

UNIVERSIDAD COMPLUTENSE DE MADRID
FACULTAD DE FILOLOGÍA



TESIS DOCTORAL

**Falsedad y corrupción en las tragedias de John Webster: a
partir de The Duchess of Malfi**

**(Deceit and corruption in John Webster's tragedies through
the lenses of the Duchess of Malfi)**

MEMORIA PARA OPTAR AL GRADO DE DOCTOR

PRESENTADA POR

Mojgan Pooyá

Director

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que Dios tenga en Su gloria,

que fueron mis primeros

profesores y guiaron mis

pasos por el mágico mundo

de la literatura

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Summary in English

Key Words: Heratio, Textual Strategy, Cohesion, Deceit, Corruption, Tragedy

In the present thesis, through the analysis of two great tragedies of the Early Modern Age, *The Duchess of Malfi* and *The White Devil*, making the former the axis of study, it has been tried to discover the textual strategies used for creation their cohesion, as well as to explore the mental labyrinth of their author, John Webster, for the apprehesion of the different aspects of deceit and corruption dominant in society, during the historical period in which he lived, although the idiosyncratic characteristics of this Jacobean dramatist make him transcend the specificities of his own era and achieve timelessness.

By examining the history of studies on Webster's works, we find that after about a century of disregard, with the flourishing of Romanticism in the nineteenth century, his works are placed in the spotlight. In the twentieth century, the experience of catastrophes resulting from the two world wars and the surprise and shock of human societies at the extent of ferociousness hidden in human nature, make Webster's oeuvre, especially *The Duchess of Malfi* and *The White Devil*, achieve increasing success, because in these two tragedies, consistent with the terrifying events of the twentieth century, we witness, among other aspects of human life, multiple manifestations of psychological and physical torture, and crimes such as sister-killing, fratricide and wife-killing –but moving far beyond the

immediate strong impact, and presenting with deep human insight, a firmly nuanced study of character and socio-historic context.

Webster's status in English theatre, and the critics' attention to him in the present age –which also reflects his relevance today– justify, I believe, the undertaking of research on his two plays. Since he has sometimes been accused of writing tragedies without solid structures, the question in the present research is: Do these two tragedies really lack internal cohesion? And my hypothesis in relation with the above-mentioned question is that Webster has indeed been able to achieve internal cohesion in his tragedies through: 'heratio' (the echo technique), the employment of interconnected images and metaphors, intertextual references, and the presence of a unifying theme (deceit and corruption).

The methodology used in this thesis is based on the precise and meticulous textual study of the two tragedies on the one hand, and the collection of data¹ together with their scrutiny in accordance with the proposed topics, on the other.

In relation to the above question and hypothesis, after providing examples of Webster's use of the echo technique in *The Duchess of Malfi* and *The White Devil*, examining some of the

¹ *The Duchess of Malfi*: Gunby, D.C. (ed.) (1972). *John Webster: Three Plays*. London: Penguin.

The White Devil: Luckyj, Christina. (ed.) (2008) [1966]. *The White Devil*. London: A & C Black Publishers.

images and metaphors used in them, and also verifying that the themes of 'deceit' and 'corruption' are a common denominator and extend their shadow over both plays, we arrived at the conclusion that upon reading the two tragedies, one does sense the existence of an internal cohesion in them.

In the introduction, first a history of studies on the importance and influence of John Webster in the English theatre and literature is presented. Subsequently, the role of writers and literary critics of the Romantic period in reassessing and introducing his works to the literary community is explored.

The first chapter of the present thesis, defines the 'echo technique' and examines Webster's manner of its employment using examples from these two great tragedies. A strategy which has its roots in Webster's discarding direct approaches in favor of more deviant methods. At times he achieves this through linking speech and action: one character's words are actually enacted by another; at others, it is the different characters' speeches that are inter-reflective.

He introduces and expands issues through several chains of images. Webster also uses the 'echo technique' in relation to general patterns in the play and he likewise applies it to trends of a more limited range of action, their combination forming the framework that holds the play's structure together.

In chapter two, a definition of Conceptual Metaphor, especially Orientational Metaphor is given, and samples of them

from *The Duchess of Malfi* and *The White Devil* are presented and studied.

In the third chapter, I consider the appearance-reality dichotomy and a whole series of accompanying concepts such as the question of ambiguity and the contrastive spheres of the public and the private, the natural and the artificial, and the fog of secrets and concealed truths that makes it difficult to distinguish one sphere from the other.

The fourth chapter discusses the constant reference to the subject of social hierarchy and the contrast between the “high” and the “low”, thus reinforcing the question of “name” treated in chapter three. The playwright’s subtle -even cunning- methods (among others, his constant semantic manipulation) to expose the duality between the ‘great’ men’s elevated social status and their psychological depravity, are analyzed alongside his realistic portrayal of the complex world of the court, emphasizing Webster’s abstention from simplistic sociological clichés.

In the fifth chapter, the major issues of hidden secrets and their inevitable retinue of mutual mistrust, attempts at concealment, the quest for discovery, and the strategies deployed to achieve this end, is explored as yet another thematic nexus.

In the sixth chapter, I have a closer look at the dramatic enactment of the function of the important figure of the informer, whose activities are always taking place under cover. I also focus on some of the implications of the concept of concealment and how this question triggers off a chain of actions and reactions that bind together the different dramatic episodes.

The lameness of wisdom in solving man's problems and the tricks played upon the characters by it, has also a significant role in fastening together the action through the use of irony. Examples are brought up underscoring Webster's subversive questioning of such solid concepts as human knowledge and insight, which in turn resonates with the dramatist's presentation of the essential ambiguities of life.

In the seventh chapter, I analyze the function of language at work where it is seen as the most potent arm of a sophisticated deceit machine. Using examples, I demonstrate that the image of the tongue, wherever it appears, is always collocated next to words referring to totally negative concepts, corrupting the idea of language as a positive element through these damaging associations.

Chapter eight examines the dark, grim Websterian universe and its sense of claustrophobia, with spirits that are walled in and lives that are lived under the shadow of fear. In this chapter the object of analysis is the chain of interlocking images and symbolic elements that create the atmosphere of terror, persecution, disease, decay and death.

Summary in Spanish

Palabras clave: Heratio, Estrategias Textuales, Cohesión, Falsedad, Corrupción, Tragedía

En la presente tesis, a través del análisis de dos grandes tragedias de la Temprana Edad Moderna, *The Duchess of Malfi* y *The White Devil*, haciendo de la primera el eje de estudio, se ha intentado descubrir las estrategias textuales empleadas para crear su cohesión así como explorar el laberinto mental de su autor, John Webster, a fin de aprehender los diferentes aspectos de engaño y corrupción dominantes en la sociedad durante el período histórico en el que vivía, si bien las características idiosincráticas de este dramaturgo jacobino le hacen trascender las especificidades de su propia era y alcanzar la atemporalidad.

Al examinar la historia de los estudios sobre las obras de Webster, encontramos que después de aproximadamente un siglo de falta de atención, con el florecimiento del Romanticismo en el siglo XIX, sus obras salen a la luz. En el siglo XX, la experiencia de las catástrofes resultantes de las dos guerras mundiales y la sorpresa y anonadamiento de las sociedades humanas ante la envergadura de la ferocidad oculta en la naturaleza humana, hacen que las obras de Webster, especialmente *The Duchess of Malfi* y *The White Devil* alcancen un éxito creciente, porque en estas dos tragedias, acorde con los acontecimientos estremecedores del siglo XX, somos testigos, entre otros aspectos de la vida, de múltiples manifestaciones de

tortura psicológica y física, y crímenes como el asesinato de hermanas, el fratricidio y el asesinato de esposas, pero trascendiendo más allá del fuerte impacto inmediato, percibimos una profunda visión humana, y un estudio finamente matizado de carácter y de contexto socio-histórico.

El estatus de Webster en el teatro inglés, y la atención de los críticos hacia él en la era actual, que también refleja su relevancia hoy en día, justifica, a mi parecer, hacer investigación sobre estas dos obras de teatro tuyas. Puesto que él a veces ha sido acusado de escribir tragedias sin estructuras sólidas, la pregunta en la presente investigación es: ¿Carecen realmente de cohesión interna estas dos tragedias? Y mi hipótesis en relación con esta pregunta es que Webster sí ha sido capaz de lograrla en sus tragedias a través de: 'heratio' (la técnica del eco), el empleo de imágenes y metáforas interconectadas, referencias intertextuales y la presencia de un tema unificador (engaño y corrupción).

La metodología utilizada en esta tesis se basa, por un lado, en el estudio textual preciso y meticuloso de las dos tragedias y, por el otro, en la recopilación de datos¹ junto con su escrutinio de acuerdo con los temas propuestos.

¹ *The Duchess of Malfi*: Gunby, D.C. (ed.) (1972). *John Webster: Three Plays*. London: Penguin.

The White Devil: Luckyj, Christina. (ed.) (2008) [1966]. *The White Devil*. London: A & C Black Publishers.

En relación con la anterior pregunta e hipótesis, después de proporcionar ejemplos del uso de Webster de la técnica del eco en *The Duchess of Malfi* y *The White Devil*, examinar algunas de las imágenes y metáforas utilizadas en ellas, y también verificar que los temas de ‘engaño’ y ‘corrupción’ son un denominador común y extienden su sombra sobre ambas obras, llegamos a la conclusión de que, al leer las dos tragedias, uno sí que siente la existencia de una cohesión interna.

En la introducción, primero se presenta una historia de estudios sobre la importancia e influencia de John Webster en el teatro y la literatura ingleses. Posteriormente, se explora el papel de los escritores y críticos literarios del período romántico en la reevaluación e introducción de sus obras a la comunidad literaria.

El primer capítulo de la presente tesis, define la ‘técnica del eco’ y examina el modo en que Webster la emplea, utilizando ejemplos de estas dos grandes tragedias. Una estrategia que tiene sus raíces en el hecho de que Webster descarta las formas directas de enfoque en favor de métodos más desviados. A veces logra esto vinculando el discurso con la acción: las palabras de un personaje son representadas por la actuación de otro; otras veces, los discursos de los diferentes personajes son inter-reflexivos.

Él introduce y expande los temas mediante varias cadenas de imágenes. También utiliza la ‘técnica del eco’ en relación con los esquemas generales en la obra; asimismo, la aplica a tendencias de un rango de acción más limitado, su

combinación formando el marco que mantiene unida la estructura de la obra.

En el capítulo dos, se da una definición de la Metáfora Conceptual, especialmente la Metáfora Orientacional, y se presentan y estudian muestras de ellas, extraídas de *The Duchess of Malfi* y de *The White Devil*.

En el tercer capítulo, considero la dicotomía apariencia-realidad y toda una serie de conceptos acompañantes, como la cuestión de la ambigüedad y las esferas contrastantes de lo público y lo privado, lo natural y lo artificial, y la niebla de secretos y verdades tapadas que hace que sea difícil distinguir una esfera de la otra.

El cuarto capítulo discute la referencia constante al tema de la jerarquía social y el contraste entre lo "alto" y lo "bajo", reforzando así la cuestión del "nombre" tratado en el capítulo tres. La astucia sutil del dramaturgo (entre otros, su constante manipulación semántica) que impregna sus métodos para exponer la dualidad entre el elevado estatus social de los 'grandes' hombres y su depravación psicológica, se analizan junto con su descripción realista del complejo mundo de la corte, enfatizando la abstención de Webster de clichés sociológicos simplistas.

En el quinto capítulo, los principales temas de secretos ocultos y su inevitable séquito de desconfianza mutua, los intentos de ocultamiento, la búsqueda de descubrimiento y las estrategias implementadas para lograr este fin, se exploran como otro nexo temático más.

En el sexto capítulo, miro más de cerca la representación dramática de la función de la figura importante del informante, cuyas actividades siempre se realizan de manera encubierta. También me centro en algunas de las implicaciones del concepto de ocultamiento y cómo esta cuestión desencadena una serie de acciones y reacciones que unen los diferentes episodios dramáticos. La minusvalía de la sabiduría para resolver los problemas del hombre y los trucos que juega en los personajes, también tiene un papel importante en sujetar juntos la acción mediante el uso de la ironía. Se presentan ejemplos que subrayan el cuestionamiento subversivo de Webster de conceptos tan sólidos como la perspicacia y conocimiento humanos, que resuena a su vez con la presentación de las ambigüedades esenciales de la vida por el dramaturgo.

En el capítulo séptimo, analizo la función del lenguaje donde opera como el más potente brazo de una sofisticada máquina de engaño. Utilizando ejemplos, demuestro que la imagen de la lengua, donde quiera que aparezca, se coloca siempre junto a palabras que refieren a conceptos totalmente negativos, corrompiendo la idea del lenguaje como un elemento positivo a través de estas asociaciones dañinas.

El capítulo ocho examina el oscuro y melancólico universo de Webster y su sensación de claustrofobia, con espíritus que están amurallados y vidas que se viven bajo la sombra del miedo. En este capítulo, el objeto de análisis es la cadena de imágenes entrelazadas y elementos simbólicos que crean la atmósfera de terror, persecución, enfermedad, putrefacción y muerte.

Introduction

John Webster is, undoubtedly, one of the most noteworthy dramatists of the Jacobean age; and the two tragedies *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi* could be considered as masterpieces of the Early Modern period. These works were written around 1612 and 1613¹. In relation to their subject-matter, Cunningham (1970: 91) says,

His two great plays have women as their central characters. One is evil [Vittoria Corombona], one is good [the Duchess of Malfi]. Both are indomitable. Both these characters are based on people who really lived... He treated historical fact as cavalierly as he treated his audiences; plots were to be manipulated as he wished.

A brief survey of the critical history of these two plays reveals that the first critiques of them appeared in the seventeenth century. Among the earliest opinions expressed in written form on John Webster's work are the encomiastic verses of three great early modern dramatists, contemporary to Webster: Thomas Middleton, William Rowley, and John Ford:

Thomas Middleton:

“ [...] Thou by this work of fame,

¹ Womack (2006: 123). These dates according to Cunningham (1970: 90) are 1611 & 1612. And according to Smith and Sullivan Jr. (2010: xiii) are 1612 & 1614.

Ha'st well provided for thy Living Name;
To trust to others' honourings is worth's crime;
Thy Monument is raised in thy Life Time"

John Ford:

"Crown him a poet, whom nor Rome nor Greece
Transcend in all theirs for a masterpiece" (Neill 2015: 6)

Half-way through the century, Abraham Wright states that *The White Devil* is 'but an indifferent play to read, but for the presentments I believe good' (Moore 1981: 33). Samuel Sheppard, in his *Epigrams Theological, Philosophical, and Romantic* (1651), mentions 'How pretty are thy lines, thy verses stand/ Like unto precious Jewels set in gold,/ And grace thy fluent Prose' (Ibid). On the other hand, Samuel Pepys, the famous diarist, declared in 1661 the following on *The White Devil*: 'I never had so little pleasure in a play in my life' (Ibid: 37). And as to critical analysis of Webster's dramaturgy in the eighteenth century, Moore (1981: 33) writes " [...] there is no critical heritage of John Webster between 1700 and 1800".

With the growth of Romanticism in the nineteenth century many of its writers and commentators, confronted with a kind of self-expression, individualism, and rebelliousness against established conventions in Webster's works, joined his adepts, and wrote numerous works of criticism in favour of his two tragedies. Coleman (2010: 56-7) states,

It was in the nineteenth century, then, that debates over the value of Webster's work begin to re-emerge. A number of individual critics are significant in the nineteenth-century re-

evaluation of Webster, among them Charles Lamb and William Hazlitt (Romantic enthusiasts), Alexander Dyce (the first modern editor of Webster's works) and, resisting many of the claims of these critics, Charles Kingsley and his followers... In terms of the canonization of Webster, there is little doubt that the nineteenth century witnessed a shift in the reputation of Webster.

And Robinson (2019: 2) writes, "After vanishing from the canon of English drama in the eighteenth century, Webster was recovered in the nineteenth as a precursor for forms of gothic fiction and 'dark Romanticism'." With the professionalization of literary criticism in the twentieth century, Webster critics took a political, psychological, and sociological approach to the study of his plays. The rise of Fascism and the savageries that ensued, brought about the collapse of humanitarian values. This, in turn, justified a new enthusiasm for a playwright that at the beginning of the seventeenth century had unveiled the corrupt and sinful human soul. Robinson (2019:2) specifies, "In the twentieth century Webster became instead the embodiment of intellectual melancholy and alienation".

In relation to the attention paid to Webster in the twentieth century, Holdsworth (1987:21) writes the following, emphasizing Eliot's role:

"If opinions of Webster were in danger of ossifying, this was averted by the appearance of T. S. Eliot's essays on Elizabethan and Jacobean literature during the twenties and thirties. Eliot introduces a new approach, a set of fresh ideas, and draws into the debate aspects of the plays hitherto

neglected”.

In this regard Coleman (2010: 60), –alluding to the fact that the horrors of the two world wars revealed the “corruption and depravity of human nature” and thus helped bring forth Webster’s great “insight”– quotes from Eliot’s famous poem (1970: 55-6) written in 1919:

“Webster was much possessed by death
And saw the skull beneath the skin;
And breastless creatures under ground
Leaned backward with a lipless grin.

Daffodil bulbs instead of balls
Stared from the sockets of the eyes!
He knew that thought clings round dead limbs
Tightening its lusts and luxuries.”

In relation to the studies done on Webster, Callaghan (2011), making a survey of the critiques written on *The Duchess of Malfi* in the period running from 2000 to 2008, alludes to several approaches such as Gender and Sexuality, Religion, Sovereignty, etc. and believes that,

“Precisely those qualities that gave rise to critical derision of Webster as a sensationalist earlier in the twentieth century – highly sexualized violence, cruelty, depravity and the misuse of political power– are in the new millennium understood to be Webster’s prescient vision of the parlous fragility of love and innocence.” (Callaghan 2011: 66)

As an example of reviews of *The Duchess of Malfi*

carried out within Gender Studies, Haber's article (2010) can be referred to. In this article while confirming that *The Duchess of Malfi* impeaches the corruption of the surrounding world, she suggests that "Webster's criticism has an even broader target: his play interrogates and indicts the genre of tragedy itself, presenting it as a creation of those in power, a creation that is inescapably masculinist and aristocratic –and wholly fantasmatic (Haber 2010: 237)".

The question that has triggered the present research is that: since there has always been some negative critique of this Jacobean dramatist's tragedies *The Duchess of Malfi* and *The White Devil* in relation with their structure, can it justifiably be said that they lack internal cohesion? And the hypothesis in relation with the above-mentioned question is: Webster has indeed been able to achieve internal cohesion in his two tragedies through:

- a) 'heratio' (the echo technique) and intertextual references
- b) the employment of interconnected images and metaphors
- c) the presence of a unifying theme (deceit and corruption)

Discussing this hypothesis, we will also have a side-glance to a challenging point raised by some critics: that in both tragedies there is a lack of a *typical* Renaissance hero. As we know, the existence of a concrete hero, a man, usually representing goodness, is one of the most essential elements of a tragedy; a point that apparently has been passed over in Webster's two tragedies. In *The Duchess of Malfi*, contrary to the

method common to tragedies written in the Early Modern Age, the hero is a woman. White (2000: 203) has explored this point:

“The Duchess of Malfi is generically unusual, even unique in Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedy. The norm of tragedy was the fall of an initially heroic man or the rise and fall of a great villain. This play is the tragedy of a virtuous woman who achieves heroism through her death. Not only this, she is inescapably a victim of others’ evil and of social attitudes, rather than one undermined by inner weakness or overweening ambition.”

Moreover, even accepting the Duchess as a tragic hero, the assassination of the titular character in the fourth act and the continuation of the play’s action –and a tumultuous one at that– without her, for the whole of the fifth act, is seen as incompatible with the accepted conventions of tragedy. It must be said however, that even after the Duchess’ death, her presence continues to be strongly felt in the play. Also, her death triggers off substantial transformation in two main characters –Bosola and Ferdinand. And so, in fact it could be said that she has not been eliminated by the dramatist before the play ends.

In *The White Devil* the issue is even more complicated, that is to say, none of its main characters have the requisite traits to take on the role of hero/heroine representing goodness. It may be said that in this play we are dealing with a spectrum of evil in which the characters occupy their position in a scale of gradation, to be exact, they are either less evil, evil, or more evil. And Isabella and Camillo who are the victims of Brachiano’s and Vittoria’s whim and conspiracy, thus remaining outside the afore-

mentioned spectrum of malevolence, have such passive roles that they cannot be considered as main personages. In a sense, *The White Devil* maps the collision of villains.

The identification of Vittoria with the title role, the ‘White Devil’, and thus her potential denomination as the central villain of the tragedy is –typical of Webster– a crabbled question. Gunby (1995: 59) explores this aspect in detail:

“She is all the more problematic because of the way in which Webster presents her –she is never alone on stage, for instance, and never soliloquizes. Moreover, Webster severely limits her stage appearances, offering different facets of her personality each time she does appear. In I. ii. we see the bored wife (and also the frightened daughter), in III.ii. the defiant and resourceful woman, in IV. i. the outraged mistress, in V. iii. (briefly) the grief-stricken wife, and in V. vi. the courageous tragic heroine. Webster seems, in fact, to be working in a fashion quite consciously disjunctive in his presentation of Vittoria.”

However, the interlocutor in this work can not ignore the separate outstanding scenes that exist shining all through the play. As was said before, our hypothesis is that the presence of thematic unity –deceit and corruption–together with Webster’s use of the echo technique (heratio) give rise to two tragedies with cohesive structures.

Since the research in this thesis is focused on *The Duchess of Malfi*, the general environment and prevalent mood of this play shall be initially delved into. The experience of reading this tragedy is similar to that of getting locked in a room with no

windows –and not casually so. As the play folds out, its atmosphere becomes more and more oppressive, and not only through the development of its plot but that of a whole series of elements that help create an airtight complex. We are presented with the central metaphor of life as a hunting-ground where there are the two main categories of predators and preys, the struggle extending itself within each of these.

This nuclear metaphor is reinforced by the intricate network of images that form a claustrophobic framework, with the “chamber” and its multiple echoes as its protagonist. The literal space where the characters move is strictly confined.

The action is not carried out in the open or even in halls, but in rooms within rooms and the compartmentalization reaches its climax at the end when Bosola, having cornered the Cardinal, allows him to “retreat to Julia’s chamber/ But no further” (V. v. 17). There is constant mention of doors and keys, of closing up and locking in. This Claustrophobic world is given an added nuance when Webster introduces into it the concepts of conspiracy and murder.

The chambers in this play are made to form a wasp-nest construction where there is the constant buzz of whisperings, of plots and counter-plots, of sycophants flattering bigwigs, of intelligencers and other “political monsters” listening behind doors and hangings, and exchanging their information – not hesitating to double-deal each other if their interests so demand.

As the play moves on, these spaces take on the added characteristic of mortal traps as they become increasingly associated with death and decay: “death hath ten thousand several doors/ For men to take their exits” (IV. ii. 219-20). Palaces turn into prison cells, their apartments increasingly resembling catacombs as corpses accumulate within them (reaching a climax in Act V where the actual transferring of dead bodies from one lodging to another, forms part of the action).

Closely related to this portrayal of life in terms of captivity and confinement is the issue of “face”, of appearance versus reality, of the tricks played on us by the visual impression. Here, the mask not only appears in the literal aspect of vizarded characters at III. v. 92, but in the form of a whole chain of imagery to do with falsehood and deceit.

Parallel to this, is the question of a deformed scheme of things, not only at the State level –where we are presented with a system on the verge of collapse, its foundations eaten away by corruption and tyranny, its Law and Justice adulterated versions of the original concepts– but also at the level of the human psyche where the frontiers between different notions are presented as fuzzy and ambiguous, best exemplified by the floating suspicion of Ferdinand’s incestuous inclination towards the Duchess, and Bosola’s ambivalent roles as malcontent-satirist-villain and final avenger.

Within this psychological setting, the issue of identity –especially in relation with the Duchess, Ferdinand, and Bosola in *The Duchess of Malfi*, and Flamineo in *The White Devil*– is

discussed by various critics. Sullivan (2005: 119), for instance, studies the connection between identity, sleep and conscience:

One can also read the play's emphasis on sleep in terms of conscience as described in casuistical texts that proliferated in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Webster's play is saturated with references to conscience, and as we will see Ferdinand's madness marks not only the end of his sleep but the rousing of his dormant conscience.

The *crisis* of identity is introduced with particular visual force in the case of Ferdinand's lycanthropia. As Whigham (2000: 175) puts it:

His lycanthropia, unitary wolf at last, brings him to his logical end in total isolation. Walled in alone, not in a secret garden but in an inward hair shirt, he is finally *sui generis*, a peerless class of one.

The following pages enclose a more detailed study of these themes with special emphasis on the major techniques by which Webster achieves the coherence that contrary to what some critics¹ have declared, characterizes his play in the midst of the aimlessness and chaos he ventures to portray.

This study will be based mainly on a close reading of Webster's two tragedies, in a firm belief that the original text is the purest fountain to resort to when looking for the dramatist's key concerns and the mechanism at work in the deeper, less

¹ See for example Ribner (1989: 119)

easily discernible waters of his plays.

Other stop-overs will include a look at the microcosm of symbols (hearts, keys, rings, poniards and swords) within *The Duchess of Malfi* as well as the dramatic devices by which the general sensation of insecurity and persecution is created, a tricky terrain infested with nets where the unwary reader-spectator may get entangled in the same way as the characters, for here we are in a domain where “[...] weak safety/ Runs upon ingenious wheels” (III. ii. 186-7), for the forces of evil constantly try “[t]o circumvent us in riddles”. (III. v. 40)

And following these discussions, I shall look, on the one hand, at language as presented in the play where it is protagonist –as the chief instrument of deception: as the means of distraction from Nature and as an obstacle to everything natural and sincere, its function as a tool for communication shown to have been sabotaged in favor of its potential as a major device for misinformation in power politics.

On the other hand, I shall examine Webster’s strategies in creating this general landscape. Our journey through the latter will include inevitable ports of call at his interlocking images, the echoing mechanisms by which he drives home key issues and drills into our mind and consciousness a series of associated concepts whose cumulative effect leads to the formation of a complete psychological portrait of each character; the chameleonic nature of his lexis where the changing values of words such as “honest”, “noble”, and “great”, depending on the semantic environment in which they are placed, compel us to

constantly adjust our conception of the protagonists; his particular use of animal and nature imagery and the ingenious and surprising associations established in the metaphors and similes which characterize his style.

Vittoria's last words in *The White Devil*, are a good example of this, when she uses the adjective '*great*' with the very negative connotation which becomes absolutely clear by the end of the play for the reader-spectator:

O happy they that never saw the court,
Nor ever knew great man but by report.
VITTORIA dies (V. vi. 259-60)

I. The echo: workings of a dramatic technique

One of the most salient features of Webster's dramatic style is his use of 'heratio' or echo technique. He demonstrates great ability in presenting the main themes of the play in a most subtle manner, discarding direct approaches in favor of more deviant methods. Much in tone with the general atmosphere of his play, concepts are rather insinuated than blatantly introduced.

Once a first entry is made into the reader-spectator's mind, an idea is driven home by repeating it on different occasions and through different agents, growing in strength and amplitude in the way a painting does with each successive stroke of the brush. At times this is achieved through linking speech and action: one character's words are actually enacted by another; at others, it is the different characters' speeches that are inter-reflective. Issues are also introduced and expanded through several chains of images. (which I shall study in Chapter VIII)

The question of State corruption and its disastrous effects is one of the principal subjects developed by way of this technique. The first series of metaphors and comments related to this question are introduced right at the beginning of the play through the conversation between Delio and his friend Antonio who has just returned from France. Antonio's praises of the French court and all the negative elements absent from it, immediately put the reader-spectator on the guard, hinting that here things may be just the opposite; Some of the play's key

words and concepts are mentioned in this initial speech. Perry and Walter (2011: 94-5) say,

Antonio's famous panegyric to the French royal household (I. i. 4-22) frames the action of *The Duchess of Malfi* in terms of the political meaning of privacy or secrecy of rulers, praising the French king for eschewing the intimacy of 'flattering sycophants' (8) and insisting upon the overriding importance to his 'blessed government' of 'a most provident council' (16-17).

The disease-ridden socio-political environment and the poisoned atmosphere of the court, is aptly captured in the contaminated fountain image:

Antonio: [...] a Prince's court

Is like a common fountain, whence should flow
Pure silver-drops in general. But if't chance
Some curs'd example poison't near the head,
Death and diseases through the whole land spread.

(I. i. 11-15)

An idea taken up later on by Pescara though expressed in different terms:

Pescara: [...] These factions amongst great men, they are like

Foxes, when their heads are divided:
They carry fire in their tails, and all the country
About them goes to wrack for't. (III. iii. 36-8)

We also hear of some regulars of the court; the "flatt'ring sycophants" and "dissolute and infamous persons" (I. i.

8-9) who are put in contrast to “a most provident Council” whose members advise princes on “what they ought to do” (I. i. 20), and find it “a noble duty to inform them/ What they ought to foresee” (I. i. 21-22). The impact of this introductory speech is enhanced by the appearance, just after Antonio’s words, of Bosola who provides us with the living example of the court parasite mentioned by Antonio and who blatantly declares the guiding principle of his life:

Bosola: ...Could I be one of their flatt’ring panders, I would hang
on their ears like a horse-leech, till I were full, and then
drop off. (I. i. 52-3)

We see Bosola hanging about the Cardinal, persistently demanding reward for a certain service he claims to have rendered him and for which he had been condemned to the galleys. The enigma created by the unspecified nature of this service and the fact that Bosola had been condemned because of it, as well as his interlocutor’s being who he is (a Cardinal: one of the most high-ranking representatives of order and precisely the first we are presented with in the play) reaffirm our suspicions that the palace dealings here are not as honorable as they should be.

Later in the play, we are to hear of and witness further the behaviour of these “dissolute and infamous persons”. Thus, in Act III, after the sham accusation of theft and expulsion of Antonio from the Duchess’s service (in order to cover up their secret marriage and facilitate their flight to Ancona), we are again presented with an example of the “lice” that abound in the court.

Having expelled Antonio, officially her former ‘master of household’, the Duchess asks the courtiers at her service their opinion of him. These turn out to be less than depreciatory, but Bosola is quick to reveal to us the truth of the situation:

That these are rogues, that in's prosperity,
But to have waited on his fortune, could have wish'd
His dirty stirrup riveted through their noses:
And followed after's mule, like a bear in a ring.
Would have prostituted their daughters to his lust;
Made their first born intelligencers; thought none happy
But such as were born under his bless'd planet;
And wore his livery: and do these lice drop off now?

(III. ii. 228-35)

The question of court corruption is further exposed through the figure of Duke Ferdinand who no sooner appears on stage than proves himself to be the exact opposite of the judicious ruler Antonio had mentioned in the opening act. His flaws as statesman are instantly revealed through his need to be surrounded by flatterers:

Ferdinand: [...] Methinks you that are courtiers should be my
touchwood, take fire when I give fire; that is, laugh when I
laugh, were the subject never so witty. (I. ii. 43-6)

Ferdinand not only highlights this issue through the choice of his *entourage*, but by his direct comments on the subject. Thus, to the Duchess: “You live in a rank pasture here, i'th' court, / There is a kind of honey-dew that's deadly: / “Twill poison your fame” (I. ii. 230-32) (the deadly honey-dew image

echoing the poisoned fountain of Antonio's first speech); and later on, the same idea is expressed in relation to court calumny which is defined by Ferdinand as " [a] pestilent air, which princes' palaces/ Are seldom purged of " (III. i. 50-1).

Apart from this issue, a cumulus of other subjects are presented through this linking method. Upon a close reading of the text, common denominators progressively float to the surface from the apparently fathomless depths of Webster's text, rendering cohesion to superficially disparate elements.

Examples of this type abound, some more subtle than others. There is, for instance, the crab image, which, appears as early as Act I. In the discussion where the two Aragonian brothers try to persuade their widowed sister not to remarry, Ferdinand talks of:

[...] the irregular crab,
Which, though't goes backward, thinks that it goes right,
Because it goes its own way. (I. ii. 241-44)

The image apparently begins and ends in this dissertation. On a deeper level, however, it lingers on and its symbolism is echoed in action in the betrothal scene a couple of speeches further on. Here we have an actual reversal of order with the Duchess wooing Antonio. The same occurs with the Aragonian Brothers' hypothetical argument on their sister's remarriage and the question of hierarchy.

The Cardinal warns the Duchess not to taint the family honour by behaving without 'discretion', nor allowing

“anything without the addition, / Honour,/ Sway your high blood” (I. ii. 220-1), adding, a few lines further on: “You may flatter yourself,/ And take your own choice: privately be married/ Under the eaves of night-” (I. ii. 239-41). These hypotheses are immediately turned into actual fact when the Duchess does both of these things: she marries someone well below her social rank and that, in the absolute privacy of her chamber.

Another such example can be found in Act I. ii. where we hear the Duchess speak of “discord” and “tempest,” referring to her brother’s foreseeable anger at her marriage with Antonio, while ingenuously (and rashly, in the grim light of the shuddering development of events that agonizingly lead to the tragic finale) trying to appease her beloved’s understandable worries about the reaction of his fearsome and tyrannical future brothers-in-law:

Antonio: But for your brothers?

Duchess: Do not think of them:

All discord, without this circumference,

Is only to be pitied, and not fear’d.

Yet, should they know it, time will easily

Scatter the tempest. (I. ii. 386-89)

Then in Act II we witness the realization of the tempest metaphor used by the Duchess, through her brothers’ reaction to her secret betrothal. This is especially true in Ferdinand’s case, and the hazardous optimism of the Duchess’s predictions are further emphasized for the reader-spectator by the Cardinal’s explicit reference to the tempest in Ferdinand’s soul:

Why do you make yourself

So wild a tempest? (II. v. 16-17)

and the actual enactment of the “violent whirlwinds” (II. v. 51) of the Duke of Calabria’s raving fury.

With these subtle hints, this repetition of concepts through simple or metaphoric speech, by the same or different characters, Webster constructs an intricate network of signals, inviting the reader-spectator to play at his intelligent game of clues. Nonetheless, the game becomes at times more complicated and the cohesive links, of greater sophistication.

Such is the case, for instance, of the nexus established between the Duchess’s “fair soul” and the all-important though polemic and ambiguous image of the shining stars in Act IV. Irrespective of the particular interpretation of this image that we could accept as convincing (from the various proposed by critics), the interesting question for us at this stage of our study is how Webster has aptly linked it to the equally central figure of the Duchess.

One of the elements that the Duchess and the shining stars image share is their brilliance amidst the general darkness that shrouds the whole play. Throughout, there are various references to light in connexion with the Duchess. Antonio, describing her to Delio, sums up her qualities in these terms: “She stains the time past: lights the time to come” (I. ii. 134) and Bosola speaks of her “white hand” (III. ii. 293).

The Duchess shares yet another quality with the stars: their guiding force amid the chaos of motives and actions

of the court in which she lives and in spite of her own confusion, is seen by the other characters as their guiding star.

Bosola, a character especially noted for his Machiavellian resolution, is seen towards the end of the play, bending over the dead body of the Duchess, desperately seeking help to reorganize the course of his life just as a mariner would resort to the stars to steer a lost ship in the right direction: "Return, fair soul, from darkness, and lead mine/ Out of this sensible hell" (IV. ii. 340-41). Antonio too, is left without a living compass in his life after his wife's death in Act IV, as he himself confesses: "I have no use/ to put my life to" (V. iv. 62-3).

Furthermore, the permanence of the stars has a certain parallel in the phrase: "I'm Duchess of Malfi still" (IV. ii. 141). And in fact, the Duchess's presence continues to be felt right to the end of the play, haunting Ferdinand, Bosola and Antonio (though each differently), in spite of her physical disappearance.

A similar linking-up of ideas occurs in relation to the concept of life as a living hell. Right from the beginning of the play Webster mentally prepares us for the hellish scenes of the Duchess's torture by making totally different characters mention the subject in distinct contexts. In I. ii. 247 we had heard the Cardinal describe the marriage night as "the entrance into some prison". These words, though pronounced by a character whose words we may legitimately take as having some weight in the play (the Cardinal being the official representative of the religious authority), may not necessarily have alarmed us as to the future

happenings were they not reinforced by similar assertions from a character completely opposed to him in nature, such as Antonio, and coming in a situation drastically different from that in which the Cardinal's words were uttered.

If the Cardinal presents such a negative view of matrimony in the midst of the tense atmosphere of the discussion he and Ferdinand are having with the Duchess, attempting to discourage her from any possible plans she may have had for remarrying, what strikes the real alarm in our mind is hearing Antonio's equally disturbing vision of wedlock in the distended atmosphere of the wooing scene. When the Duchess asks his opinion of marriage, his response is:

Antonio: I take't, as those that deny purgatory,
It locally contains or heaven, or hell;
There's no third place in't. (I. ii. 315-17)

The Cardinal had likened marriage to a "prison". Antonio's description of it is also hardly comforting. With the threatening climate already built up in the play, the idea of there being no third place with respect to married life strikes a menacing note, especially following a reference to hell. We begin to have an uneasy sensation that if things don't work out perfectly for the married couple-to-be, there will be no possibility for its taking the course of a normal marriage, that there will be no middle ground of ordinary every-day life of bitter-sweet sensations, but a radical orientation towards tragedy.

These foreshadowing hints soon acquire horrific concretion as the Duchess's marriage becomes both prison and

Her insistence on the use of the vernacular language instead of Latin in the trial, together with the accompanying threat of refusing to answer the questions put to her if not thus addressed, reveal her acute intelligence and astuteness. We know, through Francisco's hint "you understand Latin" (III. ii. 14), that Vittoria urges putting aside Latin in court purposefully.

The initial exposition of her case by the lawyer makes it absolutely clear to her that she has already been condemned even before the trial proceeds:

Lawyer: Domine Judex converte oculos in hanc pestem mulierum corruptissimam (III. ii. 10-11)

Lord Judge, turn your eyes upon this plague, the most corrupted of women (Luckyj 2008: 57; note 10-11).

She tactfully embarks upon a sagacious plan of making the spectators fully participate in the court proceeding, by having everything spoken in the language they can *all* understand and not only the privileged elite who may be familiar with Latin:

Vittoria: [...] amongst this auditory
Which come to hear my cause, the half or more
May be ignorant in't. (III. ii. 15-17)

Vittoria thus brings into play what in modern terms is called 'public opinion', in this way trying to frustrate the 'naming and shaming' project intended for her by the high and mighty: Monticelso, the Cardinal, and Francisco, the Duke of Florence. (As it is clear from the private conversation between Francisco

They told me my intent was to root up
That well-grown yew, and plant i'th'stead of it
A withered blackthorn, and for that they vowed
To bury me alive: my husband straight
With pick-axe gan to dig, and your fell Duchess
With shovel, like a fury, voided out
The earth and scattered bones, Lord, how methought
I trembled, and yet for all this terror
I could not pray.

Flamineo: No, the devil was in your dream.

Vittoria: When to my rescue there arose, methought,
A whirlwind which let fall a massy arm
From that strong plant,
And both were struck dead by that sacred yew
In that base shallow grave that was their due.

(I. ii. 214-37)

It must be mentioned that according to dramaturgical tradition, normally in scenes where the reader-spectator witnesses a court session, we have on the one side the positive pole, and on the other, the negative. That is to say, we either witness the trial of an innocent individual presided by a biased judge, or we have a just and upright magistrate trying to prosecute a corrupt dignitary disregarding the probable consequences. Thus, the dramatist obtains our emotional participation, whereas in *The White Devil*, both sides are somehow corrupt and guilty.

In this way, one cannot remain indifferent to the Cardinal's unjust naming and shaming project, on the one hand

and neither can one ignore Vittoria's adulterous conduct and her role in instigating Brachiano to murder his wife and her husband, on the other. It is thus that *The White Devil* lacks a conventional hero and heroine and this fact is perfectly crystallized in the court scene.

In this relation, Coleman (2010: 46) comments, "The complicating factor, of course, is that Vittoria is guilty of adultery and of plotting murder, and thus her pleas are as empty and as hypocritical as are those of her accusers; thus Vittoria occupies an ethically and legally problematic position throughout this scene". And as to the *White Devil's* not having a concrete hero/heroine, Smith (1970:82) believes:

"This is hardly a play in which a hero elects to press through with things to the end on some principle or driving design. What it shows us instead are characters moving by emergent expedients to self-regarding ends, whose tragedy lies just in their inevitable collisions with the emergent wills of others".

Going back to our original question: why is it that Vittoria insists so pertinaciously for her prosecution to be carried out in a language intelligible to everyone?, our answer was that it was because she intended to entice the audience at the court session to suppose that so much insistence on the transparency of the legal procedure –starting logically with the full comprehension of its language– may have risen from her possible innocence.

This strategy of Vittoria is not left unanswered by the lawyer. That is to say, when the lawyer in charge of pleading

against her, despairs from proceeding in Latin, in other words, delivering his defamatory accusations in a language unintelligible to the majority –who may thus presume Vittoria’s indictment to be due to reasons they haven’t understood, and not a plot against an innocent victim– he counterattacks.

The counterattack consists of using Latinisms instead of Latin proper, or even inventing high-flown words that indicate the lawyer’s absurdity in his gross use of bombast and excessively inflated language, as Vittoria ridicules in court, and even Francisco, the Duke of Florence finally admits (as I will later discuss in page 42 of this chapter), though unwillingly, since the lawyer has been counted on by both Francisco and Monticelso as their executive arm in their project against Vittoria and Brachiano.

Some critics such as Luckyj (2008: 57 notes.) have pointed out this aspect of the lawyer’s derisory performance in comments such as “the comically ineffectual lawyer”. While this undoubtedly is the case, however, in my opinion, the lawyer in accordance with the desires of the authorities who have employed him, in order to achieve their final aim which is to compensate for the lack of sufficient proof against Vittoria by bringing up charges of a moral nature against her, employs a turgid, inflated language precisely to serve their intentions of obscuring the legal process, even if, in the desperate attempt, the prosecution’s performance falls perforce into ridiculousness.

A good example of this tactic is his presentation of Vittoria to the judges:

Most literated judges, please your lordships,
So to connive your judgments to the view
Of this debauched and *diversivolent* woman
Who such a black concatenation
Of mischief hath effected, that to extirp
The memory of't must be the consummation
Of her and her projections. (III. ii. 26-32; my italic)

“Diversivolent”, for instance, is a nonce-word (Luckyj 2008: 58) coined for the occasion and used by the lawyer as an adjective for the culprit, with Latin roots and sounding overwhelming. Moreover, its lexical neighbour, the adjacent word “debauched”, contaminates, so to say, the strange-sounding “diversivolent” which impresses the audience to a great degree, precisely *because* of its strangeness. The term sounding so alien as it does to their ears, their conjectures as to the extremely horrendous nature of the deeds the word refers to, are validated in their minds through the image the lawyer uses immediately after the singular “diversivolent”: the “black concatenation of mischief” brought about by the offender, metaphorically evokes a malignant tumor to be extirpated.

The lawyer carries on ‘contaminating’ the lexical environment surrounding the choice term among the appellatives he uses for Vittoria, namely, “diversivolent”, commanding attention with the following:

Vittoria: What’s all this?

Lawyer: Hold your peace.

Exorbitant sins must have exulceration. (III. ii. 33-4)

Vittoria's "black concatenation of mischief" is now further explained, but certainly not to clarify the accusation, but to continue the awful, murky meanings implied by the "exorbitant sins" employed by the lawyer, with its hint at irregular and abnormal activities of the indicted woman, whose assumed sins are presented as if pertaining to an anomalous creature, such as a witch. The verb "extirp" is strengthened by the explicit surgical term "exulceration", which again, supposedly expands on the preceding "extirp", but actually adds to the horror created in the audience's minds in relation to Vittoria's deeds, with the reference to the need for revealing her heinous crimes in the same way as an ulcer must be cut open to let out the abominable pus formed in it.

The audience is now witnessing a spectacular tug of war between the lawyer and Vittoria, the latter having initiated it with a most appropriate shooting image in response to the lawyer's:

Lawyer: Well then, have at you.

Vittoria: I am at the mark sir, I'll give aim at you,
And tell you how near you shoot. (III. ii. 23-5)

And now, after the lawyer's talking of extirpations and piercing ulcers, Vittoria counter-attacks, quenching his bursts of oratory with an astute speech, snatching at the images of disease and doctoring but with a sense of fine humour, attracting the attention of the spectators, making the lawyer sound ridiculous in his desperate attempts at making a bugbear of her.

Vittoria: Surely my lord this lawyer here hath swallowed

sense of aversion towards her in the audience, to shock them, through the presentation of her as a transgressive woman, without setting forth the precise nature of the offence supposedly committed and for which the trial is being held, since he doesn't seek to address the reasoning faculty of those present in the courtroom, but to provoke their gut-reaction, their sense of horror at things they haven't understood the exact meaning of, but that 'sound' threateningly obscure, and thus, evil.

Interestingly, in the following scene (III. iii), Webster brilliantly employs 'heratio' –the echo technique– when Flamineo, expounding the question of corruption to the ambassadors, makes a wily reference to the manoeuvres of the lawyer, using the very same adjective –“diversivolent”– the lawyer had maliciously used in his introductory speech at the tribunal when describing the accused Vittoria. Now in a parallel construction, “this debauched and *diversivolent* woman” (III. ii. 28; my italic) becomes, in Flamineo's mouth, “yon diversivolent lawyer”:

Flamineo: [...] O gold, what a god art thou! And O man, what a devil art thou to be tempted by that cursed mineral!

Yon diversivolent lawyer; mark him; knaves turn informers,
as maggots turn to flies; you may catch gudgeons with either.

(III. iii. 22-5)

Not only does Flamineo intentionally apply the lawyer's own 'choice' word to the lawyer himself, but surrounds it with a cumulus of negative references, the most direct and dark being the devil, but also “that cursed mineral” that tempts man, and disreputable individuals such as “knaves” and “informers”.

Flamineo thus takes counter-measures against the crafty man of law's attacks on Vittoria, hinting that if she is being presented as evil, the lawyer, for his part, lacks integrity and so, apart from ridiculous –as was seen in the previous scene (III. ii. 26-50)– he is dangerously hypocritical.

This subtle creation of parallels and echoing of concepts, I believe can't fail to give cohesion to the text, and brings to mind Smith's opinion (1969: 129) that "the scenes interpenetrate one another, are to be thought of, so to speak, as existing side by side".

II. Patterns in reverberation

The symbolic kneeling and rising mentioned in chapter I, forms part of a larger pattern of symbolic gestures within the play. There is a general rise-fall movement in Webster's work that makes the overall rhythm of his play, if charted out in detail, appear like an electrocardiogram –one revealing quite an irregular heartbeat indeed (we shall look at the protagonism of the heart itself as a central symbol in the play later on in chapter VIII).

The sequence of these opposite thrusts gains pace from Act III.iv. when the Duchess, Antonio, and their children are officially banished from Ancona –to which they had escaped from Duke Ferdinand's persecution on the pretext of making a pilgrimage to the nearby Shrine of Loreto– and the play rushes on to its denouement. The comment of one of the pilgrims present at the Shrine on Antonio's plight is quite significant:

First Pilgrim: Alas Antonio!

 If that a man be thrust into a well,
 No matter who sets hand to't, his own weight
 Will bring him sooner to th' bottom...
 Fortune makes this conclusion general,
 All things do help the unhappy man to fall. (III. iv. 38-43)

The well image in this speech and the idea of being dragged down by forces beyond ones' control is reproduced in the Duchess's words to her executioners: "Pull, and pull strongly, for

your able strength / Must pull down heaven upon me” (IV. ii. 230-31). The contrastive rise-fall concept is again touched on –and in a very concise manner, fitted in compactly in two lines– a couple of speeches later by Bolsola:

The element of water moistens the earth,
But blood flies upwards, and bedews the heavens. (IV. ii. 261-62)

Bosola’s speeches after the Duchess’s murder, reflecting to the full his remorse and intense preoccupation with the issue of guilt and damnation include ascent-descent images:

[...] her eye opes,
And heaven in it seems to ope, that late was shut
To take me up to mercy. (IV. ii. 345-47)

My estate is sunk
Below the degree of fear... (IV. ii. 361-62)

O penitence, let me truly taste thy cup,
That throws men down, only to raise them up. (V. ii. 344-45)

As can be seen, Webster by expressing salvation in terms of an upward thrust and damnation as a descending movement, brings to mind the idea of the Conceptual Metaphor. This notion was first introduced by Lakoff and Johnson in 1980 and it is indispensable to mention it here briefly.

“The central characteristic of Lakoff and Johnson’s theory of (conventional) metaphor is that the metaphor is not a property of individual linguistic expressions and their meanings, but of whole conceptual domains. In principle,

any concept from the source domain –the domain supporting the literal meaning of the expression– can be used to describe a concept in the target domain –the domain the sentence is actually about (Croft & Cruse 2004: 195)”.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 31-2) use the formula TARGET DOMAIN IS SOURCE DOMAIN to describe the metaphorical link between the domains. The metaphorical mappings in «They’re in love» is the manifestation of the STATES ARE CONTAINERS metaphor.

A (conventional) metaphor is therefore a conceptual mapping between two domains (Croft & Cruse 2004: 196). One of the kinds of Conceptual Metaphor is the orientational metaphor of which Kövecses (2010: 40) writes the following as its definition: “Their cognitive job, instead, is to make a set of target concepts coherent in our conceptual system. The name of ‘orientational metaphor’ derives from the fact that most metaphors that serve this function have to do with basic human spatial orientations, such as up-down, center-periphery, and the like. For example, all the following concepts are characterized by an “upward” orientation, while their “opposites” receive a “downward” orientation:

“MORE IS UP; LESS IS DOWN: Speak up, please. Keep your voice down. HEALTHY IS UP; SICK IS DOWN: Lazarus rose from the dead. He fell ill. HAPPY IS UP; SAD IS DOWN: I’m feeling up today. He’s really low these days.”

Another example of the ‘orientational metaphor’ in Webster’s work can be found in *The White Devil* when Cornelia

realizes the relationship between her married daughter, Vittoria, and Duke Brachiano:

My 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. 215-9; my italics)

Going back to our discussion of *The Duchess of Malfi*, it must be said that apart from the religious connotations of this rise-fall concept and its close relation to the characters' moral evolution towards salvation (upward thrust) or damnation (downward pull), the image is used, in my opinion, to reflect the general inconstancy of life influenced by a consortium of forces that may have a part in governing it: fickle Fortune, changeable Nature, swinging socio-political structures, and the variable emotional states of the human being himself.

From the impression of general foundering in the play, suffice it here that the idea reaches a climax in the closing scene (Act V. v.) where speech and action join forces to enact this symbolic global collapse. Words such as "struggle", "strike", "slay", "wound", "pain", "ruin", "lost", "bottom", "sink", "fall" and "die" are combined with a verse rhythm that aptly imitates the breathless moments of final struggle and ultimate breakdown.

Bosola's speech on the Cardinal's fate while he (Bosola) himself lies fatally wounded could exemplify what we have just discussed:

Bosola: Yes, I hold my weary soul in my teeth;
 'Tis ready to part from me, I do glory
 That thou, which stood'st like a huge pyramid
 Begun upon a large and ample base,
 Shalt end in a little point, a kind of nothing. (V. v. 75-9)

The vivid image introduced right at the beginning of Bosola's speech epitomizes the mood of the play's last episode as a whole; what is uttered in this scene is an ultimate attempt at making sense of what has been of their lives by men cornered by death, doggedly holding their "weary souls" in their teeth.

The word "weary" itself suggests that the inevitable end would not be unwelcome after all, confirmed by the term "ready" in the next line. After such vocabulary as "weary" and "part", the contrast of "glory" is all the stronger at the end of the second verse, reinforced by the image of strength and erectness formed by "stood'st like a huge pyramid".

The contrastive pairs continue in the fourth and fifth verses with "begun" and "end" on the one hand and "large and ample" together with "little" on the other. The "base" suddenly turns into a "point" and all end up in "nothing". The rhythm of the verse accordingly dies out in a wide dispersion, as if the pompous words of the third and fourth verses had exploded into the minute particles of the closing verse (with its added load of words and their being shorter and more succinct than their counterparts in the preceding lines).

The Cardinal's last speech is another example of this panting, staccato cadence of thought leading up to a final

prostration:

Cardinal: Look to my brother:

He gave us these large wounds, as we were struggling
Here i'th' the rushes. And now, I pray, let me
Be laid by, and never thought of.

[Dies.] (V. v. 88-90)

The Cardinal tries to explain the events that culminated in his receiving a mortal blow. The speech begins with an energetic though summary account of the strife –an account ever more realistic in its conciseness as it is being told by a dying man with only a few moments in which to jam the most significant facts of the struggle.

Equally convincingly, there is a brusque change in the logical progression of thought. Accordingly, the verse gets cut up in four utterances (“and now”- “I pray”- “let me be laid by”- “and never thought of”), broken in between, in a masterful reproduction of the literal gasping for air of a moribund man.

These last two lines, with their spasmodic movement, artfully echo in their cadence, Ferdinand’s explicit reference, a few speeches before, to broken air cells: “Give me some wet hay, I am broken winded” (V. v. 66). And all this is set within a most expressive visual framework: the actual falling to the ground and, being wounded, presumably writhing in pain of one after another of the protagonists until the final view is one of a stage strewn with corpses (no less than seven, including the minor figure of the servant and those bodies present on the stage from before, such as Julia’s and Antonio’s), the final global collapse physically

enacted.

Apart from general patterns such as the one described above, Webster also uses the echo technique in other terrains, less ample in size but significant nevertheless. This is the case with the symbolic image of the Gordian knot. In the betrothal scene the Duchess, having put her ring to Antonio's finger as the sign of wedlock, refers to the marriage bond between them as the Gordian knot:

Duchess: Bless, Heaven, this sacred Gordian, which let violence
Never untwine. (I. ii. 396-7)

The image is indirectly invoked two Acts later, when we hear from one of the pilgrims at the Shrine of Loreto –where the official banishment of the Duchess, Antonio and their children takes place– that “with such violence [the cardinal] took/ Off from her finger” the Duchess's ring [III. iv. 35], metaphorically untying the Gordian knot (also present is the added symbolism of the “sacred Gordian” being untied by the supposedly sacred figure of the Cardinal, and done so in a holy shrine, a place for honouring sacraments, not breaking them).

Not only does Webster use heratio throughout the play, but he also makes his characters explicitly refer to the concept of echoes as well as constructing actual dialogues based on this technique. An example of the first, when characters directly refer to the concept of echoes, is Julia's comments to the Cardinal:

Cardinal: The only way to make thee keep my counsel

Is not to tell thee.

Julia: Tell your echo this
Or flatterers, that, like echoes, still report
What they hear, though most imperfect, and not me. (V. ii. 240-43)

The other example is in the betrothal scene, where the Duchess and Antonio are privately married per “verba de presenti” and the Duchess insists that it is even more valid (in all senses) than if it had been carried out through the ecclesiastical channel:

How can the Church build faster?
We are now man and wife, and ‘tis the Church
That must but echo this. (I. ii. 407-9)

The Church *does* Echo this but in a very macabre manner, as the Echo scene of the last act takes place precisely in the ruins of an abbey, where the reverberations of Antonio’s own voice in the ruined wall sound like the Duchess, warning Antonio of the dangers that await him, and where he imagines seeing her once again, or in an impressive, near telepathic moment –“on a sudden”, in “a clear light”– has a vision of “a face folded in sorrow” (V. iii. 42-3).

Antonio: [...] But all things have their end:
Churches and cities, which have diseases like to men
Must have like death that we have.
Echo: *like death that we have.*
Delio: Now the echo hath caught you.
Antonio: It groan’d,
 methought, and gave

A very deadly accent!

Echo: *Deadly accent.*

Delio: I told you 'twas a pretty one, you may make it
A huntsman, or a falconer, a musician
Or a thing of sorrow.

Echo: *A thing of sorrow.*

Antonio: Ay sure: that suits it best.

Echo: *That suits it best.*

Antonio: 'tis very like my wife's voice.

Echo: *Ay, wife's voice.*

Delio: Come: let's walk further from't:
I would not have you go to th' Cardinal's tonight:
Do not.

Echo: *Do not.*

[...]

Antonio: Necessity compels me:
Make scrutiny throughout the passages
Of your own life; you'll find it impossible
To fly your fate.

Echo: *O fly your fate.*

Delio: Hark: the dead stones seem to have pity on you
And give you good counsel.

Antonio: Echo, I will not talk with thee;
For thou art a dead thing.

Echo: Thou art a dead thing. (V. iii. 17-38)

In relation with the Echo scene, Wiseman (2001: 215) has the following comment: "Echo's authority and 'her' cultural significance as proximate to the subject but pointing towards the absence or extinction of the subject –both– is evident in habitual

figuring of E/echo as ‘a dead thing’ which foretells death. This supra-human, deathly, authority is illustrated by probably the best-known instance of Renaissance E/echo, in *The Duchess of Malfi* where Echo is both person and function”.

It is true, as suggested by Gunby (1972: 445-46) that the Echo scene (V. iii.) is not an essential building block of the plot, and that “its value lies rather in the atmosphere it creates; in the elegiac beauty of the verse, and the prefigurative nature of the snatches¹ repeated by the echo”. But as I have tried to demonstrate, it is also important as the epitome of a major technique used by Webster to transmit the main concerns of the play.

The scene not only refers back to speeches and acts preceding it, but some of those succeeding it also link up with this scene. Thus, in the last act, Bosola, reflecting on the impermanence of man’s deeds in the records of collective memory, comments: “We are only like dead walls, or vaulted graves/ That, ruined, yields no echo” (V. v. 97- 8). This reiteration of the ruin-echo image triggers off in the reader-spectator’s mind a process similar to a video rewind sequence, a rapid regression to the Echo scene, and the recollection of the fact that, by contrast, the Duchess’s ruined remainders *did* yield an echo.

Thus, Webster may be subtly hinting at the presence of an ultimate moral order within the seemingly chaotic world of the play, where the innocent and the guilty apparently reach a

¹ “Be mindful of thy safety”, “O fly your fate”, “Thou art a dead thing”, and “Never see her more”

violent end by the most arbitrary means, without the existence of any logic whatsoever in the meting out of death. For, The Duchess may be as dead as her direct and indirect executioners are at the end, but at least something is left of her; that is, of her own psyche, be it only a dubious echo in a ruined abbey, while her murderers are “laid by, and never thought of” (V. v. 90), their memory irrevocably wiped out.

So, though the Duchess’s curses upon Nature –wishing “those three smiling seasons of the year” would turn into “a Russian winter” (IV. i. 96-7)– logically don’t take effect in their literal sense, metaphorically they do have their realization in the fate of her torturers, whose ‘season’ of flourishing fortune and apparent worldly glory ends in a shameful, sterile oblivion.

In this way Webster establishes the link we mentioned three paragraphs before with the Echo scene, through the image of winter offered by the Duchess in her curse, and in the last scene, by Delio’s closing metaphor. The importance of the melting “print in snow” image with which the play ends, and its possible connexion with Webster’s moral vision discussed above, is all the greater for coming in the closing speech of the play and thus, worth the attention due to concepts presented in such structurally prominent positions:

DELIO: These wretched eminent things
 Leave no more fame behind’em, than should one
 Fall in a frost, and leave his print in snow;
 As soon as the sun shines, it ever melts
 Both form and matter. (V. v. 113-17)

As to Webster's second strategy, that is, constructing actual dialogues based on the heratio (echoing) technique, two fine examples can be found in the wooing scene between Antonio and the Duchess (I. ii.), and in the dialogue between Julia and the Cardinal where the former tries to worm his secrets out of him (V. ii.).

Although the echo technique is used in both scenes, there are very different nuances to it in each. In the first, it is based on one character punning on a word pronounced by the other, with *double entendres* related to love making and matrimony, thus creating a general mood of playful romance ingeniously made to pivot upon the topic of wills and testaments. In this manner, the shadow of death and its morbid retinue darken even the minute patches of light in the play, as is the case in this scene (I.ii.) and the one in the Duchess's bedchamber with its lively atmosphere broken by Ferdinand's entrance and which we shall refer to in greater detail in chapter VIII p. 122:

Antonio: I'd have you first provide for a good husband,
Give him *all*.

Duchess: *All?*

Antonio: Yes, your excellent self,

Duchess: In *a winding sheet?*

Antonio: In *a couple*.

Duchess: St Winifred! That was a strange *will*.

Antonio: 'T were strange
If there were no *will* in you to marry again.

(I. ii. 308-13; *my italics*)

In the scene between Julia and the Cardinal (V. ii.), however, the mood is totally different. Here, tension is masterfully built up through Julia's cunning insistence in her attempt to draw out his secrets from the Cardinal, and the latter's no less dexterous manoeuvres to repulse her attacks. This sets in action a linguistic tug of war between the two characters that is enhanced by an almost obsessive repetition of the verb "tell" in a lexical duet with "know" :

Julia: [...] Come, I must be your secretary, and remove
This lead from off your bosom; what's the matter?

Cardinal: I may not *tell* you.

Julia: Are you so far in love with sorrow,
You cannot part with part of it? Or think you
I cannot love your Grace when you are sad,
As well as merry? Or do you suspect
I, that have been a secret to your heart
These many winters, cannot be the same
Unto your tongue?

Cardinal: Satisfy your longing.
The only way to make thee keep my counsel
Is not to *tell* thee.

Julia: *Tell* your echo this,
[...]

For, if that you be true unto yourself,
I'll *know*. [...]

Cardinal: It hurries thee to ruin: I'll not *tell* thee.

(V. ii. 230-56; *my italics*)

Parallel to this echoing in form, there is an echoing in concept within the dialogue that turns upon the central axis of

secrecy and concealment. Both Julia and the Cardinal base their arguments on this idea but each takes on the other's interpretations of it and moulds it into a new perspective. Thus Julia, trying to make the Cardinal place his trust in her, adroitly recurs to her adulterous relationship with him as a plausible guarantee of her future silence:

[...] do you suspect
I, that have been a secret to your heart
These many winters, cannot be the same
Unto your tongue? (V. ii. 236-9)

When the Cardinal counter-attacks by an attempt at scaring her away with a hint at the darkness of his secret (the murder of his sister the Duchess), Julia deftly turns the Cardinal's logic against him, using the weapon of their own sinful relationship:

Cardinal: Very well; why, imagine I have committed
 Some secret deed which I desire the world
 May never hear of!

Julia: Therefore may not I know it?
 You have concealed for me as great a sin
 As adultery. Sir, never was occasion
 For perfect trial of my constancy
 Till now. Sir, I beseech you. (V. ii. 249-53)

III. The question of “face”

The above discussion takes us to another major concern of Webster’s in *The Duchess of Malfi*: the appearance-reality dichotomy and a whole series of accompanying concepts such as the question of ambiguity and the contrastive spheres of the public and the private, the natural and the artificial, and the fog of secrets and concealed truths that hangs about the play in a way that makes it difficult –if not at times impossible– to distinguish one sphere from the other. Perry and Walter (2011:87) think:

“The distinction between secrecy and privacy is, moreover, especially vexed in the context of the inevitable public significance of a ruler’s domestic arrangements. This is, of course, fundamental to the plot of Webster’s play, and so it is by no means clear that its political and domestic spheres can ever be said to be differentiated.”

And in relation to dichotomy, Mülller-Wood (2007:59) mentions:

“*The Duchess of Malfi* has typically been read dualistically, as a dialogue between different moral and representative registers making thinly veiled political references to early modern England. While the Duchess and her husband Antonio represent sanity, containment and emotionality, her brothers embody madness, excess and political scheming.”

The play’s concern with the disparity between ‘outward appearance and inner substance’ is also one that could legitimately claim the attention of a modern reader-spectator for

its prominence in some image-centered societies of our own times. Webster's concern with false 'face' is, at least to some extent, comparable to the threat –pointed out by social observers of our times– of the consumer society's all-absorbing preoccupation with the public 'look', bringing this twenty-first century life close to a grotesque masquerade. Regarding the relation of Webster's tragedy to contemporary concerns, Callaghan (2011:66) refers to:

“ [...] the assurance not only that the themes and preoccupations of *Duchess* resonate profoundly with the twenty-first century present, but also that Webster demonstrates an incisive dramaturgical and political vision.”

The preoccupation with appearances and their beguiling function runs through the whole play. It stands out so prominently that Dollimore (2010:60) quoting from an important article of Price (1955) says that “according to him, the basic conflict in both *The White Devil* and *The Duchess* [is] one between 'outward appearance and inner substance' in a universe 'so convulsed and uncertain that no appearance can represent reality'. So form itself becomes the reality; it does so in terms of 'double construction, an outer and an inner [...] figure in action and figure in language', all of which serves to bind the scenes of the plays 'into a whole of the highest possible unity'.”

Although, as it will be progressively examined in the present thesis, Webster is more than subtle in his treatment of concepts, and even this appearance-reality dichotomy is, to my understanding, approached in an ambiguous manner so that

finally the readers and the audience are left to work out each situation with which they are presented, with utmost care, for not *always* is there this disparity between what is shown to be and what really is, specially in the case of the positive characters such as Antonio and the Duchess –a typical feature of Webster’s nuanced and complex dramatic technique.

The above-mentioned duality crops up once and again in the characters’ speech, in recurring images and in the action itself. Form is constantly placed in a contrastive relation with substance and it is in this respect that the question of ‘face’ and its constant transformation acquires central importance.

Early on in the play, the reader-spectator is warned not to be deceived by false appearances, and this is done through the figure of Antonio, who describes the Cardinal’s true character to his friend Delio. The latter has *heard* (an instance of the indirect flow of information within the world of the play) of the Cardinal’s being “brave”¹ –used to playing “his five thousand crowns at tennis” (I. ii. 77)– as well as dancing, courting ladies, and fighting duels, in short, engaging in “notably unpriestlike [...] pursuits” (Brown 1997: 51 note 153).

None the less, Antonio is quick to sound the alarm: “Some such flashes superficially hang on him,/for form” (I. ii. 80-1). He directs Delio’s –and so our own– attention to the discrepancy that exists in this case between form and substance:

¹ with the meaning of ‘flamboyant’ (Marcus 2019: 145 note 70) or ‘bold’ and ‘extravagant’ (Brown 1997: 51 note 153)

Antonio: [...] but observe his inward character; he is a melancholy churchman. The spring in his face is nothing but the engend'ring of toads: where he is jealous of any man, he lays worse plots for them, than ever was impos'd on Hercules. (I. ii. 81-5)

Webster is presenting us a corrupt world where order has been broken and moral principles have been emptied of their content, having left behind a mere carcass and where all gestures are but a grotesque mimic of their authentic prototypes. This state of affairs is demonstrated through two salient figures: the “black malcontent[s]”, Flamineo in *The White Devil* and Bosola¹ in *The Duchess of Malfi*.

Flamineo, in the *White Devil* is representative of the kind of character that corrupt worlds of power and authority breed. In a conversation with Cornelia, his mother, pointing the finger at her for his shortcomings as a human being, he blames her for his various vices of character:

Flamineo: Now, you that stand so much upon your honour,

[...]

I would fain know where lies the mass of wealth

Which you have hoarded for my maintenance,

[...]

Cornelia: What? Because we are poor,

Shall we be vicious?

Flamineo: Pray what means have you

¹ Though we will see later on that he gradually steps out of this cliché and undergoes a substantial transformation.

To keep me from the galleys, or the gallows? (I. ii. 290-298)

In these initial lines we already have the iteration of financial references which abound in Webster's works. Not having at his disposal a "mass of wealth", and suffering from the "want of means" is emphasized upon by Flamineo as the principal cause of his becoming a servile knave. An example he gives of the kind of hardships he has had to undergo –amongst other needs, to complete his university studies– because of his lack of funds, carries the seal of his ironic humour:

For want of means...

I have been fain to heel my tutor's stockings

At least seven years. (I. ii. 303-5)

Neurotically humorous and frustrated to the extreme, he lashes out his cutting sarcasm right and left. At one point, he blames his mother for not providing the capital necessary for him to raise his level in the hierarchy of his princely master's attendants, using a most vivid image:

That I may bear my beard out of the level

Of my lord's stirrup. (I. ii. 295-96)

And at another, sparing no one his irony, he declares:

My father prov'd himself a gentleman,

Sold all's land, and like a fortunate fellow,

Died ere the money was spent. (I. ii. 299-301)

Greatly chafed at his non-achievement in spite of his academic training at the famous university of Padua¹, and burdened by his non-fulfilled ambitions that have given rise to this malcontent's complex about his subservient position, Flamineo uses at times not only harsh and cruel words in addressing his mother, but near-savage and grossly offensive assertions towards her:

I would the commonest courtezan in Rome
Had been my mother rather than thyself. (I. ii. 316-17)

and again, the root of all can be traced back to financial concerns expressed with Flamineo-brand wanton humour:

Nature is very pitiful to whores
To give them but few children, yet those children
Plurality of fathers; they are sure
They shall not want (I. ii. 318-21)

Dollimore (2010: 242) analyses Flamineo's character within the historic context of Webster's play:

"The circumstances which Flamineo struggles against were just as familiar in the first decade of the seventeenth century [...] It was frustration rather than exploitation which characterised these men; leaving university they encountered a society unable to use their talents or fulfill their sense of duty, self-esteem and honour [...] Flamineo is concerned not with duty but survival and gain. His situation is more desperate: he suffers from frustration *and* exploitation and

¹ The same university where Bosola had been a scholar (The Duchess of Malfi: III. iii. 39-40)

insofar as they can be distinguished the former makes him susceptible to the latter.”

In the case of Bosola, his biting humour strips situations of their false apparel and shows up their bare –and more often than not, ugly– realities. This is the case with the conversation he has with old Castruchio, a typical courtier with ambitions of advancement in his ‘career’. In the dialogue between them, Bosola gives him various pieces of advice that, according to this experienced Machiavellian (who at least in some parts of this episode, reminds one of a modern parody of a public-image advisor) will guarantee his success in public office.

The first promising sign that qualifies Castruchio for an eminent courtier is, in Bosola’s words, his having “a reasonable good *face for’t*” (II. i. 4 *my italics*). He then recites a detailed list of behavioural distinctives of high-ranking officials:

Bosola: [...] I would have you learn to twirl the strings of your band with a good grace; and in a set speech, at th’end of every sentence, to hum, three or four times, or blow your nose, till it smart again, to recover your memory. (II. i. 6-9)

And as is typical with Bosola’s caustic satire, these up to now innocently cynical recommendations take a sudden meander and enter into a shady terrain where such crucial decisions as those concerned with a man’s life or death are shown to be mere toys in the hands of senior magistrates:

Bosola: When you come to be a president in criminal causes, if you smile upon a prisoner, hang him, but if you frown upon him, and threaten him, let him be sure to ’scape the gallows (II. i. 9-12).

These words prove the extent to which the logical order of things has been tampered with. Even the yardstick with which an official's popular acceptance should –ideally– be measured, must be applied inversely: “[...] if you hear the common people curse you, be sure you are taken for one of the prime nightcaps” (II. i. 22-3).

This conversation is followed by another, again with the protagonism of Bosola and his pungent satire, where the appearance-reality dichotomy is further emphasized. This time Bosola's revelation of the unpleasant truths of life are much more corrosive, in that he makes abundant use of disease imagery and references to witchcraft, in relation, not this time to the deceptive 'face' of public office, but more directly to the human body itself.

Here, Bosola's interlocutor is the Old Lady. The conversation begins with Bosola's significant query: “You come from painting now?” (II. i. 24). The idea of the constant attempts at hiding one's deformities (as is shown in the play, not only physical, but spiritual), and the sheer grotesqueness of this ultimately vain effort, this symbolic “scurvy face physic” (II. i. 26) –to use Bosola's own words– is vibrantly captured in his next image, where we see examples of ‘stabbing similes’ (Bradbrook 1980:99 note 5):

“[...] There was a lady in France, that having had the smallpox, flayed the skin off her face, to make it more level; and whereas before she looked like a nutmeg grater, after she resembled an abortive hedgehog.” (II. i. 29-32)

Bosola's use of prose in skillful imitation of the

‘unpoetic’, every-day aspect of life, his “rough-cast phrase” (II. i. 36) and his cruel down-to-earth look at human society, makes his ideas on false appearances all the more convincing since the vehicle he uses for conveying them –his prosaic language– is itself a great distance apart from the stylized verse associated with officialdom and its codified speech.

Bosola sees a woman’s closet as “a shop of witchcraft” (II. i. 39) where a most striking assortment of raw materials –“fat of serpents; spawn of snakes, Jews’ spittle, and their young children’s ordure” (II. i. 40-41)– is used in order to build up a fake outer image of the person, “all these for the face” (II. i. 42).

In fact, the true “face” of humanity is thought to be so repulsive, that Bosola soon follows up his reference to witchcraft (usually associated with covering up an ugly interior by a beguilingly attractive exterior aspect) with a chain of images connected with disease and deformity:

Bosola: [...] I would sooner eat a dead pigeon, taken from the soles of the feet of one sick of the plague than kiss one of you fasting. (II. i. 42-4)

Bosola makes a transition from prose to verse in order to sum up his theories on human beastliness and fix his conclusions in a set tableau with a formal framework and stylized speech. This is more in tone with the axiomatic mood of this summarizing of his opinions on the innate duality between appearance and reality. His key inquiry is “What thing is in this outward form of man/ To be beloved? [...]” (II. i. 49-50), and offers an ingenious dissertation on what man considers deformity in

animals and yet his total blindness when it comes to his own misshapen inner self:

Bosola: Man stands amaz'd to see his deformity,
 In any other creature but himself.
 But in our own flesh, though we bear diseases
 Which have their true names only tane from beasts,
 As the most ulcerous wolf, and swinish measles;
 Though we are eaten up of lice, and worms,
 And though continually we bear about us
 A rotten and dead body, we delight
 To hide it in rich tissue; all our fear,
 Nay, all our terror, is lest our physician
 Should put us in the ground, to be made sweet. (II. i. 54-64)

These references to disease, decay and death, this special animal imagery (the selected animals –such as the louse and the worm– all conjure up negative concepts), the sense of human life being in essence nothing but a disguised death (“continually we bear about us/ A rotten and dead body” –the verb “bear” highlighting man’s impotence in the face of his ineluctable predicament) and the element of constant panic (“all our fear, nay all our terror”) in man’s life are key factors in the play as a whole and crop up in every scene creating a unique atmosphere that, rather than the action and the formal structure of the play, acts as its true cohesive agent and which we shall further analyze as we advance in this study.

There is another salient reference to witchcraft in connexion with the “face” and its mutations, this time by Ferdinand in his warnings to the Duchess not to try to beguile

his brothers as to a possible remarriage: “ [...] look to’t; be not cunning: /For they whose faces do belie their hearts/ Are witches” (I. ii. 232-34). There are several references to the deceiving outward aspect of things expressed in figurative speech, as is the case with the Duchess’s words to Bosola in the prison cell:

Pray thee, why dost thou wrap thy poisoned pills
In gold and sugar? (IV. i. 19-20)

The society in which the action of the play takes place is shown to be an enormous and grotesque masquerade where every single member is dressed up and masked. There are *direct* allusions to masks within the play. For instance, Ferdinand’s words to the Duchess: “A visor and a mask are whispering-rooms/ That were never built for goodness” (I. ii. 256-57). But there is also the *enacting* of the concept of wearing masks, when Bosola and the guard enter “vizarded”, on Ferdinand’s errand, to take away the Duchess to her prison (Act III. v). In the prison-cell scenes (Act IV), we witness how Bosola changes his clothes and accordingly his role, professing first to be an old man, then a tomb-maker and lastly a common bellman.

This symbolic dressing up is intimately linked with the idea of life being a cumulus of repeated gestures, and mankind, a company of tired actors who rehearse *ad infinitum* the same morbid play. Bosola frantically tries to escape a predetermined course of action even though his independence may be tainted by evil:

I will not imitate things glorious,
No more than base: I'll be mine own example. (V. iv. 80-1)

There are, however, more explicit allusions to the world as a theatre. Take, for example, the following comment of the Duchess on the brink of despair: "I account this world a tedious theatre/ For I do play a part in't against my will" (IV. i. 83-4). The comment carries within it the idea of man's impotence in bearing his fate, and echoes somehow the Duchess's own words when she was being taken away by Ferdinand's soldiers: "...I am arm'd 'gainst misery: / Bent to all sways of the oppressor's will" (III. v. 141-42), the difference being that in this case the ultimate shaping force of Fortune is temporarily substituted by a power one step lower, though not less implacable –the decision of worldly tyrants.

The next reference to the real world and the fictitious one of the theatre within the play itself comes in the scene where Ferdinand explains to Bosola, his mercenary assassin, why he detests him, though Bosola's murdering the Duchess had been carried out in accordance to Ferdinand's own orders:

Ferdinand: For thee, (as we observe in tragedies
That a good actor many times is curs'd
For playing a villain's part) I hate thee for't:
And, for my sake, say thou hast done much ill well (IV. ii. 286-89)

Bosola in turn refers to his role as actor in the last scene when he explains, to the bewildered courtiers who have gathered around him and the dying Aragonian brothers, that the reason for the final strife had been revenge for the Duchess,

Antonio, Julia, and lastly for himself, emphasizing once again the concept of man's powerlessness:

Bosola: Revenge, for the Duchess of Malfi, murdered
By th' Aragonian brethren; for Antonio,
Slain by this hand; for lustful Julia,
Poison'd by this man; and lastly, for myself,
That was an actor in the main of all,
Much 'gainst mine own good nature, yet i'th' end
Neglected. (V. v. 81-86)

And commenting on the part accident has played in the chaotic course of the final contention, highlighting the lack of any logical retributive scheme in the workings of Fortune, he asserts, referring to Antonio's being erroneously slain by Bosola, that Antonio's death was simply due to "such a mistake as I have often seen/ In a play" (V. v. 95-6).

The world of *The Duchess of Malfi* is one where the superficial dressing of things acquires disproportionate importance. We witness a society shamelessly practicing the art of deceit, where everyone wears a mask and where the main concern is to keep the true face beneath it hidden away in the dark closet of privacy. In such a state of affairs, pretence becomes an everyday stuff and the whole of human activity turns into a game of cunning in which the winner is the one who manoeuvres best in the terrain of double-dealing.

Thus, an intricate network of mutual deception is established, with each constitutive member trying to outwit the other. No one is exempt from the need to constantly pretend to

what he or she is not. The characters on the highest steps of the social ladder have to protect their “name”, “fame”, and family “honour” and those at their service need to earn a living at the cost of truth, for they have to serve the interests of their masters and thus become their unscrupulous knaves.

The Cardinal, for example, calls upon the Duchess’s sense of family honour when he advises her not to harbour thoughts of remarriage, asking her not to allow “anything without the addition, / Honour” (I. ii. 220-21) rule over her “high blood”. And later on, when Ferdinand in his fury at the news of his sister’s secret marriage enumerates with unbridled, frenzied rage the tortures he would like to inflict upon her, the Cardinal again brings up the question of their -in his view- endangered family honour:

Cardinal: Shall our blood?

 The royal blood of Aragon and Castile,

 Be thus attainted? (II. v. 21- 3)

This preoccupation with family honour is, of course, rather a superficial one. The Cardinal is more worried about the repercussions that a possible violent act of Ferdinand’s against the Duchess may have on their socio-political position. This is proved by his calculating manoeuvres as to the particular means to get rid of his sister and her husband and children, seeking only to carry out the ‘dirty job’ in a way to make its whitening easier. Ferdinand himself realizes the necessity of this keeping up appearances in his moments of lucidity in between his violent fits of wrath: “So, I will only study to seem / The thing I am not.” (II. v. 63-4).

The Duchess is also concerned with the question of “fame” and “name”. She is anxious that Cariola should keep the secret of her marriage zealously, emphasizing the importance in this matter, of her fame:

Duchess: Cariola,

To thy known secrecy I have given up
More than my life, my fame. (I. ii. 271-73)

Antonio further highlights the significance of this issue when his first promise in accepting the Duchess’s marriage proposal is:

Antonio: Truth speak for me,

I will remain the constant sanctuary
Of your good name. (I. ii. 377-79)

IV. “Wretched Eminent Things” in Masquerade

The question of “name” discussed above is reinforced through out the play by a constant reference to the subject of social hierarchy and the contrast between the “high” and the “low”. Barker (2011: 43-4) says,

Webster’s tragedy is... dominated... by a narrative and thematic negotiation between high and low positions on the social hierarchy. Its aristocratic heroine is doomed when her choice of a lower-born husband enrages her princely brothers; her killer, the spy Bosola, ascribes his sins to the underling’s need to ‘thrive somehow’ in a corrupt hierarchical society.

In fact, Webster’s method for demonstrating the emptiness of a traditionally-imposed ranking is as cunning as the characters he has given life to.

This is not to insinuate that Webster’s play is a revolutionary manifesto against the ruling classes. He does not place corrupt and perverse princes in a direct comparison with innocent and pure masses. The non-royal figures of this play are knaves at the service of the oppressors.

We are not taken out of the court *entourage* to have a glimpse of what may be the human condition far from the infested world of the palace. For even the tiny windows that are opened up to the outside world within the speeches of some characters (especially Bosola) do not let in the rays of a sunnier life or the wafts of a fresher air from the activities of the plebeians.

In fact the glimpses that are given of this other sphere of life are equally disappointing. The representatives of the common people are here composed of usurers, whores, immoral priests, swindlers in the guise of tradesmen, physicians who are indistinguishable from quacks, and (gathered in the madmen's get-together of IV. ii.), a host of other professionals (as, for instance, the lawyer, the tailor, the farmer, and the astrologer) who are only grotesque and out-of-shape shadows of what they should be.

The all-absorbing concern with 'form' instead of 'substance' causes havoc amongst them the same as it does amongst their rulers. And so, significantly, in the bedlam of IV. ii, we hear that the tailor had gone mad "With the study of new fashion" (IV. ii. 51) and that the gentleman usher had lost his mind:

SERVANT: [...] with care to keep in mind

The number of his lady's salutations,

Or 'How do you?' she employ'd him in each morning. (IV. ii. 52-4)

The oppression Webster portrays in *The Duchess of Malfi* is one directed against a member of the ruling class itself. Thus, the main conflict is not between the different classes, but one that confronts the natural order and the true essence of things with an artificial and false state of affairs. In spite of the existence, in the play, of various references to the social hierarchy and the corruption of its top strata, the effect is that of demonstrating the degree to which the malady of deceit and disguise has eaten up the society as a whole, having attacked its

key member –the head. This desolate view, however, is an extended one and as we said above, the disease is shown to have spread out all over.

Nevertheless, what the playwright does insist upon is the importance of the ruling classes' role as models for the community they lead, being the "common fountain" (I. i. 12) that if poisoned at its source, will infect the rest of the society. It is in this respect that the figure of Antonio as a low-ranking but truly honest person is underlined by Webster through the comparisons he makes the other characters establish between him and the rest of the court members, including some high-ranking and therefore supposedly "noble" ones.

In this *indirect* manner, the dramatist ventures to unmask the superficially eminent characters, revealing how their putrid soul compares to their dazzling outer aspect. Insistence on Antonio's social status (his lack of "nobility") and its contrast with his integrity of soul is one of the means by which the duality between the Aragonian brothers' high social position and their psychological depravity is exposed.

Ferdinand, informed by Bosola that Antonio is the man chosen by the Duchess as her husband, exclaims:

Ferdinand: Antonio!

A slave, that only smell'd of ink and counters,
And nev'r in's life look'd like a gentleman,
But in the audit time. (III. iii. 70-3)

Bosola accompanied by a guard of soldiers, all wearing masks including himself, come to take the Duchess away to her prison,

and confronted with her loyalty to Antonio and the severe distress that their separation causes her, exhorts her to “Forget this base, low fellow” (III. v. 116).

The existence of virtue where superficial appearance only proclaims low birth, is commented upon in the conversation between the Duchess and Bosola in the scene where the Duchess pretends to dismiss Antonio from her service. To her remark that although Antonio may have been a man of great integrity, “he was basely descended” (III. ii. 258), –at this moment carrying on with her plan of outwardly showing depreciation towards her steward so as to put their persecutors off the scent– Bosola responds: “Will you make yourself a mercenary herald,/ Rather to examine men’s pedigrees, than virtues?” (III. ii. 259-60). When the Duchess finally confesses that Antonio is in fact her husband, Bosola gives an enthusiastic dissertation on the value of true merit compared to wealth and rank:

BOSOLA: Do not I dream? Can this ambitious age
 Have so much goodness in’t, as to prefer
 A man merely for worth: without these shadows
 Of wealth, and painted honours? possible? (III. ii. 276-79)

And when he is told that the union has been strengthened by the birth of three children, he signals the positive social repercussions of the Duchess’s decision to marry beneath her, opting for the man behind the simple dress, rather than getting dazzled by rich covering tissues:

Bosola: Fortunate lady,
 For you have made your private nuptial bed

The humble and fair seminary of peace.
No question but many an unbenefic'd scholar
Shall pray for you, for this deed, and rejoice
That some preferment in the world can yet
Arise from merit. (III. ii. 280-86)

Webster also presents the relation between moral stature and social position through his ingenious semantic manipulation. The meaning of words such as “noble”, “great” and “honest” are in continual mutation as the play moves on. As the psyche of the characters in relation with whom such epithets are used unfolds before us, and as the situations in which these words are placed change in nature, we are compelled to revise our understanding of them.

This technique renders internal dynamism to the play's language and maintains the interest of the reader-spectator right to the end, warning him not to take the concepts presented in the play at face value, for their appearance may be as misleading as the “false lights” used by tradesmen (to whom the Duchess refers in the wooing scene) “to rid bad wares off” (I. ii. 353,354), contrasting it with Antonio's extremely honest, modest conduct –‘darkening’ his worth.

Antonio: O my unworthiness!

Duchess: You were ill to sell yourself;

This dark'ning of your worth is not like that

Which tradesmen use i' th' city; their false lights

Are to rid bad wares off. (I. ii 350-55)

Ferdinand and the Cardinal are constantly referred to

as “noble” and “great”, yet after hearing Antonio’s description of their corrupt practices as statesmen and then witnessing their shameful machinations against their own sister, as well as the dishonourable means they use to carry out their plans, these words progressively acquire an ironic overtone and we are forced to reassess our moral evaluation of them.

This is what Salgado (1980: 110) alludes to (though his observations in this regard are specifically in connexion with the final act of the play and the importance he tries to prove it has in the general structure) when he comments:

“Our understanding of ‘greatness’ has been modified so that we find it natural to accept Delio’s reference to ‘these wretched eminent things’ and a strange kind of pity even for the arch-villains fills the final scene.”

The important factor in this linguistic process is not only *who* utters these words, or in connexion with *which* characters they are used, but also the context in which they appear. This interaction between context and semantic connotations can, at times, be very subtle indeed.

The concept of “honour”, for example, is used in Act III. ii. by Bosola in relation to an essentially *dishonourable* deed. He suggests that the Duchess should cover up her flight to Ancona with a feigned pilgrimage to the Shrine of Loreto for her departure to be done “with more honour” and her flight to “seem a princely progress” (III. ii. 309-10).

We then hear Cariola, the Duchess’s waiting-woman, protest to the suggestion: “I do not like this jesting with religion,/

This feigned pilgrimage” (III. ii. 316-17). Of course, what is really occurring is that on a deeper level, below the superficial flow of the plot and Bosola’s speech’s contribution to it, lies the fact that Bosola is not only “jesting with religion” but tampering with the meaning of the concept ‘honour’. And Webster, for his part, not only has made one of his characters (Cariola) express unease about Bosola’s suggestion, but he has also made the reader-spectator uncomfortable once again as to how to interpret such seemingly straightforward terms such as “honour”.

In the same way, words such as ‘noble’, ‘free’, ‘amity’ and ‘love’ take on a bitterly ironic tone when pronounced by Bosola referring to the supposedly reconciliatory aim of Duke Ferdinand’s message to the Duchess inviting her husband Antonio to meet him at Naples:

Bosola: Will you reject that noble and free league
Of amity and love which I present you? (III. v. 41-2)

These terms sound terribly ironic because of what we have heard of and seen from Ferdinand (and in the light of his future role as their chief persecutor).

Similarly, one of the pilgrims at the Shrine of Loreto where the Cardinal’s instalment in the habit of a soldier is to take place, declares that he expects “A *noble* ceremony” (III. iv. 6; *my italics*). But as the scene moves on, we realize Webster’s ironic use of the word here since the superficial “honour” surrounding the pompous ceremony hides the hideous fact that by its means the Duchess’s possessions are confiscated and she is banished with her husband and children as the result of the vilest of

conspiracies on the part of the selfsame Cardinal and his brother.

Parallel to this transformation of the concept of nobility and greatness in relation to the Aragonian brothers is the confirmation of the idea with respect to the Duchess and Antonio, though in a different sense in each case. The Duchess, born “noble”, is proved to be so by her behaviour throughout the play.

When, at the beginning of the play, she resolutely decides to defy her powerful brothers, remarrying against their will and against the norms of her society with a man socially beneath herself:

Duchess: [...] If all my royal kindred
Lay in my way unto this marriage:
I'd make them my low foot-steps. And even now,
Even in this hate, (as men in some great battles
By apprehending danger, have achiev'd
Almost impossible actions: I have heard soldiers say so,)
So I, through frights and threat'ning, will assay
This dangerous venture. Let old wives report
I winked, and chose a husband. (I. ii. 263-71)

We may still have had our doubts as to her true “greatness”, sharing Cariola’s uncertainties as to “Whether the spirit of greatness, or of woman/ Reign most in her” (I. ii. 420-1), but by Act IV, all these doubts dissipate as we witness the Duchess’s fortitude in adversity and her courage and resistance in the face of the demoniac tortures to which Duke Ferdinand subjects her.

When Bosola is asked by Ferdinand as to the

Ancona and constantly plans ways of evading her brothers' ferocious persecution, and once she's dead, Antonio is left without any initiative for acting against Ferdinand and the Cardinal.

None the less, the words "honesty" and "noble" are positively charged when used in connexion with him. He differs from the other court 'habituals' in that he is neither a flatterer nor an intelligencer, but a modest and faithful servant and a valiant soldier. These qualities are confirmed once and again both through what is said of him by others and by his own actions.

His integrity is highlighted, for instance, through a conversation between Duke Ferdinand and the Cardinal where the former expresses his belief that Antonio, being the Duchess's major-domo, would logically serve better as their spy in her household than Bosola. But the Cardinal urges that Ferdinand is wrong to think so, for Antonio's "nature is too honest for such business" (I. ii. 153).

His worth as a courtier and a soldier is not only pointed up by Bosola's praises of him:

...he was an excellent
Courtier, and most faithful; a soldier, that thought it
As beastly to know his own value too little
As devilish to acknowledge it too much;
Both his virtue and form deserv'd a far better fortune:
His discourse rather delighted to judge itself, than show
itself. (III. ii. 250-55)

V. Skeletons in the cupboard

The question of false appearances and the mechanisms of deceit at work in the world of *The Duchess of Malfi*, together with Webster's constant semantic manipulation that through the communicative vehicle used by the playwright mirrors the theme of misleading "faces" and forms, leads us to another major issue in the play, closely linked to the one just mentioned: that of hidden secrets and their inevitable retinue of mutual mistrust, attempts at concealment, the quest for discovery, and the strategies deployed to achieve this end.

In the society depicted by the play, the mainstream of activity is directed either towards the covering up of shameful acts or de-encysting of ugly secrets –not for the purpose of purging evil but rather to discover the opponents' skeletons in the cupboard, in order to use them as weapons in the general, though apparently aimless power struggle.

Thus, this dangerous game of hide and seek becomes yet another thematic nexus in the play. The search for information that could compromise the enemy and the struggle for keeping one's own secrets intact, creates a microcosm where there exists an undercurrent of subversive activity constantly moving beneath the surface structure of the play. Whole colonies of eavesdroppers and informers continually gnaw at people's privacy like termites. "...flatterers, panders,/ intelligencers, atheists: and a thousand such political/ monsters" (I. ii. 85-7) thrive on the power-hunger of such tyrants as Duke Ferdinand

instinctively feel where to set the limits of intimacy, and so he tries to dissuade Julia from further investigation with his cool, lucid reasoning, reminding her of the perilous ground she is treading:

Cardinal: Be well advis'd, and think what danger 'tis

To receive a prince's secrets: they that do,

Had need have their breasts hoop'd with adamant

To contain them: 'tis more easy

To tie knots, than unloose them: 'tis a secret

That, like a ling'ring poison, may chance lie

Spread in thy veins, and kill thee seven year hence.

(V. ii. 257-63)

Webster creates a world of intrigue and ambiguity where suspicion and doubt are made to form such a dense underbrush that even the reader-spectator finds it hard to see through, though this does not mean that Webster's art itself is incoherent. The point is that, as we have observed in our previous discussions of his techniques, Webster intentionally creates this uncertain atmosphere through the reiteration, at strategically chosen intervals, of signalling speeches and images.

In the case of the theme of secrets and conspiracy, the method is again put to use and we have already mentioned some of the references that are accumulated in order to build up this sealed world of secrets tainted with blood, from which information leaks out only on peril of the informer's life.

Accordingly, the mistrust of the conspirators towards their own agents is shown to be justified well before the end of

the play (when Bosola, their principal tool for doing evil, turns against them). As was mentioned before, the question of feigned behaviour is closely linked to the issue of hidden secrets; and in what concerns the justifiable mistrust of the masters towards their agents, we must refer to the backdrop of a society ridden with the malady of pretence and deceptive conduct that we discussed in connexion with the appearance-reality dichotomy (Chapter III above).

Characters such as Ferdinand are well aware of the sort of people who are at their service: servants who “...do [publish] the bounty of their lords,/ Aloud; and with a covetous searching eye,/ To mark who note them” (II. v. 6-8), agents who shift allegiances as soon as they feel their interests are elsewhere –as is pointed up by Bosola’s words to Julia regarding his relation with the Cardinal:

Bosola: I have depended on him,
 And I hear that he is fall’n in some disgrace
 With the Emperor: if he be, like the mice
 That forsake falling houses, I would shift
 To other dependence. (V. ii. 203-6)

And this at best, for the majority of these agents can be really dangerous, as Bosola acutely remarks when he comments on how he must spy on the Duchess, having been recommended to her service to hold the post of the “provisorship o’ th’ horse” by Ferdinand:

Bosola: As I have seen some
 Feed in a lord’s dish, half asleep, not seeming

To listen to any talk: and yet these rogues
Have cut his throat in a dream: What's my place?
The preovisorship o'th' horse? say then my corruption
Grew out of horse dung. I am your creature. (I. ii. 206-11)

which is doubly foreboding, since Bosola himself acts exactly in the same fashion, beguiling and murdering the Duchess and later on going for his former masters, Duke Ferdinand and the Cardinal, though in Bosola's particular case, this treason to the Aragonian brothers, his final betrayal, is based on a psychological transformation in character, in order to take revenge upon the chief conspirators, rather than out of personal interest.

The figure of the intelligencer is of utmost importance in the play. Bosola on one occasion describes him as "a very quaint invisible devil in flesh" (I. ii. 183). In fact the informants are shown to lose all their human qualities and become soulless "creatures" at the service of the one who offers the highest reward. Bosola has several allusions to this idea: "It seems you would create me/ One of your familiars" (I. ii. 183-4) (with the significant choice of the verb "create") and then "I am your creature" (I. ii. 211).

The images used in connexion with secrecy and trust are built upon the essential premise of the inside-outside duality in life, and the associations they prompt are all negative. Cariola, promising the Duchess absolute silence, links the idea of secrets with poison and danger:

Cariola: ...I'll conceal this secret from the world
As warily as those that trade in poison,

Keep poison from their children (I. ii. 274-6).

These references are echoed in the Cardinal's words of precaution to the curious Julia: "'tis a secret/ That, like a ling'ring poison, may chance lie/ Spread in the veins, and kill thee seven year hence" (V. ii. 61-3). These foreboding allusions are dramatically enacted when Julia is murdered by the Cardinal who gives her a poisoned Bible to kiss and swear her silence on.

As well as references to poisoning, we had also heard the Cardinal allude in a more direct manner to death in relation to the discovery of shameful secrets, which had signalled the outcome of Julia's persistent inquiries:

Cardinal: Think you your bosom

Will be a grave dark and obscure enough

For such a secret? (V. ii. 269-71)

The concept of compromising truths as things to be hidden in a closed compartment is graphically represented in the play through images that refer to wearing them in the innermost part of the body –the bosom, the abode of the soul. And as we have seen above, since there is a continual link established between secrets and darkness and death, as well as a sense of ugliness and deformity, the purity of the human soul itself is put to question whenever a suggestion is made that its sanctuary – the bosom– has something concealed from the public view:

DUCHESS: As I taste comfort, in this friendly speech,

So would I concealment-

BOSOLA: O the secret of my prince,

Which I will wear on th' inside of my heart." (III. ii. 298-301)

DUCHESS: O, let me shroud my blushes in your bosom,
Since 'tis the treasury of all my secrets." (I. ii. 418-419)

FERDINAND: Your darkest actions: nay, your privat'st thoughts,
Will come to light" (I. ii. 237-8) (where inner thoughts
are directly associated with nefarious action).

Nevertheless, there is a single metaphor that masterfully transmits the linked themes of the appearance-reality dichotomy and the connexion between secrets and guilt: Duke Ferdinand's final identification with the wolf, in a conversation between him and Bosola after the Duchess's murder on Ferdinand's orders. The latter is convinced that the wolf will search the Duchess out:

Ferdinand: The wolf shall find her grave, and scrape it up;
Not to devour the corpse, but to discover
The horrid murder. (IV. ii. 306-8)

Towards the end of the play, however, it is Ferdinand himself who is seen in a churchyard, howling and digging up graves like a wolf, and again the idea of outer aspect hiding the inner truth is expressed in terms of the covering skin:

Doctor: One met the Duke, 'bout midnight in a lane
[...]
Said he [Ferdinand] was a wolf: only the difference
Was, a wolf's skin was hairy on the outside,
His on the inside: bade them take their swords,
Rip up his flesh, and try. (V. ii. 16-19)

“The wolf, of course, has been a constant verbal figure in the play, particularly in the torture scenes of Act Four, so it is dramatically fitting that this is the form Ferdinand’s mental torture takes. Ferdinand himself [...] does display an extreme emotionalism and impatience, which the other characters take as evidence of his madness” (Coleman 2010: 104).

Wymer (1986: 45) mentions Webster’s masterful use of this image as a dramatic technique when he declares that “in the delusion of Ferdinand that he is a wolf, Webster is able to imply guilt and remorse through the traditional belief that wolves discover murders by digging up the victims and that those suffering from Lycanthropia have wolf’s hair under the skin like the hair shirts of penitents, without resorting to the already stereotyped terminology of despair.” Likewise, Coleman (2010: 118) has a very interesting vision when he says,

“Webster’s use of the werewolf image can thus be seen to have a clear strategic function in the drama: it draws on a link already present in early modern Protestant culture between wolves and Catholics, intensifying it to establish the evil nature of Ferdinand. Whether that evil is intended to be ultimately political or spiritual in nature is not clear, and may well depend on the particular prejudices of the individual audience member: but Webster does not seem to preclude either interpretation.”

However, there are, in my opinion, wider connotations in Ferdinand’s lycanthropia. As was shown up to this point in my study, Webster, through his echo technique and that of

cumulative signals (in image, speech and action) had prepared the way for a link-up between the different concepts of corruption, pretence, concealment and guilt. Ferdinand's delusion is part of this vast inter-related network. This particular association of man with wolf had already been hinted at in the opening scenes of the play and most strikingly in the speech I examined earlier on (chapter III. P. 67-8), where Bosola uses a comparison between the animal and human worlds (including a reference to wolves) to expose the concept of hidden deformity (II. i.).

Moreover, there is yet another major connexion between Ferdinand's lycanthropia and the question of concealed realities. As was mentioned before (in this chapter p. 92), Ferdinand's acting as a wolf after the Duchess's death is what he had predicted would be the wolf's behaviour and yet it is he himself who digs up graves at the end, searching out his true self more than anything else.

This is the ultimate confirmation of Ferdinand's secret desire throughout the play to be in Antonio's stead –that is, in a carnal relationship with his own sister. All this time Ferdinand has kept his secret incestuous inclinations towards the Duchess deep inside his bosom, so much so that even he himself seems to be unaware of it until too late. And so, his final wolfish digging takes on the added symbolic connotation of a search for his real identity.

VI. A World of Tricksters

In the above section we examined the subject of secrets and the way in which Webster presents its different aspects to us. Here, we shall have a closer look at some of the implications of the concept of concealment and how this question triggers off a chain of actions and reactions that bind together the different episodes of the play.

We have already discussed the importance of the informer figure in the *Duchess of Malfi*. What must be added is that throughout the play, their function as information-carriers whose activities are always taking place under cover is dramatically enacted. The domain of private thought and action is visually marked off through walls, curtains and arras that are constantly present and behind which there is always someone listening or watching without being heard or seen.

There is this obsessive urge to break through others' privacy and peep at the naked realities of their lives with the firm conviction that "a man's nature is best perceived in privateness, for there is no affectation"¹. Bosola, having entered Julia's cabinet without the Cardinal's knowledge, overhears the Cardinal's confession to Julia on his prominent role in the Duchess's murder. He also overhears the Cardinal's soliloquy later on when he speaks of his intention to kill Bosola when he's done with his

¹ Francis Bacon in *Essays* as quoted in *The New Pelican Guide to English Literature: 2, The Age of Shakespeare*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1982, p. 111.

services:

Cardinal: About this hour I appointed Bosola
To fetch the body: when he hath serv'd my turn,
He dies. (V. iv. 28-30)

This practice is shown to be so extended that even when there is no evil intention at work, people at times stand concealed from others with their ears pricked up to their conversations. This is the case with Cariola who is placed behind the arras by the Duchess herself during her wooing of Antonio.

However, Webster misses no chance to manipulate this game for creating strong impacts. In Act III. ii. after a most jovial and homely conversation between Antonio, Cariola and the Duchess in the latter's private chamber, the Duchess is left talking alone –in the belief that the other two are still present in the room– while Antonio and Cariola decide to play an innocent joke on her and steal out of her room.

The happy, relaxed atmosphere is then suddenly broken when Ferdinand unexpectedly appears instead and catches the Duchess speaking of the pleasures of married life. Her privacy thus violated, the mood abruptly changes from one of warm intimacy to that of threat and terror:

Duchess: You have cause to love me, I ent'rd you into my heart

[*Enter FERDINAND, unseen.*]

Before you would vouchsafe to call for the keys.
We shall one day have my brothers take you napping.
Methinks his presence, being now in court,
Should make you keep your own bed: but you'll say

Love mix'd with fear is sweetest. I'll assure you
You shall get no more children till my brothers
Consent to be your gossips. Have you lost your tongue?

[*She sees FERDINAND holding a poniard.*]

'Tis welcome:

For know, whether I am doom'd to live, or die,
I can do both like a prince.

[*FERDINAND gives her a poniard.*]

Ferdinand: Die then, quickly.

Virtue, where art thou hid? What hideous thing
Is it, that doth eclipse thee? (III. ii. 61-73)

And so, being constantly threatened by the conspiracy of others, the characters in this play find their only defense in counter-conspiracy and thus the plot is driven on by a series of manoeuvres and counter-manoeuvers. The word "trick" is used with great frequency in the text:

Cardinal: What trick didst thou invent to come to Rome,
Without thy husband? (II. iv. 2-3)

Duchess: You had the trick, in audit time to be sick,
Till I had sign'd your *Quietus* (III. ii. 186-87)

Doctor: I must do mad tricks with him,
For that'sl the only way on't (V. ii. 59 - 60)

Cardinal: When he's asleep, myself will rise, and feign
Some of his mad tricks, and cry out for help,
And feign myself in danger" (V. iv. 14-16)

The society of the play is so immersed in the negative dynamics of fraud, that even the honest have to resort to it in

order to defend themselves from their sanguinary adversaries. The courtiers of Amalfi are locked up (II. ii) when the pregnant Duchess falls in labour, having already plotted a “politic safe conveyance for the midwife” (II. i. 168), and to justify their confinement, a story is rapidly put together on a supposed theft in the palace, and all this because the discovery of the true state of affairs would be fatal for both the Duchess and Antonio.

Later on, the Duchess has to turn for aid to another “trick” to facilitate their flight to Ancona: the sham ousting of Antonio from his post as her steward (III. ii.) and then her own feigned pilgrimage to the Shrine of Loreto. This trick of the Duchess brings to mind Dolan’s statement (2011:124):

“The class disparity between the Duchess and Antonio leads observers to posit a familiar story –a dishonest steward– and to ignore other possibilities that are equally conventional or at least imaginable, such as the lusty widow and the steward whose ambition leads him to marriage rather than theft. The Duchess plays to the popular disparagement of Antonio when she accuses him of theft as an excuse to get him out of her castle and away from her brothers.”

Unlike the innately treacherous Aragonian brothers, however, who have absolutely no scruples in devising their sordid stratagems, the morally conscientious characters reveal once and again their reluctance at paying the villains in their own coin. Thus the Duchess, sickened at her own use of artifice to rebuff her brothers’ attacks, exclaims:

Duchess: O misery, methinks unjust actions

Should wear these masks and curtains; and not we (III. ii. 158-59).

a phrase that echoes Antonio's earlier couplet:

Antonio: The great are like the base; nay, they are the same,
When they seek shameful ways to avoid shame. (II. iii. 51-2)

On Antonio's reaction to the contrivance that his wife of royal blood has come up with, Brown¹ (1997: 88) has an insightful comment. He finds it "a devastating second thought; if this is so, he has not made a 'noble' marriage and has not bettered himself." But it must be said that in fact, characters such as the Duchess are shown never to be able to pretend for long, as a contrast to the Cardinal who is coolly calculating to the end:

Bosola: [...] how this man [Cardinal]
Bears up in blood! seems fearless! Why, 'tis well:
Security some men call the suburbs of hell,
Only a dead wall between. (V. ii. 332-35)

The Cardinal obviously has no hesitations in following his fiercely resolute course of villainy, his "security" (theologically speaking) placing him in the very "suburbs of hell". His unflinching evil drive is finely encapsulated in the soliloquy where, holding a book, he muses on the concept of sin and retribution :

Cardinal: I am puzzl'd in a question about hell:
He says, in hell there's one material fire,
And yet it shall not burn all men alike.

¹ Note 51

Lay him by. How tedious is a guilty conscience ! (V. v. 1-4)

The Duchess, on the other hand, is more than ready to give up her pretence on the smallest hint of her interlocutor's trustworthiness. When Bosola cunningly sings the praises of Antonio , the Duchess is so moved (and in fact so much wishing to cast off all her defensive masks) that she reveals the dangerous fact of Antonio's being her husband to this arch-spy :

Duchess: O, you render me excellent music.

Bosola: Say you ?

Duchess: This good one that you speak of, is my husband.

(III. ii. 273-75)

None the less, Webster seems to follow a subtler intention in making the Duchess's defensive ruses ultimately fail. Webster subversively questions the value of such solid concepts as human wisdom, and this is yet another aspect of what we mentioned earlier on, as the dramatist's presentation of the essential ambiguities of life. The Duchess tries to use her wisdom in circumventing her brothers' stratagems against her, but her being too wise is one of the main causes of her falling in the trap. When Cariola instinctively disapproves of Bosola's proposal to make a pilgrimage to the Shrine of Loreto in the way to Ancona where the Duchess has planned to escape with Antonio instead of going there directly, the Duchess calls her "a superstitious fool" (III. ii. 318), while she herself seeks to "wisely" prevent future disaster, accepting Bosola's plan that leads her –directly into the snare.

In fact wisdom and learning are proved to be quite

lame in solving man's problems from many points of view. This question links up with what we will later on allude to as Webster's presentation of the conflict between the natural and the artificial (chapter VII page 112), in this case defined in terms of the power of instinctive reactions (natural force) as opposed to those prompted by bookish wisdom (artificial force). The Duchess herself refers to this when she asserts that "...all our wit/ And reading brings us to a truer sense/ Of sorrow" (III. v. 66-8) and Delio becomes Webster's mouthpiece for opposing the natural cycle to man's wisdom when he declares "Wisdom doth not more moderate wasting sorrow/ Than time" (V. iii. 30-1).

Nevertheless, it is Bosola, who has studied himself melancholic, that has the harshest words on wisdom and its impotence in the illogical and chaotic world in which he has become a sneering malcontent:

Bosola: O sir, the opinion of wisdom is a foul tetter, that runs all over a man's body: if simplicity direct us to have no evil, it directs us to a happy being. For the subtlest folly proceeds from the subtlest wisdom. Let me be simply honest. (II. i. 81-5)

In fact the frequent visions of madness in the play could be related to the ambiguities we have mentioned in connexion with the major themes examined in the present study, its frontier with reason and wisdom is typically shown by Webster to be blurred, bringing to mind Tourneur's words¹:

¹ Cyril Tourneur in *The Revenger's Tragedy* as quoted in *The New Pelican Guide to English Literature: 2, The Age of Shakespeare*, ed. by Boris Ford, Penguin, , 1982, p. 449.

“surely we are all mad people, and they/ Whom we think are, are not; we mistake those;/ ‘Tis we are mad in sense, they but in clothes”.

The tricks played upon the characters by wisdom have, in fact, a significant role in binding together the action of the play through irony. Thus the Duchess’s decision to marry Antonio, preferring his worth to “wealth and painted honours” (which would, in other circumstances and in a different social context have been a “wise” step to take) actually places her at the mercy of her despotic brothers.

However, the evil-doers aren’t immune to the ironic workings of a certain cunning wisdom, either. The Cardinal, for example, is in the end the victim of his own efforts to outwit his opponents. Not taking into consideration that one of the many intelligencers that abound in the court may be overhearing his conversation with Julia, he confesses to her his protagonism in plotting the Duchess’s murder and then, in what he believes is a wise act of unscrupulous stagecraft, poisons her to silence (see above page 91 in chapter VI).

Nevertheless, this stratagem puts him in the hands of Bosola who, having overheard the conversation and witnessed Julia’s killing, is now resolute to take revenge on the Cardinal. And even more ironically the way is paved for him by the Cardinal himself, who believing that he will astutely get rid of Bosola once he has served his purposes, gives him the key to his lodgings and asks him to go there at midnight to help clear away Julia’s corpse.

And finally in Act V scene iv, the Cardinal's orders to the courtiers not to rise from bed if they hear Duke Ferdinand screaming in his fit of madness, nor to come to the Cardinal's rescue upon hearing his cries for help, since he may be feigning so, to test their promise (and all this to facilitate the transfer of Julia's body away from sight and probably to kill Bosola at the same time) make possible his own death by Bosola:

Cardinal: [...] I pray, all to bed,

And though you hear him in his violent fit,

Do not rise, I entreat you.

Pescara: So sir, we shall not –

Cardinal: Nay, I must have you promise

Upon your honours, [...]

Pescara: Let our honours bind this trifle.

Cardinal: Nor any of your followers.

Pescara: Neither.

Cardinal: It may be to make trial of your promise

When he's asleep, myself will rise, and feign

Some of his mad tricks, and cry out for help,

And feign myself in danger.

Malateste: If your throat were cutting,

I'd not come at you, I have protested against it. (V. iv. 5-17)

Pescara acutely sums up this ironic turn of events in his exclamation:

How fatally, it seems, he did withstand

His own rescue! (V. v. 91-2)

Cardinal. Webster at times uses field commentators such as Antonio to point up the perfidious manipulation of information by these men, as is the case with the following lines on the Duke:

Antonio: He speaks with others' tongues, and hears men's suits
With others' ears: will seem to sleep o'th' bench
Only to entrap offenders in their answers;
Dooms men to death by information.
Rewards, by hearsay. (I. ii. 98-102)

We are then left to observe how this description is borne out in each and every detail. Bosola acts as his agent and messenger and thus his “ear” and his “tongue”. And Ferdinand’s periods of apparent inactivity are proved to be in fact pregnant with mischief, incubation periods during which data are processed and strategies are developed as, for example, the span of time before his sudden irruption in his sister’s bed chamber, inciting her to commit suicide. In this way not only speech, but non-speech –the ominous silences in the play– is shown to be perilous.

Noise and silence are equal protagonists in *The Duchess of Malfi*. On the one hand, the play is filled with all sorts of vocal manifestations. There is the constant murmuring and whispering of the spies who report their valuable items of news (‘intelligence’) to their masters. We get constant references within the text to speaking and hearing:

Bosola: ...I heard him name

Bosola, and my death: listen, I hear one’s footing; (V. iv. 31-2)

Ferdinand: What say to that? Whisper, softly: do you agree to't? (V. iv. 34-5)

Bosola: I'll whisper one thing in thy dying ear,
Shall make thy heart break quickly. (V. iv. 55-6)

Pescara: The accent of the voice sounds not in jest. (V. v. 30)

A “private conference” is shown to be an almost impossible thing, for here, walls nearly always have ears. In the scene where the Aragonian brothers meet to discuss their sister’s secret marriage, when the Cardinal urges Ferdinand to “speak lower”, the latter bursts out with “Lower?/ Rogues do not whisper’t now, but seek to publish’t” (II. v. 4-5). Even concepts such as modesty are expressed in metaphoric terms to do with sounds and echoes. Bosola, praising Antonio for having a humble estimate of his merits, comments that

Bosola: His breast was fill’d with all perfection,
And yet it seem’d a private whisp’ring room:
It made so little noise of’t. (III. ii. 256-58)

In this closed community, rumours thrive and information is mostly obtained through indirect channels. This fact is reflected in many of the speeches in the play where the characters usually comment on each other’s qualities, specifying that theirs is not a first-hand knowledge.

The speeches abound in formulas such as “ ’twas credibly reported by one...” or “I heard one say...”. This is the case, for example with Antonio’s description of Bosola’s character to Delio where he tells him “I have heard/ He’s very valiant” (I. i.

74-5), or Delio's words on Ferdinand's reaction upon hearing news from the Duchess's residence:

I heard one say the Duke was highly mov'd
With a letter sent from Malfi. (II. iv. 78-9)

This indirect information transmission is actually enacted in Act III. iii. where instead of repeating his earlier *tour de force* (making Ferdinand and the Cardinal reveal their inner selves to us by their heated exchange (II. v) on the Duchess's remarriage), Webster informs us of the Aragonian Brothers' reaction to Bosola's recent piece of news (disclosing the identity of the Duchess's lover-husband) through the remarks of the courtiers present on the occasion. Thus, Pescara notes "The Lord Ferdinand laughs" (III. iii. 53) which receives Delio's observation: "Like a deadly cannon that lightens ere it smokes" (III. iii. 54). The Cardinal's mood is equally indirectly reported by Silvio:

"That cardinal hath made more bad faces with his oppression than ever Michael Angelo made good ones: he lifts up' nose, like a foul porpoise before a storm" (III. iii. 50-2).

In the maze of hearsay that conforms the play, ascertaining the degree of truth of each information item becomes of capital importance and leads to a series of manoeuvres –either to find the truth of a matter or to distort it for the purpose of distracting the enemy– that drive the plot forward. Bosola, in one of the sessions in which he reports back to Ferdinand the information gathered in the Duchess's palace, refers precisely to this uncertain quality of rumours. His response to Duke Ferdinand's "How thrives our intelligence?" (III. i. 57) is "Sir,

uncertainly:/ 'Tis rumour'd she hath had three bastards, but/ By whom, we may go read i'th' stars" (III. i. 58-60).

Rumours, however, not only have this passive aspect, but can be actively used for misleading public opinion. The Cardinal is a genuine expert in such campaigns of misinformation. In an attempt to give a respectable explanation to the courtiers as to the cause of his princely brother's "strange distraction", he invents a sophisticated hoax which itself exploits the familiar indirect information channels of the play:

Cardinal: [...] Thus they say it grew:
 You have heard it rumour'd for these many years,
 None of our family dies, but there is seen
 The shape of an old woman, which is given
 By tradition, to us, to have been murder'd
 By her nephews, for her riches... (V. ii. 88-93)

attributing Duke Ferdinand's fits to his encounter with this apparition (it is significant how the Cardinal, through his manipulation of the incorporeal tinge of the concept "rumour", astutely disconnects himself from what he's reporting and thus achieves a certain immunity from any possible future accusations of falsehood). And towards the end of the play, he again evinces his ability in manipulating the means of communication to his own advantage when, referring to his poisoning of Julia, he tells Bosola:

Cardinal: [...] I'll give out she di'd o 'th' plague;
 'Twill breed the less inquiry after her death. (V. ii. 318-19)

Letters and messengers who distribute them are

important vehicles in the transmission of deluding information. Delio, for instance, warns Antonio to misdoubt the Aragonian brothers' apparent desire for reconciliation:

Delio: For though they have sent their letters of safe conduct
For you to repair to Milan, they appear
But nets to entrap you. (V. i. 3-5)

Messengers continually enter and exit, bringing and taking news to inform some and deceive others. This shuttle movement creates an atmosphere of febrile activity within the play, where the dynamism of the world it depicts lies not so much in the actual "doing" of things, but in a agitated bustle of Machiavellian scheming. It brings to mind Rupert Brook's description of Webster's characters: "...their foul and indestructible vitality fills one with the repulsion one feels at the unending soulless energy that heaves and pulses through the lowest forms of life... A play of Webster's is full of the feverish and ghastly turmoil of a nest of maggots." (qtd Holdsworth 1989: 56-7)

The combined role of a shrewdly competent messenger and a misinforming message can be seen in Act III. v. where Bosola delivers to the Duchess, her brother Ferdinand's letter in which he tries to lure Antonio away from his safety in the Duchess's train, with the pretext of being in need of him in a business in Naples. The letter is replete with "politic equivocation[s]" (using the Duchess's expression (III. v. 29)). The crafty use of language is signalled to us by the Duchess, who interprets the ambiguous phrase of Ferdinand's –"Send Antonio to me; I want his head in a business" (III. v. 27)– in the following

manner: “He doth not want your counsel, but your head;/ That is, he cannot sleep till you be dead (III. v. 29-30). She then goes on to demonstrate the remaining *double entendres* in the missive.

Webster again warns the reader-spectators that they should always consider the possibility of there being a necessity for a deeper reading-interpretation of the play’s language, and on this occasion he does so through the figure of the Duchess who, fully alert to protect her loved ones, discerns the trap laid for them: “...here’s another pitfall that’s strewed o’er/With roses. Mark it. ’tis a cunning one” (III. v. 31-2) and sifts the true meaning of her brother’s phrases from their misleading metaphoric form. And thus, the correct reading of the lines “*I stand engaged for your husband for several debts at Naples: let not that trouble him, I had rather have his heart than his money*” (III. v. 33-5) is shown by her to be:

“That he so much distrusts my husband’s love,
He will by no means believe his heart is with him
Until he see it.” (III. v. 37-40)

Bosola, on the other hand, endeavours to “blanch mischief” (III. v. 23). He artfully tries to beguile Antonio and the Duchess into accepting a superficial reading of the letter and not to look for deeper interpretations of it, reacting to Antonio’s refusal to accept Ferdinand’s summons to come to Naples - apparently to ask Antonio’s advice on a financial matter- with a direct attack on Antonio’s vulnerable point –his low birth– in a last attempt to goad him into leaving for Naples:

Bosola: This proclaims your breeding.

Every small thing draws a base mind to fear;
As the adamant draws iron. (III. v. 52-4)

Language as the vehicle of deception is referred to throughout the play. Ironically, Ferdinand himself had been one of the first characters to mention the subject: “What cannot a neat knave with a smooth tale/ Make a woman believe?” (I. ii. 261-62)

In the episode analyzed above, the Duchess triumphantly declares that “The devil is not cunning enough/ To circumvent us in riddles” (III. v. 39-40). Though unfortunately not always is it so, as we witnessed how Bosola, ingratiated himself with the Duchess and finally drove her to reveal the identity of her husband through his artful manipulation of language.

Incidentally, it is also interesting how the link established here between beguiling speech and the devil is extended to incorporate Ferdinand as the devil incarnate (an association to be further examined in chapter 8). The Cardinal too had been linked with the figure of the devil by Antonio who in his description of the Cardinal’s character to Delio, remarks:

Antonio: They that do flatter him most, say oracles
Hang at his lips: and verily I believe them:
For the devil speaks in them. (I. ii. 109-11)

The Duchess had already introduced the idea of evasive speech in relation to the appearance-reality dichotomy in the betrothal scene where she had pronounced significant words

on the use of language by those “born great” as a reflection of their adopting false manners as a general mode of conduct:

And as a tyrant doubles with his words,
And fearfully equivocates: so we
Are forc'd to express our violent passions
In riddles, and in dreams, and leave the path
Of simple virtue, which was never made
To seem the thing it is not. (I. ii. 362-67)

The conflict between the natural and the artificial (mentioned in chapter IV page 75) is presented here through the image of language –as it is used in the society of the play– as a means of distraction from all that’s natural and spontaneous, and as an obstacle to mutual understanding instead of a vehicle for optimum communication. So much so, that at times silence is shown to be much more eloquent than any utterance: “[...] her silence,/ methinks, expressth more than if she spake” (IV. i. 9-10) says Bosola, referring to the Duchess’s reaction to her imprisonment.

This reversal of the function of language can be seen as yet another manifestation of the global collapse of order and logic in the world depicted by the play –as reflected in situations such as the one where the Duchess declares, referring to her children, that “[...] since they were born accurs'd,/ Curses shall be their first language (III. v. 113-14) and reaches a climax in the masque of the madmen (in IV. ii.) where human speech is ultimately deformed into bedlam howls.

Ekeblad (1970: 263) says about this masque that “[...]”

when we try to see how Webster holds the balance between convention and realism, we seem to find that it is by poetic means: within the scene, the masque is related to the 'realistic' dramatic representation of what happens, in the manner of a poetic analogy. That is, the Duchess's marriage, leading to her murder, is like a marriage-masque turned into a masque of Death".

VIII. The Macabre Jigsaw Puzzle: Symbols and Images at Play

The present study cannot be concluded without examining the dark, grim setting of the two tragedies and the claustrophobic world where spirits are walled in and lives are lived under the shadow of fear. The chain of interlocking images and symbolic elements that create the atmosphere of terror, persecution, disease, decay and death is the object of our analysis here.

Many critics have censured Webster for the structural incoherence of his play. Bradbrook (1935), notwithstanding her great appreciation of the dramatist, believes that Webster is “concerned with perfection of detail rather than a general design” (qtd. Gunby 2011: 24), and Ribner (1989: 119) quoting Leech (1951) writes that “*The Duchess of Malfi* is blurred in its total meaning. It is a collection of brilliant scenes, whose statements do not ultimately cohere”.

In the previous sections of our study, we have tried to demonstrate the essential cohesion of the play on a deeper level, revealing Webster’s use of the echoing technique in building an intricate network of interconnected images and utterances through which the major themes are articulated. What follows is a close look at the mechanics of Webster’s mood construction and his use of symbols in bringing together what may at first seem loose elements of the play. This brings to mind Calderwood’s

observation that “Webster, at times so cavalier in his disregard of dramatic consistency, can at other times unify apparently discrete elements of action by remarkably subtle nexuses of imagery and structure” (qtd. Holdsworth 1989: 106) and Ellis-Fermor’s pointing out the importance of “the range and interplay of mood, thought and imagery which gives [...] richness and [...] variety, arriving at last at that impression of width and universality of implication which is an essential of great tragedy” (qtd. Holdsworth 1989:61).

One of the most salient metaphors in *The Duchess of Malfi* and *The White Devil* is that of life as a hunting-ground where the preys are relentlessly persecuted and where the question of survival is the principal concern. There are several references to predatory animals. The Cardinal tells his mistress Julia:

I have taken you off your melancholy perch,
Bore you upon my fist, and show’d you game,
And let you fly at it. (II. iv. 28-30)

In the *White Devil*, there is a reference to falconry in the quarrel scene between Vittoria and Brachiano (IV. ii.) -the clash of “two whirlwinds”. The latter has fallen into his enemy Francisco’s trap and suspects Vittoria. Mad with ire, eaten up with jealousy at her imagined infidelity, Brachiano violently rejects his beloved. According to Weis (2009: 379 note79) “bells where normally attached to a hawk’s legs for tracing. [...] Brachiano threatens to abandon Vittoria by withdrawing his protection (removing her ‘bells’) from her, i.e. ‘give you the bells’ in fact means ‘take the bells away from you’ ”.

Brachiano: [...] I'll give you the bells

And let you fly to the devil. (IV. ii. 82-3).

Returning to the analysis of *The Duchess of Malfi* several lines above, the Cardinal's identifying himself with the falconer figure has its echo in Ferdinand's description of himself as an eagle (V. ii. 30) and thus, we get a clearly established image of the Aragonian brothers as the chief hunters in the play.

The image is reinforced as the play unfolds and the hunting party's pack is formed with Bosola as the chief hound set at the quarry formed by the Duchess and Antonio. The latter explicitly refers to this situation when he comments:

Antonio: My brothers have dispers'd

Bloodhounds abroad; which till I hear are muzzl'd

No truce, though hatch'd with ne'er such politic skill

Is safe, that hangs upon our enemies' will. (III. v. 48-50)

There is also the explicit reference to hunting by Ferdinand himself, who after the assassination of the Duchess expresses the desire to "go hunt the badger by owl-light" (IV. ii. 332), adding that " 'Tis a deed of darkness" (IV. ii. 333), as if unconsciously wanting to repeat a ritual which in fact he had performed on his sister albeit indirectly by his tool, Bosola (the image also highlights the link established throughout the play between nocturnal darkness and evil deeds).

The discovery of concealed facts, a main source of activity within the play, is often expressed in hunting terms. The

Cardinal, ordering Bosola to find Antonio's hide-out, informs him that Antonio "lurks" in Milan, that Bosola should "Inquire him out, and kill him" (V. ii. 123).

Bosola himself uses a similar language when he refers to the advantages of following the example of cunning offered in the person of the Cardinal: "There cannot be a surer way to trace,/ Than that of an old fox" (V. ii. 148-49) or reveals, in a soliloquy, his intention to save Antonio from the clutches of the fearsome Aragonian brethren:

Bosola: [...] Well, good Antonio,
 I'll seek thee out; and all my care shall be
 To put thee into safety from the reach
 Of these most cruel biters, that have got
 Some of thy blood already. (V. ii. 335-39)

The White Devil also abounds in images of hunting. In Act two, scene one, where Monticelso, the Cardinal, and Francisco, the duke of Florence, verbally chastise Duke Brachiano for his indecorous behaviour and deeds, there is a very fine example of this, taken from the domain of predatory birds.

Brachiano first sets the tone by his reference to hawks, when after he submits to listening patiently to the Cardinal's unflattering enumeration of his misdemeanours, and to "forgo all passion/ Which may be raised by [the Cardinal's] free discourse (II. i. 23-4)", he addresses Francisco with:

 Do not like young hawks fetch a course about;
 Your game flies fair and for you- (II. i. 46-7)

In Francisco's incisive reply, we have the idea of predators and preys developed to full and masterly extent. Brachiano, in his efforts to obtain Vittoria, is referred to as an eagle, with an eye to his aristocratic status. But his elevated position is immediately undermined by the succeeding line where it is clarified that he is not of the type to "soar high", whereas he should aim at a prey becoming, in principle, his position as a member of the nobility – "should gaze upon the sun". However, base pursuits arising from his sensuous appetites, combined with the indolence of one accustomed to a life of plenty – "lustful ease" – have made him aim very low, and content himself with the despicable act of snatching the rotten prey of other birds that occupy a lower category than him:

Francisco: I'll answer you in your own hawking phrase.

Some eagles that should gaze upon the sun

Seldom soar high, but take their lustful ease

Since they from dunghill birds their prey can seize (II. i. 48-51)

In *The Duchess of Malfi*, the idea of a society of predators and preys is emphasized through a series of allusions to getting devoured. There is the image of the spider making the cobweb its dwelling "...and a prison/ To entangle those shall feed him" (I. ii. 103-4). (Where we have an example of Webster's compact style, collocating in a single image the concepts of entanglement, confinement, and violence, that are the principal components of the claustrophobic framework of *The Duchess of Malfi*.)

Such allusions heap up as the play moves on and we

hear the Duchess refer to her brothers' pity for herself and Antonio as the sentiment with which "...men preserve alive/ Pheasants and quails, when they are not fat enough/ To be eaten" (III. v. 109-111). And later, when she is about to die on Ferdinand's order, she again refers to the inhuman voracity of the Aragonian brethren with her striking words: "Go tell my brothers, when I am laid out,/ They then may feed in quiet (IV. ii. 236-7). By the way, Aebischer (qtd. Neill 2015: 388) goes further in his reading of lines such as this and opines: "Webster's physical tableaux are accompanied by recurring allusions to and metaphors of cannibalism."

In this context, the question of safety and the continuous threats to it acquires central importance. As we mentioned earlier on, it needs sophisticated manoeuvring to guarantee one's security in this play –the "weak safety" of the protagonists verily "runs upon ingenious wheels" (III. ii. 177). Indeed, there is not a single moment of absolute safety to be found in *The Duchess of Malfi*, privacy can be violated with fearful facility and strangulations carried out without a blink of the eye.

Webster uses a string of images that, visualizing the idea of getting entrapped, weave together a dense tissue of threat and insecurity which hangs over the play like an oppressive, air-tight mantle. He presents language as a huge "pitfall, that's strew'd o'er with roses" (III. v. 31).

Other concepts are similarly defined as traps, as is the case with the all-important concept of justice and law which to such strategically-placed figures such as Duke Ferdinand "Is like

a foul black cobweb to a spider” (I. ii. 103) (the weaving image is echoed later on in Ferdinand’s description of hypocrisy that, in his words, “is woven of a fine small thread,/ Subtler than Vulcan’s engine [net]” (I. ii. 236-7).

There is a direct reference to Bosola’s role as the principal agent for ensnaring the Duchess and her husband, curiously enough by Bosola himself. Having come with Ferdinand’s guards to take the Duchess to her prison, the disguised Bosola uses a rough, straightforward manner with the Duchess and then justifies his direct, coarse conduct, with an allusion to the cunning methods he had used before to deceive her. The apparent logic of his reasoning in this speech is itself a dialectic trap, a fine example of sophism:

Bosola: [...] I would have you tell me whether
 Is that note worse that frights the silly birds
 Out of the corn; or that which doth allure them
 To the nets? You have heark’ned to the last too much.

(III. v. 98-101)

None the less, Bosola himself is in a sense entrapped within the play as he moves away from the typical functions of the malcontent-satirist-tool villain to that of an ambiguous character who, whilst still dragging on his disillusionment with life and some of his earlier unscrupulous methods of Machiavellian acquittal, is racked by a guilty conscience that leads him to become the avenger of the innocent (a turn of events already foreshadowed by his double-role as the Duchess’s tormentor and comforter in the prison-cell scenes). This brings to

mind the following comments from Gibbons (2019: xvii-xviii), in the introduction to his edition of *The Duchess of Malfi* : “Webster seems intent on developing Bosola as a complex, unstable figure undergoing real, violent inner change, though he is unable to reform or destroy the system –in Kafkaesque manner the system devours those who serve it.”

The atmosphere of menace and terror is underlined by the various flights away from danger that form part of the action of the play. The Duchess and Antonio are constantly on the move. We see them escaping from Amalfi to Ancona where they hope to find safety. But then they are banished from Ancona, and Antonio has to “fly” to Milan where Bosola hounds him out, on the Cardinal’s orders. All their attempts however are shown to be in vain, for Webster demonstrates that the world of the court is like a jungle where there are always wild beasts on the rampage and where security is a meaningless concept. That is why Antonio’s last words are “let my son fly the courts of princes” (V. v. 71).

It is important how the silences within the play add to the sense of fear and threat. There is this idea of “a deformed silence” where “witches whisper their charms” (III. iii. 57). The intervals of apparent calm when a tacit ceasefire seems to have been established between the warring factions, or rather, unilaterally imposed by the evil-doers, are presented as being in reality fraught with danger. Antonio’s words on Ferdinand’s seeming inactivity encapsulate this idea:

He is so quiet, that he seems to sleep
The tempest out, as dormice do in winter;

Those houses, that are haunted, are most still,
Till the devil be up. (III. i. 21-3)

And there is, of course, the chilling phrase of Ferdinand's:
"Strangling is a very quiet death" (V. iv. 33).

This menacing aspect of silence is inserted within the general presentation of threat and insecurity as lacking concrete form (as exemplified by the seemingly aimless cruelty of the Aragonian brothers in their relentless persecution of the Duchess and Antonio). The chief villains themselves aren't exempt from this vague sense of insecurity. This is best seen in one of the Cardinal's soliloquies:

When I look into the fishponds in my garden,
Methinks I see a thing, arm'd with a rake
That seems to strike at me. (V. v. 5-7)

Here, the sense of fear is intensified through Webster's transformation of an element commonly associated with the peace and quiet of secure havens –a fishpond in a garden– into one laden with threat (the effect being enhanced through the use of the unspecific "thing").

Webster is an expert in such metamorphoses. Conventionally innocent objects and situations are constantly changed into the most horrific ones through a truly subtle process. In the Duchess's bedchamber scene, when the atmosphere is vibrant with joy and the Duchess is light-heartedly combing her hair, and all of a sudden, spontaneously bursts out with the simple, honest question: "I prithee / When were we so

merry?” (III. ii. 52-3), we witness a dialogue brimming with love and tenderness between husband and wife. The scene is full of typical allusions to lovers’ playful disputes: Antonio mentions, for instance, that he usually plays the trick of leaving the room while the Duchess goes on speaking in the belief that he’s still there, and that “she hath chaf’d extremely” (III. ii. 56), her consequent anger on finding him absent being lovely to him. There is also small talk, as when the Duchess comments that once her hair becomes grey, she will make all the courtiers “powder their hair with arras, to be like me” (III. ii. 60).

All these innocent references, however, are to have their horribly deformed dramatic counterparts in the prison-cell scenes (IV. i. & IV. ii.). Here, instead of the Duchess’s anger in jest, we get the hellish wrath of Ferdinand whose diabolic psychological tortures drive the Duchess to curse the whole universe, against her deep-rooted religious convictions.

In the Duchess’s bedchamber scene, the reference to powdered hair takes on the most sinister semblance (later on in IV. ii.) when Bosola, in the guise of a bellman (who usually came to prisoners the night before their execution to remind them of their mortality and need for repentance), exhorts the Duchess to prepare herself for burial and in fact echoes a wedding ceremony (where the custom was for a bride to sprinkle her hair with powder) but in a very different, morbid context related to funerary paraphernalia –in his bellman’s macabre song of death, ringing the bell brought in by the executioners:

Hark, now everything is still –

The screech owl and the whistler shrill
Call upon our dame aloud
And bid her quickly don her shroud.

[...]

Strew your hair with powders sweet
Don clean linen, bathe your feet,
And the foul fiend more to check,
A crucifix let bless your neck.” (IV. ii. 177-192)

Also, the jovial, bantering reference made by Antonio to his wife’s occasionally talking in excess, is bitterly reminded by the Duchess’s pathetic acknowledgement of her supposed defect to the tormentor, Bosola, when she rapidly winds up her last words before death:

I would fain put off my last woman’s fault,
I’d not be tedious to you. (IV. ii. 226-27)

Closely related to the general hunting metaphor and the question of threat and insecurity are a series of martial and riding images that not only help build up the violence of the play, but act as signalling lights emitting intermittent flashes that illuminate the different characters.

Earlier on, we looked at the question of fine horsemanship and military expertise in relation to Antonio. Ferdinand is, in a parallel presentation, associated with military action, but with a totally opposite nuance. In his first appearance on stage, Ferdinand engages in a conversation with his courtiers on the role of princes in military matters. He expresses his eagerness to leave the court tournaments and “fall to action

idea of evil action. Speed is associated right from the beginning with the world of witchcraft and evil. The Cardinal has an explicit allusion to this when he rebukes his brother Ferdinand for his “intemperate anger”:

Cardinal: How idly shows this rage! which carries you,
As men convey'd by witches, through the air
On violent whirlwinds. (II. v. 50-2)

These words prepare the way for later confirmations of Ferdinand's devilish nature, as when we hear of his “rid[ing] post” to Rome, in Bosola's significant words “tane up in a whirlwind” (III. ii. 161), evocative of the Cardinal's reference to ‘whirlwinds’ in conjunction with ‘witches’ in the previous scene (II. v. 50-2). Bosola again highlights the relation between haste and demonic deeds (which, coming after the previous references, confirm the link established between Duke Ferdinand and the Prince of Darkness) in his words to the Duchess a few speeches later:

Bosola: [...] Pluto the god of riches,
When he's sent, by Jupiter to any man
He goes limping, to signify that wealth
That comes on God's name, comes slowly; but when he's sent
On the devil's errand, he rides post, and comes in by scuttles.
(III. ii. 243-47)

Incidentally, this negative treatment of horsemanship takes us back to our earlier discussion on Webster's presentation of the major concepts in the play as essentially ambiguous. We had mentioned how the meaning of words such as ‘noble’ and

'great' suffer radical transformation by the end of the play. Here again we have another example of this phenomenon: we had heard Antonio refer to horsemanship as a 'noble' activity (I. ii. 64), but as the play moves on, this is put to serious doubt as it is linked with evil deeds, like in the example quoted above on Ferdinand's unbridled rage and wild galloping, or shown in a grotesque light as when Delio professes, referring to old Castruchio:

I never knew man and beast, of a horse and a knight,
So weary of each other; if he had a good back,
He would have undertook to have borne his horse,
His breach was so pitifully sore. (II. iv. 53-6)

This is yet another indication -using absurd humour- that in the world of this play nothing is as it should be, the predominant course of action being the crabbed and unnatural one.

These images of evil activity are greatly reinforced by visions of hell exhibited in many of the speeches, especially in Ferdinand's. In this way, Webster not only builds up a general atmosphere of hellish nightmare, but also exposes his protagonist's psyche, that in many cases is signalled through lexical means -the assignation of a particular semantic field to a particular character.

In the case of Ferdinand, his speeches are strikingly rich with references to sex, sin, hell, the devil and the paraphernalia of torture and murder; with special relevance of fire, smoke and death through calcination or asphyxia - contributing to the play's oppressive atmosphere.

You a corrupter, me an impudent traitor,
And should I take these they'd take me to hell. (I. ii. 187-90)

Bosola himself, however, is presented to us as another agent of hell, not only through his constant lexical references to it, but at times by means of finely interlocked images at different intervals in the play. Thus, we hear him define schemers such as himself as:

[...] the devil's quilted anvil,
He fashions all sins on him, and the blows
Are never heard. (III. ii. 321-3)

This, by the way, re-emphasizes the inherent threats of silence we discussed in p. 122. The image is then echoed later on, but this time with a direct link established between Bosola and the devil:

I have this Cardinal in the forge already,
Now I'll bring him to th' hammer. (V. iv. 78-9)

These images of hell reach their climax in Act IV after which the references to hell lose their fiery blaze and burning heat, subduing into the "cold sweat" of the guilty consciences of Ferdinand and Bosola. In Act IV, we are placed in the very center of a psychological inferno where Ferdinand tries to bring the Duchess to despair through a series of mental tortures.

The major themes of the play converge here to form a festival of horror and hopelessness. Contrastive concepts collide head-on within the speeches to emphasize the essential ambiguity of life and the reversal of the logical order of things in

the world of the play. Thus, the Duchess is seen to sleep “like a madman”, with her eyes open and we hear her confess:

[...] nothing but noise, and folly
Can keep me in my right wits, whereas reason
And silence make me stark mad. (IV. ii. 5-7)

The appearance-reality dichotomy running through the play also reaches its peak here in Act IV, epitomized by the wax figures which are shown to the Duchess and said to be the dead bodies of her husband and children. Desmet (2000: 51) holds the view that:

When Bosola and Ferdinand subject the Duchess to torture and death, their masque dramatises self-contradictions inherent in the notion of a female ruler. Bosola piously represents the trials which the Duchess endures –looking at the wax tableau of her supposedly dead family, kissing a dead man’s hand in the dark, entertaining the masque of madmen, and finally, facing her tombmaker and executioners– as an exercise in contrition, meant to bring her by degrees to mortification.

The duality between form and substance is underscored through hellish images such as the “present” offered to their sister by the Duchess’s “princely brothers” via Bosola with the expressed wish: “may it arrive welcome” (IV. ii. 166), a gift that turns out to be a coffin. Even the Duchess’s speech, up to now replete with musical metaphors and references to the splendours of nature have progressively darkened into a compendium of infernal allusions, similar to Ferdinand’s:

the well-established associations with seclusion.

In Act IV, these threatening images take on the concrete form of the Duchess's actual imprisonment. Here, the claustrophobic oppression reaches its highest point, not only through the prison-cell setting, but by means of an insistent emphasis on the cage metaphor by the different characters' allusions to it in their speech. The most salient example is Bosola's vision of man's life in this world:

... our bodies are weaker than those paper prisons boys use to keep flies in: more contemptible; since ours is to preserve earth-worms: didst thou ever see a lark in a cage? Such is the soul in the body: this world is like her little turf of grass, and the heaven o'er our heads, like her looking- glass, only gives us a miserable knowledge of the small compass of our prison. (IV. ii. 126-32)

The paraphernalia of death itself also adds to the sensation of confinement and lack of air: the Duchess's coffin is presented to her as her "last presence chamber" (IV. ii. 170), and her unconsciously ominous phrase "Thou speak'st as if I lay upon my death-bed/ Gasp[ing] for breath" (IV. ii. 118-19) dramatically paves the way for her death through strangulation.

These claustrophobic images are, however, continued right to the end of the play. In Act V, the concept of confinement is again introduced in the flirtation scene between Julia and Bosola where we get a frolicsome replica of the frighteningly serious lock-ups in the play. Significantly enough, Julia's courtship of Bosola begins with her assertion that the doors have

been locked, and her playfully threatening him with a pistol, a foreboding parody of what is to take place only one scene later where Bosola hunts down the Cardinal “like a leveret” (V. v. 45), progressively limiting his manoeuvring space (there being various specific references within the text to doors and their barricading) to the single final chamber of death:

BOSOLA: I'll suffer your retreat to Julia's chamber,
But no further. (V. v. 17-18)

Within this atmosphere of terror and persecution, several objects acquire special symbolic significance (such as the wedding ring that was discussed in chapter II p. 51). We have already seen the prominence of walls, doors, curtains and arras. Keys also stand out in the text not only as the prime symbols of confinement, but as the means for violating privacy and discovering secrets, as well as being among the essential elements in the ironic turn of events which shape the plot.

This use of the symbolic significance of objects renders a certain compactness to Webster's dramatic text. The example of the poniard and the sword further illustrates his strategies in this respect. In one of his fits believing himself to be a wolf, Duke Ferdinand bids the others to “take their swords” and “rip up his flesh” (V. ii. 18-19) to see that it is hairy on the inside. It is significant that the sword is mentioned in this relation.

Throughout the play the sword is constantly put in contrast to the poniard. The sword is seen as the symbol of piercing false surfaces and revealing the truth beneath them. It is presented as an unpolluted element that amidst all the

it with sexual connotations (when he mentions it in close connexion with the temptations of the flesh that, in his words, his “lusty” sister is exposed to, and his *double entendres* on “the lamprey” and “the tongue” (I. ii. 258-60)), but emphasizes its links with the concept of treacherous conduct when violating the privacy of the Duchess’s bed-chamber (III. ii) he offers the poniard to her to commit suicide with.

As opposed to the poniard, the sword thus becomes the instrument by which the innocent are defended or revenged. When filled with remorse for ordering his sister’s death, Ferdinand rebukes his henchman, Bosola why he didn’t stand between his fury and the Duchess’s innocence with his sword:

Ferdinand: Why didst not thou pity her? What an excellent

Honest man might’st thou have been
If thou hadst borne her to some sanctuary!
Or, bold in a good cause, oppos’d thyself
With thy advanced sword above thy head,
Between her innocence and my revenge! (IV. ii. 271-76)

It’s here that Ferdinand takes the veil off his ulterior motive for opposing so savagely his sister’s marriage which ends in his murdering her. He does so as he continues with his remonstrations of Bosola for having heeded his order to assassinate the Duchess:

I bade thee, when I was distracted of my wits,
Go kill my dearest friend, and thou hast done’t.
For let me but examine well the cause;
What was the meanness of her match to me?

Only I must *confess*, I had a hope,
Had she continu'd widow, to have gain'd
An infinite *mass of treasure* by her death:
And this was the main cause (IV. ii. 277-84, my italic)

And it is with this confession of Ferdinand's that the reader-spectator discovers the depth of the deceit and corruption, and that they have their root in financial concerns. It becomes clear that the harangue on preserving the endangered family honour and noble lineage have been intended to divert the attention away from the true reasons behind the fiercely tenacious persecution of the Duchess. In other words, all the unjust accusations about discarded chastity resulting from the secret non-ecclesiastical marriage, is an enormous falsity –a pretext in fact.

Clark (2007: 61) extends these financial motives of Ferdinand's to the Cardinal: "In the *Duchess of Malfi*,... to the Cardinal, the typical venial and lecherous prelate of early modern tragedy, this act of his sister's is enough to justify the extremist sanctions against the couple: the seizure of his sister's lands, their banishment and the Duchess's imprisonment and eventual murder."

In *The White Devil* too, we witness how Monticelso, the Cardinal, driven principally by financial interest and greed, allies himself with Francisco, the Duke of Florence, to bring Vittoria Corombona to court to be judged. Act III. i., opens with Francisco and Monticelso plotting together in order to assure the condemnation of Vittoria, having no concrete proof of her

culpability:

Francisco: You have dealt discreetly to obtain the presence
Of all the grave lieger ambassadors
To hear vittoria's trial.

Monticelso: 'Twas not ill,
For sir you know we have nought but circumstances
To charge her with, about her husband's death;
Their approbation therefore to the proofs
Of her black lust, shall make her infamous
To all our neighbouring kingdoms. (III. i. 1-8)

As we see, the two embark on very sly manoeuvring; their cunning legal stratagem consists of attacking her reputation. Here too, the blame of abandoning chastity is made a pretext partly for covering up the vested financial interests of the Cardinal. In the court, Vittoria, on her part, is very direct in her words to Monticelso when she says,

But take you your course, it seems you have beggar'd me first
And now would fain undo me... (III. ii. 213-14)

taking good care to enumerate in detail her possessions:

...I have houses,
jewels, and a poor remnant of crusadoes,
Would those would make you charitable. (III. ii. 214-16)

The irony of the word "charitable" is especially strong, closing as it does, Vittoria's listing of her "remnant" belongings after the rest is insinuated to have been swept clean by the Cardinal's insatiable craving for wealth. It is interesting that

preceding the above altercation between Vittoria and Monticelso, Webster makes Brachiano pave the way for these assertions of Vittoria's as to Monticelso's vile motivations -principally greed- by an attack on the Cardinal's lack of valour and his inequitable conduct, using the concept of the sword as emblem of justice:

Brachiano: Cowardly dogs bark lowdest. Sirrah priest,

[...]

The sword you frame of such an excellent temper,

I'll sheathe in your own bowels. (III. ii. 164-67)

and also before quitting the courtroom, by a wittily sarcastic response to the servant who reminds Brachiano of his having forgotten to take away with him the gown Brachiano had humbly used instead of a chair to sit on during the court session, having stated that:

Brachiano: [...] an unbidden guest

Should travail as Dutch women go to church:

Bear their stools with them. (III. ii. 5-7)

protesting that he had not, in fact, forgotten his gown, since:

Brachiano: Thou liest, 'twas my stool.

Bestow't upon thy master that will challenge

The rest o'th' household stuff; for Brachiano

Was ne'er so beggarly, to take a stool

Out of another's lodging: let him make

Valence for his bed on't, or a demi-foot-cloth,

For his most reverent moil... (III. ii. 172-78)

Going back to our discussion about the different

associations of the sword and the poniard in *The Duchess of Malfi*, it must be emphasized that the sword, even when used for murder (as is the case in the killings of the last Act), it is to advance a just cause. Bosola best expresses this nuance in his words to the Cardinal:

When thou kill'd'st thy sister
Thou took'st from Justice her most equal balance
And left her naught but her sword. (V. v. 39-41)

There is also a symbolic metaphorizing throughout *The Duchess of Malfi* by which Webster creates the sensation of general disintegration in the society of the play. Different organs of the human body are highlighted here and there in solitary relevance, disjointed from the uniting whole. For example, the heart comes in relation with the claustrophobic elements of the play, in conjunction with other symbolic objects such as keys, and signalling not only the concept of confinement but also that of concealment and hidden truths, as is the case with the Duchess's metaphoric presentation of her love for Antonio:

You have cause to love me, I ent'red you into my heart
Before you would vouchsafe to call for the keys. (III. ii. 61-2)

The heart also is, in the play, an important symbol of dismemberment, echoed from one scene to another. The division among the members of the ruling Aragonian family –itself a hint at the general partition within the world depicted here– is stressed through the figure of the Duchess's "bleeding heart" which her brother Ferdinand intends to "make a sponge" of to wipe out the memory of the Duchess's remarriage:

To purge this choler! Here's the cursed day
To prompt my memory, and here't shall stick
Till of her bleeding heart I make a sponge
To wipe it out. (II. v. 13-16)

This dismembered vision of the human body also reaches a climax in the torture scenes where the Duchess is given a dead man's severed hand by Ferdinand (IV. i. 43). In the same scenes, there are constant references to parts of the body in isolation:

Leave this vain sorrow;
Things being at their worst, begin to mend:
The bee when he hath shot his sting into your hand
May then play with your eyelid. (IV. i. 76-9)

Bosola's image of the bee that shoots its sting into one's "hand" and, then plays with the "eyelid" is only a mild preparatory allusion that is immediately followed by the Duchess's more explicit reference to the disjunction of the limbs:

Good comfortable fellow
Persuade a wretch that's broke upon the wheel
To have all his bones new set: entreat him live,
To be executed again. (IV. i. 79-82)

with the image of the "wretch that's broke upon the wheel" thus subtly drawing up a parallel between this inhuman practice and the breaking-up of her soul by Ferdinand's psychological tortures (the latter echoing in action Ferdinand's earlier (II. v. 31) threats of "hew[ing] her to pieces").

These images, however, do not end here, but are taken up right to the end of the play where we are again reminded of dismemberment by acts such as Ferdinand's carrying a man's leg over his shoulder in his fit of lycanthropy:

Doctor: [...] as two nights since
 One met the Duke, 'bout midnight in a lane
 Behind St Mark's church, with the leg of a man
 Upon his shoulder; and he howl'd fearfully. (V. ii. 12-15)

In *The White Devil*, the creative malcontent Flamineo is the one who makes the greatest use of images in his speeches. This brings to mind Bradbrook's illustrating remarks (1980: 99):

“The malcontent's satiric comments are summed up by some detailed, vivid and unexpected comparison, which gives the impression of a trained observation and an alert darting intelligence.”

A fine example is in Act II, scene i, where he pours out –with great inventiveness– his repugnance for the Doctor whom he calls “a quack-salving knave” (Duke Brachiano's hired assassin who poisons his picture for his wife Isabella to kiss and die) with reference to the parts of body in macabre disjunction:

Flamineo: O thou cursed antipathy to nature! Look his eye's
 bloodshed like a needle a chirurgeon stitcheth a wound with.
 Let me embrace thee toad, and love thee, [*embraces him*] O
 thou abominable loathsome gargarism, that will fetch up

lungs, lights, heart, and liver by scruples. (II. i. 306-10)

The general -nature and animal- imagery of *The Duchess of Malfi* also helps to create a supportive environment where the concepts mentioned up to now are presented in their full force. Various of these images (such as those linked with the concept of State corruption and the collapse of order, the hunting images and the figure of the wolf) have been analyzed in the previous sections of the present chapter. It is important, however, to mention the combined effect of the images in the global atmosphere of the play.

In *The Duchess of Malfi*, nature is presented in its most threatening aspect. It is its tempests that are highlighted here, symmetrically related to Duke Ferdinand's misshapen wrath and his identification with the Prince of Darkness, as for example, when the courtiers interpret the "foul storm" of the fatal night when the duke's chamber "shook like an osier", the night that brings the play to its blood-soaked end, as "nothing but pure kindness in the devil" (V. iv. 20) who according to them had been "rock[ing] his child", Ferdinand, in the cradle.

There is in *The White Devil* an extremely striking animal image, placed within an image of nature, itself with multiple salient sketches which Flamineo makes use of to give an impressive portraiture of the courtiers' behaviour in the corrupt environment that surrounds them:

"We are engaged to mischief and must on.

As rivers to find out the ocean

Flow with crook bendigs beneath forced banks,

Or as we see, to aspire some mountain's top
The way ascends not straight, but imitates
The subtle foldings of a winter's snake,
So who knows policy and her true aspect,
Shall find her ways winding and indirect." (I. ii, 329-36)

The rivers that flow "with crook bendings beneath forced banks" graphically express the dishonest means the courtiers use to obtain their object. There is the natural-artificial dichotomy encapsulated in the "forced [artificial] banks", with a hint at underhand dealings, conveyed through the word "beneath".

The idea of dishonest methods employed for achieving goals is reinforced by the following verse where we are told that "to aspire some mountain's top / the way ascends not straight" (I. ii. 332-33). The succeeding image of "a winter's snake"¹ puts the finishing touch to the previous images, with its negative connotation of temptation, its diabolic symbolism and this fearsome reptile's traditional association with evil, waiting out its time to unfold its "subtle foldings" and attack in the opportune moment: that is indeed "the winding and indirect" ways of 'policy' (I. ii. 336).

In the Malfi tragedy, the perverse psyche of the Aragonian brethren is reflected by the references to the

¹ Probably the mythical *amphisbaena*, symbol of the devil, whose two heads allowed elaborate serpentine movement and which, unlike most snakes, deliberately sought cold temperatures (Luckyj 2008: 27 note 334).

A snake coiled up while hibernating (Weis 2009: 370 note 344).

Perhaps *amphisbaena*, a mythical adder with two heads (one on each end), [...] and is the only snake that willingly goes out in the cold (Robinson 2019: 134 note 357).

deformities of nature:

Bosola: “He and his brother are like plum trees, that grow crooked over standing pools, they are rich, and o’erladen with fruit, but none but crows, pies, and caterpillars feed on them.” (I. i. 49-52)

a description that stands in direct contrast to the image of the cedar used by Bosola in connexion with Antonio as an honest courtier:

“For know an honest statesman to a prince
Is like a cedar, planted by a spring,
The spring bathes the tree’s root, the grateful tree
Rewards it with his shadow.” (III. ii. 262-65)

or the “loving palms” that symbolize the union between Antonio and the Duchess:

That we may imitate the loving palms,
Best emblem of a peaceful marriage,
That nev’r bore fruit divided. (I. ii. 401-3)

The animal imagery is put to use in a similar fashion. Thus a complete spectrum of animals, associated negatively in this play, are placed in analogies that illustrate the different aspects of the dark socio-moral world of the play: hawks, owls, blackbirds, crows, pies, moths, spiders, caterpillars, worms, toads, snakes, moles, horse-leeches, dogs, swine and wolves, which are placed in contrast to the very few positively-associated ones, linked with the honest and innocent characters (such as the robin redbreast, the nightingale or the turtle-dove in relation

to the Duchess).

The disease and decay in nature is similarly placed in a parallel with the maladies of the soul that are shown to be eating up the society of *Malfi*. The hearts of Ferdinand and the Cardinal are described by Bosola as “hollow graves,/ Rotten, and rotting others” (IV. ii. 317-18). The court is referred to as “a rank pasture” (I. ii. 230) with “a pestilent air” (III. i. 50) that princes’ palaces need to be “purg’d of” (III. i. 51). We hear of the “rotten ground of service” (III. ii. 219) and “rotten purposes” (V. ii. 295), of “decay’d fortunes” (III. v. 10) from which flatterers shrink, and “ancient ruins” that lie “...naked to the injuries/ Of stormy weather” (V. iii. 13-4).

Not only are these images significant in constructing the play’s general tableau of death and disintegration, paradoxically helping to create an *integrated* whole –constituting one of its strongest cohesive factors– but in their ever-surprising effect on the reader-spectator’s visual imagination.

The images’ strong impact is, in many cases, rooted in their internal construction. In many of the comparisons between different elements that make up some of the images, there is a considerable disparity between Webster’s image descriptions and the reader-spectator’s expectation.

Thus we get unexpected, striking comparisons such as these in *The Duchess of Malfi*: when Bosola assures that “There’s no more credit to be given to th’face, / Than to a sick man’s urine, which some call/ The physician’s whore, because

she cozens him” (I. ii. 160-2); or when the Duchess contemptuously refers to the figure of “the great Count Malateste” (III. i. 41) as “a mere stick of sugar-candy” (III. i. 42); or even when Bosola comments on the Aragonian brothers’ vengeance that “Like two chained bullets, still goes arm in arm” (IV. ii. 319). And in *The White Devil*: Hortensio, referring to Zanche, Vittoria’s black chambermaid, says to Flamineo: “I hear she claims marriage of thee” to which Flamineo retorts with this curious image:

“Faith, I made to her some such dark promise, and
in seeking to fly from’t I run on like a frightened dog
with a bottle at’s tail, that fain would bite it off and
yet dares not look behind him.” (V. i. 161-65)

Also later on, we have a derogatory reference to Zanche’s black skin colour when Lodovico uses the following simile in an aside to Francisco: “Mark her, I prithee; she simpers like the suds/ A collier hath been washed in (V. iii. 238-39).

In the use of the “imagery that ties wildly disparate things together”, Marcus likens Webster to the metaphysical poet John Donne (Marcus 2009:54) In the bizarre exchange –“strange encounter” in Marcello’s words (III. iii. 60)– between Lodovico and Flamineo after the trial scene, the latter starts his intended plan for the two of them to be “unsociably social” (III. iii. 71), by the following sarcastic wish:

“ And let the stigmatic wrinkles in thy face,
Like to the boisterous waves in a rough tide
One still overtake another” (III. iii. 62-4)

Mulryne (1965: 202-3) urges that Webster's metaphors distract the reader's attention from the situation in which they are placed precisely because of their strangeness, and censures his "reaching out for comparisons to areas of experience not at all obviously related" because "by their very unrelatedness and their often 'unpoetic' association" they give the image "a bizarre effect".

None the less, what Mulryne considers a vice, could be taken as Webster's dramatic skill. As we have tried to demonstrate throughout this study, Webster not only deals with the concept of "trickery" in the society of his play, but he is an expert trickster himself. His dramatic technique is based on tremendously subtle approaches to his themes, and the strangeness of his imagery can be examined in relation to his fondness for indirect methods. It may well be that the bizarrerie of his metaphors and similes are used by the dramatist as the most ingeniously effective strategy for reflecting the queer, shady, suspicious world of his play, his language being as perverse as the deformed souls of some of his characters.

Moreover, the claustrophobic atmosphere of the play and the profound darkness in which it is immersed would make the reading of *The Duchess of Malfi* (or seeing it performed), a monochrome, one-mood experience if it weren't for this ever-startling effect of its imagery. Webster uses the impact of his metaphors and similes as an instrument for tightening or relaxing the tension within the scenes, playing at his artful game of dramatic mutations, transforming apparently normal situations into sinister contexts and vice-versa.

–beyond the superficial disparity in the fields of its comparisons– an intimate link with the major concepts of the play. A good example of this is when the Cardinal proposes to Bosola a dozen attendants to help him assassinate Antonio, and he refuses, declaring his preference for carrying out his criminal mission on his own, and giving the following explanation:

Bosola: [...] physicians that apply horse-leeches
to any rank swelling, use to cut off their tails,
that the blood may run through them the faster.
Let me have no train, when I go to shed blood,
Lest it make me have a greater, when I ride to the gallows.
(V. ii. 312-16)

The comparisons drawn up here are closely connected with several issues echoed all through the play. For example, the idea of the court “familiar” being blood-sucking parasites within the society, the much dwelled-on question of precarious mutual trust, and the negative connotations associated with doctors that can bring no hope of true curation to the chronically sick world of the play (an issue highlighted by the demonic Ferdinand’s considering himself as a physician who is to purge the Duchess’s soul of all evil).

The same subtle cohesive mechanisms are at work in the other images such as the one Bosola offers on princes’ favours and which in spite of its striking strangeness, is completely in tune with the symbolic role of the heart figure we discussed before (page. 139), the general economizing within the play and the vision of disintegration (and its sister concept, decay) rendered

through the zooming of the human organs –a typically deviant stratagem of Webster’s:

Bosola: I would sooner swim to the Bermudas on

Two politicians’ rotten bladders, tied

Together with an intelligencer’s heart string

Than depend on so changeable a prince’s favour.

(III. ii. 266-69)

IX. Conclusion

The present doctoral thesis comprises main results and subordinate ones, which will be explained separately below. The main results are derived from the following question formulated in the introduction: ‘Do Webster’s two tragedies, *The Duchess of Malfi* and *The White Devil*, lack internal cohesion?’

After collecting data and examining examples of these two dramatic texts, I have reached the conclusion that the initial hypothesis of this dissertation: ‘Webster has indeed been able to achieve internal cohesion in his tragedies through:

- a.) ‘heratio’ (the echo technique) and intertextual references
- b) the employment of interconnected images and metaphors
- c) the presence of a unifying theme (deceit and corruption) ’

has been confirmed and proven. In relation with each of the three above issues, the results achieved will be described:

As to the creation of cohesion through the use of ‘heratio’, I concluded that this echo technique in fact constitutes one of the most salient features of Webster’s dramatic style. He demonstrates great ability in presenting the main themes of the play in a most ingenious manner –his slippery strategies– discarding direct approaches in favor of more deviant methods. Much in tone with the general atmosphere of his play, concepts are rather insinuated than blatantly introduced. Once a first entry is made into the reader-spectator’s mind, the idea is driven

home by repeating it on different occasions and through different agents, growing in strength and amplitude in the way a painting does with each successive stroke of the brush.

The echoing mechanisms are employed by this Jacobean dramatist to drill into our mind and consciousness a series of associated notions whose cumulative effect leads to the formation of a complete psychological portrait of each character. At times this is achieved through linking speech and action: one character's words are actually enacted by another; at others, it is the different characters' speeches that are inter-reflective.

With these subtle hints, this repetition of ideas through simple or metaphoric speech, by the same or different characters, Webster constructs an intricate network of signals, inviting the reader-spectator to play at his intelligent game of clues. At times, he uses the echo technique in relation to general patterns in the play and at others, he applies it to trends of a more limited range of action, their combination forming the framework that holds the play's structure together. Not only does he employ heratio throughout the play, but also makes his characters explicitly refer to the concept of echoes as well as constructing actual dialogues based on this technique.

Relative to the second means for attaining cohesion, the dramatist builds a fine web of interconnected images and metaphors, through which the major themes are articulated. I came to the conclusion that one of the most salient metaphors in *The Duchess of Malfi* and *The White Devil* is that of life as a hunting-ground where the preys are relentlessly persecuted and

where the question of survival is the principal concern. There are several references to predatory animals and the idea of a society of predators and preys is emphasized through a series of allusions to getting devoured.

Closely related to the general hunting metaphor and the question of threat and insecurity are a series of martial and riding images that not only help build up the violence of the play, but act as signalling lights emitting intermittent flashes that illuminate the different characters.

Webster's images are eloquent examples of his compact style, placing in a single image a cluster of significant concepts, such as those of entanglement, confinement and violence that are the principal components of the claustrophobic framework of Webster's second tragedy.

After scrutinizing Webster's metaphors (including at times their internal structure) I concluded that Webster uses the impact of his metaphors and similes also as an instrument for tightening or relaxing the tension within the scenes –which reveals his skill in controlling the pulse of the drama– playing at his artful game of dramatic mutations, transforming apparently normal situations into sinister contexts and vice-versa.

In relation with attaining cohesion via the presence of a unifying theme (deceit and corruption) in both tragedies, I have reached the conclusion that the world of *The Duchess of Malfi* and *The White Devil* is one where the superficial dressing of things acquires disproportionate importance. We witness a society shamelessly practicing the art of trickery, where everyone wears

a mask and where the main concern is to keep the true face beneath it, hidden away in the dark closet of concealment. And Webster sets himself the task of exploring exhaustive and incisively the appearance-reality dichotomy.

In such a state of affairs, pretence becomes an everyday stuff and the whole of human activity turns into a game of cunning in which the winner is the one who manoeuvres best in the terrain of double-dealing. Thus, an intricate network of mutual deception is established, with each constitutive member trying to outwit the other. No one is exempt from the need to constantly pretend to what he or she is not. The characters on the highest steps of the social ladder have to protect their “name”, “fame”, and family “honour”, and those at their service need to earn a living at the cost of truth, for they have to serve the interests of their masters and thus become their unscrupulous knaves.

Webster is presenting us a corrupt world where order has been broken and moral principles have been emptied of their content, having left behind a mere carcass, and where all gestures are but a grotesque mimic of their authentic prototypes. This state of affairs is demonstrated through two salient figures: the “black malcontent[s]”, Flamineo in *The White Devil* and Bosola in *The Duchess of Malfi*.

For Webster, the world of the court is like a jungle where there are always wild beasts on the rampage and where security is a meaningless notion. Intimately linked with this, is the question of court corruption which in *The White Devil* is exposed

principally through the figure of Duke Brachiano and in *The Duchess of Malfi* through the figure of Duke Ferdinand.

Another aspect of deceit and corruption is the presence of the 'informers' about whom it can be said that their engaging in this dangerous game of hide and seek becomes yet another thematic nexus in the play. The search for information that could compromise the enemy and the struggle for keeping one's own secrets intact, creates a microcosm where there exists an undercurrent of subversive activity constantly moving beneath the surface structure of the play. Whole colonies of eavesdroppers and informers continually gnaw at people's privacy like termites.

Relating to the sleaze of the 'great men' who contrary to what is expected from them do not have a conduct congruent with their social position, I arrived at the conclusion that Webster presents the relation between moral stature and social position through his skillful semantic manipulation. The meaning of words such as "noble", "great" and "honest" are in continual mutation as the play moves on, displaying in full, a lexis of a chameleonic nature. As the psyche of the characters in relation with whom such epithets are used unfolds before us, and as the situations in which these words are placed, change in nature, we are compelled to revise our understanding of them. This technique renders internal dynamism to the play's language and maintains the interest of the reader-spectator right to the end, warning him not to take the concepts presented in the play at face value.

The subordinate results of the present dissertation will be described next:

1) In both tragedies there is a lack of a *typical* Renaissance hero. As we know, the existence of a concrete hero, a man, usually representing goodness, is one of the most essential elements of a tragedy; a point that apparently has been passed over in Webster's two tragedies. In *The Duchess of Malfi*, contrary to the method common to tragedies written in the Early Modern Age, the hero is a woman. Moreover, even accepting the Duchess as a tragic hero, the assassination of the titular character in the fourth act and the continuation of the play's action -and a tumultuous one at that- without her, for the whole of the fifth act, is seen as incompatible with the accepted conventions of tragedy. It must be said however, that even after the Duchess' death, her presence continues to be strongly felt in the play. Also, her death triggers off substantial transformation in two main characters -Bosola and Ferdinand. And so, in fact it could be said that she has not been eliminated by the dramatist before the play ends.

In *The White Devil* the issue is even more complicated, that is to say, none of its main characters have the requisite traits to take on the role of hero/heroine representing goodness. It may be said that in this play we are dealing with a spectrum of evil in which the characters occupy their position in a scale of gradation, to be exact, they are either less evil, evil, or more evil. And Isabella and Camillo who are the victims of Brachiano's and Vittoria's whim and conspiracy, thus remaining outside the aforementioned spectrum of evil, have passive roles and so cannot be considered as main personages. In a sense, *The White Devil* maps the collision of villains. The identification of Vittoria with the title

role, the 'White Devil', and thus her potential denomination as the central villain of the tragedy is –typical of Webster– a crabbed question.

2) The second subordinate result is that examining data from the texts of the two tragedies it was discovered that Webster, by expressing salvation (religious viewpoint) / happiness (wordly viewpoint) in terms of an upward thrust and damnation (religious viewpoint) / misery (wordly viewpoint) as a downward pull, brings to mind the idea of the Conceptual Metaphor. Consequently, in the second chapter of the present doctoral thesis, after defining this type of metaphor that was first introduced by Lakoff and Johnson in 1980, I explored its use in parts of Webster's tragedies.

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