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"GRAMMATICAL LAMENTS" IN  
THE DUCHESS OF MALFI AND THE WHITE DEVIL

by

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Most characters in John Webster's two best-known plays, The White Devil (c. 1612) and The Duchess of Malfi (c. 1613), act in ways which violate their culture's moral, spiritual, and/or social codes. These actions include marrying outside one's class, committing adultery, and committing murder.

These enterprising characters, while stretching the boundaries of social norms for themselves, are not necessarily interested in changing society. As the Duchess asks her brother Ferdinand: " . . . Why might not I marry? / I have not gone about, in this, to create / Any new world or custom" (III.ii.110-12).<sup>1</sup> Instead of changing the world, they primarily want to follow their desires while continuing to fit into the existing world order. This belief in traditional norms can be seen in the frequent utterance of proverbs and traditional tales. Often the truth of the utterances is not at issue. Instead, the mere utterance of a tale serves the characters' needs whether they want to understand a situation themselves or provide an explanation for others.

Most often, the meaning of a proverb or fable is not examined--even today. Instead, the mere fact of having

uttered traditional wisdom is more important. These utterances--proverbs, traditional tales, axioms, and fables--can be called "grammatical laments," which as Flamineo says of axioms Vittoria utters to persuade him against killing himself and her, " . . . move . . . [one] / As some in pulpits move their auditory: / More with their exclamation than sense of reason, or sound doctrine" (V.vi.66-69). Although the characters sometimes perceive an authoritative precedent in the sayings, the laments primarily work formally to comfort the speakers and occasionally their listeners, by the very action of uttering. The ritual of speaking the proverbs and tales serves as a formal invocation of traditional wisdom. This action of speaking allows the characters to calm their fears and collect themselves in order to control a situation. Although I occasionally focus on a use of proverbs or tales which seems to define an individual aspect of a particular character, my analysis focuses primarily on the dramatic significance of characters' utterances in situations which seem typical of the Websterian world.

Webster's liberal use of proverbs, axioms, fables, and traditional tales in his two best known plays has often been maligned by critics who assume that Webster's borrowings indicate a lack of original talent. Rather than revealing a lack of creativity, however, Webster's

inclusion of sententiae (as these moral tags are often termed by critics) into the dialogue of his characters indicates a remarkable perception into an aspect of human nature. Webster includes proverbs and tales in the dialogue to show that these characters are troubled by the social and domestic upheaval in which they are involved and are searching for a foundation on which to base their actions. By summoning up "old wives' tales" and traditional folk wisdom, the characters try to explain and understand their own actions and status by searching for moral precedent. They find this precedent in the "grammatical laments" which are uttered for effect as much as reason.

These laments serve many functions. Sometimes the tales serve as distancing devices to enable the speakers to remove themselves from the action--or slow it down--in order to decide calmly how to handle the situation better. Often, speakers of proverbs use the sayings to grant themselves more authority as they stretch moral limits or violate the social order; by saying that their situation is similar to that of others, the characters bolster their wills for action.

Even though proverbs are commonly used in conversation today, they are not granted the same authority they once were. We are now more likely to label such sayings



"cliches" and try to express ourselves in a more original way. These sayings, however, still retain some of their original mystique since we realize that these are beliefs about human behavior which have been in existence for centuries. Along with this mystique, we should consider that people once believed proverbial wisdom. As Tilley reveals, writers in the period from 1500 to 1700 had an "elastic conception of what was proverbial . . .

[transcending] the limited definition of a proverb as a saying of the folk . . . Writers of the Renaissance were fond of introducing a statement by some such phrase as 'The prouerb goeth,' 'As the proverbe is,' or 'We say . . .'" (Tilley, v).

Webster's characters often preface their use of a proverb or their telling of a tale with an introduction, and these cases most clearly demonstrate how important traditional wisdom is to them. The following examples are from The White Devil: "I'll give you a saying which my grandmother/Was wont, when she heard the bell toll, to sing o'er/Unto her lute" (V.vi.180), "Remember the old wives' tradition . . . ." (V.vi.264-65).

The characters in The Duchess of Malfi also preface many speeches with an introduction: "Some fellows, they say" (I.i.48), "I have heard soldiers say so" (I.i.350), "Let old wives report" (I.i.352), "sad tales befit my woe: I'll tell you one" (III.v.121). These remarks are often

credited to authority figures (My grandmother, soldiers, old wives) or to the ever-authoritative, amorphous "they." By crediting the statement to another source, the characters both provide extra credibility for a sentiment and also relinquish partial responsibility for either their utterance or else their action.

With Tilley's explanation of how proverbs worked in these earlier centuries in mind, Webster's use of proverbs can be more clearly understood, and the mistakes of generations of critics, best represented by R.W. Dent in his introduction to John Webster's Borrowing (1960), can be avoided:

" . . . it is becoming increasingly evident that Webster did not employ even the commonest proverbs without the stimulus of some specific work. Webster's sources are in some measure determining the dialogue. Sometimes working directly from his source, but more often employing a commonplace book, probably every repetition in Webster stems from this notebook method. He composed the work bit by bit from sources [a] . . . line or two at a time, with a commonplace book open (Dent, 11).

This view of Webster as an insidious borrower is relatively new, but quite pervasive since Dent's book. Most critics simply cite Dent's work in an early footnote as the

source for information on Webster's borrowing and ignore the topic in their study. Dent's assumptions are hardly--if ever--questioned. Granted, his research provides information about Webster's literary influences which included Sidney and Montaigne. But Dent ignores any implications of the characters' use of traditional tales and proverbs, and treats this inclusion of proverbs and traditional tales as if it were the same as Webster's borrowing from other authors' works. The utterance of a proverb or traditional tale--especially when one prefaces the tale with a source--is by its very nature a "borrowing." To criticize Webster's borrowing proverbs from previous literature is really missing the whole point. This point should seem obvious, but it has been ignored by Dent, other source-seekers, and generations of critics who use Dent's book as an important source for insight into Webster's work. The massive negative feeling about Webster's borrowing has plagued criticism of Webster for too long. For those unfamiliar with this bias in the criticism, I will present the main influential ideas and demonstrate how this emphasis on sources precludes an investigation into the dramatic importance of the use of proverbs and traditional tales.

Don D. Moore's book--John Webster and His Critics 1617-1964--surveys the history of Webster criticism quite informatively. Until 1904, Webster's borrowing was not an

issue, perhaps because such composition practices were quite common. Most 18th and 19th century critics comment on the greatness of Webster's poetry or particular passages, exemplified by the enthusiastic response of William Hazlitt to the Duchess' famous line "I am Duchess of Malfi still": he says he felt

" . . . as if the heart rose up, like a serpent coiled, to resent the indignities put upon it, and being struck at, struck again. This is not the bandying of idle words and rhetorical commonplaces, but the writhing and conflict, and the sublime colloquy of man's nature within itself!" 2

Hazlitt admires Webster's use of language, just as Frederick Carpenter does in Metaphor and Simile in the Minor Elizabethan Drama, Chicago, 1895. Carpenter says the character of Flamineo "is heightened by the irony of his incessant similes . . . Antonio's rather colorless virtues are artfully depicted through his fondness for sententious comparisons." 3 These two early interpretations of Webster's use of sententiae are much closer to my own than studies which are influenced by Dent. Moore also discusses two studies of Websterian borrowing which precede Dent. The first close study of Websterian borrowing began in 1904 with Charles Crawford in Notes & Queries (Moore, 80). A

year later, E.E. Stoll's John Webster presented a broader study of Webster's borrowing. Moore's evaluation of this book reveals his own prejudice for original use of language:

Stoll . . . is more interested . . . in influences. Today [1964], we are generally interested in evaluating results as much as methods. For one reason, when we concentrate specifically on Webster's borrowing, as do Stoll and Robert Dent, we tend to come to the conclusion that more than anything else, Webster was an artistic thief. As this is not a particularly pleasing conclusion, we grant him pardon and judge instead his rearrangements (82).

Although most of his book is informative and basically objective, Moore betrays his romantic bias here in his evaluation of Webster as an "artistic thief" who needs to be "pardoned." Unfortunately, Moore's position here is quite similar to that of Dent's. Moore mentions Dent's study without comment since the time of their publications was too close to allow time to evaluate the influence of Dent's study.

Dent is not entirely misled in his recognition of Webster's tendency to borrow from others' works; however, he over-estimates the scope of this tendency. Dent determines that Webster is "second to none in his

dependence upon source" (3) and that more than three-fourths of Webster could be traced to origins (5). Even if Webster did borrow as much as Dent maintains, his inclusion of proverbs and tales should not be included with a consideration of sources as Dent does.

M.C. Bradbrook points out the need for more studies of Webster's borrowings, "both in terms of Jacobean rhetoric and of structural-linguistic apparatus of the present time" (8). I agree that these studies are needed, from which which we might learn if other playwrights used "borrowings" in the way Webster does, but my work focuses on Webster's use of proverbs and traditional tales, specifically in a dramatic sense. I think Webster's mastery of these devices can be adequately studied within the plays themselves until we gain more insight into this use of language as an aspect of other Jacobean drama and Jacobean rhetoric generally.

Of course, there is quite a difference between appropriating passages from Sidney's Arcadia and quoting from old wives' tales, although both practices were quite acceptable at Webster's time. Although I'm most concerned with Webster's use of traditional wisdom rather than contemporary literature, I'm still not convinced--even by Dent's extensive study--that Webster borrowed so much as Dent maintains. Most of the passages he quotes side by side share merely a common subject or theme. A

representative "parallel" Dent presents follows: He compares Ferdinand's question in The Duchess of Malfi "What cannot a neat knave with a smooth tale / Make a woman believe?" (I.ii.264-65) with this sentence from Overbury's "Characters" 1614: "She leaves the neat youth telling his lushious tales" (Dent, 188). As is his practice throughout the book, rather than highlighting the parallel he perceives, Dent merely lists these two passages side by side. Since he has offered no suggestions, I find the parallel between these two passages quite illusory. Searching for Webster's sources for proverbs seems rather absurd, since proverbs by their very nature are not original.

Even though the point of proverbs and traditional tales is that they have no specific source, Bradbrook, Baker, Freer, Berry, and other contemporary critics all refer to Dent's book as the authority on Webster's borrowings. The critical adoption of the assumptions behind Dent's study is the aspect which troubles me most. The idea that since Webster was such a word thief, he is just not as good a playwright as he might have been continues, as exemplified by Freer's assessment of the moralizing passages, which he sees as "victories for Webster's libraries at the expense of motivation" (160). This feeling seems to arise from the persistently romantic conception of the creative artist--an attitude which

demands "originality." With this limited conception in mind, Webster's use of proverbs is not viewed as insightful, but as tiresomely imitative.

The "new critics'" influence persists in much Websterian criticism and prevents critics from considering any other data except the text. This limitation prevents them from admitting the relevance of knowledge we have about early cultural attitudes such as those discussed in Tilley's dictionary. In 1950, predating Dent's book by ten years, Tilley says, "The earlier practice of considering the common use of similar ideas by two writers as a debt by one to the other is now more generally recognized as the use by both of a proverbial thought of their time" (viii). (Later, Bradbrook reinforces this notion.) Tilley is most impressed with Shakespeare's use of proverbs, but mentions Webster as one who approaches Shakespeare's talent for "skillful allusiveness" (viii). Although Tilley doesn't mention Webster specifically more than once in his introduction, the following general comment can illuminate the way characters use proverbs in Webster's plays:

Both sides of contemporary disputes find utterance at times in crystallized proverbial form . . . the superstitions of the past as well as the wisdom of the past are found side by side with expression of opposite views. The proverb was



everybody's weapon (viii).

An example of use of alternate proverbs for verbal sparring is in The White Devil:

Brachiano: Do not like young hawks fetch a course about:

Your game flies fair and for you--

Francisco: Do not fear it:

I'll answer you in your own hawking phrase.

Some eagles that would gaze upon the sun

Seldom soar high, but take their lustful ease,

Since they from dunghill birds their prey can  
seize.

You know Vittoria?

(II.i.46-52)

Whether or not Webster read the proverb about eagles in Turberville or Dekker as Dent claims (91), the dramatic purpose of this self-conscious use of proverbs by the characters must be examined. In Brachiano's case, the proverb he utters provides a shield for the attack he feels from Francisco. Francisco counters with an example of his own mastery of this rhetorical device, including a judgment of Brachiano as a lustful dung-seizer, followed closely by a reference to Vittoria. This is one of those multi-purpose utterances. Francisco reminds Brachiano of his duty and puts his mistress down at the same time. His not-so-subtle method of bringing up the issue of Brachiano's involvement with Vittoria is crafty and manipulative. At the same time, his use of the proverb about eagles indicates a

belief in a traditional explanation for all occurrences.

This is only one example of a self-conscious use of proverbs which has a dramatic purpose. Other instances, with even more significance, abound. Few of the uses of proverbs and tales in Webster--especially the ones noted by the characters--seem merely plugged in from a commonplace book. Even though Dent fails to discover the dramatic significance of Webster's inclusion of proverbs in the dialogue, his book can serve as a history of uses of the proverbs. Although other critics have not been as derisive as Dent, they still fail to understand the importance of proverbs and tales at certain dramatic moments. In her recent book on Webster, Bradbrook presents an elaborate defense of Webster's borrowings which she terms "bondings":

The most badly misunderstood feature of Webster's style . . . is [his] laminations or bondings of other men's images and short sayings into his text. . . . He may have expected some, but not necessarily all, of his quotations to be recognized; all derive from the common tradition, the rich collective subsoil of European poetic accumulations, and each image may work differently for different readers. . . . (137).

Of course the main problem with Bradbrook's view is that she concentrates on "readers" and not audience, and often

forgets that Webster's characters are the ones who voice these phrases. This concentration on readers rather than audience influences critics to focus primarily on the ironies they find in the character's utterance of proverbs rather than search for the immediate dramatic relevance of the use of proverbs. Coburn Freer sees the disjunction of moralizing couplets with a dramatic situation as Webster's sarcastic "inner criticism" (208). Lee Bliss also focuses on this disjunction as he applies what R.A. Foakes says of the moral tags in the plays: "Their triteness, their inadequacy as moral comment, their insufficiency in any perspective outside the immediate one, are what makes them the vehicle of much of the play's deepest irony" (229). In application to Webster's plays, this statement is inadequate. The irony of a disordered world in which the confused characters cling desperately to traditionally shared bits of comfort is perhaps obvious. What is perhaps more noteworthy, however, is the way the characters use these expressions in their search for a foundation for their actions; this use of traditional wisdom concerns much more than the immediate application. "Insufficiency" is a strange word to use concerning proverbs and tales which had been in common use for centuries. Some of the fables and proverbs uttered in the plays, such as "Things being at the worst begin to mend" (The Duchess of Malfi, IV.i.77) are still in common use. Regardless of the ultimate truth

of the sayings, the relevance of these utterances is that they seem to "work" for the characters by providing them the ability to control, explain, and/or understand an uncertain situation.

One critic who overwhelmingly misinterprets Webster's use of proverbs is Ralph Berry in The Art of John Webster (1972). In his interpretation, Berry also constantly focuses on Webster's interpretation of his work rather than the meaning as existing in the work:

The sententiae constitute the moral concerns of the plays. These are the points where the action halts, the text leaps into inverted commas, and a moral generalization is enunciated on the situation of the characters. Naturally, most of the action is completely opposed to the drift of the sententiae (77-78).

The confusion of audience vs. readers is obviously operating in this passage where Berry so blatantly ignores the fact that characters enunciate the sayings. Neither a deus ex machina appears to pronounce judgment nor does a presenter offer guidance. Try as one might (if one were of a mind to do so), it is impossible to pin down one character as John Webster's mouthpiece. The characters in this drama have been created to speak for themselves. What we must discover is what motivates them to apply

traditional wisdoms to their non-traditional actions. As shown above, instead of making their actions conform to certain standards, the characters find a tag and stretch it to fit their actions.

Although Berry refutes part of Ian Jack's reading, his criticism primarily serves to confirm Jack's criticism from forty years earlier:

". . . this background of moral doctrine has nothing to do with the action of the plays: so far from growing out of the action, it has all the marks of having been superimposed by the poet in a cooler, less creative mood than that in which the Duchess and Flamineo had their birth. There is no correspondence between the axioms and the life represented in the drama. This dissociation is the fundamental flaw in Webster (38).

Berry's comments on Jack's statement are perceptive, but they do not go far enough. He says that saying "'There is no correspondence between the axioms and the life represented in the drama' . . . is on a par with writing: 'There is no correspondence between Clytemnestra's action in killing Agamemnon and the views expressed by the chorus'" (77-8). This insight about the correspondence of the axioms uttered in Webster with the choric utterances in Greek drama helps reveal the significance of these axioms. The human need to find wisdom and meaning to fit a

situation can be seen in both instances. The inadequacy of the statement in providing answers or truth does not seem as revealing as the characters' utterance of any kind of axioms, traditional tales, or moral doctrine. No matter how feeble a solution, the gesture of reaching to the traditional wisdom of the previous ages reveals that the characters feel a need for order in their lives, and are looking to tradition to provide that meaning; even when their actions are not traditional, these characters try to present them as such.

In The White Devil, two minutes before he finally dies, Flamineo utters another bit of wisdom: "Let all that belong to great men remember th'old / wives' tradition, to be like the lions i' th'Tower on / Candlemas day; to mourn if the sun shine, for fear of the pitiful remainder of winter to come" (V.vi.264-67). Of course, it is ironic that this character who has been at least partly responsible for the murders of many blames his class status for his luck running out. It is also ironic that he compares his state to the changes of seasons--something which one can't control. But if we focus on the ironies, we avoid examining aspects of Flamineo's character which make him believe what he says. As will be demonstrated later, Flamineo feels that his low birth gives him the right to manipulate those who are from higher classes in

order to receive preferment. Even while manipulating proverbs to influence others and maintaining that he is not moved by "grammatical laments," Flamineo also believes in the traditional wisdom he utters. He manifests his belief in the traditional social structure by wishing to obtain a more powerful position within it. As he dies, the proverbs and tales he utters, including the one about the lions in the tower, indicate how powerful these bits of wisdom are to him. Although maintaining a cynical pose throughout the play, Flamineo turns to axioms at the very end and seems to utter them sincerely as explanations for what happened to him while simultaneously beginning to take responsibility for what he did to himself, and continuing to blame fate for his lot:

Let all that do ill take this precedent:  
Man may his fate foresee, but not prevent.  
And of all axioms this shall win the prize:  
'Tis better to be fortunate than wise.  
(V.vi.178-81)

In this speech, Flamineo admits to doing "ill." At this point, rather than glorifying his grasp for preferment, Flamineo says that since he has done ill, he could not prevent his death. Although this comment fits with his earlier sayings about fortune, it contains a qualification since it does not refer to everyone, but to "all that do ill."

The multiple meanings of the proverbs would probably not be immediately apparent to audience members since they do not have as much time as readers do to reflect on nuances and ironies of language. Rather, the total impression of the scene is more crucial. The cumulative effect of Webster's lavish use of proverbs would more immediately be felt by audience members than by readers who have to be more removed from the action. On stage, actors are challenged to portray their characters' consistent attitudes about the proverbs and traditional tales uttered. Dramatically, these work better when the actors utter the sayings while in character rather than while stepping outside the role to provide an "objective" authorial/narrative comment.

Berry says that in these plays "the drama consists essentially of the gap between the choric morality and the actions of the principal characters" (77). Like most of us at one time or another, Webster's characters are at a point where their words don't necessarily correspond with their actions. Rather than conforming their actions to the limits of morality, the characters re-define and stretch the axioms to explain their behavior. Webster's characters are not anarchists who are consciously attempting to question and overthrow a system. Instead, they are so ingrained into the system that they apply the system's own moral codes to define their own non-



traditional, rebellious behavior. The value of this portrayal is that Webster himself doesn't intrusively assert any system as "wrong" or "right," but instead clearly demonstrates the power and endurance of traditional beliefs. Although less judgmental than Berry, Bradbrook also views the sententiae as performing a choric function. She is also more hesitant in her assessment of the characters' use of couplets:

The gnomic couplets of Flamineo, his 'dry sentence stuffed with sage,' may have served to replace the chorus that his theatre denied Webster; biting comments on the action by some detached onlooker, or the snarling match between Lodovico and Flamineo, display self-conscious verbal artifice which is mocked at the same time that it is indulged (136).

Bradbrook's analysis of Flamineo's simultaneous indulgence and mockery of couplets describes his use of these devices quite aptly. Although Bradbrook doesn't provide an example, a scene which includes Flamineo's use of a fable will serve to show how he appears to be mocking this use of rhetorical device at the same time as he indulges it. Taking this much time to tell a tale allows Flamineo to control this scene by ending it with a reminder of the debt he is owed. After Brachiano and

Vittoria have quarreled, made up, and decided to escape from the house of penitent whores, Flameneo halts the action to tell the following tale:

Lo you sister.

Stay, my lord; I'll tell you a tale. The crocodile, which lives in the river Nilus, hath a worm breeds i'th'teeth of't, which puts it to extreme anguish. A little bird, no bigger than a wren, is barber-surgeon to this crocodile: flies into the jaws of't, picks out the worm, and brings present remedy. The fish, glad of ease, but ingrateful to her that did it, that the bird may not talk largely of her abroad for non-payment, closeth her chaps intending to swallow her, and so put her to perpetual silence. But nature, loathing such ingratitude, hath arm'd this bird with a quill or prick on the head, top o'th'which wounds the crocodile i'th'mouth, forceth her open her bloody prison; and away flies the pretty toothpicker from her cruel patient

(IV.ii.218-233).

Flameneo fears that his services as pander will be decried when Brachiano and Vittoria legitimize their union. Therefore, he subtly reminds him that they should be grateful to him, or nature will punish them. Brachiano perceives this application, but Flameneo wisely denies it, applying the fable instead to his sister, whose reputation has been

"blemish'd" (236), but will now be cured by Brachiano. Although denying that the fable has anything to do with his service, he reminds them to "scorn ingratitude" (240). The length of this speech and the fact that Brachiano and Vittoria listen attentively to him for so long demonstrates that these characters find value in traditional tales. Also, whatever the application, all characters are willing to receive a moral from the tale. It seems quite natural to them that this fable can present a message which applies to their lives. Flamineo is cynical about the way he has been treated, but he finds a comfort, of sorts, in the tale which shows a similar occurrence in nature. Shortly after indulging himself with this speech, Flamineo issues an aside to the audience which mocks his own use of the fable--even though he has issued the tale with a serious intent. This aside adumbrates centuries of critical trouble with the character of Flamineo, but seems reasonable enough to me as a self-rationalization of his own utterance in the previous scene.

It may appear to some ridiculous  
Thus to talk knave and madman; and sometimes  
Come in with a dried sentence, stuff'd with sage.  
But this allows my varying of shapes:  
Knaves do grow great by being great men's apes.

(IV.ii.241-45)

Rather than primarily mocking the use of proverbs,

many times the characters seem to sincerely define or defend their action by uttering proverbs. Perhaps the wisdom is "choric," in that it expresses the amassed opinions of society, but the individual expression of these opinions is more relevant in these plays. Rather than totally overturning tradition, these characters sift through wisdom, appropriating aspects which they find relevant to themselves.

At times, some more recent critics approach a realization of the function of Webster's proverbs and tales, but most of the time their speculations appear only in footnotes or parentheses. In her essay "The Static Protagonist in The Duchess of Malfi," Susan Baker comes closer than any other critic to offering an interpretation of the *sententiae* which refers to the characters' use of these axioms. She groups proverbs with other "cultural rhetoric" seen in The Duchess of Malfi, such as "stock arguments against a widow's remarriage, notions of blood, honor, and duty, and to her 'blasphemy' in feigning a pilgrimage" (351). Her comments on Webster's use of cultural rhetoric are insightful:

The sanctioned rhetoric of any culture both manifests and reinforces its modes of maintaining control over impulses detrimental to the smooth functioning of society. While such controls are

necessary for a society's survival, they and their rhetorical expressions can become increasingly rigid and formulaic. Carried far enough, this rigidity renders certain human possibilities simply unimaginable as it obscures them entirely.

. . . (351).

In this interpretation, Baker assumes that cultural rhetoric is only used by those in control socially to maintain a homogenous society. This is certainly one function of cultural rhetoric as she describes it. What seems to me more relevant to a study of Webster's plays is the way cultural rhetoric functions among individuals who are stretching tradition to the limit. In this case, almost all of the characters recite cultural rhetoric as a formula--however unconsciously applied--for overturning social norms. This form of re-interpretation and adjustment of cultural rhetoric seems to reveal a human need for some moral standards--perhaps especially ancient traditions--even in a creative application of proverbs and tales. Baker also doesn't quite understand the crucial importance of Webster's proverbs to his dramatic techniques. She states:

Although I cannot defend without reservation Webster's strange addiction to interrupting the poetic flow of his drama with tangential bits of oratory, these capsules of conventional wisdom are

often dramatically pertinent (352).

Even though she admits some "dramatic pertinence," Baker fails to elaborate. Both the pertinence and Webster's "strange addiction" can be understood by realizing that in creating believable characters who exist in turmoil they can't understand, Webster realized that they would not always spout original, creative phrases, but would be more likely to rely upon familiar stories or sayings to help explain their current predicament.

Some critics have hinted that Webster uses proverbs for dramatic effects. Webster's method, however, needs to be examined more closely in order to see just how using proverbs, fables, and bits of traditional wisdom displays a representative aspect of human nature (at least in the Websterian dramatic universe). Although most of the proverbs and "familiar examples" (WD, I.ii.102) seem to be used consciously, especially the multitude of those Flamineo piles on in The White Devil, the most obviously conscious uses of proverbs and tales are those occasions when the characters explicitly refer to their use of a tale or bit of wisdom. In these cases, I believe the characters are using the language determinedly for one or more of several reasons: to stop the action in order to regain self-control, to provide authority for a position, or to influence others to behave in a certain way. Many of the

characters in Webster's plays use language in these different ways, but the speeches serve to "characterize", in a broad sense, Francisco, Flamineo, Ferdinand, and the Duchess as people desiring order and reason in their lives, instead of disorder and confusion.

An initial understanding of the characters' distrust of disorder and need for order in their lives can be seen in the first act of The White Devil. Flamineo's behavior is representative of the other characters' need to fit into the existing social order, or create a new order for themselves. At the beginning of the play, we are quickly made aware of Flamineo's need to justify the path he's chosen to follow. He introduces his background and his aspirations in Act One:

My father proved himself a gentleman,  
Sold all's land, and like a fortunate fellow,  
Died ere the money was spent. You brought me up  
At Padua, I confess, where I protest  
For want of means, the university to judge me  
I have been fain to heel my tutor's stockings,  
At least seven years. Conspiring with a beard  
Made me a graduate; then to this duke's service.  
I visited the court, whence I returned  
More courteous, more lecherous by far,  
But not a suit the richer. And shall I,  
Having a path so open and so free

To my preferment, still retain your milk  
In my pale forehead? No, this face of mine  
I'll arm, and fortify with lusty wine,  
'Gainst shame and blushing (I.ii.323-38).

Although he professes confidence and independence to his mother, Cornelia, Flameneo is still uneasy about his behavior, especially in her presence, just as later, Vittoria is plagued by guilt when Cornelia berates her for sinning--or almost sinning--with Brachiano. In his unease about his behavior, Flameneo uses whatever devices or methods he can think of to achieve his goal and defend his cause, including uttering proverbs and tales. Flameneo often emphasizes his use of proverbs and tries to make his quest for power appear to be a fore-ordained task by a consistent universalizing tendency, seen in his frequent use of "We" when talking about himself: "And thus when we have even pour'd ourselves / Into great fights, for their ambition / Or idle spleen, how shall we find reward?" (III.i. 49-51); "We cease to grieve, cease to be Fortune's slaves, / Nay, cease to die by dying" (V.vi.251-52). This tendency can be seen throughout The White Devil and will be demonstrated more fully later.

An insight into Flameneo's character can help explain his use of language to establish a place for himself. McElroy compares Flameneo to the personality type



described by Robert Jay Lifton--the "protean man." McElroy describes Lifton's protean man:

" . . . a displaced person, the victim of social dislocation and the collapse of traditional moral and philosophical systems. Consciously alienated, he seeks to avoid fixities, personal and ideological, and again like Webster's character, he does so by improvising roles and inventing identities that cloak his guilt and his deep ambivalence about his own morality" (309).

Lifton's characterization of an alienated figure searching for an identity aptly describes Flamineo. One of the ways Flamineo deals with his dislocation is by describing his illusory identity in traditional "fixed" moral terms. Even though Flamineo sees himself as a victim of social dislocation, he attempts to fit into the system and find precedent or proverbial explanations for his actions to transcend his displaced feeling. To avoid feeling guilty for pandering his sister, Flamineo uses proverbs to distance himself from the individual by generalizing about all women: "Women are like curst dogs . . ." (I.ii.208); "Women are caught as you take tortoises, / She must be turn'd on her back . . ." (IV.ii.149-50); and "women are like to burs: / Where their affection throws them, there they'll stick" (V.i.92). The misogynistic nature of the proverbs allows him to remove some guilt about his own actions toward Vittoria.

The superfluity of comparisons, while seemingly professing cynicism, enthusiasm and self-assurance, indicate Flamineo's basic insecurity and desperation to receive preferment--recognition by those in power. He even tries to make his personal quest for power a universal one by comparing it to the action of natural eternal forces:

We are engaged to mischief, and must on.

As rivers to find out the ocean  
Flow with crook bendings 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 snake;  
So who knows policy and her true aspect  
Shall find her ways winding and indirect (I.ii.352-99).

Although she doesn't consider the function of proverbs in the characters' search for order, Paula Berrgren discusses the characters' grasping for order: "The impulse which leads to disintegration corresponds to the impulse to enclose and strengthen the center, sometimes as a source of protection, sometimes as a means of repression" (290).

The lack of traditional Aristotelian form in Jacobean drama, particularly Webster's plays, is often--quite naturally--seen as reflective of real events in Jacobean England. Jonathan Dollimore's book, Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries is quite useful for a fuller look at

social and cultural influences on this period's dramatic literature. Dollimore's term "Crisis of Confidence" seems to describe well the disintegration the characters feel, which causes them to search for some foundation on which to ground their actions. <sup>4</sup>

One method speakers in Webster's plays use to establish their stature is to quote or refer to previous authorities and speakers. In the first act of The Duchess of Malfi, the Duchess employs this method both playfully and sincerely as she attempts to rationalize her actions. At this point, the issue of remarriage doesn't even include the possibility of the Duchess marrying someone from a lower class (although she would have few options if she didn't). Of course, her remarriage becomes even more problematic when she marries Antonio, her steward. When feeling threatened by Ferdinand, the Duchess says "Why might not I marry?/ I have not gone about, in this, to create/ Any new world or custom" (III.ii.110-12), but she does realize the ramifications of her actions. As Bosola says when he pretends praise, the Duchess' behavior sets a precedent:

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. The virgins of your land

That have no dowries shall hope your example

Will raise them to rich husbands. . . (III.ii.285-90)

Earlier in the scene, the Duchess jokes about a change of custom: "I hope in time 'twill grow into a custom, / That noblemen shall come with cap and knee / To purchase a night's lodging of their wives" (III.ii.4-6). The Duchess' awareness of the future influence of her behavior coexists with her need to find precedent for her actions. This need to fit her own dangerously trend-setting behavior into earlier traditions is an example of her desire to fit into--even while reformulating--the existing social order. Rather than going without a "clue" into the "wilderness" of socially unacceptable behavior as she asserts (I.ii.284-85), the Duchess carefully demonstrates that she is acting methodically and that her actions have authoritative precedent.

When her brothers first warn her against remarrying, the Duchess' immediate response is to quote the amorphous "they": "Diamonds are of most value, / They say, that have passed through most jewellers' hands" (I.ii.227-28). Ferdinand questions the value of that principle by stretching it to relate to "whores." Then the Cardinal devalues the Duchess' application of the saying by attributing it to "most widows" (229), primarily believed at the time to be "lusty" (265). This banter quickly turns into threats in this discussion of remarriage which

the brothers have no reason--yet--to suspect the Duchess of planning to do.

Shortly after this speech, the audience learns that the Duchess intends to remarry. This seems surprising since we have had no prior indications of this plan. Either the Duchess is enraged enough by her brothers' lecture that she decides to take action, or she has had this intent all along. Whatever the origin of the plan, the Duchess starts piling on authorities as precedent for her action immediately after Ferdinand's exit:

Shall this move me? 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 fright and threat'nings, will assay  
This dangerous venture. Let old wives report  
I wink'd and chose a husband (I.ii.266-74).

The desire to establish precedent seems obvious in this speech of less than ten lines which calls on the authority of experience of men in battle and enforces this notion by mentioning first-hand conversations with soldiers, and looks forward to a time when her actions will be commented on by some omnipresent tale-tellers--old wives. It is

obvious that the Duchess needs courage at this point; drawing on comments about situations which she perceives similar to her own helps give her the courage to disregard her future reputation.

Webster's characters effectively use extended speeches, which include fables and tales, as a way of quieting their fears. They talk, just as the Duchess does in the speech quoted above, both to find precedent for their actions, and to drown out any doubts which they might have. Spinrad notes that Webster's dramatic world is one of uncertainty "in which the characters grope for a way of coping with their fears" (48), but doesn't mention their use of proverbs and tales as an important method of coping. Their need for a traditional stability indicates just how troubled the characters are by the discontinuities they suffer. The grammatical laments continue to serve the function of maintaining control over passion and anxiety--and resurrecting at least a verbal order in its place.

The characters' concern about order in the state can be seen in Antonio's speech to Delio in Act I. scene i. of The Duchess of Malfi. Antonio mentions his admiration of the French court because "In seeking to reduce both state and people/To a fix'd order, their judicious king/Begins at home..." (I.i.5-7) Other quotes also indicate a concern about disorder and a desire to find reason and control. In

The White Devil, the first scene serves to introduce a troubled state of affairs with Lodovico ranting about being banished and Gasparo referring to "these bad times (I.i.37). As Brachiano woos her, he promises Vittoria to set her "above law" and "above scandal"; even when he first proposes forsaking his governmental responsibilities for Vittoria's sake, law is still an important reference point for these characters (I.ii.274). Later in this scene, when Cornelia discovers Vittoria and Brachiano in conference, she laments:

The lives of princes should like dials move,  
Whose regular example is so strong,  
They make the times by them go right or wrong.

(I.ii.298-300)

These quotes which show these characters' concern about order provide background for their use of proverbs and traditional tales. Webster's opinion about what the lives of princes should be like is not the issue. Some critics, however, choose to use the behavior of Webster's characters as an opportunity for preaching about "proper" behavior:

Disordered passion, whether specifically sexual or not, represents a deviation from the nature of, from what is proper to, man; it is not Ferdinand's impulse to violence that the Cardinal objects to, it is the unrestrained disorder of that impulse.

The parallel with the Duchess is obvious: both have become threats to society by departing from communal patterns of ordered behavior, by representing the chaos of uninhibited private action (Calderwood 142).

Several critics, especially Calderwood and Joyce Peterson, are quite upset by the fact that the Duchess ignores her duties to her country by overturning The Great Chain of Being by marrying her steward, and feel that we should judge her as harshly as her brothers do. However, even if we accept this line of criticism, it is difficult to see that the Duchess has denied responsibilities since we primarily see her private life, and she doesn't appear to have many demanding public duties. The duchy of Malfi seems rather negligible. In The Duchess of Malfi, after the Duchess' death, even Ferdinand admits:

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 that was the main cause; her marriage!--  
That drew a stream of gall quite through my heart.

(IV.ii.284-88)

Regardless of how we judge her actions, the Duchess remolds the social order to fit her desires and needs: " . . .



wish me good speed,/For I am going into a wilderness,/ Where I shall find no path, nor friendly clue/ To be my guide" (I.ii.283-86). The lack of direction the Duchess feels seems similar to the "maze of conscience" Flameneo refers to in V.iv of The White Devil (122), and to the "mist" he admits to being in when dying (V.vi.259) and to the mist which Bosola uses to describe the way Antonio comes by his death in The Duchess of Malfi (V.v.94). Whether or not the similarity is relevant, in the Duchess' pathless wilderness, she creates a personal order for her actions. She does not behave quite as wrecklessly as some critics believe. Rather than the "unrestrained disorder" which Calderwood calls the Duchess' actions (142), the Duchess quite carefully plans her actions:

The misery of us that are born great--  
We are forc'd to woo because none dare woo us.  
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.362-70).

Although not specifically concerned with the use of proverbs and tales, this explanation of how members of royalty must control their private passions and maintain decorum by using "riddles and dreams" can help in an

understanding of the use of traditional wisdom by the characters in these two plays, since proverbs and tales can serve like riddles and dreams by moving the point of reference outward rather than inward. Both types of rhetorical devices allow the speakers to remove themselves from the specifics of the immediate situation in order to control their troubling impulses, and especially "violent passions." This use of language helps both those "born great," particularly the Duchess and Ferdinand in The Duchess of Malfi and Francisco in The White Devil and those aspiring to be "great"--Bosola, in The Duchess of Malfi and Flamineo in The White Devil.

The use of rhetorical devices to mask one's actual passions or feelings can be seen throughout the plays, particularly at those times when the characters admit to playing a certain role, such as Flamineo's often quoted asides: "I do put on this feigned garb of mirth / To gull suspicion" (III.1.33-34) and "Because now I cannot counterfeit a whining passion / for the death of my lady, I will feign a mad humour / for the disgrace of my sister, and that will keep off / idle questions." ( III.1.302-5) and "It may appear to some ridiculous / Thus to talk knave and madman; and sometimes / Come in with a dried sentence stuff'd with sage. / But this allows my varying of shapes: / Knaves do grow great by being great men's apes."

(IV.ii.241-45). These explanations of Flamineo's behavior precede or follow occasions when he utters even more of a hodge-podge of axioms than usual. Although these quotes indicate a high degree of awareness of his use of language, Flamineo is not entirely secure in his manipulations, as we learn at his ultimate stressful moment--as he is dying: "I am i'th'way to study a long silence: / To prate were idle; I remember nothing. / There's nothing of so infinite vexation / As man's own thoughts." (V.vi.201-04).

Although possessing an awareness of the power of language, the characters continue to be swayed and comforted by these same powers. Even in her madness following the murder of Marcello by his brother and her son, Cornelia finds comfort in singing a traditional song (V.iv.96-105) and even has the presence of mind to cite a source for her song: "I'll give you a saying which my grandmother / Was wont, when she heard the bell toll, to sing o'er / Unto her lute--" (V.iv.92-94). Singing the song allows Cornelia to pass from her distraction and be slightly comforted, at least to the point where she can utter blessings on all the observers, including Flamineo, who is actually touched by the spectacle: "I have a strange thing in me, to the which / I cannot give a name, without it be / Compassion--" (V.iv.114-16). The comfort Cornelia receives from singing the traditional song and the compassion that Flamineo begins to feel as he sees

Cornelia's grief are examples of the types of immediate effects characters feel from uttering proverbs and traditional tales.

An example of a tale which works in a manipulative way is the tale which Francisco tells Camillo of Phoebus' desire to marry. This tale is more puzzling than others, but it also serves to provide the speaker time to establish his control over a scene in order to manipulate his audience. Although critics have failed to find a purpose for this tale, it seems merely told to help convince Camillo to leave the country so that they can try to catch Vittoria in the act of adultery. There is no real need for Francisco's ruse; the play's outcome would be much the same without it, except that Camillo's farewell party becomes the occasion of his murder. It seems, however, that Francisco, as the Duke of Florence, could just tell Camillo to leave, instead of offering him an extended explanation. But providing reasons, especially flimsy traditional ones, for his actions could serve to keep Francisco in power, as those underneath him admire his use of tales. Even if Francisco isn't really concerned about justifying his actions to Camillo, perhaps he wants to establish motivation for ridding the land of Vittoria, and perhaps foresees taking control of Brachiano's kingdom. After a traditional jading of Camillo for being known as a cuckold,

Francisco asks him if he has any children (perhaps a device to see if anyone will be left behind to revenge his parents), tells him he's happier for not having children, and proceeds to tell a tale of Phoebus:

Francisco: I'll tell you a tale.

Camillo: Pray, my lord.

Francisco: An old tale.

Upon a time Phoebus the god of light,  
Or him we call the sun, would need be married.  
The gods gave their consent, and Mercury  
Was sent to voice it to the general world.  
But what a piteous cry there straight arose  
Amongst smiths, and feltmakers, brewers and cooks,  
Reapers and butter-women, amongst fishmongers  
And thousand other trades, which are annoy'd  
By his excessive heat; 'twas lamentable.  
They came to Jupiter all in a sweat  
And do forbid the bans; a great fat cook  
Was made their speaker, who entreats of Jove  
That Phoebus might be gelded, for if now  
When there was but one sun so many men  
Were like to perish by his violent heat,  
What should they do if he were married  
And should beget more, and those children  
Make fireworks like their father? So say I,  
Only I will apply it to your wife:

Her issue, should not providence prevent it,  
Would make both nature, time, and man repent it.

(II.i.334-356).

Telling this lengthy tale displays an aspect of Francisco's character--a misanthropic attitude which helps explain his later thirst for widespread revenge. By ranking his warnings of Camillo's cuckoldry and advice against having children to Jupiter's banning of Phoebus' marriage, Francisco elevates the importance of his position--even on a somewhat minor issue. Presenting this ambiguous tale serves to make his position of power more mysterious, and he appears as a sort of Delphic oracle. I can imagine the staging of this with Francisco in an elevated position telling the tale with the rest of the listeners, especially Camillo, standing in awe. Even though this tale seems unnecessary to most of us, it works for Francisco as he judges his ploy and his application of the tale to be "well fitted" (II.i.375).

This tale Francisco tells serves a similar purpose, although not as notable, to the tale of reputation which Ferdinand tells the Duchess. The tales have what I call a contemplative function: by providing a lengthy interlude with some relevance to the current situation, the tales provide the speaker with an opportunity to take control of himself and/or the situation rather than acting hastily.

Even if the immediate application is not apparent, these tales function formally, as grammatical laments.

In The Duchess of Malfi, Act III.ii.25-32, Antonio tells stories from Ovid and other sources as part of the light merrymaking between the Duchess, Cariola, and himself. The persistence of this pattern of storytelling--even in jest--demonstrates that this practice of looking to tradition for help in understanding the present is quite pervasive. Antonio notes "we read how . . ." and this statement indicates that Webster is certainly aware that this story is not original. As Antonio gleefully heaps stories upon stories--traditional tales of Daphne, Sirinx, Anaxarete, and Paris--Webster both provides an appropriate contrast for Ferdinand's wrathful entrance and establishes a pattern for one more tale, the story about Reputation which Ferdinand will be compelled to tell--"to small purpose, since th' instruction/ Comes now too late . . ." (III.ii.121-22).

Upon a time, Reputation, Love and Death  
Would travel o'er the world; and it was concluded  
That they should part, and take three several ways.  
Death told them, they should find him in great battles,  
Or cities plagu'd with plagues. Love gives them counsel  
To inquire for him 'mongst unambitious shepherds,  
Where dowries were not talk'd of, and sometimes  
'Mongst quiet kindred that had nothing left

By their dead parents. 'Stay', quote Reputation,  
'Do not forsake me: for it is my nature  
If once I part from any man I meet  
I am never found again.' And so, for you:  
You have shook hands with Reputation,  
And made him invisible. So fare you well;  
I will never see you more. (III.ii.124-37)

This particular speech is one which makes it tempting to try to pin down Webster's personal opinion of the Duchess' behavior. Perhaps his interjection of the tale at this time is an authorial intrusion, but I prefer to believe that the inclusion of proverbs and tales usually has dramatic significance. Therefore, to discover the significance of the tale at this moment, we must examine Ferdinand's motivation for uttering it. Why does Ferdinand tell this tale if, even in his rage, he believes the time is too late for the Duchess to resurrect her lost reputation (as he sees it)? Since there is little chance of actually convincing the Duchess to feel the way he does, it seems that this tale functions primarily to allow Ferdinand to regain control of the violence he feels within himself. Earlier in the scene Ferdinand speaks to the Duchess' husband--although he doesn't yet know Antonio as the one--and reveals that he has changed his mind about his original intent in coming to the Duchess' chamber: "I



came hither prepar'd/To work thy discovery, yet am now  
persuaded/It would beget such violent effects/As would damn  
us both . . ." (III.ii.93-96) Ferdinand is ultimately no  
longer able to restrain himself, but at this point he is  
still trying to maintain control of his emotions, and  
remain human rather than the wolf he becomes.

An extended step-by-step example of the effects of  
grammatical laments on a speaker is the Duchess' indulgence  
of this device. She most successfully uses traditional  
wisdom as a means of attaining peace of mind. After being  
abducted by Bosola to be taken back for imprisonment in her  
own palace, the Duchess pauses--at the height of this  
dramatic situation--to recite the tale of the salmon  
and the dogfish (iii.v.123-43), of whom the "value can  
never be truly known / Till in the fisher's basket . .

. [they] be shown. . . ." (135-36) She stretches the moral  
of this "sad tale" to her own situation: "Men oft are  
valued high, when th'are most wretched" (140). Here the  
Duchess receives comfort from her retelling: she then  
takes control of her "violent passions" and becomes "arm'd  
against misery" (141). Then, she is said to bear herself  
"nobly" (IV.i.2)--whereas only shortly before, she wished  
she could physically harm Bosola.

Next, after seeing what she believes to be the dead  
bodies of her children and Antonio, the Duchess passes

through several stages as her psyche tries to cope with this shock. Upon first seeing the spectacle, she grieves that she has nothing to live for and begs for mercy to let her die. She mentions the example of Portia and says "I'll new kindle thy coals again, / And revive the rare and almost dead example / Of a loving wife" (IV.i.72-4). After referring to Portia's legendary method of suicide (holding hot coals in her mouth), the Duchess is reminded by Bosola that she is a Christian. She grabs this reminder and turns to a lesson from church teaching--fasting (in her case, overstepping church boundaries by fasting to death).

At this point, Bosola tries to comfort the Duchess by uttering two quite traditional proverbs:

Things being at the worst begin to mend:

The bee when he hath shot his sting into your hand  
May then play with your eyelid (IV.i.77-79)

Although she now tells Bosola that it is useless to try to comfort her, this is quite similar to the kind of proverb which the Duchess has previously used to comfort herself, such as "There's no deep valley, but near some great hill" (III.v.143). While maintaining that she is not comforted, the Duchess repeats her wish to die soon, but then moves her anger outward in a blanket curse against the stars, seasons, and families. Although the comfort doesn't come easily, the thoughts of various traditions help move the Duchess from total despair to anger, and then to ask

Cariola to tell her a tale of "some dismal tragedy" since  
"To hear of greater grief would lessen . . . . [hers]  
(IV.ii.8-10).

Next, the madmen Ferdinand sends to plague her merely  
highlight the Duchess' strong will--and make her strength  
and lack of fear of death more admirable. Her thoughts of  
various precedents to her situation and traditional methods  
of response help her gain the strength and assurance that  
enables her to utter her famous proud statement --"I am  
Duchess of Malfi still" (IV.ii.147)

Generalizations can begin to be drawn at this point  
when we realize that not all the characters in Webster's  
plays receive the comfort from proverbs and tales that the  
Duchess receives. Flamineo's response to the Savoy  
Ambassador's statement--"You must have comfort"  
(III.iii.10)-- can serve as a key to understanding another  
reaction to proverbs, tales, and other "grammatical  
laments":

Your comfortable words are like honey.

They relish well in your mouth that's whole; but in  
mine that's wounded they go down as if the sting of  
the bee were in them (III.iii.12-15).

Although it's hard not to admire the passion of the multi-  
tude of statements in the nearly-melodramatic final death  
scene in The White Devil, it becomes apparent that these

words are not enough for the characters. The proverbs and tales have allowed them to manipulate situations and control their passion at moments, but when it comes to dying, they are not able to be comforted. Although we don't witness his death, Francisco's nephew sentences him to prison and torture (V.vi.290). Vittoria's last words, one final proverb, contain both a bleak warning and a continued denial of responsibility for her actions)--"O happy they that never saw the court, / Nor ever knew great man but by report" (V.vi.260-01). And most appropriately, Flameneo, the manic talker, says "I have lost my voice / Most irrecoverably" (V.vi.270-01). Compared to these self-centered, desperate statements, the Duchess' last words indicate both humility and a concern for others. As Cariola is led away from her, the Duchess says, "I pray thee look thou givs't my little boy / Some syrup for his cold, and let the girl / Say her prayers, ere she sleep" (IV.ii.208-10). Right before she is strangled, the Duchess remarks as she kneels, "Yet stay, heaven-gates are not so highly arch'd / As princes' palaces: they that enter there / Must go upon their knees. . . ." (IV.ii.236-38). The positive effects she has received from the grammatical laments, as contrasted with the final failure of the utterances for the other characters, indicates that the Duchess possesses an inner strength which allows her to both create and believe a new order. Even though her fate

is the same as Vittoria's and Flamineo, she maintains her integrity and strength in the face of death.

Although not uttered at similar times in the plays, the previously quoted statements about bees are presented to both the Duchess by Bosola and to the Savoy Ambassador by Flamineo in relation to words of comfort (Duchess IV.1.77-99 and Devil III.iii.12-15). Bosola tells the Duchess that since she has already been stung, she will not be as pained by events as she has been. Although the Duchess denies that she can be comforted, Bosola's words prove true; the Duchess obtains a strength of spirit (in part from uttering proverbs and tales) which neither proverbial bees nor literal assassins can touch. Flamineo, on the other hand, is finally unable to be comforted. He continues to see himself as "wounded"--a victim of society and others' ill will--and thus is stung finally, even by his own prating and loses his voice--literally, in death, and figuratively, in influence. The memory of the Duchess of Malfi, however, pervades the fifth act of the play:

" . . . Let us make noble use  
of this great ruin; and join all our force  
To establish this young, hopeful gentleman  
In's mother's right . . . " (V.v.110-13).

Whether or not the proverbs and tales ultimately provide comfort for all the characters, they are an

important aspect of Webster's plays. When reading, and especially when producing these plays, these utterances should be seen as devices which help the characters understand their socially unacceptable situations and cope with their radical passions. I have only treated a portion of the proverbs and tales in John Webster's plays, but my reading can be extended to include most of the other traditional wisdom uttered. I think that previous negative attitudes toward Webster's use of proverbs and traditional tales have inhibited a full dramatic realization of Webster's works. I hope that my explication of dramatic uses of the "grammatical laments" may, beyond its value for a literary understanding of Webster, provide suggestions for future productions of The Duchess of Malfi and The White Devil.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I have chosen to use the most recent edition of Webster's plays, that edited by Dollimore and Sinfield, since they not only base the text of each play on the earliest quarto, but they have also based the corrections and notes on the work of earlier scholarly editions, including F.L. Lucas, The Complete Works of John Webster, London, 1966; John Russell Brown, The White Devil, London, 1960 and The Duchess of Malfi, London, 1964; and Elizabeth Brennan, The Duchess of Malfi, London, 1964 and The White Devil, London, 1966.

<sup>2</sup> William Hazlitt, The Literature of The Age of Elizabeth, (London, 1901), 102, qtd. in Moore, 37.

<sup>3</sup> Frederick Carpenter, Metaphor and Simile in the Minor Elizabethan Drama, (Chicago, 1895), 77, qtd. in Moore, 66.

<sup>4</sup> Lawrence's Stone's summary of the "four most salient elements in the manifold preconditions of the war" in 1629 (as quoted by Dollimore) can help explain the actions of the characters in The White Devil and The Duchess of Malfi since their fictional political situation happens to be somewhat similar to that described by Stone. The most relevant of these elements described is the fourth listed, the Crisis of Confidence in the integrity of those in power, whether courtiers, nobles, bishops, judges, or kings (Dollimore, 4).

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"GRAMMATICAL LAMENTS" IN  
THE DUCHESS OF MALFI AND THE WHITE DEVIL

by

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AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S REPORT

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Abstract. The characters in John Webster's The White Devil and The Duchess of Malfi often use proverbs, axioms, fables, and traditional tales determinedly for one or more of several reasons: to stop the action in order to regain self-control, to provide authority for a position, or to influence others to behave in a certain way. While acting in ways which violate various social codes, the characters still use bits of formulaic traditional wisdom to grant themselves "comfort" in their non-traditional behavior. Understanding this use of language reveals an important aspect of Webster's dramatic method. Although dissatisfied with aspects of the social order, the characters turn to traditional methods to explain their actions. Often, they are quite aware of their manipulative use of language, but their utterances work for them as "grammatical laments"--language which serves a dramatic, formal function more than a logically meaningful one. The results of this use of language vary from characters who die "in a mist" to the Duchess whose use of language helps her create meaning for herself even while facing death. An understanding of the inclusion of traditional wisdom as an aspect of Webster's dramatization is crucial for realizing the full power of his plays--in the study and on the stage.