

“MASCULINE VERTUE” AS A FEMALE VIRTUE: A STUDY OF *THE WHITE DEVIL*

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[Women] are vngratefull, periured, full of fraud, flouting and deceit, vnconstant, waspish, toyish, light, sullen, proud, discourteous and cruell, and yet they were by God created, and by nature formed, and therefore by policy and wisdom to be auoyded. . . .

(Joseph Swetnam, *The Araignment Of Lewd, Idle, Froward, and vnconstant women*, Sig. C4v)

Although even earlier dates have been suggested by various critics,¹ John Russell Brown makes a convincing case for dating the first performance of *The White Devil* in early 1612.² Since Webster himself admitted in his address to the reader that he was a slow worker, taking “a long time in finishing this Tragedy” (25),³ he must have been working on his first independent play for some time around the turn of the decade. This period coincides with the time in which women’s self-asserting acts began to draw attention as threatening forces in Jacobean society.

In Tudor times, under the influence of the Renaissance emancipation and enthusiasm for learning, the daughters of aristocrats were often given much the same education as the sons. Despite occasional protests against the cultivation of woman’s mind, most writers seemed to appreciate intelligent women and to accept learning for women as a good

1. See E. K. Chambers, *Elizabethan Stage*, 4 vols (Oxford, 1967), vol. III, pp. 509-10.

2. *The White Devil*, ed. John Russell Brown (The Revels Plays, 1968), pp. xx-xxii; John Russell Brown, ‘The Dating of Webster’s *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*’, *Philological Quarterly*, 31 (1952), pp. 353-58.

3. All quotations from Webster are taken from *The Works of John Webster*, ed. F. L. Lucas, 4 vols (1927; rptd. New York, 1966).

thing.¹ Consequently, the Tudor age saw a number of learned and highly individualistic ladies, such as Margaret Roper, Lady Jane Grey, Sir Anthony Cooke's three daughters, and, most important of all, Queen Elizabeth I. But when the brilliant queen was succeeded by King James I, who disliked women, especially those with intelligence and independent minds, there was a reaction against the intellectual development of women and their self-assertion. Even though the king's aversion to women sprang from his personal inclination, it resulted in reinforcing the antifeminist climate of the time.² Yet, ironically, one of the characteristic aspects of King James' reign was the many court scandals caused by aggressively self-assertive noble ladies.

1. The court scandals in the early Jacobean period

One couple which created a grave scandal at Court at the beginning of King James' reign were Lady Penelope Rich and Lord Mountjoy, the Earl of Devonshire. When Lady Rich, Essex's sister and Sidney's Stella, was married against her will in 1581, she may already have pledged herself to Charles Blount.³ Her marriage was a typical Elizabethan arranged marriage, intended to recoup the fortune of the impoverished Essex family through the tie with the richly endowed young lord. By 1590 her adultery with Charles Blount seems to have been publicly known.⁴ By 1597 she had borne five bastards by Charles, though still going back to her husband occasionally.⁵ After Essex's death in 1601, Lady Rich virtually separated from her husband and lived with Charles Blount openly. The king and queen connived at

1. See Ruth Kelso, *Doctrine for the Lady of the Renaissance* (Urbana, 1956); Katherine Rogers, *The Troublesome Helpmate: A History of Misogyny in Literature* (Seattle, 1966), p. 129.

2. Rogers, p. 131.

3. C. B. Falls, *Mountjoy: Elizabethan General* (1954), p. 58.

4. In *Polyhymnia*, written for the occasion of the tilt on Accession Day in 1590, George Peele described Charles Blount playing with the name Rich. See also *ibid.*, pp. 62-3.

5. On the life of Lady Rich, see M. S. Rawson, *Penelope Rich and Her Circle* (1911).

their illicit relation, receiving them at Court with the highest honour. In 1605, Lord Rich, apparently tired of his false position, obtained a divorce and remarried. On 26 December 1605, William Laud, the Earl's chaplain, celebrated a private marriage between Lady Penelope and Blount at the Earl's country house in Wanstead. Since this marriage was against canon law, it offended both the king and queen, and the Earl and Countess were forbidden from Court. The legality of Laud's act was questioned, and his preferment in the Church was much delayed as a result. Probably none of them could have expected such a storm of indignation in their making legitimate such a long-lived tie. The Earl tried to justify his marriage to the king in a tract,¹ but the royal favour was never restored. In the event, neither of the couple long survived their disgrace. On 3 April 1606, the Earl died at Savoy House in the Strand, and his Countess did not outlive him many months.

This brilliant couple lived in Webster's neighbourhood; while the Earl of Devonshire had at one time a house in Holborn, Lord Rich's London residence was within the priory of St Bartholomew. M. C. Bradbrook suggests that, for the characterization of the Duchess of Malfi, Webster may have been inspired by the independent-minded Lady Rich.² However, her bold flouting of the institution of marriage also recalls that of Vittoria; the king told the Earl that he had married "a fair woman with a black soul".³ Beauty and charm were constant attributes of Lady Rich, perpetuated by Sidney's pen, and her love of literature was well-known. John Florio dedicated Book II of his translation of Montaigne's *Essays* to her and the Countess of Rutland. Both Lady Rich and the Earl of Devonshire were particularly fond of plays; at one party they stayed till the early hours of the morning watching two plays.⁴ According to Fynes Moryson, author

1. M. C. Bradbrook, *John Webster: Citizen and Dramatist* (1980), p. 65.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 68.

3. 'Aulicus Coquinariae', *Secret History of the Court of James the first*, ed. Walter Scott, 2 vols (Edinburgh, 1811), vol. II, pp. 200-201.

4. Falls, p. 64.

of *Itinerary* and secretary to the Earl, the latter kept a Shakespearean wise fool on his estate.¹ At Wanstead he built a fine library containing playbooks for recreation. In the production of Ben Jonson's *The Masque of Blacknesse* at Whitehall on Twelfth Night 1605, Lady Rich was one of the twelve black nymphs, together with the queen and other powerful noble ladies, such as the Countesses of Suffolk, Derby, and Bedford. Her strong personality, with its masculine determination, was demonstrated particularly in her great influence upon her brother Essex. The fact that this glorious pair, embodiments of the Renaissance values in many respects, though living a life which violated the absolute moral standard of the time, had their breach long overlooked at Court, must have suggested to a sensitive mind a different perspective on the illicit relationship than the Homiletic condemnation of "the outrageous sea of adultery."²

The public reaction to the couple's marriage, however, was unanimously severe, reflecting the rage of the king and queen. For instance, Chamberlain's letter, dated 5 April 1606, reports to Winwood the Earl's death thus:

The earle of Devonshire left this life on Thursday night last, soone and early for his yeares but late enough for himself, and happy had ben yf he had gon two or three yeares since, before the world was wearie of him, or that he had left that scandall behinde him.³

In contrast to this attitude, the young John Ford celebrated their romantic relation in *Fames Memoriall, or the Earle of Deuonshire Deceased* (1606), an elegy published soon after the Earl's death. He prefixed to his dedication to Lady Penelope the title of the Countess of Devonshire, a title which was officially denied to her at the time.⁴ Perhaps

1. *Shakespeare's Europe: Fynes Moryson's Itinerary (1617)*, with an introduction and an account of Fynes Moryson's career by Charles Hughes (1903; rptd. New York, 1967), p. xxxiv.

2. "The Two Books of Homilies appointed to be read in Churches" (1547: 1599; issued as one book 1623), *Certain Sermons* (1850), p. 118.

3. *The Letters of John Chamberlain*, ed. N. E. McClure, 2 vols (Philadelphia, 1939), vol. I, p. 226.

4. The Earl's funeral was performed with great pomp, but the herald declined to impale the Countess' arms with the Earl's. See *D.N.B.*, vol. 5 (1886), p. 243.

realizing, though, that this dedication would attract criticism, Ford defended his attitude by concluding his address to the readers with the words, "I striue not to please many" (Sig. A 3v).

Another great scandal which stirred Londoners at the time was raised by the king's first cousin, Lady Arabella Stuart. Her relationship with the king, as well as the late queen, had always been precarious, because she stood next to the English throne after the king and his children.¹ On 2 February 1610, Lady Arabella was actually engaged to William Seymour, whose descent from the Suffolk line made him especially disagreeable to the king as her consort.² When Lady Arabella and Lord Seymour were subsequently summoned before the Privy Council, they declared that they would never marry without the king's permission. On 22 June 1610, however, they were secretly married, and this marriage was soon discovered. On 9 July, Lady Arabella was committed to the custody of Sir Thomas Parry, while her husband was sent to the Tower. On 13 March 1611, she was placed under the charge of the Bishop of Durham, but through various excuses she just managed to avoid being taken away to Durham. On 4 June in the same year, she escaped, disguised as a page, boarded a French vessel in the Thames, and sailed for Calais. She was captured in the Straits of Dover, brought back, and imprisoned in the Tower. In the meantime, William Seymour succeeded in escaping from the Tower, landing at Ostend. In 1613, rumours spread that her husband was dead and that she was distracted.³

1. On the life of Lady Arabella, see Elizabeth Cooper, *Life and Letters Of Lady Arabella Stuart* (1866); Ian McInnes, *Arabella: The Life and Times of Lady Arabella Seymour 1575-1615* (1968); David N. Durant, *Arabella Stuart: A Rival to the Queen* (1978); *D.N.B.*, vol. 2 (1885), p. 53.
2. William Seymour was a grandson of Catherin Grey, a stepdaughter of the Duchess of Suffolk, whose life seems to have inspired Webster in his characterization of the Duchess of Malfi. Catherine Grey was sister to Lady Jane Grey, on whose life Webster's earlier collaborative work, *Lady Jane*, had been based.
3. For rumours of Lord Seymour's death, see Chamberlain's letters of 11 March 1613 (vol. I, p. 437); 9 September 1613 (vol. I, p. 476); 7 July 1614 (vol. I, pp. 546-47). For those of Lady Arabella's distraction, see Chamberlain's letters of 29 April 1613 (vol. I, p. 443); 9 September 1613 (vol. I, p. 476); 7 July 1614 (vol. I, pp. 546-47).

On 25 September 1615, she died in the Tower, reputedly by starving herself to death.

While Webster was writing *The White Devil*, Londoners must have experienced great excitement over Lady Arabella's disastrous career. The latter part of her tragedy—the false rumours of her husband's death, her distraction, and her death while imprisoned—remind us of the Duchess of Malfi's ordeals. Since Webster's tragedy was written earlier, the parallel offers a curious example of real life imitating art, but Lady Arabella's long-continued defiant attitude toward authority also resembles Vittoria's defiance of authority, as is magnificently displayed in the trial scene. Flamineo's suggestion to Brachiano that they should escape to Padua by dressing Vittoria "in a Pages suit" (IV. 2. 215), though such a disguise is a common device in contemporary drama, may even have reminded some of the original audience of Lady Arabella's recent unfortunate attempt to escape.

Webster's original audience witnessed yet another embodiment of female defiance. This was Mary Countess of Shrewsbury, who was Lady Arabella's aunt and a daughter of the celebrated Bess of Hardwick. She was committed to the Tower in 1610 on the charge of acquiescing in Lady Arabella's marriage. Her wilfulness and defiance before authority were commonly known at the time.¹

Though not so scandalous in behaviour as the preceding ladies, Lady Anne Clifford is another prominent woman with much learning and independence of mind, whose self-asserting acts greatly annoyed King James during this period. Since the death of her father, third Earl of Cumberland, in October 1605, she had been constantly fighting against her uncle, fourth Earl of Cumberland, and his son, over the family estates in the north. After her marriage to Richard Sackville, Earl of Dorset, in 1609, her battle was fought also against her husband, who

1. Chamberlain writes in his letter of 12 February 1612:

The Lady Shrewsberie is still in the Towre rather upon wilfulnes, then upon any great matter she is charged withall: only the King is resolute that she shall aunswer to certain interrogatories, and she is as obstinate to make none, nor to be examined. (Vol. I, p. 334.)

See also Chamberlain's letter of 12 July 1612 (vol. I, p. 364).

urged her, in order to pay his debts, to forsake her claims in favour of a money settlement. Although she was frequently at Court and was a favourite with the queen, the king and many influential lords took sides with her husband; they repeatedly rebuked her insubordination to her husband.¹ Her feelings of frustration are betrayed in her diary,² but she never gave way to the pressure exerted by these great men. Finally, in 1643, after the deaths of her uncle and his son, she inherited all the estates, where she lived until her death. Like the Countess of Shrewsbury, Lady Anne Clifford became to her contemporaries a by-word for female obstinacy.³

Jacobean moralists repeatedly preached against female wilfulness, but the wilfulness demonstrated by these women points to a possible virtue in women's self-assertion. Their acts, though condemnable by contemporary moral standards, prove human integrity in the courageous pursuit of truth to oneself, which, in Webster's terms, "masculine virtue". On the other hand, Jacobean people witnessed the purely dire consequences of female self-assertion, which the moralists had warned against, in the Countess of Essex's involvement in the murder of Sir Thomas Overbury, the most scandalous incident in the reign of King James.⁴ In December 1605 Frances Howard, daughter of Thomas Howard, first Earl of Suffolk, was married to Robert Devereux, third Earl of Essex. Soon after their marriage, the Earl was sent on the grand tour of the Continent, leaving his beautiful young wife with her parents at Court. During his absence, she was attracted by Robert Carr, the king's favourite, and even after her husband's return in 1610,

1. *The Diary of the Lady Anne Clifford*, ed. V. Sackville-West (1923); George C. Williamson, *Life of Lady Anne Clifford, Countess of Dorset, Pembroke and Montgomery* (1922).

2. *Ibid.*

3. She even refused to acknowledge the king's decision in July 1617 which confirmed her uncle in possession of the estates, awarding her husband £20,000 compensation. Her image as exemplifying female obstinacy was even reinforced in her last years when she indignantly refused Cromwell's offer of help.

4. For the murder case of Sir Thomas Overbury, see William McElwee, *The Murder of Sir Thomas Overbury* (1952); Beatrice White, *Cast of Ravens* (1965).

their intimacy continued. While Webster was working on *The White Devil*, the Countess had not yet publicly proceeded in her attempt to obtain a divorce from her husband, nor had the Howards started their plot to poison Sir Thomas Overbury, who bitterly opposed the marriage between his master, Robert Carr, and the Countess.¹ By 1612, however, rumours of the Countess' improprieties seem to have been widely circulated at Court.² Webster's family business was coachmaking,³ and so he must have been familiar with rumours at Court through his association with his gentlemen customers. Therefore, it is quite likely that, when writing *The White Devil*, Webster had knowledge of the Countess of Essex' adultery with the most powerful courtier of the time.⁴

2. Vittoria as the popular image of a bad woman

Webster's motive for choosing Italian recent history for the subject of his first work of sole authority is not known, nor has any source been identified as that Webster drew on in writing his play. Yet whatever version of the story of Vittoria Accoramboni he happened to know, it must have impressed the dramatist as material containing ample elements that would interest his audience. Even the barest outline of the affair offers the kinds of episodes which would suit the Jacobean image of bloody, corrupt Italy. Especially, Vittoria, one of the central

1. In April 1613, on refusing to accept the king's diplomatic appointment, Sir Thomas Overbury had been committed to the Tower, where he was poisoned and died on 15 September 1613. The official procedure to obtain the Countess' divorce started in May 1613.

2. In *The Narrative History of King James, for the first fourteen Years* (1615), the scandal is described as follows: "almost all men spake of the looseness of her carriage, and wonders that the *Earle* will suffer these courses in her" (p. 10): "since it was so that the world took notice of their loosenesse, now to make some satisfaction, they would consummate a *wedding* between them" (p. 31). Anthony Weldon also writes in *The Court and Character of King James* (1650) that "the world took notice they two long had lived in Adultery" (pp. 79-80).

3. Bradbrook, *John Webster*, pp. 9-28.

4. Webster's interest in Robert Carr is shown in his dedicating *Monumental Column* (1612), an elegy on Prince Henry, to this courtier.

figures of the affair, must have stirred Jacobean people's curiosity, since she affords a perfect example of a bad woman as judged by their standards. She was an adulteress, whose husband, Francesco Peretti, was murdered by the order of her lover, Paulo Giordano Orsino, Duke of Brachiano. She eventually managed to marry Brachiano, thus obtaining the title of Duchess. After Brachiano's death in 1585, though, she was pursued by the relatives of his first wife, Isabella Medici, and was murdered by Lodovico Orsini in Padua in December of that same year.

Various details in Webster's play diverge from both the historical facts and the contemporary accounts of Vittoria. Gunnar Boklund's researches have shown that Webster's main source was most likely a lost Italian account on which an extant news-letter written for the Fugger banking-house was based, for this letter contains many details in common with the play.¹ The comparison of the play with the Fugger news-letter indicates Webster's conscious design to underline Vittoria's evil; departing from the story as told in the news-letter, the dramatist suggests the possibility that Vittoria might have been responsible, though indirectly, for the murders of both her husband and Isabella.

Webster's intention to portray Vittoria as an obviously bad woman is made clear when some aspects of Vittoria's personality are compared with the qualities defined as typical female evils in contemporary writings. Vittoria, for instance, fits perfectly well into the image of a bad woman presented by Joseph Swetnam in *The Araignment of Lewd, Idle, Froward and vnconstant women*, published in 1615. Although this pamphlet was published later than Webster's play, it offers an image of a bad woman that had been prevalent in society for a long time before the play was written. Swetnam's pamphlet is an amalgam of the images of bad women commonly described in the preceding popular diatribes against women, such as *The Schole House of Women* (probably by Edward

1. On possible sources of the play, see Gunnar Boklund, *The Sources of The White Devil* (Upsala, 1957).

Gosynhyl),¹ published in 1541, and Dekker's *The Bachelor's Banquet*, published in 1603. The enormous popularity of Swetnam's pamphlet also suggests a general endorsement of the images of women depicted therein,² as well as popular amusement at these images.

Swetnam recurringly states that a beautiful wife is a cause of many disasters:

There is an old saying goeth thus, that he which hath a faire wife, and a white horse shall neuer be without troubles³. (Sig. B2v)

hee that hath a faire wife and a whetstone, euery one will bee whetting thereon. . . . hee that marrieth a faire woman, euery one will wish his death to enioy her. . . . (Sig. C1r)

Certainly, the "fair wife", Vittoria, is depicted as the source of all the disasters in the play. Vittoria's beauty, provoking Brachiano's passion, leads to the murders of his wife and her husband, the fratricide of her brother, her mother's distraction, and finally to Brachiano's downfall and her own death.

Similarly, another of the targets of Swetnam's constant attack is female deceitfulness:

A woman which is faire in shew, is foule in condition: shee is like vnto a glow-worme, which is bright in the hedge, and blacke in the hand . . . the fairest woman hath some filthines in her. (Sig. C2v-3r)

The equation of a woman with the devil is frequent in Swetnam, and the gap between a woman's beautiful appearance and her ugly reality is frequently described through the contrasts between black and white,

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1. Some of Swetnam's sayings correspond with those in *The Schole House Of Women*. For instance, Swetnam's view that women "haue two faults, that they neither say well nor yet do well" (Sig. E2v) is found in *The Schole House of Women*, while women's ability to weep at will, which Swetnam harps on, is also attacked there.
 2. It went into ten editions between 1615 and 1637, and there was one each in 1690, 1702, 1707, 1733 and 1877; the Dutch translation appeared in 1641 and again in 1645.
 3. This saying was proverbial at the time: "He that has a white Horse and a fair wife neuer want trouble." Morris Palmer Tilley, H. 657, *A Dictionary of The Proverbs in England in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Ann Arbor, 1950).

and between the devil and angel:

many women are in shape Angels, but in qualities Deuils, painted coffins with rotten bones; the Estridge carrieth faire feathers, but ranck flesh: the hearb *Molio* carrieth a flowre as white as snow, but a root as blacke as inke. (Sig. E₃v-4r)

In Webster's play, to show Vittoria's evil, the same contrasts are used not only by her foes, but also by Brachiano himself. Indeed, the oxymoron of the title of the play points to such a common image of female deceitfulness.¹

Swetnam denounces any form of self-assertion by women, especially by wives. The ideal quality of a wife, Swetnam insists, is docile submission to her husband's will.² He advises young men, if they must marry, to take a wife of around seventeen years old, rather a maid than a widow, because

a young woman of tender yeares is flexible and bending, obedient and subiect to doe any thing, according to the will and pleasure of her husband. (Sig. G₃v)

Vittoria's drive for self-realisation is the core of her nature. Other people can never hold sway over her—neither her foolish husband, nor her brothers, either villainous or virtuous, nor her moralistic mother, nor even her glorious lover. Vittoria is exactly the type of self-assertive woman whom Swetnam strongly advises his young readers to avoid marrying.

The form of female self-assertiveness on which Swetnam lays special emphasis in his warning is a desire for extravagance. A beautiful woman is costly, he says, for "a Diamond hath not his grace but in gold, no more hath a faire woman her full commendations but in the ornament of her brauery" (Sig. C₁v). If a husband is not rich enough, his wife, like Vittoria, will find a lover who can satisfy her desire:

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1. However, the actual character referred to in the title is open to question. See R. W. Dent, 'The White Devil, or Vittoria Corombona?', *Renaissance Drama*, IX (1966), pp. 179-203; H. Bruce Franklin, 'The Trial Scene of Webster's *The White Devil* Examined in Terms of Renaissance Rhetoric', *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, 1 (1961), pp. 35-51.
 2. Meek subjection to the husband is highly recommended as a primary wifely virtue in contemporary writings on matrimony. See, for instance, Sir Thomas Overbury's 'The Wife'.

“It is a common thing now adayes, that fayre women without riches find more louers then husbands” (Sig. H2v).¹ These descriptions of an extravagant fair wife also correspond to the portrait of Vittoria in the play. As evidence of Brachiano’s liaison with Vittoria, Francisco asserts that “Her husband is Lord of a poore fortune / Yet she wears cloth of Tissue” (II. 1. 56–7). In the arraignment scene, Vittoria herself admits to her love of “beauty and gay clothes, a merry heart, / And a good stomacke to [a] feast” (III. 2. 216–17).

While attacking women violently, Swetnam’s pamphlet, like medieval satires, is rife with the male fear of women’s power over men. Citing from history examples of great men destroyed by women, such as David, Solomon, Samson, and Hercules, Swetnam warns against women who are conscious of their own power:

thou shalt see the power of women, how it hath beene so great, and more preuailed in bewitching mens wits, and in ouercomming their sences, then all other things whatsoever. It hath not onely vanquished Kings and Keisars, but it hath also surprised castles & countries, nay what is it that a woman cannot do, which knowes her power? (Sig. D3r-3v)

Vittoria, who is fully aware of the power of her charm over Brachiano, manipulates him, first to carry out their spouses’ murders, and then to marry her, thus finally enabling her to attain the title of Duchess. Judged from the points of view offered in Swetnam’s pamphlet, Webster’s Vittoria is indeed an epitome of “Lewd, Idle, Froward, and vnconstant women”.

3. Vittoria’s transcendence over the stereotype

Despite this image of her as a typical bad woman, and for all the unfavourable judgment passed upon her, not a few critics have found themselves attracted by Webster’s Vittoria. They find her one of the fascinating characters in Jacobean drama because of the integrity that, for all her evil acts, she maintains throughout the play.² However,

1. Zanche makes a similar statement in V. 1. 211.

2. For instance, Travis Bogard, *The Tragic Satire of John Webster* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1955), p. 57; Margot Heinemann, *Puritan and Theatre: Thomas Middleton and Opposition Drama under the Early Stuarts* (Cambridge, 1980), p. 174.

her integrity is in most cases defined simply in terms of her courage and diamond-like will. Neither Webster's method of dramatizing Vittoria's integrity, nor the significance of her self-assertion in the social context, has been discussed satisfactorily.

The most fascinating aspect of Vittoria's personality derives from Webster's method of showing her transcendence over the stereotype of a bad woman, despite the fact that she possesses their attributes. For this method, Webster was probably indebted to Shakespeare, who used the same technique in characterizing Cleopatra.¹ As Shakespeare did with Cleopatra, by deliberately portraying Vittoria as a typical bad woman Webster points out the complex reality of her womanhood which eludes contemporary assumptions about woman.

In four of the five scenes in which Vittoria appears—I. ii, III. ii, IV. ii, and V. vi—Webster employs the same technique to show her individuality. The other characters constantly apply to Vittoria common assumptions about a bad woman; by underlining the failure of these assumptions to define the complexity of her personality, Webster presents her individuality.

(A) Act I scene ii

Vittoria and Flamineo are sister and brother in a real sense; they are confronted by fundamentally the same existential problems. The drive for self-assertion is an essential part of their natures, and both of them aim at its realisation only in terms of courtly life. In their present circumstances, though, they consider themselves impotent to fulfil their ambition; Vittoria finds herself trapped in a frustrating marriage, while Flamineo is deprived of financial means because of his father's prodigality. The system of conventional morality offers them no consolation. While Vittoria finds the virtue of chaste marriage irrelevant to her, Flamineo has realized that neither laborious work at the university nor service at the court, though considered courtiers' best quali-

1. On Shakespeare's use of this technique in the characterization of Cleopatra, see Akiko Kusunoki, 'Ideal Women and Aberrant Women in Early Jacobean Plays (1603-10)', *Essays and Studies in British and American Literature*, Tokyo Woman's Christian University, 31 (1985), pp. 27-34.

fication for advancement, can provide him with preferment or wealth; such work has taught him only humiliating submission to others and how to be "More courteous, more lecherous" (I. 2. 319). For both Vittoria and Flamineo, Brachiano is an indispensable instrument for freeing them from their frustrating situations. Besides, the brother and sister need each other; Vittoria needs Flamineo as an intermediary for her liaison with Brachiano, while Vittoria is necessary for Flamineo since the Duke's infatuation with her leads him to "a path so open and so free" (I. 2. 320).

Yet such frustrating human situations are not theirs alone. The play opens with Lodovico's cry of banishment, a cry which effectively establishes the social structure of the play. Utterly devoid of any sense of guilt, Lodovico simply blames the princes' whimsical treatments of their courtiers, while his friends, Antonelli and Gasparo, under the pretence of friendly sympathy, mock him by pointing out his own faults.¹ While great men like Brachiano and Francisco can preserve their independent selves by resorting to Machiavellian intrigue, the courtiers of lower rank must compete with each other for courtly reward in order to obtain the freedom to be themselves. It is within this repressive social structure that the extremely self-asserting Vittoria and Flamineo must work out their way to self-fulfilment.

The brother and sister are, however, vitally different from each other in their attitudes in attempting to secure this freedom. Although Vittoria's long silence at her first appearance on the stage makes it difficult to follow her thoughts, it is evident from the beginning that she is a woman of independent mind. Webster ingeniously constructs the scene so that, before her appearance, her situation is fully understood by the audience. The husband of the real-life Vittoria, Francisco Perreti of history, is said to have been "a young man of comely stature and personage",² but Webster makes Camillo the familiar comic figure of an impotent old fool. While Camillo's ludicrous nature raises laughter in the audience, as Roma Gill has observed, it simultaneously

1. John Smith, 'The Tragedy of Blood', *Scrutiny*, 9 (1939), pp. 268-69.

2. *A Letter lately Written from Rome*, tr. John Florio (1585), Sig. B6r.

evokes sympathy for his wife.¹ Before meeting Brachiano, Vittoria speaks only two lines, but these are enough to indicate her boredom with her husband and her eagerness to improve her social as well as sexual fortunes. As soon as her admirer starts his confession of love, she accepts him and expresses her willingness to flout a common assumption about the virtue of female modesty (as Juliet does in the balcony scene):

Sure Sir a loathed crueltie in Ladyes
Is as to Doctors many funeralls:
It takes away their credit. (I. 2. 200-202)

She then recounts a dream so adroitly that, while her true purpose is conveniently obscure, she succeeds in drawing a picture of herself as a victim rather than an aggressor.² Whether or not she is consciously inspiring the double murder,³ her dream arouses Brachiano's protective instinct, winning his promise that she shall "Be Dukedom, health, wife, children, friends and all" (I. 2. 258). By this time, we can fully understand Vittoria as a woman of a practical nature who coolly sees realities through her own eyes and takes action on her own. Although her hidden sense of guilt later causes occasional breakdowns of emotional balance,⁴ she never effaces her self in her pursuit of self-satisfaction. Confronted by opposing forces, her spirit remains unquenched: "Through darkenesse Diamonds spred their ritcheest light" (III. 2. 305).

Flamineo too, like Vittoria, is constant in self-assertion, but whenever he faces a crisis, he seeks to preserve his individuality by effacement, through "varying of shapes" (IV. 2, 245), as when he pretends to be

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1. Roma Gill, 'Quaintly Done': A Reading of *The White Devil*, *Essays and Studies*, n.s. 19 (1966), p. 46.
 2. M. C. Bradbrook, *Themes and Conventions of Elizabethan Tragedy* (Cambridge, 1935; 4th imp. 1980), p. 188.
 3. Harold Jenkin, 'The Tragedy of Revenge in Shakespeare and Webster', *Shakespeare Survey*, 14 (1961), p. 51, sees no fabrication in her dream, which he thinks "arises in the mind unthought".
 4. These emotional breakdowns and the split in Vittoria's personality are perceptively analysed by Gill, *op. cit.*

a cynical fool or “polliticke mad-man” (III. 2. 319). In his pursuit of the freedom to be a self,¹ he loses his individuality. Until the great moment of his death, for all his callousness and cynicism, his behaviour is fundamentally conventional; he sees life only from conventional satirical viewpoints, always endorsing common assumptions about the meanness of human nature. This is nowhere clearer than in his attitude toward women, especially his sister. Until they face death, he is unable to observe in Vittoria anything but a stock figure of a lustful, ambitious woman.

Even though Flamineo’s role of a pander is to encourage Brachiano’s passion for Vittoria, his cynical view of life forces him to degrade that very passion.² He does this by falling back upon common assumptions about the worthlessness of women, most of which are taken from Montaigne.³ However, the way Flamineo presents such concepts shows his characteristic lack of individuality. Montaigne refers to such commonplaces as female lust hidden under the mask of coyness or women’s calculated behaviour to increase men’s desire, in order to question conventional assumptions about womanhood.⁴ Flamineo, on the other hand, talks about these qualities only to express his own low estimation of women. In contriving to lock Camillo in while his wife cuckolds him, Flamineo advises his brother-in law in the same manner on how to restrain female promiscuity; instead of putting his own view, he simply juxtaposes the commonplace that a woman should be restrained of her liberty (79–80), and Montaigne’s criticism of it (90–92). Flamineo’s reaction to the meeting between Brachiano and Vittoria is basically the same. His satirical comments upon their rela-

1. Bradbrook, *John Webster*, p. 119.

2. Jonathan Dollimore, *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries* (Chicago, 1984), p. 236, sees Flamineo’s repeated degradation of Vittoria’s sexuality as a manifestation of his desire to evade his own humiliation as a pander.

3. On Webster’s borrowing from Montaigne, see R. W. Dent, *John Webster’s Borrowing* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1960), pp. 78–85.

4. On Montaigne’s questioning commonplaces about womanhood, see Kusunoki, pp. 14–18.

tionship, providing the coarsest and meanest interpretation, creates a common image of a liaison between a great man and his mistress motivated by lust and ambition. Eavesdropping on Vittoria's account of her dream, he immediately connects it with a typical device of a bad woman, an instigation to the removal of obstacles, and calls her "devil".

In the audience's minds, however, Flamineo's cynical commentary leads in a different direction. The strength of Brachiano's lines in his confession of love convinces us of the sincerity of his feelings. As Roma Gill has argued, we accept the genuineness of his love because we reject the gross interpretations given it by Flamineo.¹ Although Vittoria's true feeling toward Brachiano is not known at this stage, she is at least found to transcend the images of women imposed upon her by her brother. Likewise, Cornelia's rebuke, although it greatly shocks Vittoria, cannot reduce her to the stereotype of a cursed adulteress; after observing Camillo, the audience finds it impossible to think that Vittoria can believe in the ideal of chaste marriage upheld by Cornelia. Nevertheless, the audience's reaction to Vittoria is complex and uneasy. While conscious of the inapplicability of these common assumptions to her, one cannot forget the possibility of Vittoria's instigation of the murders, as suggested by Flamineo, and of the terrifying consequences of her adultery predicted by Cornelia.

(B) Act III scene ii

Webster's emphasis on the arraignment scene is indicated in the way it is arranged in the first quarto of the play. Although this edition has no act and scene divisions, a special title, "The Araignment of Vittoria" (Sig. E2r), is prefixed to the scene. The scene itself seems like a play-within a play, with its audience not only of the theatre, but also of lieger ambassadors and other characters in the play. Thus the whole dramatic energy is concentrated on the battle between Vittoria and authority, which, by applying to her common assumptions about a bad woman, tries to reduce her to a stock figure of a "Whoore and Murdresse" (III. 2. 153).

1. Gill, pp. 53-4.

From the start, authority is discredited by being represented by a foolish lawyer. Using Latin, the lawyer begins to accuse her of being a corrupt woman, but Vittoria immediately undercuts him by demanding that he change the language into English, so that her charge can be clearly understood by the whole assembly. This obvious echo of the similar insistence by Katherine of Aragon in her trial¹ is explained by Jacqueline Pearson as Webster's device to underline the ironical contrast between the fictional role Vittoria adopts, the innocent queen prosecuted by the vicious Cardinal and the corrupt court, and Vittoria's real evil nature.² However, in view of the satirical description of the lawyer in the scene, it seems more likely that Webster's intention was to parallel these two strong-willed women, both of whom refuse to be identified as bad women in an obscure language, as well as to point out the potential dangers of law hidden behind the façade of elaborate legal terms and procedures.³ When Vittoria scoffs at the absurdity of the lawyer's pompous jargon, he counters her criticism by another common concept, that women are incapable of comprehending sophisticated arguments: "the woman / Know's not her tropes nor figures, nor is perfect / In the academick derivation / Of Grammaticall elocution" (42-5). Vittoria's protest against being labelled as a bad woman by the lawyer in such a manner is justified, since even Francisco scorns his "learn'd verbosity" (51), driving him out of the court. Webster stresses Francisco's scorn by his stage direction in the first quarto: *Francisco speakes this as in scorne* (Sig. E3r).⁴

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- .1 Shakespeare dramatized this episode in *Henry VIII* (III. 1. 41-9), which was probably not staged until 1613, but the episode was already to be found in Holinshed. All quotations from Shakespeare are taken from *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, ed, Peter Alexander (1964).
 2. Jacqueline Pearson, *Tragedy and Tragicomedie in the Plays of John Webster* (Manchester, 1980), p. 73.
 3. If Webster studied at the Middle Temple, as M. C. Bradbrook thinks in *John Webster*, he must have been fully aware of these dangers. Another reference to the absurdity of the legal procedure is III. 2. 93-5, which may have alluded to Raleigh's loss of Sherborne in 1608 due to a minute legal technicality. See Dent, *John Webster's Borrowing*, p. 105.
 4. This kind of stage direction, in which Webster describes the character's state of mind, is rare in his plays.

Now Monticelso takes over the task of reducing her to a whore. Although Vittoria attempts to evade his accusation by casting doubt upon the Cardinal's authority "To play the Lawier" (64), he links her spirited protest with an assumed characteristic of a whore, immodest language:¹ "Oh your trade instructs your language!" (65). Monticelso's following tirades against Vittoria are wholly cliché-ridden. After pointing out her hypocrisy in much the same terms as Swetnam's², Monticelso calls her a whore, on the evidence that she holds extravagant parties, which were commonly associated with whores and courtesans.³ When Vittoria asks him for the definition of a whore, Monticelso pronounces a long delineation in the form of the Character, like those Webster himself contributed to the 1615 edition of Thomas Overbury's *Characters*. However, the twelve figures Monticelso uses here are only vaguely related to whores, only in the general sense of deceitfulness and a threat to health and wealth. However satisfactory his definition of whore may be by Jacobean standards, it certainly does not prove Vittoria to be one. Thus she can simply retort, "This carracter scapes me" (105).

Monticelso proceeds with his accusation, now defining her as a murderess, drawing on the conventional concept that murder is the natural consequence of adultery.⁴ Here, too, however, the only evidence that Monticelso can present is Vittoria's deviation from the conventional assumptions about a widow—her unwidowlike attire and "scorne and impudence" in behavior (125). Upon her denial of her knowledge of

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1. Swetnam writes: "There are three waies to know a whore: by her wanton lookes, by her speech, and by her gate. . . ." (Sig. D1v).
 2. For instance, to describe woman's deceitfulness, Swetnam, like Monticelso, uses the image of the sea: women are "like vnto the Sea, which at some times is so calm, that a cockbote may safely endure her might, but anon againe with outrage she is so growne, that it ouerwhelmeth the tallest ship that is" (Sig. D4r).
 3. For instance, see Garvis Markham, *The Famous Whore, or Noble Curtizan* (1609), Sig. D4r.
 4. This homiletic concept is traced by Dent (*John Webster's Borrowing*, pp. 105-6) to Dekker's *If It Be Not Good, the Devil Is in It*, II. iii. 63-64, and Samuel Hieron's sermon.

the murder of her husband, he simply calls her “conning” (128), which is another typical attribute of a bad woman.¹ Although Vittoria violently protests against the way in which her arraignment is conducted, Monticelso dismisses her objection, saying that “Shee scandals our proceedings” (134).

So far Vittoria has simply refused to allow that these assumptions to be applied to her, but now she starts to challenge the assumptions themselves. Though admitting the traditional female virtues of “modesty and womanhood”,² she must in the circumstances “personate masculine vertue” (140) in order to defend herself. Masculinity in women, being a deviation from the traditional concept of womanhood, is almost always presented as a negative quality in Jacobean drama.³ Here, though, she calls it a “vertue” since it is her only means to save herself from “a cursed accusation” (138).

Vittoria’s following retort to Monticelso poses a challenge to common attitudes to women. When Monticelso shows Brachiano’s letter as evidence of her adultery, she insists on her independence of others’ conduct toward her:

Grant I was tempted,
Temptation to lust proves not the act—
Casta est quam nemo rogavit—
You reade his hot love to me, but you want
My frosty answer. (206-10)

Then she points out the male selfishness of accusing women of men’s love for them: “Condemne you me for that the Duke did love mee?” (211). The denunciation that women allure men to love was common in contemporary tirades against women; in drama of the period, some

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1. For instance, Swetnam repeats a well-known saying about woman’s cunningness: “if all the world were paper, and all the sea inke, and all the trees and plants were pens, and euery man in the world were a writer, yet were they not able with all their labour and cunning, to set downe all the crafty deceits of women” (Sig. Flr).
 2. On the traditional female virtues in Jacobean England, see Kusunoki, pp. 1-12.
 3. O.E.D. lists Fynes Moryson’s *Itinerary* (1617) as the first use of “masculine” as a female attribute. Shakespeare uses “mannish” as a bad female attribute in *Troilus and Cressida*: “a woman impudent and mannish grown” (III. iii. 217).

male characters, including Brachiano and Antony, also accuse women of their ruin, regardless of their own faults. Webster took this criticism of the male attitude from Tofte's *Honour's Academy*¹ and has Vittoria voice it. Vittoria's challenge reaches its climax when she denies the validity of the assumptions by which she is evaluated:

Summe up my faults I pray, and you shall finde,
 That beauty and gay clothes, a merry heart,
 And a good stomacke to [a] feast are all,
 All the poore crimes that you can charge me with: (215-8)

Common targets of attack upon women, such as their love of gorgeous dress, extravagant banquets, and their vivacious minds, are, Vittoria insists, nothing but "faigned shadowes" (150) of female evils, and such superficialities are inadequate to judge the worth of women. Even though the audience knows that Vittoria has sinned against orthodox morality and is telling lies here, her argument so brilliantly brings out the irrelevancies of the conventional criteria used to judge women that her violation seems less important. One cannot but agree with the English ambassador: "shee hath a brave spirit" (144).

Vittoria's cry of "rape" (285), though ridiculous, seems justified, after we are made to observe the whole procedure of the distortion of justice in the hands of the Cardinal. She makes a final protest, if only to release her frustration: "ô womans poore revenge? / Which dwels but in the tongue" (293-5). Ever since medieval satires, woman's tongue had been an object of attack, and it is also frequently satirized in Jacobean drama.² Vittoria challenges this attitude, saying

1. Nicolas de Montreux, *Honours Academie* tr. R. Tofte (1610), p. 51: "O you blinde and frantike Louers, who alwayes make your Mistresses the motius of all your misfortunes." Swetnam writes: "women haue deuices and inuentions to allure men into their loue. . . ." (Sig. F 2r) This male attitude is also severly criticized in the pamphlets, written allegedly by women, in answer to Swetnam; Rachel Speght's *A Mouzell for Melastomus* (1617); Ester Sowernam's *Ester hath hang'd Haman* (1617); Constantia Munda's *The Worming of a mad Dogge* (1617).

2. For instance, Swetnam attacks woman's tongue as follows:

Is not strange of what kinde of mettall a womans tongue is made of? that neither correction can chastise, nor faire meanes quiet: for there is a kinde of venome in it, that faire meanes nor foule they are to be ruled. (Sig. F4v)
 Swetnam also mentions "womans revenge with tongue" (Sig. G3r). The male fear of woman's tongue is satirized in Ben Jonson's *Epicoene, or The Silent Woman*.

that their tongue is their only means of self-defence. Her oral revenge, however, is not successful since Monticelso immediately reduces her reaction to another stock female quality, "fury" (289).¹

However, these common attitudes toward women are discredited in this scene, not only by Vittoria's brilliant challenge to them, but also by the corruption of the authority that advocates them. During the trial Brachiano suggests the possibility that the Cardinal aimed to cheat Vittoria of her property; the Cardinal does not deny this possibility. At the end of the trial Vittoria calls Monticelso "devill" (291). This label at least turns out to be relevant, since he is later found to be both the holder of the black book that contains "a generall catalogue of knaves" (IV. 1. 65) and a man inciting Francisco to sinister revenge. Another representative of authority, Francisco, is a perfect Machiavellian prince. In inspiring Camillo's murder, Monticelso and Francisco are no less guilty than Vittoria, for they purposely send him away to create an opportunity for Brachiano to pursue his passion for Vittoria and to rid her of her husband; "To what scorn'd purpose else should we make choice of him for a sea Captaine?" (II. 1. 373-4), says Monticelso to Francisco.

The inhabitants of this world are inescapably infected by its evil and violence. Even Brachiano's virtuous wife, Isabella, as John Russell Brown has observed,² not only reveals her hidden selfishness in her meek submission to her husband, but resorts to dissimulation as she tries to mediate between him and her brother. And in feigning jealousy, she vents her true feeling of fierce hatred of Vittoria, while Vittoria's good brother, Marcello, leaves Francisco to follow his brother and thus to join Brachiano. Her puritanical mother tells a lie in trying to save Flamineo from his murder charge. Furthermore, the innocent Giovanni has already been said to bear Francesco's features. In the world where the distinction between good and evil does not exist, the

1. Swetnam says that "there is nothing more dangerous then a woman in her fury", and that "there is nothing so terrible as the fury of a woman" (Sig. B1v).

2. John Russell Brown, ed., *The White Devil* (The Revels Plays), pp. liii-liv.

conventional standards of female virtues are not relevant. Yet the men in power employ society's assumptions, not as a means to consider the true nature of women, but as a means to pursue their own selfish desires. In such a situation, a woman can prove her integrity only through the assertion of her independence of these assumptions, as Vittoria magnificently demonstrates in this scene. Although she is defeated in the trial and dispatched to the house of convertites, her challenge is unabated; she refuses to surrender to weeping, which was considered a typical female reaction:¹ "I will not weepe, / No I do scorne to call up one poore teare / To fawne [on] your injustice" (III. 2. 295-7).

(C) Act IV scene ii

Some episodes which illustrate Vittoria's relationship to Brachiano resemble those between Antony and Cleopatra. Both Brachiano and Antony face their disasters as the result of following their lovers' wish; Antony, by yielding to Cleopatra's insistence that he should fight at sea at the battle of Actium, and Brachiano, by responding to Vittoria's wish to get rid of their spouses. Suspicious of their mistresses' unfaithfulness, both men launch fierce verbal attacks on them; taking typical male attitudes, they blame their women for their ruin, saying that they were "bewitched", and talk about the goodness of their wives whom they have deserted. Yet the situation in which the heroines find themselves are entirely different. Even though Cleopatra's Egypt is utterly powerless before Caesar's Rome, she, as a queen, can challenge the opposing forces in her own person and thus achieve her own self-fulfilment.² In contrast, married life with Camillo allows Vittoria no chance to satisfy her will. Before her death, she wishes that she "never saw the Court, / Nor ever knew great Man but by report" (V. 6. 261-2). This statement indicates the same paradox that Antony finds in

1. Women's tears are described in contemporary diatribes against women as follows: "wash away your black sin with the cristall teares of true sorrow and repentance" (Swetnam, Sig. E2r); "the weapons of a vertuous woman was her teares, which euery good man pitied, and euery valiant man honoured" (*Hic Mulier* (1620), Sig. B3r).

2. On Cleopatra's achievement of self-fulfilment, see Kusunoki, pp. 27-34.

himself. Realizing that his infatuation with Cleopatra endangers his military honour, Antony wishes that he has never seen her, but is told by Enobarbus that, then, he would have left unseen "a wonderful piece of work". Likewise, Brachiano's courtly life, though corrupt and dangerous, offers Vittoria the grandeur of life which Cornelia's puritanical fervour, Marcello's timid morality, and Camillo's mediocrity could never provide for her. As Travis Bogard suggests, despite their denouncement of the great men and their court at the end, Vittoria and Flamineo would never shun the court, for avoiding the court would to both of them be "empty idealism".¹

Vittoria's tragedy, however, is that Brachiano is actually unable to offer the protective strength on which she counts and which he has promised her. In the Machiavellian manoeuvres of power politics, Brachiano is no match for Francisco. Compared with the latter's impeccable execution of his revenge, the absurd procedures of murdering Isabella and Camillo not only belittle the victims' deaths, but also stain the glorious stature of Brachiano, who ordered the crimes; for the murders, he is dependent upon comic figures, such as the verbose quack-doctor or the ridiculously self-complacent Conjuror.

The arraignment scene also reveals Brachiano's lack of ability. His hyperbolic language and grandiose gesture of spreading his rich garment upon the floor may impress upon the audience his superiority to the rest of the men at the trial.² In fact, however, by stalking out in the middle of the trial, he neither protects Vittoria from her enemies' malice nor prevents her being sent to the house of converts. Although Webster seems to have followed the historical sources here,³ his original audience must have been puzzled by the impotence of this great man, for it was their common understanding that great men would protect their mistresses from the force of law.⁴ The Latin motto spoken by

1. Bogard, p. 129.

2. Gill, p. 56.

3. The real-life Vittoria had first been confined in the nunnery of St. Cecilia and then in the Castle of St. Angelo, where she was tried in December, 1581.

4. For instance, a Roman courtesan, who was a mistress of Cardinal Hypolito of d'Este in Gervase Markham's *The Famous Whore*, says that she was ever, protected by her "law-prooffe" great man (Sig. DIV).

Brachiano in leaving the court, "*Nemo me Impune laces[s]it*" (III. 2. 186), becomes an ironic comment upon his own weakness; he is never able to revenge himself upon Monticelso.

The quarrel scene between Vittoria and Brachiano further undercuts the latter's heroic stature. Deranged by Francisco's love-letter to Vittoria, Brachiano, like Camillo, degenerates into a stock comic figure embodying jealousy. Jacqueline Pearson has rightly said that, although, in the scene of their first meeting, Brachiano's grand passion for Vittoria is sharply contrasted with Camillo's petty jealousy, as the play proceeds they come to look increasingly alike.¹ Furthermore, Brachiano now takes toward Vittoria an attitude very similar to that shown by Monticelso in the arraignment scene; drawing upon common assumptions, he tries to reduce her to a stereotype, using expressions very much like Monticelso's, such as "whore" (45), "changeable stuffe" (49), or the devill" (89). Vittoria's objections are interpreted by Brachiano, as they were by Monticelso, as showing female "cunningness". Vittoria's tears he condemns as women's "dissembling trade" (96), in much the same tone as that of the contemporary detractors of women.² Finally, as Monticelso did toward the end of the trial (II. 2. 256-58), Brachiano tries to evaluate her personality through the public assesment of her: "all the world speakes ill of thee" (103).

Such an attitude in her lover evokes a violent retort from Vittoria. Her first reaction is, characteristically, to express her defiance of the common judgement of her:³

No matter.

Ile live so now Ile make that world recant

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1. Pearson, p. 62; see also Lee Bliss, *The World's Perspective: John Webster and the Jacobean Drama* (New Brunswick, 1983), p. 121.
 2. For instance, Swetnam describes women's dissembling of their tears as follows: "doe but crosse a woman, although it be neuer so little, shee will straightway put finger in the eye and cry: then presently many a foolish man will flatter her and intreat her to be quiet: but that marres all, for the more shee is intreated, shee will powre forth the more abundance of deceitfull teares . . ." (Sig. B4v).
 3. As to the importance of reputation to women, Swetnam says: "there is but small difference by being naught, and being thought naught" (Sig. H3v).

And change her speeches. (103-5)

Then she deliberately reduces her relation to Brachiano to an ordinary liaison between a great man and his mistress based on "reward and preferment", and attacks him for his failure to fulfil his promise: "What have I gain'd by thee but infamie?" (109). And yet this act does not efface her individuality, since she acts thus only in order to declare her refusal to subject herself to such a commonplace pattern of human relationship:

Go, go brag

How many Ladies you have undone, like mee.

Fare you well Sir; let me heare no more of you.

I had a limbe corrupted to an ulcer,

But I have cut it off: and now Ile go

Weeping to heaven on crutches. (119-24)

Vittoria realizes that her *Eu* tree is not only incapable of offering her protection, but is a "foole, / Whose greatnesse hath by much ore-growne" (145-46) his wit; she defines him, as he has done with her, as a stock figure of "dissembling men" (185) who "ad miserie to miserie" (187). As she did to Monticelso in the trial, she declares her determination not to surrender herself to tears: "for all thou art worth / Ile not shed one teare more" (128-29).

Courageously counter-attacked by Vittoria, Brachiano capitulates and begs for reconciliation. In the rest of the scene, through a curious mixture of female helplessness and masculine defiance, Vittoria ingeniously manipulates Brachiano and secures the position of Duchess so that she can truly transcend the image of a "Whore".

In the meantime, Flamineo constantly makes satirical comments on the lovers' quarrel and interprets it as a usual case of sexual warfare. Upon her firm refusal of reconcilment with Brachiano, for instance, Flamineo taunts Vittoria, ascribing her defiance to a typical female characteristic of frowardness: "How scurvily this frowardness becomes you" (161). Yet the audience is by now well aware that neither Vittoria's motives for the quarrel nor her refusal of reconcilment springs merely from her femininity; rather, they both come from her

human drive to assert her individuality. The discrepancy between what one sees on the stage and Flamineo's interpretation of it only brings home his lack of insight into the lovers' relationship.

(D) Act V scene vi

The great irony of Flamineo's cynical commentary is that, while effectively stripping off the magnificent appearance of great men and exposing their ugly realities, it fails to comprehend other aspects of life. Brachiano's death scene makes it clear that, despite Flamineo's constant debasement, the relationship between Brachiano and Vittoria goes beyond the pattern of a commonplace liaison between a great man and his mistress prompted by lust and perferment. When Brachiano realizes that he is poisoned by his helmet and will soon die, he momentarily glimpses the truth; in the face of death, feeling the terrors of dying, he recognizes the meaninglessness of princely power. Even at such moments, he expresses his love for Vittoria:

Where's this good woman? had I infinite worlds
They were too little for thee. Must I leave thee? (V. 3. 18-9)

In his last torments, while Lodovica and Gasparo are threatening damnation and oblivion, the person he turns to for help is Vittoria (V. 3. 170). As in the scene of their first assignation, although Vittoria speaks little in the face of Brachiano's approaching death, the few words she utters indicate her thoughts. Her first reaction still shows her regard for herself: "I am lost for ever" (V. 3. 35). Yet, in the rest of the scene, in spite of her realisation that her ambition for a glorious life has now been thwarted forever, she, unlike her brother, never shows bitter feelings towards the dying Brachiano; she is truly concerned with his salvation, ordering the crucifix to be held closely, so that his distracted spirits can be calmed. Even Francisco, disguised as Mulinassar, is impressed with Vittoria's deep grief at Brachiano's death: "How heavily shee takes it" (V. 3. 183). Flamineo immediately objects to Francisco's comment, speaking of the untrustworthiness of women's grief and tears. The audience, however, only confirms the inapplicability of this common assumption to Vittoria.

Vittoria in her last moments, in both the mock-death and real death scenes, demonstrates her final battle against having common concepts about women being fixed upon her. Flamineo's preoccupation with courtly reward, which he believed would obtain him the freedom to be himself, has corroded his personality so greatly that the gleaning of reward itself has now become his purpose of life. He sincerely rejoiced at his sister's marriage to Brachiano, thinking that thereby he had finally secured advancement (V. 1. 1-3), but when Brachiano dies, giving him nothing at the end of all his harvest, he feels as if he is "falling to peeces" (V. 4. 21). Though he experiences "the mase of conscience" (V. 4. 115) at the sight of his mother's madness, he dismisses it, deluding himself that reward, if finally given by his sister, will dissolve all these horrors in him. The pursuit of reward, instead of developing his self-knowledge, makes him lose sight of his true self. When Vittoria denies Flamineo's claim to reward for his long service to Brachiano, offering him only Cain's portion, he again resorts to self-effacement, this time by enacting a mock-death, in order to force her to show him "kindnesse" (V. 6. 152). To test her sincerity, Flamineo tries to make her conform to the image of a widow by demanding that she commit suicide, saying that the dying Brachiano ordered him to murder her to prevent her remarriage. When her attempt to persuade him of the sin of self-slaughter is rejected by him as "Feminine arguments" (V. 6. 70), she skillfully acts the given role of a virtuous widow, declaring her willingness to "sacrifice heart and all" (V. 6. 87) in loyalty to her deceased husband.¹ Yet she soon emerges from this stereotype, for, dropping her acting, she then tells her supposedly dying brother that she only pretended to conform to this image, while treading upon his body and cursing.

Rising from the imagined torture of death, Flamineo attacks Vittoria, by delivering a conventional diatribe against women. He

1. Such whole-hearted devotion of a widow to her late husband, if not her suicide, is commonly recommended in contemporary writings on womanhood. See, for instance, Sir Thomas Overbury's Character of "A vertuous Widdow", ed. F. L. Lucas, *The Complete Works of Webster*, vol. IV, pp. 38-39.

equates her treachery with the unfaithfulness of a remarrying widow, who will "re-marry / Ere the worme peirce your winding sheete" (V. 6. 157-8) and then develops his diatribe into a denunciation of marriage itself: "That ever man should marry!" (163-4). Encountering her real death, however, Vittoria proves that her individuality cannot be summed up by such common assumptions.

As Cleopatra does to Caesar, Vittoria first tries to fascinate her vanquishers by exploiting the common concept of female helplessness. Her tactic fails, and Lodovico characterizes her as a "glorious strumpet" (207) in his release of diabolical hatred towards her. This label she at once rejects, reminding him of her prerogatives as a duchess; that he should fall down on his knee to ask her forgiveness, and kill her before her maid. Her courageous act evokes admiration even from her enemy, Gasparo: "Are you so brave?" (219) When Lodovico taunts her about her fear, she first disclaims this womanish reaction by exploiting another assumption about women, the lack of imagination,¹ and then resolutely declares her refusal to weep: "I will not in my death shed one base tear" (226). It is significant that, always at the climax of her fight, she refuses to subjugate herself to this typical feminine conduct.

Although Vittoria has persistently refused to be judged by conventional standards, she reaches self-awareness in her own way: "O my greatest sinne lay in my blood. / Now my blood paies for 't" (240-1). Her regard for conventional morality underneath her amoral conduct has been pointed out by John Russell Brown, the idea being sensitively developed by Roma Gill.² Vittoria's uneasy awareness of her deviation from morality at times causes emotional disturbance, as in her shock at Cornelia's rebuke and curse, or when Brachiano denounces her as a whore in the quarrel scene. However, it does not lead, as some critics think,³ to her acceptance of society's moral code. In the assessment

1. As to the interpretation of "conceit", I accept Dent's argument in *John Webster's Borrowing*, p. 169.

2. Brown, ed., *The White Devil* (The Revels' lays), pp. liv-lv; Gill, *op. cit.*

3. For instance, Pearson, p. 81.

of her own life, she simply acknowledges the consequence of her having chosen to put above morality her drive to follow the requirements of her own nature. Nor does her last speech, in which she envies those who never saw the court or knew great men, indicate her repentance or any impulse to blame temptation rather than herself. She thus shows simply her recognition of the evils and dangers inseparably embedded in glorious court life, though she herself would never shun it. Therefore, her final assertion of individuality is accomplished in her courageous confrontation with the dislocation of spirit, not in any reconciliation with the conventional moralization of death: "My soule, like to a ship in a blacke storme, / Is driven I know not whither" (248-9).

Witnessing Vittoria's magnificent self-possession in the face of death, Flamineo finally realizes that his sister possesses an individuality that transcends the cynical assumptions about women which he has hitherto applied to her. For the first time, he recognizes the integrity of her spirit, and calls it "masculine vertue". Though still cynically, he even tries to save her from being categorized as a bad woman because of her viciousness and guilt:

Know many glorious women that are fam'd
For masculine vertue, have bin vitious
Onely a happier silence did betyde them.
Shee hath no faults, who hath the art to hide them. (244-7)

In their world, where law has degenerated to an absurd formality, and morality and religion to instruments of the Machiavellian prince and the venal prelate, women may be considered virtuous only when they are successful in covering their faults. Isabella and Cornelia, embodiments of female virtues by conventional standards, are to be found, as mentioned before, hiding selfishness and viciousness under their virtuous appearances. If society's views of good women have no validity in the context of the play, the only way for a woman to prove her integrity is through "masculine vertue", an aggressive assertion of her individuality such as has hitherto been reserved mainly to the male. Vittoria's challenge to common assumptions about women is thus

recognized by her brother as a challenge to society's moral code, which sanctions these assumptions. It is significant that Flamineo's last words are his acknowledgement, though in his usual sardonic tone, of the inapplicability to his sister of the proverbial saying about women's invulnerability to death; "falce reporte / Which saies that woemen vie with the nine Muses / For nine tough durable lives" (254-6). This is the only speech in the play in which Flamineo admits, though jokingly, the irrelevance of common concepts of womanhood to his sister.

Unlike Vittoria, Flamineo can assert his autonomous individuality only at the moment of his death. After having effaced his individuality in the service of others, he can at least make his death serve himself. Refusing to reconcile his death to moral ethics, he, too, courageously faces the consequence of his having inverted all moral standards to obtain the freedom to be a self. Moreover, Vittoria's consistent assertion of her inviolable individuality makes him aware of the limitations of his cynicism¹ and affords him a brief perception of the possibility of human integrity for all the evils of their world.

4. Vittoria's "masculine vertue" and the Jacobean background

The historical facts of some noble ladies' rebellion against authority, dealt with earlier in this study, indicate the growing sense of individuality among some English women at the very time when Webster was working on his first independent play. These women began to conceive of themselves and of their role in society from an angle differing from that of conventions. Society's response to their actions, as has been shown, was generally critical. However, Webster's dramatization of Vittoria's drive for self-realisation as "masculine vertue" points to a positive aspect, as well as to the possible dangers and evils, of women's urge to satisfy their will.

The word "masculine" was usually used for women to criticize any form of their violation of conventional norms. In the early seventeenth

1. For the limitations of Flamineo's cynical view of the world, see also Bliss, pp. 96-136.

century the issue of women's increasing masculinity had for some time been a matter of society's concern. Particularly, women's mannish aggressiveness was identified with their desire to copy men's dress. Toward the end of the sixteenth century, for instance, Willaim Harrison wrote in his *Description of England*:

I have met with some of these trulls in London so disguised that it hath passed my skill to discern whether they were men or women.¹

Women's fondness for dressing like men, which William Harrison observed among women of a special kind, "trulls", had become a fashion prevalent in all social classes by the end of the second decade of the seventeenth century.² This change in women's dress was a serious matter, for it reflected, or at least suggested, a change in the way women saw themselves in relation to men. Women's dressing like men was, therefore, interpreted as indicative of their denial of the conventional sex role and was attacked severely as both a symptom and a cause of social disorder. Thomas Adams, for instance, in his sermon, *Mystical Bedlam, or The World of Madmen* (1615), calls a masculine woman "hic mulier" and condemns this new fashion as evidence of feminine pride and a defacing of the image of God in which woman had been formed.³ This anxiety over women's fashion and aggressiveness culminated in King James' proclamation of 1620.⁴ In the same year, the pamphlet entitled *Hic Mulier: Or, The Man-Woman* was published. The false Latin of the title suggests that its title was most likely taken

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1. John Dover Wilson, *Life in Shakespeare's England* (Harmondsworth, 1944; rptd. 1949), p. 165.
 2. For instance, the author of *Hic Mulier* writes as follows: "since the daies of *Adam* women were neuer so Masculine; Masculine in their genders and whole generations, from the Mother, to the yongest daughter; Masculine in Number, from one to multitudes . . ." (Sig. A3r); "It is an infection that emulates the plague, and throwes it selfe amongst women of all degrees, all deserts, and all ages . . ." (Sig. B1v-B2r)
 3. *The Works of Thomas Adams*, ed. Joseph Angus, 3 vols (Edinburgh, 1861-62), vol. I, pp. 277-78.
 4. For this proclamation, see Akiko Kusunoki, 'A Study of *The Devil's Law-case*: with Special Reference to the Controversy over Women,' *Shakespeare Studies*, The Shakespeare Society of Japan, 21 (1985), pp. 7-8.

from Adam's sermon.¹ Although this pamphlet itself is only a journalistic version of the conventional indictment against self-assertive women, probably intended to capitalize on the king's edict, it was accompanied by a fascinating companion-piece called *Haec-Vir: Or The Womanish-Man*. Hic-Mulier in this pamphlet, instead of vindicating women's goodness in conventional terms as most defendants of women did,² justifies her violation of social norms by claiming women's right to follow their own will.³ Hic-Mulier's assertion of her autonomous individuality echoes that of Vittoria. Yet it took nearly ten years after *The White Devil* was produced for such a bold declaration of women's independence to be printed.

However, it is noteworthy that *The White Devil* is not the only play of the period that reflects changing attitudes toward women's self-assertion. Although the subject is never so profoundly explored as in Webster's tragedy, some other plays written around the turn of the decade represent as somewhat justifiable women's defiance of common assumptions about womanhood. One interesting example of society's ambivalent feelings toward rebellious women is seen in the difference between Dekker's and Middleton's attitude in *The Roaring Girl* (1608, Prince Henry's)⁴ and that of Nathan Field in *Amends for Ladies* (1611, Queen's Revels(?)). Both plays centre on an actual contemporary Amazon in breeches, Mary Frith, commonly called Moll Cut-purse. Her eccentricity and criminal activities were well-known at the time.⁵ Chamberlain's letter of 12 February 1612 gives a critical description, though tinged with amusement, of her penance at Paul's Cross:

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1. Barbara J. Baines, ed., *Three Pamphlets on the Jacobean Antifeminist Controversy* (New York, 1978), p. ix.
 2. See Kusunoki, 'A Study of *The Devil's Law-Case*', pp. 28-29.
 3. For *Haec-Vir*, see *ibid.*, pp. 9-9; 29-30.
 4. The dates of the plays and the names of the companies that first performed them are taken from *Annals of English Drama 975-1700*, eds. Alfred Harbage and S. Schoenbaum (Philadelphia, 1964).
 5. In the Consistory Court in 1605, she was charged with wearing manly apparel as well as practising bawdry, but she denied these charges. See W. X. Fincham, 'Notes from the Ecclesiastical Court Records at Somerset House', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 4th series, IV (1921), pp. 111-13.

this last Sunday Mall Cut-purse a notorious bagage (that used to go in mans apparell and challenged the feild of divers gallants) was brought to the same place, where she wept bitterly and seemed very penitent, but yt is since douted she was maudelin druncke, beeing discovered to have tipled of three quarts of sacke before she came to her to penance. . . .¹

Nathan Field denounces Moll as a bawd in his play, but Moll in *The Roaring Girl*, despite her refusal to play the normal roles of woman, is presented as essentially a virtuous woman, who helps the young lovers to marry. Moll insists that judging women by common opinion—condemning “by common voice”²—is wrong, and that eccentricity alone does not make a woman evil. The authors obviously intended to provide a different view of this “notorious bagage”, but the play’s sentimentality prevents any deep probing into the significance of Moll’s self-assertion.

Evadne in *The Maids Tragedy* (1610, King’s) is another outstanding female character. In the first part of the play she is charmingly independent in her callous exploitation of male sexuality and of society’s concepts of happy marriage. The evil in Evadne’s self-assertion is also mitigated by the corruption and stupidity of the men surrounding her. When Melantius, her brother, forces her into repentance, she loses both her independence and charm; she is subsequently transformed into another new female figure, a woman revenger, thus usurping the traditional male role of revenge plays. Yet her revenge is represented as a kind of female hysteric outburst, and her suicide, after Amintor denies her his bed for ever, narrows the focus by insisting on sexual frustration, thus obscuring the issue of a woman’s self-assertion in a corrupt world.

Fletcher’s *The Womans Prize, or The Tamer Tam’d* (1611, Unknown (King’s in 1633)) also suggests a new approach to women’s assertion of individuality. The play forms a parody on Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew*. Petruchio’s first wife, the tamed Kate, is now dead, and the wife he has just married, Maria, is determined not to subjugate herself to her husband’s autocratic will, and so is refusing to consum-

1. *The Letters of John Chamberlain*, vol. I, p. 334.

1. The quotation is from *The Works of Thomas Middleton*, ed., A. H. Bullen 8 vols (1885; rptd. New York, 1964), vol. IV.

mate the marriage. Maria's fight to change the traditional concepts of marital role-playing receives powerful support from her cousin, Byancha, who sees it in a sociological and historical light:

All the several wrongs
Done by Imperious Husbands to their Wives
These thousand years and upwards, strengthen thee:
Thou hast a brave cause. (I. ii.)¹

Maria presents Petruchio with her conditions, and all the women in the city stand up to support her and Byancha. In the end Petruchio submits himself to Maria's demand of "both sexes due equality". As Angela Ingran notes, this is probably the only play of the period that presents women acting for themselves to obtain freedom from their assumed roles.² However, Maria's conditions are conventional, and, without fully exploring the meaning of Maria's defiance of society's concept of women's roles, the play ends with the happy reconciliation of the couple.

The heroines of these plays all give precedence to their urge to realize their own will over their duty to observe society's moral code. In presenting women's transgression in a sympathetic light, the authors before Webster seem to reveal their acknowledgement of the validity of this aspect of feminine nature. What they caught a glimpse of Webster squarely faced and fully explored in *The White Devil*. Despite the obvious evil in Vittoria's ambition, by placing it in an extreme human situation in which men ruthlessly pursue their desires, Webster questions the validity of conventional concepts of womanhood and presents the possibility of the integrity, as well as of the dangers, found in women's impulse to insist on their true nature. Webster's understanding of the feminine mind may have been inspired by the actions taken by the contemporary aristocratic versions of "Hic-

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1. All quotations of the play are taken from *The Works of Beaumont and Fletcher* eds. Arnold Glover and A. R. Waller, 10 vols (Cambridge, 1905-12), vol. VIII, p. 9.
 1. Angela Ingran, 'Changing Attitudes to 'Bad' Women in Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama', unpublished Ph. D. thesis (University of Cambridge, 1977), p. 227.

Mulier.” Webster’s characterization of Vittoria suggests that it was not only women’s attitude to themselves that began to change in early Jacobean England. Webster’s play may signal the emergence of a new male attitude at around the turn of the decade, an attitude which, although well aware of its dangers, recognized that women’s desire for self-realisation was an essential part of their humanity. At all events, in another decade, this attitude was to be developed, in *Haec-Vir*, into a forthright challenge to society’s assumptions about womanhood.