

JOHN WEBSTER AS A MORALIST

The plays of the seventeenth century are, in general, illustrations of a set theme. We are not only clear what the plays are about, we are fairly sure of the kind of attitude which the dramatist wants us to take. But in Jacobean years this clarity and this certainly largely evaporate... In the great decade near the beginning of the seventeenth century the minds of the dramatists were directed much more to the exploration of the individual personality than to the enunciation of general truths.¹

This apt and clearly drawn contrast between Elizabethan and Jacobean drama ought to prevent the student of Webster from falling into the error of confusing the sentiments expressed by the characters of Webster's plays with the sentiments of the author himself. Yet modern critics of Webster persist in building up from the sentiments, thoughts, actions, and passions of the characters a world that it labels 'Webster's World'.

This is, of course, an extremely vague phrase and might well be taken as referring to the type of character and situation that Webster prefers to depict. Hereward T. Price seems to be using the phrase in this sense when, referring to the scene in which Isabella takes upon herself the blame for her husband's unnatural conduct, writes Webster's world is so corrupt that goodness itself tends to deceive'². There would seem to be little doubt, however, that both Clifford Leech (in spite of the reasonable position he takes up in the above quotation) and Ellis-Fermor use the phrase to mean Webster's conception of the world and of life in general.

Thus when we see of Shakespeare's major tragedies, we juxtapose the darkness of the event with the light that could possibly be, but in Webster there is no possibility other than the one presented, there is no world imaginable but that of the fearful and the mad.³

¹ Clifford Leech *John Webster* p. 67.

² Hereward T. Price "The Function of Imagery in Webster" *PMLA* Vol. LXX, no. 4 part 1, September 1955.

³ Clifford Leech *op. cit.* p. 31

The world that Webster is presumed to have imagined is so dark and so evil that even the possibility of moral teaching is utterly precluded.

Certainly in the writing of *Macbeth* Shakespeare was with part of his mind concerned with the evils of ambition and usurpation: to some extent the play was a political morality... But *The White Devil* is in no sense a morality play: not only do we fail to see Vittoria and her brother as a fearful warning, but when under the spell of the play we cannot imagine a world without them: we cannot believe that Giovanni should inherit his father's dukedom, or that the surviving son of Antonio and the Duchess of Malfi should be established in his mother's right. It is not merely that normality seems tame after the dark splendours of the storm: that is what we feel in *Macbeth*: rather, there is no road but that which leads to the gallowes, where the mandrake breeds.⁴

Yet throughout both Webster's great dramas there are *sententiae* expressing the most traditional and orthodox morality. One finds it difficult to comprehend the function of these moral precepts in a world so utterly evil that there isn't even the possibility of virtue. Once the poet is credited with with so morbid and despairing an outlook a contradiction is created beteen the explicit statements of the poet on life and morality, and the general tone and attitude of the play. Both Clifford Leech and Ellis-Fermor are obliged to find some explanation for this contradiction between the explicit and the implicit meaning of the play that their theories presuppose. Clifford Leech falls back on the desperate resource of presuming that Webster did not understand his own plays.

Yet we can, I think, assume that Webster did not fully realise the significance of his plays. There is a strange gulf between the effect of Jacobean tragic plays on us and the comments on those plays made by the dramatists themselves.....That Webster had little realisation of the effect of his plays is perhaps shown in the indiscriminate praise of his leading contemporaries in the address to the reader which precedes *The White Devil*.....Yet so little did the Jacobeans understand themselves that there is no need to suspect Webster of flattery.⁵

Ellis-Fermor prefers to find the cause of the contradiction in an unresolved conflict in Webster's mind.

From the *sententiae* of the play we perceive that he has built for himself a moral system which does not correspond wholly with his instinctive affections.....nor with the profounder and hardly less instinctive doubts that trouble his spirit.⁶

In another passage Ellis-Fermor goes on to credit him with a sort of amoral stoicism utterly at variance with the explicit moral teaching of the plays.

⁴ U. Ellis-Fermor *Jacobean Drama* p. 92

⁵ Clifford Leech *op. cit.* p. 32.

⁶ U. Ellis-Fermor *op. cit.* pp. 184-5.

By nature he was endowed with a great love of resolution, courage, manliness and originality, and a clear perception that good and evil are irrelevances beside the reality of these things.⁷

A world of utter despair and hopeless evil can be redeemed only by faith. Kierkegaard pointed out that if sin is defined as despair (and all the evil characters of Webster's plays are subject to various forms of the sickness of despair and Webster himself, if we are to believe the critics, is afflicted with the disease mentioned above) then the opposite of sin is not virtue but faith. A man who has plunged into the darkness of utter despondency cannot be saved by the reasonable teaching of an orthodox and conventional morality. Only the miracle of faith, transcending all merely rational conceptions, can lead the despairing sinner towards salvation and peace. This development has been pointed out in Shakespeare, who is imagined by some to have passed through despair towards a mystical serenity of faith, but it is remarkably absent from Webster. This would seem to make Webster's world even more terrible and despairing than the most pessimistic plays of Shakespeare, since in Webster there is not even a gleam of light. Ellis-Fermore has, indeed, succeeded in finding momentary flashes of faith and serenity, but no constant rays.

For Webster, though more intimately preoccupied with death than any other predecessor except Shakespeare, was touched for a moment with the illumination that spread over the latest phase of that drama, replacing the darkness of the earlier years by the assurance of a serener, or the light-heartedness of an indifferent generation. Light-heartedness was impossible to Webster, and he had become too deeply subdued to what he worked in for serenity to be more than a passing mood, but he remains the playwright who most clearly perceives the chaos and conflict in which the tragic thought of his generation was caught and, while unable to climb out of the 'deep pit of darkness', discerned for a moment, through the eyes of one of his characters, the 'stars' that 'shine still'.⁸

Such criticism seems to me give an entirely false impression of Webster's real outlook, and, what is perhaps more important, completely fails to provide the reader with a true conception of the basic assumptions and beliefs upon which the play rests, and to which the sentiments, actions, and declared beliefs of the characters must be referred in order to place the characters and their thoughts and actions in a clear and unambiguous light. A reader who approached either *The White Devil* or *The Duchess of Malfi* with the expectation that Webster is to paint a world of evil, sin, despondency and despair from which there is no escape imaginable or redemption possible,

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 186.

⁸ *Ibid.* p. 170.

save for momentary flashes of mystical illumination, could not fail to be bewildered, perplexed and disappointed by the plays themselves. Far from portraying an utterly evil and sinful world, Webster, in my opinion, directs his attention away from general conceptions of the world as a whole to a keen and penetrating psychological study of a group of sinful and evil people, an analysis of their characters, and a sympathetic recreation of their passions and sentiments. Far from symbolising or shadowing forth the world as Webster conceived it, these characters are obvious exceptions to the general rule, figures that fascinate because of their strangeness, their perversity. Vittoria, Flamineo, Brachiano and Lodovico; Ferdinand, the Cardinal and Bosola, and even, to a certain extent, the Duchess and Antonio, are all exceptional characters set off against a background of the most orthodox and conventional morality. If we are to use the phrase 'Webster's world' we should, I think, apply it to this world of orthodox religion, conventional morality and common-place platitudes which forms the firm and indispensable foundation for the gloom and terror of these plays. Unless one accepts this fact the plays become vague and wavering in intention, and obscure and self-contradictory in meaning. Non-existent problems, such as the supposed contradiction between the implicit and explicit meaning of the plays, perplex and irritate the reader; critics complain of the lack of any moral teaching in plays that are filled with moral platitudes and common-places, of the failure to portray education through suffering on the part of a playwright whose intention was to show that suffering is a result of sin and that virtue is its own reward, of the lack of a mystical redemption from despair in a world that despair has never touched, however lost and despairing single, individual members of that world may be.

When the basic attitudes to life, religion and morality are traditional and conventional, when the playwright accepts without question the moral and spiritual values of his time, he may be forgiven if he fails to define these values clearly and fully, and it may be regarded as a venial fault if he fails to make the moral principles underlying his play unmistakably apparent to a critic belonging to a different age with totally different moral and religious assumptions. Webster does not, however, provide his modern critics with this excuse for misunderstanding and misinterpretation. Although he may leave general concepts such as virtue and justice undefined, yet he makes his moral and religious position sufficiently clear, and points in a broad and effective background of general principles against which his brilliant studies of moral perversity or weakness are portrayed. The first scene of a Jacobean play is almost always of immense

importance in so far as it sets the tone, atmosphere and general attitude of the play. *The White Devil* is no exception to this rule. In this case, however, the first scene is devoted not only to setting forth the general moral principles that form a basis for the play as a whole but also to giving a brief but brilliantly effective sketch of Lodovico's character—with the unfortunate result that some modern critics have allowed themselves to be misled into regarding Lodovico's outlook as being identical with the author's own. The word 'banished' with which the play opens has been taken as the key-word to the play and the author's whole attitude to life. Nothing could be more absurdly far from the truth. It is the key-word to Lodovico's character, but that character only becomes clear when seen against the general principles of morality enunciated by Antonelli and Gasparo. The sane, orthodox outlook of the two gentleman serves as a foil to the dark, insane perversity of Lodovico's attitude. The two friends pour out the story of his heinous crimes in order to try to convince him that he has been justly punished, that to harbour any grudge or grievance against his judges is absurd and unjustifiable, and that his personal disaster is not only just but might well prove beneficial in so far as it has given him an opportunity of seeing the results of his conduct and so of reforming his way of life. They accuse him of having ruined the noblest earldom by his prodigality, of having sold his estates to purchase luxuries and dainties, of having allowed himself and his fortune to become the prey of flatterers and sycophants, of having indulged in all kinds of excesses and extravagances, drunkenness and debauchery, and of having committed horrible and bloody murders. From the list of these crimes it is not very difficult to uncover the principles that form the foundation of the moral principles accepted by Antonelli and Gasparo; duty to society (consisting, in the case of great men, in performing their duties towards their inferiors and their dependants), duty to one's family (in preserving one's estates, wealth and honour intact), and one's duties towards oneself (in controlling one's passions and appetites, in refusing to allow oneself to become the tool of evil men or evil desires, and in remaining true to certain rational and accepted principles of moral conduct). It is, of course, by no means logically inevitable that the theory of morality that we have attributed to Antonelli and Gasparo should also be attributed to Webster. Nevertheless, the fact that it is allowed to set the moral of the first scene of the play allows us to assume, at least tentatively, that it may approximate to the basic moral principles upon which the author has built the ethical fabric of his play. There are a number of other alternatives. Antonelli and Gasparo might be meant to re-

present an orthodox and traditional philosophy which the author wishes to prove untenable; they might represent a purely conventional outlook serving as a contrast to the pessimistic but realistic attitude of Lodovico; they might serve as puppets to put forward conventional and accepted opinions that the author might shelter behind if he were attacked for the daring, 'atheist' opinions put forward in the play; or they might stand for the view of life that the author accepted in his conscious mind but which he subconsciously rejected in favour of a despairing and outrageous nihilism. The first three, all of which presuppose that Webster was more or less in conscious agreement with the world-view held by a Lodovico, could only be accepted if supported by external evidence, or if it were proved that there was no other means of removing the obscurities or of solving the contradictions of the play; yet far from solving our problems such a supposition only raises more. The whole purport and teaching of the play, which is that sin brings its own punishment, only falls into place if we assume that Webster accepts the orthodox morality and the conventional outlook of his time, and that he regards Lodovico, Flamineo, Vittoria and Brachiano as examples of perversity and evil. A Jacobean audience would immediately accept the moral principles taken for granted by Antonelli and Gasparo as the norm, and the grotesque outrageousness of Lodovico's sentiments make it quite clear that he is intended to represent the exceptional and the pathological:

Gasparo: You have acted certain murders here in Rome
Bloody and full of horror.

Lodovico: 'Las, they were flea-bitings. (I. i. 31-32)

The manner in which he spurns Antonelli's conventional but nevertheless apt description of the uses of adversity serves to give the audience a striking insight into the depths of his insane sense of grievance:

Antonelli: and so affliction
Expresseth virtue fully, whether true
Or else adulterate.

Lodovico: Leave your painted comforts:

I'll make Italian cut-works in their cuts
If ever I return. (I. i. 48-52)

It is quite obvious that Webster meant the audience to be shocked and horrified by Lodovico's statements, and equally obvious that the

attitude to life, religion and morality revealed in the sentiments of a Lodovico, a Vittoria, or any other of the 'atheistical' characters in Webster's plays were meant to reveal the terror of that hell that an evil person carries around with him. Moreover the word 'Italian' in the above quotation is of considerable significance here as we shall find that the evil characters in Webster are conceived not only as horrifying exceptions in a more or less sane and stable, though imperfect, world, but as strange, fascinating, unfamiliar figures to be found in the Italy of the Renaissance but utterly foreign to English soil. Thus Webster's principal characters, far from representing the author's general attitude to man and the world that he inhabits, are at two removes from such a straight-forward universality - first because they are obvious exceptions to the normal run of human beings, and secondly because they are represented as being typical of Renaissance Italy, a country which, in the eyes of an English Protestant of the Elizabethan and Stuart periods, was immoral, irreligious and evil.

As for the point of view that would make Webster subconsciously in agreement with the pessimists, nihilists and atheists of his dramas, I find it difficult to accept such excursions into the domain of psycho-analysis, especially when carried out by amateurs, as one of the legitimate activities of a literary critic. If the play as it stands is obscure, unsatisfying, and vague in meaning and intention then I suppose that there is a certain amount of justification for such desperate expedients as the psycho-analysis of a dead man's mind. But where the play is, as in this case, perfectly clear and straight-forward if one accepts the author's explicit commentary on his own play, and obscure and unsatisfying only if one assumes that the author's real meaning differs from that commentary, then it is clear that the reader and critic should keep to the straight-forward, obvious interpretation of the play's outlook. The desire to represent Webster as being in substantial agreement with the sentiments and attitude of the evil characters in his plays probably springs from the inability of certain critics to accept the rather naive and unsopisticated ethical code to be found side by side with the most penetrating psychological analysis, just as the inability of some Romantic critics to accept the dogmatic religious and moral outlook of Milton tempted them into attributing to the poet a sympathy with the outlook of the Devil.

In *The White Devil* Webster makes his ethical position perfectly clear by means of the sentiments placed in the mouth of Cornelia. The scene in which she makes her first appearance on the stage is an

unforgettable example of the imaginative brilliance of Webster's theatrical invention, which employs as its medium not only the speech, sentiments and actions of the characters but also the stage setting, and the movement and disposition of the characters on the stage. The adulterous lovers occupy the centre of the stage, with Flamineo and Zanche, the pander and the negress, on one side, and Cornelia, Vittoria's mother, listening behind. There is thus a sort of double chorus - Flamineo commenting cynically on the progress made by Brachiano and Vittoria in their criminal lust, Cornelia bewailing the sinfulness of her daughter and the viciousness of her son. It is in this scene that the moral setting of the play is most vividly revealed and most effectively impressed on the spectator's mind, and the fact that the rest of the action of the play represents a substantial proof of the truth of the sententiae contained in Cornelia's first speech should permit us to regard this play as being not only just as much of a morality play as any of Shakespeare's, but but as a morality play with perhaps an even more explicit and straightforward moral attitude than any of Shakespeare's.

May fears are fall'n upon me: O, my heart!
 My son the pander! Now I find our house
 Sinking to ruin. Earthquakes leave behind,
 Where they have tyrannized, iron, or lead, or stone;
 But, woe to ruin, violent lust leaves none. (I. ii. 206-210)

This speech, and it worthy of remark that Webster does not disdain the help of the conventional rhymed couplet in order to point a common-place, would seem to imply that virtue is capable of preserving a house and family from ruin, and that prosperity is more commonly to be found consorting with virtue than with vice - a platitude upon which, indeed, the rest of the play is a commentary. There is nothing to suggest that virtue is impossible in Webster's world. On the contrary, it is usually spoken of as something far less surprising and far more easily acceptable than vice or sin. The extraordinarily effective introduction of the young Giovanni in Act II scene i brings before our eyes a living example of that virtue which is generally, in Webster, confined to abstract formulation in the sentences. The moral attitude revealed is one typical of the Humanist Renaissance, and differs in no way from the Elizabethan ideals manifested in the works of Sidney and Spenser. This brief but memorable scene contains in brief the true character and education of a prince. He should be trained by example rather than by precept, and in this no teacher can be superior to his own father—one of the arguments for the superior virtue of an aristocracy of birth. His virtue should be of power

to withstand temptation and adversity, and should be formed on the Roman model of courage, discretion, self-control and justice, together with a real sense of his responsibilities as a ruler and prince. The classical humanistic basis of Webster's morality is revealed in Francesco's remark,

See, a good habit makes a child a man,

Whereas a bad one makes a man a beast. (II, i, 140-1)

For Webster, as for Shakespeare and other thinkers of a typically Renaissance cast of mind, the highest compliment that can be paid to any human being is to describe him as a 'man'. Although certain aspects of humanity may be 'bestly', there is a world of difference between a true man and a beast, and a man who lives a virtuous life is worthy of the greatest admiration and respect. That this is no unattainable ideal in Webster is shown by the demonstration of Giovanni's sense of justice with which the play ends. This surely proves that Webster's world is not incorrigibly evil and that his hope lies rather in the actions of good men like Giovanni rather than in a mystical faith in something indefinable and far. Webster's attitude to princes and great men is, as a matter of fact, sufficient to defeat any attempt to make Webster a pessimist. There are many bitter and cynical attacks on great men throughout the play but it must be borne in mind that these are placed in the mouths of the two most notorious villains, Lodovico and Flamineo. Lodovico is a boldly and effectively drawn character, an admirable example of what the nineteenth century called a nihilist and the seventeenth century an atheist. His whole outlook is based on a sense of grievance, and thus on a sense of denial and revolt. He is a typical specimen of that type of man who believes himself to be essentially worthy and good, but who has been treated, in his own opinion, with harsh injustice by the world and particularly by the great. This sense of grievance and despised virtue drives him into a diabolical obsession with crime and destruction (but it is significant that his mania for destruction is always directed against sinful people) and ultimately with self-destruction.

I do glory yet

That I can call this act mine own. For my part,

The rack, the gallows, and the torturing wheel,

Shall be but sound sleeps to me: here's my rest:

I limn'd this night-piece, and it was my best. (V. vi. 295-9)

This diabolical obsession draws a sharp contrast between himself and Flamineo, whose sins are committed out of no passionate obsession

with sin itself or out of any sense of grievance, but purely and deliberately to advance himself in the world and, by making himself a pander and a tool to the vicious desires of the great, better his financial position. The mean and abject nature of his crimes stands in vivid contrast to the Satanic darkness of Lodovico's. Moreover whilst Lodovico's crimes are committed against the wicked, so that his sin consists mostly in appropriating to himself the task of punishing sin, which rightly belongs to God and the prince, Flamineo's crimes are directed against the pure and the innocent and the virtuous. It would seem rather surprising to accept any statements made by these characters on life or morality as worthy of credence, and more surprising still to attribute them to the author. Yet if we are to accept Webster as a pessimist it must be on the strength of sentiments expressed by characters such as these, since it is in their speeches that typical 'Websterian' attitudes are to be found, and rarely outside. Taking their remarks on great men (since few things reveal optimism or pessimism so clearly as one's attitude to the great) we shall find that they give us valuable insight into the characters of the two men, but only in the case of Flamineo any hint as to the position taken up by Webster himself. One of the outstanding features of Lodovico's character is his lack of insight into other's characters and motives, and his rather remarkable lack of practical intelligence and imagination. This is clearly revealed in the first scene of the play, indeed in the first word. He never attempts to refute the accusations that Antonelli and Gasparo bring against him - yet he finds it impossible to understand how he could have been sentenced to banishment, he sees nothing but the most bewildering injustice in the way he has been treated. In this scene he attacks great men for their cruelty and injustice, to be mildly reprehended by his two friends for doing so. But the most telling incident, so far as his attitude to great men is concerned is his falling so easy a victim to Francesco's simple stratagem, and in being so easily persuaded that the Cardinal, by a present of gold, wishes to assure him of his secret sympathy and encouragement in the crime he is about to commit. The attack on great men which immediately follows is thus almost comically ironic.

O the art,

The modest form of greatness! that do sit,
 Like brides at wedding-dinners, with their looks turned
 From the least wanton jest, their puling stomach
 Sick of the modesty, when their thoughts are loose,
 Even acting of those hot and lustful sports
 Are to ensue about midnight: such his cunning:

He sounds my depth thus with a golden plummet.
 I am doubly arm'd now. Now to the act of blood.
 There's but three Furies found in spacious hell,
 But in a great man's breast three thousand dwell. (IV, iii, 145-155)

Here we have the ridiculous situation of a man so cynical and intent on seeing evil everywhere that he is easily tricked into believing the Cardinal a hypocrite. If we are to interpret correctly Lodovico's judgments on great men or indeed on any aspect of morality or society, it must be as indices to Lodovico's character and certainly not as *sententiae* revealing anything of Webster's own attitudes and beliefs. Flamineo's observations must, on the other hand, be given much more serious consideration as they contain more than a little universal validity. Flamineo differs from Lodovico in nothing so much as in the power of his intelligence and the keenness of his insight into other's characters and motives for action. Lodovico's sense of grievance dulls his intelligence and insight; Flamineo's mean ambition serves to sharpen his. His understanding of character is keen and shrewd, his judgments are based on clear-sighted observation and an only too lucid insight into the seamier side of human nature.

Fie, fie, my lord,
 Women are caught as you take tortoises,
 She must be turned on her back. (IV, II, 153-5)

This statement is absolutely typical of Flamineo's '*sententiae*', and of those of all the 'melancholy' character's of Jacobean drama. It is a statement almost universally true, a statement that shocks one into perceiving a valuable even though only a partial truth, but one to which there are, of course, notable exceptions - exceptions which are far more important than the norm. Flamineo's remarks concerning great men are, however, more worthy of credence and more likely to reflect the opinions of the author since, whereas the remark on women is intended not so much as a reasoned judgment as a piece of advice to Brachiano on how to behave towards Vittoria, his remarks concerning great men are made on the death of Brachiano, on the collapse of all his hopes and the failure of all his schemes and intrigues, a moment when Jacobean villains are permitted to have a glimpse of the truths that they have ignored.

To see what solitariness is about dying princes! as heretofore they have unpeopled towns, divorced friends, and made great houses un hospitable, so now, O justice! where are their flatterers now? Flatterers are but the shadows of princes' bodies; the least thick cloud makes them invisible..... He was a kind of statesman that would sooner have reckoned how many cannon bullets he had discharged against

a town, to count his expense that way, than how many of his valiant and deserving subjects he lost before it.

Francisco. Oh, speak well of the duke.

Flamimeo. I have done. Wilt hear some of my court-wisdom? To reprehend princes is dangerous and to over-commend some of them is palpable lying. (V, iii, 42-67)

There is no suggestion that all princes are bad. In fact it is all but explicitly stated that some are good and virtuous. This opinion is also more than implied in the closing aphorism of the conjurer:

Both flowers and weeds spring when the sun is warm,
And great men do great good or else great harm. (II, ii, 55-6)

That power for good as well as for evil lies in the hands of great men acquits Webster of any possible charge of unalleviated pessimism as far as the body politic is concerned, and his continually emphasising, both in the sententiae and in the action of the play, that vice and sin and selfish irresponsibility on the part of a ruler brings ruin and destruction in its wake lends his whole outlook an undeniably optimistic colouring. That great men can put their virtue into action and so bring order and justice to the countries under them frees Webster not only from the charge of pessimism but also from that of fatalism and determinism. It would indeed be strange for a fatalist to lay so much emphasis on the virtue of the young Giovanni and to depart from the historical truth in order to make him the instrument of justice at the end of the play, thus making quite clear his belief in the efficacy of individual character and effort.

It would seem, therefore, that there is little reason or justification for suggesting that Webster's outlook, conscious or unconscious, can be identified with the outlook of a Flamimeo, a Lodovico or a Brachiano. I should suggest, on the contrary, that *The White Devil* is at once a psychological drama and a morality play, in which the psychological studies are set against a background of the most orthodox and conventional morality, and an attitude to life which differs little if at all from that which had been held by a typical Elizabethan such as Sir Philip Sidney, and in which the sentences are designed to inculcate the moral truth, exemplified by the play itself, that uninhibited lust brings murder and ruin and remorse in its train, that vice brings its own punishment and virtue its own reward. In this play the author sets out to demonstrate the terrible effects of lust and unbridled passion as well as to analyse psychologically various forms of perversion and despair. There is nothing to suggest that the characters are ever considered as anything but horrifying exceptions to the general rule - exceptions even in the immoral and irreligious

Italy of their birth. If one's own outlook on life happens to find adequate expression in the sentiments of a Vittoria or a Lodovico, a Brachiano or a Flaimeo, one should at least refrain from crediting Webster with the same attitudes. If these outrageous sentiments are taken as being the truth as Webster saw it then we transform a beautifully constructed, clearly conceived drama into a bewildering skein of contradictions, ambiguities, 'tensions' and unconscious meanings. A Jacobean audience must certainly have seen Vittoria's 'noble and resolute' end as the shocking and horrifying end in store for the unrepentant sinner and atheist, and I can see no reason for supposing that that was not also the view of the author.

Critics are almost unanimous in perceiving a falling-off in the author's powers as we pass from *The White Devil* to *The Duchess of Malfi*. The poetry is less beautiful, the imagery less striking and original, the characters less clearly and boldly drawn, the construction of the play less sure. Yet in many ways it is the more interesting and even the more fascinating play, and one which, I think, gives one more food for thought and to which one turns more readily than *The White Devil*. Although the characters may seem less firmly drawn a further acquaintance with the play reveals this as the sign of a psychological curiosity and insight far in advance of that displayed in *The White Devil*. The characters of Bosola and the Duchess are far more complex and life-like than any of the characters in the preceding play. As for the moral attitude, the values accepted by the author as the bases of his thought and the ethical foundation of his morality play (for this play is just as much a morality as *The White Devil*) remain constant. The point of interest has, however, shifted. In *The White Devil* the author was concerned with the effects of lust and unbridled appetite. In *The Duchess of Malfi* he is concerned with the more complex and subtle theme of integrity.

Integrity of life is fame's best friend,

Which nobly beyond death, shall crown the end. (V, v, 145-6)

In *The Duchess of Malfi* all the principal characters, the Duchess herself, Antonio, Bosola, Ferdinand, the Cardinal, even the waiting-maid Cariola, are all examples of a lack of true integrity, an inability to see themselves truly and clearly, an inability to perceive the difference between what they are, what they pretend to be, and what they imagine themselves to be. They all lack one of the essential characteristics of integrity—the courage to face up to their own character and their own position in society, thus achieving true self-knowledge and a sense of responsibility and duty. In Ferdinand this

flaw takes the form of the extraordinary contradiction between his insane jealousy of his sister's honour and his own vicious, vulgar, debauched and brutal character. The cold Machiavellianism of the Cardinal is a more obvious manifestation of a lack of integrity consisting as it does in maze of lies and hypocrisy - a maze in which he finally finds his own ruin. Antonio is clear-sighted, reasonable and honest, both as regards himself and his own position, and as regards the people around him. His lack of integrity takes the form of a certain weakness of character which prevents him from acting with the same truth and frankness that we find in his thought and observation, and leads him into the devious paths of deceit and shame. This weakness of character in Antonio is all the more striking when seen against the background of his true and manly virtues and ideals. We feel that there is no trace of vain-glory but only an honest appraisalment of his own worth in his declaration to the Duchess:

Were there nor heaven
Nor hell, I should be honest: I have long serv'd virtue,
And ne'er ta'en wages of her. (I, i, 503-505)

The degradation into which Antonio is dragged by the split between his ideals and his actions is strikingly symbolised by his appealing to truth at the very moment that he is entering upon a course of secrecy and hypocrisy.

Truth speak for me;
I will remain the constant sanctuary
Of your good name. (I, i, 526-8)

This lack of integrity brings about a tragic decline in Antonio's character. Nothing could point the pernicious nature of the disease that is eating at his soul more clearly than the contrast between the Antonio of the above quotations and the Antonio of Act III, who seems quite cheerfully prepared to accept the fact that the Duchess is popularly regarded as a strumpet and himself as a dishonest and corrupt parasite provided that their lives are safe. From a noble and honest courtier he dwindles into an ineffective and insignificant hanger-on at court.

None of these characters, however, have the absorbing psychological interest of Bosola, another study in lack of integrity and one of the most fascinating characters in Jacobean drama. In him Webster has incorporated features of both Flamineo and Lodovico and has thus produced a man who may lack the bold and effective outlines of these characters but who has infinitely more complexity and, I

think it may be argued, even more truth to life. Almost incomprehensible in his extraordinary contradictions and vacillations he is a brilliant example of Webster's ability to trace the terrible results of a despair that takes the form of self-pity and self-contempt: a weak man with no very strong or stable moral principles he has nevertheless a sincere respect for virtue and a sincere pity for the innocent and the weak in their sufferings, yet he is driven by the sense of defiance and revolt that springs from his self-contempt to indulge in cruelties of the most diabolical and unspeakable and calculated sadism against that Duchess that he admires and pities. Yet even his self-contempt is not courageously faced but is rather a secret and malignant tumour hidden under a bitter sense of grievance.

But the real tragedy of a lack of integrity rests in the portrait of the Duchess herself. If Antonio fails through weakness, the Duchess fails through an almost deliberate blindness. She refuses to face either the true nature of her actions or their inevitable consequences. In marrying Antonio she flouts the desires of her brothers, contravenes the conventions of her society, rejects the responsibilities of a Duchess and defies the Church of God. Yet she clings to her brothers' friendship, has an exaggerated regard for her own reputation and good name, demands the respect due to a Duchess, and appeals to God and to heaven. All these contradictions spring essentially from a lack of integrity, an inability, or rather a refusal, to look courageously and honestly at herself, her character and her actions, a wishful blindness to the incompatibility of her duties and her desires. "I am blind", she declares to Antonio, and Cariola asks her if she sleeps "Like a madman, with your eyes open." Webster's Duchess degenerates from the noble and virtuous aristocratic lady portrayed by Antonio in the opening scene into the fallen woman, whom the common rabble call a strumpet, of the later sections of the play, still clinging pathetically to the illusion that her reputation is safe, her good name unspotted, her position as a Duchess still worthy of respect. Webster traces the course of this degeneration in a bold and effective manner. Her greedy gorging of the apricots in Act II reveals in the most striking fashion how the 'spirit of greatness and of woman in her' has degenerated into tetchiness and mere sensual indulgence. The light-hearted badinage in Act III scene ii, which would be charming set against a background of frank and passionate love, is almost disgusting when played against a background of mean hypocrisy and deceit. In the same scene she saves her husband's life by destroying his reputation and good name and proclaiming him a thief and a scoundrel. And so, as the play progresses, the miserable couple have recourse to more and more

shameful ways of avoiding shame. The Duchess descends deeper and deeper into the pit of despair and dishonour without ever succeeding, without, indeed, even attempting, to come to terms with herself or with life. Perhaps the most bitter irony in a play built upon irony is the Duchess' declaration to Bosola, 'I am Duchess of Malfi still'. She has forfeited all right to respect as a ruler, and as a woman, yet she peevishly and vainly attempts to demand respect from the villainous Bosola. But her flaw rests in a lack of integrity and not in actual sin, so that in spite of her degeneration she retains much of the essential virtue and nobility of her character to the end, however tormented, petulant and hysterical she may become. Her last commands respecting her children show that she has not forfeited all right to be respected as a mother, and she meets death with fortitude far truer and more dignified than the defiance of a Vittoria. Nothing reveals the characters of the personages in Webster's plays so significantly as their deaths, and it is most revealing that of all his principal characters only Isabella in *The White Devil* and the Duchess in *The Duchess of Malfi* have faith in heaven. Antonio's mind remains in this world, he has no faith in anything beyond the present life and all he can hope to acquire is a kind of Stoic fortitude. As for the other characters their minds are far from heaven, and they die in a defiant or a resigned despair. Only the Duchess turns to heaven in quiet confidence. And yet, even here, I feel, it is not so much a passionate and redeeming faith as mere orthodox piety. Her belief is sincere but it is not strong enough to transform her. Heaven is no more than her last refuge when her world falls in ruins about her. Death is to 'serve as mandragora to make her sleep.' On her reviving for a few moments she calls first on her lover and then for mercy, a pathetic rather than an inspiring end.

With the pathetic horror of this death we reach the end of Act IV. Webster has often been criticised for having dragged the play on through another act. It cannot be denied that this does constitute a superficial weakness in the play, although one not nearly so striking on the stage as in the study since the final scenes are theatrically most effective. Moreover the fifth act appears an unnecessary appendix only if we concentrate all our interest on the story of the Duchess and forget that the play is partly a psychological analysis of various forms of despair and lack of integrity, partly a morality play demonstrating the terrible results of these weaknesses in various individuals. Up to the end of the fourth act the Duchess has been the centre of interest, but after her death the various other forces at work in the other characters are shown working their authors' ruin. The means by which

each is brought to destruction are both psychologically true and morally edifying. The vicious, turbulent Fredinand through bestial madness, the cold, Machiavellian Cardinal through over-cunning, Bosola by the man whose vices he had served and in an attempt to redeem, too late, his past crimes, Antonio in facing up to the danger that he ought to have faced years before. The fifth act is, thus, devoted to showing the effects on the mind of a lack of integrity, and also to proving Webster's thesis that sin is its own punishment and brings in its train the inevitable consequences of perplexity, despair and death.

It has been pointed out that there is no sense of redemption in a Websterian tragedy, and this has been taken as an indication of the depth of his despair and pessimism. But redemption is a mystical state to which only those may attain who have passed through utter despondency and despair, who have lost faith irrecoverably in all the intellectual and rational categories that give a meaning and a purpose to life. Such a man must have recourse to something beyond mere reason and the intellect, and finds salvation in the absurdity of faith. That there is no redemption in Webster does not testify to a lack of faith and hope, but merely to an absence of despair and despondency. A writer with so unquestioning an acceptance of the conventional social, moral and religious standards has no need whatsoever of a mystical faith. In a note to *The Duchess of Malfi* Lucas quotes a passage from the *Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia* in which the original of two of Webster's most pessimistic statements are to be found.

In such a shadowe, or rather pit of darkeness, the *wormish* mankinde lives, that neither they knowe how to foresee, nor what to feare: and are like tennisbals, tossed by the racket of the hyer powers."⁹ No one would dream of suggesting that Sidney conceived a world of utter corruption in which goodness and virtue is simply unimaginable, and there seems to me to be as little reason for suggesting that Webster did so. The pessimistic statements generally quoted to demonstrate the darkness of Webster's outlook are usually to be found in the mouths of evil or sinning characters. They are psychologically true in so far as they represent the outlook of such a character, and they are morally edifying in so far as they present to the audience a shocking and terrifying picture of the world in which sinners and atheists live, but they rarely put forward what Webster or any normal Jacobean could possibly have regarded as an acceptable picture of life and

⁹ *The Works of John Webster* ed. Lucas Vol. I, p. 112.

the world. Sometimes such statements are placed in the mouths of 'melancholy' characters such as Bosola or Flamineo, and these may truly represent the authors sentiments, and act as a kind of chorus to the drama. Such are the remarks on women, on sex, on the court, on bodily corruption and the omnipotence of the passions. Such remarks are quite capable of bringing down in ruins the conventional and facile optimism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but the tougher and firmer faith of the Renaissance, based on the double foundations of humanism and religion, thus combining the classical respect for man and the created world with the religious concepts of the Fall, original sin and grace, was able to withstand much stronger blows. The Elizabethan could attack a woman for painting, and at the same time accept as normal that she should look for 'the face she had before the world was made'. He could turn with revulsion from the act of sex and all the functions of the body, yet respect the sacred bond of marriage and the equally holy ties between parents and children. The terms optimist and pessimist are not really applicable to men of that period, since either word implies a limiting of experience, a tendency to look at the world from a certain point of view and a tendency to close one eyes to certain aspects of life. Whether idealist or realist, and the Elizabethans and Jacobeans were usually both idealist and realist at one and the same time, they looked at life much more objectively and fearlessly than has been customary since the eighteenth century. A certain number of the Jacobeans were attracted by the gloomier aspects of life, but because writers such as Webster displayed brilliant psychological insight into the various forms of despair and an unforgettable power of imagination in bringing these to life through the medium of dialogue, sentiments, imagery, action and stage-setting, there is nothing in this to prove that Webster shared these sentiments with his characters. Nor is there any reason for accepting Ellis-Fermor's attractive and poetic conceit that Webster, from his pit of darkness, could perceive, now and again, the 'stars' that 'shine still'. This is justified neither by Webster's general outlook nor by the quotation so rudely dragged from its context and so anachronistically interpreted. The allusion is to a remark made by Bosola in answer to the Duchess' wild curses.

Duchess.

I'll go pray; -

No, I'll go curse.

Bosola.

Oh, fie!

Duchess.

I could curse the stars -

Bosola. Oh, fearful!

Duchess. And those three smiling seasons of the year

Into a Russian winter: nay, the world
To its first chaos.

Bosola. Look you, the stars shine still.

Duchess.

Oh, but you must

Remember, my curse hath a great way to go. (IV, i, 121-3)

Bosola's 'The stars shine still', far from revealing mystical faith and serenity only emphasis the utter vanity of the Duchess' defiance and despair. As a matter of fact 'the stars shine still' could suggest mystical serenity only to generations brought up on romantic emotional nature symbolism. To a Jacobean they would be the ornaments spangling the black weed of night, or influences guiding the destinies of men. It is surely obvious that Bosola's remark is meant to emphasise the impotence of the Duchess' rage, and the senselessness of all revolt against ineluctable fate.

Marlowe has been indicated as the dramatic predecessor of the Jacobean playwrights in general and of Webster in particular because of the influence of Machiavelli on his conception of life and morality. Even a desultory comparison of Marlowe and Webster, however, should serve to underline what we have been attempting to prove - that there is nothing unconventional or revolutionary in Webster's outlook. Whereas Marlowe's whole attitude towards the world is strongly affected by the teaching of Machiavelli and by Machiavelianism, Machiavelli's influence on Webster seems to me to be confined to the portrayal of certain characters, and does not affect his general outlook. If we compare *Edward II* with *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*, one cannot but be struck by the very great contrast between the two playwrights. In Webster there is no doubt as to what is good and what is bad, the distinction between good and evil is clear-cut. In *The White Devil* we have some obviously vicious characters, and others as obviously virtuous. In *The Duchess of Malfi*, since the author is concerned not so much with the simple conceptions of vice and virtue as with the more ambiguous quality of lack of integrity, and the characters of Antonio, the Duchess and even Bosola are a complex of virtues and vices, virtues and failings, there is not the same obvious distinction between good and evil characters, but there is an equally clear distinction between good and evil, a distinction no less clear because left largely implicit. In *Edward II*, however, there is no such definite moral background. One may set aside the Queen as an adulterous vixen, Mortimer as a ruthless usurper, the nobles as a set of brutes and only Kent and the young prince as virtuous characters, but what is one to make of the King, of Gaveston, of Spencer and Baldock? Edward is portrayed as a despicably weak

and contemptible effeminate and hedonist, Gaveston as a vindictive and scheming pervert, Spencer and Baldock as ambitious, cynical and unscrupulous Machiavellians. And yet it is in these degenerate and vicious characters that one finds a real capacity for loyalty and love. That he should depict love as proliferating in such a dunghill is of the greatest significance for a true understanding of Marlowe's thought. For the moment, however, I shall rest content in indicating the vast difference between Marlowe's outlook and Webster's — the latter's resting firmly on rational categories such as virtue, justice, integrity, the latter's resting rather vaguely on emotional concepts such as love, loyalty and innocency. In portraying a Machiavellian character such as Mortimer Marlowe was indeed the predecessor of Webster (and of almost all the Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists), but in his pessimism and cynicism coupled with faith in love and loyalty as redeeming characteristics Marlowe is obviously much closer to Shakespeare than to Webster, and has progressed far beyond Webster's comparatively naive and unquestioning outlook.

Some poets, such as Shakespeare, approach the world directly and imaginatively, and convey their conception of life in the form of characters and symbols that shadow forth reality as they themselves perceive it. Others accept a conventional world-view, and against this accepted pattern weave their own particular embroideries. In the case of the play-wright this may mean accepting a world-view which has already been crystallised into intellectual dogmas and rational principles, and portraying against this the characters, sentiments and actions of men. The first takes man as a glass through which to portray the world and reality; the second takes the analysis and creation of character, and the pointing of the accepted codes of morality as an end in itself. Webster belongs to the second category, and any attempt to force him into the first merely serves to obscure the moral purport of the play and dull the brilliance of the psychological analysis.

Adair Mill