

SOCIAL COMMENTARY AND THE FEMININE CENTER IN JOHN WEBSTER

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ABSTRACT

In the early seventeenth century, John Webster published two significant works, both of which examined the societal issues of his day. In The White Devil and The Duchess of Malfi, Webster made an unprecedented move in placing a strong female character at the center of his tragic plays. The transition that is evident through these plays goes far beyond the gender shift in his tragic heroes. Through Webster's use of satire, societal issues such as the stereotypical role of the female, elements of class-consciousness, and the role of faith in a patriarchal society are unmasked and examined throughout each work. However, Webster does not stop at simply exposing the issues evident to an audience in his time; he also suggests the possibility of a new social awareness and an interrogation of the struggles that bind his characters to their stereotypical roles in society. Although this possibility is not fully realized, as Webster's characters fail to transcend any major boundaries, small successes and satirical references within Webster's work suggest that these issues were significant, both to Webster himself and to the audience that had a hand in the societal shift taking place.

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my mother, Lida Princevalli, whose strength and laughter along the way have meant more to me than she will ever know.

INTRODUCTION

Recognized for his work in Renaissance drama, John Webster continues to be revived and debated by critics even in the twenty-first century. Despite various critiques concerning the playwright's style and his inattentiveness to the tragic form, Webster is mostly remembered for two great tragedies. The White Devil, first performed in early 1612, and The Duchess of Malfi (1613-14) survive as Webster's two great masterpieces. The first serves as the gateway for the other, and it is interesting to note the stark similarities in the framework of each drama. Both plays are praised for their use of the female as the focal point of dramatic action; however, the feminine center serves only as a glimpse into the abundant social commentary with which each play is truly concerned. John Webster's works examine the role of the female as prescribed by a patriarchal society, the recognition of class-consciousness within this same realm, and societal views concerning faith as revealed by religious and other figures; most often these issues are highlighted through Webster's use of satire in both plays. However, despite Webster's characters' often satiric insight into the social climate of their time, these men and women remain corrupt and ultimately fail in escaping the stereotypes they interrogate in each play.

Researchers have extensively studied possible sources for both The White Devil and The Duchess of Malfi and believe that each play is rooted in historical fact. This is significant in that the underlying issues examined in Webster's plays, most specifically the role of the female, reflect the patriarchal European society of Webster's day and age. The White Devil, for example, retells "an Italian scandal of adultery and murder in high places" (Ranald 32). The play is loosely based on the tragedy surrounding Vittoria Accoramboroni, a beautiful Italian woman born in 1557. M.C. Bradbrook suggests, as many critics do, that Webster could have heard the scandal surrounding Vittoria's arraignment and death from translator John Florio, who would have had

direct access to Bracciano's real-life heir, or perhaps might have read an account of the story in a Fugger newsletter (121). Similarly, The Duchess of Malfi had its basis in historical fact; however, Webster may have been unaware of this basis. According to Ranald, the true Duchess of Malfi was Giovanna, granddaughter of Argonese King Ferdinand I of Naples. The original Duchess was married in 1490 at age twelve, widowed, and married for a second time in 1504 to Antonio Bologna (48). Bradbrook and Ranald agree, as do many others such as Charles R. Forker, that Webster's main source for the play was most likely William Painter's Palace of Pleasure (1567), a context that, according to Bradbrook, "did not enforce any historic stringency" (144). The fact that Webster's second play was not as historically grounded as his first is significant, mainly in that the societal issues examined in The White Devil were intentionally re-examined in The Duchess of Malfi, Webster's second, more well-received play. It can be argued then, that these issues were pressing, if not to Webster himself, then to the audience of a Jacobean drama. In effect, the role of Webster's female characters, as well as other issues interrogated throughout his plays, suggest the possibility of transcending patriarchal limitations, and highlight the societal shifts taking place at that time.

Historians have noted an enormous societal shift taking place in Europe around the mid-sixteenth century and lasting until approximately the early 1700s. Perhaps initiated by the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, or, in fact, only strengthened as a result of her rule, social, political, and religious change allowed women to gain some power during this era. In 1558, John Knox, a Scottish reformer, remarked that he was horrified to think that women might actually gain power in society. He argued that "God not only ordained that women were barred from authority, but given their essential nature they would be incapable of wielding authority if they illegitimately usurped it" (Levin and Sullivan 1). However, during this period, change was inevitable, not only

concerning issues of power, but changes in behavior and the way women expressed themselves, as well as how women's roles were viewed by society as a whole. According to Carole Levin and Patricia A. Sullivan, enormous social, political, and religious changes allowed women to gain some power during this time, not only changing female behavior and how women expressed themselves, but changing the way they were perceived by society (2).

In 1977, Joan Kelly-Gadol posed an important question: "Did women have a Renaissance?" Merry E. Wiesner argues that this question prompted an important re-examination of that particular period of literature, especially when Kelly-Gadol answered her own question with a very surprising "no" (Wiesner 1). Kelly-Gadol goes on to argue that women experienced a setback during the Renaissance that their male counterparts did not, "a contraction of personal and social options" (Wiesner 1). However, a great deal of re-thinking has taken place among new historicists since Kelly's proclamation, and the overall consensus seems to be that while women may have experienced a contraction of their public role in society, they just as often objected or chose to ignore limitations imposed upon them. The limitations affected not only women of the upper class, but middle and lower class women as well (Wiesner 3).

During the Renaissance, law codes expanded in an attempt to place limitations on the female half of society, despite social class. Women were already unable to make wills, be witnesses, and buy and sell property; soon, however, further restrictions were placed on financial decision-making, women's work, and education. New historicists now argue that women were well aware of this tightening and made great strides during this period to protect their rights, not necessarily as individuals, but as members of a greater network. Linda Woodbridge notes in her book Women and the English Renaissance that "Frederick, Duke of Wurttemberg, who visited England in 1602, wrote that 'the women have much more liberty than perhaps in any other

place’’ (172). Despite restrictions being placed upon them, women during this period united to express disapproval of apparent inequalities prevalent in English society.

From the late sixteenth to the early seventeenth century, restrictions were specifically tightened concerning widows and unmarried women, demanding that these women choose a male guardian to oversee financial affairs (Wiesner 4). However, women responded by fighting back against these restrictions, often times taking their male guardians to court, especially when they felt their financial interests had been mishandled. Wiesner cites various supplications and requests in the archives of many German cities, such as Munich and Strasbourg, concerning the initiative women took to defend their interests. Beginning in the mid-fifteenth century, for example, master craftsmen guilds began to impose limitations on widows who at one time had access to unrestricted rights. While Wiesner’s examples are German, she argues that similar developments were taking place in Lyon, France, and in England (according to scholars Natalie Davis and Pearl Hogrefe) (23). This period also saw restrictions concerning women’s work as a result of economic, political, and ideological shifts in society such as

[...] the rise of territorial states, dislocation caused by the religious wars, increasing suspicion of unmarried women, secularization of public welfare, campaigns against prostitution and begging, new ideas about women’s “proper” role and ability to be trained. Whatever the reason behind it, in every occupation in which women’s work was restricted, the women themselves objected. (Wiesner 7)

Much like the widows who fought to continue operating their shops after the death of a husband, women in medicine, for example, as well as female writers fought back against similar restrictions and defended their roles in society. Maria Marquardt of Augsburg and Elizabeth Heissin of Memmingen appeared in front of city councils to challenge ordinances restricting

women from practicing medicine (Wiesner 9). Female poets and writers like Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, and Scotswoman Mary Oxlie, expressed their sentiments and justification as females in writing for a larger public in the works themselves (Wiesner 16). Wiesner goes on to suggest that widows were the most vocal individuals concerning women's work during this period. Women sought release from restrictions being placed on them in their local courts, guilds, and city councils (Wiesner 7). However, the price of speaking out against injustice was often times greater than expected. According to Levin and Sullivan, a woman's honor was inextricably tied up with her sexuality, as sexuality was indeed perceived in one of two ways. Promiscuity was connected to eloquence, as silence was equated with chastity (6). A vocal widow was perceived by patriarchal society as promiscuous and therefore dishonorable.

Several scholars have expressed the opinion that women often sacrificed femininity for education, gender for the reputation of being a learned individual. During this period of change many felt that "no woman could be both learned and sexually active" (Wiesner 13). Wiesner contends that women who "chose the life of learning were generally forced to give up a normal life" and live a life of celibacy, sacrificing natural feminine desires. Woodbridge agrees and suggests that the ideal of a chaste woman coincided with male attempts to deprive women of certain freedom (171). If a woman proved to be both educated and feminine, much like Vittoria in The White Devil, she was often labeled a whore. According to Ann Rosalind Jones, "Female silence was equated with chastity, female eloquence with promiscuity" (qtd. in Levin and Sullivan 6). Honor in women was often associated with celibacy, so if a woman wanted to be educated, she must also remain celibate and "reject the world of women" (Wiesner 13).

As a result of shifting Renaissance society, Wiesner contends that there were, in fact, women as early as the sixteenth century who "recognized that the low intellectual status of their

sex may not have been the responsibility of ‘nature,’ or of the women themselves” (14). By the late seventeenth century, women began taking steps that could truly be considered feminist, expressing themselves publicly and realizing that women were experiencing discrimination and unequal rights simply as a result of their gender (Wiesner 15). Woodbridge agrees and believes that there is “much to suggest that the Renaissance literary obsession with aggressive women reflected the realities of London life” (171). Foreign visitors such as Thomas Platter, Frederick, Duke of Wurttemberg, and Fynes Moryson all voiced their opinions that women in London took many liberties, such as visiting playhouses and taverns unescorted, that women in other countries simply did not possess. Woodbridge goes on to say that this common belief was often displayed in literature of this period (171). Through his writing, it seems clear that John Webster was more than aware of this shifting society in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century. Through characters of various social class and gender, Webster presents a social commentary representative of this period and opens up the possibility of significant social change, though his characters, in the end, fail to break through any social barriers.

Societal changes taking place in the late sixteenth to the early seventeenth century affected women in the home and in the public sphere. Change affected the way women were perceived in drama as well. Female characters of this period were more assertive and favorably accepted in the dramatic realm. According to Linda Woodbridge, female characters were able to speak their minds and were “likelier to rail than weep” (244). However, this was not always the case, especially in regard to literature of the time:

The first decade of the seventeenth century had witnessed unprecedented misogyny in the drama; the basically satiric temper of the early Jacobean theater, in part a literary fashion and in part a response to a genuine malaise prompted by change and instability in the

nation's political, social, and economic, and even scientific life, produced a body of plays which delineated with savage cynicism the lewdness, infidelity, aggression, shallowness, cupidity, and deceit of a legion of faithless citizens' wives, insatiable widows, and homicidal whores. Women had joined other character types as scapegoats for the ills of society. (Woodbridge 249)

By the second decade of the seventeenth century, however, the characteristics of women in drama had changed: female characters began to court their men, distinguish themselves as leaders in government, commit noble suicide much like their male counterparts, and even direct action within the play itself. Women in drama concerning the court were known to go to law to redress grievances, acquit themselves in court when held against their will, and even reflect an interest in sexual iniquities of the time (Woodbridge 245-47).

Some attribute this radical change in drama that took place in the second decade of the seventeenth century to pressure applied by female playgoers and the economic importance of females in the audience. From 1610 to 1620 women were more vocal about their disapproval of the way they were often portrayed in drama. Many times female playgoers would hiss, walk out, and make threats to stop attending plays if dramatists continually abused women (Woodbridge 252). Perhaps some playwrights altered the roles of women in order to provoke thought in an audience representative of this shifting society, while others sought solely to appease the increasingly influential voice of women. However, J.W. Lever points out that "Webster's satirical tragedy looks beyond individuals to the society that has shaped them," and that both of his more well known plays, The Duchess of Malfi and The White Devil, "take as their theme the debasement of a whole civilization [...] the White Devil is not Vittoria Corombona but Renaissance Europe" (86). If examined from this point of view, female roles in Webster's drama,

as well as other issues repeatedly examined throughout his works, were not only representative of a shifting view of gender and power, but a mirror for various components of societal transformation.

CHAPTER ONE: THE ROLE OF THE FEMALE

The Female and The White Devil

In the early seventeenth century, John Webster seemed to be going in new directions with regards to gender and the way in which he chose to portray his central female characters as strong-willed, tragic figures. However, both of Webster's tragedies, The White Devil and The Duchess of Malfi, portray their leading female character as being trapped in a world of masculine power. According to Kate Aughterson, "Women are double victims. In the ideal patriarchal system they are displayed as proxies of masculine power, and vessels of masculine legitimate power" (225). Aughterson goes on to describe the women of Webster's plays as "sacrificial victims" to this patriarchy. They appear as pawns in the hands of their masculine superiors: husbands, men of influence, political and religious men of status. Laura Bromely agrees: "The language of men in Vittoria's society reveals that they perceive women only in terms of sexual stereotypes." She goes on to note, "Any woman whose behavior departs from the norms of passivity and silence is labeled and condemned as a 'whore,' 'fury,' or 'devil'" (50). Writing in the early seventeenth century, Webster represents the female gender as tending towards transgressive behavior but without the power to validate itself. As a result, Webster's characters are better able to unveil political and social abuses of their time, often through a satiric tone, without necessarily reforming them.

In both plays, Bromely's claim that women, unless dutifully silent, are looked upon as whores and furies is indeed true. On one occasion in The White Devil, Flamineo remarks, "Women are like curst dogs: civility keeps them tied all daytime, but they are let loose at midnight; then they do most good or most mischief" (1.2.199-201).¹ Numerous times the male characters refer to Vittoria in the play as an "excellent devil" and even compare her at one point

to Eve; Monticelso asserts that “Were there a second paradise to lose / This devil would betray it” (3.2.70-71). The Duchess, too, in her eponymous play is referred to in the derogatory ways that Bromely outlines. According to Ferdinand, she is a “lusty widow.” In the early seventeenth century, the word “lusty” is documented as being used in two diverse contexts. In one definition the term is defined, “of persons and their attributes: joyful, merry, jocund, cheerful, lively” (“Lusty,” def. 1). In the other definition, as it is used most often in Webster’s work, as well as in the writing of John Fletcher in 1610 and Randle Cotgrave in 1611, “lusty” is defined as being “full of desire, desirous” and “full of lust or sexual desire” (“Lusty,” def. 3 and 4). These definitions seem more fitting to Webster’s work, as many times Ferdinand makes references to the Duchess as being filled with a sinful desire associating her with the demonic, calling her “screech owl” and imagining her and Antonio’s bodies being “burnt in a coalpit” (2.5.68). Ferdinand’s imagery associated with the Duchess is often analogous with hell, and his vision of her burning with Antonio closely resembles a witch burning on a stake. Ferdinand makes the imagery much more gruesome, as he comments that the ventage of the coalpit has been stopped, creating a sense of suffocation both physical and spiritual. Images such as this can be found in both plays and are often associated with women as Webster presents his audience with strong, yet stereotypical female characters. Each character, it seems, is capable of breaking through the boundaries of a patriarchal society, yet by the end of each play, these females have been destroyed.

In Webster’s first revenge tragedy, The White Devil, Vittoria Corombona takes center stage as the play’s leading female. Immediately it is suggested that she is taking part in an adulterous affair with Bracciano, who happens to be married to the innocent and pure Isabella. Her affair proves to be a double-edged sword in that she will not only be tried for adultery but

also implicated, though not charged, in the plot to kill Isabella. Vittoria's unruliness is remarkable when it is compared to the more conventional behavior of characters such as Isabella and Cornelia, who both exhibit the characteristics of an obedient female. It is instructive to examine the effects produced by patriarchal constraints on these women, both the obedient and outspoken.

In act 2 of The White Devil, Isabella accepts the fault for her divorce with Bracciano: "[...] Of such a separation; let the fault / Remain with my supposed jealousy, / And think with what a piteous and rent heart / I shall perform this sad ensuing part" (2.1.223-26). Soon after, she laments the power of men wishing that she could carry out her "apprehended wishes." Francisco refers to her as a "fury" as she suddenly, playing her predisposed part, voices her desire to "dig the strumpet's eyes out" and divorce Bracciano of her own free will (2.1.247). In this scene, Isabella portrays the "expected" and "accepted" behavior of a woman, according to Laura Bromely. She is at first passive and silent, even accepting of her husband's abuse, choosing to sustain Bracciano's relationship with Francisco over exposing her husband's adulterous affair. When finally choosing to voice some emotion over these circumstances, she is dually expressing the stereotypes of the acceptable female, becoming a "fury": hysterical and irrational (Bromely 52). By the end of the scene she is a "foolish, mad, / And jealous woman," according to Francisco (2.1.265-66).

Cornelia's role as Vittoria's dishonest, mad mother follows much the same stereotype. Aware of the relationship between Vittoria and Bracciano, Cornelia takes pity on Camillo, Vittoria's husband, and wishes an early death for the adulterous couple. Fearing her "fits of madness," Bracciano associates Cornelia with evil omens dreading that "thy rash tongue / Hath raised a fearful and prodigious storm." He now sees her as "the cause of all ensuing harm"

(1.2.305-06). Cornelia, like Isabella, plays into the role that is expected of her. Bromely suggests, “When [Cornelia and Isabella] lie, as Isabella does about her estrangement from Bracciano, and as Cornelia does about the murder of Marcello, they do so not to assert themselves and defy the values and actions they oppose, but only to avoid still more disruption and violence” (53).

Originally, Cornelia wishes death for her daughter due to the shame she feels for bearing a child who has become adulterous. Unlike Cornelia and Isabella, however, Vittoria does not resort to madness when coming under pressure from the male characters in the play. Instead, Vittoria uses her position as a woman to expose corruption within this patriarchal society, rather than feigning “madness” as a corrupt situation is unveiled. In many ways her motives and methods are quite masculine, perhaps indicating why it is her character that remains the focal point of this great tragedy.

Despite any virtue in Isabella’s attempt to protect the relationship that exists between her husband and brother, and despite Cornelia’s obvious dissatisfaction at the adulterous behavior of her daughter, these female characters remain powerless in the play. Cornelia’s warnings to Vittoria and Bracciano are ultimately ignored, and her “madness” is believed to be a sign of the devil. Isabella, as well, is tossed aside by her husband, even after her pathetic attempt to preserve his profitable relationships. In the end, Isabella is murdered. In order for a woman to be empowered in The White Devil, Webster suggests that she must eventually take on the characteristics of a man. At one point, Vittoria admits, “And womanhood I tender; but withal / So entangled in a cursed accusation / That my defense of force, like Perseus, / Must personate masculine virtue to the point” (3.2.135-35). While Vittoria savors the fact she is a woman, she realizes that in order to defend herself she must take on the characteristics of a man; like Perseus, Greek rescuer of the virtuous Andromeda, Vittoria must convey unwavering strength in the

presence of evil. Though she herself is not virtuous, Vittoria believes these men see her as an uneducated female, incapable of masculine strength. Therefore, in order to rescue herself from an unwanted fate, she must find strength like that of Perseus to defeat her enemies in court. However, even in taking on such masculine characteristics, Vittoria is still chastised by the men who control her in society.

At Vittoria's arraignment, she is faced with a lawyer who speaks in Latin: "Domine iudex, converte oculos in hanc pestem / mulierum corruptissimam" (3.2.10-11). In translation according to the footnote, the lawyer remarks, "My lord judge, turn your eyes upon this plague, the most corrupt of women" (1691). By using Latin here, the lawyer encodes a view of women that is dismissive and reductive; he belittles Vittoria by speaking a language that he assumes she will not understand. The lawyer suggests that Vittoria's actions, like a plague, are deadly and infective. Immediately, however, Vittoria turns to Francisco: "Pray, my lord, let him speak his usual tongue. / I'll make no answer else." (3.2.12-13). Francisco is surprised to hear that she does, indeed, understand Latin, as she also understands that more than half of the people who have come to hear her arraignment do not. She insists, "I will not have my accusation clouded / In a strange tongue. All this assembly / Shall hear what you can charge me with" (3.2.18-20). Vittoria is aware that the lawyer's use of Latin hides a derogatory view of women. This view is an integral factor in Vittoria's arraignment, as she has not truly committed any crime. She realizes that her choice as a woman to commit adultery is being put on trial and voices her apparent dissatisfaction with the efforts of the court to persecute her gender, rather than her part in the crime at hand. Vittoria is bold in her remarks. Not only does she insist the man speak a language that everyone may understand, but also that he speak it clearly so that the charges against her are not obscured. Her language comes across as proud, haughty even; she faces these

men without fear. She seems to recognize the use of learned language to keep her in her place. Unlike Isabella and Cornelia, Vittoria will back down from no one; however, like them, she is scorned by this patriarchal society.

Through Vittoria's knowledge of Latin, Webster points out that she is indeed of an educated and noble family. By King James' reign, members of the nobility and upper class society began to feel the pressure to educate their daughters. It isn't until the early seventeenth century that one finds references to schools for females, usually run by married women, particularly in London. Up until this point in society, it was customary for families of the upper class to educate their daughters at home in the areas of reading, writing, music, dance, and needlework (Yeandle 272). According to Merry Wiesner, however, learning was still a male preserve at this time, and further education in a woman was tolerable only if she rejected the acceptable role of a woman (13). Vittoria in The White Devil is both educated and indeed a woman. However, as much as her character attempts to break through the boundaries of women in her time, her adulterous affair ruins her and places her in a category with other "strumpets" and "furies." As educated as she is, she finally fails to break the stereotype placed upon her by this patriarchal society.

As the arraignment continues, the lawyer attempts to overwhelm his audience with an educated vernacular. The lawyer remarks,

Most literated judges, please Your lordships
So to connive your judgements to the view
Of this debauched and diversivolent woman,
Who such a black concatenation
Of mischief hath effected, that to extirp

The memory of't must be the consummation

Of her and her projections. (3.2.27-33)

The lawyer's language here relies on words that are heavily indebted to Latin and obscure in meaning. *Diversivolent*, "desiring strife or differences," and *concatenation*, defined as a "union created by chaining or linking together," both are examples of a highly educated language used in an effort to keep Vittoria in her place as a stereotypical woman ("Diversivolent," def. 1 and "Concatenation," def. 2). The lawyer here asks the judges to view her as a woman who chooses to be linked to mischief and strife. He suggests that Vittoria will make an effort to alter the judges' perceptions of her actions. The lawyer recognizes Vittoria's education and ability; however, he casts a dark shadow over her attempts to use her education to free herself of any charges against her. Vittoria is quick to point out his bombast with sarcasm and contempt: "Surely, my lords, this lawyer here hath swallowed / Some pothecary's bills or proclamations, / And now the hard and undigestable words / Come up like stones we use give hawks for physic" (3.2.36-39). Vittoria mocks the usefulness of the lawyer's elevated language and deems it irrelevant. She eloquently conveys her contempt by comparing the lawyer's words to stones once regurgitated by hawks without being digested. The lawyer's words are similarly indigestible. They do not convey anything that is real, and they keep us at distance from what women truly are. The lawyer's language, similar to the ancient remedy, is flawed. Vittoria is obviously not impressed and certainly not feeling overwhelmed in the situation that she has found herself. She is, however, coming dangerously close to exposing the incompatibility of the patriarchal language system with reality. Despite showing quite the opposite characteristics to those of Isabella and Cornelia, Vittoria is still disdained by the male characters, again referred to by Monticelso as a "devil" who would betray a second paradise (3.2.70-71).

When Francisco and Monticelso realize that they cannot charge Vittoria for the murder of Camillo, they suddenly decide to discredit her and charge her with adultery instead. Critics contend that the audience is well aware that Vittoria is doomed from the very beginning of the trial, despite the lack of evidence against her because “she [has chosen] a sexual relationship over a sterile marriage or widowhood” (Bromely 50). As the trial moves forward, Vittoria proves that she is able to outsmart any of her accusers. Monticelso produces a letter that reveals the adulterous meeting place of Vittoria and Bracciano:

At an apothecary’s summerhouse
Down by the river Tiber- view’t, my lords-
Where, after wanton bathing and the heat
Of a lascivious banquet- I pray, read it.
I shame to speak the rest. (3.2.196-200)

Vittoria responds to Monticelso’s attempt to condemn her for the “crime” of adultery; she admits that she was tempted, but that “temptation to lust proves not the act. / *Casta est quam nemo rogavit*” (3.2.201-202). Her defense is a Latin reference to Ovid: “she is chaste who no man has solicited” (1696). Her words are a jab at the lawyer who once attempted to dismiss her by speaking in a foreign tongue. She emphasizes the men’s lack of conclusive evidence and suggests they convict her solely because the Duke did love her: “beauty and gay clothes, a merry heart, / And a good stomach to feast are all, / All the poor crimes that you can charge me with” (3.2.210-12). In reaction to her conviction, Vittoria forces the patriarchal figures to defend not only their actions, but the language used in her sentencing as well. Monticelso confines Vittoria “unto a house of convertites,” a term she questions, as he goes on to explain it is “a house of penitent whores” (3.2.266, 271). Vittoria questions the nobility in erecting such a building and

asks whether she is to live there. Francisco tells her to have patience, but she insists that she must seek “vengeance” instead. Vittoria cries out, “A rape, a rape!” (3.2.278). She believes that the men have “ravished justice.” Her cries are quite fitting. While she has, indeed, committed adultery, her misdeed has exposed the even greater crimes of the patriarchal society that has condemned her. Her recognition of the mitigating language surrounding her persecution reveals her awareness of the unjust arraignment and the attempts of her prosecutors to keep her in her place as a stereotypical woman living in a patriarchal society. Laura Bromely suggests that “Webster purposely problemizes the questions of Vittoria’s guilt and forces us to judge her in relation to the other characters” (51). In many cases, these characters, making their own assertions concerning the role of a woman in society are corrupt in nature, or they are extreme opposite examples of the female gender when compared to Vittoria.

Among all of the female characters in the play, Vittoria best exemplifies a woman victimized within a corrupt patriarchal society. Granted, she commits adultery, but the extent of her crimes does not compare to the misdeeds of her male counterparts, even according to some of the male characters in the text. Lodovico suggests in act one, scene one, that Bracciano “[...] by close panderism seeks to prostitute / The honors of Vittoria Corombona” (1.1.41-42). Even Monticelso admits that Vittoria was bought by Camillo’s father as a bride for his son. “He bought you of your father,” Monticelso remarks, proving that Vittoria was locked into her marriage, not by choice but by negotiation beyond her control (3.2.24). Early on, the audience is made to see Vittoria’s nonconformist attitude as a product of her victimization by a patriarchal society. Through her unwillingness to conform to the “accepted” role of a woman and by the way in which Webster prompts the audience to be sympathetic to her character, he challenges us to reconsider the values of a patriarchal society and perhaps even to critique these values.

However, despite her efforts, Vittoria does not transcend the boundaries of society within the pages of the drama itself; she falls victim, much like the other female characters in the play, to the patriarchy that confines her.

The Female and The Duchess of Malfi

Much like its predecessor, The Duchess of Malfi reveals a woman who, despite her attempts at transcendence, is ultimately encumbered by the female stereotypes of her time. In Webster's play, a widowed Duchess is warned against remarrying by her controlling brothers, Ferdinand and the Cardinal. Despite her admirable love for a man ranked below her in social status, the brothers view any mention of a second marriage as an act of dishonor against the family. Webster portrays the various female stereotypes that are sustained by a patriarchal society in his play through each of his female characters, much as he does in The White Devil. However, it is possible that the Duchess has made an advance over Vittoria in her status as a woman. No longer is the central female character playing the part of the adulteress as in The White Devil; instead, in The Duchess of Malfi, the part of adulteress is reserved for a minor female character. This exchange of roles seems significant; however, like Vittoria, the Duchess ultimately fails to transcend any true boundaries created by the patriarchal society in which she lives.

Both Cariola and Julia are minor characters when compared to the Duchess, but they serve an important role in the play, much like Isabella and Cornelia in The White Devil, exposing further patriarchal stereotypes. Some may think Cariola is virtuous in bearing witness to and hiding the Duchess' marriage to Antonio. From the very beginning she provides the Duchess with sound advice and is quick even to suggest forebodings about a second marriage: "For I'll conceal this secret from the world / As warily as those that trade in poison / Keep

poison from their children” (1.1.353-55). Cariola obviously has a close relationship with the Duchess, as she is willing to conceal her secret. However, the use of the word “poison” as a metaphor for the secret she keeps casts doubt on Cariola’s true views concerning the Duchess’ marriage to Antonio, and her loyalty will be questioned later in the play. Further on Cariola advises the Duchess not to trust Bosola, to which the Duchess replies in contempt, “Thou art a superstitious fool” (3.2.318). At this point, the audience begins to feel sorry for Cariola, who, although virtuous and a friend to the Duchess, is not able to step up and embrace the power that could be hers, perhaps due somewhat to social status. In the end, like the Duchess, Cariola falls victim to this patriarchal society making her character all the more pathetic. “I will die with her,” Cariola shouts as she is removed from the Duchess’ room (4.2.198). However, when Cariola is met with the executioner’s rope, she quickly calls out, “I am quick with child,” in hopes that the men will take pity on her (4.2.252). Eventually, Cariola is strangled for the secret she has kept, and the audience is left to question her loyalty to the Duchess in the first place.

Unlike Cariola, Julia is by no means a loyal character. Taking part in an adulterous affair with the Cardinal, Julia exposes his corruption as a religious figure, but still implicates herself as an immoral woman taking part in an adulterous affair. Not only does Julia extend her love to the Cardinal, but to Bosola as well, and in an odd turn of events, is propositioned by Delio. Her character is complex and, like Cariola, despite her knowledge of intimate secrets and her relations with a powerful figure in the play, she is ultimately discarded. However, there is much to be said for Julia’s aggressiveness in her relationship with the Cardinal. She remarks,

You have concealed for me as great a sin

As adultery. Sir, never was occasion

For perfect trial of my constancy

Till now. Sir, I beseech you. (5.2.266-69)

Julia is aggressive in pleading with the Cardinal for information regarding Antonio; however, upon hearing the information and swearing that she will conceal it, she is poisoned by the book on which she has taken her oath. Once again, a chance at transcending any type of boundary restricting the female character in this play is thwarted by the men who ultimately control the society in which they live. Julia is enterprising in seeking the secrets of the Cardinal, but also subject to masculine control because she is trying to get information for another male character, Bosola.

Much like Vittoria and the other female characters in both plays, the Duchess is categorized early by her brothers as a desirous, “lusty widow” and forbidden to re-marry, despite the suggestion that she has waited the customary period after her husband’s death. The two brothers insist:

Ferdinand	You are a widow:
	You know already what man is. And therefore
	Let not youth, high promotion, eloquence-
Cardinal	No, nor anything without the addition, honor,
	Sway your high blood.
Ferdinand	Marry? They are most luxurious
	Will wed twice. (1.1.296-300)

Even though at this point in the play the brothers are unaware of her intentions to marry Antonio, they are adamant that the Duchess shall not dishonor her family by wedding more than once. Christy Desmet suggests,

Characters within Webster's play also attempt to define the Duchess as a woman rather than a prince by resorting to feminine stereotypes. To her brothers, she has the vices typical of widows. In a studied duet warning their sister against remarriage, Ferdinand and the Cardinal build their argument on a litany of common female faults: because women are all driven by lust, widows who remarry are not far removed from whores. Naturally shameless, women also neglect their reputation; and weak in both mind and will, they succumb easily to amorous advances and smooth tales of courtship. (47)

While the stereotypes suggested sound much like the characters of Cariola and Julia, the Duchess is attempting, according to Desmet, to "transcend conventional roles" and become "neither maid, nor widow, nor wife" (47). And truly, it is at this point in the play where the Duchess begins to struggle with her identity and push the boundaries associated with a stereotypical, "acceptable" female character, all the while attaining her status as a hero.

The Duchess attempts to transcend boundaries in the next few scenes of the play when, first, it is she who proposes to Antonio and decides they shall be married simply by the exchange of vows. She is ambitious, often a flaw of any tragic hero, and is associated with this trait and its connection to masculinity. In speaking of himself, Antonio reminds the Duchess that what she is attempting is dangerous: "Ambition, madam, is a great man's madness" (1.1.421). Antonio warns the Duchess of being too ambitious and also suggests that she is, indeed, great. She must woo Antonio "because none dare woo" a widow like the Duchess. However, the Duchess is ambivalent in attempting to forsake her identity as a widow. She tries to free herself from this attachment to her late husband by proclaiming, "'Tis not the figure cut in alabaster / Kneels at my husband's tomb" (1.1.455-56). The image of the statue, frozen in a manner of reverence for her dead husband, is renounced. She then struggles in identifying herself as being separate from

this label: “I do here put off all vain ceremony, / And only do appear to you a young widow” (1.1.457-58). Even though she has taken one step in escaping the category of widow, she falls back into it when she tries to characterize her feelings for Antonio. She cannot identify herself as anything other than being connected to her dead husband. As the Duchess attempts to distinguish herself from the image of being a “lusty” widow, she only seems to substantiate her brothers’ label by “lusting” after and marrying Antonio and, indeed, dishonoring her family.

According to the patriarchal discourse of Ferdinand, once the Duchess has stained her reputation in regards to her family, she becomes a “vile woman” and is associated with screech owls, apparitions, and a curse, much like Vittoria. In her attempts to remain noble and not satisfy her brothers’ accusations with any type of response, by not challenging the “the Renaissance discourse of ‘woman,’” the Duchess “allows herself to be read as a ‘whore’” (Jankowski 92). Perhaps, in the end, she only contributes to her own stereotypical classification. However, despite these references and her apparent boundaries, both physical and abstract, the Duchess does make a tentative attempt to transcend this classification. We can see this most clearly through the comments of Bosola, the horse caretaker and henchman to both Ferdinand and the Cardinal, who by the end of the play begins to view the Duchess from a new perspective. Bosola’s commentary is significant. At first, he is associated with “a very quaint invisible devil” and is hired to spy on the Duchess (1.1.262). He is motivated by gold and suggests to Ferdinand that the Duchess has been infected by some kind of witchcraft, having chosen to marry someone beneath her. Further on in the play, however, Bosola recognizes “a behavior so noble” in the Duchess and begins to refer to her as “Your Grace” (4.4.5, 18). He is overwhelmed by her strength and nobility under such dire circumstances; the Duchess, in turn, becomes a “prince” worth serving to Bosola, rather than a “lusty widow” corrupted by sorcery. However, as much as

a reader may yearn to credit Bosola's view of the Duchess, he cannot be trusted. Webster assigns important social commentary to a character that further represents corruption in society. In fact, the Duchess expresses yet again that her stereotypical role in society cannot be transcended as she, too, reminds her audience once more before her death, "I am Duchess of Malfi still" (4.2.138). At this moment, the Duchess makes a strong claim to independent status, a final attempt to break out of the confines that restrict her status as a woman. She views herself as a prince and is resigned to accept her death nobly. In her last moments she is almost saint-like, forgiving her executioners, unafraid of what may come. Her strength is magnified by Bosola's response as he later confesses that he is sorry for murdering such a noble woman and vows to revenge the death of the Duchess. Once again, however, similar to Julia, this aggressive language on the part of the Duchess may suggest an assertion of power, but, like this minor character, the Duchess is ultimately unable to transcend the boundaries of this patriarchal society.

Webster was not the first to portray controversial women in his plays. William Shakespeare, a contemporary of Webster, dealt with similar challenges in reference to the standards of a gender conscious society. However, a debate exists in reference to Shakespeare's masculine women, and his intentions in portraying these women are questionable. Both All's Well that Ends Well and The Taming of the Shrew are known for their aggressive female characters, but recognized more for their comical value and the stereotypical way in which each ridicules its female characters, rather than portraying any possibility of transcendence beyond the typical female stereotype. Helena, for example, in All's Well That Ends Well, has been condemned for her masculine characteristics in her cunning plot to gain her husband's love, as well as being criticized for her weaknesses in staying with a husband who never loved her in the first place. Kate, in The Taming of the Shrew, is remembered for being just that, a shrew. She is

less remembered for the status she has gained at the play's conclusion in marrying Petruchio. These women, unlike Webster's Vittoria and the Duchess, experience a supposed "happy ending" at each play's conclusion, problem comedy or otherwise. The audience is led to believe that in marrying their respective husbands, the women are better off with them than without them. For the most part, Shakespeare's aggressive females are not tragic figures. Although some do fit the mold, these women are usually lacking some other characteristic that Webster's females convey. Cleopatra, for example, is a mature, sexually aggressive woman and is considered a tragic figure; however, Cleopatra shares top billing with Antony and is not the central figure, nor the tragic hero, in this play. In much the same light, Cressida, the leading female character in Troilus and Cressida, is sexually active, but again shares the play's title with a male character and is not considered a truly tragic figure. Webster's female characters, however, are central to the plot of their drama and experience a tragic downfall made apparent to the audience as a result of their status as women in a society controlled by men. Webster makes his women tragic "heroes" and gives them a voice, but these women do not prevail. They unquestionably do not experience a happy ending; at the conclusion of Webster's dramas, the audience is left with an awareness of a patriarchal society quite similar to their own and the ability to give these women more credence as significant, autonomous figures. Neither woman is able to free herself from the constrictions of the patriarchy, but they both challenge that patriarchy in various ways.

CHAPTER TWO: SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Social Consciousness in The White Devil

Throughout the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, London withstood numerous blows. In conjunction with the Queen's decline and eventual death in 1603, the plague swept the city streets, hitting hardest between 1603 and 1610. The theaters of London closed and reopened numerous times on account of spreading disease. According to M.C. Bradbrook, when theaters did reopen, "the actors turned a critical eye on the details of City life; some of their satire on usurers and the tricksters of the underworld was as conventional as that of a pulpit" (94). The plague at this time was designated a poor man's disease and most often associated with members of the lower class, as was a surging crime rate within the city. However, in the eyes of the theater, members of the lower class were not alone in their corruption (Bradbrook 123). Playgoers soon identified with a dramatization of society much like their own. Within his plays, John Webster portrayed a social consciousness immediately recognizable to an audience of his day, complete with clear class distinctions and a sense that corruption exists on all levels.

According to Bradbrook, "Webster's tragedies give the brilliant physical impact of the outer world that comes on recovery from deep sickness or escape from deadly peril" (124). She notes various themes that exist within Webster's works, such as "the relations of marriage and money, of different classes in one complex society, and the relation of the play world to the real world" (104). Ralph Berry carries these thematic concerns one step further and finds that Webster recognizes three key societal elements, most notably in The White Devil: "the rottenness of courtly life, the evils of social parasitism, and the capriciousness of a prince's reward" (99). Whatever the manner in which one identifies Webster's major thematic purpose, one thing remains quite clear in Webster's work: Webster was well aware of the social hierarchy

that existed in London, of the corrupt nature of this society, and of the audience's recognition of these divisions as portrayed through his works.

Within The White Devil exists a patriarchal society in which women are subject to the domination of men. Beyond this sense of gender distinction, however, lies a greater social consciousness of class division and the corruption that exists on all levels and in all facets of society. In act five of The White Devil, Cornelia states in reference to the grave, "This poor men get, and great men get no more" (5.4.111). In this scene Flamineo is showing signs of madness for the havoc he has caused within his family. Cornelia shares a short saying that her mother once recited and ends with a general sentiment that all men experience death, and good men are equal in the afterlife, despite their status. Flamineo's distress concerning the grief he has caused is apparent in this scene as her words unnerve him and lead to a vision of Bracciano's ghost. He is quite aware of the corruption of his actions, and obviously bothered by his mother's words. However, despite each character's awareness, and Cornelia's suggestion, that men are equal in death, the characters of Webster's plays represent a true division that existed in European society, a greed for wealth and power, and a corruption that infects even the most innocent soul.

In The White Devil, Flamineo serves as a representation of the corruption of lower class members of society. Brother to Vittoria, but clearly lower in status due to his position as mere secretary to Bracciano, Flamineo is interested only in gaining status and wealth. Through the use of metaphor, Flamineo relates his frustrations to Bracciano: "'Tis just like a summer birdcage in a garden: the birds that are without despair to get in, and the birds that within despair and are in consumption for fear they shall never get out" (1.2.43-46). Flamineo recognizes that no matter what their status in society, people are never satisfied. This is true of both Bracciano and Flamineo, as Flamineo is well aware of the adulterous affair taking place between Bracciano and

his sister, though he is satisfied in keeping the secret so that it may result in his own personal gain. To his mother, who finds shame in her daughter's affair, Flamineo soon comments,

Now, you that stand so much upon your honor,

Is this a fitting time o'night, think you,

To send a duke home without e'er a man?

I would fain know where lies the mass of wealth

Which you have hoarded for my maintenance,

That I may bear my beard out of the level

Of my lord's stirrup. (1.2.308-14)

In these last lines, Flamineo mocks his mother's failure to provide a fortune for him so that he will no longer have to attend a lord of noble status, walking beside his horse. Her idealism and virtue have not worked in the past to gain their family prosperity and status, and Flamineo doubts his status will change any time soon unless he attempts to gain status by some other means. He realizes here that this elevation in status can only be achieved through corruption. Flamineo's selfishness in his knowledge of Vittoria's affair is quite obvious, and his corruption disgusts his mother as she responds, "What? Because we are poor, / Shall we be vicious?" (1.2.314-15). It seems Flamineo would answer that question with a resounding "Yes!" According to Berry, "[Flamineo] is concerned, quite simply, with making his way in the world. He is prepared to commit crime to further his career; and the word 'payment' is never far from his lips" (103). Flamineo is clearly dissatisfied with the results of a virtuous path, as he expresses to his mother that, despite his seven years of education which led him to the duke's service, he is only more fashionable and lecherous "but not a suit the richer" for it (1.2.327).

Flamineo is not the only corrupt character seeking personal gain in Webster's play. If Flamineo represents the greed and corruption that existed within the lower realm of society, then the Cardinal Monticelso represents corruption existing not only on a higher level, but within the church as well. As Monticelso turns over to Francisco his black book that holds "the names of many devils," he depicts an underworld that exists within a society of men who many would mistake for being honest, including even himself in the list:

 Their number rises strangely, and some of them

 You'd take for honest men. Next are panders.

 These are your pirates, and these following leaves

 For base rogues that undo young gentlemen

 By taking up commodities. (4.1.45-49)

Francisco cannot believe that such people exist in the world, but Monticelso continues and reveals the various levels of society on which these people do, in fact, exist:

 These are for impudent bawds

 That go in men's apparel; for usurers

 That share with scriveners for their good reportage;

 For lawyers that will antedate their writs;

 And some divines you might find folded there,

 But that I slip them o'er for conscience sake. (4.1.54-59)

Monticelso practically admits his own guilt through his dialogue as he passes over the names of some divines, such as himself, "for conscience sake" who will willingly do the work of the devil. Being in possession of a book such as this connects him with so many corrupt men and an overall sense of corruption that exists on all levels of society according to Webster's play.

Monticelso associates himself with moneylenders, those who prostitute their own wives and seek to benefit, those who declare bankruptcy but hide their assets, fraudulent lawyers, cross-dressers, and usurers. Similar to the men he has listed in his book, Monticelso's corruption is, of course, subtle and often unexpected by characters in the play, but nevertheless exists, particularly in the arraignment of Vittoria, which brings to light yet another corrupt division of society—the law.

It is made quite clear by Monticelso that he and Francisco have nothing but “circumstances” to charge Vittoria with concerning her husband's death. He is concerned more with her “black lust” than any connection to the death of her husband. He remarks to the English Ambassador: “You know what whore is: next the devil Adult'ry / Enters the devil Murder” (3.2.110-11). It is apparent here that Monticelso is concerned more with Vittoria's adultery than with any true connection to murder. However in an attempt to condemn her for something, he makes reference to both as being “devils” and insists that one will eventually result in the other, that both adultery and murder are equally appalling and inseparable as sins. According to M.C. Bradbrook, Vittoria is able to turn the trial around on the men who are attempting to convict her: “Vittoria demonstrates the disgraceful political role of a corrupt Church, leaving a skeptical gap that is to be unresolved even in the final scene” (132). Because of the corrupt nature of the Cardinal, his connection to the trial leaves the audience to assume that it, too, is plagued with corruption, made obvious in his attempt to connect adultery and murder. Ralph Berry suggests that “the Law stands, in The White Devil, in massive confrontation with evil” (98). I would argue here that evil prevails; Monticelso and Francisco have their way and are able to prosecute Vittoria for adultery. By the end of the trial, evil and law have become one and the same. Furthermore, according to Berry, by the end of the play the corruption that exists within “the spectacle of courtly reward and punishment has run its course; the horrors are summed up; the

courtly way of life is seen without illusion” (99). By the end of the arraignment, the audience is witness not only to the ills of adultery on the side of the defense, but also to the corrupt prosecution. Justice is thwarted, as the trial is managed by men who condemn Vittoria in an attempt to confine her to the stereotypical role of a woman. She is condemned not for her role in the death of her husband, but for her role in an adulterous affair with Bracciano, an affair for which Bracciano does not suffer. Not only is this underhandedness suggested in reference to the law, but due to the Cardinal’s role in the case and further on in the play, a corrupt connection is therefore made with the Church. In her final words before her death, Vittoria blatantly comments on the corrupt nature of the court: “Oh, happy they that never saw the court, / Nor ever knew great man but by report!” (5.6.262-63). Flamineo as well in his final words to the audience warns against any hopes of good fortune, even, if not especially, in the service of great men.

If there is one hope for honesty and truth in the society depicted in The White Devil, it is most probably portrayed through the character of Giovanni, son of Bracciano and Isabella. At the end of this tragedy it is Giovanni who must collect the bodies and provide the audience with one final moral lesson, perhaps leaving them with a sense of justice at the play’s end, a sense of good amidst a barrage of evil. Giovanni remarks, “Away with them to prison, and to torture! / All that have hands in this shall taste our justice, / As I hope heaven” (5.6.292-94). Lodovico, at this point, will even prosecute himself, and names the gallows as his final resting place. Giovanni continues,

Remove the bodies. See, my honored lords,

What use you ought make of their punishment.

Let guilty men remember their black deeds

Do lean on crutches, made of slender reeds. (5.5.299-302)

However, it is hard to believe that Webster would allow his work to be tied up so nicely at the end, especially after portraying a society that is corrupt at every level and within every institution, be it law or the church. It seems that in Webster's eyes, every person is capable of corruption, and if one recalls, as Berry suggests, the words of Flamineo upon conversing with Giovanni, Webster indeed plants the seeds of corruption in this next generation of men. "He hath his uncle's villainous look already," remarks Flamineo in reference to Giovanni (5.4.28). This single line leaves the audience unsure whether or not the cycle of corruption will continue. As J. R. Brown states, "'There is no answer; the play leaves us with a sense of insecurity'" (qtd. in Berry 106).

Social Consciousness in The Duchess of Malfi

Awareness of societal division and corruption is nowhere more obvious than in Webster's most well known play, The Duchess of Malfi. According to Berry, "The Duchess of Malfi does not postulate an ordered universe at all. It offers a vision of a meaningless universe, a context for humanity irretrievably prone to corruption and error [. . .]" (107). Early on, Webster portrays disorder by first referencing a model, the judicious French court. This model serves as an apparent contrast to the courtly system portrayed in Malfi, the setting of his drama. Antonio makes this reference upon his return from France. When asked by Delio how he likes the French court, Antonio responds,

I admire it.

In seeking to reduce both state and people
To a fixed order, their judicious king
Begins at home, quits first his royal palace
Of flattering sycophants, of dissolute

And infamous persons, [. . .]
And what is't makes this blessed government
But a most provident council, who dare freely
Inform him the corruption of times?
Though some o'th' court hold it presumption
To instruct princes what they ought to do,
It is a noble duty to inform them
What they ought to foresee. (1.1.4-9, 16-22)

Antonio admires the French court, both for the judiciousness of their king in ridding himself of “flattering sycophants” and for the nobility of the council in having the duty to warn the king of any foreseeable depravity within his kingdom. Early on, Webster purposely conveys an image of an honest court as a striking contrast to the action that is about to unfold within the court of Malfi. By referencing the French court, Webster creates an interesting dynamic and obvious polarity to the Italian court. From the very beginning, the distinction between members of particular social classes is clear, and this, in turn, encourages disastrous ambition and an inherent desire to compete in a society where corruption exists on all levels.

The corrupt nature of various characters, despite social status, is revealed early in the play. Delio warns the audience that Bosola is a notorious murderer, and that it is the Cardinal who secretly commissioned Bosola for his crimes. From the start the audience is presented with characters from diverse social classes, similar only in their corrupt nature. Robert Ornstein suggests, “Perplexing as these characters seem to modern readers, they were no doubt recognizable to Webster’s audience [...]” (70). Bosola, like Falmineo, yearns for power and wealth and, in turn, will commit any criminal act in an effort to gain status. According to

Ornstein, “Bosola is a malcontent, embittered by experience, and hungry for the security which advancement will afford” (67). His focus is exclusively on material wealth; in his conversation with the Cardinal, he demands belated payment for earlier crimes:

I have done you
Better service than to be slighted thus.
Miserable age, where only the rewards
Of doing well is the doing of it. (1.1.29-32)

Bosola not only openly admits his desire for wealth, but is quick to reveal the corruption that exists within men of higher social standing, making clear to the audience that he is not alone in his corruption. In reference to the Cardinal and Ferdinand, Bosola suggests they are “like plum trees that grow crooked over standing pools; they are rich and o’erladen with fruit, but none but crows, pies, and caterpillars feed on them” (1.1.49-52). Bosola is the first to feed on the riches of the Cardinal and his brother, “dominated by the thought of payment for his services” (Berry 122). In exposing their corruption, Bosola reveals his own, since by his own admission he has to be a caterpillar.

References to the divisions of social class are prevalent throughout the course of the play, as it is made clear by Ferdinand and the Cardinal that the Duchess is absolutely forbidden to marry again, particularly below her social class:

Ferdinand: You are a widow;
 You know already what man is. And therefore
 Let not youth, high promotion, eloquence-
Cardinal: No, nor anything without the addition, honor,
 Sway your high blood. (1.1.295-99)

Not only are the Cardinal and Ferdinand concerned with the honor associated with the social status of their family, but the status of the Duchess as a widow. Immediately upon hearing of the Duchess' second marriage the Cardinal responds, "Shall our blood/ The royal blood of Aragon and Castile, / Be thus attainted?" (2.5.21-23). Ferdinand at this point refers to his sister as a "notorious strumpet" (2.5.4). R. S. White suggests, "Right through the sixteenth century, widows were in a unique legal position in England. They could marry according to their own choice more readily than spinsters and they could own property and title gained from their husbands. In other words, they were more free of their own family than if they had never married" (211). White suggests that there were three main fears that troubled families of these widows, the third being that the woman would marry below her social status, depriving the family of their inheritance and, in their eyes, demean the family name (211). Frank Whigham seems to agree that this third fear, suggested by White, is indeed true. Whigham regards "Ferdinand as a threatened aristocrat, frightened by the contamination of his ascriptive social rank and obsessively preoccupied with its defense" (171). This must be the case as Ferdinand continues on quite a vengeful tirade, even imagining the Duchess in the "shameful act of sin" she has committed. Still in the dark concerning her new husband, Ferdinand begins to imagine the Duchess with some "strong-thighed bargeman, / Or one o'th'woodyard, that can quoit the sledge" (2.5.43-45). These are men of low social status, and it infuriates Ferdinand to think of his sister marrying beneath her. He must be calmed by the Cardinal as he claims that only her "whore's blood" will appease his fury. Eventually, Ferdinand's disgust with his sister's actions will lead to her demise.

From the very beginning, the Duchess is well aware of her own social status and the limitations that exist because of it. She laments, "The misery of us that are born great! / We are

forced to woo, because none dare woo us” (1.1.442-43). Conscious of her place in society, she is certain that she must woo Antonio because, due to his low status as her steward, it is not proper for him to propose marriage to a duchess. It is interesting to ponder the relationship that exists between Antonio and the Duchess. He is obviously wary of their relationship and the union she is proposing, as he warns her against ambition: it “is a great man’s madness” (1.1.421). Antonio also suggests, “There is a saucy and ambitious devil / Is dancing in this circle” (1.1.413-14). It is not clear who this ambitious devil is, but in his second reference to ambition it becomes clear that he is warning the Duchess against this common tragic flaw. While it is obvious that Antonio admires the Duchess, his intentions in marrying her are never made certain to the audience. Like other characters of similar standing in the play, he may be susceptible to corruption as well. The Oxford English Dictionary defines ambition, as used in the early seventeenth century, as “the ardent (in early usage, inordinate) desire to rise to high position, or to attain rank, influence, distinction or other preferment; the object of strong desire or aspiration” (“Ambition,” def. 1). The issue of ambition that is raised by Antonio at this point in the play may be applicable to a number of characters, including Antonio himself. His reference lies in direct opposition to the French court, which Antonio praised early on in the play for warning its judicious king against ambition and corruption of any kind. So far in the play, the source of corrupt ambition is found in the desire to attain a higher social status. The ambition that informs his decision to marry the Duchess leads him to the recognition that he is crossing a boundary in associating himself with a character of higher status, much like other characters, such as Bosola, in the play, whose ambition brings only tragedy. Ultimately, Webster does not allow these ambitious characters to prevail; instead, he presents his audience with only a possibility of societal change. Characters in Webster’s plays are punished for going too far with their own ambition. Antonio is aware of this,

and in a way, warns the Duchess of the “ambitious devil” tempting both of them towards marriage.

Much like Monticelso in The White Devil, the Cardinal in The Duchess of Malfi represents corruption that exists not only in men of a higher class, but within the church as well. According to Robert Ornstein, “The Cardinal is a complementary portrait of the buried life: his diseased ego is satisfied not by a brute assertion of will but by a rational mastery of Machiavellian arts [...] He has a connoisseur’s taste for flawless villainy, for security in evil” (70). As mentioned, the Cardinal was the first to take part in dirty dealings with Bosola, hiring him as a hit man early on and then again to spy on the Duchess. Antonio provides more insight into the workings of the Cardinal: “He should have been pope, but instead of coming to it by the primitive decency of the church, he did bestow bribes so largely and impudently as if he would have carried it away without heaven’s knowledge” (1.1.163-67). The Cardinal seems to believe that the religious codes he attempts to preach apply only to those beneath him. Like Monticelso in The White Devil, the Cardinal berates the men and women beneath him, condemning them for “immoral” deeds similar to the corruption he himself portrays. The Cardinal, like his brother, feels that the Duchess has shamed the family by remarrying below her social status; however, his words are hypocritical as it is revealed further on in the play that the Cardinal himself is having an affair with a married woman. He has the audacity to refer to his sister as a “cursed creature” and believes nature unequal in placing “women’s hearts / So far upon the left side!” (2.5.32-33). The Cardinal proves just as deceitful as his sister in his dealings with Bosola, his affair with Julia, and his involvement in and attempt to cover up Julia’s murder later on in the play.

According to Berry, in The Duchess of Malfi the court “serves as a general symbol of social corruption,” and I would add that the court in The White Devil performs a similar

function. Within The Duchess of Malfi, the court is comprised of corrupt characters such as Ferdinand and the Cardinal; within The White Devil, characters such as Monticelso and the arraignment itself represent this social corruption. The court's only possibility of redemption lies with the virtuous but impulsive Duchess, who falls victim to the overwhelming corruption portrayed in the play, or the words with which Vittoria attempts to unveil the dirty dealings of those in high places, only to be silenced for her adultery and status as a woman. Vittoria's social status is relevant, the Duchess' even moreso; however, both women are set up for destruction. The court system is flawed in its incapacity to handle the faults of these women; rather than providing any opportunity for each woman to justify her actions and allowing for any character to transcend the boundaries of a corrupt society, the court serves only to condemn each character's faults. In The White Devil, it is suggested that even the innocent and virtuous Giovanni will inherit the corrupt shadows of courtly intrigue sometime in the near future. No matter what the social status of each individual character, Webster suggests that corruption exists in every level of society. By giving center stage to the female characters in each of his plays, he is only setting them up for disaster; each woman is ultimately unable to transcend the boundaries of a society riddled with division and corruption, a society quite recognizable to the audience of Webster's day.

The social awareness of Webster's plays is unique due to the power placed in the hands of truly ambitious characters. William Shakespeare, for example, in Hamlet, portrays ambitious courtiers Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, much like the characters of Bosola and Flamineo. Both men seek to gain the king's favor in spying on Hamlet, much like Bosola is motivated by status and wealth in spying on the Duchess; however, the intentions of Shakespeare's characters are less sinister than those of Bosola and Flamineo. When asked by Hamlet if Rosencrantz and

Guildestern were sent by the king to visit Hamlet, they readily admit that they are not making a free visitation: "My lord, we were sent for" (2.2.288). In Shakespeare's play, these characters do not have the power or nearly the ambition of Webster's lower class courtiers. In Webster, the courtier is much more pernicious and has the capability to do more damage throughout the course of each play. In The Duchess of Malfi, Bosola is placed in charge of not only spying on, but murdering the Duchess, while Flamineo in The White Devil, turns his back on his own sister and plays a part in her death. However, despite the ambition of each character, not one prevails socially. In a similar fashion, Webster portrays the steward Antonio much like Shakespeare's steward Malvolio in Twelfth Night. Ambitious "to be Count Malvolio," his low status and admiration for Olivia is comparable to Antonio's status before marrying the Duchess. While characters in the Twelfth Night ridicule Malvolio's ambition, Antonio is also held in contempt by the Duchess's brothers, and, in a way, feared for the power he will gain in going through with the marriage, bringing shame in the eyes of Ferdinand and the Cardinal to the family. Unlike Malvolio, however, Antonio follows his own ambition and marries the Duchess, igniting a controversy that serves as the central conflict within the play, while Malvolio, the subject of a practical joke, is safely put back in his place through comedy. Webster is perhaps the most radical dramatist of his time in suggesting to his audience the power and ambition of such characters and the possibility of societal change, but Webster is also resolute in concluding each play with the downfall of such ambition and the continuity of societal corruption.

CHAPTER THREE: AN ABSENCE OF FAITH

The Absence of Faith in The White Devil

Beyond the boundaries of gender and social consciousness in Webster's plays lurks an even more offensive glimpse into the social climate of Webster's time. Travis Bogard hints at it: "There is a suggestion here of something deeper, working in secret to produce a greater horror than man can bring on himself- a natural evil which man cannot control" (41). Beyond the social evils that Webster explored within his drama, beyond the limits of gender and social class, beyond the pursuit of power and the inherent greed for wealth, lies an institution that Webster portrays as being riddled with disease and contributing to the moral decay of society. A terse statement that sums up the bankrupt state of spiritual life in the plays come from Flamineo in The White Devil: "Religion- oh, how it is commeddled with policy!" (3.3.37-38). Policy here, as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary, suggests "the art, study, or practice of government or administration; the conduct of public affairs; political science" ("Policy," def. 1a). This seems to refer both to religion in general and to the church as an institution. In keeping with this view, Webster examines the church's role in the atmosphere of faithlessness that pervades each play and places special emphasis on the viciousness of church functionaries, especially those of very high rank.

In order to create a sense of foreboding throughout The White Devil, Webster utilizes various references to supernatural omens and an obvious fear of the unknown. Vittoria, for example, is referenced as a screech owl and a raven; according to the text, both birds were regarded as omens of disaster or impending death (3.3.52). Furthermore Bracciano insists that his love for Vittoria was a result of being "bewitched," suggesting that Vittoria is connected to the evils of witchcraft. J. R. Brown suggests that witchcraft "has become a synonym for the power of

sex” (qtd. in Berry 108). However, I would suggest that witchcraft has become more precisely a synonym for the power of women in Webster’s work, power, in the time of The White Devil, that would have been feared by men. In a play riddled with references to the supernatural and witchcraft, Webster has quite purposely portrayed a sense of foreboding that will not allow his female characters to transcend any patriarchal boundaries. This atmosphere upholds boundaries for characters who attempt to transcend the patriarchal constrictions that tie them down.

Vittoria, for example, is confined from the very beginning, as she is often connected to the absence of morality and faith, and therefore most frequently identified in connection to evil and various elements of witchcraft. M.C. Bradbrook notes, “The implications of witchcraft, even of diabolic possession, are suggested in Bracciano’s first words upon entering” (122). Bradbrook goes on to suggest that Bracciano’s conversation with Flamineo, commenting that he is “quite lost,” implies that Bracciano is under the spell of Vittoria, the white devil. Flamineo then speaks to his sister “of magical powers that compel love,” never revealing whether or not those powers are, in fact, sinister. However, Flamineo’s words later suggest that Vittoria’s love for Bracciano is most definitely evil by nature, as he refers to his sister as an “Excellent devil!” (1.2.256). The atmosphere created by Webster is quite adamant in disallowing any type of transcendence; as a result of this atmosphere and Vittoria’s connection to evil, she has no chance of clearing her name in a patriarchal court.

Another character who confirms a lack of moral compass is Cornelia, whose bold attempts to steer her daughter away from adultery are also made in vain as her plea earns her only the title of madwoman and the fear of Bracciano that she “Hath raised a fearful and prodigious storm” (1.2.306). According to Margaret Loftus Ranald, “Even Cornelia, the moral center of the play, suffers the loss of her children and eventually her sanity” (40). She is an omen

of bad luck, as Bracciano explains. Any harm that ensues is ironically the result of Cornelia's moral ranting. In Webster's play any attempt to maintain conventional morality is doomed to failure. Faith is absent in Webster's drama, specifically when the functionaries of the institution which should promote faith is found to be corrupt.

The drama of The White Devil is most significantly played out in the arraignment of Vittoria. It is in this scene that Webster continues to create an atmosphere of foreboding and an evil corruption that exists in institutions such as the church and state. According to Ralph Berry, "A very considerable part of the language of The White Devil is impregnated with the suggestion of evil" (94). Ranald agrees: "It is as if God has abandoned the world of his creation, leaving humanity to work out its problems unaided. Evil is rampant throughout" (40). However, it is important to note that the suggestion of evil pervades not only the language, but also the characters themselves, significantly those whom an audience may expect to be morally just. In Webster's tragedy, this faith-based connection to evil creates boundaries for characters who are given the chance to transcend in each play. In The White Devil, Monticelso serves as the most dominant religious figure in the play, yet this character of the cloth is riddled with corruption and the suggestion of evil. As mentioned before, it is Monticelso who condemns Vittoria for the adulterous affair she has with Bracciano when he cannot prove that she has played a part in the death of her husband. In order to condemn Vittoria in her arraignment, Monticelso must attack her sense of morality, and to do so his language is clouded with imagery suggesting that Vittoria is evil and a devil: "I am resolved, / Were there a second paradise to lose / This devil would betray it" (3.2.69-71). And again in reference to Vittoria in the same scene, he comments, "You know what whore is: next the devil Adult'ry / Enters the devil Murder" and "If the devil / did ever take good shape, behold his picture" (3.2.110-11, 218-19). Much like Flamineo, Monticelso

is adamant in connecting Vittoria with various references to hell and the devil. Berry suggests, “The extreme mental anguish, as much as the moral evil of the characters, finds as its symbol hell” (109). I would suggest here, then, that Monticelso’s references to evil, in turn, reveal his own uneasiness regarding the moral corruption found in himself, rather than any other character. His adamant references reveal an internal conflict with faith and the immoral actions he knowingly takes in condemning Vittoria. Offering Francisco the use of his black book, convicting Vittoria for a crime without evidence and condemning her to lodge in a house of convertites are only a few of the immoral actions Monticelso must live with, posing as a man of morality and faith.

Both Flamineo and Monticelso exemplify the play’s lack of a spiritual center. As noted earlier, Flamineo seeks wealth and power in supporting his sister’s affair. His motives are underhanded, and he makes this very clear to the audience in his threats to Cornelia: “I visited the court, whence I returned, / More courteous, more lecherous by far, / But not a suit the richer” (1.2.325-27). Flamineo is disappointed with his inherited social status and believes the only the way to transcend such a position is through underhanded dealings with men of higher rank. Monticelso, as well, is shown to suffer from this moral anguish as he himself engages in underhanded dealings with “base rogues” and “panders.” Monticelso proves more like a gangster than a cardinal when he reveals to Francisco his black book filled with “the names of many devils” (4.1.26). Both men suffer from a lack of morality in the play, and both are the first to condemn Vittoria for the “crime” she has committed. Associating her with witchcraft, referring to her as a devil, the accusatory tone of both characters is an attempt to assuage their own guilt for the licentious acts in which each man has taken part.

By the end of The White Devil, Webster has revealed a terrifying view of the institutions comprising a patriarchal society. Specifically, he highlights the immorality and lack of faith that exists. The evil atmosphere that pervades the play has a huge effect on all of his characters. References to evil and witchcraft seem to constitute an attempt by some characters to mask the guilt resulting from their own corruption. For others, this atmosphere causes limitations. Morally decent characters are unable to prevail as a result of the corruption and lack of faith in the social institutions that surround them.

The Absence of Faith in The Duchess of Malfi

The foreboding atmosphere Webster created in The White Devil carries over to his later work, The Duchess of Malfi, in which spiritual and religious life is found to be utterly corrupt. Gerald Eades Bentley reiterates the suggestions of Ranald and Berry: “Many of the Jacobean dramatists were preoccupied with this conception of an evil world- a world in which dishonesty, ingratitude, hypocrisy, corruption, lechery and cruelty seemed to dominate the actions of men” (257). In creating this type of atmosphere, Webster established boundaries for many of his characters, specifically the women taking center stage in his plays.

Like Vittoria, the Duchess is linked through numerous images with different elements of evil, most often by her brother, Ferdinand. Ferdinand frequently associates his sister’s sexuality with witchcraft. As he warns her never to remarry, he remarks, “Be not cunning, / For those whose faces do belie their hearts / Are witches ere they arrive at twenty years- / Ay, and give the devil suck” (1.1.310-13). Both Ferdinand and the Cardinal continue to warn the Duchess that any actions she takes under the cloak of night will also be brought to the light, insinuating that she is about to perform some sinister deed that needs the protection of darkness. Further on in the play, upon hearing of the Duchess’ second marriage, Ferdinand again associates her death with an

eerie image of a witch being burnt. Ferdinand remarks, “I would have their bodies / Burnt in a coalpit [. . .]” (2.5.67-68). He goes on to suggest quite a gruesome death experienced, most notably, by women believed to be practicing witchcraft. Ferdinand is obviously appalled at the actions of the Duchess, and his only explanation for those actions is to associate her deeds with the work of the devil. The Duchess, however, is not the only character linked to such sinister workings. Webster’s most morally corrupt characters condemn the Duchess as a result of their own guilt and corruption, and, as in The White Devil, portray the corruption of the functionaries within an institution whose main objective should be to promote faith. The Cardinal is overcome by the sinister atmosphere of the play and goes on to support the decision of his brother to employ the “invisible devil,” Bosola, to spy on his sister. It becomes obvious that a lack of faith exists in this text, as its sole figure of religion, similar to Monticelso in The White Devil, is portrayed as being corrupt. Like Monticelso, an air of evil permeates the Cardinal, as his actions are not at all what an audience would hope for a man of the church. Not only is the Cardinal taking part in a plot to murder his sister, but he is also indulging in the very actions for which he has condemned the Duchess and, even worse, using his faith to sanction these immoral actions. Taking part in an affair with Julia and murdering her by the use of a prayer book, the Cardinal’s corrupt actions as a churchman add to the sense of foreboding Webster has created in The Duchess of Malfi.

Bosola, similar to the Cardinal, adds to the corrupt atmosphere that exists, referring to himself as “a very quaint invisible devil” whose life is a “sensible Hell” (1.1.262, 4.2.346). His corruption is well known to other characters in the play as he is referenced by Delio as “a notorious murderer” and chosen by Ferdinand to spy on the Duchess. The darkness surrounding his character is made quite apparent and his connection to the Cardinal is of great importance to

the text as he is chosen to complete the threesome who will most emphatically condemn the Duchess for her decision to remarry. Perhaps like Flamineo and Monticelso in The White Devil, Bosola, the Cardinal, and Ferdinand condemn the Duchess as a result of the guilt created from their own misdeeds. All three find the devil's work in the Duchess' decisions, yet all three men are equally corrupt.

If the "moral anguish" of each character, as suggested by Berry, does in fact manifest itself in Webster's symbolic suggestions of "hell" on earth, this could account for the often-debated use of torture and superstition referenced throughout The Duchess of Malfi, specifically in connection to Ferdinand. At times, these references almost seem out of place because they are pushed to such an extreme. For example, the wax bodies and artificial hand used by Ferdinand in an attempt to prompt some sort of emotional response from the Duchess are extreme examples of measures taken by Webster to represent a moral evil that exists in many of his characters. In fact, this scene very nearly resembles a vision of hell as Ferdinand approaches the Duchess in the dark making a "solemn vow / Never to see [the Duchess] more" (4.1.23-24). He leaves her with the "dead man's hand" and stands to the side as torches are brought in revealing the artificial figures of Antonio and the children. At this point, the Duchess threatens suicide crying, "Portia, I'll new-kindle thy coals again" (4.1.72). Here she references Brutus' wife committing suicide by putting hot coals in her mouth, hence remaining faithful once Brutus' cause has failed following the assassination of Julius Caesar. Like Portia, the Duchess would rather die quickly than live without Antonio and her children. This hellish scene prompts the Duchess to say that she longs to bleed and wishes the men would kill her quickly (4.1.111-12). Much in the same way, Ferdinand's use of madmen to "cure" the Duchess of her ailment creates a sinister atmosphere from which the Duchess cannot escape; her palace has now become a prison as a result of her

brothers' immoral actions. The more sinister the scheme to torture the Duchess, the more Ferdinand is overwhelmed by the guilt of his own immorality. It is apparent that evil deeds have plagued Ferdinand, as, from the very beginning, he and the Cardinal are portrayed by Webster as men, like Bosola, hungry for power. Perhaps the ultimate anguish that engulfs Ferdinand is his affliction with lycanthropy and paranoia as a result of the tortures to which he has subjected his sister. These ailments best exemplify the moral torment from which Ferdinand suffers. He can no longer look his sister in the eye due to the shame of the persecution he has imposed upon her. In a conversation with the Duchess, Bosola reveals:

Your elder brother, the Lord Ferdinand,
Is come to visit you, and sends you word,
'Cause once he rashly made a solemn vow
Never to see you more, he comes i'th' night,
And prays you, gently, neither torch nor taper
Shine in your chamber. (4.1.21-26)

This suggests that Ferdinand is in a state of spiritual darkness, overcome by guilt and aware of his own morality. Once again, after the Duchess is dead, Ferdinand tells Bosola to "cover her face" and attempts to displace responsibility for her murder; this is the second time he cannot look her in the eye. It seems he has fallen victim to a madness that he once attempted to impose upon his own sister. Throughout the play, this disconnection with faith and the church reveals a boundary that exists for characters in the play. By presenting various institutions that are corrupt, Webster shows how his characters are unable to transcend the boundaries each institution's members create.

Albert H. Tricomi argues that Berry's hypothesis concerning the mental anguish of Webster's characters is "highly selective, faultily premised, and in one instance even counterdeterminative" (350). Tricomi argues that the evil atmosphere created by Webster is only the result of an exploration of the demonic by the characters in his play and states: "If we are to revisit the subject of Webster's 'art' of creating atmosphere, as I propose to do, that art and atmosphere, with its intimations of the supernatural and demonic, is best viewed as constitutive of the felt reality in which Webster and his early modern audience were immersed" (351). I would agree with both Berry and Tricomi in recognizing their hypothesis that these characters were indeed immersed in a "felt reality"; however, Webster's characters are immersed in both a sense of their own moral anguish as well as conflicting sentiments concerning religion and the demonic, which is why the two are so often connected in each of these plays. I would also argue that the pervading sense of evil linked most often to the corrupt characters in Webster's plays reveals more than a mere exploration of superstition and the demonic beliefs at that time. There is a loss of faith prevalent in Webster's work, whether it is faith in a higher order or faith in the institutions that control society. The characters who ultimately fail are victims of those who are found to be the most corrupt, the most powerful, and most often connected to symbols of the demonic.

Beyond connecting any character to some form of witchcraft or the devil, in a manner much like Webster's first tragedy, the atmosphere of The Duchess of Malfi suggests something sinister from beginning to end. From ominous signs and superstition, to the entrance of madmen and Ferdinand's lycanthropy, The Duchess of Malfi portrays a setting that invites the evil workings of its characters throughout the play. As a result of this sinister design, characters are unable to transcend the boundaries of the immorality and lack of faith that are suggested. The

corruption of the moral life and the institution that supports it is too great, and though characters may ultimately die as a result of their own corruption, at the end of Webster's plays, the religious code and the church still stand unmoved and quite visible to his audience.

CHAPTER FOUR: WEBSTER'S USE OF SATIRE

Throughout his work, Webster uses satire to attack the follies of a patriarchal society. In doing so, he points out the shortcomings of various institutions plagued by corruption, but inhibits his characters from transcending any societal boundary that stands in their way. Webster distributes his satirical voice to various characters throughout his works, each satirizing some aspect of the world in which they live. Gerald Eades Bentley argues that “[Webster’s] most impressive lines are usually in the form of condensed observation about human affairs uttered under stress of emotion by characters who seem to have sudden perceptions of new values or of the true significance of their own deeds” (257). However, I would argue that this type of commentary subverts any character’s claim to being admirable and provides the audience with no consistent point of view. The characters who most often deliver Webster’s satirical commentary are corrupt and are given little or no opportunity to transcend the boundaries they satirize. Therefore, the audience is left with no moral standpoint in Webster’s plays. Each character displays an intriguing insight into the unjust ways they are being treated, but is unable to transcend and change the society that each ridicules.

As a result of the burning of satires in 1599 and “the Court of High Commission’s prohibition against further publication without specific license, satirists were forced to seek a new genre” (Aggeler 209). Many, such as Marston, Donne, and Webster, turned to tragedy. As a taste for satire already existed among the Jacobean audience, attempts to appeal to the masses led to the incorporation of the “themes and rhetorical techniques of formal verse satire” and creation of satirical tragedy, a creative way around the outlawed genre (Aggeler 209). For three hundred years since, critics have argued whether or not the persona of such satires belongs to the satirist, whether the voice within each work belongs to the writer himself or to a fictional character (Gill

409). Satire in each of Webster's most well known plays is delivered by a number of characters, and in examining the words of each, we can plausibly look for Webster's own commentary, or at least commentary consistent with the patriarchal society represented at that time.

Rupert Brooke points out that "With Webster every character and nearly every speech has something of the satirical outlook. They describe each other satirically. They are forever girding at the conventional objects of satire, certain social follies and crimes" (10). As Brooke and Bentley argue, many characters deliver satirical commentary on a wide range of topics. The recognition in each character of the shortcomings of a patriarchal society are significant in that each character, despite their recognition, is unable to overcome the boundaries they satirize. Vittoria in The White Devil, for example, mocks the language of an educated attorney in her arraignment. She suggests:

Surely, my lords, this lawyer here hath swallowed
Some pothecary's pills or proclamations,
And now the hard and undigestible words
Come up like stones we use give hawks for physic.
Why, this is Welsh to Latin. (3.2.36-40)

Vittoria recognizes the absurdity of the trial and the attempt of the educated lawyer to speak above Vittoria's status as a woman. She compares the lawyer's use of elevated language to giving a hawk pebbles in order to help with digestion, both equally preposterous in nature. Vittoria mocks both the trial and the education of these men by pointing out the shortcomings of both institutions. However, Vittoria will not overcome the institutions she satirizes. She is still condemned for her adulterous affair by the court and dies as a result. Flamineo, as well, in an argument with his mother, points out the shortcomings and follies of his own education. After

graduating and moving on to the Duke's service within the court, Flamineo admits that he only learned to be more fashionable and lecherous, never profiting from his education, only becoming more greedy and corrupt as a result (1.2.326-27). Flamineo, like Vittoria, recognizes the shortcomings of the society in which they live, but is unable to transcend the limitations he fully recognizes.

Lodovico is another character in The White Devil who ridicules the imperfections of the patriarchal society portrayed by Webster in his play. Lodovico's commentary has to do with the charity of an individual:

Italian beggars will resolve you that
Who, begging of an alms, bid those they beg of
Do good for their own sakes; or't may be
He spreads his bounty with a sowing hand,
Like kings, who many times give out measure,
Not for desert so much as for pleasure. (4.3.83-88)

Through his commentary, Lodovico suggests that beggars asking for handouts will entice the givers to be charitable for the sake of their own souls; however, in making this comment to Flamineo, Lodovico is also recognizing the charity of an individual who gives only for the sake of his own personal benefit. Here, Lodovico satirizes the charity of more wealthy and more powerful individuals. Francisco, as well, supports Lodovico's commentary mocking wealthy and powerful men, especially towards the end of the play when he begins to recognize his personal faults. Francisco comments, "As ships seem very great upon the river which show very little upon the seas, so men i'th'court seem colossuses in a chamber, who, if they came into the field, would appear pitiful pygmies" (5.1.118-121). As members of the court, Francisco and

Lodovico's personal awareness of their own shortcomings towards the end of the play still does not allow for either man to move beyond their corrupt station in society. Both men play a part in the death of other characters in the play, fully aware of the immorality of their deeds, unable to break away from the corrupt nature of the society they satirize.

Various characters in The Duchess of Malfi also deliver satirical commentary recognizing and mocking the shortcomings of the society in which they live, yet these characters are still unable to overcome the boundaries created by this society. Delio, for example mocks the ambition of Antonio in marrying the Duchess. He comments, "They pass through the whirlpools, and deep woes do shun, / Who the event weigh ere the action's done" (2.4.82-83). Delio recognizes that Antonio acted in haste when marrying the Duchess and observes that intense scrutiny would have served him better, as Antonio now is "betrayed" in his haste. However, Delio's comments are ironic, and he himself becomes the object of ridicule since just a few lines prior to this he is propositioning Julia, offering her gold to be his mistress. While Delio's observations concerning Antonio are clear-sighted, his commentary is inconsistent, as his actions are not at all admirable. While Delio may survive the tragedy within this play and serve to deliver the play's final commentary, his words leave no final mark on the audience as he has proved himself just as corrupt as the characters he laments. Delio closes the play: "Integrity of life is fame's best friend, / Which nobly, beyond death, shall crown the end" (5.5.138-39). The insight of Delio's words is just as tragic as the action of the play in that they hold no water when delivered by a man equally corrupted and unable to transcend the boundaries of the society in which he lives.

Ferdinand is another character in The Duchess of Malfi whose satire is profound, but tarnished by his ill reputation. An example of Ferdinand's commentary comes in the form of a

lengthy monologue quite separate from the action of the play, as he takes a moment to comment on the value of reputation in accordance with a widow's actions. He appropriately begins his lengthy dirge with "upon a time" and recites the voice of Reputation in response to the parting of Love and Death:

'Stay,' quoth Reputation,
'Do not forsake me; for it is my nature
If once I part from any man I meet
I am never found again.' And so for you:
You have shook hands with Reputation,
And made him invisible. So, fare you well.

I will never see you more. (3.2.133-39)

Ferdinand comments that a widow who remarries forsakes her reputation and that as a result of the actions of his sister, he will no longer recognize her as family. Like Delio, however, Ferdinand's commentary is ironic in that the audience is also well aware of Ferdinand's corruption throughout the play. Despite the insight of Ferdinand's commentary and his attempts at ridiculing the reputation of his sister, Ferdinand is unable to overcome his own corrupt reputation, unable to rise above the greed and power struggle that lies behind his commentary.

Concerning the purpose and structure of the satirist, Robert C. Elliott comments, "His avowed purpose is to expose some aspect of human behavior which seems to him foolish or vicious, to demonstrate clinically that the behavior in question is ridiculous or wicked or repulsive, and to try to stimulate in his reader the appropriate negative response which prepares the way to positive action" (111). Elliott believes that "this is the heart of satire, and here the latitude of the satirist is most boundless" (111). If this is, in fact, the true purpose of satire then

why does Webster choose to convey the majority of his satirical commentary through the most corrupt character in each of his plays? Furthermore, what action does Webster hope to stimulate in his audience if the institutions that are satirized ultimately prevail at the end of each of his works? Webster's characters do not overcome the boundaries each recognizes and mocks, but instead fall victim to the society that confines them.

In The White Devil, Flamineo delivers a majority of the social commentary in regards to the rigid levels of a patriarchal society, the role of women, and the recognition of corruption existing within the church. For example, Flamineo comments in response to the unhappiness of Bracciano that men, regardless of their position in society, are never happy with what they have achieved: "'Tis just like a summer birdcage in a garden: the birds that are without despair to get in, and the birds that are within despair and are in consumption for fear they shall never get out" (1.2.43-46). Flamineo also recognizes that corruption is classless in that it affects men at all levels of society. Flamineo laments: "Proof! 'Twas corruption. O gold, what a god art thou! And O man, what a devil art thou to be tempted by that cursed mineral" (3.3.20-23). Again, Flamineo's ridicule encompasses men at every level of society, putting him on the same playing field as characters like Bracciano and Francisco, all equally corrupt in their own way, each man unable to transcend the boundaries Flamineo so obviously illustrates. Even after recognizing the greed that exists in men and the unhappiness felt despite one's position in society, Flamineo still yearns for more- more power, more wealth- and ultimately his inability to stand up against these vices leads to his demise.

Flamineo is also the most vocal character when it comes to satirizing the role of women in society. In response to Bracciano's feelings towards Vittoria, Flamineo asks, "What is't you doubt, her coyness? That but the superficies of lust most women have. Yet why should ladies

blush to hear that named which they do not fear to handle? Oh, they are politic [. . .]” (1.2.18-21). It seems Flamineo recognizes the abilities of a woman, specifically Vittoria, to handle a man. He comments that on the outside Vittoria comes across as innocent, yet she is more intelligent than men give her credit for. When trying to convince Camillo to reject his misgivings that his wife is having an affair, Flamineo remarks, “Women are more willingly and more gloriously chaste when they are least restrained of their liberty” (1.2.90-92). Then later, when speaking again of Vittoria, Flamineo comments, “Women are like curst dogs: civility keeps them tied all daytime, but they are let loose at midnight; then they do most good or most mischief” (1.2.198-201). Flamineo obviously recognizes the power of women as much of his satire is directed towards the role of a woman in society. Despite this recognition and the opportunity to aid his sister in overcoming the boundaries a patriarchal society creates, Flamineo is more concerned with his own well being and focused solely on his own advancement in the society he satirizes, even in the face of his own lamentation that prosperity and disaster go hand in hand (3.1.50-52).

Flamineo’s final satirical commentary focuses on the corruption of the church within this same society, and again, despite this recognition, it is the church with which Flamineo joins forces to condemn Vittoria. Flamineo notes: “A cardinal! I would he would hear me. There’s nothing so holy but money will corrupt and putrify it, like victual under the line [...] Religion-oh, how it is commedled with policy” (3.3.24-26, 37-38). Again, Flamineo mocks the corruption of the church, then joins forces with the cardinal, a symbol of this very institution, to condemn his sister. His commentary is significant, yet loses credibility with the audience when the character recognizing such corruption, instead of rising up against it, conforms to the patriarchy that allows such corruption to exist. Flamineo’s commentary ridicules the institutions that form

insurmountable boundaries for the characters in Webster's play; however, his inability to transcend these boundaries leaves Flamineo an object of satire just as corrupt as, and even less admirable, than the institutions he mocks.

In The Duchess of Malfi, Bosola engages in a vein of social commentary similar to that of Flamineo in The White Devil, and is even referred to by Antonio as the "court gall" towards the beginning of the play. Like Flamineo, Bosola focuses on the recognition of a class-conscious society and the role of women. However, whereas Flamineo's commentary is delivered mostly in the form of short observations throughout the course of the play, the majority of Bosola's commentary is similar to the one instance in which Flamineo takes a break from the action of the play to berate the Duchess's loss of reputation. Most memorably, Bosola begins one of his "moral essays" with the words "Observe my meditation now" (2.1.45). What begins as the simple mocking of an old woman who applies cosmetics to her face transforms into a significant social commentary about the natural decay of the human body. "What thing is in this outward form of man / To be beloved?" Bosola asks, and he continues to scold humanity for recognizing the deformity in all living things, but not in himself (2.1.46-47). Travis Bogard comments that, as Bosola speaks, his abhorrence is "forcing him to move from a disgust at specimens before him to a general loathing of all humankind" (42). Bosola is quite aware of the pitfalls of a patriarchal society and eager to comment on the role of women throughout the play; however, in this case, it is clear that his commentary runs deeper than a vain attempt to ridicule an old woman. However, a tension exists between the cosmetic concealment Bosola ridicules and his attempt to move beyond this simple folly. Included in his satirical observation is the idea of transcending stereotypes, and, ironically, it is Bosola himself who is unable to escape his status as corrupt, lower class citizen and gain power through his own intelligence in this play.

Bosola further comments on the position of women in society and their abilities in reference to the Duchess:

The orange tree bears ripe and green fruit and blossoms all together, and some of you give entertainment for pure love, but more for precious reward. The lusty spring smells well, but drooping autumn tastes well. If we have the same golden showers that rained in the same time of Jupiter the Thunderer, you have the same Danaes still, to hold up their laps to receive them. (2.2.15-21)

Bosola argues that all women, old and young, have the ability to get what they want when it comes to men. Older women, like the widowed Duchess, may not be as young but are still sweet. Bosola observes that as long as men desire women, women will be seduced. He goes on to comment, like Flamineo, that women are cunning and more intelligent than men give them credit for. However, with this recognition, and even with a change in his feelings towards the Duchess by the end of the play, Bosola is ultimately corrupt, and his actions result in the demise of the Duchess, perhaps the only character in the play portraying any sense of morality. The Duchess falls victim to the patriarchal society Bosola so aptly mocks.

It is clear through his satirical commentary that Bosola recognizes the corruption that exists in all levels of a patriarchal society, despite social status. He compares the Cardinal and Ferdinand to plum trees that “grow crooked over standing pools; they are rich and o’erladen with fruit, but none but crows, pies, and caterpillars feed on them” (1.1.49-52). Bosola recognizes the wealth and status of the two men, but ultimately knows that they attract only the most base individuals who feed off their status in an effort to gain just a little power of their own. Ironically, despite this recognition, Bosola associates with these men. Waiting to deliver news of the Duchess to Ferdinand and the Cardinal, Bosola thinks to himself: “Now, for this act I am

certain to be raised, / And men that paint weeds to the life are praised” (3.2.329-30). Despite his recognition of Ferdinand and the Cardinal’s ill reputation and his dealings with both men in the past, Bosola is overcome with his own corruption and appetite for power. His satirical commentary is poignant yet fails to provide enough of a foundation for Bosola, or any character for that matter, to transcend the boundaries of their society.

Charles R. Forker believes that “Webster gives us a persistent chorus of satirical deflation and hostile moralism” (262). Forker goes on to observe that “generally speaking, this feeds our pessimism and discourages approval of the romantic values of the play, but it can reflect negatively upon the detractors themselves, exposing their malice, their frustration, or their emotional or imaginative poverty” (262). I would suggest that the distribution of satirical commentary in Webster’s plays makes it impossible for characters to transcend the abuses of a patriarchal society because the negativity that results, exposing the frustration of these characters, leaves little room for societal change. The transcendence of these characters beyond the unjust societal boundaries each so aptly satirizes cannot take place, and in the end, the audience is left only with the recognition of the world around them and perhaps a stimulus to change.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Known for his two greatest tragedies, The White Devil and The Duchess of Malfi, John Webster, like many well-known dramatists in his day, wrote with an obvious audience in mind. Many critics argue that John Webster's use of an assertive female as the central tragic hero within his plays was groundbreaking (Ranald 29). However, it seems that Webster's portrayal of the tragic heroine, despite her empowerment, only served to highlight existing female stereotypes. Perhaps by focusing on these assertive female characters, still confined by their gender, Webster is better able to portray a patriarchal structure in which corruption existed at every level. As both plays are fictionalized according to historical events, the feminine center of Webster's plays is just one facet of his striking social commentary. Choosing to explore issues beyond gender, such as social consciousness and faith, Webster utilized the outlawed literary genre of satire to convey the limitations of a patriarchal society within the setting of his plays, much like that of the audience he attempted to reach. In essence, Webster pushed the envelope. His plays conveyed the realization of corruption at all levels of society and the possibility of empowerment. His satiric commentary is broad, and his evolution of the "she-tragedy" paramount, as "[...] the image of women in drama changed startlingly for the better" towards the end of the first decade of the seventeenth century (Woodbridge 249). However, as much as Webster's characters attempted to transcend the patriarchal structure that confined them, ultimately, they are represented as not succeeding. Unable to escape the social stereotypes they conveyed within his plays, perhaps they contributed to an undermining of a patriarchal society far beyond the stage, as Webster himself planted the seeds of satiric commentary for the next generation of dramatists.

NOTES

¹ John Webster The White Devil, 1.2.199-201, English Renaissance Drama: A Norton Anthology Ed. David Bevington. New York: Norton and Company, 2002. References to The White Devil and The Duchess of Malfi are to this edition and are cited in the text.

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