Imagery as a key to meaning in John Webster's "The White Devil"

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IMAGERY AS A KEY TO MEANING IN
JOHN WEBSTER'S THE WHITE DEVIL

by

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CHAPTER I

A REVIEW OF WEBSTERIAN CRITICISM

John Webster's reputation, both as a poet and a dramatist, rests on the quality of his two tragedies, The Duchess of Malfi and The White Devil, highly individual plays that have established him as one of England's great tragic dramatists. Nevertheless, critical opinion ranges from denunciation of Webster as a second-rate poet glorifying corruption to excessive praise of him as a magnificent poet with a remarkable insight into evil. Webster's reputation grew slowly; its present ascendance is summarized very well by F. L. Lucas: "In his own age he gained no special prominence; the eighteenth century almost ignored him; only since the Romantic Revival has he risen ... to the place of honour next to Shakespeare." Historically, the adulation of Webster begins with Lamb and Swinburne, and although a strong cross current of indictments, based on the view that Webster, in effect, turns Christian ethics upside down, flowed through late nineteenth century criticism, a gradually rising tide of praise, emphasizing his gift for the "pure" poetry of word and image, has lifted his reputation to its present eminence.

Lamb's critical enthusiasm rescued Webster, along with other contemporaries of Shakespeare, from critical oblivion. But, once

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revived as a major Jacobean dramatist, Webster became the center of a critical controversy that continues to the present day. His themes, dramatic structure, characterization, and imagery have all been subjected to scrutiny by a parade of critics; some of these critics are biased by critical pre-conceptions; others focus their interpretations of Webster's tragic vision on such a narrow basis that the plays get lost in a plethora of trivia. Even so, a survey of Websterian criticism discloses some incisive and discriminating opinions of Webster's art and of his tragic vision in The White Devil.

Of all the Romantic critics, Hazlitt left in his study of Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights a valid criticism of Webster no one can afford to neglect. Writing twelve years after Lamb's resurrection of Webster in Specimens of English Dramatic Poets (1808), Hazlitt concentrates on Webster's characterization and finds that his characters have greater complexity than those of his contemporaries except, of course, Shakespeare. Webster, says Hazlitt, brings his characters "into dramatic play by contrast and comparison, flings them into a state of fusion by a kindled fancy, makes them describe a wider arc of oscillation from the impulse of passion" than do Dekker, Tourneur, Marston, and other Jacobean playwrights. Yet Hazlitt's critique of Webster's characterization is not unbridled praise; he points out a tendency on the part of Webster to carry terror and pity to unwarranted excess—a comment which has become one of the salient objections of later critics. Unlike Lamb, who in his criticism of The White Devil praises Vittoria's

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"innocence-resembling boldness" in the trial scene, Hazlitt finds her character more complex; he sees her sincerity, ironically associated with her guilt, as a contrast with the hypocrisy of affected contempt shown by her accusers.\(^3\) Hazlitt's essay demonstrates keenness of perception and unbiased critical judgment combining sincere praise with objectivity, an objectivity not echoed by later Victorian critics.

Victorian attacks on Webster stem from an enraged sense of moral indignation and are typified by the essays of Charles Kingsley, who slashes out at Webster for violating artistic purpose. Kingsley's remarks, especially those concerning The White Devil, are vituperative:

The whole of the story is one of sin and horror. The subject matter of the play is altogether made up of the fiercest and the basest passions. But the play is not a study of those passions from which we may gain a great insight into human nature. ...The study of human nature is not Webster's aim. He has to arouse pity and terror, not thought, and he does it in his own way, by blood and fury.\(^4\)

As if this vitriolic tirade were not sufficient to damn Webster, Kingsley narrows his assault to a spearhead attack on Webster's characterization. To Kingsley the characters in The White Devil are nothing but stereotypes: "in general, they are not characters at all, but mere passions or humours in human form."\(^5\) Kingsley's moralistic obsession impairs his critical vision; he sees Webster's fascination

\(^3\)Ibid., p. 97.

\(^4\)Charles Kingsley, Plays and Puritans and Other Historical Essays, 2nd ed. (London, 1890), pp. 50-52.

\(^5\)Ibid., p. 52.
with gloom, despair, sickness, and death, coupled with the erotic, but he fails to find in Websterian tragedy any valid insights into the nature of human life. Webster's dramatic artistry is obscured by the moralistic mote in Kingsley's eye; however, his discussion of Webster has some value as an example of the extremes of personal prejudice that crept into criticism in the Victorian Age.

Two decades after Kingsley, the moralistic critic, came Swinburne, the heretical apostle for freedom. Swinburne lays rhapsodic accolades at the feet of a nearly deified Webster. Once again critical opinion is impaired by bias--now a bias toward unrestricted freedom of poetic expression. For special praise Swinburne refers to the historical background of The White Devil and says: "the leading circumstances were altered and adapted with the most delicate art and the most consummate judgment from the incompleteness of incomposite reality to the requisites of the stage." He sees in Webster's selection of and additions to the dramatic details of Vittoria's life evidence of superb plot manipulation. In addition, Swinburne finds the characters in the tragedy to be of the highest quality, surpassed only by those of Shakespeare "in pathos and passion, in subtlety and strength, in harmonious variety of art and infallible fidelity to nature."

Swinburne's appraisal, based more on personal enthusiasm than on

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penetrating analysis, amounts to romantic hero worship in an almost
simon-pure state.

Excessive glorification of Webster, such as that of Swinburne, is
not typical of other critics of his time. George Henry Lewes, review-
ing an 1850 production of The White Devil, continues the comparison of
Shakespeare and Webster. Rather than find them both pre-eminent among
Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights, he finds Shakespeare supreme and
unrivaled. Lewes admits a youthful enthusiasm for the Renaissance
dramatists that stemmed from his reverential respect for the criticism
of Lamb and Hazlitt, but his enthusiasm, tamed by the judgment of
maturity, has waned. By the time he writes his essay, Lewes sees only
mediocrity in The White Devil. His opinion is sharp; the lesser dram-
atists, when compared to Shakespeare, are not dramatists at all.
Including Webster in the group of would-be dramatists, Lewes asserts
that The White Devil appeals to the imagination because of Webster's
tragic intent rather than because of his tragic vision. He rebukes
Webster for being commonplace in dramatic structure; nevertheless, he
finds qualified merit in Webster's "noble lines of manly verse which
charm the reader, yet fail to arrest the spectator." Lewes' distinc-
tion between Webster the poet and Webster the dramatist becomes a
touchstone in Websterian criticism, a distinction that continues into
present day evaluations of Webster's works.

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8George Forster and George Henry Lewes, Dramatic Essays, ed.
The critical cleavage between poetic and dramatic elements in Renaissance drama flows through the late nineteenth century and into the twentieth in the essays of William Archer, who views most of the Renaissance playwrights as inept and their dramas as illogical, primitive, and inconsistent. He holds Shakespeare apart, but speaks out against the others en masse. Archer attacks many of the conventions in Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedy; he finds justification for others, such as the soliloquy, because it can exist without destroying reality. But the aside he deplores as "a device which contradicts the whole nature of things. ...It is, in short, a sign of sheer artistic helplessness." Staged horrors, Archer sees, as a playwright's condescension to the macabre taste of his audience; inconsistencies in time he abhors, chiefly because he seeks realism in the plays. Archer also writes scathing criticism of the Renaissance convention that blank verse is requisite for tragedy, and although he concedes that good blank verse is not easy to write, he argues that most Renaissance drama is not written in great, or even good, blank verse. He states his belief forcefully:

The established custom of writing in verse, good, bad, or indifferent, enabled and encouraged the dramatist to substitute rhetoric for human speech. It is immeasurably easier to make dramatic characters speak as men and women do not speak than to capture the true accent and the delicate interplay of actual talk. ...It [blank verse] was a wand in the hand of genius, but a crutch to a hobbling talent.¹⁰

⁹William Archer, The Old and the New Drama (Boston, 1923), p. 41.

¹⁰Ibid., pp. 47-49.
Archer's criticism attempts to force the tragedies of Shakespeare's contemporaries into the restrictive mold of late nineteenth and early twentieth century realism. But despite his emphasis on a dichotomous drama composed of the separate elements of the dramatic and the poetic, Archer performed a service of lasting importance. Following his radical statement of the absurdities he saw in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, later critics had to look for a solid critical basis for their own evaluations of the plays. No longer could sheer enthusiasm pass for criticism.

In his definitive edition of Webster's works, F. L. Lucas brings critical objectivity into Webberian studies. Lucas refers to Archer's aesthetic contempt for Webster and states in the General Introduction of his edition that his goal is "not to praise, but to try to understand." Lucas singles out for commendation the splendid poetry found in Webster's tragedies, but unlike critics who view as two separate elements, the "poetic" and the "dramatic," Lucas finds Webster a dramatic poet who produced unified tragedies. Vivid language gives individuality and life to Webster's characters, while the life of his characters, in turn, enlivens his plots. Lucas, in his analysis of Webster's poetic style, includes more than words, images, and rhythms; he also includes the creation of that somber mood of disillusionment common to Jacobean drama, a mood Webster captures par excellence in his tragedies.

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11Lucas, op. cit., p. 16.
For if we ask where lies the peculiar and abiding spell of this dramatist whose technique is unequal and psychology uncertain, however brilliant at moments both of them may be, the answer is in his poetry—in his gift not only for the pure poetry of word and image, but for the poetry also of personality and atmosphere; and lastly for the poetry of a most embittered and tragic view of life.\(^{12}\)

Similarly, Moody E. Prior holds that the fusion of poetic and dramatic elements in *The White Devil* produces a pervasive mood of disillusionment. Prior states that "mood is important in any understanding of Webster; it is incorporated into the prevailing imagery."\(^{13}\) Webster's use of diction and imagery, Prior finds, serves the multiple functions of delineating character, establishing the world of the play, developing interrelationships between the various parts of the tragedy, and creating the play's dominant mood.

Another critic who finds unity in *The White Devil* through an integrated and specific study of the relevance of imagery to structure is Hereward T. Price.\(^{14}\) Throughout the play, hidden corruption gradually emerges and is accentuated by the profusion of images depicting infection, poison, and sickness, while the disparity between appearance and reality is heightened by reiteration of images which promise happiness but only deceive. Price's summary description of the functions of Webster's imagery is the foundation of his essay; in it he asserts that

\(^{12}\)Ibid., p. 28.
imagery in *The White Devil* "reveals character; it does the work of argument; it emphasizes mood, and it prefigures the events to come."\(^{15}\) Furthermore, Price finds that Webster's imagery is distinguished from that of other Jacobean dramatists by its double construction of "figures in language and figures in action. These he fuses so intimately as to make the play one entire figure."\(^{16}\) And so, because of the variety of functions implicit in Webster's imagery, as well as the parallels of language and action, Price concludes that *The White Devil* is unified to a high degree.

While Price focuses his attention on the unifying effect of imagery and action in the entire play, Webster's use of rhetoric in the trial scene (III.ii) is examined by H. Bruce Franklin.\(^{17}\) The imagery, language, rhetoric, and structure of this pivotal scene are all scrutinized; all of them Franklin finds vital parts of Webster's art. Franklin notes that in this scene "deceit and diabolism are not only ubiquitous, but are also the basis of dramatic structure."\(^{18}\) Contrasting characteristics of the Lawyer and Vittoria emerge from the varying language Webster gives to each; opposed to the Lawyer's textbook example of bad forensic style is Vittoria's plain style. Once she defeats the Lawyer in the verbal battle, Vittoria exposes the twisted

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\(^{15}\)Ibid., 712.

\(^{16}\)Ibid., 719.


\(^{18}\)Ibid., 35.
rhetoric and outrageous lies of her prosecutors. Webster's variations of rhetorical patterns, Franklin contends, are sources of dual revelations: revelations of character and revelations of the nature of the world of the play. Although Franklin restricts his essay to the trial scene, he strikes a balanced, harmonious chord between detailed observation of imagery, rhetoric, and structure and Webster's thematic aims.

Similar to Franklin's study, in that it focuses attention on the trial scene, is an essay by Miss Inga-Stina Ekeblad,¹⁹ who notes, in part, that the trial scene follows

the characteristic movement of a central Websterian scene ... [in that it moves] from swift, foreboding, dialogue to slowly analyzing speeches, practically monologues. ... In such speeches a development is seen from highly figurative language, searching, through a number of elaborate images, for adequate expression of thought and feeling, to language which becomes transparent as intensity of thought and feeling increases.²⁰

In Webster's tragedies, Miss Ekeblad detects language shifts, especially before the death speech of a major character, where the elaborate and complex imagery changes and becomes lucid and straightforward—the kind of language that indicates clarity of vision. But although correlation between language in individual scenes of The White Devil and the entire movement of the tragedy is a guide to structural unity in the play, Miss Ekeblad extends her thesis further than the evidence she cites will allow. In his death-scene speeches, Brachiano raves madly; he speaks

¹⁹Inga-Stina Ekeblad, "Webster's Constructional Rhythm," ELH, XXIV (September, 1957), 165-176.
²⁰Ibid., 175.
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distractedly; notwithstanding some piercingly lucid observations about
the world he is departing from, his anguished outcries hardly indicate
clarity of vision. On the other hand, Vittoria's ante-penultimate
speech, "O my greatest sinne lay in my blood./ Now my blood paies for't"
(V.vi.240-241), indicates some awareness of her sin and its consequences;
but her next lines, "My soule, like to a ship in a blacke storme/ Is
driven I know not whither" (V.vi.248-249), certainly do not support Miss
Ekeblad's conclusion. The death speech of the remaining major character,
Flamineo, also implies only partial insight:

   Noe, at my selfe I will begin and end.
   While we looke up to heaven wee confound
   Knowledge with knowledge. o I am in a mist. (V.vi.258-260)

Nevertheless, despite its over-emphasis on clarity of vision in the
dearth speeches of central characters, Miss Ekeblad's essay has critical
value, because it points to structural unity in the play, a unity
reflected in the impetus given by language to both individual scenes
and to the entire play.

In another study devoted primarily to prominent scenes in the
play, those centering upon Vittoria and Flamineo, B. J. Laymon contrasts
the imagery highlighting the leading characters of The White Devil.21
To Laymon, Vittoria and Flamineo, sister and brother, are antipodal
figures: she attracts; he repels. Vittoria is presented on the plane of
physical appearance, while Flamineo is presented more inwardly, more
psychologically. Laymon focuses his study on the dramatic opposition

21B. J. Laymon, "The Equilibrium of Opposites in The White Devil:
A Reinterpretation," MLA, LXXIV (September, 1959), 336-347.
of these two characters and expands in detail Hazlitt’s statement that one of the strengths of Websterian characterization lies in its dramatic play of contrasts. From this point of view, Laymon directs his imagistic study toward the problem of Webster’s search for tragic affirmation.

Lord David Cecil, however, approaches his consideration of Webster’s tragic vision from the point of view of orthodox Christianity. Lord David points to Giovanni, the young prince who at the end of the play is the political leader, as if he were a phoenix-like reincarnation of virtue rising from the ashes of the evil world to restore moral order. In summarizing his interpretation of The White Devil, Lord David says:

And such then is Webster’s tragic vision of the world: a fallen place in which suffering outweights happiness and all activities are tainted with sin; where evil is the controlling force, and good—just because it is good—is inevitably quietest; hoping, at best, and with luck, to slip through the tempest of existence, unnoticed. Yet it is also a place where the moral law cannot be thwarted indefinitely. So that finally evil destroys itself, justice is vindicated.\(^{22}\)

Lord David concedes that the few characters in the play who try to live virtuously (Cornelia, Isabella, and Marcello) are defeated on the materialistic plane; nevertheless, he finds them morally triumphant, overlooking the fact that two of the most vicious characters (Monticelso and Francisco) escape scot-free. Lord David’s assumption that Giovanni will restore moral order seems to be too presumptive, for he has been described as a miniature of his father (Brachiano, who is as ruthless as

\(^{22}\)Lord David Cecil, Poets and Storytellers (New York, 1949), p. 34.
anyone else in the play) and compared to a fledgling bird of prey. The ghosts, the physical tortures, and the fearful mists typical of the play's atmosphere, Lord David sees as symbolic incarnations of spiritual terror, but his interpretation of *The White Devil* seems to miss the essential ambiguity existing in the characterizations. The central figures are more than mere personifications of ruling passions, as Lord David asserts; they are characters struggling in a dominantly evil world to find a meaning for man's existence and some goal worthy of achievement. Even so, Lord David's assessment of the play merits consideration because it is unique in its traditional Christian interpretation.

Diametrically opposed to Lord David's view is Ian Jack's interpretation of the play: that Webster suffers from a philosophical poverty reflected in the fact that the play contains no positive moral statement of any sort.  

Webster's world, in Jack's view, is dominantly evil; it is spiritually infected so that if evil be taken from it, nothing remains. Rather than moral strength, Jack finds total decadence, a narrow outlook grounded in the macabre and somber side of life, and an unharmonious presentation of the relationship between good and evil. The sententia abounding in *The White Devil*, Jack contends, are reflections of Webster's dissociation with the full awareness of life necessary for a tragic poet; he finds no thematic reconciliation between the moral axioms that punctuate the scenes and the life that Webster represents. Accordingly, Jack interprets the play as "a

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chaotic struggle, lit indeed by flashes of 'bitter lightning,' but fated to sink again into a mist of confusion and sub-human activity."\textsuperscript{24}

Lying between the critical extremes of Christian morality and total decadence is Travis Bogard's interpretation of the play.\textsuperscript{25} Bogard bases his approach to Webster's tragic vision on the satiric qualities of his tragedies. Interpreting The White Devil as a study of economic determinism accentuated by an aura of omnipresent evil, Bogard holds that it is impossible for Webster to focus the direction of his tragedy on any forces more profound than those created by man. The sententia in the play, Bogard contends, imply some natural evil in the world, an evil man cannot control; there is only a hint of any power stronger than man-made forces in the tragedy. Bogard states that "Webster shows the world as a pit of darkness; ...there is no god. ... The usual distinctions of virtue and vice are meaningless."\textsuperscript{26} To him the play is finally a treatment of courtly rewards and punishments, and he summarily concludes: "Despite the quantity of positive ethical statement in The White Devil, the final impression which the play leaves is that evil is so pervasive as to nullify any absolute, positive counsel; ...but Webster refused to shape his tragedy to conform with easy moralizing."\textsuperscript{27} Perhaps unwittingly, Bogard expresses the key to

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 43.

\textsuperscript{25} Travis Bogard, The Tragic Satire of John Webster (Berkeley, 1955).

\textsuperscript{26} Travis Bogard, Introduction to his edition of The White Devil (San Francisco, 1961), p. xi.

\textsuperscript{27} Bogard, The Tragic Satire of John Webster, p. 131.
Webster's tragic vision in his admission that The White Devil does not lend itself to easy moralizing.

Another recent critic who recognizes that Webster's tragedy is not subject to easy interpretation is Irving Ribner; to him the play is "an agonized search for moral order in the uncertain and chaotic world of Jacobean scepticism. ...Webster's concern is with the ability of man to survive in the decaying world without direction, to maintain his human worth in spite of all." Ribner interprets the paradoxical title as implying that good grows out of evil; he finds moral ambiguity in the world of the play, where good wears the mask of evil and evil disguises itself as good. To him The White Devil expresses a profound moral concern, but not necessarily of a morality based upon faith in divine order, for Ribner asserts that "Webster bases his faith upon human integrity and in the nobility to which human life can aspire in spite of the discord which surrounds it." 

Contrary to Ribner, Robert Ornstein finds The White Devil lacks moral discriminations and argues that "there is no suggestion that the courts of princes were once less corrupt or that sensual pleasure was not always the norm of human existence." Impotent and meaningless, virtue exists in the world of the play, but to Ornstein the insistence upon the illusion of virtue, rather than virtue, dooms the people of

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29 Ibid., p. 100.

Webster's Italinate court to moral chaos. Flamineo is a victim of the tyranny of self-knowledge, for he sees his goals so clearly that he recognizes no alternatives; he understands the essential nature of his society but is unable to solve the problem of his own destiny. "In a sense," Ornstein says, "the blind determinism of the emancipated will is the great unrecognized theme of *The White Devil*."31

The preceding review of Websterian criticism shows a diversity of interpretations and appraisals of *The White Devil*. In general, two types of critics dominate the field: those who try to define Webster's tragic vision of life, and those who focus on technical analysis of the play: its characterization, plot, rhetoric, structure, and imagery. The latter critics frequently extend their essays to consider the meaning of the play as a whole, but the interpretative critics seldom devote more than a passing comment to technical aspects of the play. However, almost all critics of Webster mention imagery in one or more of its functions as a vital element of Webster's artistry in *The White Devil*.

Even so, though Webster's imagery has been a stimulus to critics through the years, none of the critics has yet examined the body of imagery in the play in order to find its total relationship to themes. Price mentions such a relationship, when he says that Webster "works up to a sudden speech or perhaps only a sudden line to reveal, as by lightning, the essential quality of a life or even the meaning of the

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31 Ibid., p. 138.
whole play." But Price stops short of reinforcing this statement with illustrations that fully reveal how Webster's highly imagistic language discloses meaning in The White Devil.

One of the ways Webster's imagery acts as a key for interpretation of the meaning of the play is through verbal iteration. Iteration of key words and images, devil, poison, kiss, lost, and wolf, to name a few, and varied categories of words and phrases (such as, diseases and cures, religious expressions, hunting terms, and Christian virtues) establish patterns of meaning. As Richard B. Heilman says in his study of King Lear, "a recurring word exists in a dual relationship; one of its links is to the thing denoted; the other is to the pattern of meaning of the total uses of the word." A somewhat similar statement could be made with regard to The White Devil. In fact, Price comments on the existence of verbal iteration in the play, saying: "The relentless repetition of the same kind of figure, the heaping up of the same word, time and time again, cannot be accidental. Such frequency of occurrence shows that there must be method, conscious and deliberate." Repeated readings of the play have convinced me that to neglect its verbal iteration is to overlook an essential key to meaning.

Not only through verbal iteration, but also through an image cluster, Monticelso's "Character of a Whore" (III.ii.82-105), a tightly compressed speech binding together themes, action, and individual

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32 Price, op. cit., 719.

33 Richard Bechtold Heilman, This Great Stage (Baton Rouge, 1948), p. 91.

34 Price, op. cit., 720.
images, Webster points to the ultimate meaning of the play. Also the
play contains numerous short passages that link and crisscross themes
and images that unify the structure and, more importantly, reinforce
meaning.

The White Devil is a complex and difficult play, but I have found
that Webster's verbal iteration, image groups, and patterns of images,
when examined concomitantly with themes, provide clues to its meaning.
Excessive attention to only one of Webster's themes and the imagery
related to it has resulted in severely limited interpretations of the
play by several critics. In an effort to avoid focusing my appraisal
of the play too narrowly, my concern has been not to catalogue and
classify images, nor to trace a single type of image. Rather, my
essay centers on images that are repeated and inextricably bound with
themes. I am convinced that Webster's image groups, patterns of
recurrent words and phrases, and his images, whether used literally
or figuratively, are keys to meaning in The White Devil.
CHAPTER II

IMAGERY IN THE OPENING SCENE

Webster wastes no words in the short opening scene of The White Devil. In its sixty-two lines, he initiates almost all of the dominant types of images that occur throughout the play, establishes the atmosphere of apprehensive distrust that pervades the Italian Court, foreshadows the development of his main themes, and introduces narratively Brachiano and Vittoria, two of the three characters who really matter.

Lodovico opens the play: "Banish't" (I.i.i.). Explosively, this one word line reveals his bitter and angry disillusionment with the social and political life in the court. Concurrently, this dramatic exclamation begins the theme of justice, a theme that moves from the initial realm of secular justice to a climactic final representation of divine justice. Lodovico scornfully blames his banishment on the vagaries of Fortune, but his comrade, Antonelli, tells him: "You are justly dom'd (I.i.13). Then, Antonelli and Gasparo enumerate the Count's "violent sinnes" (I.i.35).

Lodovico, in only three years, has depleted his wealth by "damnable degrees/ Of drinkings" (I.i.18-19) and sumptuous entertaining at "prodigall feastes" (I.i.22). Even worse, he has committed horrid and bloody murders (I.i.30-32). His prodigality, wantonness, and criminality Lodovico does not deny; in fact, he disdains the murders as mere "flea-bytinges" (I.i.32) and considers himself above any law other than the vindictive courtly justice of "great men." When Lodovico asks why his earlier misdeeds went unpunished, Gasparo consoles him, saying:
The law doth sometimes mediate, thinkes it good
Not ever to steepe violent sinnes in blood,
This gentle pennance may both end your crimes,
And in the example better these bad times. (I.i.34-37)

Gasparo's linking of "sinnes" with "crimes" and "pennance" with "law" ties secular and divine justice together. His speech implies that retributive justice is not always harsh and that Lodovico could choose to turn from crime and sin.

But Lodovico is envenomed with jealousy; he feels no contrition; he is not even grateful that his life has been spared. Rather than accept his exile as justified, he accuses Brachiano of deserving banishment as much as he:

...ther's Paulo Giordano Orsini,  
The Duke of Brachiano, now lives in Rome,  
And by close pandarisme seekes to prostitute  
The honour of Vittoria Corombona. (I.i.39-42)

Typical of "these bad times" (I.i.37) is the acceptance of sin in court life; Brachiano's "close pandarisme" is actually known, and Lodovico's past murders are common knowledge. But traditional moral standards have become so debased that open sin and immorality are accepted ways of life. Morally, the court is rotten to the core. Life itself appears to have neither meaning nor value.

Early in the opening scene, Lodovico blames his banishment on chance and says: "Fortune's a right whore" (I.i.41). And although the expression of "Fortune's harlot-like character ... was a centuries old commonplace,"¹ Lodovico's words begin a pattern of prostitution that is

repeated often. Through the succeeding scenes, moral values, religious sacraments, social customs, and Christian ethics are all prostituted. Vittoria literally becomes Brachiano's whore; her brother, Flamineo, is their pander, and assassins disguised as priests administer the last rite to their victim, Brachiano, in a travesty of extreme unction.

Contrasting with the libertinism described in the opening scene—riotous drinking, sumptuous feasting, wanton whoring, and ruthless killing—are implications of the existence of a set of values based on orthodox Christianity. The words, "pennance," "pardon," and "vertue," suggest an awareness of traditional values. Gasparo refers to banishment as "a gentle pennance" (I.i.36); Lodovico says that Vittoria could have secured his "pardon/ For one kisse to the Duke" (I.i.13-14), and Antonelli tells Lodovico that "affliction/ Expresseth vertue fully" (I.i.48-49). From these words which render the opening scene alive with moral and religious connotations, Webster's implied value system, rooted in Christian virtues and traditional morality, grows.

An awareness of past morality and future retribution reverberates throughout the play in images associated with natural phenomena. Thunder roars, earthquakes ravage, and meteors flash in the highly imagistic language of the opening scene. Lodovico mocks his enemies:

...Oh I pray for them.
The violent thunder is adored by those
Are pasht [violently dashed] in pieces by it. (I.i.10-12)

Lodovico, who is the ultimate agent of revenge, is cognizant of an absolute justice that will inevitably come from Heaven's chastisement, but he defiantly challenges this justice, as if daring any supernatural forces to harm him. A few lines later, Casparo relates that Lodovico's
former friends now laugh at his misery and consider that his downfall was predestined like the falling of a spent meteor (I.i.24-26). To which Antonelli adds:

...[They] jeast upon you,
And say you were begotten in an Earthquake,
You have ruin'd such faire lordships. (I.i.26-28)

These natural phenomena are typical Renaissance omens presaging the downfall of evil. Later in the play, whirlwinds break limbs from a tree in Vittoria's dream (I.ii.241-243), and Brachiano accuses his wife of coming to Rome on some "amorous whirlwind" (II.i.152). Additional images of atmospheric phenomena describe the ravages of nature and culminate in the final act of the play in storm images that conclude the justice theme.

The sickness pattern that time and again is emphasized in The White Devil also originates in the opening scene with Gasparo's description of the sycophants who have abandoned Lodovico:

Your followers
Have swallowed you like Mummia, and being sicke
With such unnaturall and horrid Phisicke
Vomit you up ith kennell. (I.i.15-18)

Sickness images, diseases, and cures form a pattern of infection, a kind of moral pestilence, that afflicts most of the plague-ridden inhabitants of the court. Nausea, venereal diseases, malignancies, and jaundice vividly particularize the pattern of sickness; contrariwise, hopefully sought cures turn into poison, and the shadow of death hovers over the infected court. Rampant moral sickness spreads outward from the court leaders and taints even the few characters who try to live by
traditional moral principles. Continually, the characters seek a panacea, but are doomed to failure, owing to their mistaken assumption that their infection is physical, when, in reality, it is moral. In part, the characters' misunderstanding of the nature of the illness of their world arises from their inability to distinguish between appearance and reality.

The disparity between appearance and reality is accentuated by both the action and language of the play. In the opening scene, the sympathetic commiseration of Antonelli and Gasparo should console Lodovico, but does not. Deceit and flattery are endemic in the court to such a degree that Lodovico assumes their words are only "painted comforts" (I.i.50). Later in the play, images of deception appear as "painted meat [that] no hunger feedes" (IV.ii.205), seemingly luscious apples that turn to soot and ashes (III.ii.67), and caged birds that seem to sing, but actually cry (V.iv.117). As the pattern of deception gains in strength and intensity, all of the characters, at times, are involved either as the deceivers or the deceived. Self-deception is frequent; this motif also begins in the opening scene, when Lodovico deludes himself into believing that he is sheep-like.

Two categories of characters are distinguished by animal imagery in the opening scene: wolves and sheep. Lodovico compares his enemies to wolves—wolves that, once their appetite is temporarily satiated, no longer seem to be wolves:

This tis to have great enemies, God quite them:  
Your woolfe no longer seemes to be a woolfe  
Then when shees hungry.  

(I.i.7-9)
Although Lodovico does not designate his enemies specifically, the wolf image typifies many of his associates. By repetition of lupine comparisons, Webster extends the wolf imagery to explicitly include Francisco, the cunning politician, and Monticelso, the carnivorous Cardinal. Vittoria, when cornered at her trial, fights like a wolf at bay; her maid, Zanche, is lustfully animalistic and is compared to a vicious wolf. Brachiano stalks his prey, Isabella and Camillo, with lupine tenacity. The wolf image is the first animal image in the opening scene; its prominent position is fitting, for the world of the play is vicious, predatory, and rapacious.

But the court is not filled entirely with carnivores. In the concluding lines of the first scene, Lodovico says:

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

(I.i.61-62)

Lodovico mistakenly considers himself to be a sheep, for although he has been banished, his punishment was justified. But he is no sacrificial lamb. The meek, innocent, and sacrificial characters, those to whom the sheep image can be properly applied, are Isabella, Marcello, and Cornelia. Their passivity stands out in quiet contrast to the ceaseless, vicious activity of "great men." There is a sheep-like innocence and a sacrificial quality in their devotion to others; nevertheless, although "wolves" and "sheep" as classes of characters are imagistic representations of good and evil, Webster's characters are not mere stereotypes. The minor characters are less complex than Flamineo and Vittoria, who have the central roles, but in all of the characters there are opposing tendencies toward good and evil, complex traits that reinforce their
individuality and, despite their excesses, provide credibility to Webster's characterizations. Because the setting of *The White Devil* is in the Italian court, where greed and viciousness prevail, animal imagery dominates the play.
CHAPTER III

THE PREDATORS

In The White Devil reiterated animal imagery illustrates the predatory nature of the world of the play. Rapacious animals and birds represent plundering greed and predatory stealth in Francisco, Monticelso, and Brachiano, the leaders of the court. The dominant animal images are of wolves and dogs.¹

A detailed evaluation of the wolf and dog imagery points to the complete depravity of the leading court figures who live totally for self. In them, human standards of decency have been abandoned. Wildly individualistic, Brachiano and Francisco, the men of highest political rank, and Monticelso, an "eminent" prelate (a Cardinal who becomes the Pope), expend tremendous energy to achieve and to maintain their positions. Self-assertion dominates their actions; they display contempt for tradition and act as if they were inhabitants of a private world. No traditional ethical restraints deter them from relentless pursuit of their enemies. Thus, through them disorder spreads unchecked.

The first use of animal imagery is Lodovico's deprecation of "great men" as wolves (I.i.7-9). In context he refers only to his enemies in general, but later it appears that he is specifically speaking of Brachiano; however, Webster never positively identifies the

¹Almost two-thirds of the animal images (i.e., twenty-one of thirty-four) pertain to these animals.
"great men" who have banished Lodovico. Rather, his bitterness is directed toward the entire court where political justice is meted out by dual standards: one law for the high, another for the low. Rapidly Webster expands the wolf imagery to include most of the leading members of the court either by allusion or self-description. There are the cunning politic wolves, Monticelso and Francisco, whose wolfish guile thoroughly exemplifies animality (II.i.370-378). Later, during the trial, Vittoria explicitly calls Monticelso a wolf after he has taunted her, when Brachiano left the chamber, saying: "Your champion's gon" (III.ii.187). Vittoria's reply is instantaneous and appropriate: "The wolf may prey the better" (III.ii.188). Monticelso, who is both her prosecutor and judge, continues his relentless stalking and demonstrates that her animalistic description of him is fitting. But not only the "great men" are wolfish, for Lodovico and other hired assassins are compared to a foraging wolf-pack (IV.i.73). Likewise, Flamineo, an impoverished court attendant, compares himself to a wolf feeding at a woman's breast (V.iv.30-31), and Brachiano calls Vittoria a wolf (IV.ii.93). The many wolves of the play are all typified by Lodovico's initial image; they do not seem to be wolves at all, if their voracious appetites for vengeance, lust, or power are temporarily satiated. Thus, Webster's initial animal image presents the predators, their Machiavellain reliance upon deception, and their animalistic dedication to gluttoning their appetites.

2Lucas, op. cit., p. 200.
Two of the "great men," Monticelso and Francisco, when they connive in Act IV, demonstrate their animalistic debasement. Wolf-like, each lives sheerly for self and holds that any means is justified to secure and retain personal goals, whether riches, authority, or revenge. During a private conversation, they perpetrate an elaborate mutual hoax which is an excellent demonstration of deceit and lupine treachery. Francisco obtains from the Cardinal his black book listing the names of all sorts of devils, "a generall catalogue of knaves" (IV.i.65). While the Cardinal pretends to have assembled the list of murderers, usurers, bawds, pirates, and spies in order to ferret them out, both he and Francisco know that knaves are essential to perform the acts of violence required by "great men" to maintain their positions. The listed villains can be forced into service by extortion or induced to act for the benefit of the powerful by the lure of materialistic rewards. Francisco flatters his brother, telling Monticelso that he has

...done infinite good in [his] discovery
Of these offenders. ...
Better then tribute of wolves paid in England.
'Twill hang their skinnes o'th hedge. (IV.i.73-76)

In this passage, wolf imagery indicates that it is not just "great men" who have lowered themselves to animality; the hired assassins, spies, and panders also have subverted their human characteristics. The entire dialogue is typical of Webster's contrast between appearance and reality. Each of the brothers seems to wrap himself in a sheep-like fleece, but by his subsequent acts reveals his complete viciousness. Francisco lacks self-knowledge and never recognizes that he has become a beast, although he knows the dangers of associating with evil. This
knowledge reveals itself when he commends his nephew, Giovanni, saying:
"A good habite makes a child a man, / Whereas a bad one makes a man a
beast" (II.i.140-141). By his habitual actions, Francisco shows himself
a predatory beast, the acme of rapacity.

Wolfishness, however, is not limited to the men in the court. When
Brachiano believes that Vittoria has been unfaithful to him (owing to
Francisco's spurious love letter), he curses her for leading him to ruin:
"Woman to man / Is either a God or a wolf" (IV.ii.92-93). Raging with
anger, Brachiano is mistaken in his analogy, especially in describing
himself as "an heathen sacrifice" (IV.ii.90) led to ruin by Vittoria's
beauty. At no time in the play does Brachiano appear sacrificially
innocent. If Vittoria is a wolf leading him to ruin, Brachiano is the
hunter stalking her. But this inappropriate analogy typifies the play's
animalistic characters who are quick to censure animality in others,
but fail to recognize their own bestiality.

Aside from Vittoria, the only other woman described in wolf images
is Zanche, the foil to her mistress. Zanche is entirely animalistic;
she is the bitch wolf. Her sexual desires are sheer lust. She attempts
to attract Francisco and Flamineo by inciting their passions, but both
of them display more cunning than she. Each of them, respectively,
appears to be taken in by her scheming in order to learn her secrets or
to insure her silence. Flamineo admits that his expressed love for
Zanche is more nearly extortion than affection:

Shee knowes some of my villanny; I do love her, just
as a man holds a wolfe by the eares. But for feare of
turning upone mee, and pulling out my throate, I would
let her go to the Devill. (V.i.148-151)
Flamineo's analogy indicates that the wolf is to be feared; Brachiano's analogy of the wolf-bitch leading man to ruin shows that the wolf is dangerous; Francisco's comparison of rogues and knaves to wolves implies that the predators should be exterminated; still, none of these characters awakens to the dangers of continuing his own wolfish ways of life.

The viciousness associated with the wolf reverberates in the images of dogs. Brachiano, after concocting a feeble lie to help Vittoria at the trial (he claims to have visited her out of "charity"), suddenly realizes that he may be trapped, if he remains in the courtroom. His exit is stormy. He threatens the Cardinal whom he has previously accused of being like "Cowardly dogs [that] barke loudest" (III.ii.169). Once again the enraged Brachiano misapplies his analogy, for the Cardinal is not a cowardly dog; rather, he is a wolfish dog, one that does not hesitate to attack its enemies. Actually, Brachiano's analogy more nearly describes his own behavior, because like a cur, he leaves his mistress without protection in the face of her prosecutors and displays only verbal boldness.

Although he mistakenly applies the dog image at the trial, when Brachiano lies dying of poison, he aptly blames his death on Francisco, saying that he is a victim of

That old dog-fox, the Polititian Florence--
Ile forswearre hunting and turne dog-killer;
...for marke you, sir, one dog
Still sets another a-barking. (V.iii.93-96)

The world of the play is epitomized in these lines. It is a world of barking dogs that sense danger and killer-dogs that turn on each other.
Ironically, Brachiano vows on his deathbed that he will "turne dog-killer"; consequently, he never has an opportunity to put his threat into action. But from his barking at the trial, it may be inferred that he would only bark, not act. In spite of Brachiano's braving both Monticelso and Francisco verbally, he lacks the stealth to pursue them; they are, like wolf-pack leaders, craftier predators than he.

The stalking killer is ever present in the play. Monticelso, after he is elected Pope, by chance sees Francisco and Lodovico in a private conversation. He becomes suspicious that a plot is forming and calls Lodovico to task, accusing him of villainy. Knowing Lodovico to be one of the "devils" listed in his book of knaves, Monticelso has cause to be suspicious. He upbraids Lodovico:

Wretched creature!
I know that thou art fashion'd for all ill,
Like dogges, that once get blond, they'l ever kill.

(IV.iii.104-106)

The comparison is apt. Blood flows continually as one death follows another, all of them perpetrated by the predators as they range throughout the court satisfying their thirst for the blood of their foes, whether they be sheep, less cunning wolves, or weaker dogs.

Hunting terms and animal imagery combine in one of Vittorla's speeches during her quarrel with Brachiano in Act IV: "Your dog or hawke should be rewarded better/ Then I have bin" (IV.ii.193-194).  

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3Lucas, op. cit., p. 234, identifies rewarded as "a technical term in hunting or hawking" and refers to Webster's parallel usage in The Duchess of Malfi (I.i.59): "There are rewards for hawkes and dogges."
Comparing herself to a trained predator, Vittoria repeats an analogy made in the first act by Flamineo who had declared:

> Women are like curst dogges, civiltie keepes them tyed all day time, but they are let loose at midnight, then they do most good or most mischeefe. (I.ii.188-190)

Also in the play's second scene, while Flamineo is leading Camillo into another chamber in order that Vittoria and Brachiano may enjoy their adultery, Flamineo says of his sister: "Let her not go to Church, but like a hounde/ In Leon [on a leash] at your heeles" (I.ii.81-82).

Subsequently, Flamineo alludes to dogs in describing himself. When Brachiano outspokenly calls him a pander, Flamineo quips, "What mee, my Lord, am I your dog?" (IV.ii.52). He is rebuked by Brachiano's reply, "A bloud-hound" (IV.ii.53). Later in the play, Flamineo, in one of the few humorous speeches in the tragedy, though its lines also indicate confusion and terror, describes himself as running from Zanche "like a frightened dog with a bottle at's taile, that faine would bite it off and yet dares not looke behind him" (V.i.151-156). The dog metaphor recurs a few lines later when Flamineo says that the "perfumed gallants" of the court, those who lavish their attention on painted courtesans, are sure to become infected with venereal diseases: "for they that sleep with dogs; shal rise with fleas" (V.i.163). He plies Zanche with flattery, telling her that her dark beauty is more alluring than the painting and gay apparel of the courtesans and alludes to her sexuality in his lustful

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Bloodhound: a standard Renaissance metaphor for a pander. This image also implies the hunting down of game (or enemies), combines the dog image with the blood image, and implies treachery; thus, it has multiple-connotations.
flattery of her. Flamineo continues to dupe Zanche by comparing himself
to a dog, saying: "Esop had a foolish dog that let go the flesh to catch
the shadow." (V.i.167-168).

Flamineo's final use of animal imagery occurs when his executioners,
Lodovico and Gasparo, unmask to reveal their identity. He has been
interrupted in his attempt to kill Vittoria and Zanche and suddenly finds
himself prey to the killer-dogs, rather than a predator. He exclaims:
"Fate's a Spaniell/ Wee cannot beat from us" (V.vi.178-179).

Thus, the use of animal imagery makes evil concrete. By emphasiz­
ing the ferocity and bestiality into which most of the characters have
fallen, this image pattern reflects the predatory qualities of "great
men," lesser court hangers-on, and two of the women in the court.
Wolves relentlessly pursue their prey; killer-dogs shred their victims
to bits; and birds of prey, falcons, hawks, and eagles, swooping from
the skies to pounce upon terrified, cowering quarry, represent the
ruthlessness of evil. Images of predatory birds strengthen the dominant
atmosphere of pervasive terror and constant unrest in The White Devil.

Hawking terms recur in a pattern of pursuit and attack. Occasionally,
metaphors of falconery are elaborate, as in the conversation between
Brachiano and his brothers-in-law, Monticelso and Francisco. The
latter try to dissuade Brachiano from his adultery and imply that

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5 Lucas, op. cit., p. 268, compares this passage to "Lyly, Euphues,
109; 'The kinde Spaniel, which the more he is beaten the fonder he is'."

6 Fifteen of the play's forty bird images are of birds of prey.
lascivious living will destroy his fame and his power. But Brachiano feigns incomprehension, turns to Francisco, and inquires:

...What say you?
Do not like yong hawkes fetch a course about,
Your game flies faire and for you.  (II.i.46-48)

Francisco interrupts and continues the image:

I'le answere you in your owne hawking phrase--
Some Eagles that should gaze upon the Sunne
Seldom soare high, but take their lustfull ease,
Since they from dunghill birds their prey can ceaze.  (II.i.49-52)

This extension of the hawking metaphor presents one of the central thematic implications of the play: the difference between what people do and what they should do. Concurrently, it focuses attention on evil in the court. "Lustfull ease" typifies the social world of the Italian court, where pandering, banqueting, illicit sexuality, and murder are accepted norms. In this conversation between three of the high ranking members of the court, although each of them applies the evil of improper conduct to the others, no self-application is made. Completely wrapped in a mantle of egoism, Brachiano, Francisco, and Monticelso are totally lacking in any self-understanding.

The characters' use of hawking terms, in addition to revealing their predatory traits, shows their admiration for the sheer physical power of predatory birds. One of the courtiers describes Giovanni as a "sweet prince," but Flamineo sees the lad only as a potential figure of power in the realm. He expands his view of Giovanni in a revalatory tale:
Wise was the Courtly Peacocke, that being a great Minion, and being compar'd for beauty by some dotsrels that stood by, to the Kingly Eagle, said the Eagle was a farre fairer bird then herself, not in respect of her feathers, but in respect of her long Talants [talons].

(V.iv.4-8)

To Flamineo beauty is not important; only power is. Giovanni is to be feared, for he is a fledgling bird of prey. Later in the same scene, Webster combines predatory bird imagery with imagery of carnivorous animals to indicate inherent evil in the seeming good of both young birds and young carnivores. Flamineo emphasizes his prediction that Giovanni's talons will grow by stating:

So —the wolfe and the raven
Are very pretty fools when they are yong. (V.iv.30-31)

Although the raven is not a bird of prey, its feeding on carrion is analogous to the eating habits of the wolf, and the raven has been previously introduced as a symbol for Vittoria's darkly fascinating beauty. Flamineo, in the first act, compares Vittoria's hair to "the black birds feathers" (I.ii.117). But it is for the future power that Giovanni represents that Flamineo shows deference to Brachiano's heir apparent, though he vehemently curses Giovanni behind his back.

Webster employs his dominant predatory images, both wolves and hawks, in language of warning. Francisco, Brachiano, and Flamineo all recognize the preying wolf as a danger; yet none of them heeds his

7OED: Raven: "A widely distributed corvine bird ...of Europe and Asia of large size, feeding chiefly on carrion. ...The common raven has been popularly regarded as a bird of evil omen and mysterious character." One of the earliest citations of the ominous raven is Beowulf, 3024-3027, where the raven and the wolf both feast on dead warriors.
apprehension. Brachiano attempts to escape danger by fleeing to Padua, but to no avail; his flight is part of the wolf-like Francisco's plan. Similarly, the hawk represents peril to be avoided. Flamineo suspects that the love letter sent to Vittoria by Francisco may be bait for a trap and warns the Duke, "Ware hawke, my Lord" (IV.ii.81), but Brachiano does not heed the warning. Neither does he take into account Vittoria's admonition: "This is some treacherous plot, my Lord" (IV.ii.85). Brachiano apparently believes that his own cunning equals that of his foes.

Another parallel between animal and bird imagery lies in the imagery describing both Vittoria and Zanche. Both are compared to wolves and also to birds of prey. Cornelia denounces Zanche, asking: "Is this your pearch, you haggard? Flye to'th stewes" (V.i.178). Typical of the characterization of Zanche, the word "haggard" stresses the wanton, wild quality of hunting birds. Vittoria, on the other hand, is described in imagery from falconery that emphasizes pursuit more than unrestraint. Brachiano doubts her loyalty and gives her Francisco's letter, inquiring: "You are reclaimed, are you? Ile give you the bels/ And let you flie to the devill" (IV.ii.83-84). Vittoria applies bird imagery to herself when she confronts her executioners and offers herself as a reward to Gasparo, if he will be lured from his task. She enticingly says:

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8 OED: "Haggard ...of a hawk: caught after having assumed the adult plumage; hence, wild, untamed."

9 Lucas, op. cit., p. 241, states that bells were attached to a hawk's legs to terrify the quarry and to make the hawk easier to find when it was to be reclaimed.
I have seen a black-bird that would sooner fly
To a man's bosom, then to stay the gripe
Of the fierce Sparrow-hawke.  

(V. vi. 185-187)

Thus, in her final attempt at deception, Vittoria compares herself to a blackbird that would escape from one hunter by fleeing to another for refuge. Obviously, she cannot succeed, because Gasparo is a hired avenger, a predator as ruthless as Lodovico. This final bird image points to Vittoria as the prey, not as the predator.

Revealing aspects of the standards of the world of the play also occur in the imagery of predatory birds. Francisco decides to entice Lodovico into being his agent of vengeance and soliloquizes:

The engine for my business, bold Count Lodowicke...
'Tis gold must such an instrument procure,
With empty fist no man doth falcons lure.

(IV.i.138-140)

In the Italian court, wealth is a bait used by "great men" to ensnare the services of lesser predators. Flamineo serves Brachiano for rewards—rewards that are vehemently denounced as insufficient, immediately after Brachiano's death: "Like a wolf [cancerous growth] in a woman's breast; I have been fed with poultry; but for money, ...I had as good a will to cossen him, as e're an Officer of them all" (V.iii.55-57).

The members of the court seek varying rewards: riches, fame, power, or the ego-satisfying reward of personal revenge. All of their goals are secular and materialistic. In their excessive individualism, most of the characters represent the acme of Renaissance secularism and materialism. The temptations of lust, gluttony, greed, and vengeance dominate most of them; traits that should elevate man above the level of animal existence have been subverted. Love has succumbed to lust;
compassion has given way to brutality; temperance has been replaced by surfeit; truth has vanished, and consequently, disorder rages through the realm. Webster highlights the pestilence of moral ulceration with recurring images of sicknesses and cures.
CHAPTER IV

SICKNESSES AND CURES

The sickness pattern in The White Devil makes a running commentary on the corruption that spreads from the religious and political leaders in the Italian court to infect the world of the play with social and moral ulceration. Flamineo, the play's sardonic malcontent, almost monopolizes the direct references to sickness. Prurient nastiness overflows from his jaundiced mind and engulfs his speech in images and references to sickness that often accentuate illicit sexuality in images and allusions to venereal disease. In his first allusion to venereal disease, he mocks Camillo as being impotent, saying:

Hang him, a guilder that hath his braynes perisht
with quicke-silver is not more could in the liver.
The great Barriers moulted not more feathers then
he hath shed haires, by the confession of his doctor.²

(I.ii.26-29)

Flamineo vents his hatred of the foppish, rich "perfumed gallants" when he tells Zanche, "Their fattin [satin] cannot save them. I am confident/ They have a certaine spice of the disease" (V.i.161-162).

Although other characters occasionally employ references to venereal disease, their use of such images is infrequent and chiefly

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¹Flamineo speaks thirteen of the twenty-four sickness images; in his lines also occur four of the six direct references to venereal diseases.

²Shedding of hair is a Renaissance expression frequently used to imply venereal disease.
complements Flamineo's. When Francisco warns Brachiano to curb his lust or else he may have to "change perfume for plaisters" (II.i.70), he implies the danger of venereal disease, and he continues the implication by stating that inevitably the Duke's adultery will lead to regrets "'bout moulting time" (II.i.93). And in Act IV, Brachiano, enraged by jealousy, denounces Vittoria as being a fickle whore and rants: "Prevent the curst disease shee'll bring mee to;/ And teare my haire off" (IV.ii.48-49). The occasional allusions to venereal disease not only indicate the prevailing immorality in the court, but also develop an undercurrent of social and moral malignancy, an undercurrent that surges to the surface of the play more frequently in images of less severe sicknesses.

The sickness pattern begins in the opening scene with Casparo's comparison of Lodovico to a sickening physic vomited up by his friends. Nauseous physical infection echoes in the final act when Cordelia witnesses the murder of Marcello, her younger son, by Flamineo. After the killing, she is distraught and grief stricken, and she sickens. Her physical sickness contrasts with Flamineo's moral sickness, for he is devoid of mercy, remorse, or compassion; he callously inquires: "Do you tume your gaule up? I'le to sanctuary, and send a surgeon to you" (V.ii.18-19). Thus, nausea is an overt indication of a deeper moral sickness in the various characters.

The recurrence of such words as "purge," "physic," and "pills" signifies an awareness of sickness and a desire to cure the maladies

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3 See p. 22, above.
infesting the court, but most of the characters are so obsessed with the physical side of life that they fail to realize that their need is for a moral cleansing rather than a panacea. Flamineo repeatedly alludes to purgation. He attempts to sway Marcello from contentment with a subservient station in life by pointing out that his rewards are so scant that "one purgation can make thee as hungrie againe as fellowes that worke in a saw-pit" (III.iii.17-19). Later in the play, Marcello threatens to whip Flamineo because of his incontinent behavior with Zanche, but Flamineo belittles the threat and asks Marcello: "Are you cholericke? I'le purg't with Rubarbe" (V.i.193-194).

Images of purgation also are employed by both Vittoria and Francisco, who draw their analogies from the treatment of sick birds. Vittoria compares the almost unintelligible words of the Lawyer's oration at her trial to some swallowed

...Poticaryes bils, or proclamations.
And now the hard and undegesteble wordes,
Come up like stones wee use give Haukes for phisicke.

(III.ii.39-41)

Francisco arrogantly boasts of masterminding the poisoning of Brachiano, claiming that he and his accomplices shall,

...like the partridge,
Purge the disease with lawrell; for the fame
Shall crowne the enterprise and quit the shame.

(V.iii.278-280)

Webster's source for Francisco's speech is Pliny, but as he so often

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^Lucas, op. cit., p. 260, "Pliny says (VIII.27) that doves, daws, blackbirds, and partridges purge themselves by eating laurel."
does, Webster enriches his borrowings with multiple levels of meaning. Immediately prior to speaking these lines, Francisco has learned that Brachiano poisoned Isabella; and so, according to the secular code of revenge, Francisco's murder of Brachiano suddenly acquires a gloss of justice. But to Francisco, justice is not important, "Tush for Justice!" (V.iii.277), he exclaims and continues by expressing his belief that the ingenious execution of Brachiano's death will expiate his own guilt—guilt he compares to the partridge's disease purged by laurel. In this speech by Francisco, the justice theme in the play is united with sickness pattern through the purgation image.

In addition to the cleansing function of vomiting and purgation, reiterated medical terms further implement the sickness pattern as one of the unifying elements of the play. Despite the continuing search of the characters for medical cures, none of their treatments can heal their illness, because the infection afflicting their world is moral, not physical. In the court, religion has lost its meaning, family life has crumbled, and love has been replaced by lust. Deceit, treachery, and perfidy are commonplace not only in the action, but also in the speech of the courtiers. Vittoria refers to Francisco's plea for leniency at the trial as "poison/ Under your guilded pils" (III.ii. 198-199); Flamineo describes the conjurer by saying that "he will shoot pils into a mans guts and shall make them have more ventages then a cornet or a lamprey" (II.i.296-297).

Pills that bring death rather than recovery provide Vittoria with an appropriate metaphor in her vindictive denunciation of Monticelso, who is the prosecutor and the judge at her trial. After he sentences
her to confinement in a "house of convertites, ...a house of penitent whores" (III.ii.276-278), she shouts: "Die with those pills in your most cursed maw[e] should bring you health" (III.ii.287-288). And during her feigned suicide-murder pact with Flamineo, she states that "To kill one's selfe is meate we must take/ Like pills, not chew'd but quickly swallow it" (V.vi.77-78).

Flamineo's dialogue introduces other medical terms. On seeing Monticelso and Francisco in a private conversation, Flamineo supposes a plot is being formed against his master; he boastfully tells Brachiano, "I will compound a medicine, out of their two heads, stronger then garlic, deadlier then stibium" (II.i.284-285). The compounding of medicines appears again in Flamineo's colorful language in Act V. Giovanni has warned Flamineo that he should be penitent, but Flamineo sees no value in penitence or virtue; so he soliloquizes that even if he were as virtuous as Anacharis, he would still be "pounded to death in a mortar...to make a most cordial cullis[a healing broth containing gold] for the devil" (V.iv.21-24).

Bloodletting, often a type of purgation, also accentuates the sickness pattern. During his discourse on melancholy with Lodovico, Flamineo says that rather than use mirrors each morning to set their faces, they should look into "a sawcer[a vessel used in bloodletting]/Of a witches congealed bloud" (III.iii.85-86). And in Act V, when he uncases his pistols before Vittoria and Zanche, he says: "These are two cupping glasses, that shall draw/All my infected bloud out" (V.vi.105-106). He also refers to blood sucking "horse-leeches" (V.vi.167), and Vittoria mentions the healing treatment of leeches at her trial.
Flamineo's allusion to "infected blood" parallels Vittoria's great death speech: "O, my greatest sinne lay in my blood./ Now my blood pales for't" (V.vi.2h0-2h1). Thus, different types of imagery are tightly fused in the repeated word, "blood." "Infected blood" in Flamineo's speech implies both physical sickness and sin, and the entire figure unites sickness imagery with retribution. Analogously, in Vittoria's speech, the actual letting of her blood provides expiation, while revealing her awareness that her passions have led her into sin. By this sort of complex interrelationship of images, Webster dovetails his figures and themes through the unifying pattern of sickness.

But Webster does not restrict medical images and terms to treatments and diseases; he also uses the words "surgeon" and "physician" with connotations of blood, gore, and death, rather than healing. Flamineo, employing characteristically gruesome and morbid comparisons, says of the conjurer: "Looke, his eye's bloud-shed like a needle a Chirugeon stitcheth a wound with" (II.i.303-301). And Vittoria, during Brachiano's amorous wooing, wishes him a whole heart, to which he replies: "You are a sweet Phisition" (I.ii.199). The analogy is continued in Vittoria's reply:

Sure Sir a loathed crueltie in Ladyes
Is as to Doctors many funeralls:
It takes away their credit. (I.ii.200-202)

In addition to the repetitive implication of sickness in the references to a physician, Vittoria's comparison highlights the paradox inherent in Webster's characterization of her as a "white devil." For Vittoria elects to act like a "sweet phisition" in healing Brachiano's pangs of
desire, but had she displayed "loathed crueltie," her reputation would not have been blemished. Ironically, her "kindness" leads to the deaths of Camillo, Isabella, Brachiano, and ultimately, Flamineo, Zanche, and herself.

The sickness pattern is especially effective in revealing the true picture of Flamineo in two key scenes in the latter part of the play. In the earlier of the two, Flamineo discusses the poisoning of Brachiano and vehemently denounces flatterers, false tears, and dissemblers (V.iii.11-53). Rather than sorrow at Brachiano's poisoning, Flamineo expresses dissatisfaction; his pandering service to the Duke has not provided him with the reward he wanted. Owing to the treachery of Brachiano's enemies, Flamineo is unable to attain lasting preferment. Francisco's perfunctory remark, "Come you have thriv'd well under him" (V.iii.54), increases the tension on Flamineo's pent-up emotions so that he explodes with embittered revilement of Brachiano; Flamineo's speech reveals penetrating insights into his characterization:

"Faith, like a wolfe [a cancerous growth] in a woman's breast; I have beene fed with poultry; but for money, understand me, I had as good a will to cosen him, as e're an Officer of them all. But I had not cunning enough to doe it." (V.iii.55-58)

Flamineo's imagery is essentially correct; he has been fed by Brachiano with just enough rewards to keep him in the Duke's service. Comparing

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5 Lucas, op. cit., p. 253, relates that for centuries regular treatment of an ulcerous growth was to give it raw meat to feed on. He also reports the use of the word "wolf" to stand for an ulcer in "Barrough, Meth. Physicke (1590), 331: 'Lupus is a malignant ulcer quickly consuming the neather parts; and it is very hungary like unto a woolfe'; and Sir T. Browne, Pseudodoxia, VI.10."
himself to a malignancy attached to Brachiano, Flamineo echoes the word "wolf" from the opening scene, when Lodovico compared the great men who banished him to hungry wolves. In Flamineo's speech, the sickness and animal images are united and both linked by the wolf image to the pattern of disorder and by implication to the theme of justice. In both images, the ravenous feeding further demonstrates the rapacious nature of the court, where greed dominates not only the political and religious leaders, but also the hangers-on and retainers, such as Flamineo.

Another of Flamineo's insights comes during his death speech. Here the sickness pattern terminates with an abrupt and jolting change. No longer are morbid, nauseous, and putrid images used. Near the climactic end of his death speech, Flamineo says:

'Tis well yet there's some goodnesse in my death,  
My life was a blacke charnel: I have caught  
An everlasting could. I have lost my voice  
Most irrecoverably. (V.vi.269-272)

The sudden change in the sickness pattern from references to bloodletting, venereal disease, malignancy, and vomiting to a lost voice (a kind of moral laryngitis) and a cold is starkly effective. Taken out of context, the final metaphors of sickness seem to be reversions from cynical adult speech to child-like language describing minor maladies. But this is not the case. The concluding words of the sickness pattern assume ominous connotations of eternal suffering through the modifiers, "everlasting" and "irrecoverably." The morbid and gruesome sickness images in the rest of the play are associated with pain and suffering in the mortal world. At the end of the tragedy, Webster abruptly shifts to eternal suffering in the world of damned souls.
Thus, the sickness pattern in The White Devil says a great deal about the nature of the totally self-centered, lustfully depraved, and materialistic characters. It reveals them as both infected and infectious and indicates that they mistakenly believe only in the world of the physical. Pills, which should be remedies but turn out to be poison, are representations of evil disguising itself as good. The repeated purgation images imply the need for soul cleansing. Cankerous growth, described as gnawings from within, indicates hidden moral corruption infecting the courtiers.

But the sickness pattern and the animality pattern represent only the court and its present decadence. With the terminal shift in imagery from mortal sickness to immortal suffering, Webster forcefully points his tragedy beyond its restricted locale to a past world of ordered morality, a world that is emphasized by images and verbal iterations based on religious terms, the cardinal virtues, and traditional morality.
CHAPTER V

THE PATTERN OF ORDER

If most of the characters in The White Devil are animalistic and frantically energetic in keeping the action of the play constantly turbulent, at the other pole from the animalistic characters are three representatives of goodness: Isabella, Marcello, and Cornelia. Were these three outnumbered and unassertive characters the only link with past morality, the remnants of an ordered world would scarcely be noticed. Actually The White Devil is not just an examination of evil, but it is a dramatization of conflicting value systems that are concretized by the imagery and verbal iteration in the play. Contrasted with the secular animalistic world is an implicit spiritual world; contrasted with present immorality is past morality; contrasted with temporal goals are goals whose end is eternal reward; and contrasted with heaven is the damnation of hell. Through Webster's heavy seeding of Christian terms and images, the language of the play recurrently emphasizes the traditional Christian value system that seems now to be only a memory.

Isabella, Brachiano's wife and a sister of Monticelso and Francisco, appears in only one scene (II.i); however, her dialogue reflects the morality of the past and reveals the traditional values by which she attempts to live. She comes to Rome with forgiveness in her heart and hopes to win her husband back from Vittoria. The Duchess explains her intentions to her brothers, stating that all the wrongs done to her
Are freely pardoned, and I do not doubt, ...
these armes
Shall charme his poysone, force it to obeying,
And keepe him chast from an infected straying. (II.i.21-28)

Her Christian forgiveness contrasts with Brachiano's devilish malice.
When they first meet, Brachiano turns to ask savagely: "What amorous
whirlewind hurryed you to Rome?" (II.i.152). Isabella replies, "Devoc-
tion, my lord" (II.i.153). The reader knows, such is the irony here,
that Isabella has come because of devotion to her husband, but Brachiano
chooses to think that she means religious devotion and asks: "Is your
soule charg'd with any grievous sinne?" (II.i.154). Knowledge of sin
exists, then, even in this adulterous Duke. His accusation is more
nearly a sub-conscious confession than an effective charge. Later in
the scene, Isabella's language again employs Christian terms. Initially
she mentions "pardon"; "pity" is her second reference to Christian
principles. Following Brachiano's continued insistence that her reason
for coming to Rome was to meet some amorous gallant, she reminds him of
the man he once was, saying:

...burst my heart, and in my death
Tume to your antient pitty, though not love. (II.i.181-182)

Brachiano continues his false accusations and crowns his rage by
literally divorcing himself from his wife; figuratively he is completing
his divorcement from the traditional world she represents. Ever the
forgiving, sacrificial wife, Isabella laments:

O my unkind Lord may your sins find mercy
As I upone a woefull widowed bed,
Shall pray for you, if not to tume your eyes
Upon your wretched wife and hopefull sonne,
Yet that in time you'le fix them upon heavene. (II.i.212-216)
Isabella's use of "pardon," "charity," "mercy," "pity," and "prayers" underscores the disparity between the world in which Brachiano lives, the living hell of the court, and the world of moral order that focuses its attention on heaven and Christian virtues, the world Isabella tries to regain for Brachiano.

But Isabella is not capable of bringing Brachiano back to the fold: she is too meek, too sheep-like. Voluntarily she sacrifices the good opinion her brothers hold of her in an effort to preserve the peace between them and Brachiano. Rather than admit to Francisco and Monticelo that her husband's love cannot be reclaimed, she assumes a guise of jealousy and in their presence repeats, as if it were her own, the divorce speech Brachiano made privately to her. Despite her being a loving wife, a devoted mother, an exemplary Christian in her pity, charity, and mercy, and a practitioner of prayer, Isabella is forced to conceal the truth in order to save the peace. In her counterfeit role as the jealous spouse, Isabella's dialogue exemplifies the pattern of deceit that Webster uses in both action and language throughout the play. She assures her brothers that Brachiano has not been loud with her: "By my life sir no./I sweare by that I do not care to loose" (II.i. 238-239). To Francisco it seems that she is swearing by her life, but from her previously revealed desire to keep the peace between her brothers and her husband, Webster shows that she unselfishly lies to retain order.

Neither of Isabella's brothers thinks that the breaking of the sacrament of marriage is serious, and Francisco jokingly says that surely she will return and ask the Cardinal "for a dispensation/ Of her
rash vow, [and it] will beget excellent laughter" (II.i.276-277). Thus, early in the play divorce begins the disintegration of family life that culminates in Flamineo's Cain-like killing of Marcello. Brachiano goes beyond merely severing the marriage and resorts to execration: "Accursed be the Priest/ That sang the wedding Masse, and even my Issue" (II.i.193-194). Again Isabella acts as a cautionary force and tells him that he has cursed too far; her warning ultimately proves true.

Although Isabella is aware of the dangers of rending the family assunder, of pursuing merciless vengeance, and of failing to live by the Christian virtues of mercy and pity, she has assumed a guise of jealous rage in the vain hope of preventing the spread of disorder from Brachiano's "infected straying." Her jealous tirade parallels Brachiano's outrageous fury and foreshadows the tirades of Monticelso and Vittoria during the trial scene. Isabella is the first victim of the predators in the play, and she is also the first of the sheep-like characters to fall into deceit and lying in an effort to accomplish good. Both Marcello and Cornelia, the play's other passively good characters, follow her in equivocation.

There can be no doubt about which type of world Marcello represents. The Conjurer, explicating the dumb show, says: "The vertuous Marcello/Is innocently plotted forth the roome" (II.ii.43-44). Much later, just after Flamineo has thrust his sword through Marcello, a courtier exclaims: "Vertucus Marcello./ He'es dead" (V.ii.27-28). The values by which Marcello tries to live figure prominently in his infrequent appearances. Prior to Vittoria's trial, he indicates brotherly devotion for her in his compassionate statement: "O my unfortunate sister!" (III.ii.32). Although Marcello laments her adultery, Flamineo brags of
being its instigator. Flamineo takes pride in being "a kind of path/ To her [Vittoria's] & mine owne preferment" (III.i.36-37), but Marcello argues that Flamineo leads them all to ruin. The brothers' opinions of rewards and preferment are also poles apart. Marcello interrupts Flamineo's long discussion of secular rewards to expound his own ideas of value:

> For love of vertue beare an honest heart,  
> And stride over every pollitick respect,  
> Which where they most advance they most infect.  
> Were I your father, as I am your brother,  
> I should not be ambitious to leave you  
> A better patrimony.  

(III.i.60-65)

Flamineo sees only riches and material rewards in preferment, but Marcello sees the infectious corruption of courtly life. Aside from his stated belief in virtue, Marcello demonstrates his disgust with immorality in the court and selects Zanche as the target for his abortive attack upon it. He calls her a devil who haunts Flamineo (V.i.85) and, after she has made Cornelia the butt of some bawdy humor, kicks the impudent strumpet (V.i.183). But Marcello's actions, at best, are feeble. Because of the dominance of physical power, evil, and immorality in "great men" of the court, spokesman for traditional morality must be cautious to preserve their lives.

Following the equivocation begun by Isabella, who lied to preserve order, Marcello also falls into the path of deceit. He tells his mother that a whispering in the court of his involvement in a pending duel is only an idle rumor, owing to his desire to keep Cornelia from worry. Quickly he changes the subject and speaks of the crucifix she wears as a necklace. The crucifix, a tangible symbol of Christianity, once was broken by Flamineo when a suckling babe. Now it is mended,
but like the value system it symbolizes, it is not strong enough to stem the rampant flow of evil and sin engulfing the court. Suddenly Flamineo rushes forward and runs his sword through Marcello. In his death speech, Marcello says that "there are some sinnes which heaven doth duly punish/In a whole family" (V.ii.22-23), indicating that because of the sins of Flamineo and Vittoria their family is being destroyed by Heaven's punishment. The final lines of Marcello's death speech focus on the underlying cause of Flamineo's and Vittoria's sins--their dedication to the false goals of preferment:

Let all men know,
That tree shall long time keepe a steddy foote
Whose branches spread no wider then the roote. (V.ii.24-26)

Marcello lied to his mother to ease her anxiety; Isabella lied to her brothers to preserve order, and Cornelia lies to save Flamineo's life, stating that Marcello's wrathful words provoked his murder. Even in her equivocation, Cornelia presents herself as a spokesman for Christian principles. In Act V, she asks God's forgiveness for Flamineo, begs him to repent, and attempts to stem the increasing flow of blood. Earlier in the play she had foreseen the terror of her family's sinking into ruin and bemoaned Flamineo's pandering:

Oh my heart!
My sonne the pandar; now I find our house
Sinking to ruine. Earth-quaakes leave behind,
Where they have tyrannised, iron, or lead, or stone,
But woe to ruine, violent lust leaves none. (I.ii.206-210)

Recurring throughout Cornelia's speeches are allusions that show her firm in belief, even though ineffectual in action. She realizes that
"great men" should lead exemplary lives, and in one of her many sententious expressions says:

The lives of Princes should like dyals move,
Whose regular example is so strong
They make the times by them go right or wrong. (II.i.279-281)

The wrongs of the times, enacted in bloody crimes and the never ending deceit of court leaders and their hired assassins, stem from the leaders' rejection of moral order that is represented by Cornelia.

Although she and the other two representatives of morality are weak and ineffectual in their action, at times the language is dramatically effective. One such occasion is Cornelia's dirge:

Call for the Robin-Red-brest and the wren,
Since ore shadie groves they hover,
And with leaves and flowers doe cover
The friendlesse bodies of unburied men.
Call unto his funerall Dole
The Ante, the field-mouse, and the mole
To reare him hillockes, that shall keepe him warme,
And (when gay tombes are rob'd) sustaine no harre,
But keepe the wolfe far thence, that's foe to men,
For with his nailes hee'1 dig them up agen. (V.iv.89-98)

This passage, one of the gems of seventeenth century poetry, is noteworthy not only for its intensity of feeling, but also for its sharp contrast with the viciousness of the dominant image patterns. Cornelia's dirge is sung at the preparation of Marcello's corpse for burial; she is distraught with grief. She enters and gives Flamineo three flowers: "rosemary, for remembrance of Marcello; rue, for both sorrow and repentance; hearts-ease (the common Elizabethan term for pansy), for the peace
of mind Flamineo can never find." Then Cornelia takes Flamineo by the hand and speaks of hands that are blood-stained and toad-spotted, hands that cannot be cleansed. As a spokesman for traditional morality, her language reflects the need for the purging of sin and corruption from the court through the implication of sacrifice. Flamineo becomes uneasy and tries to leave, saying: "I would I were from hence" (V.iv.85), but the dirge detains him. Contrasted to the rapacious hawks, eagles, and ravens that are vicious images of the predators are Cornelia's gentle birds: robins and wrens. She calls upon them to befriend man by covering and thus burying the "friendlesse bodies of unburied man" (V.iv.92). Specifically, Cornelia refers to Marcello's corpse; however, by implication she alludes to the funeral tears shed for Brachiano, who in death, like Marcello, had only one true mourner. In the dirge the burrowing animals, all small and industrious, are asked to cover the corpse in order that it will be safe from grave robbers who desecrate "gay tombes." This phrase implies a contrast between pompous state burials of the rich and the simplicity of Marcello's winding sheet, described by Cornelia as

This sheet
I have kept this twentie yere, and everie daie
Hallow'd it with my praiers. (V.iv.64-66)

Cornelia also alludes to the wolf, man's foe; her use of the predatory term marks a sharp turn to the imagery used to describe villains and rogues. Lucas asserts that Cornelia alludes to the wolf as an

\[\text{Dent, op. cit., p. 158.}\]
instrument of God's justice sent to disinter murdered corpses. And this may well be the case, because Cornelia's song is specifically directed to Flamineo as a reminder of his lupine ferocity in killing his brother. Following the song, Cornelia's dialogue points to the inevitability of death—the universality of death that is the same for the rich as for the poor. Flamineo's wolfishness, even were it instrumental in gaining wealth, cannot provide him with an escape from death. Ultimately the grave will claim him as it does Marcello. Cornelia expresses her view: "This [death] poore men get; and great men get no more" (V.iv.104). Throughout the dirge, the solemn tolling of Cornelia's knell-like song contrasts with the falsity of "flattering bels" at court funerals and accentuates the vastness separating the world of riotous egoism of the predators from the ordered, moral, and selfless world of those they prey upon.

Webster gives further significance to the dirge by showing its effect upon Flamineo. He is shaken to the core of his being. The unperceived quality of humanity remaining in him, his conscience, speaks. Momentarily he is filled with compassion; the pandering, preying, and murdering Flamineo has not succumbed entirely to animality; his conscience, though dormant, is not mute. Webster's portrayal of Flamineo is similar to his gradual revelation of Vittoria in that he injects into each of them, despicable as they are at times, qualities of universal humanity. Thus, the full meaning of Cornelia's dirge lies not within itself, but rather in its effect. The quality of the poem, of necessity, is exceptional, because ordinary poetry would not produce a twinge of conscience in Flamineo.

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2Lucas, op. cit., p. 263.
But the dirge stirs him, as his soliloquy indicates:

I have a strange thing in mee, to th' which
I cannot give a name, without it bee
Compassion--I pray leave mee.

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I have liv'd
Riotously ill, like some that live in Court.
And sometimes, when my face was full of smiles,
Have felt the maze of conscience in my brest.

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We thinke cag'd birds sing, when indeed they crie. (V. iv. 107-117)

By his soliloquy, Flamineo reveals that vestiges of elevating human traits which raise man's existence to a level above animalism remain hidden under his facade of cynicism. But in his dedication to the pursuit of worldly preferment, he suppresses conscience.

Not as strikingly as the revelation of conscience in Flamineo, yet quite effectively, Webster reveals an awareness of the verities, past morality, and Christian precepts, even in his rogues and villains whose speeches are sprinkled with words from the morally ordered world of the past. Sometimes they use such terms either derisively and sacrilegiously or in meaningless figurative comparisons lacking in moral implication, such as Brachiano’s telling Monticelso that he will listen to the Cardinal’s stern discourse and remain "As silent as i'th Church" (II. i. 26). During Vittoria's trial, Brachiano advises Monticelso not to bother bringing a chair for him, because an "unbidden guest/ Should travaile as dutch-women go to Church;/ Beare their stools with them" (III. ii. 6-8). Flamineo also repeats the word "church" frequently in his speeches. When he is busily engaged in pitting his wits against his brother-in-law, Camillo, in order to separate him from Vittoria, Flamineo advises that Vittoria should be
kept close: "let her not go to Church" (I.ii.82), except on a leash. He further emphasizes the word "church" in an aside on the poverty of wounded soldiers who beg in churches (V.i.111). Isolated, these iterations of "church" may seem to be merely descriptive, but in total context they amplify the chain of recurring religious words.

Webster's verbal iteration of Christian terms and religious words sometimes occurs only in expletives, as in Lodovico's comment about his enemies, "God quite them" (I.i.7) and Camillo's mild oath, "As I am a Christian" (I.ii.181). Once during Vittoria's trial, Monticelso swears in exasperation: "O for God sake!" (III.ii.21), and Flamineo parallels the Cardinal's expletive in the following act, imploring Brachiano not to make any promises to Vittoria: "O no othes for gods sake!" (IV.ii.150). The presence of a swearing Cardinal indicates the complete overthrowal of religion as a meaningful force in the court. Religion is meaningless to most of the characters; it consists only of pomp, ceremony and pretense.

Not only in oaths are Christian terms ironically reversed to connote sacrilegious implications. In Vittoria's verbal game with Flamineo, she feigns abhorrence of suicide and asks:

Are you growne an Atheist? will you tume your body,  
Which is the goodly pallace of the soule  
To the soules slaughter house?  

(V.vi.57-59)

Her expressed view conforms to orthodox Christian tenets, although her purpose is to trick Flamineo into self-destruction. Gasparo, one of the avenging killers, acts similarly when he instructs Flamineo to "Recommend your selfe to heaven" (V.vi.197), but Gasparo's actions demonstrate his lack of sincere belief in heaven; he is a hired assassin. Earlier
in the play, in another indication of Gasparo's lack of religious belief, he disguises himself as a monk, and while pretending to administer extreme unction to Brachiano, strangles his victim.

The mockery of religion continues in the actions of Francisco and Lodovico, who take the sacraments before attempting secular revenge. Francisco greets his hired killer:

Come deare Lodovico.
You have tane the sacrament to prosecute
Th' intended murder. (IV.iii.72-74)

Later, when the conspirators meet, Lodovico comments: "You have our vows seal'd with the sacrament/ To second your attempts" (V.i.62-63). Religion has no meaning for any of the killers; its meaninglessness to most of the court is explained in one of Flamineo's piercingly lucid observations on the corrupt nature of the world in which he lives. Flamineo deprecates Monticello, saying:

I hope yon Cardinal shall never have the grace to pray well, till he comes to the scaffold. ...

Religion; oh how it is commeddled with policie. (III.iii.31-36)

Flamineo realizes that sham and pretense afflict his world; yet, ironically he fails to look to the past for guidance and persists in living solely for the present. In this passage, "grace" and "prayer" are combined with "religion" as indications of what is missing from religious life; sincere spirituality has been replaced by religious formalism. By continual repetition of Christian terms and religious words, Webster emphasizes a swelling current of memories of past morality that lingers in the characters' minds and from time to time surges outward in their
imagistic speech. Still, most of the characters live totally for self and the present. Serious consideration of others, of past morality, or of eternity scarcely cross their minds.

Thus, structurally and thematically, Webster's tragedy gradually shifts its focus from the restricted locale of the play to a more universal locale as the final act unfolds. Reiterated in the dialogue of the final act are both religious terms and the cardinal virtues of Christianity. While the pattern of order implicit in these repetitions expands, the suffering of the characters shifts from the purely physical to anguished soul-searching. In his death speech (V.ii.20-26), Marcello alludes to Heaven's punishment and shifts the focus of the theme of justice from social equity to divine retribution. Cornelia's prayer for God's forgiveness of Flamineo directs the focus of the final act more specifically to the universal, as does Vittoria's comment on the power of the crucifix to settle Brachiano's dying ravings (V.iii.131-132). In the concluding scene, hell and damnation are prominent in the imagistic language of Vittoria, Zanche, and Flamineo.

Webster focuses on immortality at the end of the play by concentrating the repetition of "Heaven" and "Hell." The two hells of the play, the living hell of the court and the eternal hell of damned souls, are graphically depicted, the former in action, the latter in

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3 Thirty-one of the seventy-eight references to religious terms and Christian virtues appear in Act V.

4 Five of the direct references to Heaven are in the final act, and only one reference to Hell appears outside the final act.
language. Contrasted with the riotously unrestrained individualism of the predators is the placid calm of Isabella, Marcello, and Cornelia, the meek, sacrificial, sheep-like characters. Contrasted with the living hell of the court and the unending agony of hell for the damned souls, by implication, is heaven. By the end of the play, the three passive spokesmen for traditional morality have been defeated, but their value system survives. The values by which they lived continues in the verbal iteration of religious terms and Christian virtues.

Ultimately then, a pattern of traditional order is established in The White Devil. It is a contrasting force that challenges the disorder of the ways of life of the principal characters. That traditional order does not triumph matters little, because Webster shows the suffering and damnation of the three leading characters. Imagery illuminates their damnation. The imagery describing the conflicting value systems reaches two climaxes of intensity: the "Character of a Whore" (III.ii.82-105) and the death scene of Flamineo and Vittoria (V.vi.). In these passages, imagery links most of the major themes with image patterns and serves as a key to meaning in the play. The death speeches bring together divergent aspects of the theme of justice and point to knowledge that man should learn from life. In the final scene, the major characters, like those of Shakespeare, pause on the threshold of death to look back at the course of their lives in a re-appraisal of values. But unlike Shakespeare's great tragic characters, Webster's figures learn little through their suffering.

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The "Character," on the other hand, brings us directly to the central metaphor of the play: whoredom. In the following chapter, a detailed analysis of these climaxes of both action and imagery indicates the function of imagery as a key to meaning in The White Devil.
CHAPTER VI

IMAGE CLUSTERS

An image cluster is a tightly compressed passage, made up of image piled upon image, a fusing together, in effect, of thematic statements that both echo and foreshadow crucial image patterns. Image clusters coincide with climactic actions and synthesize patterns of imagery and patterns of meaning. In Heilman's study of King Lear, he points to the second mad scene (IV.vi) as best exemplifying Shakespeare's fusion of themes and image patterns in a compressed passage. Webster's image cluster in The White Devil, Monticelso's "Character of a Whore," is not so inclusive as that of Shakespeare in that it does not merge all the dominant types of images with all the themes; nevertheless, it is highly effective.

Although the "Character" is the only genuine image cluster in the play, numerous shorter passages combine themes with one or more types of images; for example, Flamineo's laconic revilement of the insufficiency of the rewards for his services to Brachiano (V.iii.55-58), combines the themes of deceptive appearances, corruption, and material rewards with images of sickness, feeding, and animality. But passages such as this are more a crisscrossing of selected images and themes than a

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1Heilman, op. cit., pp. 198-199. Heilman calls the scene a "nexus of all the main lines of development in the play; all the patterns of image and symbol are focused here; the result is a compelling synthesis of all the individual systems of meaning."

2See p. 145, above.
synthesizing of the play's central thematic and imagistic patterns. The "Character," however, is vital to both the meaning and imagery in the play. Owing to its imagistic significance, I cite it completely.

Shall I expound whores to you? sure I shal;
Tle give their perfect character. They are first,
Sweete meates which rot the eater: In mans nostrill
Poison'd perfumes. They are coosning Alcumy,
Shipwrackes in Calmest weather. What are whores?
Cold Russian winters, that appears so barren,
As if that nature had forgot the spring.
They are the trew matteriall fier of hell,
Worse then those tributes ith low countries payed,
Exactions upon meat, drinke, garments, sleepe,
I even on mans perdiction, his sin.
They are those brittle evidences of law
Which forfeit all a wretched mans estate
For leaving out one siable. What are whores?
They are those flattering bels have all one tune
At weddings, and at funerals: your ritch whores
Are only treasures by extortion fild,
And emptied by curs'd riot. They are worse,
Worse then dead bodies, which are beg'd at gallowes
And wrought upon by surgeons, to teach man
Wherein hee is imperfect. What a whore?
Shees like the guilty counterfetted coine
Which who so eare first starapes it, bring in trouble
All that receave it. (III.ii.82-105)

This cluster of images occurs during Vittoria's trial, the initial hardship she has to face. Webster prepares for the "Character" through both action and language. Monticelso's expressed total dedication to vengeance, "For my revenge, I'de stake a brothers life" (II.i.388), Vittoria's complicity in, if not direct responsibility for, the murdering of both Camillo and Isabella (I.ii.221-240), and the complete degradation of the court, as pictured in the opening scene--these are Webster's preparations for the "Character," the first climax of action and imagery. Structurally, the "Character" consists of four verse paragraphs that are separated by variations of Monticelso's introductory rhetorical question: "Shall I expound whores to you?" (III.ii.82).
Images in the initial section of the "Character" involve three of the senses: taste, smell, and sight. All of the sensory images imply deception and self-delusion. The sweetmeats cause rot; the perfumes cause death, and the calm seas cause shipwrecks. The remaining figure, "coosning Alcumy," likewise, is rooted in deception and false hope.

The image of corrupting sweetmeats links feeding images with hidden decay. Prior to the "Character," images concerning feeding have suggested excessive sensual indulgence, as in Lodovico's "prodigall feastes" (I.i.22), Brachiano's "delight [that] doth it selfe soon'est devour" (I.ii.194), and Isabella's reported custom to "feed her eyes and lippes" on Brachiano's picture (II.ii.27). Immediately preceding the image cluster, Monticelso asserts that Vittoria has "counterfet [ed] a Princes Court,/ In musicke banquets and most ryotous surfets" (III.ii.78-79). Foreshadowing that which is to come, the feeding image in the "Character" anticipates Vittoria's confession of having "a good stomache to a feast" (III.ii.217), Flamineo's image, "painted meat [that] no hunger feedes" (IV.ii.205), and the description of Brachiano as a poisoner, infamous for serving "villanous sallets" (V.iii.158). The concealed rot infesting the sweetmeats links sensual excess with corruption and is analogous to the hidden moral ulceration afflicting the court.

The second type of sensory image in the "Character" is olfactory. Whores are compared to the aroma of perfume, explicitly to poisoned perfume. "Poison" is iterated frequently in the play. Sometimes the

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3 Two of the six murders (those of Isabella and Brachiano) are accomplished by poisoning. "Poison" is used in a dozen images in addition to appearing literally in the text eighteen times.
scent of perfume connotes eroticism; for example, Francisco warns Brachiano that his lust may force him to "change perfumes for plaisters" (II.i.79) and Flamineo describes the satiation of sexual lust to Camillo: "Thou shalt lye in a bed stuff with turtle feathers and swoon in perfumed lynnen" (I.ii.149-150). And in Act V, Lodovico taunts Brachiano in a speech that again links perfumes and poison by reminding Brachiano of his "fine imbrodered bottles, and perfumes/ Equally mortall with a winter plague" (V.iii.160-161). Thus, Monticelso's olfactory image is both summarizing and prophetic. Although a pattern of smells is not dominant in the play, perfumes imply the need to disguise the stench of corruption permeating the atmosphere of the court.

Likewise, the image from alchemy is not part of a large image pattern, but the implication of deceit in "coosning" is central both to imagery and to meaning. There are only three other images from alchemy; nevertheless, the prostitution of energy in attempting to derive precious metals from base metals implies man's constant pursuit of illusory goals. Additionally, it connotes the disparity between appearance and reality, one of Webster's central themes.

The terminal image in the opening section of the "Character" emphasizes unexpected violence: a shipwreck during apparently calm weather. Monticelso has previously used a similar image to warn Brachiano of the dangers of incontinence:

Wretched are Princes

... When they to wilfull shipwreck loose good Fame
All Princely titles perish with their name. (II.i.38-43)
Storms and violence again highlight Monticelso's imagery when he
denounces Lodovico as a "foule blacke cloud" (IV.iii.102). And in the
concluding scene, storm imagery dominates the final climax of action and
imagery, the death speeches of Vittoria and Flamineo.

In the initial section of Monticelso's "Character," Webster under­
scores, then, misuse of the senses, and in the final metaphor, the
misinterpretation of Nature. Since one of Webster's central thematic
concerns is with the consequences of misguided living, the storm
imagery effectively illustrates misguided human beings floundering like
uncaptained ships in stormy seas.

Continuing the sensory impressions, Monticelso begins the second
part of the "Character" by contrasting tactile sensations: heat and
cold. But the cold of Russian winters that is contrasted to the "trew
matteriall fier of hell" (III.ii.89) evokes more meaning than merely
an extreme of temperature. Webster's image implies the sterility and
emptiness not only of whores, but also of the world of the play. In
one of Flamineo's sardonic expressions in Act I, he has alluded to the
infertility of whores; thus Monticelso's direct analogy is a recasting
of the idea of barren frigidity of prostitutes. In the larger meaning
of the play, the cold and barren court has no genuine life; living is
merely frenzied animalistic existence. There can be no fructification
in the Russian-like coldness, no human warmth. The fire of hell that
contrasts with winter's coldness reinforces the sensory imagery; more­
over, it begins a pattern of damnation that continues to the climax of
the final scene. "Hell," as an image, recurs in Vittoria's anguished
outcry at Brachiano's death: "O mee this place is hell" (V.iii.182) and
again in the final scene where she and Zanche enjoy their apparent success in speeding Flamineo to the torture of hell's fires. The idea of hell is also kept in the foreground by verbal iteration of "devil" and "damnation."

Monticelso then moves on to hellish injustices in political life. Sensory images are combined with economic injustices in the words, "tributes ... payed ... upon meat, drink, garments, and sleepe" (III.ii.90-91). Next, Monticelso broadens his analogy to taxes on sin (and even perdition) and the injustice implicit in enforcing the letter of the law in the confiscation of estates.

Following his third rhetorical question, Monticelso again begins with a sensory image: the auditory image of sounding bells. But the flattering bells he compares to whores have only a monotone; they dully toll two of the chief events in life, marriage and death. Omission of the other major event, birth, reflects on the sterility of life in the court and implies the meaninglessness of courtly life. Later, in Act V, the flattering bells and dissembling grief that herald Brachiano's death further exemplify the falsity of emotions that the characters demonstrate, a falsity perceptively described in the "Character."

Next, Monticelso turns to economic considerations and compares whores to "treasuries by extortion fild,/ And emptied by curs'd riot" (III.ii.98-99). This image brings to mind Lodovico's squandering away his fortune and is echoed by Brachiano's dying rant: "When I want monie,/ Our treasurie is emptie; ther is nothing" (V.iii.107-108). Visual images of dead bodies and surgeons' work coalesce with the dominant sickness pattern in Monticelso's allusion to anatomies;
moreover, implications of the justice theme, on a political level, lie under the surface of these lines. Man's lack of perfection, alluded to in the final lines of this part of the "Character," is illustrated throughout the play, with the emphasis on moral imperfection. To Monticelso whores are worse than cadavers, for from dead bodies man can learn by means of dissection of his own physical imperfection, but from whores nothing of value is gained. Hidden among the dovetailed images of sickness, disease, gallows, and falsity lies a key word: "learn." In the final scene, knowledge and what is learned by Vittoria and Flamineo are crucial to the total meaning of the play.

"What is a whore?" (III.i.102) is Monticelso's last rhetorical question. By its phrasing he moves from the general to the specific and begins his concluding statement. The counterfeit coin is both a visual and a tactile image and, by extension, an auditory one since the "ring" of a counterfeit is a flat monotone, not unlike that of the flattering bells. Primarily, however, the final image returns to questioning values, appearances, and guilt. Values are foremost in Webster's consideration, and when his characters lose the ability to distinguish between that which is of value and that which is not, they have completely prostituted their human power of discrimination. Specifically, in the context of the trial scene, both the coin (Vittoria) and its stamper (Brachiano) are equally guilty of causing turbulent disorder in the court. Deception closes the "Character," just as it was begun, with illusory appearances masking evil under a guise of good.
Thus, one reason why the "Character of a Whore" merits detailed examination is its fusion of images and actions and themes; another is that whoredom is the key metaphor of the play. It is an extended metaphor, not limited to sexuality, but one that includes all of the obsessed characters who prostitute their human traits to animal instincts. Both the explicit and the implicit patterns of prostitution are central to the meaning of the play, and in the "Character," Webster is grouping patterns and images to enforce and to illuminate his meaning of the prostitution of morality. The "Character" is vital to an understanding of Vittoria; here she first appears as a wolf at bay. Set upon unmercifully by Monticelso, who is both treacherous and mean, Vittoria earns the reader's admiration for her spirit of ceaseless resistance. Her prosecutor is too vicious, and one cannot keep from feeling that (as the English Ambassador, a spectator at the trial, says) "the Cardinals too bitter" (III.ii.111).

Indeed, the Cardinal may be too vindictive in his railing at Vittoria, but the "Character" is more than the plot attack on her; it exposes the prostituted values of the courtiers and their decadent world. Through the events leading to the trial (adultery and two murders, to mention the worst) and the imagery of the first two acts, Webster reveals that the court is inhabited by people who give full reign to their lusts. The courtiers have violated the restraints insisted upon by Renaissance orthodoxy; the links in the chain of being have been violently pulled apart. Webster's characters have lowered

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themselves from humanity to animality. The characters may be easily separated into groups of wolves or sheep, but such a division may be too pat. To arrive at a more meaningful grouping of the central figures, let us consider them in terms originated by some seventeenth century moralists who reacted to secularism and worldliness and founded Jansenism, a movement grounded upon the revival of Saint Augustine's teachings. One of the leaders of this movement, Cornelius Jansenius, coined three phrases that define the driving forces of man's depravity: *libido sciendi*, the zeal for knowledge, *libido dominandi*, the will for power, and *libido sentiendi*, the appetite for sensation.

In *The White Devil* there are no characters dominated by a passion for knowledge (as is Marlowe's Dr. Faustus). But the two other types of lust driving man to his depravity are present. *Libido sentiendi*, an animal-like appetite for sensation, rules supremely in Zanche, Vittoria's Moorish Maid. To a high degree it exists in Brachiano, as his lechery attests; in Flamineo, as his prurient speech indicates; and in Vittoria, as her epicurean tastes and vitality for the sensations of life (not mere sexuality) testify. Ruled chiefly by *libido dominandi* is Monticelso. His will for power and authority is unrestrained; accordingly, he incites Francisco to avenge the murder of their sister (Isabella) and proves his dominance over his brother. Monticelso's plots and policy are additional indications of his lust for power. Brachiano's *libido dominandi* asserts itself when he exercises his

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power to have his wife and Vittoria's husband killed and when he metes out political justice to Flamineo by granting him a day-to-day pardon for killing Marcello. Flamineo's insatiable desire for preferment and its accompanying wealth indicates his will for power, and in both Lodovico and Francisco, libido dominandi impels their conspiracy and policy. The evils represented by these libido-driven characters are those which Saint John condemned: "For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life, is not of the Father but is of the world" (I John,ii,16). Lust for power and lust for sensation combine to drive Flamineo and Vittoria to their damnation in the final scene of the play, the second dramatic and imagistic climax.

At the beginning of the final scene, Flamineo goes to Vittoria's apartment, impelled by libido dominandi. His quest for riches continues, even though after his conscience spoke to him (in V.iv) he had a momentary recognition of the damning consequences of his preferment-seeking life. He has since been visited by Brachiano's ghost who indicates that he is soon to die. Near the end of the play, Flamineo sums up the horrors of his life: his banishment by Giovanni; "the pitious sight of [his] dead brother; and [his] Mother's dotage" (V.iv.139-140), and the death omen he has received from the ghost. These he resolves to make meaningful by acquiring riches from Vittoria. Flamineo is desperate; he knows that his time is limited. Still, he believes that all the evil deeds of his life and their consequences can be justified, if he can gain material wealth. He says:

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All these
Shall with Vittoria's bountie turne to good,
Or I will drown this weapon in her blood.    (V.iv.141-143)
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In this frame of mind, he meets Vittoria, states that he comes on "worldly businesse" (V.vi.3), and demands that she give him material reward for his long service to Brachiano. Under duress, she writes him a conveyance, and with some self-satisfaction, reads the document to him: "I give that portion to thee, and no other/ Which Caine gorn'd under having slain his brother" (V.vi.i11-15). Thus, she transforms Flamineo's intended business from the worldly to the moral, and so, as the concluding scene begins, Webster now openly dramatizes the value conflict that has been implicit throughout the play. The final concern of the play is focused completely on the central ethical issues.

Flamineo once again suppresses his conscience and concentrates determinedly on the pursuit of preferment and security. Vittoria, on the other hand, assumes a guise of piety, feigns abhorrence of his suggested suicide-murder pact (see p. 58, above), and begins a discourse on the darkness of damnation:

...o the cursed Devill
Which doth present us with other sinnes
Thrice candied ore; ...
Makes us forsake that which was made for Man,
The world, to sinke to that was made for devils,
Eternal darkness. (V.vi.59-66)

Vittoria's allusion to candied sins is analogous to the corrupting "sweet-meates which rot the eater" (III.ii.84) in Monticelso's "Character," and her reference to man's forsaking the world for "eternall darkness" is an extension to the moral level of Monticelso's physical imperfection revealed in cadavers by surgeons' work (III.ii.100-103). Vittoria's words are, of course, a partial mockery of Christian belief and a delaying tactic. But they effectively serve
Webster's purpose by focusing on the themes of justice and damnation. The irony is that both Vittoria and Flamineo inevitably sink into "eternall darkenesse."

Deception is omnipresent in the action during Flamineo's proposal of a suicide-murder pact and in the equally feigned acceptance of it by Vittoria and Zanche, who take his pistols (not knowing they are loaded with blank cartridges) and swear "most religiously" to shoot him and then themselves. When they shoot, Flamineo falls, as if mortally wounded, and Vittoria and Zanche tread upon him, calling him a "most accursed devill" (V.vi.12h). They rejoice in their apparent victory, and Vittoria takes devilish pleasure in his apparent departure for hell:

...thy sinnes,
Do runne before thee to fetch fire from hell,
To light thee thither. (V.vi.11h0-11h2)

Flamineo plays his counterfeit role to the hilt, describing hell's agonies:

O I smell soote,
Most stinking soote, the chimneis a-fire,
My liver's purboiled like scotch holly-bread;
There's a plumber laying pipes in my guts, it scalds. (V.vi.11h2-11h5)

The olfactory and tactile images in this passage strengthen Webster's portrayal of damnation, even though Flamineo's speech is a hoax. Then suddenly he rises and reverses the action, calling Vittoria and Zanche "cunning devils" (V.vi.14h9) and denouncing woman's treachery. His plan to kill them aborts, owing to the arrival of Lodovico and Gasparo.
With their arrival, Webster's change in the characterization of Vittoria accelerates. After her flattery of Gasparo fails to stay her execution, the other avenger, Lodovico, says: "Thou dost tremble, / Mee thinkes feare should dissolve thee into ayre" (V.vi.222-223). But Vittoria's reply indicates her diamond-like endurance:

O thou art deceiv'd, I am too true a woman; Conceit can never kill me: Ile tell thee what, I will not in my death shed one base teare, Or if looke pale, for want of blood, not feare. (V.vi.224-227)

With this dialogue, Webster brings two of the four ancient elements into the imagery of the death scene: air and water. Fire has figured prominently in Vittoria's discourse with Flamineo concerning hell, so that the essential elements broaden the meaning of the lines. Water, often metaphorically used to evoke feelings of mutability, is emphasized in the imagery of the final scene, especially in the last speeches of Vittoria and Flamineo. Here Vittoria's deception ceases, along with false tears. Her greatest sin, her passion, Vittoria now pays for with her life's blood. In dying she teaches Flamineo how to die, and he defines the essence of Vittoria as a "white devil":

Th'art a noble sister, I love thee now; if woeman doe breed man, She ought to teach him manhood: ... Shee hath no faults, who hath the art to hide them. (V.vi.241-247)

Ironically, Vittoria's deceptive art, the ability to conceal her moral faults, makes her sins seem more venial than they really are. Nevertheless, her behavior in death is an example to Flamineo, who imitates her bravery.
Both of the principal characters assume a variety of rapidly changing roles in the final scene. Vittoria alternates from hypocritically speaking Christian beliefs to thoroughly damning Flamineo and from an attempt to beguile Gasparo to confronting death unafraid. Flamineo remains a crass materialist, but assumes the guise of a counterfeit sinner pretending to see hell's tortures and of a would-be victim of murder before reverting to his true self, the self-willed individualist.

The fluctuating roles are underscored by sea imagery. Vittoria compares her soul to a ship in stormy seas, and Flamineo tells her to

...cast anchor.
Prosperity doth bewitch men seeming clear,
But seas do laugh, shew white, when Rocks are neere.

(V.vi.249-251)

Flamineo's image is a close parallel to Monticelso's "Shipwrackes in Calmest weather" in the "Character."

Despite the fact that both Vittoria and Flamineo come to some understanding of the illusory nature of their personal goals, their knowledge is limited. Vittoria admits that her soul is being driven in a black storm. Her compelling force, *libido sentiendi*, has not brought her lasting pleasure. Through her suffering she gains some knowledge, at least knowledge of her inability to direct the course of eternity by prostitution and deception. She sees that all for which she has lived is meaningless. Indicative of her partial insight is the final couplet of her death speech: "O happy they that never saw the Court, / Nor ever knew great Man but by report" (V.vi.261-262).
And what of Flamineo? He too learns little. From Vittoria he learns to meet death bravely, but libido dominandi has driven him through an empty life. He still thinks only of self:

Noe, at my selfe I will begin and end.
While we looke up to heaven wee confound
Knowledge with knowledge. o I am in a mist. (V.vi.258-260)

At the verge of death, Flamineo recognizes that there are two kinds of knowledge; man’s knowledge and God’s knowledge. Previously he recognized only knowledge of worldly power, the ways of court policy, self-centered intellect, and the false god of riches that he worshipped. Having practiced only evil in his wasted corrupt life, at his death he acquires a “knowledge of good bought dear by knowing ill.” But too long he has filled himself with the knowledge of the world; he cannot change. He dies knowing only of his ignorance and finding that “this busie trade of live appears most vaine” (V.vi.273).

Flamineo’s final two lines reverberate with auditory imagery:
"Let no harsh flattering Bels resound my knell,/ Strike thunder, and strike lowde to my farewell" (V.vi.275-276). His request for a triumphant departure from the world demonstrates the acme of egoism; for one who has lived negatively--by policy, deceit, and immorality, the monotonous of flattering bells is an appropriate knell.

But the emptiness and negation of life that Flamineo expresses does not imply that Webster’s ultimate tragic vision is nihilistic.

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6Paradise Lost, IV.222
Rather, *The White Devil* points back to morality based on the verities and exemplified by Christian virtues. For what the play states is strengthened by what it implies. And the implications about the quality of the lives of the principal characters depend, to a large degree, on imagery and its illumination of contrasts between immorality and morality.
CHAPTER VII

MORAL STATEMENT OF THE PLAY

If imagery provides the best key to Webster's meaning in The White Devil, it would seem to follow that his purpose is, like that of the surgeons alluded to in Monticelso's "Character of a Whore," to dissect the moral rot of the court in order to dramatically demonstrate man's imperfection. Simultaneously, Webster would appear to be, however obliquely, pointing his audience's attention to a larger kingdom, free of moral ulceration, animality, injustice, and deception of all sorts—a kingdom in which appearance and reality are one. Although the two central characters, Vittoria and Flamineo, gain only a modicum of knowledge of this kingdom, Webster, in dramatizing their deaths, suggests a course of life they might better have followed.

The moral concern of the play, a reflection of Webster's tragic vision, is far broader, then, than the explicit moral statements in the text. Throughout the play there is a continual and insistent implication, most clearly expressed in the imagery (for instance in the animal imagery), that though the predatory characters are in temporal control of events, their control is not final. Rampant disorder implies order; similarly, the reiterated sickness pattern implies an opposite condition in man. Deceptive appearances, developed by both action and imagery, imply an underlying reality, just as injustice implies the existence of justice. And, of course, immorality implies its opposite, morality. Webster does not choose to state these opposing values didactically; instead, through the imagery he gradually reveals his
contrasting realms: the decadent and immoral court and the other kingdom of morality.

Specifically, the animal imagery accentuates human types from whom elevating human traits have vanished. Images of the wolf, the raven, the killer-dogs, and the plundering birds of prey demonstrate the ferocity and bestiality into which human beings can fall. The behavior and the ideology of the predators, their dog-eat-dog ruthlessness and their total dedication to self, illustrate the prostitution of human potentiality by animal energies. When man sinks to animality, he tries to elevate sexuality as a good in itself. This attempt amounts to prostitution of human emotions, none of which are evil in themselves. Like the predatory animals that represent them, the unrestrained individualists practice no moderation; each follows his own libido to the point of daring damnation.

Contrasted with the predators are their prey; they are weak, sheep-like, and sacrificial. Their gentleness is typified in Cornelia's dirge by the robin and the wren that are contrasting images to the voracious hawks and ravens Webster uses to symbolize the forces of evil. Isabella, Marcello, and Cornelia are virtuous, but owing to their constant exposure to the infectious courtiers, even their virtue becomes tainted. Nevertheless, Cornelia's dirge produces a twinge of conscience in Flammeo; Marcello's death speech points to the retribution of divine justice, and Isabella's continued devotion to Brachiano, even after his merciless divorce speech, demonstrates the virtue of love. That the virtuous are struck down, or in Cornelia's case driven to madness, indicates the temporal dominance of evil. But The White Devil does not present total triumph of evil.
On the level of secular justice, Lodovico and Gasparo face torture and imprisonment from Giovanni, the new ruler; Zanche meets death at the hands of hired assassins; Brachiano dies an agonized death by poison. Monticello, who had urged Francisco to avenge their sister's death, escapes detection, and although Francisco flees the scene, Giovanni's prediction that guilty men will fall implies courtly punishment for Francisco. However, Webster's primary concern is not with political justice and secular punishment. One may infer from Giovanni's threat of retaliation that powerful factions in the court will continue to bring fear, apprehension, and disorder so long as the prostitution of morality continues. Until Princes' lives return to order and again "like dyals move" (II.i.279), rampant disorder and corruption will continue to plague the world.

The pattern of sickness amplifies corruption of past morality. Linked to this pattern are images of false cures and poison that reinforce deceptions and poisonings in the action. The morbidity of many of the images in the sickness pattern might be excessive were Webster not implying moral ulceration of such magnitude that its infections spreads even to non-corrupt souls. Flamineo's "everlasting cold" and "irrecoverably" lost voice bring the sickness pattern to its termination in a way that implies eternal damnation. Also in the pattern of sickness are the false hopes for a panacea, false hopes that grow from the self-deception of the characters who believe the illness afflicting their world to be economic and social, rather than moral.

Deception and false appearances are central in the action of the play, and Webster's imagery accentuates the disparity between appearance
and reality. Wolves that seem not to be wolves, caged birds that seem to sing, but actually cry, and true and counterfeit jewels—these are some of the images that underscore the difference between seeming and being. When moral values are completely overthrown, as they are in the world of the play, the illusory often seems to be real. The title image is of interest here. Vittoria's qualities as a "devil" are numerous. She wilfully becomes Brachiano's whore; she is guilty of complicity in, if not responsible for, the murder of both Isabella and Camillo; she attempts to kill Flamineo, and she follows libido sentiendi in unrestrained pursuit of pleasure. Her "whiteness" is largely a matter degree. At the trial, although she makes her sins seem more venial than they actually are, she is not completely hypocritical as are her prosecutors. At Brachiano's death, Vittoria recognizes the living hell of the court, and she grieves sincerely for him. In the final scene, Vittoria faces death courageously. But Vittoria admits her guilt, and even as early as the trial scene, she does not moralize or attempt to justify her action; she lies, but she makes no excuses. "Devil" though she be, she is less one than many of the other characters.

In the final scene of the play, Webster presents the ultimate implications stemming from his anatomy of rottenness. Imagery points to his meaning by the reiteration of images of hell and damnation. In addition, the death speeches reveal what each of the leading characters has learned about life. Because Vittoria's last three speeches summarize her acquired knowledge, they merit reappraisal.

0 my greatest sinne lay in my blood.
Now my blood paires for't. (V.vi.211-212)
In this passage Vittoria admits, in addition to her guilt and passion, the justice implicit in her death, a knowledge Flamineo never acquires. But Vittoria's knowledge is somewhat limited.

My soule, like to a ship in a blacke storme, 
Is driven I know not whither. (V.vi.2\textsuperscript{18}-2\textsuperscript{19})

Vittoria cannot fathom the depths of eternity and damnation. But she does realize that she is powerless to direct the course of her soul. Her final lines seem rather anti-climactic:

O happy they that never saw the Court. 
Nor ever knew great Man but by report. (V.vi.2\textsuperscript{61}-2\textsuperscript{62})

The final scene of the play colors most critical interpretations, especially with regard to the moral statement, if any, found by the critic. Here the recent interpretations of Ornstein and Ribner are of interest. Ornstein finds the play lacking in moral discriminations, for in his view Vittoria's admission of her sins and Giovanni's prediction that the guilty will fall seem like Christian aphorisms added to the text, rather than concluding statements that crystalize moral judgment in the play.\footnote{Ornstein, op. cit., pp. 130-131.} Ribner, contrariwise, asserts that despite the references to heaven and hell, Webster's world is lacking in any certainty of a divine providence directing man's affairs. But in his view, though the play does not reveal a philosophy of negation, it implies a
profound moral belief in man's ability to survive and to retain his human worth in spite of all the worldly evils.²

Interestingly, both Ornstein and Ribner acknowledge that Webster presents the reality of virtue in Isabella, Marcello, and Cornelia; nevertheless, their interpretations of this aspect of the theme vary widely. To Ornstein the virtue is not illusory, though it is the source of deceptive illusions about the meaning of family, love, marriage, and retribution. He further asserts that it is the representatives of virtue who are deluded, while Webster's villains "escape the restrictive bonds of illusions of morality only to be swept to disaster by the irresistible tide of their desires."³ The villains, Ornstein asserts, are limited only by the tyranny of self-knowledge and their immediate goals. Certainly, Ornstein's analysis of the tyranny of self-will is trenchant, especially for Flamineo and Vittoria. Flamineo frequently perceives the falsity of his world, the sham and pretense of religion that is steeped in policy, and the illusory happiness of courtly preferment, but his one speech of compassion indicates that Flamineo does have a sense of morality, although he suppresses it, but Ornstein's assertion that there is no basic difference between Vittoria and Zanche fails to consider the difference between total animalistic lust in Zanche and the zest for life and physical pleasure (not sheer sexuality) in Vittoria.

²Ribner, op. cit., p. 100.
³Ornstein, op. cit., p. 137.
The virtuous characters, Ribner asserts, mask their virtue under a cloak of evil. He cites Isabella's pretense that she, not Brachiano, destroys their marriage and Cornelia's telling lies to protect Flamineo as indications of the general human corruption in a world where good and evil cannot be easily distinguished. Still Ribner fails to distinguish between appearances and reality, even after he says: "real as their virtue may be, it appears to the world cloaked in evil."\(^1\) The fact that the virtue of Isabella, Cornelia, and Marcello is real has more meaning than how it appears to the world. Vittoria, Ribner sees, as a woman who attains some victory over the world by her "integrity of life" (the quotation comes from *The Duchess of Malfi*); he sees Flamineo as a death force challenging Vittoria, a vibrant force of life. To Ribner, Flamineo is a conventional stage figure who represents total evil, a sort of reflection of the world about him, an antagonist to Vittoria whose death he parallels with brave defiance, never learning, however, "that life itself can afford a basis of morality in a chaotic world."\(^5\)

But it is my opinion that courage and defiance, however admirable, scarcely seem like compensation for the damnation of Flamineo's "everlasting cold" and Vittoria's storm-driven soul.

In *The White Devil* Webster's imagery, verbal iteration, and patterns of images highlight decadence and depravity in the Italian Court, a world where all coherence is gone. Webster concentrates his imagery in key passages and scenes that vigorously support his themes. By the

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\(^1\)Ribner, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

\(^5\)Ibid., p. 106.
climax of the play, he shifts focus to the knowledge gained by his principal characters, limited though it be, to imply the meaning of the play as a dissection of corruption: man's turning away from the traditional verities results in damning consequences. The anguished death of Brachiano and the confused deaths of Vittoria and Flamino dramati-cally illustrate Webster's meaning. Furthermore, Webster contrasts the endemic deception of the world of the play with the underlying reality of traditional morality. By understanding the nature of corruptive evil, man can learn the way back to an ordered life based on the traditional verities.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


