the play he is finally faced with himself, and the unrealised consequences of his own actions.

Act V, scene i opens with his pathetic expectation of happiness at the wedding, for his goal seems in sight at last.

In all the weary minutes of my life, Day nere broke up till now. This mariage Confirmes me happy.

V.i.1-3.

But this act is, ironically, to see the confounding of all his hopes, and the vanity of all human expectation generally. Even one as intelligent as Flamineo is gulled finally. He expresses a sadly misplaced admiration for the disguised Francisco:

I never saw one in a sterne bold looke Weare more command, nor in a lofty phrase Expresse more knowing, or more deepe contempt Of our slight airy courtiers. Hee talkes As if hee had travail'd all the Princes Courts Of Christendome; in all things strives t'expresse, That all that should dispute with him may know Glories, like glow-wormes, afarre off shine bright, But lookt to neare, have neither heat nor light.

V.i.31-39.

This is extravagant praise from Flamineo, and he is pitifully deceived. He is eager to believe if he thinks there might be a suitable object for his faith.

He continues his aping of great men's actions throughout this act - quarrelling with Marcello over Zanche the Moor, though he loves her 'just as a man holds a wolf by the eares: But for feare of turning upon me, and pulling

¹ John Webster, London, 1951, p.51.
out my throate, I would let her go to the Devill'. So his murder of Marcello is a meaningless horror, part of the desperate searching for some act which will have significance to him. The blind groping of his action here and the blank response to it, remind one of Ferdinand's blindness and groping in the persecution of the Duchess. It is as if they are drugged and deadened by pain so that they do not know what they are doing, but can only move from one dreadful step to the next in the confusion which surrounds them.

The story of the broken crucifix which Cornelia tells to Marcello just before the murder, intensifies the effect of some impending disaster, some inevitable doom. Cornelia's words over her dead son, as she slips into madness, apply as fittingly to Flamineo - 'these have kill'd him, that would not let him bee better look't to.' And indeed it is Flamineo now who is crumbling, and dying as he begins to realise his own involvement. When Brachiano asks him, indicating the dead Marcello, and the grieving Cornelia, 'was this your handy-worke?' he replies simply, 'It was my misfortune'. A Lodovico would have been unhappy only because the murder was not as cunning and ingenious as it might have been, we realise; and even now the contrast with the real Machiavel increases our knowledge of Flamineo.

Then, when Brachiano names him repeatedly on his death bed, for the first time Flamineo begins to show fear, or uneasiness, to admit his dread

I doe not like that hee names mee so often, Especially on's death-bed: 'tis a signe
I shall not live long: V.iii. 127-129.

The sense of an overhanging fate is again intensified. The scene with the young prince Giovanni emphasises his loneliness, once more through the contrast of character,
showing the now awakening Flamineo, his sensitivity, always extreme, heightened, against the unseeing, stolid little prince. Giovanni ignores Flamineo's witty remarks, and says:

Study your prayers, sir, and be penitent,
'Twere fit you'd thinke on what hath former bin -
V.iv. 17-18.

This sets the pattern for the confounding of Flamineo in the scenes which follow. Revelation follows revelation, in dismal succession. Flamineo responds to Giovanni's words with defiance, but it is an hysterical sort of defiance, for he is easily pushed off balance in his uncertain state:

Study my prayers? He threatens me divinely,
I am falling to peeces already, I care not, though like Anaxarchus I were pounded to death in a mortar. And yet that death were fitter for Usurers - gold and themselves to be beaten together, to make a most coriall chullice for the devill.

V.iv. 20-24.

His wit is defensive, half hysterical in its brilliance, something which he pushes between himself and that realisation which presses upon him and makes him afraid. When the courtier comes with news of his banishment he retorts with a witty answer, so that the messenger says 'Very good: you are merry.' But when he is gone Flamineo's anger and terror break out.

Then Francisco comes, bringing the news of his mother's grief. Flamineo at once determines to see her and will not be stopped. His fate pushes him on to destruction. In this scene with Cornelia, Flamineo, who has always had most to say, speaks very little, except to say 'I would I were from hence', as he is accused once more, this time by the demented Cornelia. Then, after the dirge, his one moment of self-realisation comes:
I have a strange thing in mee, to th' which
I cannot give a name, without it bee
Compassion - I pray leave mee.

To feel compassion would be a genuine experience for the
detached Flamineo. For a moment it seems that he might
reach out beyond himself, past the barrier which separates
him from any real involvement of the emotions. But in what
seems almost a kind of terror he draws back. The
recognition of compassion would involve, finally, the
realisation that the path he has committed himself to was
a false one, and leave him again to face the confusion,
to carve out a new way for himself. So he turns frantically
to the question of reward for his services, because this
is something tangible, something which he can grasp to
stave off the terror.

This night Ile know the utmost of my fate,
Ile be resolv'd what my rich sister meanes
T'assigne mee for my service: I have liv'd
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.

Close on this quickly suppressed revelation follows
Brachiano's ghost. Flamineo dares it, and even mocks at it

Ha! I can stand thee. Neerer, neerer yet.
What a mockerie hath death made of thee! Thou
look'rst sad.

The ghost is ominously silent, only throwing earth upon
him, and showing the skull. Flamineo's reaction is
still mocking

O fatall! hee throwes earth upon mee.
A dead mans scull beneath the rootes of flowers.

But his irony only thinly covers his desperation. The
skull beneath the flowers suggests the frustration of all human aspiration, the delusion of all hope. There is an irony of fate which mocks even Flamineo's irony, for the ghost heralds the fatality approaching him. And when it goes Flamineo's front crumples:

This is beyond melancholic. I dare not my fate To doe its worst. 

V. iv. 136-137.

So he goes to turn these terrible visions to good with Vittoria's bounty, or to kill her. Possibly he knows his hope is futile, but he has been set on such a course from the beginning of the play and cannot turn. He can only turn to monetary reward, for having rejected self-realisation as too much to bear, he has nothing else. When he comes roughly on Vittoria, she asks

Ha, are you drunke?

and he replies

Yes, yes, with wormwood water: you shall tast Some of it presently.

V. vi. 5-7.

So he has been through the whole play, drunk on wormwood water, eaten away by his bitter vision of the world. And her accusation is the last blow. 'Is't come to this?' Desperate and terrified, he can only attempt to bring some of the terror and guilt to her, and to finally confirm his cynicism.

In her panic when he threatens her with death, her desperate attempts to escape it, and her final betrayal of Brachiano, his deepest cynicism seems confirmed. He knows that she will try to betray him also.

Kil'd with a couple of braches...

O men
That lye upon your death-beds, and are haunted
With howling wives, neere trust them, they'll re-marry
Ere the worme peerce your winding sheets: ere the Spider
Then the revengers come, and both he and Vittoria must die. Flamino can accept his fate - death for him is even a relief, though he reaches this position by a way far different to that taken by the Duchess of Malfi. It is his inevitable fate, and he has known it. His continual tragic awareness is finally brought before us.

Fate's a Spaniell,
Wee cannot beat it from us: what remains now?
Let all that doe ill, take this precedent:
Man may his Fate foresee, but not prevent.
V.vi.178-181.

Death is welcome chiefly because it puts an end to the torment of the mind's continual struggle to understand the world around it, and to the pain of the confined conscience. When Lodovico asks him what he thinks of, he replies

Nothing; of nothing: Leave thy idle questions,
I am ith way to study a long silence,
To prate were idle, I remember nothing.
There's nothing of so infinit vexation
As mans owne thoughts.

But in his death he is allowed at least to see the nobility of Vittoria's courage, though he sees it still within the cynical setting of a world where women are famed for virtue only because silence has covered their sins. And Vittoria's measure of virtue is covered to most of the world by the evil of her reputation. He dies still in a mist acknowledging the evil of his life and glad that his death will have some goodness in it. Lodovico's acceptance of his own death again offers a contrast which shows the depth of Flamino

LOD. I do glory yet,
That I can call this act mine owne: For my part,
Flamineo then is a thoroughly consistent character, and there is a complete reconciliation between his later mood of melancholy, and his earlier speeches and actions. His character is most fully drawn through the series of contrasts which show his response to certain situations against that of the other characters, whether they are deliberate foils, like Lodovico, or the virtuous characters, or fully developed characters in their own right, like Vittoria, who yet contrasts with her brother in ways which throw further light upon his character.

His way of speaking is strongly individualised, the rhythm, imagery and tone of his speeches suggesting beneath the surface railing and cynicism the deeper level of emotion and thought. He is shown as an over sensitive man lost in a world of transformed values, who, in the face of the rottenness of humanity and the corruption of the society around him, commits himself to evil for the one value which he can discern, - material reward. That this in itself is an illusion is one of the tragic ironies of the play. Webster's characters waste themselves for nothing.

He considers his acts as pandar and murderer justified by the evil around him. But these actions are only a mask over his true self, and his mind struggles within him. His thoughts seem to reach out in countless directions in a frantic search for some value which he can hold, but he finds nothing. Similarly he throws himself into the aping of great men's actions in an effort to find some experience which will touch him. Even his wit, his continual brilliant descriptions of the surfaces of events and people, seem to be an effort to sum up the physical world and thus
capture it, as if in describing something fully and exactly he comes close to experiencing it.

But he achieves nothing, except to involve himself deeply in evil, and to suffer mental anguish in a cynicism which cuts him off from the rest of the world. Finally, in the last act, he is faced with himself and the consequences of his actions. In a series of revelations his involvement is brought home to him, and he comes to the edge of a genuine experience of compassion: but in fear of the unknown he turns to the one tangible thing left - preferment. But, ironically, this is the least tangible thing of all. So Flamineo is swept to doom, having only the recognition of the value of courage in the face of death, which scarcely serves to take the edge off his cynicism, and the realisation that all human hope is illusory, only death itself bringing the ending of anguish of mind and pain of life.
my modesty
And womanhood I tender: but withall
So entangled in a cursed accusation
That my defence of force like Perseus,
Must personate masculine vertue -

The difficulties involved in interpreting and judging Vittoria are central to the main themes of The White Devil - the impossibility of judging in such a world as that which is presented in the play, or even of distinguishing the real from the illusory.

In presenting Vittoria's character, Webster leads us into a maze of shifting appearances and conflicting impressions. Her own actions and words are surrounded by the comments and interpretations of the other characters.

We hear of her first from Lodovico in Act I, scene i, where she is linked with the world of corruption and bribery, placed before us as the mistress, or potential mistress, of one of the most corrupt of great men.

So - but I wonder then, some great men scape
This banishment: there's Paulo Giordano Orsini,
The Duke of Brachiano, now lives in Rome,
And by close panderisme seekes to prostitute
The honour of Vittoria Corombona,
Vittoria, she that might have got my pardon
For one kisse to the Duke.

Though her own words, when she speaks, are innocent enough, calling for lights to attend the duke, as she might with any other visitor, we immediately have Flamineo's comments to qualify our negative impression. He assures Brachiano that Vittoria is won, and his cynical remarks on women pass over to shade our consideration of Vittoria.

What ist you douht? Her coynesse? thats but
the superficies of lust most women have;

I.i.18-19.
In the scene where Flamineo gulls her husband Camillo, she again says very little; but Flamineo, as usual, is quick to make the suggestions which colour her darkly. When she accepts Brachiano's suit, though we are given little indication of what she herself might think, her brother's words seek again to reduce her actions to the lowest possible level.

So now you are safe. Ha, ha, ha, thou intanglest thy selfe in thine owne worke like a silke-worme. Come sister, darkenesse hides your blush, women are like curst dogges, civilitie keepes them tyed all day time, but they are let loose at midnight, then they do most good or most mischeefe -

I.ii.186-190.

Her public reputation is obvious, one need only witness the lawyer's remarks to Flamineo before the trial:

Mee thinkes none should sit upon thy sister but old whoore-maisters -

III.i.12-13.

and Monticelso says, accusing her:

Alas I make but repitition Of what is ordinary and Ryalto talke; And ballated, and would bee plaied a'th stage,

III.ii.256-258.

The word 'whore' itself is repeated again and again with reference to her. A reputation for insatiable lust has been built around her. Such is the suggestion of the fable the brothers tell to Camillo:

for, if now
When there was but one Sunne, so many men Weare like to perish by his violent heate, What should they do if hee were married And should beget more, and those children Make fier-workes like their father? So say I, Only I will apply it to your wife, Her issue, should not providence prevent it, Should make both nature, time, and man repent it.

II.i.343-351.
And Isabella's 'mock' tirade further helps to blacken Vittoria.

Are all these ruines of my former beautie, Laid out for a whores triumph? ...
To dig the strumpets eyes out, let her lye Some twenty monethes a-dying. II,i.240-249.

But the opinions of the other characters as to Vittoria's nature are of little use in attempting to discover her true character. Webster's characters are locked within their own little worlds of self, obsessed with their own problems and plotting. Even a seemingly detached observer like Flamineo cannot help colouring his judgements of people with the bitterness of his own disillusion. They rarely reach out to other people, and are as often as not wholly mistaken in their evaluations of their fellows, whether for their own purposes, (as the Duchess's followers slander Antonio once they think that he is powerless and out of favour), or from a genuine inability to distinguish the real from the illusory.

Isabella is probably prompted by motives of her own to exaggerate Vittoria's vices, and Monticelso and Francisco are planning the ruin of the lovers through the deliberate blackening of their reputations.

FRAN. You have dealt discreetly to obtaine the presence Of all the grave Leiger Embassadours To heare Vittorias Triall. MON. 'Twas not ill, For sir you know we have nought but circumstances To charge her with, about her husbands death, Their approbation therefore to the proofes Of her blacke lust, shall make her infamous To all our neighbouring Kingdomes - III.i.1-8.

To know the world of The White Devil is to distrust the validity of all such reputations, of 'ordinary and Ryalto talk', especially where the reputation is so unquestioned
as it seems to be with Vittoria.

The dominant impression she gives may be that of an amoral, ruthless woman, devoted to a life of passion and ambition. We see her agree to Brachiano's suit, perhaps incite the murder of her husband and Brachiano's wife, at her trial plead innocence even of the adultery of which she is guilty, and finally attempt to betray her brother to death. Yet she dies with courage and defiance at the hands of the revengers.

But, like her brother, she is not merely evil. She has all the brilliance and daring of Flamineo, and, like him, she possesses a fineness of sensibility, a sensitivity which others like Marcello, Cornelia, and even her lover Brachiano are without, and cannot comprehend. Again, as in the characterisation of Flamineo, the contrast of the other characters is important in establishing our own knowledge of Vittoria.

Brachiano is a man of strength rather than intelligence - he never really understands Vittoria. In the House of Convertites scene he is quick to believe her unfaithful, and Flamineo's response to Brachiano's insulting of Vittoria here shows the brother's consciousness, beneath all the surface scorn for his sister, that he and Vittoria, though they have been degraded, are made of better stuff than ever was in Brachiano.

BRA.  ... Where's this changeable stuffe?
FLA.  Ore head and eares in water. I assure you, Shee is not for your wearing.

As the presentation of Lodovico, a truly evil character, and, on the other hand, Cornelia and Marcello as representatives of an impossible virtue, qualified our response to Flamineo's evil, so the presentation of Camillo, the foolish courtier, qualifies our response to Vittoria's adultery. Against Flamineo, this man, the wronged husband,
for whom perhaps we should expect to feel some sympathy, makes a poor showing, exciting neither our compassion nor our respect. Flamineo regards him with a deserved contempt.

is hee not a courtly gentleman? -

(when he weares white sattin one would take him by his blacke mussel to be no other creature then a maggot).

I.ii.135-137.

and dupes him easily. Vittoria is a young and passionate woman. Camillo gives a doddering impression, even if he is fairly young. He is, anyway, unbearably silly. It is as Flamineo says:

this fellow by his apparell
Some men would judge a pollititian,
But call his wit in question, you shall find it
Merely an Asse in's foot-cloath -

I.ii.55-58.

There is no sympathy to be wasted on him. He is gulled easily, used by the Cardinal and Francisco. Observing him, we can understand Vittoria's contempt, even perhaps her infidelity.

Her guilt seems less important, too, when we examine the nature of her accusers. In the trial scene Montecelso and Francisco are not distinguished by any disinterested passion for justice. The lawyer is a pedantic ninny, and Vittoria soon routs his affectation and foolishness.

LAW. Most literated Judges, please your Lordships, So to connive your Judgements to the view Of this debaushd and diversivolent woman Who such a blacke concatenation Of mischiefe hath effected, that to exterpe The memory of't, must be the consummation Of her and her projections - VITT. What's all this? LAW. Hould your peace. Exhorbitant sinnes must have exulceration. VITT. Surely my Lords this lawier here hath swallowed Some Poticaryes bils, or proclamations. And now the hard and undegesta"ble wordes, Come up like stones wee use give Haukes for physicke.

III.ii.29-41.
In contrast to him, she seems simple and direct, so that we almost expect the truth to come from her, rather than from her accusers.

She is in fact guilty at least of adultery, despite her superb imitation of innocence. She is an adulteress, but she is not by nature the whore that Monticelso accuses her of being. His accusations are too harsh, too black, and tinged with personal loathing. The ambassadors see this:

Fr. Emb. Shee hath lived ill.
Eng. Emb. Trew, but the Cardinals too bitter.

III.ii.110-111.

She is neither as innocent as she would seem, nor yet so guilty as the Cardinal and company would have her. It is not really her guilt or her innocence which is emphasised, but the impossibility of judgement itself. Vittoria's real trial, as with the other characters, is in the course of life itself, and the final facing of death.

From the beginning, there is an ambiguity about her character. When she relates her dream to Brachiano we are left hesitant, wondering, though Flamineo is in no doubt about how to interpret it

Excellent Divell.
She hath taught him in a dreame
To make away his Dutchesse and her husband.
I.ii.246-248.

Perhaps she is aware that she is inciting the Duke to murder, for she doubtless knows him, a man of no great wit or sensibility, to whom murder or violence is the easy answer to any problem. There is a hardness, a ruthlessness, in the last two lines

And both were strucke down by that sacred Eu
In that base shallow grave that was their due.
I.ii.244-245.
Yet she introduces the dream gently, and its relation carries an undercurrent of emotion which is part of the individual characterisation. Perhaps she merely day-dreams aloud, voicing her fears, in the hope that Brachiano will end them, without necessarily seeing that the implication is murder. The idea of her as a coldly calculating murderer is softened strangely, and we have little indication of what she really thinks or intends here. The impression of her scheming is qualified by the note of sadness,

As I sat sadly leaning on a grave,
Checkered with crosse-sticks,

by what seems her constant apprehension of the nearness of death; a sudden terror evident in the words

*Your fell Dutchesse
With a shovell, like a fury, voyded out
The earth and scattered bones -

and most of all by a kind of baffled helplessness which characterises Vittoria throughout the play.

*Lord how me thought
I trembled, and yet for all this terror
I could not pray.*

I.ii.225-240

We are rarely shown Vittoria's thoughts; in her case we are not given, as with Flamineo, the idea of a long and withering course of disillusionment which has led to the inevitable rejection of the 'principles' of Cornelia. She does not appear so often as Flamineo, there are no soliloquies, and the comparatively few speeches possess a strange ambivalence. Vittoria has none of Flamineo's voluble rage against the court society. With her the detachment and cynicism are absent, the anger muted; beneath the brilliance and defiance there is a prevailing sadness and bewilderment.

Clifford Leech has noted the moments of panic which come upon Vittoria throughout the play. As she accepts

*John Webster*, p. 36, and pp. 42, 43.
Brachiano's suit in Act I, scene ii, as he promises her all joy and safety, Cornelia comes forward, protesting. Flameneo is scornful, and tells her to go, but Vittoria cries 'Dearest mother heare me.', as if she wishes to clear herself of blame. She tries to explain the situation to her mother, as if Cornelia's opinion really matters to her.

I do protest if any chast deniall,  
If any thing but bloud could have alayed  
His long suite to me ...  

I.ii.283-285.

At her mother's curse, a true terror seems to seize Vittoria. Brachiano brushes it easily aside,  
Fye, fye, the woman's mad.  
I.ii.290.

angry only because his meeting with Vittoria has been interrupted, but she runs from the room alone, crying  
O me accurst!  

I.ii.294.

There is no defiance in her reaction, none of the self possession and bravado that carries her through most of the trial scene and helps her to outface her accusers. Such a reaction seems to hint, as J. R. Brown observes, at a regard for conventional morality beneath the apparent defiance.  

At the end of the trial, when sentence is passed, Vittoria's self possession crumbles for the second time. It is perhaps partly fury that she has been made to suffer, but there is also an element of fear beneath the defiance as she sees how thin is the wall of safety she has tried to build for herself. First she cries that she must have vengeance, and curses her accusers, raging. Then she recovers her self possession, and goes on with the old act of bravado. But the words which she speaks are to be  

WD, p. liv.
re-echoed in later scenes where her defiance covers only fear and despair.

I will not weep,
No I do scorne to call up one poore teare
To fawne on your injustice

III.ii.295-297.

Miss Bradbrook has remarked that Vittoria's love for Brachiano is at all times dignified and heroic. But there is an ambiguity also about the nature of Vittoria's love for Brachiano. When she speaks to Brachiano for the first time after she has agreed to his suit, there is a lightness, a dryness about her words rather than the sense of any deep passion or love.

BRA. Loose me not Madam, for if you forego me
I am lost eternallie. VIT. Sir in the way of pittie I wish you hart-hole. BRA. You are a sweet Phisition. VIT. Sure Sir a loathed crueltie in Ladyes Is as to Doctors many funeralls It takes away their credit.


This is all, and it is strangely impersonal.

Despite the impossible vows which his unrealistic assurance and confidence presses him to make to her, Vittoria is always alone, always she must fight for herself. In Act II, where the brothers charge Brachiano with keeping Vittoria as his whore, he makes no attempt to deny such accusations. He offers defiance rather than denial

were she a whore of mine
All thy loud Cannons, and thy borrowed Switzers Thy Gallies, nor thy sworne confederates, Durst not supplant her.

II.i.62-65.

His defiance seems more for himself than for Vittoria, for his own right to do whatever he wills without interference from his wife's kinsmen. At the trial he enters, defies

1 Themes and Conventions of Elizabethan Tragedy, p.190.
the accusers, and again we feel that he defies them on his own account rather than Vittoria's, then leaves her alone to defend herself as best she may.

She, in her turn, will not admit that she loves him:

Condemne you me for that the Duke did love me?
So may you blame some faire and christall river
For that some melancholik distracted man,
Hath drown'd himself in't.

III.ii.211-214.

In the scene at the House of Convertites the insensitivity and stupidity of Brachiano are counterpointed against Vittoria's realisation of her shame and despair, to show both the sensitivity and loneliness of Vittoria, and the fear and doubt which has underlain all of her actions. He is easily deceived by Francisco's letter, and brushes aside her innocence as 'politic ignorance'. Flamineo's contempt for him is thinly covered.

What a strange credulous man were you, my Lord,
To thinke the Duke of Florence would lover her!

IV.ii.157-158.

Vittoria's tears are no mere pretence, for not only is her genuine innocence rejected as mere dissembling, but now she is faced with the weakness of Brachiano's love, and all the bitterness of her own life. She sees the stupidity and easy distrust of Brachiano, and her contempt for him breaks out.

O thou foole,
Whose greatnesse hath by much oregrowne thy wit!
What dar' st thou do, that I dare not to suffer,
Excepting to be still thy whore?

IV.ii.145-148.

She realises that she is, in the world's opinion, (and perhaps in her own) this man's whore, and that he is a stupid man, hardly worthy of her.

What have I gain'd by thee but infamie?

IV.ii.109.

Her words are spoken, as Flamineo's often are, not so much
to the other characters as to herself, as she broods on the degradation of her position.

O yee dissembling men!
... To ad miserable to miserable...

and finally

Am I not low enough? IV.ii.185-188.

Brachiano's suspicions, his accusations, have brought to her as bitter a revelation as that which came to Flamineo, as she is forced to realise that the Duke's 'love' cannot protect her from hurt and despair, can give her nothing except a momentary escape.

Yet her shame and her hopelessness are unperceived by Brachiano, and even perhaps by Flamineo. They see her fling herself upon the bed crying

O that I could tossse my selve
Into a grave as quickly: For all thou art worth
Ile not shed one teare more; Ile burst first.

IV.ii.127-129.

and it may seem that this is merely the act of the femme fatale, that she merely toys with Brachiano. Flamineo is cynical, watching her. But the words which she uses echo her similar vow to her accusers in the trial scene, after she had been sentenced, where her assumed bravado covered the deeper feeling, so that now again we see suggested the fear, the confusion, beneath the surface gesture, and the 'deepe sence of some dethlesse shame'.

Even in the scene of Brachiano's death, the nature of Vittoria's love for him is still ambiguous. Certainly she is horror struck at his sudden collapse. 'O my loved Lord, poisoned?' she cries, and then, 'I am lost for ever.'

1 See C. Leech, John Webster, p. 157.
2 The White Devil, V.iii.8,35.
But this last cry seems to have more reference to herself, to her own hopeless state, now robbed of the only thing she could place between herself and the realisation of emptiness and death which seems to haunt her, rather than to be an expression of any deep grief. It has a far different sound to the Duchess of Malfi's 'My Laurell is all withered.'

One cannot deny that she is deeply affected by Brachiano's death, but the realisation of her own aloneness is as great, or greater, than her sorrow for the Duke's tragedy. Her horror, expressed in the few utterances she makes in response to his ravings, suggests that she sees the hell which has descended on him, and fears it coming to herself. And as he sinks into his delirium he does not recognise her, but sees only the gray in her hair. She says few words during his agony, but those few are suggestive of an unbearable terror, rather than grief. Whatever comes to Brachiano may also come to her. When she comes back after he is dead she cries 'O mee! this place is hell.' and runs from the room alone. Whatever passion she may perhaps have felt for Brachiano, her desire for life, and her terror of death, are still greater.

As with the other characters, Vittoria's evil is qualified by her fear. She is motivated by terror as well as by passion and ambition. In the final scenes we are shown clearly the fear and doubt which have underlain the whole course of her life. In the last scene, where Flamineo faces her with the pistols, and she presses upon him his guilt for the murder of his brother and for her own ruin, both are driven by an overriding fear, they claw at each other like blinded beasts. One is reminded of the sermon on Hell in Joyce's Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man.

In hell all laws are overturned - there is no thought of family or country, of ties, of

1 The Duchess of Malfi, III.v.108
2 The White Devil, V.iii.182.
relationships. The damned howl and scream at one another, their torture and rage intensified by the presence of beings tortured and raging like themselves. All sense of humanity is forgotten. This is the quality of the terror here, the sheer blindness of fear, the desperate unknowing in which they force their own guilt upon one another.

But what is the fury of those dumb beasts compared with the fury of execration which bursts from the parched lips and aching throats of the damned in hell when they behold in their companions in misery those who aided and abetted them in sin, those whose words sowed the first seeds of evil thinking and evil living in their minds ... They turn upon these accomplices and upbraid them and curse them. But they are helpless and hopeless: it is too late now for repentance.

Vittoria's terror is evident in her actions, in her frantic attempts to escape death; and in her speech, in its hurried, panicked movement, and the nature of the images she uses. The dreadful picture of the Judgement day which she draws for Flamineo is doubtless occasioned by her own apprehension of death, and terror of damnation.

I prethee, yet remember,
Millions are now in graves, which at last day
Like Mandrakes shall rise shreeking.
V.vi.66-68.

When she takes up Zanche's suggestion of a trick to lead Flamineo to death, and acts out a mockery of fidelity and devotion to Brachiano

O but frailty!
Yet I am now resolv'd, farewell affliction;
Behold Brachiano, I that while you liv'd
Did make a flaming Altar of my heart
To sacrifice unto you ... Now am ready
To sacrifice heart and all.
V.vi.82-87.

it seems that she betrays all. But rather she reveals

1 London, Jonathan Cape, 1952, pp.139-140.
once more that any love she may have had for Brachiano has not been so real as her desperate clinging to life. She may have loved Brachiano, though that cannot be certain, but she loves her life more, painful existence though it may be.

Yet when the revengers come, and she sees that there is no hope, she asserts all of her courage to face the murderers. But the proud words she uses inevitably echo those other scenes where she has covered her inward fear with a show of defiance.

Ile tell thee what,
I will not in my death shed one base teare.

V. vi. 225-226.

and we hesitate, seeing that she may again be desperately afraid, yet covering her dread over with a proud defiance.

After she is wounded, Vittoria is silent for a while, then she says

My soule, like to a ship in a blacke storme,
Is driven I know not whither.

V. vi. 248-249.

The image of the blind and wandering ship accompanies Vittoria throughout the play, suggesting that she does not know where she goes. Vittoria is much more instinctive than the intellectual Flamineo. Her response to the harshness of the court world is blind, instinctive and passionate, unlike the calmer decision of her brother. In a terrifying manner, Vittoria always seems to act out of a void, out of nothingness - we can never be quite sure what thoughts have led her to act as she does, to speak as she does - we can only feel about her a kind of instinctive and dreadful terror, like that of a frightened animal, which drives her forward towards a fate 'fixt with nayles of dyamonds to inevitable necessitie'.

Watching her die, Flamineo continues this image of the sea, of blindness
Then cast ancor.
Prosperitie doth bewitch men seeming cleere,
But seas do laugh, shew white, when Rocks are neere.

V.vi. 249-251.

Pleading for Brachiano, he had promised infinite happiness
of the union

Thou shalt lye in a bed stufft with turtles
feathers, swoone in perfumed lynnen like the fellow
was smothered in roses - so perfect shall be thy
happinesse, that as men at Sea thinke land and trees
and shippes go that way they go, so both heaven and
earth shall seeme to go your voyage.

I.ii.148-152.

and the imagery was again of the sea and illusion. Heaven
and earth will only 'seeme' to go her voyage. Flamineo
does not believe in such promises, even as he makes them, he
who has spoken of lovers' oaths as

like Marrinners prayers, uttered in extremity;
but when the tempest is ore, and that the vessel
leaves tumbling, they fall from protesting to drinking.

V.i.170-172.

B. J. Layman, in his article 'The Reconciliation
of Opposites in The White Devil,' suggests that the
fragility of the promised happiness is known to Vittoria,
even at the moment she accepts Brachiano. From the
beginning she has

steered her course in anguished awareness of the
rocks which have threatened, undeceived by the
earlier promises of happiness ... Her fictions and
pretences form her response to life's matrix of
terror.1

Beneath the surface brilliance of Vittoria's actions must
lie the same consciousness of futility which haunted her
brother. Such a consciousness has been suggested in her
speeches and actions throughout the play; now in these

final speeches, near death, it is evident. Her life as well as her brother's is described in the images the dying Flamineo uses:

the Lyons 1th Tower on Candlemas day, to mourn if the Sunne shine, for feare of the pittifull remainder of winter to come.

V.v.266-268.

Her final cry of conscience

0 my greatest sinne lay in my blood.
Now my blood paies for't.

V.vi.240-241.

and of regret

0 happy they that never saw the Court,
Nor ever knew great Men but by report.

V.vi.261-262.

coming from a woman who, beneath her passionate defiance, may have been oppressed both by her conscience and a sense of futility, is not merely perfunctory.

Yet none of the other characters ever see Vittoria as she really is. Even Flamineo at the end, sees her bravery but does not penetrate to the fear beneath it. And Lodovico only cries '0 thou glorious strumpet' as he is about to kill her, suggesting that she goes to her death still with a reputation in the eyes of the world, for incredible lust and evil. The reputation of a person depends not on their inner quality, but on the circumstances of their lives.

So even when we have found the real Vittoria behind the maze of appearances with which Webster confronts us, there is still the basic question which the dramatist puts through his characterisation of Vittoria. How can one judge any person in a world such as that of The White Devil? Vittoria cannot be judged. Flamineo says of her, as she dies:

Know many glorious women that are fam'd
For masculine vertue have bin vitious,
Onely a happier silence did betyde them.
Shee hath no faults, who hath the art to hide them.  
V.vi.244-247.

Vittoria could have seemed as virtuous as Isabella, had her temperament and the circumstances of her life been propitious.

And of all Axiomes this shall winne the prise,  
'Tis better to be fortunate than wise.  
V.vi.182-3.

The one thing that is certain is her courage. The fear which we know beneath her final defiance of death does not diminish her, rather it adds to her courage, as its presence beneath all the actions of her life only adds to her tragic stature. There is a true greatness in Vittoria - to see the terror and the futility and yet to act bravely, with pride, and to face death after every hope is exhausted, still with pride, and with a courage which covers her deep fear - this is the only true greatness which can be had in the world of The White Devil.
What a mockerie hath death made of thee! thou look'st sad.

Both Vittoria and Flamineo have been, in some measure, alienated from the world about them. They are not, as Brachiano is, successful Machiavellians. They are too sensitive for the environment in which they must live. Their minds are too subtle, they have too many doubts, are too conscious of futility, to act as confidently as Brachiano. He does not have the perception of Flamineo or Vittoria; he accepts the Transformed World, and does not think about it, flinging himself into the exercise of his power and greatness with a boyish assurance. His actions do not cover any hidden dread, he believes in himself, and in his world. He is the Machiavellian who cuts his way through all obstacles, planning the murders of Isabella and Camillo in the style of one who is used to having his way. Human lives are nothing to him. Flamineo says of Brachiano:

Hee was a kinde of States-man, that would sooner have reckond how many Cannon bullets he had discharged against a towne, to count his expence that way, than how many of his valiant and deserving subjects hee lost before it.

V.iii.60-63.

Once he has determined on something he pushes all obstacles out of his path.

He is completely callous towards Isabella, though on examining her character closely, one may suspect he has reason to distrust and loathe her. The murders are executed coldly and efficiently. Yet he is far from being

See pp.235ff.
a politician of the order of Francisco, shrewd and sagacious. Francisco himself makes the comparison between them:

He that deales all by strength, his wit is shallow:
When a mans head goes through each limbe will follow.  
IV.i.135-136.

Lacking in intelligence, he is always quick to violence. As soon as he hears that the Duchess has arrived at court he begins to exclaim and threaten darkly - 'She had been better...'. The images of storm and thunder, battle and cannon, accompany Brachiano throughout the play. His own speeches are filled with them.

Thunder! infaith
They are but crackers. FRAN. We'll end this with the Cannon.
BRA. Thou'llt get naught by it bit iron in thy wounds, And gunpowder in thy nostrels. II.i.77-78.

He applauds the precocious Giovanni's warlike courage:

Forward Lap-wing,
He flies with the shell on's head. II.i.128-129.

In the divorce scene he scorns and defies Francisco again, with characteristic violence:

Now all the Hellish Furies take his soul!
... let thy brother rage
Beyond a horred tempest or sea-fight,
My vow is fixed. II.i.206-208.

There is something child-like in his bluster, his raging. Indeed, a kind of immaturity is the keynote of his nature. He is emotional, rash, impetuous. In his passion for Vittoria he is characteristically extravagant - whatever he does, he performs in the grand manner.

0 should she faile to come -
he cries dramatically to Flamineo, who gives the cool reply
I must not have your Lordship thus unwisely amorous—
I.ii.36-37.

When he meets his mistress his language is suitably turned to the occasion.

Give credit: I could wish time would stand still
And never end this enterview, this howre,
But all delight doth it selfe soon'st devour.
Let me into your bosome happy Ladie,
Powre out in stead of eloquence my vows —
Loose me not Madam, for, if you forego me
I am lost eternallie.

I.ii.192-198.

It is doubtful that Vittoria is taken in by such boyish effusions, no matter how much Brachiano may believe in them at the time. What are his vows, anyway, but eloquence? He is extravagant in his promises to her, full of confidence in his powers to bring her joy and content. He has no perception at all of the fragility of his power and greatness, so he can make the impossible promises to Vittoria, with no sense at all of their futility.

Sweetly shall I enterpret this your dreame,
You are lodged within his armes who shall protect you,
From all the feavers of a jealous husband,
From the poore envy of our flegmaticke Dutchesse —
I'le seate you above law, and above scandal1,
Give to your thoughts the invention of delight
And the fruition; nor shall government
Divide me from you longer than a care
To keepe you great: you shall to me at once,
Be Dukedom, health, wife, children, friends and all.

I.ii.249-258.

Vittoria perhaps has little hope of their fulfillment, and Flamineo doubtless scorns them.

When he is at Vittoria's house watching the dumb shows of the murders, the conjurer tells him that the guards are coming to apprehend Vittoria, and suggests

'twere fit we instantly
Make out by some backe posterne.

II.ii.50-51.
and Brachiano goes along with him, leaving his mistress to her fate. It is the same at the trial. Here he enters with characteristic defiance, threatens the accusers, and departs flamboyantly. Throughout the play his treachery is emphasised. Flamineo knows him 'most methodically'

As in this world there are degrees of evils:  
So in this world there are degrees of devils.  
You'r a great Duke; I your poore secretary.  
I doe looke now for a Spanish fig, or an Italian sallet, daily.  

IV.ii.60-63.

and

O sir, I would not go before a Pollitique enemie with my backe towards him, though there were behind mee a whirlle-poole.  

IV.ii.70-72.

Vittoria, relating her dream, used the image of the yew tree to describe Brachiano, and in Act IV, scene ii, Monticelso, pretending to discourage Lodovico from revenge, uses the image again:

Or like the blacke, and melancholick Eugh-tree,  
Do'fst thinke to roote thy selfe in dead mens graves,  
And yet to prosper?  

IV.iii.123-125.

Such is Brachiano. His treachery is that of an uncontrolled emotional nature, without the restraint given by reason or self doubt.

He is easily swayed to and fro on the turn of his emotions. There is no constancy in him. In the House of Convertites, he is instantly transported into a jealous fury when he finds the letter from Francisco. He does not stop to consider, to reason. He is incapable of such rational behaviour, which would require thought rather than violent emotion. 'Udsdeath, Ile cut her into Atomies', he savagely exclaims, at once turning on her, threatening and blustering. It is merely the fury of outraged pride.
When Flamineo turns against this outburst to face him, he reacts fiercely: 'Do you know mee?' How proud he is of his rank and power, how assured of his hold over lesser mortals, how confident that his power can achieve all! He gives Vittoria no chance to explain, but rages on, insulting and threatening her. All his former love is vanished, all his passionate vows are forgotten. He sees himself deluded, believes that now at last he sees the truth:

Your beautie! 0, ten thousand curses on't. How long have I beheld the devill in christall! Thou hast lead mee, like an heathen sacrifice, With musicke, and with fatall yokes of flowers, To my eternall ruine.

IV.ii.88-92.

He sees it all as Vittoria's fault, and none of his own. Yet when she faces him with his treachery and her own misery, he is quick to swing to remorse.

I have drunke Lethe. Vittoria! My dearest happinesse! Vittoria! Why doe you aile my Love? why doe you weep?

IV.ii.130-132.

Again it is the stupidity, the insincerity of pure emotionalism. Yet it is not a deliberate insincerity, it is not that he does not really feel, for the moment, the emotion which he declares. But it is only for the moment. He can be swept in an instant to the opposite extreme. The vows which he now makes to her are as extravagant as they have formerly been, and as empty. They are meaningless, even as he utters them, though he does not realise this

Once to bee jealous of thee is t'expresse That I will love thee everlastingly, And never more be jealous.

Never shall rage, or the forgetfull wine, Make mee commit like fault.

IV.ii.143-174.

It is scarcely any wonder that Vittoria and Flamineo are
filled with contempt.

From what we have seen so far, it will be evident that Brachiano's character is a foil to Vittoria's and Flamineo's, showing, in contrast to the fairly simple brashness of his own character, the depth of theirs, the complexity of their motives to action. Brachiano does not have the integrity of Vittoria or Flamineo. He can, for instance, say to Flamineo, as the pandar tells him that Vittoria is won,

\[\text{Wee are happie above thought, because 'bove merrit.}\]
\[\text{I.ii.16.}\]

and not really sense the hypocrisy of it. Again, his acceptance of Francisco's offered friendship is hypocritical. And his feigning of grief and concern for Francisco over Isabella's death is sickening. But it is part of the world around him. Francisco's offer of friendship is doubtless as false as Brachiano's acceptance. It is because of his ability to act the hypocrite, that he cuts his way successfully through the world. The hypocrisy required from a successful politician does not bother him as it would bother Flamineo. He is without that sensitivity, that innate sense of fineness, which is only a hindrance and a bitterness in such a world.

There is no hidden guilt in Brachiano. He can brush aside Cornelia's curse, angry only that she has interrupted his successful suit to Vittoria. He is probably already planning the murders of Camillo and Isabella, yet he thunders at Cornelia

\[\text{Uncharitable woman, thy rash tongue}\]
\[\text{Hath rais'd a fearfull and prodigious storme,}\]
\[\text{Bee thou the cause of all ensuing harme.}\]
\[\text{I.ii.388-390.}\]

It is not, as it is with Flamineo and Vittoria, that the guilt
is too much to bear, and he must thrust it upon others, he is merely angry, and directs his fury upon Cornelia. Though on his death bed he cries, in his distraction

Indeed I am to blame.

For did you ever heare the duskie raven
Chide blackness? Or was't ever known, the divell
Raild against cloven Creatures?

V.iii.87-90.

it seems a perfunctory kind of repentance — there is no true study of suppressed and rising guilt as we have with Flamineo, or later, Bosola.

Brachiano, indeed, is a more generalised study than either Vittoria or Flamineo. He is the great man, the successful Machiavellian, at least in life. Faced with death he crumbles. The demonstration of the falsity and hollowness of merely external greatness is the main force behind his characterisation.

Throughout the play it has been emphasised that he is the great man, the very type of the politician. The first we hear of him is from Lodovico, in the scene which closes with Lodovico's words on the practises of such men:

Great men sell sheep thus, to be cut in pieces,
When first they have shorne them bare and sold their fleeces.

I.i.62-63. 

The conjurer says of him, after Brachiano has witnessed the dumb-shows of the murders with enjoyment

Both flowers and weeds, spring when the Sunne is warme,
And great men do great good, or else great harme.

II.ii.55-56 

Flamineo is constantly making speeches on the wiles and actions of politicians, and Brachiano is included within this classification; he typifies the evils which Flamineo describes. He is the portrait of a kind, the great man who crumbles when he is faced with death, when all his
external grandeur is to no account.

There are really no surprises in the presentation of his character, no sudden revaluations in moments of self-knowledge, as is often the case with Webster's characters. There is a revaluation, but it is an expected one, general rather than individual. Instead of seeing the awakening of the individual, as we do with Flamineo, for instance, so that the pretences and acts are for a moment pierced, enabling us to see the inner life of the person, glimpse for a moment his true thought and emotion, we see rather the clinching of the argument that beneath the violence and the seeming control of life, the power and splendour of the Great, there is nothing which can withstand death.

So sympathy for Brachiano is always distanced. At his death there is none of the mixture of sympathy and admiration which we feel for Vittoria or Flamineo; rather there is pity, pity as for an animal suffering an agony before death. He has not their tragic stature, for he has not suffered the torments in living which have been their lot, the torture of continual consciousness of futility and doom. There is an irony throughout Brachiano's death scene. It is not the tragic irony which we saw with Flamineo and Vittoria, and which increased rather than diminished their stature. The irony which attaches to Brachiano only diminishes him. Flamineo and Vittoria have seen their fate, and tried to flee it, but could not; they die with integrity and courage. Brachiano's fate falls on him all unaware, and his death is ignominous, like that of a helpless animal.

After Flamineo has murdered Marcello, Brachiano toys with him over granting a pardon, saying that he will give him only a lease of life which he must renew every day. Even as he speaks, in confident expectation of life, Lodovico sprinkles the poison onto his beaver. With characteristic violence, he cries that some great ones are to blame, and
sends the innocent armourer off to torture. Yet still, in his first pain, he thinks of Vittoria and the boy, so that there is some element of goodness in him. Even in such a study as that of Brachiano, there is still some hesitancy of judgement.

Unlike Vittoria or Flamineo, when on the edge of death he gives no thought to the pointlessness of life, or the lack of knowledge of what may come after death - he is concerned with the moment of death only, and his complete inability to stay it. Brachiano, who has dealt death out so freely to others, has never, like Vittoria or her brother, been haunted himself by its terror. He had believed in his power and greatness, unlike the others, and now there is none of this left. He cries, when he knows he must die

0 thou strong heart!
There's such a covenant 'tweene the world and it,
They're loath to breake.

V.iii.14-16.

This sudden terror, and fear of death is alone immediately personal; even in a generalised study like that of Brachiano there are still the individual touches. But his speeches on the slipperiness of great men's lives point the general moral, rather than being expressions of individual discovery.

0 thou soft naturall death, that art joint-twin
To sweetest slumber: no rough-bearded comet
Stares on thy milde departure; the dull Owle
Beates not against thy casement: the hoarse wolfe
Sents not thy carion. Pitty windes thy coarse,
Whilst horrorre waights: on Princes.

V.iii.30-35

The distraction into which he falls is symbolic of the disintegrating state of the universe around him, rather than an expression of any personal awareness of its nature on the part of Brachiano. After describing the Duke's distraction Lodovico points the moral of the scene

Such a fearefull end
May teach some men that beare too loftie crest,
Though they live happiest, yet they dye not best.

V.iii.74-76.
and Flamineo's remarks on the solitariness of dying princes draw us once again to contemplate the general aspect of his death. The disguised Capuchins torture him

GAS. Brachiano!
LOD. Devill Brachiano,
Thou art damned. GAS. Perpetually.
V.iii.149-151.

They emphasise the evil of his past life, and his fast approaching damnation, the rot of death and the total forgetting of his own existence.

LOD. And thou shalt die like a poor rogue. GAS. And stinke
Like a flie-blowne dog.
LOD. And be forgotten before thy funerall sermon.
V.iii.167-169.

He calls for Vittoria, but even this last anguished cry raises only our pity, never our admiration. When she comes, the murderers say

for charitie,
For Christian charitie, avoid the chamber.
V.iii.173-174.

echoing one of Brachiano's most flamboyant scenes. The murderers are grimly humorous over him, in a way that the murderers of Vittoria and Flamineo are not. He can only suffer them - it is left for Vittoria and Flamineo to preserve their wit and courage in death, to outmatch their murderers with their quality of dying. But Brachiano is a poor thing in death. The murderers have their sport with him:

LOD. You would prate, Sir. This is a true-love knot
Sent from the Duke of Florence.
GAS. What, is it done?
LOD. The snuffe is out. No woman-keeper i'th world,
Though shee had practis'd seven yeare at the Pest-house,
Could have don't quaintlyer.
V.iii.175-180.

And over his dead body some minutes later Zanche and Francisco dally, as Zanche relates her dream, simpering at the disguised Duke.
Flamineo, giving an account of the disguised Francisco's stoic teachings, brings forward the famous couplet:

Glories, like glow-worms, afarre off shine bright
But looke to neare, have neither heat nor light. V. i. 48-49.

and these two lines immediately precede the final entrance of Brachiano. His life and death are an illustration of this favourite maxim. Again, Webster is concerned with showing an appearance, then piercing through to show how false this outward show is, how far different is the reality underneath. But it is not the same quivering nervous study of individual character as is the case with Vittoria and Flamineo; instead it is the general study of a type, the proof of the hollowness of great men, the illusory nature of merely external splendour.

On his first appearance, Brachiano says to Flamineo 'Quite lost, Flamineo'. Though this is Brachiano's characteristic extravagance, it is true enough. Despite his apparent control, he is always lost, But he is not aware of this. Flamineo and Vittoria are also wanderers in 'the mist', but where they contrast with Brachiano, and where he fails to approach their tragic stature, is in his lack of any consciousness of being lost, any doubt or dread beneath the bravado. This is what wins our admiration for Vittoria and Flamineo, what gives to them their tragic grandeur. When he dies, we feel pity, but not admiration. We do not respond to his death as we do to that of the others, where we are faced suddenly with the confusion and dread, the unhappy consciousness which underlay their lives. There is something impersonal in our response to his death.

He does not even realise his futility, then, except in so far as he knows his impotence to halt death. He only feels pain, physical pain, and the anguish of his own powerlessness. His torture at the hands of the Capuchins is dreadful indeed, but it is not tragic. He is passive
before them. He has indeed been yoked with fatal flowers and drawn towards the sacrificial altar. But it is not Vittoria who has led him to his doom, but the impersonal powers of the Webterian universe who will destroy all equally. As we watch him suffer agonies at the hands of the revengers, we think again of the mad Ferdinand's words,

Hence, hence! you are all of you, like beasts for sacrifice, there's nothing left of you, but tongue, and belly, flattery, and leachery.¹

and it is the anguish of all of them, not merely of Brachiano, that we see.

¹ The Duchess of Malfi, V. ii. 78-80.
The White Devil, more than anything else, is a drama of exploration. We have noted that Webster, in these two tragedies with which we are dealing, searches for what is most real or stable in the Transformed World, both in the nature of man, and in the nature of the universe in which he lives.¹

The theme of trial, of testing, runs through the play, suggested in the image of the jewel, of diamonds which are to be tested to discover whether they are real or counterfeit. In the first scene, Flamineo describes Camillo,

> you are a goodly Foile, I confesse, well set out -(but coverd with a false stone, yon conterfaite dyamond).

I.i.137-139.

and the image reappears in all the most crucial scenes.²

¹See pp.

²Vittoria’s affair with Brachiano is described as being 'fistt with nayles of dyamonds to inevitabole necessitie', and on their first meeting they exchange jewels. Monticelso uses the image again, describing Vittoria's imitation of innocence at the trial, and she replies

> know that all your strickt-combined heads, Which strike against this mine of diamondes, Shall prove but glassen hammers, they shall breake -

III.ii.147-149.

Going into imprisonment, she exclaims that it is through darkness that 'Diamonds spred their ritchest light'. (III.iii.305). In the House of Convertites scene, Brachiano cries, accusing Vittoria,

> 'How long have I beheld the devill in christall!'

IV.ii.89

his stupidity and lack of faith bring her suffering and trial to a crisis; and finally, in Act V, when Flamineo faces his sister with death, the final trial, there is the dialogue over the pistols, where the jewel imagery appears once again.

(V.v.25-29)
Throughout the action, Webster tries his characters, tests them against the background of the transformed universe, searching through them for some value, some inner greatness in the soul of man which can withstand the pain of life, and the terror of death, and thus defeat the vision of disillusion.

Speaking of Flamineo, Leech writes

> It is in him that we have the most flagrant antinomianism, the strongest scepticism, the relentless and frustrated searching for the meaning of things...

and this seems part of the feeling behind *The White Devil*. Flamineo's vision, negative and cynical, is, in a sense, the touchstone of the play. For his vision is the barest minimum, the bitterest picture, and throughout the play this disillusioned view of the world is thrust before us, in his speeches. It is then diffused more widely in the actions of all the characters. Continually, Webster seems to be asking, of the disillusionment, of this barest portrait of the world, is this all that there is?

Disillusion is almost a habit of mind, not only for Flamineo, but for all the other characters as well. When his sister's ghost appears before Francisco, he rejects it; such things have no place in the world. It is interesting to compare Francisco's encounter here and Charlemont's with the ghost of his father in *The Atheist's Tragedy*. Francisco sees Isabella's ghost merely as the product of his own imagination:

> Thought, as a subtile Jugler, makes us deeme Things, supernaturall, which have cause Common as sickenesse.

IV.i.111-113.

Charlemont also rationalises, more tediously, when he hears

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1 *John Webster*, p. 52.

2 Except, of course, for the 'virtuous' characters.
the ghost of his father speak to him:

Tush. These idle dreams
Are fabulous. Our boylng phantasies
Like troubled waters falsifie the shapes
Of things retain'd in them; and make 'em seeme
Confounded, when they are distinguish'd. So
My actions daily conuersant with warre;
(The argument of bloud and death) had left
(Perhaps) the imaginary presence of
Some bloudy accident upon my minde:
Which mix'd confusedly with other thoughts,
(Whereof th' remembrance of my Father might
Be one) presented all together, seeme
Incorporate; as if his body were
The owner of that bloud...

II.vi.51-64.

but when the ghost reappears he forgets all of this and cries

O pardon me! my doubtfull heart was slow
To credit that which I did feare to know.

II.vi.78-79.

So that it seems as if Charlemont's showy display of rationalism had only been presented to be vanquished by the ghost's persistence, and he, chastened, be forced to admit this testimony to the existence of other worlds, of something greater than man can fathom. The disbelief was not genuine.

But with Francisco the disillusion is real, and it is sustained. It is not Francisco's disbelief that vanishes, but the ghost of Isabella. For a moment Francisco wonders, and questions: 'How cam'st thou by thy death?' but then he drives it from his mind:

how idle am I
To question mine owne idlenesse! did ever
Man dreame awake till now? Remove this object -
Out of my brain with't! what have I to do
With tombes, or death-beds, funerals, or teares,
That have to meditate upon revenge?

IV.i.114-119.

and turns quickly to the plot in hand.

It is against this background of disillusion that the characters are tried. In the final act of the play everything is taken from them.
Flamineo's hope for preferment is quite broken, the virtue of the 'good' characters, as we have seen, is proved worthless. Even the love of Vittoria and Brachiano does not stand out against the general disillusion. It offers no real answer to the coldness of Flamineo's vision. It is Flamineo's speeches on love which we remember:

Tis just like a summer bird-cage in a garden, the birds that are without, despaire to get in, and the birds that are within despaire and are in a consumption for feare they shall never get out:

I.ii.41-44.

Finally, Vittoria realises that Brachiano's love can save her from nothing, and Brachiano himself falls before death. His power was not real.

I that have given life to offending slaves
And wretched murderers, have I not power
To lengthen mine owne a twelve-month?

V.iii.24-26.

The stoic speeches of the disguised Francisco (though they contain the beginnings of ideas which are to give The Duchess of Malfi some amount of moral resolution) offer no alternative to disillusion. Flamineo speaks wearily to Zanche, on lovers' oaths, and then asks

Is not this discourse better now then the morality of your sun-burnt Gentleman?

V.i.186-187.

Indeed the cynicism seems more real. Flamineo's loveless

Glories, like glow-wormes, afarre off shine bright
But lookt to neare, have neither heat nor light.

V.i.38-39.
exchanges with Zanche emphasise it. It is like the fear which paralyses Bosola in *The Duchess of Malfi.* But Flamineo's fear is not a fear to act on what he knows is just, like Bosola's, but a fear to believe, to commit himself, where all may be illusion.

How? love a Lady for painting or gay apparell? I'll unkennell one more example for thee. Esop had a foolish dog that let go the flesh to catch the shadow: I would have Courtiers bee better diners.

_v.i.166-169._

Yet, for all his care, Flamineo does precisely this, like all of them he catches after the shadow. But unlike Bosola or Antonio in the later play, Vittoria and Flamineo do not let go the flesh to take hold of the illusion, for it seems that there is nothing so substantial in that world.

Even Brachiano's death, after all the terror and the suffering, seems less than nothing. It is even more chilling than Flamineo's words would have led us to expect:

'Faith, for some few howers salt water will runne most plentifully in every Office o'th Court. But beleve it; most of them do but weepe over their step-mothers graves.

_v.iii.48-50._

It seems that even death offers no alternative to the vision of disillusion. Brachiano's dying has been a pathetic affair, ignoble and grimly ironic. Marcello expires insipidly. Still the cynicism seems dominant.

Then Flamineo is faced with his mother, mad, and mourning over Marcello, the brother whom Flamineo has killed, when yellow spots doe on your handes appeare, bee certaine then you of a Course shall heare, out upon't, how 'tis speckled! h'as handled a toad sure.

_v.iv.80-82._

and he realises his guilt. Though he is quick to suppress the feeling, still the disillusion is broken. At least

^1See pp.165ff.
Flamineo's cynical vision of the world has to him this one virtue - that it is familiar. When the disillusion is threatened, there is only confusion. The compassion which Flamineo dimly recognises when he sees his mother mourning, touches the doubts which he may have felt all along, beneath the cynicism - perhaps he has been wrong in the course of life which he has chosen, but what remains now?

Then Brachiano's ghost appears to him. There is a difference between this scene and that where Francisco dismissed Isabella's ghost. There the momentary doubt, or wonder, was forgotten, pushed away with the turn to the things of the moment, the plotting and the scheming of the successful Machiavellian. But now the doubt cannot be dismissed so easily. Beneath Flamineo's mockery of the ghost there is an almost hysterical fear.

Ha! I can stand thee, neerer, neerer yet.

and a half seriousness in his fevered questioning. It is all of death.

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 necessarie question.

V.iv.122-125.

And indeed, in that world, this seems the most necessary question. The ghost is silent, answering in the fatal action: 'The Ghost throwes earth upon him and shewes him the scull.' 'What's that?' cries Flamineo, and then

O fatall! hee throwes earth upon mee.
A dead mans scull beneath the rootes of flowers.

V.iv.129-130.

So it is with all of their lives. Beneath all of the most hopeful things, beneath Vittoria's love for Brachiano, Flamineo's expectation of reward, Brachiano's power and splendour, beneath everything there is only death. The imagery associated with it appears throughout the play. Even in the cynicism lies the apprehension of death -
Flamineo and Lodovico speak of the murdered Isabella
FLA. How crokes the raven?
Is our good Dutchesse dead? LOD. Dead. FLA. O Fate!
III.iii.68-69.

and death seems the more terrible, half mocked by these two men who do not seem afraid, and yet who know that they will be destroyed inevitably. Cornelia's dirge reminds us of the death which surrounds all the characters, expressing the exquisite aloneness, the friendlessness of men, and the constant apprehension of death which underlies everything.

Call for the Robin-Red-brest and the wren,
Since ore shade groves they hover.
And with leaves and flowres doe cover
The friendlesse bodies of unburied men.

Even in death man is surrounded by enemies, helpless and threatened.

But keepe the wolfe far thence, that's foe to men,
For with his nailes hee'l dig them up agen.
V.iv.89-98.

The one value which can withstand death, and defeat the vision of disillusion, is the desperate courage with which those who have a true nobility of spirit meet death, a courage the more heroic because it covers a deep dread. When Flamineo first faces Vittoria with death she is terrified: she will give him anything if he will spare her, and her desperation and the feverish cunning of her tricks to escape seem only to confirm his most bitter cynicism. His contempt is evident when Zanche, conspiring with Vittoria to trick him to his death first, pretends devotion to him.

ZAN. How madam! Do you thinke that I'le out-live you?
Especially when my best selfe Flamineo
Goes the same voyage. FLA. O most loved Moore!
V.vi.88-90.

When he hands the pistols to Zanche, anticipating their ignoble treachery, he says:

Thou dost instruct me nobly.
V.vi.95.
Throughout the scene he plays with the word 'noble', and the irony is painful. When they have shot him, he says, cynically, knowing that they will betray him

As you are Noble
Performe your vowes, and bravely follow mee.
V.vi.121-122.

But when the revengers come, after Vittoria's last hope of life is gone, she can thrust back her fear, and die with a true nobility.

Ile tell thee what,
I will not in my death shed one base teare,
Or if looke pale, for want of blood, not feare.
V.vi.225-227.

Though we sense her dread beneath the defiance, still her nobility is the greater for this. Seeing her now, Flamineo at last can truly admire his sister

Th'art a noble sister,
I love thee now; if woeman doe breed man,
Shee ought to teach him manhood:
V.vi.241-243.

When Lodovico asks Flamineo 'Dost laugh?', he replies

Wouldst have me dye, as I was borne, in whining?
V.vi.196.

After the evil and the self betrayal of his life, the miserable scrambling after petty preferment

'Tis well yet there's some goodnesse in my death,
My life was a blacke charnell:
V.vi.269-270.

This final courage before death is the one value which emerges from the confused world, the one element in the characters as steadfast and as real as death itself. It is that only which can give to them, even for a moment, nobility and grandeur; redeem a little the 'blacke charnell' of their lives, of life generally in the Transformed World. At the moment of their deaths Vittoria and Flamineo see themselves most clearly, all of their hope gone, all their
illusion cast away, going each alone and deeply afraid into darkness, yet they go gloriously, with dignity and courage.

What emerges most clearly from the pattern of the lives of the characters in *The White Devil* is the impossibility, in the Transformed World, of judging man, his guilt or innocence, evil or good. We have seen this demonstrated especially in the characterisation of Vittoria. The evil of such characters as Vittoria, and Flamineo, is qualified by the nature of the world they live in, and by their contrast with the thoroughly evil, like Lodovico, and the apparently virtuous, like Marcello, Cornelia and Isabella. Most importantly, their evil is qualified by that width of vision which shows, beneath the most cynical and vicious action, pain and fear and a hopeless confusion.

There is, in a sense, a double focus on the actions of all the characters in the play. We are made aware of their evil, but also of their misery. This double focus is reinforced by the imagery. The image of poison is particularly frequent - the word appears in almost every scene. The politicians murder with poison, but they are themselves poisoned; actually, as in Brachiano's case, and in mind and spirit. Indeed, the whole world in which they live is poisoned.

In the imagery of beasts, too, there is this double effect. The wolves, dogs, and birds of prey suggest the lust and bestiality of man, and the wasting struggle of the court world. Much of this imagery appears in the speeches of Flamineo, where, as we have seen, it serves to express the sense of loss of an essential fineness in man. Yet though men may live and torture others with all the ferocity of beasts, they also suffer and die like helpless animals. Brachiano says

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Thou hast lead me, like an heathen sacrifice,
With musick, and with fatall yokes of flowers
To my eternall ruine.
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*IV.ii.90-92.*
The same double effect comes with the imagery of devils and damnation. The word 'devil' runs throughout the play, describing the crimes and treachery of the politicians, and the evil of such as Flamineo and Vittoria, but having also the suggestion of the damned. Lucas, describing the lives of the characters, writes:

The life they live before us, is, in Donne's phrase of human existence, 'but a going out into the place of execution.'

Vittoria is referred to continually as a devil, so are Flamineo and the other characters. Their behaviour may indeed seem akin to that of devils, yet they themselves are tormented. Lodovico says, at the end of Act IV, after witnessing the scheming of Francisco and the Cardinal:

There's but three furies found in spacious hell;
But in a great man's breast three thousand dwell.

IV.iii.154-155.

The line emphasises not only the cunning and treachery of the politicians, but suggests that those who scheme and kill may also suffer the tortures of the damned. And in Act V we do indeed see the hell on earth.

Brachiano, in his delirium, imagines that he sees the devil:

Do not you know him?

FLA. No, my Lord. BRA. Why 'tis the Devill. I know him by a great rose he weares on's shooe, To hide his cloven foot... V.iii.102-105.

Gasparo and Lodovico cry at him, as he dies:

GAS. Brachiano!

LOD. Devill Brachiano, Thou art damn'd. GAS. Perpetually.

V.iii.149-151

emphasising his damnation, the torture that will be his in hell. Vittoria pictures the Judgement Day vividly, and presses upon Flamineo the knowledge of his own damnation.

1 Lucas, Works. I. p.94
And Flamineo, too, can imagine hell, with real terror beneath the seeming mockery.

O the waies darke and horrid! I cannot see, Shall I have no company? V.vi.139-140.

So through the imagery, as well as through the characterisation and pattern of events, Webster establishes the essentially tragic perspective through which we finally view his characters.

The presence of doom is always close to the characters. It is evident in the one sweeping movement of the play, and emphasised further in the imagery. In the first scene with Lodovico there is the imagery of thunder and earthquakes, and of coming doom - already the particular atmosphere of violence and hatred is being established. The imagery of storm and natural disaster is repeated throughout the play.¹ Francisco and Brachiano try to outdo each other with threats of violence, Cornelia sees Vittoria's and Brachiano's affair as being more dreadful than an earthquake

now I find our house Sinking to ruine. Earth-quakes leave behind, Where they have tyrannised, iron, or lead, or stone, But, woe to ruine, violent lust leaves none. I.ii.207-210

Even the child Giovanni practises for the wars. Continually there is the violence, the rush towards impending disaster.

Stormes are i'th aire, my Lord; IV.iii.103

says Lodovico to Monticelso before the terrors of Act V. Edmund Gosse writes

Of most of his characters, we can say from the first, that they are 'fey'; their doom is

Never can we think for a moment that there will be any escape from this doom. There is a desperate irony about the lives of all of the characters.

But dreadful though this irony may be, it is not, as we have seen, an irony which mocks them, or detracts from their tragic stature. It is a strangely compassionate irony - there is none of the harshness of Tourneur about it. Webster places the characters against some terrible and inexorable force which compells them onto the paths of doom, lets them see that doom, and yet shows them unable to prevent it.

Fate's a Spaniell,
Wee cannot beat it from us: What remaines now?
Let all that doe ill, take this precedent:
Man may his Fate forsee, but not prevent.
V.vi.178-181.

Man is not blameworthy for all the evil in the universe, as he is in Tourneur's play. Indeed, it is suggested that it is because of the evil nature of the universe that man himself becomes corrupt.

In allowing his characters this tragic awareness of their own doom, (and sometimes of their own evil), Webster differs from Tourneur. And this is where his work penetrates more deeply into the problems of men living in a twisted and transformed world. He does not judge, but shows the difficulties involved in judging. There can be no possibility of judgement, of condemnation, when the complexity of the personalities and the circumstances of their lives have been presented so fully and completely.

Know many glorious woemen that are fam'd
For masculine vertue have bin vitious,
Onely a happier silence did betyde them...
V.vi.244-246.

1 'John Webster', Seventeenth Century Studies, London, 1885, p.46.
Flamineo says of Vittoria, and this is not merely a cynicism, a final expression of disillusion. He is aware of the good in Vittoria, just as he has been aware of the limitations of Flamineo's virtue. Vittoria may be a better person than Isabella, Flamineo better than Marcello.

Webster shows us characters set upon the paths of evil, bitter and unscrupulous, but he shows us also that there was no other way for them - their action was 'fixt with nayles of dyamonds to inevita"ble necessitie.'

There is no forced solution, even with the entrance of Giovanni there is no unconvincing return to order. Giovanni's appearance, indeed, most subtly confirms the tragic, ironic perspective of the world and man. Still there is violence and death - the revengers are sent off to torture, Lodovico with undefeated defiance. The moral which Giovanni offers

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

V.vi.302-303.

is suitable, coming from him, who was always a moralising little puppy. In Giovanni there is more than a suspicion of the flatness and self righteousness which characterised Marcello and company. It is the final stroke of irony that he should end the play with his flat moral, his warning to guilty men that their deeds will bring about their collapse, for Francisco has escaped punishment, and one feels that it is not, anyway, the evil of their deeds which has brought Flamineo and Vittoria to their deaths, but the force of their inevitable fate. Giovanni's brash simplification is bitterly laughable. It is the final lack of understanding, the completion of the tragic isolation of Vittoria and Flamineo - that Giovanni should judge them, and with such an unbearable ease and assurance, when the whole progress of the play has shown so clearly that they cannot be judged.
For the nature of the world of The White Devil is such that men cannot do good, cannot be wise. There seems no certainty, no wisdom to be had. Should Flamineo turn to good (if, like Bosola, he had the opportunity to see what was good) Fate would bring him to destruction as equally and apparently meaninglessly as if he continued in evil. In such a world it is almost impossible to distinguish between good and evil, the appearance and reality.

Is Isabella truly virtuous, truly admirable? Or does she conceal a hidden viciousness? Is she perhaps as much a mixture of black and white as Vittoria? Perhaps her virtue is only seeming - a mere matter of circumstance. If the circumstances of Vittoria's life had been equally favourable, if the faults in her character had been as easily concealed as Isabella's were, perhaps she would have gone to her death with a similar appearance of virtue. This uncertainty, this hesitancy of judgement, is at the centre of The White Devil, what remains when the old values and standards of judgement are peeled away and we are left with the bone structure of existence in the Transformed World.
CHAPTER V:
THE THEME AND CHARACTERS OF THE DUCHESS OF MALFI

(i)

The Duchess of Malfi is a most carefully constructed play. In his note To the Reader, which introduces the 1612 Quarto of The White Devil, Webster wrote,

To those who report I was a long time in finishing this Tragedy, I confesse I do not write with a goose-quill, winged with two feathers, and if they will needes make it my fault, I must answere them with that of Eurypides to Alcestides, a Tragicke Writer: Alcestides objecting that Eurypides had onely in three daies composed three verses, whereas himselfe had written three hundreth: Thou telst truth, (quoth he) but heres the difference, thine shall onely bee read for three daies, whereas mine shall continue three ages.1

and this care and deliberation is even more evident in The Duchess of Malfi. The pattern of the action, the characterisation of each individual, even the imagery and tone of the writing, are all most carefully used to present the themes of the play. Perhaps this careful and detailed ordering is responsible for the loss of spirit and spontaneity which we notice when we compare this play to the earlier one. Brown remarks that The Duchess of Malfi, 'like a Pygmalion's image, ...has been almost killed by being cherished too much.'2

In Hazlitt's judgement the later tragedy was not 'quite so spirited or effectual a performance as The White Devil'3,

2 DM, p.xli
and several critics after him have seen the greater excellence of the earlier play.\(^1\) It is evident in the dramatic structure alone, which in The White Devil seems to grow from the very nature and lives of the characters, in its single magnificent sweep towards doom; while the poetic justice which is meted out to each of the characters in the final scenes of The Duchess of Malfi may seem too obviously 'manoeuvred' towards the demonstration of the themes of the play.\(^2\) The characterisation too, though fine and individualised, seems to have lost some of the life of the portraits of Vittoria and her brother; and even the brilliant extravagance of the language is curbed in the later play. The wit and poetry of Flamineo's speeches remain unmatched. Indeed, the whole experience of life seems muted in the second, more 'ordered' play.

We have discussed, in the beginning of this thesis, Webster's search for some value which will stand against evil and death in the Transformed World. In The Duchess of Malfi he has found this value in the courage and simplicity of the Duchess herself, in that 'simple vertue, which was never made, To seeme the thing it is not:'\(^3\) The whole experience of the play is ordered towards this discovery.

We are presented, in this play, with the same world that we saw in The White Devil, only here, perhaps, the evil is deeper, tinged with madness at its extreme. The Cardinal and Ferdinand are the last in the series of Webster's portraits of the evil, quite hopeless and despairing and insane.

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Ornstein, p.129.  


\(^3\) I. i. 513-514.
It is also, on the other side of the scale, less heroic - Bosola and Antonio are studies of moral weakness. From the beginning of the first act the darkness, deceit, the hidden corruption of that world is evident. Antonio opens the play with his speech on the wisdom of the French court, which is free of all flatterers and 'infamous persons', and it is clear immediately, from the action which follows, that Ferdinand's court is no such 'work of Heaven', we see the Duke himself surrounded by flatterers, and hear of his own corruption and that of the Cardinal.

Yet from the beginning we are also made aware that there is some possibility of goodness even in such a world of deception and evil. Antonio's 'character' of the Duchess contrasts immediately with the picture of evil presented in the descriptions of her brothers, and this contrast is sustained throughout the play. Bosola is aware of the path which he should have taken, even Antonio feels that there is some standard of nobility. Creeping round in the dark on the night of the birth of the Duchess's child, he realises his essential kinship with Bosola.

The Great are like the Base; nay, they are the same, When they seek shamefull waies, to avoid shame. II.iii.239-240.

In the fifth act, the memory of the Duchess's goodness haunts all of the characters.

As with The White Devil the meaning of the play is conveyed largely through the characterisation. Though the workings of the theme are more obvious in this second play, this does not mean that the characters are merely puppets who are manoeuvred in order to demonstrate a moral. Ferdinand, the Cardinal, Bosola, the Duchess and Antonio remain studies of individual human beings responding to the experiences offered by their world. In The Duchess of Malfi Webster continues his exploration of the human mind.
PERD. Leave me.
MAL. Why doth your Lordship love this solitarines?
FERD. Eagles commonly fly alone: They are Crowes, Dawes, and Sterlings that flocke together:

As with many of Webster's characters, there has been much disagreement over the interpretation of Ferdinand, particularly over the question of whether or not he was motivated "by an incestuous passion for his sister. Lucas says

As for Duke Ferdinand, he is mainly what the plot requires him to be, an angry tyrant. Though he sees evidence for such a motivation, he considers the suggestion merely 'ingenious', and says, moreover, that it is 'an inessential one; it can be taken or left ...' He concludes that Webster did not mean us 'to hunt for more motives in Ferdinand's heart that he has set in Ferdinand's mouth.'

Leech, in John Webster, sees the whole matter of motivation in Ferdinand as being blurred in Webster's mind. In the later book, The Duchess of Malfi, he sees strong evidence for an incestuous motive, and perceives, moreover, that it is part of the peculiar intensity of Ferdinand's rage that he does not know the reason for it.

1 Lucas, Works, II, p.23.
3 pp. 99ff.
4 pp.57-60.
Gunnar Boklund, one of the more recent critics, thinks such an interpretation of the Duke's actions 'improbable'.

Perhaps too much attention has been paid to the question of whether or not Ferdinand was motivated by love for his sister, with too little attempt to discover the possible relation of such a motivation to the mode of characterisation, and to see if such a motivation could have a part in the final meaning of the whole play. J. R. Brown points out that

"... it is precisely when the hints of incest are considered within the play as a whole, that Webster's intentions become clear: a hidden motivation for Ferdinand is in keeping with the general mode of characterisation..."

In a world where the characters live within a web of deceptions about themselves and others, hidden motivation is part of the texture of experience. Such men as Ferdinand must cultivate the practice of habitual deception if they are to survive in a world where no man may trust another.

FERD. For that
You must give great men leave to take their times:
Distrust, doth cause us seldome to be deceiv'd,
You see, the oft shaking of the Cedar-Tree,
Fastens it more at roote.

I.i.254-258.

From the first we are made aware of Ferdinand's moodiness. He surrounds himself with flatterers, and trusts no-one. The courtiers jest and laugh and he seems to listen to their talk in a detached, cynical way, yet one senses that he is preoccupied. Again the technique used is one of contrast. He mocks Castruchio half heartedly,

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   and see also Bogard, p.53

2 DM., p.11.
yet he is ever alert for slights to himself. When Silvio makes a witty remark and the other courtiers laugh, he is angry:

Why do you laugh? Me thinks you that are Courtiers should be my touch-wood, take fire, when I give fire; that is, laugh when I laugh, were the subject never so witty — I.i.124-126.

But his own wit is a poor thing, and his perversity is evident to all — it is the basis of Antonio's description of him in Act I scene i.

The Duke there? A most perverse, and turbulent Nature What appears in him mirth, is meerely outside, If he laugh hartely, it is to laugh All honesty out of fashion. I.i.168-171.

He engages Bosola, though it is the Cardinal who suggests this man. Ferdinand thinks that Antonio would have been fitter. He cannot estimate a character or sum up a situation like the Cardinal — he does not have his brother's sure grasp on outside affairs; it is as if his mind is constantly busy with some other thing. He does not have to explain himself to the creature he is hiring, yet he feels he must.

She's a yong widow,
I would not have her marry againe.
BOS. No, Sir?
FERD. Doe not you aske the reason: but be satisfied, I say I would not. I.i.272-276.

There is always this self-consciousness about him. When he and the Cardinal attempt to dissuade the Duchess from re-marriage, his near hysteria, his preoccupation with his sister's sexual life, is made most evident against the Cardinal's calmer persuasions. There is nothing that the Duchess can say which does not turn Ferdinand's mind at once on its little circle of lust and secrecy.
PERD. Marry? They are most luxurious
Will wed twice.
CARD. O fie!
PERD. Their livers are more spotted
Than Laban's sheep.
DUCH. Diamonds are of most value
They say, that have past through most Jewellers hands.
PERD. Whores, by that rule, are precious.

Now hear me:
You live in a ranke pasture here, i' th Court -
There is a kind of honney-dew, that's deadly:
'Twill poyson your fame; look to 't: be not cunning:
For they whose faces do belye their hearts
Are Witches, ere they arrive at twenty yeares,
I, and give the divell sucke.
DUCH. This is terrible good councell:
PERD. Hypocrisie is woven of a fine small thred,
Subtler, than Vulcans Engine: yet (beleeve't)
Your darkest actions: nay, your privat' st thoughts,
Will come to light.

I.i.325-350.

But it is he himself who dwells on such thoughts always -
like Bosola, he can see the Duchess only through the twisted
perspective of his own mind.

Again, in Act II, scene v, where the brothers receive
the news of the Duchess's pregnancy, his reaction is contrasted
with the calmer response of the Cardinal. He is transported
into a fury at the knowledge, and seems aware that he will be
tormented continually by this news.

Here's the cursed day
To prompt my memory; and here 't shall sticke
Till of her bleeding heart, I make a spunge
To wipe it out.

II.v.19-22.

His words are like those of a betrayed husband.

Foolish men,
That ere will trust their honour in a Barke,
Made of so slight, weake bul-rush, as is woman,
Apt every minnit to sinke it!

II.v.46-49.

His mind rushes towards the picture of her with her lover,
though it panics him.

Me thinkes I see her laughing,
Excellent Hyenna - talke to me somewhat, quickly,
Or my imagination will carry me
To see her, in the shameful act of sinne.

II.v.52-55.

He is afraid, yet fascinated - such is surely the behaviour of the rejected and half-demented lover. And there is the hint of guilt which underlines the fury, and which perhaps makes his terror so intense:

I could kill her now,
In you, or in my selfe; for I do thinke
It is some sinne in us, which Heaven doth revenge
By her.

II.v.82-85.

The Cardinal does not comprehend, or perhaps he is afraid
'Are you starke mad?'

The very viciousness of Ferdinand's imagined revenge on the lovers, suggests an anguish far deeper than mere outraged honour, it is a horrible vengeance which centres on the vision of the Duchess with her lover.

I would have their bodies
Burn't in a coale-pit, with the ventage stop'd,
That their curs'd smoake might not ascend to Heaven:
Or dippe the sheetes they lie in, in pitch or
sulphure,
Wrap them in't, and then light them like a match:
Or else to boile their bastard to a cullisse,
And give't his leacherous father, to remew
The sinne of his backe.

II.v.87-94.

The critics, on the whole, have been remarkably insensitive to the pain of Ferdinand, to the impossible anguish which he endures. He has been condemned as a villain, blamed and judged outright. But his fate is akin to that of the characters of The White Devil, caught and driven towards a doom which he may sense, but is totally unable to resist. He is dimly aware of the nature of his feelings for his sister, but pushes it back in terror.
He must be seen as a man possessed, despite himself. He makes frequent allusions to witchcraft, feeling that he is caught in the grip of something outside himself, some dark and fierce thing. The compulsion is so arbitrary that he feels almost caught within a spell. The imagery of his speeches is all of lust and darkness, poison, devils, and witches. The last image runs through many of his speeches, suggesting both his sexual obsession and the fact that he feels himself almost, in a sense, bewitched, spellbound. Ferdinand is a most penetrating study of a man locked completely within himself, locked in darkness with the terrible thing which has taken possession of him.

In Act II, scene v the Cardinal says, of Ferdinand's violent passion:

> How idlely shewes this rage! - which carries you,
> As men conva'd by witches, through the ayre,

In Act III, scene i, there is a dialogue between Ferdinand and Bosola, on whether or not love can be caused by witchcraft. Ferdinand's passionate denial of such a possibility suggests that he himself feels under just such a charm. As Bosola mentions the word 'sorcery' he is immediately alert.

> BOS. I do suspect, there hath bin some Sorcery Us'd on the Duchesse.
> FERD. Sorcery! - to what purpose?

Then he questions Bosola, eagerly, or perhaps with fear:

> Can your faith give way
> To thinke there's powre in potions, or in Charmes,
This is Ferdinand's fate, to love whether he will or not. Like the characters in The White Devil, he has no choice, unlike Bosola or Antonio or the Duchess. The questions continue, the eagerness to dismiss the possibility that he has been possessed against his will. Bosola has touched a centre of thought within Ferdinand, something which he has dreaded. We see for a moment the turmoil beneath Ferdinand's cruel behaviour.

Away, these are meere gulleries, horred things
Invented by some cheating mounte-banckes
To abuse us: Do you thinke that hearbes, or charmes
Can force the will? Some trialls have bin made
In this foolish practice; but the ingredients
Were lenitive poysons, such as are of force
To make the patient mad; and straight the witch
Swears (by equivocation) they are in love.

Then, immediately, he thinks of the Duchess,

The witch-craft lies in her rancke blood: this night
I will force confession from her:

as if, beneath the surface of his mind, he thinks continually of her.

- When Bosola gets him a key to the Duchess's bedchamber, he asks Ferdinand:

What doe you intend to doe?
FERD. Can you ghesse?
BOS. No:
FERD. Then doe not aske then:
He that can compasse me, and know my drifts,
May say he hath put a girdle 'bout the world,
And sounded all her quick-sands.

The impression conveyed by the imagery and tone of the speech is that of a man struggling helplessly to free himself from
something into which he sinks deeper and deeper with every effort to escape. Bosola replies

    I doe not
    Thinke so.
    FERD. What doe you thinke then, pray?

III.i.107-109.

There is an intensity about his enquiry, as if he is eager to discover some answer to help him know what it is which has its hold over him, or to test if his terror and half-known guilt is evident to the outsider. Bosola's reply comes obviously as a relief, for Ferdinand is calmer.

    BOS. That you
    Are your owne Chronicle too much: and grosly
    Flatter your selfe.

It is a misunderstanding, of course, but one that Ferdinand is grateful for.

    Give me thy hand, I thanke thee:
    I never gave Pention but to flatterers,
    Till I enteraied thee: Farewell,
    That Friend a Great man's ruine strongly checks,
    Who railes into his belief, all his defects.

III.i.110-117.

But Bosola, with the usual ignorance of Webster's characters concerning their fellow men, is no more help to him than the flatterers with whom he surrounds himself in the first scenes. These he made laugh at his bidding in order to give a false impression of his wit; but here, at a deeper level, he tragically cannot see what is real about himself. Even the 'honesty' of Bosola, can never penetrate so far.

In Act III, scene ii, he surprises the Duchess in her bed-chamber. He remains silent, watching, listening to

1 See note on p.262.
her speaking to her lover, whom she thinks is still there. Then he presents the poniard, silently, and begins almost to rave,

Vertue, where art thou hid? What hideous thing Is it that doth ecclipze thee?

III.ii.81-82.

He seems to be speaking to himself rather than to the Duchess:

DUCH. Pray sir heare me:
FERD. Or is it true, thou art but a bare name, And no essentiaall thing?
DUCH. Sir!
FERD. Doe not speake.

III.ii.83-87.

He hardly listens to her protests at all, as if he is quite lost in the horror of the realisation brought by what he has overheard.

The howling of a Wolfe Is musicke to thee, (schreech-Owle)

III.ii.105-106.

he cries, as the Duchess speaks of her husband. He can escape the reality of her affair no longer. Yet he will not see the husband, he will keep at least the actual sight of the successful rival away from him - again it is the behaviour of a jealous and demented lover.

I would not for ten Millions I had beheld thee:

II.ii.112-113.

The imagery of beasts, of dumb things, in which he describes the husband, reflects the condition of his own mind.

Let not the Sunne Shine on him, till he's dead: Let Dogs and Monkeys Onely converse with him, and such dombe things To whom Nature denies use to sound his name...

III.ii.120-123.
Then, into the midst of this horror, comes the Duchess’s question,

Why might not I marry?
I have not gone about, in this, to create
Any new world, or custome. III.ii.127-129.

its very reaasonableness showing sharply Ferdinand’s very
hysteria, his gathering madness. He can only reply, blankly,
‘Thou art undone’, and then, the confused

And thou hast tane that massiy sheete of lead
That hid thy husbands bones, and fouled it
About my heart. III.ii.130-133.

as if he searches desperately for a reason, some explanation,
some excuse. His attack on the Duchess’s virtue, his
accusations of lust, as well as showing the preoccupation of
his own mind, seem motivated by the desire to find something
which will account for the violence of his feeling. His care
for her ‘honour’, he snatches at only to keep himself from
realising what it really is which makes him feel the fierce
rage at the thought of his sister being married. The Duchess
sees the extremity of it:

You are, in this
Too strict: and were you not my Princely brother
I would say, too wilfull: My reputation
Is safe. III.ii.138-141.

And immediately the desperate Ferdinand seizes on the word:

Dost thou know what reputation is? III.ii.142.

launching into his fable, clinging to the formality, escaping
Again it is through the contrast of character, the Duchess's sanity against Ferdinand's raving, that we see the essential madness of the Duke, the horror that has overcome him, all the more clearly.

He ends the interview with the Duchess, leaving blankly, abruptly.

FERD. So fare you well.
I will never see you more.

DUCH. Why should onely I,
Of all the other Princes of the World
Be cas'de-up, like a holy Relique? I have youth,
And a little beautie.

FERD. So you have some Virgins,
That are Witches: I will never see thee more.

III.ii.158-165.

Again the image of the witch reminds us of the spell-like nature of Ferdinand's passion, brings us back to his suffering.
The repetition of the blank words, 'never see thee more' show something of the response of a trapped animal - as if he can think of nothing to do or say - only the necessity to go away fills his mind. Bosola reports that he has ridden off, 'ta'ne up in a whirlewind'.

He told me, (as he mounted into th' saddle,)
You were undone.

III.ii.197-198.

1 See Elizabeth Brennan, 'The Relationship between Brother and Sister in the Plays of John Webster', MLR, LVIII, 1963, '...it appears, therefore, that Webster was interested not so much in honour, or revenge for honour as in their use as disguises for other passions.' p.489. And in III.iii. when the brothers hear of the husband's identity, Ferdinand again grasps at the superficial excuse to hide his true motive 'Doth she make religion her riding hood...'

2 Note the echo of the Cardinal's earlier speech
How idlely shewes this rage: -which carries you,
As men convai'd by witches, through the ayre,
On violent whirle-windes -

II.v.65-67.
Again there is the dull, blank repetition which covers a total confusion of mind, a paralysis of thought and action. Yet, to the others, he is merely deadly, they are afraid of him, they have no conception of his pain.

PES. The Lord Ferdinand laughs.
DEL. Like a deadly Cannon,
That lightens ere it smoakes.

III.iii.65-67.

As with Flamineo, Ferdinand's loneliness is accentuated by the lack of perception in the others.

At the end of Act III, when the Duchess is apprehended, and at the beginning of the fourth act, he separates himself from actual involvement, having Bosola supervise the torture, and report to him on its progress. But when Bosola mentions the restraint which makes her 'too passionately apprehend/ Those pleasures that she's kept from' Ferdinand sees at once the implication of Bosola's words, and cries

Curse upon her!
I will no longer study in the booke
Of anothers heart:

IV.i.18-20.

It is through Ferdinand's response to such words and phrases, and the contrast of his response to that of other, saner characters, that we become aware of the nature of his involvement with the Duchess. He goes to see her, in the darkness. His continual accusations

It had been well,
Could you have liv'd thus alwayes: for indeed
You were too much i' th' light:

IV.i.48-50.

1 IV.i.16-17.
suggest his own guilt pressing on him, his awareness of such an evil apprehended in himself. He leaves her with the dead hand and the ring as love token. And the Duchess's question as to what kind of witchcraft he practises brings us back to the torture of Ferdinand's own soul, under the spell-like passion. He sees his own blood running in the Duchess's veins, blood which is infected, and must be purged. Pitilessly he identifies her with himself

Damne her! that body of hers,
While that my blood ran pure in't, was more worth
Than that which thou would'st comfort, (call'd a soule)
I will send her masks of common Curtizans,
Have her meate serv'd up by bauds, and ruffians,
And ('cause she'll needes be mad) I am resolv'd
To remove forth the common Hospital
All the mad-folke...  

IV.i.146-154.

He surrounds her with the evil, the coming madness which he feels in his own mind, as if he acts out his own punishment on her. Scott-Kilvert remarks that the Duchess's torment of being continually watched and prevented from sleeping was a recognised method of dealing with witches.¹

To feede a fire, as great as my revenge,²
Which nevr' will slacke, till it have spent his fuell -
Intemperate agues make Physitions cruell. 

IV.i.168-170.

² Just what is Ferdinand's motive for revenge? We have seen earlier how revenge for lost honour in Webster is often only a cloak for some other motive. Revenge is commonly associated with betrayed lovers - perhaps, indeed, this is how Ferdinand unconsciously sees himself.
The words foreshadow his own coming suffering and madness in the last act, where the doctor tries to buffet the madness out of him.

After the Duchess's death, the spell which has seemed to bind Ferdinand breaks. Coming in, after her murder, he enquires briefly of Bosola 'Is she dead?' When he looks at her, the sudden realisation comes:

Cover her face: Mine eyes dazel: she di'd yong. IV.ii.281.

Immediately she is dead, at the moment when it is too late, his awakening begins. The first thing he thinks of is the connection between them, almost a self-identification:

She, and I were Twinnes:
And should I die this instant, I had liv'd
Her time to a Mynute.

IV.ii.284-286.

Now he can feel pity, now he can see her innocence, when it is too late. This is the universe which destroys men, letting them see when it is too late what they should have done, destroying them with the horror of the realisation of guilt. For Bosola and Antonio there was some chance of seeing what they should have done, while there was still time to act justly and redeem themselves; but there was never such a chance for Ferdinand. His lot is akin to that of the characters of the former play, doomed without any chance of redemption, seized by a fierce passion which came almost from outside himself, forced by its pressure to act with what seems an almost insane evil; then released and swept into madness when he realises the horror of what he has done.
I bad thee, when I was distracted of my wits, 
Goe kill my dearest friend, and thou hast don't. 
For let me but examine well the cause; 
What was the meanenes of her match to me? 
Onely I must confesse, I had a hope 
(Had she continu'd widow) to have gain'd 
An infinite masse of treasure by her death: 
And that was the mayne cause; her Marriage -
That drew a streame of gall quite through my 
heart, 
IV.ii.298-306.

His reference to the treasure seems only a rationalisation, 
an excuse which he puts between himself and the realisation 
of his real motive. He tries to convince himself that his 
motive was merely mercenary, but the sudden exclamation 
'h'er Marriage -/ That drew a streame of gall quite through 
my heart' indicates the true feeling.

He attempts to blame Bosola for the murder, but he cannot 
keep the knowledge of what he has done from his mind.

O horror!
That not the feare of him, which bindes the devels 
Can prescribe man obedience. 
IV.ii.340-342.

Unable to face himself, like so many of Webster's characters, 
he goes off to hunt the badger 'Tis a deed of darkenesse.'

In the fifth act the agony of Ferdinand reaches its 
extraviey. Yet such a powerful and even terrifying portrait 
of a man guilt-ridden and completely isolated has been 
singularly downrated. Critics see Ferdinand as having 
insufficient tragic stature to carry the weight of the final 
act. Elizabeth Brennan attributes this apparent lack of 
success of Act V as being partly due to a lack of understanding
of Elizabethan and Jacobean notions of psychology and partly to the difficulty of presenting the lycanthropic form of madness.  

Others have been less understanding of the difficulties facing Webster, perhaps also rather unperceptive with regard to the characterisation of Ferdinand. Leech, like many of the earlier critics, sees only strain in the ravings of Ferdinand, 'the lycanthropy of Ferdinand is mere rage and bluster', and he sees in the Duke no awareness of his own condition, until his last moment, concluding that he is not tragic, but 'sub-human'. But Ferdinand's half baffled, half terrified consciousness of evil within himself has been evident throughout, as we have seen. Now, in madness, he attempts to escape final knowledge of himself, of the love for his sister which seized him and drove him towards his own destruction as surely as it drove him to murder her. The oppression of the guilt he has stifled is evident in his madness. His mind returns continually to the murder it has striven to obliterate. Speaking to Pescara of the madness, the Doctor says

he was a woolffe: onely the difference  
Was, a woolffe's skinne was hairy on the outside,  
His on the In-side: bad them take their swords,  
Rip up his flesh, and trie:  
V.ii.17-20.

\[ ^1 \] Elizabeth Brennan, 'The Relationship between Brother and Sister in the Plays of John Webster', p.493.

\[ ^2 \] John Webster, p.103.
The 'hairy inside' is suggestive both of torment and penance. Ferdinand thinks he is haunted, though it is only his own shadow. Perhaps he thinks it is the Duchess, for the thought of Hell is in his mind. Everything he says is indicative of guilt.

What I have done, I have done: I'll confess nothing. V.ii.52.

But the Doctor cannot see it. Neither can Bosola, though, afflicted with the knowledge of his own part in the murder, he can see the terrible judgement which has fallen on the Lord Ferdinand.

The irony of the doctor's brash confidence is dreadful, his belief that he can buffet the madness out of Ferdinand. It accentuates the loneliness, the isolation, like the facile morality which Marcello and Cornelia offered Flamineo, and which only showed his complete isolation.

Straight I was sent for,
And having ministered to him, found his Grace Very well recovered. V.ii.20-22.

He toys with him, 'does tricks' with him. The isolation of Ferdinand is the most complete and terrible of all the Websterian characters. The Doctor says

I finde by his eye, he stands in awe of me, V.ii.73-74.

But the Doctor's methods are not the cause of Ferdinand's fear - he has no eye for the Doctor's tricks, being unable to see anything outside his guilt.

In his last appearance, Ferdinand enters suddenly to
where Bosola scuffles with the Cardinal, and he thinks that he is on a battlefield. He wounds Bosola, crying

the paine's nothing: paine many times is taken away with the apprehension of greater, (as the tooth-ache with the sight of a Barbor, that comes to pull it out) there's Philosophy for you.

V.v.78-80.

His death has something of the grand ring of the characters of The White Devil, then Bosola draws our attention to his final realisation

He seemes to come to himselfe,
Now he's so neere the bottome.

V.v.88-89.

and then Ferdinand says

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 owne dust.

V.v.90-92.

This, of course, has been much quoted as evidence for the incest motive in Ferdinand, and while this is true, how much more does it indicate of the essential problem set by the existence of Ferdinand. It is the same problem as was set by the lives of Vittoria and Flamineo. They may fall in evil, but their evil is forced by the circumstances of their lives, and the essential qualities of their natures. Ferdinand's passion for the Duchess, as we have seen, is almost imposed on him from without, as if he is used as an instrument by powers greater and more terrible than himself. Can we judge him, after all, for the murder of the Duchess? She would have been destroyed anyway, her simplicity and integrity alien to the universe in which she is forced to live. As with the
fate of Vittoria and Flamineo, we feel that her death was not determined so much by the personal revenge of any one character as by some greater force which governs the universe and which will destroy also the hapless Ferdinand when it has used him.

With Ferdinand, Webster's study of the anguished Machiavellian reaches its peak.

_0 most imperfect light of humane reason,_
That mak'st us so unhappy, to foresee
What we can least prevent:

III.ii.90-92.

His villains destroy and are destroyed almost because of what they are, and there is no reason under heaven for what they are - for why Ferdinand should have been as he was, seized by the strange passion, so close always to darkness, driven mad into death. We can judge Bosola or Antonio perhaps, but not Ferdinand - he is not within that sphere. The blackness closes over him entirely, no integrity of life can give meaning to his existence - he was never allowed any chance to show it. The standards that Webster has laboriously found in this play, the moral values which emerge in the Duchess's suffering and death, do not apply to him. His fate raises again the problem of judgement which was central to _The White Devil_. Even after _The Duchess of Malfi_ it is a problem which seems inexplicable. Again it is through the exploration of the individual's mind that Webster presents his general theme.
Yeats writes

When I think of life as a struggle with the Daemon who would ever set us to the hardest work among those not impossible, I understand why there is a deep enmity between a man and his destiny, and why a man loves nothing but his destiny. In an Anglo-Saxon poem a certain man is called, as though to call him something that summed up all heroism, 'Doom-eager'.

Such one feels, are the characters of The White Devil, and such is Ferdinand.

Perhaps they are most relevant to this character, for in him the disguise is complete, the innermost habitus, so that there is nothing in him which is spontaneous. His true self is more deeply hidden even than Ferdinand's, and so it remains right till the end of the play, with only one glimpse of what might really lie beneath the surface. Yet that one glimpse throws all of his preceding action into perspective, suddenly and clearly, so that we see what lies behind the whole course of his actions.

Ferdinand's motivation, his love for his sister, serves his persecution of her credibly, even comprehensibly, but we are never sure of the Cardinal's reasons, if indeed he has any. There are no rages, no passionate outbursts, to hint at a possible conflict within.

He is always terse in his speech, using few words. Constantly he is contrasted with Ferdinand, so that the tale, the complete control of emotion is shown more sharply. But the deeper meaning of Webster's technique of characterisation, lends itself to

1 W.B. Yeats, 'Anima Hominis', Mythologies, p. 336.
Those houses, that are haunted, are most still,
Till the divell be up.

With the Cardinal, we remember again Bacon's words,

There be some whose lives are,
as if they perpetually played upon a stage,
disguised to all others, open only to them-
selves. But perpetual dissimulation is pain-
ful...

Perhaps they are most relevant to this character, for in him the disguise is complete, the pretence habitual, so that there is nothing in him which is spontaneous. His true self is more deeply hidden even than Ferdinand's, and so it remains right till the end of the play, with only one glimpse of what might really lie beneath the surface. Yet that one glimpse throws all of his preceding action into perspective, suddenly and clearly, so that we see what has underlain the whole course of his actions.

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He is always terse in his speech, using few words. Constantly he is contrasted with Ferdinand, so that the calm, the complete control of emotion is shown more sharply. But his very calmness, if we are watchful, if we are aware of Webster's techniques of characterisation, lends itself to

The Cardinal seems indeed quite cut off from the root of life, so detached as to be almost dead to all feeling. The scene in Act II, scene iv, where he amuses himself with Julia, illustrates perfectly the quality of his detachment. He asks what trick she has invented to come to him, and escape from her husband:

JUL. Why, (my Lord) I told him
I came to visit an old Anchorite
Heare, for devotion.
CARD. Thou art a witty false one:
I meane to him.

But it is obvious that he has Julia summed up. He does not expect fidelity from her, so he is able to appreciate, objectively, the 'wit' of her behaviour. He has no love for her, rather he appreciates her wit and falsity - it gives him amusement, reflects his own cynicism. Insulated by this cynicism, nothing she does can really touch or hurt him. He has a complete disillusion, a disillusion unaccompanied by any of Flamineo's or Bosola's sense of loss.

Sooth generally for woemen,
A man might strive to make glasse male-able,
Ere he should make them fixed.

He is perfectly in control, in command of the situation, able to outwit Julia, to take advantage of her immorality, using it for his own amusement.

He is completely unmoved by her weeping, which he knows for the pretence it is. He has seen it all before, one feels;
it is as if he is infinitely weary of the manoeuvring, the manipulations, of human beings - not disgusted, or even contemptuous, but merely weary:

the selfe-same teares
Will fall into your husbands bosome, (Lady)
With a loud protestation, that you love him
Above the world: Come, I'll love you wisely,
That's jealously, since I am very certaine
You cannot make me cuckould.  

II.iv.30-35.

And when she threatens to leave, he soon outmanoeuvres her, reminding her of the advantages she has from being his mistress. His image of her as a trained hawk is characteristic of him - a man aware of his own power, of the vices of others which can be brought to his own advantage. Julia is reduced to a plaintive whine

You told me of a piteous wound i' th' heart,
And a sicke livour, when you woed me first,

II.iv.48-49.

which is answered by the Cardinal's perfunctory and meaningless

Rest firme, for my affection to thee,
Lightning mooves slow to't.  

II.iv.52-53.

Flamineo's detachment was partly involuntary, but the Cardinal's seems self-induced, a conscious suppression of all emotion in the interest of 'appearances', until he is quite unable to feel anything, or to know what he really is, so that there is the most blank and dreadful confusion of all beneath the apparent self-possession. Everything about him is undefined and hidden, so that his fate at the end, tormented by the shapeless and terrifying
thing, arm'd with a Rake
That seems to strike at me

V.v.6-7.

is grimly fitting.

His open hypocrisy, and his cynical awareness of it, are established at the start. He says to Bosola

Would you could become honest -

I.i.41.

when it is known by the two of them that Bosola, suborned by the Cardinal, has fallen into the gallies seven years for murders. He seems perfectly aware of, and quite in control of, the surface opposites in his character - the mask of the Cardinal and man of the Church, and beneath it, the other scarcely less surface face of the Machiavellian plotter.

Antonio's 'character' of him in Act I scene i penetrates beneath the first 'appearance' only to the second one.

DELIO. they say he's a brave fellow,
Will play his five thousand crownes, at Tennis, Daunce, Court Ladies, and one that hath fought single Combats.

ANT. Some such flashes superficially hang on him, for forme: but observe his inward Character: he is a 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, Pandars, Intelligencers, Atheists, and a thousand such politicall Monsters: he should have beene Pope: but in stead of comming to it by the primative deecnsie of the church, he did bestow bribes, so largely, and so impudently, as if he would have carried it away without heavens knowledge.

I.i.154-166.

This is as far as most observant men will penetrate.

The essence of the Cardinal lies in his perpetual desire for 'concealment', and the never-ending feigning and deception which this involves. His motives for persecuting the Duchess
are always left vague, even his degree of involvement may seem ambiguous - but this is as the Cardinal intends. Though driven by no passion of the kind which seizes Ferdinand, he yet directs the whole course of action towards the death of the Duchess, using the nearly mad Ferdinand almost as a tool. Yet, till the very end, this remains concealed.

In the very first scene there is that sinister ambiguity. He instructs Ferdinand to hire Bosola to spy on the Duchess.

CARD. Be sure you entertaine that Bosola For your Intelligence: I would not be seene in't And therefore many times I have slighted him, When he did court our furtherence: as this Morning. I.i.235-238.

He says, 'for your intelligence', as if it is only Ferdinand's idea - yet Ferdinand would have Antonio as spy, and the Cardinal at once sees that this would not be suitable.

You are deceiv'd in him, His Nature is too honest for such businesse, I.i.239-240.

as if, in contrast to the rash Ferdinand, he has everything planned out and arranged in his own mind.

In the dialogue where the brothers warn the Duchess against remarriage, the discretion of the Cardinal is contrasted to the hysteria of Ferdinand, but he also threatens her, though more obliquely, characteristically, than his brother.

You may flatter your selfe, And take your owne choice: privately be married Under the Eaves of night... I.i.351-353.

Ferdinand delivers his piece about such a marriage being executed rather than celebrated, then the Cardinal speaks
The marriage night
Is the entrance into some prison.
I.i.360-361.

leaving the suggestion of a sinister threat. He says nothing more in the scene.

He is always anxious for the affairs in connection with the Duchess to be kept quiet and hidden. When in Act II scene v they receive the letter with the news of the Duchess's child, he quiets Ferdinand's raving,

CARD. Speake lower. II.v.7

then he asks,

I'st possible?
Can this be certaine? II.v.16-17.

as if he is summing up the consequences and possibilities of such an event in relation to some plan which he has in his mind. There is always this undercurrent in the Cardinal. Then he goes on to give his excuse, which is hollow enough

Shall our blood
(The royall blood of Arragon, and Castile)
Be thus attainted? II.v.30-32.

but not so explicable even as Ferdinand's. Throughout the play the Cardinal is shown as having an almost pathological obsession with 'appearances'. If this is partly a cover for some more sinister motive, (as Elizabeth Brennan suggests) we are never shown that motive; it remains shadowed.

1 'The Relationship between Brother and Sister in the Plays of John Webster', p.489.
His reaction is not a fierce personal one, like Ferdinand's - when he speaks of their blood, he means, as Brown points out, their noble lineage, not, as with Ferdinand, passion or sensuality. Perhaps the Cardinal's obsession with 'honour' exists because for him there can be nothing else, and he must clutch at this because he can feel no other emotion, give no other reasons for his actions, hollowed out as he is. But this is only a suggestion, - the Cardinal's motives remain, fittingly, quite clouded.

Only once does he call the Duchess 'curs'd', in contrast to the streams of abuse which Ferdinand pours over her, and then he passes swiftly into a generalisation on the deceitfulness of women, rebuking Ferdinand for his rage:

How idlely shewes this rage! -which carries you,
As men convai'd by witches, through the ayre,
On violent whirlewinds -

II.v.65-67.

Then when Ferdinand asks if he too is not affected by the news of the Duchess's child, he replies

Yes - I can be angry
Without this rupture...

You have divers men, who never yet exprest
Their strong desire of rest, but by unrest,
By vexing of themselves:

II.v.73-79.

And the Cardinal is one of these, a completely hidden man, and what makes him eventually one of the tragic figures is that

1 DM, p.26n., p.65n.
he becomes hidden even to himself, through the long, long process of dissimulation. He conceals all his feeling, all anger, all motive - perhaps even the 'strong desire of rest'. Ferdinand says

So - I will onely study to seeme
The thing I am not:

II.v.81-82.

but Ferdinand can never, like his brother, completely cover his passions. It is perhaps because of this that he can finally recognise what he has been, and gain some self-realisation, which is more complete than any understanding attained by the Cardinal.

Somehow we sense that he, for all his quietness, is more deadly than Ferdinand. The courtiers remark on him, when the brothers receive the news of the identity of the Duchess's husband.

SIL. That Cardinall hath made more bad faces with his oppression
Then ever Michael Angelo made good ones,
He lifts up's nose, like a fowle Por-pisse before A storme -

III.iii.61-64.

It is again the Cardinal who, preoccupied with the externals, the appearance of honour, exclaims

Doth she make religion her riding hood
To keepe her from the sun, and tempest?

III.iii.72-73.

Yet he himself does exactly the same thing, covering his very real evil with the mask of churchman. It is he who plans the banishment, giving the orders right away, and in Act III, scene iv, he who executes the banishment, to the
accompaniment of the pilgrims' comments.

1st PIL. Here's a strange turne of state - who would have thought
So great a Lady, would have match'd her selfe
Unto so meane a person? Yet the Cardinall
Beares himself much too cruell.


They notice that the Pope has seized the Duchess's lands
by the Cardinal's instigation, and they see him tear the
wedding ring from her finger 'with such violence'.

At the very end of Act III, and during Act IV,
the Cardinal is distanced from the torture and death of the
Duchess. Bosola comes from the Lord Ferdinand to apprehend
her, and it is he, Ferdinand's minion, who supervises the
tortures. This is probably partly to focus our attention on
Ferdinand's behaviour, and on the cause of his coming madness.
The planning, the final death of the Duchess, has been prepared
by the Cardinal, and now he retires, as he always does, to let
the maddened Ferdinand loose to do the bloody work, and suffer
the blame. One senses his presence in Act IV, his watching
and waiting, though he does not appear in the torture scenes.

Act V, following the Duchess's death, brings to the other
major characters some measure of self-realisation, but to the
Cardinal there cannot be even such a measure of realisation
as the unfortunate Ferdinand gains.

During his brother's mad scene, he is terse, short in
his comments - the terseness only hints at what he could be
feeling

Force him up.
and

How now, put off your gowne. 

\[ V.ii.50, 69. \]

Then, asked if he knows what has brought the madness onto Ferdinand, he immediately begins to dissemble.

I must feigne somewhat:--

\[ V.ii.88. \]

He tells the story of the old woman's ghost, and then we see him with Bosola, striving to keep his knowledge of the Duchess's death from the creature. Here the web of deceit which he has spun all round himself and in which he is fast becoming entangled, is evident. And here it is, suddenly, that he admits his involvement,

For, (though I counsell'd it,) 
The full of th' engagement seem'd to grow 
From Ferdinand: 

\[ V.ii.108-110. \]

and we see that he has been behind it all, using Ferdinand's passion as an opportunity to dispose of the Duchess. But why? We are not told. There is never any speech from him, as there is with Ferdinand, analysing his own motives. They remain hidden. Perhaps, as much as Ferdinand, he is shown as the tool of the powerful and evil forces which govern that universe, blind and unknowing, acting out their will and thinking it is his own. Perhaps it is as Bosola's says, after the death of the Duchess:

Your brother, and your selfe, are worthy men; 
You have a paire of hearts, are hollow Graves, 
Rotten, and rotting others:

\[ IV.ii.344-346. \]
But now the Cardinal continues his feigning, questioning Bosola calmly on the Duchess's death. He seems completely devoid of any feeling, making plans now for Antonio's murder in his usual efficient manner.

Then comes the scene with Julia. With the knowledge of the Duchess's murder in the back of his mind, he is faced with Julia's attempt to 'remove/ This lead from off your bosome', an attempt motivated solely by her lust for Bosola. Her light and meaningless coquetry is counter-pointed against the confusion which begins to overtake him. Her persistent demands that he tell her what is troubling him finally drag from him the anguished question

Will you racke me? V.ii.265.

and he tells her, in a rush, as if he cannot get the words out quick enough.

But he still keeps control, when he finds that Bosola has overheard, and goes on with his plotting to conceal Julia's murder. When Bosola accuses him, his reaction is terse, leaving the impression that the creature's words aggravate him unbearably.

No more, There is a fortune attends thee.
V.ii.322-323.

Then comes the ironic scene of his death. He sets the trap himself, with his elaborate tricks to keep the courtiers away.

1 V.ii.249-250.
while Julia's body is being disposed of. Quite suddenly, in the midst of all this planning, but not unexpectedly, if we have been attentive to the implication of his words and his silences, and to the possibility of the buried self beneath the surface, he says,

at midnight
I may with better privacy, convey
Julia's body to her owne Lodging: O, my conscience!
I would pray now: but the Divell takes away my heart
V.iv.28-31.

Then, as Flamineo pushed away the self realisation which came with the sudden compassion for his mother, and turned frantically to the hope of preferment, so the cardinal goes straight on with his plotting, dismissing the doubt:

About this houre, I appointed Bosola
To fetch the body: when he hath serv'd my turne,
He dies.
V.iv.33-35.

Then, in Act V, scene v, he enters, with a book:

I am puzzel'd in a question about hell:
He saies, in hell, there's one materiall, fire,
And yet it shall not burne all men alike.
Lay him by: How tedious is a guilty conscience!
When I looke into the Fish-ponds in my Garden,
Me thinkes I see a thing, arm'd with a Rake
That seemes to strike at me:
V.v.1-7.

How fitting that the Cardinal, a rational, passionless man, should go logically through his books looking for information about hell, when he begins to feel his guilt. But he finds nothing there, and attempts to dismiss what he has felt with the worldly cynicism 'How tedious is a guilty conscience!'
But he cannot forget what he has seen and feared, the image of the thing armed with a rake, a hidden thing, lurking in pools, vague and undefined, yet terrible as the Cardinal's most hidden evil. There is this one glimpse of his anguish, then he closes over, and we do not see him so clearly again.

His death is ironic, with the courtiers thinking that he is feigning the cries for help, when, for the first time in the play, he is truly genuine. And the cowardice and hopelessness of his death contrasts with the bravery of the Duchess's, as Ferdinand's insanity contrasted with her sanity.

Bosola remarks

Now it seemes thy Greatness was onely outward:
For thou fall'st faster of thy selfe, then calamitie Can drive thee:

V.v.56-58.

He is stabbed, and cries

Shall I die like a Levoret
Without any resistance? helpe, helpe, helpe:
I am slaine.

V.v.61-63.

His repentance

Oh Justice:
I suffer now, for what hath former bin:
Sorrow is held the eldest child of sin.

V.v.72-74.

seems merely perfunctory. It is a detached generalisation, but perhaps suitable from the Cardinal. His last words are more genuinely personal.

And now, I pray, let me
Be layd by, and never thought of.

V.v.112-113.
There is the suggestion of an infinite weariness, the 'strong desire of rest'. Such a weariness has characterised him throughout the play. He crumples wholly, there is nothing in him, and Bosola says

I do glory
That thou, which stood'st like a huge Pyramid
Begun upon a large, and ample base,
Shalt end in a little point, a kind of nothing.  
V.v.95-98.

Yet Bosola and Flamenco are essentially different. Bosola has none of the resolution of Flamenco, has not the complete cynicism which leads Flamenco to reject all else but the way he sees before him to preferment, and so keep to this path because there is nothing else which is not hypocrisy.

Bosola is a study of a weak man, sensitive, as Flamenco was sensitive, yet essentially irresolute, with that soft place of decay which reminds one a little of some of Conrad's characters. We are always kept in doubt as to which source of action Bosola will finally take, which way he will turn. This is part of the tension of the play.

Flamenco entered upon an evil career, because there seemed no alternative, but it is made plain that Bosola knew there is a better source of action than the one canvassed. He says, even in the first scene

Bogard, p.67.
Smother thy pitty, thou art dead else:

In contrast to the Duchess, Antonio and Bosola are the weak ones, those whose care for their advancement or security makes them afraid to do what is just, because in doing so they may lose everything.

Bosola has often been compared with Flamineo. Travis Bogard, for instance, writes

His desperation, like Flamineo's, makes him resolve upon a life of criminal service, and once the resolution is made, he cleaves to it. Yet Bosola and Flamineo are essentially different. Bosola has none of the resolution of Flamineo, has not the complete cynicism which leads Flamineo to reject all else but the way he sees before him to preferment, and to keep to this path because there is nothing else which is not hypocrisy.

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1 Bogard, p.67.
Let good men, for good deeds, covet good fame, 
Since place, and riches oft are bribes of shame —
I.i.315-316.

So he is always aware of what he should have done, a knowledge denied to Flamineo, but he hesitates to throw over the promise of preferment in order to commit himself to a path, which, though just, offers no security; and this failure to do what is just haunts him throughout the play.

We first see him plaguing the Cardinal for reward for his services. The fact that he has been neglected by the Cardinal, that indeed he has cause for grievance, is clear enough. So too is his knowledge of the futility of his hopes, and indeed of the whole process of preferment seeking. Bosola is conscious too, that he is not merely a flattering pandar, that there is some good in him.

He, and his brother, are like Plum-trees (that grow crooked over standing-pools) they are rich, and ore-laden with Fruite, but none but Crowes, Pyes, and catter-pillers feede on them: Could I be one of their flattering Pandars, I would hang on their eares like a horse-leech, till I were full, and then droppe off. I pray leave me.

I.i.50-55

Again the comparison is with Flamineo, who had fought down, and denied, such a potentiality in himself.

no this face of mine
I'le arme and fortefie with lusty wine,
'Gainst shame and blushing.¹

Conscious of evil, Bosola yet knows the difficulties involved in striving to be honest:

¹ The White Devil, I.ii.323-325.
CARD. Would you could become honest -
BOS. With all your divinity, do but direct
me the way to it - I have knowne many travell
farre for it, and yet returne as arrant knaves
as they went forth: because they carried them-
selves always along with them;
I.i.41-45.

He is conscious perhaps of too many things at once - of
the evil of the world around him, of his own evil and the
fact that there is good in him not in the others, of the
desirability of honesty and at the same time the impossibility
of practising it in such a world.

Approaching Ferdinand he says 'I was lur'd to you',
obvious contempt beneath the words. He is aware of what he
is doing. When Ferdinand offers him the gold he says

So:
What followes? (never rain'd such showres as these
Without thunderbolts i'th taile of them:) whose
throat must I cut?
I.i.264-266.

and when he is told of his task he recognises what it is,
and where such a course of action must lead him.

Take your Divels
Which Hell calls Angels: these curs'd gifts would
make
You a corrupter, me an impudent traitor,
And should I take these, they'll'd take me to Hell.
I.i.285-288.

He will give back the gold, seeing that the'angels'will lead
him to hell, but he cannot resist the offer of the
provisorship of the horse, and pitifully he rationalises
his weakness:

I would have you curse your selfe now, that your
bounty:
(Which makes men truly noble) ere should make
Me a villaine: oh, that to avoid ingratitude...
I.i.295-7.
There is something in Bosola's plaints which seems almost a note of whining, far different from Flamineo's dry bitterness. He is moreover conscious of what others may think of him, anxious to justify himself.

And yet do not you scorne us, for places in the Court, are but like beds in the hospital, where this man's head lies at that man's foot, and so lower, and lower.

Ferdinand instructs him in his task

Be your selfe:
Keepe your old garbe of melancholly; 'twill expresse You envy those that stand above your reach, Yet strive not to come neere 'em: this will gaine Accesse, to private lodgings,

Ironically, the one genuine thing about Bosola, his melancholy, is to be used as part of his guise as intelligencer, to enable him to deceive the more easily. His self betrayal is evident to him

Say then my corruption Grew out of horse-doong: I am your creature.

From now on, Bosola's characterisation forms the study of a man increasingly haunted by, even obsessed with, his own corruption.

This is evident in the scene in Act II where he talks with Castruchio and the Old Lady. Conscious of his own deception as intelligencer, he must listen to Castruchio's questions on how he can deceive the world into taking him for a courtier.
BOS. You say you would faine be taken for an eminent Courtier?

CAS. 'Tis the very maine of my ambition.

II.i.1-2.

W. E. Edwards, criticising these speeches of Bosola's writes:

There are times indeed when he (Webster) reminds us forcibly of old Polonious unloading his store of maxims without bothering to find out whether they are needed. It is not that his pregnant observations lack point, so much as that they are somehow not entirely relevant at the moment - Hamlet's bitterness about women's painting springs out of the immediate situation and in turn affects it, and his macabre reflections on mortality have a different ring from the same sentiments in a homily. Flamineo and Bosola seem primed up to deliver their notes whether anyone listens to them or not, like bores who imagine themselves raconteurs. Why need Bosola swoop down on an old woman to unload his notes on cosmetics, for instance?

Such criticism doubtless has its liveliness to commend it. But Mr. Edwards's charm can hardly justify what seems a basic lack of perception. That Bosola delivers his speeches as if he does not care whether anyone listens to him or not is true, but he does not deliver 'notes' for the edification of the other characters, the speech reveals rather the state of his own mind, almost as if he thought aloud. The same is true of some of the speeches of Flamineo and Vittoria, Ferdinand and perhaps even the Cardinal. Bosola's bitterness about the Old Woman's painting reflects a disgust which itself springs from his own sense of corruption and shame. The imagery in which he describes her is deliberately repulsive, that of filth and decay.

OLD LADY. It seemes you are well acquainted with my closset?
BOS. One would suspect it for a shop of witchcraft, to finde in it the fat of Serpents; spawne of Snakes, Jewes spittle, and their yong children's ordures - and all these for the face: I would sooner eate a dead pidgeon, taken from the soles of the feete of one sicke of the plague, then kisse one of you fasting: II.i.35-41.

He regards the pair with loathing; he is sensitive to their ugliness, knowing it within himself, feeling it in all of humanity, since he has betrayed himself. Yet after all, the evil of Castruchio and the Old Lady is not so great - compared with other characters of the play they are merely foolish. It is Bosola's own self disgust which causes him to magnify it. Even the Duchess he sees only through the knowledge of his own corruption, a knowledge which twists everything to reflect its own image.

I observe our Duchesse
Is sicke a-dayes, she puykes, her stomacke seethes,
The fins of her eie-lids looke most teeming blew,
She waines i'th' cheeke, and waxes fat i'th' flanke;
And (contrary to our Italian fashion,)
Weares a loose-bodied Gowne - there's somewhat in't,
I have a tricke, may chance discover it
(A pretty one) - I have bought some Apricocks,
The first our Spring yeelds. II.i.65-73.

The innocence, the delight of the Duchess upon receiving the fruit, contrasts sharply with the baseness of Bosola's own motives. Against the Duchess's delight, the delicacy of her words

Indeed I thanke you: they are wondrous faire ones: II.i.141.
No, they taste of muske (me thinkes) indeed they doe: II.i.141.
comes the sudden harsh brutality of Bosola's

I forgot to tell you the Knave Gardner,
(Onely to raise his profit by them the sooner)
Did ripen them in horse-duong.

II.i.148-150.

so that at the same time as we see the simplicity and beauty of the Duchess we see the inner corruption which twists Bosola's mind, and governs his actions, so that the beauty is closed to him forever, in the first apricots 'our Spring yeelds', seeing only the remembrance of his own corruption.

And when again he encounters the Old Lady, and rails at her, we see, in the imagery of lust for gain, how beneath the railing, the surface meaning of his speech, there lies the continual consciousness of his own degradation, the selling of himself for profit.

Who - I? no, onely (by the way now and then) mention your frailties. The Orrenge tree bears ripe and greene fruit and blossoms all together: And some of you give entertainment for pure love: but more, for more precious reward. The lusty Spring smels well: but drooping Autumnne tastes well: If we have the same golden showres that rained in the time of Jupiter the Thunderer: You have the same Danaes still, to hold up their laps to receive them:

II.ii.12-19.

So he sinks lower and lower, and in scene iii we see him creeping around in the night, with a dark lantern (which Lucas notes was in itself a thing of sinister association for Webster's audience¹), listening for the cries of a woman in labour, encountering an equally degraded and cowardly

¹ Works, II, p.153n.
Antonio, discovering the horoscope of the new-born child. Yet he has no love for the Duchess's watchers - he is delighted at the thought of the rage the arrival of his news of the child will throw them into.

by him I'll send
A letter, that shall make her brothers Galls
Ore-flowe their livours -  

II.iii.89-91.

As yet his attitude to the Duchess is uncertain, or rather, unformed. He witnesses the dismissal of Antonio and thinks it both strange and cunning. He hears the opinions of the minions on Antonio, when he is seemingly disgraced and out of favour, with contempt.

these are Rogues; that in's prosperitie,
But to have waited on his fortune, could have wish'd
His durty Stirrop rivited through their noses:
III.ii.268-270.

Is his own praise of Antonio genuine, or merely the trick of an intelligencer? Despite Antonio's general reputation for virtue and worthiness, Bosola thinks that he is the Duchess's bawd

This precise fellow
Is the Dutchesse Bawde: 

II.iii.81-2.

Yet, with the knowledge of his own treachery always in his mind (as we know it is through the continual references which he makes to intelligencers, even here, in these speeches to the Duchess)¹ he may admire the fidelity of the man, his apparent courage to be faithful to the less powerful, the

¹ See III.ii.272-273, and III.ii.307-309.
losing side. But his praise is still partly motivated, no doubt, by his intent to trap the Duchess. The uncertainty is always there, the conflict between what he really thinks, and what he is required to do as intelligencer. But the response when the Duchess confesses that she is married to Antonio is not wholly feigned —

Do I not dreame? Can this ambitious age
Have so much goodness in't, as to prefer
A man, merely for worth: without these shadowes
Of wealth and painted honors?

III.ii.318-321.

One remembers his previous bitter words to the Old Lady on the prostitution of humanity for gain. Here he finds his cynicism unjustified, for there are some who are brave enough to stand against the world's malice for what they know is right, who are not motivated by the desire of gain, or hampered by the fear of losing what they have. But he is still afraid, he must work for Ferdinand, he must dissemble:

O the secret of my Prince,
Which I will weare on th' in-side of my heart...

III.ii.344-345.

he promises the Duchess when she asks for concealment.

Then he gives the advice of the feigned pilgrimage to Loretto, so apparently helping her to escape for a short time. Lucas says of this:

In Belleforest Painter this suggestion comes from the duchess' woman. Why should Bosola make it here, thus furthering his victim's escape for the time being. Perhaps the best answer is to be found in the parallel situation in The White Devil, where (4.i) Florence himself engineers Vittoria's flight with Brachiano, and when they escape to Padua, explains his motive (4.3.55f.)
How fortunate are my wishes! Why! 'twas this I only laboured ... thy fame, fond duke, I first have poisoned.

Similarly it would seem here that Bosola intends the duchess to discredit herself with the world and her own subjects: the only alternative is to suppose that he really wants her to escape. That I can hardly believe, though it is certainly clear that he has at times a great deal of feeling for his victim.¹

The solution to this apparent problem lies in the confused nature of Bosola himself. He may wish the Duchess to escape, but he has not the strength to oppose Ferdinand so completely and openly. There is still a tension in his mind, a conflict between his sense of justice and his cowardice, an uncertainty about which course of action he should take: to throw aside security and take the part of the Duchess, or in cowardice to serve Ferdinand as intelligencer and reveal everything. It is this conflict that could lead him to make a suggestion which will stave off for a short while the Duchess's destruction, and at the same time not endanger his own position with Ferdinand.

His speech of self-contempt, when she has gone, bares his essential weakness.

-all to my Lord? O, this base quality Of Intelligencer!

Ⅲ.ii.374-376.

He attempts, pathetically, to rationalise his treachery,

why, every Quality i'th' world Preferres but gaine, or commendation:
Now for this act, I am certaine to be rais'd,

Ⅲ.ii.376-378.

¹ Works, II, p.168n. and see also W. Archer, 'The Duchess of Malfi', Nineteenth Century, LXXVII, 1920, p.129.
but he does not believe it, there is an element of disgust:

And men that paint weeds, (to the life) are prais'd.

III.ii.379.

At the end of Act III he overtakes the fleeing Duchess, coming first as a messenger for her brothers. His behaviour, his words, seem mechanical, as if he is hardened to his task as creature, or distancing himself from what he does. When he returns, he comes to take the Duchess prisoner, and he is visarded. Again his words are dulled, functional, those of the instrument who may possess no feeling of his own.

DUCH. ... to what Prison?
BOS. To none:
DUCH. Wither then?
BOS. To your Palace.
DUCH. I have heard that Charon's boat serves to convey All on the dismal Lake, but brings none back again.
BOS. Your brothers mean you safety, and pity.

III.v.122-128.

There is a depth of misery and conflict beneath the deadened words, the intensity of suffering Bosola feels in his treachery touches their surface. His insult to Antonio

BOS. Trye (Madam)
Forget this base, low-fellow.
DUCH. Were I a man:
I'll'd beat that counterfeit face, into thy other -
BOS. One of no Birth.

III.v.139-143.

1 C. G. Thayer, in an interesting article on the disguise theme in the characterisation of Bosola ('The Ambiguity of Bosola', Studies in Philology, LIV, 1957.) believes the Duchess here refers directly, in the phrase, 'counterfeit face', to Bosola's deceptions as intelligencer, his false self, which covers his true character. But we must remember that there is not really such a sharp distinction, especially to the other characters in the play, between the true and false self of Bosola, both sides are merged together in the ambiguity of his nature, the wavering and hesitating weak man. Bosola is, moreover, physically visarded, and this is ostensibly, at least, what the Duchess refers to. One cannot deny that her words probably have a double meaning, remembering that the last time she saw Bosola he had been helping her to escape, praising Antonio and her disinterested marriage, but that she refers (continued next page)
which Bogard interprets as an attempt to rouse courage in the Duchess at 'the moment when her hysterical behaviour threatens to give the spirit of woman the upper hand'\(^1\), is provoked rather by his sense of the ignominy of his position: his admiration for the Duchess, and even Antonio, mixed with the shame for himself, leads him to try to anger or hurt, even to degrade her. It is obvious that his own degradation still haunts him - when the Duchess responds to his taunt by saying

Say that he were borne meane ...
Man is most happy when his owne actions
Be arguments, and examples of his Vertue.

\[\text{III.v.144-146.}\]

the words touch a nerve in Bosola, who replies, his mind fixed on his own self-betrayal

A barren, beggerly vertue.

\[\text{III.v.147.}\]

This element of conflict in his attitude to the Duchess is evident in the beginning of Act IV, where he is describing to Ferdinand his sister's behaviour under torture. There is genuine admiration in the words

(continued from previous page)
directly to Bosola's 'moral disguise' in the sense that the critics have duly given it, is doubtful. She refers to what is before her, the creature whom she has trusted, and who now emerges as a betrayer, the instrument of her brothers. We cannot assume that the Duchess knows that Bosola's commitment to evil is not real, that his treachery is only part of a role he plays out, a moral disguise.

\[1\text{ Bogard, pp.69-70.}\]
She's sad, as one long us'd to't: and she seemes
Rather to welcome the end of misery
Than shun it: a behaviour so noble,
As gives a majestie to adversity:

IV.i.4-7.

but then, as if he cannot bear the thought that there is
such nobility, while he himself is so degraded, he attempts
to reduce her

and this restraint
(like English mastiffes that grow feirce with tying)
Makes her too passionately apprehend
Those pleasures she's kept from.

IV.i.14-17.

During Act IV we may see Bosola's growing sympathy and
compassion for the Duchess. Throughout the play, and
especially in the last two acts, one notices the sounding,
again and again, of the word 'pity'. At the very end of Act I,
Cariola, speaking of the Duchess, has said 'I owe her much
of pitty.' The Duchess herself says, during her suffering
in Act IV,

I shall shortly grow one
Of the miracles of pitty:

IV.i.111-112.

and after the madmen have gone, Cariola describes her as
having the appearance of

some reverend monument
Whose ruines are even pitied.

IV.ii.35-36.

Capturing the Duchess, Bosola offered her the feigned pity
of her brothers - they pass the word between them:

BOS. Your brothers meane you safety, and pittie.
DUCH. Pitie!
With such a pitie men preserve alive
Pheasants, and Quailes, when they are not fat
enough
To be eaten.

III.v.128-132.
Bosola's early, disgusted view of humanity has no pity, only a withering contempt for humanity. It is only later, as he watches the suffering of the Duchess, that pity grows. In his first attempt at 'comfort' his words seem perfunctory - there may be even an element of mockery in their very inadequacy.

O fye: despaire? remember
You are a Christian...

and the almost sadistic

the Bee
When he hath shot his sting into your hand
May then play with your eye-lyd.

which, however, is infused with such a knowledge of suffering that we are brought back to the torture of Bosola's own mind. His response to her despairing curses is half mocking, but it is a mockery which is itself half fearful, uncertain.

The horror of the apparently mocking 'O fearful' is perhaps real, the horror of Bosola facing the Duchess's unbearable agony with an anguish of his own, for he knows that he has brought her to this. Watching her, he comes,
half unwillingly to compassion

Now, by my life, I pity you.

IV.i.103.

and he begs Ferdinand to go no farther with the tortures.

When the Duke refuses, and says that he must see the Duchess
again he replies

BOS. Never.

FERD. You must.

BOS. Never in mine owne shape,
That's forfeited, by my intelligence,
And this last cruell lie: when you send me next,
The businesse shal be comfort.

IV.i.159-164.

His feeling of guilt is heightened by his growing sympathy
for the Duchess. But Ferdinand is merely scornful-

Thy pity is nothing of kin to thee.

IV.i.166.

In scene ii he enters after the dance of the madmen,
disguised as an old man. The comfort which he offers, the
only comfort which he can give, is that of the slow breaking
from life, the stripping away of all illusion, before death.

His speeches here are reminiscent of the meditation in Act II.

Such a knowledge of the misery of life he possesses - he has
indeed, more 'wisdom' than the Duchess, in the purely
intellectual sense, but he has none of her courage and resolution
to act as he knows is right and just. So he can prepare the
Duchess for death:

What's this flesh? A little cruded
milke, phantasticall puffe-paste: our bodies are
weaker than those paper prisons boyes use to keepe
flies in; more contemptible: since ours is to
preserve earth-wormes:

IV.ii.124-127.
Yet he is aware, because he knows it himself, of the desperate clinging to life. When he presents her with the strangling cord

Yet, me thinkes
The manner of your death should much afflict you,

IV.ii.219-220.

it is as if he is not certain of her courage, cannot quite believe that it is real, knowing his own terror. There is almost an element of wonder in his response. It is not a dispassionate testing of her valour, as Bogard suggests, he is too deeply caught up in his own crisis, watching her.

After her strangling, his sharp orders for the murder of Cariola and the children testify to the emotion which he hides. He is still stunned by the Duchess's death; there is not even contempt for Cariola, only impatience

Delayes: throttle-her.

IV.ii.262.

He leaves the bodies of the Duchess and the children on the stage so that he may confront Ferdinand. But Ferdinand turns upon him with the ironic accusation

Why didst not thou pitty her?

IV.ii.292.

and blames him for the part which he has played.

For thee (as we observe in Tragedies,
That a good Actor many times is curssd
For playing a villaines part) I hate thee for't:
And (for my sake) say, thou hast done much ill, well:

IV.ii.307-310.

1 Bogard, p.69.
Bosola has been throughout the play a potentially good man acting out the part of the villain, because he did not have the strength to do what was just. Now he realises what his lie has led him to do. His insistence on his reward from Ferdinand is more than mere fury at the Duke's ingratitude - he needs it to hold as some sort of reason, some excuse for all that has happened. It is immediately after Ferdinand's terrifying accusation that he says, desperately, because there is nothing else to say, or to think of:

Let me quicken your memory: for I perceive
You are falling into ingratitude: I challenge
The reward due to my service.

IV.ii.311-313.

Then he tries to blame the brothers, who are

Rotten, and rotting others:

IV.ii.346.

and then, feebly, attempts to rationalise his weakness.

And though I loath'd the evill, yet I lov'd
You that did counsell it: and rather sought
To appeare a true servant, then an honest man.

IV.ii.357-359.

Like Flamineo, he tries desperately to escape the revelation of his guilt.

Finally, when Ferdinand has gone, he seems to come to a decision:

Off, my painted honour!

IV.ii.362.

which is strengthened when the Duchess stirs for a moment. But he cannot call for help, though he might wish to, because her enemies would only come and kill her.

So, pitty would destroy pitty:

IV.ii.373.
In such a world the practise of compassion is almost impossible, yet its awakening in Bosola is the experience which gives him courage at least to try and recover his lost integrity.

Flamineo was afraid to recognise the compassion which he felt when he saw his mother mourning over Marcello, and went to his death unknowing. Bosola can recognise the experience and act on it, though with a hesitation which would not have been Flamineo's had he been able to see what was right. For though Bosola determines on action, still, in these last scenes after the Duchess's death, he wavers and hesitates. When the Cardinal offers him a fortune to murder Antonio he asks:

Shall I go sue to fortune any longer?
'Tis the fool's Pilgrimage.
V.ii.334-335.

Yet, when he is left alone his fear, his lack of resolution return again.

I must looke to my footing;
In such slippery yce-pavements, men had neede
To be frost-naye'd well: they may breake their neckes else.
V.ii.367-369.

Though he is afraid, Bosola can see what is right, what he must do, can recognise the value of compassion, and the courage of the action which must follow if the experience is not to be lost. This is the measure of the distance between the two plays. Moral integrity is realised as the standard, and can be recognised by some of the characters, though the world is the same, if not more vicious, than the world of The White Devil.
Bosola's growing compassion is counterpointed against Ferdinand's scorn of it, to show the loneliness of the experience, and against the false compassion that Julia pretends for the Cardinal, which is merely an act to get from him the information which she wants for Bosola. Amongst the other characters there is a complete lack of pity. This is the cruel dialogue on the mad Ferdinand which takes place between the courtiers:

GRIS. 'Twas a foule storme tōnīt. 
ROD. The Lord Ferdinand's chamber shooke like an Ozter. 
MAL. 'Twas nothing but pure kindnesse in the Divell, 
To rocks his owne child. 
V.iii.23-26.

Bosola's vision seems to grow wider, after he has watched the suffering of the Duchess. Even when Julia is poisoned, he comes forward, crying

For pitty sake, hold. 
V.ii.306.

as if the spectacle of humanity destroying one another is almost too much for him to bear any more. His former disgust with mankind is replaced by a sense of the darkness in which they dwell - he watches Ferdinand's ravings silently, saying only

Mercy upon me, what a fatall judgement 
Hath falne upon this Ferdinand! 
V.ii.83-84.

aware that such a fate could befall him, he sees the sham of the Cardinal's greatness, and is anguished at the death of Antonio, by his own hand. Yet though it brings him only heartbreak, Bosola's compassion, and the wavering courage
which springs from it, is the only thing which can lend him something of nobility, help him to recover a little of his lost integrity.

The death of Antonio steels Bosola at last, he will no longer pretend even to have a courage which is beyond him.

I will not Imitate things glorious
No more than base: I'll be mine own example.

V.iv.94-95.

He has, like Antonio, a gray sort of being; he cannot be noble in the way that the Duchess was, or glorious like the characters of *The White Devil*. He is a much more mediocre type of person, sensitive, yet somehow weakened in the very centre of his being, and blighted. There is nothing really rare about him - there are, one imagines countless Bosolas.¹

When he finally faces his enemy, the Cardinal exclaims, seeing the real Bosola

thou look'st ghastly:
There sits in thy face, some great determination,
Mix'd with some feare.

V.v.8-10.

He kills the Cardinal, paying no heed to his promises or his pleas, stabbing again and again, like a man blinded to all but this one task he has willed himself to do.

At his death there is a great weariness - 'I hold my weary soule in my teeth'. He speaks of himself

(That was an Actor in the maine of all,
Much 'gainst mine own good nature, yet i'th' end
Neglected.)

V.v.106-108.

¹ This, of course, is not a criticism of Webster's characterisation, for the drawing of the character of Bosola is a remarkable achievement, possibly because he is such an ordinary man.
He has no hope for those who are like him

Oh, I am gone -
We are onely like dead wals, or vaulted graves,
That ruin'd yield no eccho:

V.v.120-122.

He dies with the apprehension of the darkness in which man
lives, and still with the same conflict that has been his
from the beginning - the knowledge of what it is that must
be done if man is to have any nobility, his life any meaning
at all

Oh this gloomy world,
In what a shadow, or deepe pit of darknesse,
Doth (womanish, and fearfull,)mankind live!
Let worthy mindes nere stagger in distrust
To suffer death, or shame, for what is just -
and the consciousness of his own failure. Finally, he
realises his essential distance from those, like the Duchess,
who have dared always to be just.

Mine is another voyage.

V.v.124-129.
Like Bosola, Antonio is possessed by the inner moral cowardice which prevents him from ignoring danger and throwing himself wholeheartedly into what he knows is right, but unlike the parasite, he has no knowledge of his own failure. Just as Bosola's capacity for goodness may seem hidden by his outwardly evil actions, so Antonio's inner unworthiness is hidden by his reputation for honesty and courage, a reputation in which he himself believes. The first impression of Antonio, in his opening conversation with Delio is one of gravity, formality and apparent virtue. Delio welcomes him back as 'a very formall French-man, in your habit:' \(^1\) and his opening speech is full of virtuous approval for the well-ordered court of the French king.

The word 'worthy' is constantly used of him by the other characters. 'You have be-spoake it worthely,' \(^2\) says Ferdinand, after Antonio's speech on horsemanship, and so it continues. The Cardinal too, refers to the 'honesty' of Antonio's nature, and this is another tag which hangs pathetically upon him throughout the play.

\(^{1}\) I.i.3

\(^{2}\) I.i.148.
He is also reputed to be wise. But Bosola, too, was a scholar. In *The Duchess of Malfi* speculative knowledge seems only to hamper the characters. In Act II, scene i there is a dialogue between Antonio and Bosola on honesty and wisdom, where it is made clear that only folly proceeds from those who consider that they have wisdom.

**BOS.** Oh Sir, the opinion of wisedome is a foule tettor, that runs all over a mans body: if simplicity direct us to have no evill, it directs us to a happy being: For the subtlest folly proceedes from the subtlest wisedome: Let me be simply honest.

---

II.i.81-84.

Antonio is always careful and serious, and tends to give long speeches whenever he is asked for an opinion. His summing up of Bosola's character in Act I, scene i soon flows into a long screed of 'wise' generalisations on melancholy:

> for (ile 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,

---

I.i.78-82.

and again, when Ferdinand asks him what he thinks of good horsemanship, he answers:

> Noblely (my Lord) as out of the Grecian Horse,
> issued many famous Princes: So out of brave Horse-man-
> ship, arose the first Sparks of growing resol-
> ution, that raise the minde to noble action.

---

I.i.144-147.

This is priggish learnedness, and there is too an irony of which Antonio is unconscious, for his proficiency in horsemanship does not give him resolution, or raise his mind
to noble action. Like Bosola, resolution is the quality he most lacks, and both of them are contrasted to the Duchess, with her simplicity, and her involvement in what she sees as right.

Antonio is always displaying his learning. Even in the warm and delightful bedchamber scene, his humour is rather heavy, and his speech to Cariola on the single life is learned, and full of classical allusions. Its formality and unreality are most strongly felt in this setting, and Cariola rightly remarks 'This is a vaine Poetry:' His wisdom is a dry kind of wisdom, false, - his generalisations seem a symptom of a kind of separation from experience, a fear of involving himself completely in life, or accepting it wholeheartedly, as the Duchess does. Yet it is a different thing altogether from Flamineo's inability to experience. Flamineo felt frustration at his incapacity to find anything in life which would touch him deeply; Antonio seeks only to escape the involvement in life for which he lacks the courage.

He sees himself as a man who has selflessly served virtue.

Were there nor heaven, nor hell,
I should be honest: I have long serv'd vertue,
And nev'r tane wages of her.

I.i.503-505.

He reminds one of Marcello - he is one of those whose virtue has never really been tried in circumstances where he would

1 III.i.40.
lose everything if he did what he knew to be just. There is an element of falsity about him, in his 'modesty'. His response to the Duchess's proposal is 'Oh my unworthiness,' but we cannot quite feel this to be genuine, knowing Antonio's own opinion of his worthy self. He is the kind of person who does not know what he really feels, because he always takes care to have the stereotyped righteous response to everything. In this, he has even less self knowledge than Bosola, who is at least aware of his own weakness and pretence.

His reputation extends also to courage. He took the ring at the tilting, and Ferdinand praises him. But again this is a superficial kind of courage. As early in the play as the wooing scene, his lack of real moral courage is suggested. When he grasps the point to which the Duchess is moving, he says, (after giving another wordy speech, this time on ambition)

But he's a foole
That (being a-cold) would thrust his hands i'th' fire
To warme them.

I.i.489-491.

Again, like Bosola, the fear for security is evident. He can preserve the outer forms of virtue, but when it comes to the most difficult kind of integrity he is afraid. His fear is there in the question 'But your brothers?' and

1 I.i.495.

2 There is some suggestion in the play of hidden ambition in Antonio - it is suggested in this scene, and seems indicated as he dies, 'In all our Quest of Greatnes ...' (V.iv.75.)
contrasts with the Duchess's courage, her consciousness of the
danger into which she is going.

As Bosola sinks into corruption in the second and
third acts, so Antonio's cowardice becomes more and more marked.
When the Duchess falls into labour after eating the apricots,
he flies immediately into a panic, thinking they (by which
he invariably means 'he') are lost. It is as well the
Duchess herself has made all the arrangements for the midwife,
he himself collapses in the crisis. 'I am lost in amazement:
I know not what to think on't.' Throughout the following
scenes his fear increases to desperation. It is his own
danger, rather than the Duchess's, which he seems most
conscious of.

DEL. How fares it with the Dutchesse?

ANT. She's expos'd
Unto the worst of torture, paine and feare;
DEL. Speake to her all happy comfort.

ANT. How do I play the foole with mine own danger!
You are this night (deere friend) to poast to Rome,
My life lies in your service.

DEL. Doe not doubt me -

ANT. Oh, 'Tis farre from me: and yet feare presents me
Somewhat that looks like danger.

II.ii.60-77.

Bosola, when he meets him creeping round in the darkness,
observes that he is sweating, and looking wildly:

Antonio? Put not your face; nor body
To such a forc'd expression of feare -

II.iii.11-12.

Afraid of Bosola, he speaks to him aggressively, and his
terror increases when he sees the letters of the child's
horoscope drowned in blood.

The kinship between these two characters, the 'good' man
and the unscrupulous parasite is strongly suggested in these scenes, where both of them are lurking in the darkness, Antonio aware of his fear, Bosola of his corruption. For a moment, as he makes an excuse to have Bosola arrested, Antonio realises his degradation, and at the same time sees his essential likeness to Bosola:

The Great are like the Base; nay, they are the same,
When they seek shamefull waies, to avoid shame.

II.iii.68-69.

His weakness becomes more and more evident. In Act III, talking with Delio, he shows himself aware of what the common people are saying about the Duchess, relating their opinion, and only glad that they do not guess that she is married. He shelters under his wife's loss of reputation.

The common-ralbe, do directly say
She is a Strumpet...

for other obligation
Of love, or marriage, betweene her and me
They never dreame of.

III.i.29-42.

Again, in the bed-chamber scene, when Ferdinand comes, he lets his wife bear her brother's insults, while he hides. Then he attempts to blame the innocent Cariola, and his speech

I would this terrible thing would come againe,
That (standing on my Guard) I might relate
My warrantable love:

III.ii.174-176.

is empty bluster. He even suggests that she be the one to murder Ferdinand, though this task should properly fall on him. All the worst of him is revealed here. The Duchess, of course,
is the one who thinks up the plan for escape.

Though in banishment the Duchess has courage, Antonio has rather resignation:

Doe not weep:  
Heaven fashion'd us of nothing: and we strive,  
To bring our selves to nothing:  

III.v.96-97.

there is no bravery about this kind of resignation, only a deadness. Though he expresses the same idea of the betterment of man through suffering which the Duchess comes to, his words are generalisations rather than knowledge gained through experience. His words seem to express only stock sentiments, as if he says what he thinks is fitting for the occasion. There has never been much life in him to give up. He didn't have the Duchess's capacity for entering into everything with his whole heart - he is always a little afraid, and draws back. And once again, at the moment of parting, he is more concerned with his own danger than he is with hers.

My heart is turnde to a heavy lumpe of lead,  
With which I sound my danger: fare you well.  
III.v.106-107.

Unlike Bosola's genuine efforts to recover his lost integrity, Antonio's attempt at reconciliation with the Cardinal is the tired gesture of a man weary of life. He can venture because he has no great desire for life, or at least, he can think that he will venture.

This night, I meane to venture all my fortune -  
(Which is no more then a poore lingring life)  
To the Cardinals worst of mallice:  

V.i.69-71.

Again, as with Bosola, there are the words '(for I'll goe
in my own shape). But his own shape is more base than Bosola's. He is tired of everything - perhaps he knows that death will come, but he does not care. It seems mere foolishness to attempt reconciliation with the Cardinal, surely he must know something of the Cardinal's hatred, after all that has happened.

His outlook has always been melancholy, negative, and sterile. When the echo, or the Duchess's voice, haunting him, replies to his questions 'Thou art a dead Thing', its choice of words is apt indeed. He has never been truly alive. With the vision of the 'face folded in sorrow', he seems to realise his wretched state, and resolves:

Come: I'll be out of this Ague;
For to live thus, is not indeed to live:
I will not henceforth save my selfe by halves,
Loose all, or nothing.

V.iii.59-63.

Delio's reply, 'Your owne vertue save you!' sounds ironically. In the end, most of Webster's characters are deceived by appearances. Delio, Bosola, and even the Duchess, never see through to Antonio's inner worthlessness, even though he may finally do so himself.

As he goes to approach the Cardinal, he is still hoping for a pardon, still clinging desperately to his miserable life:

Could I take him
At his prayers, there were hope of pardon.

V.iv.48-49.

1 V.i.76.
2 V.iii.50.
3 V.iii.64.
But his hope does not seem any more real than his resolution. When he is wounded and dying, he glimpses again, for a moment, his own sterility

BOS. What art thou?
ANT. A most wretched thing,
That onely have thy benefit in death,
To appeare my selfe. V.iv.54-57.

He dies in a grey kind of sadness, seeing life merely as an ague, without even Bosola's knowledge that there may be a different quality of existence for others, who have the courage he has not possessed.

Pleasure of life, what is't? onely the good hours
Of an Ague: meerely a preparitive to rest,
To endure vexation:
V.iv.78-80.

No doubt she was rash; but life can bring crises when
He either fears his fate too much,
Or his deserts are small,
That dars not put it to the touch
To gain or lose it all.

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1. See note on p. 381.
2. Thomas and Paradoxes of Shakespearean Tragedy, p.201.
3. The Duchess of Malfi, p.49.
For I am going into a wildernesse,
Where I shall find nor path, nor friendly clewe
To be my guide.

Most critics will admit that it is not the inequality of the Duchess's marriage to Antonio which concerns Webster, but they sometimes discover in her the fault of rashness, and a preoccupation with her own desires that leads her to neglect her duties. Miss Bradbrooke sees the Duchess as warm-hearted and wilfull (though charmingly so), relying exclusively on her likings, her immediate feelings; and Leech sees her involved in her passion for Antonio to a point where she acts without regard for her duty as a sovereign prince.

He feels that Webster emphasises that in this marriage there is harm to public order, and neglect of duty. Lucas admits that it could be argued that the Duchess to some extent forgot her duty to her subjects in Amalfi, but sees also that this idea is not emphasised by Webster. Instead, Lucas seizes the essential point of the Duchess's 'rashness':

No doubt she was rash; but life can bring crises when
He either fears his fate too much,
Or his deserts are small,
That dares not put it to the touch
To gain or lose it all.

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1. See note on p. 263.
2. Themes and Conventions of Elizabethan Tragedy, p.201.
3. The Duchess of Malfi, p.49
For the Duchess's 'rashness' is rather her courage - she will dare anything for that which she feels is right, and in this she is contrasted with Antonio and Bosola, who are eaten away with a moral cowardice which destroys all their ability to act for what they know is right, bravely, and without fear of consequences.

The Duchess is the only character in the play with both simplicity and courage. She is virtuous, but yet not the paragon of virtue Antonio would have us believe in his over idealised 'character' of her. She is, in her own words:

'Tis not the figure cut in Allablaster Kneeles at my husbands tombe.

I.i.519-521.

Her dislike of deceit is in obvious contrast to the society around her, where deception is universal. She has an evident distaste for the small pretences in which she has to engage in the first part of the wooing scene.

so we

Are forc'd to expresse our violent passions
In ridles, and in dreames, and leave the path
Of simple vertue, which was never made
To seeme the thing it is not.

I.i.510-514.

Later, when, in order to protect herself and Antonio from capture and perhaps death, she is forced into some measure of deceit, the fear and the constant necessity to dissemble, is unbearable to her.

Oh misery, me thinkes unjust actions
Should weare these masques and curtaines, and not we:

II.ii.191-192.
The Duchess has a warmth, a living quality which the others lack. There is in Antonio a faint cynicism, a world-weariness which is different from Flamineo's because it is less genuine; there is about it the suggestion of mere attitudinising, of a scholarly, untried kind of cynicism.

Say a man never marry, nor have children, What takes that from him? onely the bare name Of being a father, or the weake delight To see the little wanton ride a cocke-horse Upon a painted sticke, or hear him chatter Like a taught Starling.

I.i.456-461.

These are the limp commonplaces of the copybook cynics, and against this tiredness the Duchess's radiance of life shows strongly. This contrast is emphasised through the whole play. Her decision

And even now,
In this hate (as men in some great battailes By apprehending danger, have achiev'd
Almost impossible actions: I have heard Souldiers say so,
So I, through frights, and threatnings will assay
This dangerous venture:

I.i.284-289.

comes after we have already seen Bosola's weakness demonstrated in his corruption, and after we have heard the brothers' threats, so that we are aware of the danger which faces her. In such a world, it seems, a courage like the Duchess's is rare; fear is part of the condition of man's life.

She always acts, pushing her fears aside. It is she who plans the conveyance for the child, while Antonio remains panic stricken in the crisis. And she has the child while
Antonio and Bosola are creeping round in the dark outside, both afraid. When she and Antonio are found out, it is she who has already planned the escape,

You must instantly part hence: I have fashion'd it already

III.ii.293.

and when Cariola demurs about the feigned 'pilgrimage', she replies

Thou art a superstitious fool, Prepare us instantly for our departure: Past sorrowes, let us moderately lament them, For those to come, seeke wisely to prevent them. III.ii.367-370.

Even after they are banished, it is she who advises Antonio what to do. And she faces Bosola with the same bravery with which she faced Ferdinand when he entered her bedchamber.

O they are very welcome - III.v.111.

Though such courage and virtue as the Duchess's are necessary if one is to preserve one's integrity, yet they are almost impossible to practise in such a society. The Duchess is alien to the world around her. Her simplicity is the one standard in that confused universe, yet it is evident from the beginning that she will be destroyed.

The doom over her life is most carefully prepared - never for a moment can we expect that her happiness or safety will endure. The same method we noted in the earlier play is used to give the impression of doom, the echoing of a death scene in the first actions of the doomed character, the foreshadowing of death even in the midst of happiness.
Ironically, even the pretext which she uses to call Antonio to her, and to lead up to the subject of marriage, is that she wishes to make her will. The imagery is all centred on death:

I am making my will, (as 'tis fit Princes should
In perfect memory) and I pray Sir, tell me
Were not one better make it smiling thus?
Then in deepe groans and terrible ghostly looks,
I.i.427-430.

In this way her marriage and death are connected from the beginning. When he kneels, and she puts the ring on his finger, the words with which she asks him to rise look forward to those which she will speak in Act IV, kneeling to die.¹ And in his reply, her coming torture is imaged.

¹ See IV.ii.239-241.

Ambition (Madam) is a great mans madness,
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—
I.i.483-487.

Even as they make the marriage contract, there is another ironic foreboding, as the Duchess prays that heaven bless

this sacred Gordian, which let violence
Never untwine.
I.i.549-550.

² See III.v.122-125.
But the Gordian knot was cut by the sword.¹ Cariola's final words, closing the first act, intensify the effect of foreboding, the expectation of doom.

> Whether the spirit of greatnes, or of woman Raigne most in her, I know not; but it shewes A fearefull madness. I owe her much of pitty. I.i.576-578.

In effect, the whole of the second and third acts are informed with this sense of doom. The corruption shown in the scenes with Bosola, Castruchio and the Old Lady, the degradation of Bosola, the weakness of Antonio, and the coldness and disillusion of the scenes between Julia and the Cardinal show the Duchess's complete alienation. And in the final scene of that act comes the maddened response of Ferdinand to the news of the child's birth, and the more controlled yet equally sinister response of the Cardinal. This is the near madness, the complete evil, and the danger of the world in which she moves.

Act III continues the progress to doom. The warmth of the bed-chamber scene gives an impression of a happiness all the more intense, all the more valuable, like the love of Romeo and Juliet, because of its inevitable doom. Even here comes the foreshadowing of the later torture, the mention of grey hair which Bosola will echo as he prepares the Duchess for death, and the reference to the 'unquiet bedfellow.'²

¹ See G. Boklund, The Duchess of Malfi, p. 92.
² See IV.ii.133-135, and IV.ii.138.
DUCH. Does not the colour of my hair begin to change?

When I wax gray, I shall have all the Court
Powder their hair, with Arras, to be like me:

III.ii.66-68.

When Ferdinand enters, after the bed-chamber scene,
she is ready, as she has always been. Her apparent belief
in Ferdinand's former assurances of safety was only
superficial. I think she never forgets the nature of
that wilderness

Where I shall find nor path, nor friendly clewe
To be my guide -

I.ii.405-406.

Vittoria too sensed her fate, the echo of the sea, sounded
as she accepted Brachiano's love, and as she died, yet this
echo suggested not only her inevitable doom, but also her
consciousness of the emptiness, the illusion of her love for
Brachiano; while the Duchess knows the worth of her own
love, never doubting for a moment what she must do, that
she must dare everything in the world for this love.

This is the difference in the fate, the doom of the two
characters, and the difference in the two plays themselves -
this possibility of knowledge. For Vittoria there is the
path to doom on which she is set and on which she is driven
to destruction, and none of her actions except the final
desperate courage may temper that destruction. She cannot
believe in her love for Brachiano, in any of her actions, as
the Duchess does - one has the impression, as one has with
all the characters in *The White Devil*, that she does not
know what she is doing. She is driven forward to death,
but the Duchess goes forward, chooses her way. Though the Duchess will be destroyed, inevitably, because of the nature of the universe in which she lives, yet there is something which she can do so that her life will not have been merely futile. She has some choice, some chance to decide the quality of her existence, so that, in a sense, the doom cannot touch her, cannot negate what she has made of her life.

Miss Bradbrook considers that the Duchess develops into a tragic figure through the wakening of a responsibility absent in the wilful if courageous action of the former scenes, and that it is in this development that the interest of the prison scenes lies.\footnote{Themes and Conventions of Elizabethan Tragedy, pp.203ff.} Rather the Duchess makes an adjustment to the world outside her, realising that the nature of the evil universe is something from which she cannot separate herself, however much her personal values may be alien to it. She will realise that her virtue and her innocence cannot live in the morally twisted world, and above all, she will know that in such a world it is only important to hold, as she does, to her own integrity, and to face the inevitable destruction with courage, accepting death as a release, with dignity and peace.

When Bosola comes to take her prisoner, she is angry and proud, yet she seems to realise even here that something more than her brothers' spite may be involved in her coming...
suffering.

And yet (O Heaven) thy heavy hand is in't.

... naught made me ere
Go right but Heaven's scourge sticke.
III.v.91-95.

She seems to know that there can be only death; she never voices any false hope of escape. With the relation of the fable, with its theme that all men will be tested in death, she seems prepared for whatever might befall her. So the tortures which come from the crazed Ferdinand's mind develop into a trial of the inner strength and greatness of the Duchess.

The appearance of the apparently dead bodies of her husband and children, those she had loved, bring her almost to despair.

There is not betweene Heaven, and earth one wish I stay for after this:  IV.i.72-73.

She hates even the suggestion of life offered by Bosola, and longs only for death. But should she die now it would be, as it is with the other characters 'in a mist'. There would be no sense of resolution, her existence would seem merely futile. She comes almost to the verge of madness, in her agony of mind:

DUCH. I could curse the Starres
BOS. O fearefull.
DUCH. And those three smyling seasons of the yeare
Into a Russian winter; nay the world
To its first Chaos.
BOS. Looke you, the Starres shine still:

She seems quite powerless in her grief and suffering, isolated in the universe of evil.
Left alone with Cariola, she hears the noise of the madmen capering around outside. She is imprisoned and surrounded by insanity, as, indeed, she has been throughout her life, in her goodness and sanity, separate from, yet surrounded by the evil and near madness of the court society - 'all discord, without this circumference'. Now, with the discord broken in upon her she must strive to maintain her sanity. The emphasis is all upon the long endurance, the acquaintance with misery which is necessary in such a world.

I'll tell thee a miracle -
I am not mad yet, to my cause of sorrow.
Th' heaven o'er my head, seemes made of molten brasse,
The earth of flaming sulphure,yet I am not mad:
I am acquainted with sad misery,
As the tan'd galley-slave is with his Oare,
Necessity makes me suffer constantly,
And custome makes it easie -

IV.ii.25-32.

Her imprisonment and suffering is an image of the condition of life which all must endure. The madmen show the final disintegration of the outside world. They are all familiar figures of the Jacobean world.

There's a mad Lawyer, and a secular Priest,
A Doctor that hath forfeited his wits
By jealousie: an Astrologian,
That in his workes, sayd such a day o' th' moneth
Should be the day o' doome; and, fayling of't,
Ran mad: an English Taylor, crais'd i' th' braine,
With the study of new fashion: a gentleman usher
Quite beside himselfe, with care to keepe in minde,
The number of his Ladies salutations,
Or 'How do you', she employ'd him in each morning;
A farmer too, (an excellent knave in graine)
Mad, cause he was hindered transportation,
And let one Broaker (that's mad) loose to these,
You'd thinke the divell were among them.

IV.ii.49-62.
This could be a piece of satirical comment - but the placing of the speech is such that what may have been material for comedy in another dramatist is here within the tragic perspective. Their speeches are obsessed with lust, cuckoldry, the corruption of the law, the consciousness of doomsday and hell. But there is also in their words the suggestion of an infinite pain.

I. MAD-MAN. (Astrologer.) ........

... I cannot sleepe, my pillow is stuff't with a littour of Porcupines.

2 MAD. (Lawyer.) Hell is a meere glasse-house, where the divells are continually blowing up womens soules, on hollow yrons, and the fire never goes out.  

IV.ii.79-83.

The speech which introduces them makes it plain that their madness is a consequence of the condition of their society, the terrors and the confusion of the Transformed World. In them, as in the Duchess, we see imaged the suffering of mankind, only they are the ones who have not had the strength to endure. Fittingly, after this last spectacle of the world's horror, Bosola enters as tomb-maker and mortifier, preparing her for death.

No more does he offer her 'sugred comforts', promises of mercy or life, but only death. The Duchess is at first still defiant, and emphasises her greatness of rank.

Am not I, thy Duchesse?  

IV.ii.132.

Bosola's answer reduces this kind of greatness to its true place.
Thou art some great woman sure, for riot begins to sit on thy fore-head (clad in gray haires) twenty yeares sooner, then on a merry milkemaydes. Thou sleep'st worse, then if a mouse should be forc'd to take up her lodging in a cats eare: a little infant, that breedes it's teeth, should it lie with thee, would crie out, as if thou wert the more unquiet bedfellow.

IV.ii.133-139.

Yet she replies

I am Duchesse of Malfy still.  

IV.ii.139.

This assertion is sometimes taken as being the supreme moment of the Duchess's career, where she clings to her own essential being in the face of death.¹

But the Duchess will have more understanding allowed to her in the end than that mere knowledge of one's own being which Ornstein terms 'a lonely existential awareness of self.'² It is indeed a moment of greatness, and a climax of her endurance and suffering. But she has yet further to go. Her true inner greatness must be separated from everything which could be only a false appearance of greatness. She is not great merely because she is a Duchess; the rank gives her no advantage when she is finally faced with death, as it gave none to Brachiano. Bosola answers her assertion

That makes thy sleepes so broken;  
Glories (like glowe-wormes) afarre off, shine bright,  
But lookd to neere, have neither heate, nor light.  

IV.ii.140-142.

and the Duchess assents immediately.

Thou art very plaine.  

IV.ii.143.

¹ See, for instance, Bogard, p.76, and C. Leech, John Webster, p.17 and p.85.

² Ornstein, p.148.
Then the executioners come, and she is ready. Beside Cariola's frightened exclamation, she says calmly:

Peace, it affrights not me.  

Then comes the dirge, with its final emphasis on the brevity and the emptiness of life, the suffering and the terror, and the release of death. The Duchess is still calm, though Cariola's fear grows wilder and wilder. She can even look out beyond herself and think of others, of Cariola, and the children. To Bosola's continual, half fearful questioning as to whether she feels any dread, she replies with dignity, insisting that death does not terrify her. And it is not the last desperate pretence of Vittoria. Finally she has done with their speaking:

So I were out of your whispering:  

She does not die in the mist of error which surrounds the other characters in the end, none of the terror of the unknown place to which the soul is going overtakes her.

Tell my brothers,  
That I perceive death, (now I am well awake)  
Best gift is, they can give, or I can take -

The Duchess is the only character who insists on truth, on an inner reality, rather than on the surface appearances of greatness or reputation. In her marriage with Antonio, it is the internal truth of their union which matters to her, rather than the externals of ceremony.
How can the Church build faster?
We now are man, and wife, and 'tis the Church
That must but echo this:

I. i. 562-564.

She, sure that what she does is right, has no need to cling to the outer forms of ceremony and reputation. Only the confused, the guilt ridden, grasp at these - it is Ferdinand who tells the fable of lost reputation, and who, in Act III, grasps at the fact that the Duchess's children have probably not been christened; it is the Cardinal who is obsessed with the harm the Duchess has done to their noble family's name. The fact that the common people think that she is living as a strumpet cannot bother her, who knows the real truth. She has an inner honesty, no matter what appearances may suggest to the common eye. Similarly, she has no time for the external forms of religion, ignoring Gariola's warnings about the 'feigned pilgrimage,' yet her parting words to Antonio suggest that she is not without a deep religious sense.

In the eternall Church, Sir,
I doe hope we shall not part thus.

III. v. 84-85.

There is an assurance, a calm, in the last speech, a death speech which echoes the earlier wooing scene, so that there is a remembrance of love in her death:

Pull, and pull strongly, for your able strength,
Must pull downe heaven upon me:
Yet stay, heaven gates are not so highly arch'd
As Princes pallaces - they that enter there
Must go upon their knees: Come violent death,
Serve for Mandragora to make me sleepe;
Go tell my brothers, when I am laid out,
They then may feede in quiet.

IV. ii. 237-244.
There is not such another death speech in Webster, none with such calm and assurance. Stripped of all appearances of greatness, the Duchess has an inner integrity and courage which give her true greatness.
Though in our miseries, Fortune have a part,
Yet, in our noble suffering, she hath none—
Contempt of paine, that we may call our owne.

The Duchess, the one character with the courage to
practise a simple virtue, must, because of the powerfully
evil nature of that world in which she lives, die. Is
the play then, as it has been suggested, a 'tragedy of
despair'? The answer is to be found in the attitude to
death and man's existence presented in the play. We have
mentioned already the emphasis on the deception of superficial
appearances — the idea which appeared already in the earlier
play, summed up in Francisco's words

Glories, like glow-wormes, afarre off shine bright
But lookt to neare, have neither heat nor light.2

The couplet reappears in the later play, significantly spoken
by Bosola as he prepares the Duchess for her death. She
assents to its wisdom. In The Duchess of Malfi, as in
The White Devil, it is death which tests the apparent greatness
of the characters, and separates the appearance from the
reality.

In Act II, scene i, Castruchio seeks to hide his lack
of wit, of general ability, beneath the pose of courtier;
this kind of deception is characteristic of the court. But
more significantly, the Old Lady tries to disguise her decay,

1 Bogard, p.141.
2 The White Devil, V.i.38-39.
to conceal the signs of mortality. So do all men, Bosola suggests in his meditation, and this is the most contemptible of deceits, and also the most futile.

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

Mortality is the condition of all men. Man's disguises, whether they are physical, like the Old Lady's, or moral, like Bosola's, are of no account before it. Webster sees through the people of his courts, the great men and women, the parasites and pandars, and the ordinary fearful ones like Antonio; sees through the plotting and manipulating for power and preferment, through all of these things to the common bond of mortality. Men are, beneath the superficial appearances of position and wealth and reputation, equal in this at least. Power, wisdom, wealth, are to no avail.

Just after his meditation, Bosola meets Antonio, who self-righteously rebukes him for his melancholy, a melancholy which Antonio considers only a cover for Bosola's pride in his preferment. It is the usual ironic misunderstanding by
one character of another which appears so frequently in Webster. Bosola answers

Oh (Sir) you are Lord of the ascendant, chiefe man with the Duchesse, a Duke was your cosen German, remov'd: Say you were lineally descended from King Pippin, or he himselfe, what of this? search the heads of the greatest rivers in the World, you shall finde them but bubles of water: Some would thinke the soules of Princes were brought forth by some more weighty cause, then those of meaner persons - they are deceiv'd, there's the same hand to them: The like passions sway them, the same reason, that makes a Vicar toe to Lawe for a tythe-pig, and undoe his neighbours, makes them spoile a whole Province, and batter downe goodly Cities with the Cannon. II.i.99-109.

The true quality of man, his genuine greatness, or lack of it, as in The White Devil, can be tested only in death.

The Duchess, upon her capture at the end of Act III, restates the idea, in her fable of the salmon and the dogfish:

I pre-thee, who is greatest, can you tell?
Sad tales befit my woe: I'll tell you one.
A Salmon, as she swam unto the Sea,
Met with a Dog-Fish; who encounters her
With this rough language: why art thou so bold
To mixe thy selfe with our high state of floods
Being no eminent Courtier, but one
That for the calmest and fresh time o' th' yeere
Do'st live in shallow Rivers, rank'st thy selfe
With silly Smylts, and Shrimps? and darest thou
Passe by our Dog-ship, without reverence?
O (Quoth the Salmon) sister, be at peace:
Thank Jupiter, we both have pass'd the Net -
Our value never can be truely knowne,
Till in the Fishers basket we be showne,
I' th' Market then my price may be the higher,
Even when I am neerest to the Cooke, and fire.
So, to Great men, the Morral may be stretched.
Men oft are valued high, when th'are most wretched. III.v.148-166.
So, in Act IV, with the Duchess's trial and death, the themes of deception of appearances, mortality, endurance and integrity, stated before in speeches such as those of Bosola's, or suggested through the counterpoint of character, now appear directly in the action. The Duchess is deprived of all the mere appearances of greatness, everything is taken from her so that she must face death only with such greatness as may be within her.

Death is the final trial, yet it is also a release from the only too obvious pain of existence. As the Duchess says:

Tell my brothers,
That I perceive death, (now that I am well awake)
Best giift is, they can give, or I can take.
IV.ii.229-231.

But it is not a release into a world where good may be triumphant; there is none of this hope in the echo which comes from the ruined abbey, and which, it is suggested, could be the voice of the dead Duchess. It is only full of mourning for this world. But it is at least an end to suffering, and if, as with the Duchess, death comes as the climax of the struggle to do what one knows is just, the ending comes in peace.

Bogard says that the play is a tragedy of despair, that in The Duchess of Malfi, the controls over evil, still possible in The White Devil, are gone. Decay is everywhere, so that in the end man is powerless to foster good or check evil because death surrounds all actions and renders them meaningless. Even good and evil are appearances when seen against the background...
of common mortality. Such a view, he thinks, leads to despair. ¹ Death is final indeed, underlying everything in the play—but this does not mean that good and evil are mere appearances; rather, there must be a view of the universe which can include death. Within that terrifying framework man must come to terms with death, not try to forget, or to hide, like the Old Lady with her painting, nor live in continual dread, like Antonio or Bosola, so that life becomes a half life.

The course of life, in this play as in the earlier one, is as much a trial as death itself. It is indeed the quality of one's existence which determines one's attitude at the moment of death. The greatness which the Duchess shows at her death is evident also throughout the course of her life. The tiredness and half-hopelessness of Antonio was also part of his life. It is because her life has been what it has, because she has never sacrificed her integrity out of fear, that the Duchess can face death, after the first panic, with calm. For her there need be no remorse, no futility, no apprehension that her life has been wasted. She can face the fact that everything must be cast away before death, for she has not clung tenaciously, like the others, to the surface things, while forfeiting her own integrity.

The courageous endurance of suffering is the only hope for the nobility of man, this courage and the capacity to

¹ Bogard, pp. 141-142.
feel love and compassion, no matter what the danger.

Though in our miseries, Fortune have a part,
Yet, in our noble sufferings, she hath none —
Contempt of paine, that we may call our owne.

V.iii.70-72.

The Duchess dares to love Antonio, though she knows
the consequences of this act. Yet we have already noticed,
in the chapter on Antonio, the basic worthlessness of his
nature. Is there then an irony about the Duchess's love,
after all? The Duchess's true love and fidelity have been
contrasted against the coldness and self-seeking of Julia's
relationships with the Cardinal, Delio, and Bosola: her
courage in loving against the moral cowardice of Bosola and
Antonio. Does the presentation of her lover throw a doubt
across the redeeming power of the capacity to love?

In the wooing scene, the Duchess's directness, once
she has come to the point, the subject of marriage, shows
sharply against the false sound of Antonio's response —

O my unworthinesse.

I.1.495.

and she reproves him for this 'darkening of his worth', but
indulgently, not with real disapproval, as if she is sure
that it is only modesty which provokes his response.

You were ill to sell your selfe,
This darkning of your worth, is not like that
Which trades-men use i'th' City — their
false lightes
Are to rid bad wares off: and I must tell you
If you will know where breathes a compleat man,
(I speake it without flattery) turne your eyes,
And progresse through yourself.

I.1.495-502.
She does indeed 'speak without flattery'; she does not, here at least, see through the valour and virtue of his reputation. She is only tender towards his fearfulness of her brothers.

Does she have any consciousness of what Antonio is truly like, finally? I think we can never be sure of this, though there is perhaps a faint suggestion. After Ferdinand has faced his sister in the bed-chamber scene, and Antonio comes out of hiding to bluster, and accuse Cariola of betraying them, his cowardice seems evident, and the Duchess, answering him, only says briefly

That Gallery gave him entrance. II.ii.173.

making no other comment. We cannot tell if she has seen his cowardice or not. Later, in the speech where she is pretending to banish him:

I have got well by you: you have yeelded me A million of losse; I am like to inherit The peoples curses for your Stewardship:

is there perhaps some awareness of Antonio's deficiencies? Does she know what he is really like, as Vittoria comes to know Brachiano? We can never be sure; later it seems not, when Bosola delights her by speaking well of Antonio, and, ironically, traps her. But then, no matter what she may guess about him, she still loves him. Her love is not an illusion, like Vittoria's. Even if she knows what he is like, her knowledge never qualifies her love, only makes it deeper,
and sadder. The love itself cannot be negated by the worthlessness of its object.

So it is with Bosola. He too, loves Antonio, and cannot see how false a being he is. Delio, too, never sees through the myth of Antonio's virtue,

Your own vertue save you! V.iii.64.

are his last words to him. Delio's admiration, his mistaken impression of Antonio, is an ironic thread through the play. Yet, as with the Duchess's love, it is quality of the love which redeems all, the capacity to love another, despite all danger. Such an emotion is evident in Bosola's words to the servant, after he has killed Antonio:

BOS. Thou seem'st to have lov'd Antonio?

SERV. I brought him hether,

To have reconcil'd him to the Cardinall.

BOS. I doe not aske thee that:

V.iv.85-88.

For once it is not the game of political manoeuvring which counts. The irony of Antonio's worthlessness does not touch the love, does not detract from the tragic stature of the characters. Like the irony in The White Devil, it intensifies the tragedy. That the love is misplaced is a fact of the transformed world, perhaps it is inevitable in such a world; but the fact that it is there at all shows a greatness in humanity which cannot be negated by any circumstance of their environment, or their fate.

1 G. Boklund, The Duchess of Malfi, p.135.

2 ibid., p.136.
Yet the Duchess's death seems to disconcert some critics. Boklund sees her victory, but suggests that it is only sub specie aeternitatis 'a truly chilling perspective.' He sees futility, finally, as emerging triumphant, in the persistent ironic reversals of the last act.

What governs events is nothing but chance, independent of good and evil, physics and metaphysics, and symbolised most appropriately in the figure of a madman. Webster's use of ironic reversals is thus part of a larger scheme: plot and theme thus combine and co-operate to produce a final effect of unrelieved futility, foreshadowed several times in the past by Bosola's bitter denunciations of the world.

But it is important to see the apparent futility of the last act in its true perspective, that is, to see the deaths of the grey-coloured, bewildered characters, in sharp contrast to the nobility and final peace of the Duchess's death. Act V shows us what man is reduced to, under the blows of fate and evil, if he is afraid, if he has never been alive. This is why the deaths of Antonio and Bosola, and even the Cardinal, lack the splendour of those characters in *The White Devil*, because Webster now seeks a deliberate contrast to nobility and courage.

There is, throughout this last act, a weariness, the weariness of the characters themselves - Antonio, Bosola, and the Cardinal. The latter is tired of Julia; even his poisoning of her seems mechanical, a weary gesture. Now all

1 G. Boklund, _The Duchess of Malfi_, p.135.
2 ibid., p.130.
is exhaustion, as if all strength has been spent on 'a poore
lingring life.' In the echo scene the weariness is
particularly evident. Antonio admires the ruins, his
admiration is tinged with sadness, the reflections which they
suggest are melancholy:

But all things have their end:
Churches, and Citties (which have diseases like to men)
Must have like death that we have.
V.iii.18-20.

And the echo says
Thou art a dead Thing.
V.iii.50.

Bosola's exclamation, as he sees that he has mortally
wounded Antonio,

We are meerely the Starres tennys-balls, (strooke, and
banded
Which way please them)
V.iv.63-64.

may suggest a general futility, but it is coloured by his
own disillusion and constitutional melancholy, his despair
at the mistaken death. It cannot really be equated with
Webster's viewpoint. Man may indeed, on one level, be the
victim of fate, yet on another, he may overcome it.

Though in our miseries Fortune have a part,
Yet, in our noble suff'ring's, she hath none -
Contempt of paine, that we may call our owne.
V.iii.70-72.

The Duchess's goodness is not negated by her death,
neither is Bosola's compassion, the fact that he has attempted,
at the last moment, to turn and act justly. Compassion, like
love, or courage, is most necessary in such a world, and yet
it is almost impossible. Bosola states the problem, wavering himself.

O poor Antonio, though nothing be so needfull
To thy estate, as pitty, yet I finde
Nothing so dangerous:

V.ii.365-367.

There is, indeed, nothing so dangerous. Bosola's growth of pity, and the action which springs from this, bring him only heartbreak. For he kills Antonio, blindly, the man he would have saved 'bove mine own life,' above the security which he had held so dear, and he cannot bear it. But the futility, the death by chance, emphasises only the blindness, the cruelty of the world, which makes the courage all the more valuable. Though he cries

Smother thy pitty, thou art dead else:

V.iv.61.

it is the moment of heartbreak, of momentary defeat. Before he dies he remembers

Let worthy mindes nere stagger in distrust
To suffer death, or shame, for what is just -

V.v.127-128.

seeing that, despite his own lack of courage through the course of his life, others can have bravery, and that this nobility is the only counter to the misery and corruption of the world.

Though fate may thwart him, it is the courage of the spirit which counts, the courage which can act for what is just, though it is late, though there will be no hope of success on earth. Delio's words, closing the play, express the same thought

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

V.v.145-146.
Man may live if he does not show compassion, or love, if he
does not dare to, because the consequences will be too dreadful;
but it will be only a half life, like Antonio's. It is better
to die, as the Duchess does, still with integrity, and without
futility.

Bogard sees in *The Duchess of Malfi* a disgust with
mankind, its degeneracy and bestiality. Mortality is 'the
loathsome reality of the processes of natural decay'. But
it is noticeable that Bosola is the one who voices such a
disgust, and we have already seen how his disgust is part of
his own self-contempt, his consciousness of his own degradation.
The images of beasts which Bogard notices are used mainly by
Bosola, and by Ferdinand, who is similarly obsessed with
corruption - so that they see the world twisted round to
reflect their own image. We must be careful, when speaking
of the disgust with humanity found in the play, to distinguish
between those expressions which are part of the individual
characterisations, and that wider view which gives the play
its tone, which fixes the final perspective through which we
view mankind.

There is corruption enough in the play, as we have seen,
but the final attitude towards man is not characterised by
disgust. It is most evident, even more than in *The White
Devil*, that those who reach out to drag others into the

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1 Bogard, pp. 133ff.
blackness of their own corruption are themselves inwardly
racked by this evil, whether they realise it or not. We
may remember, for instance, the evil of Julia and the Cardinal,
but much more we remember the disillusion, almost the horror
of their affair. There is no joy in their cold liaison, and
little pleasure. The Cardinal's callous torture of Julia,
and her use of him, remind one a little of hell, where each out
of his own suffering may gain only the cold pleasure of
watching others suffer equally. The statues which bring such
despair to the Duchess are the art of a madman, himself
suffering beyond despair, trying to purge his own guilt from
another. The torturing of man by man is the nightmare which
runs through The Duchess of Malfi. And the semblance of
rationality which is preserved adds a further dimension of
horror. There is little more terrible than the Cardinal's
and Ferdinand's rationalisations as to why they persecute the
Duchess. Bosola says of them

Your brother, and your selfe, are worthy men;
You have a paire of hearts are hollow Graves,
Rotten, and rotting others.                      IV.ii.344-346.

The cowardice of Antonio, the weakness of Bosola, are
perhaps contemptible, but again one cannot be blind to their
pain, though it is muted in contrast to Ferdinand's. There
is Bosola's continual sense of his corruption, Antonio's
constant fear for his safety which makes his life hardly worth
living. In a different world Antonio may have been truly
worthy, and Bosola might have escaped the circumstances which forced his weakness. Antonio is aware, finally, that his life has been without dignity or courage.

BOS. What art thou?
ANT. A most wretched thing.

V. iv. 55-56.

All is greyness - and their greyness is reminiscent of Eliot's poem, 'Animula':

Issues from the hand of time the simple soul
Irresolute and selfish, misshapen, lame,
Unable to fare forward or retreat,
Fearing the warm reality, the offered good;
Denying the importunity of the blood,
Shadow of its own shadows, spectre in its own gloom...

As with The White Devil, there is the suggestion of a double focus through which we must regard the evil characters like the brothers, and the evil of men generally. It may seem that men are worse in their degeneration, in their destruction of good, than beasts, yet, as the Duchess points out, even the birds are more happy than man.

The Birds, that live i' th field
On the wilde benefit of Nature, live
Happier than we; for they may choose their Mates,
And carrol their sweet pleasures to the Spring:

III. v. 25-28.

As in the earlier play, the vision of an evil humanity merges, in the course of the action, into that of a suffering humanity, bewildered and driven by fate. Contempt, anger, merge finally into a bewildered pity, and this process is again reflected in the imagery. Bogard has noted the images of rapacious birds in the first act², where man indeed may seem on a

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² Bogard, p.134.
level with the beasts.

black-birds fatten best

in hard weather: why not I, in these dogge-days?

I.i.39-40.

He and his brother, are like Plum-trees (that grow
crooked over standing-pooles, they are rich, and
ore-laden with Fruite, but none but Crowes, Pyes,
and Gatter-pillers feed on them:

I.i.50-53.

Yet, in the later part of the play, the bird image has
a different suggestion. Even the Cardinal's description of
Julia as a trained hawk does not have the expected connotation
of a bird of prey. For it is a tame hawk, chained to a
'melancholy perch', taken down and showed game occasionally.
There is no freedom. Julia, evil, unrestrained as she
might seem, is yet more of a prisoner than the Duchess, more
in the power of the Cardinal than the Duchess will ever be.
The images of birds in the later acts continue this idea of
imprisonment, and also of frailty and complete helplessness.
We have already noted above the Duchess's speech

The birds that live i'th field ...

but such freedom is not for man, and anyway, even the
freedom of the birds is dangerous and short-lived. Bosola
continues the image, which seems at once that of a freedom man
cannot attain to, and a vulnerability and helplessness, only
able to wait for capture and death. The birds will be
trapped and killed or imprisoned, as will those human beings
who dare to act freely, like the Duchess.

Finally, over the play, there is not as much despair as seems...
Is that note worse, that frights the silly birds
Out of the corne; or that which doth allure them
To the nets?

III.v.118-120.

They are kept only to be destroyed. With such pity as Bosola offers the Duchess from her brothers

men preserve alive
Pheasants, and Quailes, when they are not fat enough
To be eaten.

III.v.130-132.

Again it is an image of complete helplessness before destructive powers. While the Duchess waits in prison to endure the torture of the madmen, the image appears again, that of the imprisoned, dying birds, suggesting the fragility and suffering and inevitable destruction

The Robin red-brest, and the Nightingale,
Never live long in cages.

IV.ii.15-16.

And then, in Bosola's mortifying speech, just before her death

didst thou ever see a Lark in a cage? Such is the soul in the body: this world is like her little turfe of grasse, and the Heaven ore our heades, like her looking glasse, only gives us a miserable knowledge of the small compasse of our prison.

IV.ii.127-131.

The change from the birds of prey to the helpless ones, waiting only for death, comes with the widening of vision, from the evil of man to his suffering.

It is not disgust which emerges as the dominating attitude toward man, rather it is compassion which mutes the strain of contempt and finally overcomes it, showing, at the same time, the impossibility of judging man in such a world.
Finally, over the play, there is not so much despair as sorrow,
a sadness for the lot of man on earth. The Duchess, just
before her imprisonment, says, as she parts from Antonio

For all our wit
And reading, bring us to a truer sense
of sorrow:

III.v.82-84.

Such a sense hangs over the play, especially over the last
acts, where the vision has deepened, where we are most
aware of the suffering of all of the characters.

The sadness, the nearness of doom, are especially
noticeable in the muted and subtle scene of the echo.
If it is the voice of the Duchess from beyond the grave, as
is suggested, it brings no hope, only melancholy and warning,
and knowledge of death. All of the characters are haunted now,
in some way or another. Delio, at the beginning of the
scene, says of the echo

That many have supposed it is a Spirit
That answers.

V.iii.8-9.

and Antonio observes

'Tis very like my wives voyce.

V.ii.32.

Its sadness is complete - it is 'a thing of sorrow', aware
of Antonio's fate, warning him, yet, it seems, knowing
that the warning is to no avail. It is profoundly melancholy.
Antonio feels his fate close, as does Bosola, senses the
approach of death

Necessitie compells me:
Make scrutiny throughout the passages
Of your owne life, you'll find it impossible
To flye your fate.

V.iii.41-44.
He asks if he shall ever see the Duchess again, and the echo replies

Never see her more:
ANT. I mark'd not one repetition of the Echo
But that: and on the sudden, a clear light
Presented me a face folded in sorrow.

V.iii.54-57.

This is the one clear light - the sorrow, the word sounding through the scene, the still sadness which is caught again by Delio in his summing up of the lot of man. But for the Duchess it would be hopeless, but we cannot forget her; her bravery haunts them all, makes them aware of their own evil, or their failure.

Boklund sees Bosola's final assertion of moral values, and the re-establishment of the surviving son as being indications of hope.

With far less ambiguity than in The White Devil moral integrity is accepted as the true guiding principle of man's life; its representatives even seem to be on the way towards establishing a duchy of virtuous living where evil triumphed before.¹

Seeing also the power of evil which seems to contradict this hope, he concludes that the two themes of futility and integrity of life are not reconciled, but deliberately juxtaposed.

Integrity of life is fame's best friend, but mankind also lives, womanish and fearful, in the deep pit of darkness from where no conceivable integrity will help us up.²

¹ Boklund, The Duchess of Malfi, p.135.
² ibid., p.135.
Moral integrity is the guiding principle of man's life, but the condition of man is such that he may never see it, and his world one in which its practice is virtually impossible, rewarded only by persecution and destruction.

The victory of the Duchess is within herself only, 'beyond death'. There is no real hope of a new order in which such virtue will be possible, in the re-instatement of the young boy. His return is not emphasised, and it is not meant that it should carry a weight of hope; indeed, it seems only a perfunctory gesture required by the convention in which Webster had to work. Any such promise, coming after such a presentation of man's relation to the universe as we have in The Duchess of Malfi would have been inconsistent and unacceptable.

Still, there is not merely futility. Delio's words, and Bosola's, sum up the situation:

**BOS.**

oh this gloomy world,
In what a shadow, or deepe pit of darknesse,
Doth (womanish and fearefull) mankind live!
Let worthy minded here stagger in distrust
To suffer death, or shame, for what is just -

**DEL.**

These wretched eminent things
Leave no more fame behind 'em, than should one
Fall in a frost, and leave his print in snow -
As soon as the sun shines, it ever melts,
Both forme and matter: 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 nobley (beyond Death) shall crowne the end.

V.v.124-146.
There is no expectation of change anywhere but in the minds of the just. There is no need for Boklund to say that the prevailing facts speak against the expectation of a tolerably virtuous future. No such future is expected. Webster sees relief from despair, not in the expectation of a better world, a better mankind, but in the knowledge that there are some, like the Duchess, who will dare to 'suffer death, or shame, for what is just', that there are some who have an inner greatness of spirit, who can live bravely despite the misery of life and meet even the last trial of death with dignity. Knowledge of such greatness is not despair, even though that greatness may consist, at the end, in knowing death to be

Best gift is, they can give, or I can take — IV.ii.231.

Such knowledge will only come with peace when the life has been lived with courage and dignity, and such courage, as we have seen, gives nobility to man, and a victory 'beyond Death.'
Webster's characterisation has been attacked for its tendency towards generalisation. Ornstein writes of The White Devil:

(We are not 'engaged' in the fates of Flamineo and Vittoria because we do not share their emotional responses, which are not only different in degree from normal feeling but different in kind as well)… In the very act of asserting their individuality, Flamineo, Vittoria, Zanche and Lodovico lose it: they imitate one another. Because Webster's dichotomies of strength and weakness are artistically and morally primitive, tragic heroine and whorish servant, noble aristocratic lady and silly cuckold exit alike into the mist.1

And it seems to Bogard that his characters do not possess an inner reality. Only their outer nature is revealed, and even this is frequently absorbed into the panorama of general forces, with the result that the characters often lose even the exterior marks of their distinguishing individuality.2

But we have seen surely that such accusations are unfounded, or proceed from a misunderstanding of the characters, and of the methods used in their creation. In the presentation of Vittoria and Flamineo we may see a contrast of the intuitive as against the intellectual nature, and this contrast may reappear in the characters of the Duchess and Bosola, yet such contrasts do not really prove or even aid the case for

1 Ornstein, p. 139.
2 Bogard, p. 55.
generalisation; for it is not merely to demonstrate this contrast that we have the lives of Vittoria and Flamineo, the Duchess and Bosola, set down before us. Webster's width of vision, his interest in human minds, made him always aware of such contrasts in his characters, but the presentation of such facets is far from being the whole of the characterisation. It would be foolish to see Vittoria and Flamineo or the Duchess and Bosola as representative solely of the respective advantages and disadvantages of the intellectual and intuitive natures. It is only upon analysis that we see this contrast. It adds complexity to the vision of the whole play, and in that must receive some consideration, yet it would be misguided to emphasise its importance too much. Seeing, or reading the play, we may be aware of it, if at all, only amongst other things - what we see most clearly is the struggle of the individuals, through this only do we see the general themes.

We have seen how Isabella, Marcello and Cornelia demonstrate the failure, the inadequacy of traditional values, yet we are conscious mainly of them as individuals; the particular faults which show us the limitation of the traditional morality show us also what kind of characters they are. At Flamineo's death we are aware that this is the lot of the sensitive and disillusioned man in the transformed universe, but we are aware of this only because of the successfully individual character study of Flamineo, not because Webster, like Tourneur, has taken a type and made it throughout perform actions in accord with the thesis which it demonstrates, a type
which is merely representative and has no life of its own. Similarly Vittoria's characterisation shows the problem of judgement in such a world so well, only because it is so successful as an individual character study. Even when a character is used functionally, as Brachiano is, rather than explored as a study in personality, it does not mean that he will remain only a general figure, a mere puppet. Though his actions may be those characteristic of 'the great men' there are still the individual elements in his characterisation, the quickness to suspicion, to rage and threats of violence, the essential shallowness of his nature. He is not a Lussurioso or a D'Amville. At his death we may think (and certainly our attention is drawn to this interpretation by Flamineo's comments) that this is how all great men die, this is what their greatness comes to finally; yet we are conscious also of the individual man who cries out for Vittoria, who is most afraid of death, most attached to the life which he cannot bear to leave.

0 thou strong heart!
There's such a covenant 'tweene the world and it,
They're loath to breake.
V.iii.14-16.

Miss Ellis-Fermor draws our attention to Webster's practice of investigating his characters in a series. She cites, for instance, what she terms the series of Machiavellians, and concludes that he liked to investigate certain types of characters more fully than one portrait could allow. One

1 The Jacobean Drama, p. 176.
notices indeed that the earlier Cardinal and Duke, in *The White Devil*, seem only line drawings for the more fully developed Ferdinand and his brother. There is the same contrast between the controlled nature and the emotional one, especially evident in the scene where both Monticelso and Francisco accuse Brachiano (a scene strongly reminiscent of that one in the later play where the brothers warn the Duchess against remarriage.)

This repetition of kinds of characters shows neither a tendency towards generalisation, nor even a limitation in sympathy. Rather it suggests a concentration of interest.¹ It is not an indication that Webster's characterisation is patterned or consists only of types which are repeated over and over again. Miss Ellis Fermor remarks that Webster is preoccupied in these plays primarily with one particular phase of human experience, with life lived so that action and reflection go on simultaneously under conditions of high concentration illuminating and stimulating each other. And ultimately it is the reflections that are his main interest; those that his people, in moments of illumination, make upon their own discoveries, and those that he, under the thinnest of choric disguises, makes upon them.²

Gosse also noted Webster's preoccupation with the elucidation of his characters, the exploration of their minds.

In *The Devil's Law Case*, the attention becomes completely exhausted in following the development of a dozen characters, any one of whom would have been decisive enough to serve a minor playwright for hero

¹ Una Ellis Fermor, *The Jacobean Drama*, p.176.
² ibid., p.175.
or heroine. So Lionardo is said to have been held in constant check by the desire to work out an ideal of perfect beauty, ...

Hence Webster, in his turn weighted with the desire to give an impossible perfection to his studies of human nature, paused and loitered till life went by, and left less work of his to be garnered than any of his contemporaries.†

It is evident from Webster's method of continual revaluation of a character, which we have noticed especially in his characterisation of Vittoria, that he is concerned with fullness of vision, with the complete exploration of the character's nature, and the circumstances of his life. If he presents evil in a character, he will show the circumstances which modify that evil, if he presents a character with a reputation for virtue, he will show us also those things which may render his virtue suspect, or make it perhaps inadequate in the face of the life which must be lived. The movement is one of exploration towards some possible centre of reality, some truth of character, and through this to the truth of the condition of the world.

The fullness which Webster seeks in his characterisation is closely connected with the theme of the impossibility of judgement. This will be made clear if we contrast the presentation of Isabella, for instance, with Tourneur's Castiza. Both are comparatively minor figures in the action of the play, both are virtuous young women. Castiza's virtue is evident

at once - on her first appearance she hears the story of the rape of Antonio's wife, and her reaction is characteristic:

   Royall bloud: monster he deserues to die,
   If Italy had no more hopes but he.

   I.i.124-125.

From then on each of her actions falls into the stereotyped pattern of the virtuous woman. She is never openly inconsistent, as Gratiana is, but good characterisation does not lie merely in consistency, and Gratiana never really comes alive. Her last words in the play offer no unexpected complexity:

   ... for no tong has force to alter me from honest.
   If maydens would, mens words could haue no power
   A vergin's honor is a christall Tower,
   Which being weake is guarded with good spirits,
   Vntill she basely yeelds no ill inherits.

   IV.iv.

'... no tong has force to alter me from honest.' - this is the essential thing about her conception. She is the virtuous figure who cannot be changed by the evil of the world, who remains quite untouched. There is neither development or exploration of her character. The imagery of light, of cyrstal and angels associated with her shows her function clearly, the contrast of the symbol of virtue with the darkened world around her.¹

When Isabella first appears, in Act II, scene i of The White Devil, we know only that she is the wife whom

¹ The comparison with the Duchess of Malfi, who is also a virtuous woman contrasted against a world of prevailing evil, is evident. The Duchess does not remain merely a symbol, the presentation of the alien nature of her virtue is at one with the unfolding of her character.
Brachiano has wronged. So we should perhaps expect to be sympathetic. But there is an atmosphere of conspiracy as she plans with her brother and the Cardinal how she shall charm back an 'infected' Brachiano.

Sister away, you must not yet bee seene. II.i.9.

Next we see her with her husband. Against the fierce, cynical court world, the cloying sweetness with which she addresses him seems a trifle suspect, coming as it does after Brachiano's violent interview with her brother and the Cardinal. We see that, for all her supposed virtue, she is deceitful, denying that she has gone to her kindred about him.

... these your frownes
Shew, in a Helmet, lovely; but on me,
In such a peacefull interview, me thinks
They are too-too roughly knit. BRA. O dissemblance!
Do you bandy factions 'gainst me? Have you learn't
The trick of impudent basenes to complaine
Unto your kindred? ISA. Never my deere lord.
II.i.171-177.

So that the situation is not so simple as it might have seemed—it is not merely the case of the sweet and virtuous wife maltreated by the callous husband. The dissimulation, the emphasis which she places on her own virtue, and on his wrongdoing, the cloying and perhaps false sweetness, the artful viciousness of her diatribe against Vittoria, all qualify her apparent virtue. But this impression itself is qualified by the exclamation of pain, as she leaves.

Unkindnesse, do thy office, poore heart, breake,
These are the killing greifes which dare not speake.
II.i.278-279.
We cannot deny that she has loved Brachiano, and that she has suffered. We cannot forget this, and cast her aside merely as a whimpering milk-sop, just as her deceit does not absolve Brachiano from a particularly vicious murder.

In the characterisation of Isabella both the concept of a virtuous character, and the method of presentation is different. With Isabella it is not merely the content of the speeches to which we pay attention, as it is with Castiza. Castiza speaks out of the vacuum of her own stereotyped personality, we cannot move beyond the expressions of conventional virtue which are allotted to her. With Webster's character, the full effect comes as much from the underlying current of emotion and thought which the words, the pauses, the slight changes in tone, may suggest. Her words to Brachiano are heavy with insinuation, even a kind of disguised taunting.

O my loved Lord,
I do not come to chide; my jealousy!
I am to learne what that Italian meanes -
You are as welcome to these longing armes,
As I to you a Virgine.

II.i.162-166.

Above all, we can place the speech in context with her other speeches and actions, and contrast them to those of the other characters, to see the doubtful nature of her virtue. The effect is one of a widening, an opening out of circumstances, so that we see all ways at once, gaining a deeper insight into the natures of the characters. This width of vision is a constant feature of Webster's characterisation.
But as well as having a greater fullness in this sense, Webster's characters also have a sense of inner reality which is lacking in Tourneur's characterisation. Tourneur's characters, in a sense, state their own natures in the actual content of their speeches, directly telling us what they are. Lussurioso says, for instance

\[
\text{Ime one of that number can defend} \\
\text{Marriage is good: yet rather keepe a friend.} \\
\text{Glue me my bed by stealth - theres true delight;} \\
\text{What breeds a loathing in't, but night by night?} \\
\text{I.iii.116-119.}
\]

and our attitude to the character is directed; we are virtually told what to think of him, what he is, by Vendice's comment, 'A very fine religion!' But, as with Castiza, it is a set speech - there is nothing individual in it, no sense of any continuity of thought beneath the words. Similarly the Duchess reveals herself. Attempting to seduce Spurio, she is made to say (it is an indication of the nature of Tourneur's characterisation that we always feel that his characters are 'made' to say what they do, rather than speak naturally, from themselves)

\[
\text{It is as easie way vnto a Dutchesse,} \\
\text{As to a Hatted-dame, (if her loue answer)} \\
\text{But that by timorous honors, pale respects,} \\
\text{Idle degrees of feare, men make their wayes} \\
\text{Hard of themselues - what haue you thought of me?} \\
\text{I.ii.140-144.}
\]

1 The Revengers Tragedy, I.iii.120.
and we know that she is evil. Yet there is no sense of her as a real living being, no sense that her speech could be motivated by any fear or doubt or real emotion. It is a set 'character piece' put into her mouth. We see what she says and register that this is in accordance with Tourneur's conception of an evil woman. We can take speeches like the Duchess's and Lussurioso's in themselves, we do not have to look deeper to see what their motivation may be - there is no further depth than that which is expressed in their mere content. How they may speak it is of no account.

Vendice may seem, superficially, of the same type as Bosola or Flamineo - a court malcontent, aware of and disgusted by the evil of court society. There is a cynicism in Vendice's speeches: they reveal nothing of his character, except in the blunt, conventional way we have noticed with Lussurioso and the Duchess, and we may be reminded of Flamineo's bitterness. Yet the cynicism is not, as with Flamineo and Bosola, part of the individual characterisation, it is not informed with a sense of loss, or of self contempt - one can't penetrate beneath, to find what bitter motive compels it, what it may be a cover for. The cynicism of Tourneur's characters is more likely to be imposed from the outside, to have no roots in the individual characterisation. There is no sense of personal disillusion in Vendice - only a generalised hatred of evil.
The language of his characters is one of Webster's most important means of conveying the half hidden thoughts and emotions which may lie beneath the surface of his characters' actions and speeches. Their words are not mere exposition, they are, as with the best dramatists, also an expression of the speaker's character. Webster can indicate, in the imagery and rhythm of his speeches, the quality of a character's mind. We have seen the pompousness and emptiness of Antonio's speech, which suggests the quality of his character. Then there is the fevered and hysterical viciousness of Ferdinand's speeches, and the quickness, the characteristic high tense note of Flamineo's. There is even a contrast in sound - we see it in Marcello's speeches, the way they fall flat against the living quality, the struggling thought of Flamineo's words.

The imagery of animals used continually by Flamineo indicates, as we have seen, both his feeling of the loss of man's essential fineness, and his sense of his own degradation, just as Bosola's constant references to intelligencers make us aware that, beneath the treachery of his acts as creature to the Duke, his mind dwells continually on his own corruption. Often the silence of a character will indicate something of his true feeling, as with Flamineo, seeing his mother winding Marcello's corpse, or Ferdinand when he enters the bed-chamber of the Duchess. Again, there is the method of a single line or phrase repeated throughout the character's life - so Vittoria's assertion 'I will not weep', finally comes to
suggest, not defiance, but confusion and despair. Through all of these methods, together with that most important one, which we have noticed earlier, the use of character foils, Webster penetrates beneath the surface appearance of his characters to the inner reality.

Stoll, in *John Webster*, following Symonds' observation that Webster's characters are presented in 'brief lightning flashes of acute self-revelation', remarks that there are two ways by which the dramatist achieves this effect:

1. first, by brief, vivid, and picturesque description of the outward appearance or facial expression of characters, or of action going on at the same moment upon the stage; and secondly, by isolated, highly-charged, utterances of the character himself in moments of passion.

But we have seen, in the studies of individual characters, that the function of such description of outward appearance is as much to show the mistaken impression, or at least the partial vision of the speaker as it is to actually indicate the nature of the person described.

Of the description Stoll says that 'There is no analysis, observe; rather, the method is pictorial;' Antonio's descriptions of Bosola, the Cardinal, Ferdinand and the Duchess are indeed drawn from the outside, but, in a sense, it is not Webster who describes them so, but the

3 ibid., p.128.
other characters. Despite the flashes of truth in such descriptions, as when Antonio notes Ferdinand's 'most perverse, and turbulent Nature', and sees that the Cardinal is not the 'brave fellow' of common opinion, they do not go deeply, and their limitation reveals the essentially clouded nature of the characters' perception of their fellow men. The Doctor describes Ferdinand in his madness,

and he howl'd fearfully:
Said he was a Woolff: onely the difference
Was, a Woolffes skinne was hairy on the out-side,
His on the In-side: bad them take their swords,
Rip up his flesh, and trie: straight I was sent for,
And having minister'd to him, found his Grace
Very well recovered.

V.ii.16-22.

but he does not see the guilt which has brought on the madness and which is evident in every action and speech of the mad Ferdinand.

What I have don, I have don: I'll confess nothing.
V.i.52.

It is the same with the Cardinal's description of Bosola, after the latter has thrown aside his security

thou look'st ghastly:
There sits in thy face, some great determination,
Mix'd with some feare.
V.v.8-10.

After Bosola's soliloquies, his hesitation and doubt, we see him suddenly, as the Cardinal sees him, from the outside, in the very sickness of terror. The full force of such descriptions indeed depends upon the audience and reader having more knowledge than those who give the description, and being
able to recognise their blindness, and through that the complete isolation of the other characters. The same is true of the scene Stoll notes:

PES. Marke Prince Ferdinand,  
A very Salamnder lives in's eye,  
To mocke the eager violence of fire.  
SIL. That Cardinall hath made more bad faces with his oppression  
Then ever Michael Angelo made good ones,  
He lifts up's nose, like a fowle Por-pisse before a storme -  
PES. The Lord Ferdinand laughs.  
DEL. Like a deadly Cannon,  
That lightens ere it smoakes.  
PES. These are your true pangues of death,  
The pangues of life, that struggle with great states-men -  
DEL. In such a deformed silence, witches whisper Their charmes.  

III.iii.58-71.

where the full force of the description depends again upon the audience and reader having a fuller knowledge than is possible to the courtiers - on knowing why Ferdinand's laughter is deadly, why the Cardinal's oppression is more terrible than even they could imagine, on seeing, with our knowledge of the hidden life of Ferdinand, the striking aptness of the image.

In such a deformed silence, witches whisper Their charmes.

The second method of characterisation (the 'highly charged utterances ... in moments of passion') Stoll sees as working from the inside rather than from the outside, though only momentarily. He cites such examples as Ferdinand's

Cover her face: Mine eyes dazell: she di'd yong. IV.ii.281.

and the Duchess's sudden ''Tis welcome:' when she sees Ferdinand standing in her bed-chamber. Other examples which
come at once to mind include Flamineo's

I would I were from hence.

V.iv.85.

and the Cardinal's

When I looke into the Fish-ponds, in my Garden,
Me thinkes I see a thing, arm'd with a Rake
That seemes to strike at me:

V.v.5-7.

being lines where, in an instant, we may see deeply into the
most hidden thought of the characters. Such lines point down
to an underlying stream of thought and emotion which is only
occasionally visible on the surface, yet, when it is, striking
upon our imagination so powerfully that we can see the
character, quite suddenly, in a new light. But it is not a
completely new picture of him, suddenly super-imposed on our
old impression - rather it is a fuller vision of the character,
a re-ordering of our experience of him.

This is, after all, the way in which we see people in
ordinary life; the sudden insight which comes with an
utterance or action of the person, and which shows us all that
we have known of him before, re-ordered in a new whole.
Suddenly they become clear to us, and we realise that they have
always been this way. As with the Cardinal, standing in the
garden by the dark pool, the insight is always associated with
a concrete picture, and behind this picture we can see the sum
of all their experience, the whole pattern of their lives
which has brought them to this moment. With Flamineo's 'I
would I were from hence.' we seem to see him, standing,
stricken, amongst those other characters who cannot see what he is, and we know almost the colour and expression of his face, the stillness of his body and the terror of his mind. It is with Webster, as Ten Brink said of Chaucer, that he

... sees the speakers vividly before him, and has in his mind's eye the facial expression which accompanies every word they utter.  

But the sudden insight into the characters which such lines give, is not merely momentary in effect - it must presuppose a whole skillful and carefully planned building up of the character, otherwise we would not be able to see how the pieces settle. The Cardinal's constant restraint, shown in the continual contrast with Ferdinand, the coldness of his liaison with Julia, the veiled threats to the Duchess, the silences and the turn of his words, the tiredness and the perpetual desire for concealment - all these fall into place. When we look back over the Cardinal's life, over his actions and speeches, we see nothing really that could not have happened without perfect consistency. When he begins to waver, when he sees in the dark pond the thing armed with a rake, it is not altogether surprising. We can see, looking back, (as we cannot when we are faced with the sudden changes in Tourneur's characters, for instance) that this hollowness has underlain all of his power and self control. The change, which is not really a change in the Cardinal but in our way of looking at him, has been prepared for in his characterisation throughout the play,

and this is the way with most of the other characters. With those more fully drawn of Webster's characters, there is beneath the surface of the words and action, the appearance and reputation of a character, something which is constant, something which we may term a continuity of consciousness, a sense of the character's inner being. It is there even in such an apparently simple dialogue as that between Vittoria and Brachiano in Act I, scene ii. Though Flamineo draws our attention to the sexual interpretation of the dialogue, yet it seems that there is some current of emotion beneath the words which his insinuations do not reach.

BRA. What valew is this Jewell? VIT. Tis the ornament of a weake fortune.
BRA. In sooth Ile have it; nay I will but change My Jewell for your Jewell. FLAM. Excellent.
His Jewell for her Jewell, well put in Duke.
BRA. Nay let me see you weare it. VIT. (Here) sir?
BRA. Nay lover, you shall weare my Jewell lover. FLAM. That's better, she must weare his Jewell lower.

I.ii.211-217.

It is as if the dialogue itself ran only along the surface, while the minds of the characters brooded on other things - through the language shows the current of half-hidden desire and fear. This deeper level of consciousness is what gives to Webster's characters their sense of inner reality.

There is a most careful selecting and ordering of detail in Webster's construction of his characters. In *The Duchess of Malfi*, as we have seen, it is perhaps too careful, so that the characters seem to have lost a little of the life of Flamineo and Vittoria. The imagery, rhythm and tone of the speeches, the nature of the actions are

1 See note on p. 264.
detailed into the life of the individual character. Julia tells of the Cardinal's wooing, and we see how perfectly in character is the nature of the courting, with its control, its considered tone, as if he had planned it out of the court gentle man's handbook, he who can never do anything spontaneously, yet knowing what kind of behaviour is expected from a lover can simulate it perfectly. The piteous wound, the sick liver - what could be more correct, and as such, more fitting from the Cardinal. It is not merely a matter of consistency, for Lodovico surely is a most consistent villain, even down to his passion for Isabella, and in him there is not this living quality, the sense of real consciousness beneath the words and actions.

It is only there in those of the characters whose minds he has explored most thoroughly, Flamineo, Vittoria, the Cardinal, Ferdinand and even Bosola. It is, in effect, the creation of a world of consciousness for each character. The images of the speeches seem to come from the characters' own experience and memories of life, not to be merely imposed by the mind of the dramatist. We see this, for instance, in Ferdinand's mad speeches, where each image seems to emerge from a deep and terrible knowledge of pain, guilt, isolation, and the apprehension of damnation and hell.

It is in his exploration of the human mind, and especially of the response of his characters to an environment of evil and suffering, that Webster makes his greatest contribution to drama.
CONCLUSION

(i)

Critics have attacked Webster's plays for being 'incoherent', 'decadent' and 'chaotic'. ¹ Salinger, speaking of Jacobean Tragedy generally, says

But the tone of these plays, with one exception, is not only more subjective but more incoherent than that of the older popular drama. ² and of Webster in particular, he writes

The poet's solemnity and his groping for a new basis for tragedy only serve to expose his inner bewilderment...³

Though Webster presents us with a world of confusion and evil both as a foil to the struggle of his characters and as a background to his own search for value and meaning in the Transformed World and in the life of man, this does not mean that the vision of the play is 'decadent', or incoherent. It will surely be evident from this study that the charges of sensationalism often brought against Webster cannot stand. Never does Webster use such devices merely for dramatic thrills - the Duchess's torture, Brachiano's torment and Ferdinand's madness are important both in the development of characterisation

³ ibid., p. 341.
and the demonstration of theme. Neither does he exploit evil merely for its own sake.

Flamineo's vision, near death, and throughout the play, is in many pieces; yet the fragmentary knowledge of the characters, as they face death, does not mean that the play is incoherent - to show the broken nature of that knowledge which is within the characters' grasp is not to write a play which is in itself merely fragmentary and without unity. There is in both tragedies a sense of almost unfathomable complexity, of a great diversity of experience, yet all are drawn together in an attempt to describe the condition of man's existence. The problem is similar to that of a metaphysical poem - the heterogeneous images and the underlying consciousness of unity which brings together all the different experiences. So it is with Webster's plays - the apparently separate and disparate experiences of the characters are drawn together to plot out the meaning of the play. Webster indeed gives that 'impression of the heterogeneous diversity of real life' of which Cecil thought him incapable.¹

A study of the death speeches of Flamineo and Vittoria shows Webster's care in construction, the planning of every detail to give an effect both complex and concentrated in

¹ D. Cecil, *Poets and Storytellers*, London, 1949, p.29
speeches which are the culmination of the characterisation of Flamineo and Vittoria, and of the whole perspective of man and the universe established in the play.

VIT. My soule, like to a ship in a blacke storme, Is driven I know not whither. FLA. Then cast ancor. 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. Art thou gonne And thou so neare the bottome? falce reporte Which saies that woemen vie with the nine Muses For nine tough durable lives: I doe not looke Who went before, nor who shall follow mee; Noe, 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. VIT. O happy they that never saw the Court, Nor ever knew great Man but by report. FLA. I recover like a spent taper, for a flash And instantly go out. Let all that belong to Great men remember th'ould wives tradition, to be like the Lyons ith Tower on Candlemas day, to mourne if the Sunne shine, for feare of the pittifull remainder of winter to come. 'Tis well yet there's some goodnesse in my death, My life was a blacke charnell: I have caught An everlasting could. I have lost my voice Most irrecoverably: Farewell glorious villaines, This busie trade of life appeares most vaine, Since rest breeds rest, where all seeke paine by paine. Let no harsh flattering Bels resound my knell, Strike thunder, and strike lowde to my farewell. V.vi.248-276.

Throughout the whole of this passage there is the dramatic interplay between the actual event, and the memory or reflection aroused by it - the movement of the passage is the movement of the characters' consciousness. Here most evidently the images penetrate beneath to the fear and desperation, indicating the current of the character's thought. From the sight of his sister dying, Flamineo's thoughts move
back across the course of their whole lives. He speaks to Vittoria, seeing her wounded by the revengers, near death,

Prosperity doth bewitch men seeming cleere
But seas do laugh, shew white, when Rocks are neere.

and the couplet is not merely a sententia thrust in from the common-place book because it is appropriate to the moment; it is fused into the consciousness of the character, making us realise that perhaps Flamineo's mind is cast back also to the beginning, to the wooing scene

that as men at Sea thinke land
and trees and shippes go that way they go, so both heaven and earth shall seeme to go your voyage.

I.i.150-152.

Now that they are both dying their past illusion is most clear to them, and behind the knowledge of illusion is the realisation of pain and grieving, the 'infinit vexation':

Wee cease to grieve, cease to be fortunes slaves,
Nay cease to dye by dying.

When he turns again to his sister

Art thou gonne
And thou so neare the bottome?

the image is one of drowning, of an infinite depth in which they will be lost, sunk into oblivion. It is an image of the sea still, so that the sense of futility, of illusion, of blind and hopeless wandering, is linked to death.

My soule, like to a shippe in a blacke storme,
Is driven I know not whither -

The emphasis of his words, one imagines, falls upon the 'thou' - again we are brought back to the immediate dramatic situation. He sees his sister lying there, she who was
always so full of a life which seemed denied to him, for whom always he had a grudging admiration beneath the surface scorning cynicism, and her own imminent death brings the knowledge of his own so much closer. He speaks, apparently lightly, but the levity thinly covers the seriousness:

falce reporte
Which saies that woemen vie with the nine Muses
For nine tough durable lives:

One imagines the critical complaint - why, now, at this crucial moment, must Flamineo 'unburden his notes' on the life-span of the Muses? But Flamineo, like Bosola, is a scholar as well as a Machiavellian, and not a scholar of Antonio's kind, whose comments are heavy and learned and artificial, a pompous decoration which is meaningless in itself. Flamineo's learning, his wit, his delicate use of words, are part of his very consciousness of experience, a way of thinking which is part of his life, fused into his every action and thought. When we remember him we remember his voice, talking and talking, and the wit which plays about everything, about every person and situation, every stroke of fate, above the pain and the terror, and the very dreariness of grieving. Here, in the very words:

nine tough durable lives

there is an irony, a bitter sound. Vittoria, before him, is so obviously frail.

Then he turns again from his dying sister to himself, to a full realisation of his own separateness, which he has known all along, but which in the face of death is most clear,
knowing his own going into darkness, alone as he has always been alone.

I do not looke
Who went before, nor who shall follow mee:
Noe, at my selfe I will begin and end.

All else is confusion, the 'infinit perplexity'

While we looke up to heaven wee confound
Knowledge with knowledge. o I am in a mist.

After Vittoria dies, he speaks again, himself near death.
The image of the taper comes suddenly, the exhausted candle giving the impression of the flickering momentary life which goes into darkness, into total oblivion.

I recover like a spent taper, for a flash
And instantly go out.

He speaks of those, like himself and his sister, and perhaps even Marcello and Isabella, who have been the pawns of the Great

Let all that belong to Great men remember th'ould wives tradition, to be like the Lyons 1ith Tower on Candlemas day, to mourn if the Sunne shine, for feare of the pittifull remainder of winter to come.

As the image of the spent taper seemed to come from his own apprehension of the tenuous nature of life, so this image is suffused with the knowledge of the fragility of happiness.

It is a mark of the success of Webster's characterisation that we can see the image as coming from Flamineo's own memory, rather than as being merely imposed upon him by the dramatist.

It seems that Flamineo's mind, casting back, remembers the lions in the tower, sees them now, with the final crushing of his hopes, with his sister dead, and he himself dying, coloured
with his own apprehension. The words - mourn, pitiful - have a thin woeful sound, and the tower is a place of execution.

Then, once more, the awareness of evil which has been part of Flamineo from the beginning is evident -

'Tis well yet there's some goodnesse in my death,
My life was a blacke charnell:
again his mind moves back, attempting to draw all of the threads of his life together, and then the wit comes, the brilliant wit which is almost a defiance, near to the deep oblivion.

I have caught
An everlasting could. I have lost my voice
Most irrecoverably:
The juxtaposition of the small things, the cold, the losing of the voice, with the most infinite and final of experiences intensifies the impression of man's fragility. And the image of the voice is so apt for Flamineo, who has always been most voluble, most bitter and gay above the fear. Even in desperation and utter confusion his wit can still play, though at the edge of death.

He turns, and cries
Farewell glorious villains,
but the admission of the glory in evil holds within it the knowledge of the pain and futility of these same great ones, for he says then

This busie trade of life appeares most vaine,
Since rest breeds rest, where all seeke paine by paine.
In Flamineo's mind, as through the whole of the play, there is the constant qualification on qualification. This is his final realisation, when he sees most clearly - yet still he
turns, bravely and defiantly, and dies in the grand manner, with all the old bravado. We know the fear lies beneath, as we do with Vittoria's

I will not in my death shed one base tear
yet we can admire the courage which turns away from fear, accepting it, and seeking only to cover it over with glory.

Let no harsh flattering Bels resound my knell,
Strike thunder, and strike loud to my farewell.

The concentration of this speech is surely evident. Middleton Murray speaks of 'the highest gift of all in poetry, that which sets poetry above the other arts: I mean the power of concentrating all the far reaching resources of language on one point ...' and in some of the greatest moments of his plays, Webster does have this. The brilliant images of Flamineo's death speeches are not merely parts of a collection of poetic utterances, mere 'flowers stuck in sand' — even if the images come from sources other than the poet's own imagination, it is his own mind which fuses them into the lives of his characters, and finally orders them into the vision of his play. This analysis of Flamineo's death speech surely demonstrates the imaginative power of Webster, and such a speech is typical of his method. Through his imagery Webster uses that which is passing, ephemeral, yet definite


and concrete; the many coloured pieces of his characters' experience and memories, to suggest the movement of the mind, the soul. In these speeches, the imagery, tone, and movement are all concentrated to the one point, all fused into the expression of the characters' consciousness, of his living and dying, through that revealing 'a depth of vision which penetrates the surface violence or anarchy of life to illumine the underlying pattern and meaning of man's fate.'

Even Flamineo's wit is an essential part of the final vision. Critics have complained of that spirit of apparent mockery which seems to destroy all values, question even the moments of greatness and glory. But the wit which we have seen in these last speeches is one which preserves, even heightens the tragedy. We have observed the fact that Flamineo has a tragic awareness of futility and waste which is lacking in Brachiano, and which gives Flamineo a tragic stature which the Duke is without. So the undercurrent of humour which runs throughout the play, ironical and often bitter, also gives a kind of tragic awareness, a constant widening of the play's focus, an apprehension of the possibility of futility even at the point of victory, and this gives a kind of toughness to the tragedy. Flamineo's wit does not diminish him, as the wit through the play does not diminish the other characters, for beneath are always the rage and

1 Ornstein, p.129.
bafflement and finally the sorrow.

It is not only the world of the court which he shows us, the politicians and parasites and great men, but the whole of humanity. Through the pattern of his tragedy he reaches to the universal nature of man. In this lies his significance as an artist. This is not to say that he wholly succeeded in his presentation of that vision. There are dramatic faults enough in the plays - too many scenes which symbolise the corruption of the world, the fables which may demonstrate part of Webster's vision of man (as with the Duchess's parable of the salmon and the dogfish) or those which may show the condition of mind of a character (as with Ferdinand's terrifyingly blank recitation of the fable on Reputation) may yet mar the dramatic power of the play, time lapses and inconsistencies of plot. Yet these are relatively unimportant; basically, they are caused by the strain between that which Webster wished to present as his vision of experience, and the convention which he was forced to use. The conventions of Jacobean drama were not really suitable for a careful delineation of the human mind.

Perhaps Webster's plays would have been more efficient as mere pieces of drama if he had attempted to simplify his characters in the interest of dramatic effectiveness, for much of what they are will necessarily not be evident in the quick passage of the stage performance. But that would have meant his achievement, his portrait of the human mind, would have been less; and this was what Webster did best, and what gives to his tragedies that power and those elements of greatness which they have.
Both Tourneur and Webster make use of the same background—the Transformed World, with its evil, corruption, and incredible confusion. Their poetic vision centred round this same universe, it gave to them the experience which they will transform into a vision of the world and man. Tourneur's vision is essentially a bitterer, narrower vision of humanity - The Revengers Tragedy is a play of absolutes, with a rigid distinction between good and evil, and this, as we have seen, is reflected in the characterisation.

Tourneur may experience the evil, the rottenness of the Transformed World as intensely, perhaps, in a sense, more intensely than Webster. But his attitude to evil is very different. He has a sharp, intense apprehension of evil and darkness, which gives his play an almost lyrical quality which is evident in the poetry of Vendice's speeches, and in the rapid patterned order of his action. It is through the pattern of his plot rather than through his characterisation that Tourneur communicates his theme - and the pattern of external event reveals only a world of evil, and finally the unlikely triumph of Divine Retribution.

The order, the final moral pattern which comes into The Revengers Tragedy does not emerge from the play itself, it is not the sum of the actions and speeches of the characters, searched for through the lives which we have set before us in the play. The ordering of experience is not the dramatist's
own in the sense that he has formed it himself from his own experience, rather it is something ready-made and to hand, which he imposes over the world of his creation. Tourneur accepts the old standards of value and judgement and applies them to the Transformed World.

In dramatic structure alone (if we except the ending) Tourneur's play may indeed be superior to Webster's. The Revenge Tragedy is tighter and more compact than either The White Devil or The Duchess of Malfi. Perhaps Tourneur benefits from the single-mindedness of his vision, which gives him a concentration which Webster can achieve only at moments. But if there is less ambiguity in Tourneur there is also less complexity. The insight of the play is characterised by vividness and intensity rather than by depth or breadth of vision. This can be seen easily by comparing the trial scene in Tourneur's play with that in The White Devil.

In the trial of the youngest son there is the sharp distinction between good and evil which characterises the play. It is obvious that the youngest son is guilty, and equally obvious that justice will not be carried out. The formalised yet most dramatically effective action of the scene is merely a demonstration of that evil of society suggested by the Judges' words:

That Ladies name has spred such a faire wing
Ouer all Italy; that if our Tongs
Were sparing toward the Fact, Iudgement it selfe
Would be condemned and suffer in mens thoughts.
I.ii.63-66.
By the time we reach the trial scene in *The White Devil*, a most careful preparation has been made – we are aware of Vittoria's guilt, and Flamineo's also; but of so much else besides, so that we can realise the impossibility, in such a world, of judging any person or action without doubt or hesitancy. We suspect Vittoria's fear beneath the seeming assurance, and the corruption and doubtful motives of her accusers. Furthermore, we know the nature of the world in which they are placed, and the way in which it has forced both Vittoria and Flamineo to evil. The trial becomes not a trial of Vittoria's innocence or guilt, but a focus for all the ambiguities of the play, including those of Vittoria's own character.

Tourneur's trial scene demonstrates, and implicitly condemns, the impossibility of justice in a world of corruption, but to him justice means only the due reward of virtue and the punishment of vice. Webster's scene shows, more deeply, the very impossibility of applying these old values, their uselessness, and even irrelevance in the face of the complexities of life in that ruthless world.

Tourneur is narrower in his outlook, he does not see so much as Webster. The experience offered by his play sharpens rather than widens our apprehension of experience – we do not see something new, but we see what we have seen before more sharply. The complexity of Webster's vision of man; the constant qualification of his evil, the knowledge of the impossibility of judgement in such a world, give him a much more
difficult task of presentation than faced Tourneur. It is, as we have seen, largely through the exploration of the minds of his characters, and the complete rendering of their motives to action and the circumstances of their lives, that Webster conveys his themes, and the conventions with which he worked were not wholly suited to this purpose.

Yet he succeeded admirably, particularly in the delineation of characters of fine mind and sensibility forced into evil and eventual destruction by the prevailing corruption of the Transformed World. He brought, to the 'Tragedy of Blood' a new dimension of compassion, and a depth of vision found only in the plays of Shakespeare. Stoll writes, of the Malcontent, as he appeared in Webster's tragedies:

... the high-flying is gone - the haughty, hypocritical piety and railing and indignation. The Malcontent no longer looks on men as on grasshoppers before him, but numbers himself among them; and, leaving the old cocksure heights of censure, he has come down into the mystery and pathos, the paradoxes and irony, of human inquiry and endeavour.1

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1 John Webster, p. 131.
Additional Notes

Note to p.138.

Critics have complained about the time lapse between the second and third acts in *The Duchess of Malfi*; Ferdinand's fury at the end of Act II, his threats of terrible vengeance seeming to dwindle into a three year wait before he shows any sign of taking revenge. They have tried to explain this away but again their attention is directed towards excusing Webster's lapse, rather than attempting to show that such a three year period of inaction could be itself part of Ferdinand's characterisation. J. R. Brown writes:

Webster has been taken to task for allowing Ferdinand to be inactive for two or three years following the discovery of the Duchess's child. But his response to this news is both wild and paralysed ... while he wants to act (and does act in fantasy) he is unable to bring himself to do so. Such a state of being is consistently portrayed in this scene, and later ... his silence on coming into her chamber in III.ii and his subsequent questions, generalisations, cruelty, and refusal to act, are best understood as a mixture of passion and paralysis.2

His essential confusion makes him hesitate before taking any action - he keeps from the point where he must commit himself and thus acknowledge what it is which drives him.

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2 Ornstein, p.130.

2 DM, pp.67-68n.
Note to p. 195.

F. L. Lucas, in an additional note to the 1958 reprint of his edition of the play, writes:

There still seems to persist in some critics the notion that we are to think the Duchess is in some way blameworthy for wedding Antonio, and in some degree deserving of her fate. 1

Both Clifford Leech 2, and Miss Bradbrook 3, as well as other critics in their studies of the Duchess's character, take care to point out the theoretical objections to the remarriage of widows, and to unequal marriages, that prevailed at the time of the play's composition. These, however, seem to bear little relevance to Webster's own study of the Duchess. There seems little suggestion in the play itself that the Duchess is blameworthy, as a widow, for re-marrying, or that she is wrong to marry a man of lesser rank. There is even in the play an insistence on the equality of man, beneath the surface differences of rank and reputation.

1 p. 35.
2 The Duchess of Malfi, pp. 51-52.
3 Themes and Conventions of Elizabethan Tragedy, pp. 199-201.
The awakening of the characters cannot be seen merely as a statement that they have felt the onset of conscience. The realisation of each of them is differentiated, according to the nature of their character and the pattern of their lives - Bosola's remorse, mingled with his characteristic fear and hesitation, Flamineo's terror, Ferdinand's guilt and madness. And Brachiano suffers distraction and a terrible fear of death rather than the onset of an unlikely conscience. In each individual the realisation, if there is one, is a little different. It is never inconsistent, imposed by the exigencies of the plot, blindly and blankly improbable. We can always see that it has been prepared for throughout the play - there is an added insight into character rather than a blatant inconsistency. When Vittoria cries

O my greatest sinne lay in my blood.

Now my blood paires for't.

we can remember, looking back, how all along she had been still half caught in the traditional morality, anxious not to offend her mother, and terrified by her curse. So now, at the moment of her death, we are not surprised by her 'conscience' - rather we see her character fully, the pattern of her life falls into place. The difference between this and the onset of conscience in a character like Tourneur's Levidulcia is immense.

1 Bogard, for instance, writes that in Webster 'the word 'conscience' is used as a description and explanation of all the mental and spiritual upset ... The recognition of a guilty conscience is the only acknowledgement of inner turmoil. It is cursory, undeveloped statement, revelatory of the effect of turmoil rather than of the actual anguish.' (pp.47-48).
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