

JOHN WEBSTER'S DEMONOLOGY

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B. S. Concordia Teachers College, 1962

A MASTER'S REPORT

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY

Manhattan, Kansas

1963

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Clifford Leech closes his discussion of The White Devil with the remark that "There is a Calvinist strain in Jacobean drama.... The tragic writers know little of heaven, but much of hell."¹ Leech was referring, primarily, to a sense of total depravity and an awareness of eternal punishment in Webster's formation of plot and character. His description applies equally well to Webster's verbal artifice. The word "devil" itself occurs twenty-six times in The White Devil, twenty-two times in The Duchess of Malfi, and even in the pre-Christian Rome of Appius and Virginia, Webster does not hesitate to allow the usage. In Jacobean England, the Prince of Darkness was intrinsically linked with the black arts of witchery and sorcery. Significantly, a chain of allusions to witchcraft extends through three of Webster's plays. If one adds to "witches" and "devils" the frequently recurring allusions to hell, damnation, and darkness, one finds that Webster was very much aware of the diabolical.

Webster was, of course, fond of repeating images. He often introduces a figure (for example, "poison," "jewels," "wolves," "tempest," or even "glass house") and extends the image through the play, using it in a variety of contexts. John Russell Brown says that such chain images help "to bind the composition together."² More significantly, Hereward T. Price demonstrates that an immense configuration of images dealing with the "polarity of appearance and reality" relates to the very center of Websterian

¹John Webster: A Critical Study (London, 1951), p. 57.

²John Russell Brown, ed. The Duchess of Malfi, by John Webster (Cambridge, Eng., 1964), p. xlili.

drama.³ I am suggesting that there is also an art to Webster's use of the diabolical. In certain recurring situations, Webster's imagination plays conjuror, and his images plucked from demonology and folklore are associated with lust, revenge, and sacrilege. A highly significant pattern of image and allusion develops.

The purpose of this study is to demonstrate that an intricate pattern of demonic image and allusion exists in both The White Devil and The Duchess of Malfi, and to show what Webster accomplishes with this pattern. To begin, certain key associations must be established. The diabolical imagery usually occurs in context with specific conditions: an illicit sexual desire, a thirst for revenge, an attack on the order of the church, or a guilty conscience. Deception and Machiavellianism (the code for satisfaction of revenge or sexual drive) are also characterized as satanic. Webster's villains often mar or invert some ritual of the church,⁴ and when they are troubled with their sins, the flashes of conscience are not so much a "sense of right," but rather an awareness of the Devil within and a fear of damnation. In contrast, when Webster presents a virtuous character, he associates images of heaven and divinity.

The demonic details, by their connection with sex, deceit, and revenge, relate to the very center of Webster's plays. Besides giving connotations of absolute evil to certain actions, these details accent the essential conflict and help delineate the

³"The Function of Imagery in John Webster," PMLA, LXXX (1955), 717-739.

⁴James R. Hurt, "Inverted Rituals in Webster's The White Devil," JEGP, LXI (1962), 42-47.

dramatic structure. We can discover an essential difference between The White Devil and The Duchess of Malfi. In the former, Webster balances adultery and murder against revenge of a black Machiavellian. Both Vittoria and Francisco are linked with the demonic. The play opens with a marring of the sacrament of marriage and ends with an inversion of last unction. In The Duchess of Malfi, however, the conflict is not evil against evil, but evil against good. The lines of revenge, deceit, and abnormal sexual desire meet in the tormented psyche of Ferdinand, with whom a ponderous majority of demonic images are associated. Conversely, there are saintly overtones to the Duchess' death. Thus, in bold outline, we can see the plan of the plays.

Before we begin a detailed investigation, we should recall that a fair-sized corner of the Jacobean mind was very much concerned with witchcraft and demonology. King James himself had published his Daemonology in 1597. It opens with an arraignment of those "damnable opinions" expressed by Reginald Scot in his Discovery of Witchcraft. Whereas Scot had attempted to expose witchcraft as superstition and fraud, James demonstrated by empirical evidence and biblical authority that witches and sorcerers were very real instruments of the Devil. James' first parliament had been in session less than two weeks when the witchcraft act was introduced. Under this stringent law, "Anyone who shall use, practice or exercise any invocation or conjuration of any evil and wicked spirit . . ." should suffer death as a felon.⁵ The discussion

⁵Statutes at Large, III (London, 1693), Jacobi I, cap. xii (1604).

on the reality of witches continued in such books as William Perkins' Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft (1603), John Cotta's A Short Discoverie of Unobserved Danger (1612), and George Gifford's A Discourse Concerning Witches and Witchcrafte (1593 and 1604). For many people, there was no doubt that witches and sorcerers were real--and approximately forty to fifty persons were executed for practicing witchcraft during James' reign.⁶

Demonology had its application to psychology, as well. Robert Burton presents a lengthy digression on ". . . the Nature of Spirits, Bad Angels or Devils and How They Cause Melancholy."⁷ Thomas Nashe affirms that "the Diuell when with any other sickenes or malladie the faculties of our reason are enfeebled and distemperd, will be most busie to disturbe us and torment us."⁸ In Pierce Penilesse His Symplication to the Diuell the Knight of the Post tells Pierce that, for some, the name "Diuell" is merely a synonym for a "pestilient humour in a man, of pleasure, profit, or policie, that violently carries him away to vanitie, villanie, or monstrous hypocrisie."⁹ The knight then demonstrates that the Devil is a very real and supremely powerful spirit with many devices for working mischief. We can see that a rich store of theological, psychological, and superstitious beliefs existed. Our discussion of Webster's demonology must draw from this tradition.

⁶ Wallace Notestein, A History of Witchcraft in England from 1553 to 1713 (Washington, D. C., 1911), p. 105.

⁷ Anatomy of Melancholy, Part I, sect. i, memb. i, subs. i.

⁸ The Fierours of the Nighs in The Works of Thomas Nashe, ed. Ronald E. Hexterrow (Oxford, Eng., 1958), I, 348.

⁹ Nashe, I, 219.

In Webster's plays, which deal so extensively with cunning and subversion, Satan certainly has his place. Webster stands in the shadow of Machiavelli, and all his villains are superb Machiavellians.¹⁰ To Ferdinand the law is as a web to a foul, black spider. Both the law and the web are used to entangle and condemn. He is introduced as a man who hides a pestilent nature under a mask of smiles, and later revenge for honor becomes a hood for his jealous fury. Francisco is an arch Machiavellian directing events from within his disguise as Iulianassar. Bosola wears his "garb" of melancholy, playing the roles of malcontent, intelligencer, bellman, and executioner--until, almost symbolically, he casts off his disguise. Revenge is always cloaked, death wrought on the unsuspecting by hired executioners, by trickery, by concealed poison. Satanic imagery fits well into such an intricate network of deceit. In Christian literature Satan has always been the subtle deceiver who can cite scripture or transform himself into an angel of light. Burton, quoting Augustine, refers to the Devil as "The Lord of Lies . . . 'as he was deceived himself, he seeks to deceive others.'"¹¹ George Gifford's A Dialogue Concerning Witches and Witchcraftes was designed to lay open "how craftely the Diuell deceiueth not onely the Witches but many other and so leadeth them awrie into many great errors."¹² Nashe uses

¹⁰ For a full discussion, see Travis Bogard, The Tragic Satire of John Webster (Berkeley, 1955), ch. 1.

¹¹ I, II, i, 2.

¹² The Shakespeare Association Facsimiles, No. 1 (Oxford, Eng., 1951), p. A12.

"Machiavellian" to describe the Devil.¹³ In Webster, he is the "invisible devil," the "cunning devil," the confectioner who "candies sins o'er." The Devil uses a politician as his quitted anvil--"He fashions all sins on him, and the blows/ Are never heard." As the proverb states, "The White Devil is always worse than the Black."

Webster's demonology, however, involves more than the machinations of various characters. The best way to uncover the pattern is by a systematic analysis in which the images are related to their dramatic context and to their source in folklore or theology. The first of Webster's major plays, The White Devil, is a good starting point. After the pattern is established, it can be examined in The Duchess of Malfi.

It is fascinating to watch the manner in which Vittoria is revealed to us. I can hardly agree with B. J. Layman who writes, "When Webster first introduces Vittoria to us, nocturnally, it is as a whore without qualifications, lacking all whiteness."¹⁴ Leech is closer to the truth when he says, "We are attracted by them [Brachiano and Vittoria], we give them some measure of sympathy, we realize that they are our kin."¹⁵ We are so much attracted, in fact, that we forget that morality is involved. The first forty-five lines serve to introduce Brachiano, Flamineo,

¹³ E.g., "This Macheuillian trick bath bee [the devil] worth the noting. . . ." in Terrors of the Night in Works, I, 347. See also, Fierce Perilesse in Works, I, 220-221, for a summary of the diabolical pestilent humour of Machiavellianism.

¹⁴ "The Equilibrium of Composites in The White Devil: A Reinterpretation," PMLA, LXIV (1959), 348.

¹⁵ Leech, p. 35.

and the problem to be solved: a cuckolding. Then enters Camillio, a type of fop--affected, dull-witted, jealous, and gullible. In the spirit of good, ribald fun, we want to see him cuckolded. As the scene develops, we see a spirited woman escaping from a dull, improbable marriage. Her lover is a handsome duke whose wife is described as "phlegmatic." The affair is directed by a clever, although cynical, pander. Even though we are partially aware that whoredom is involved, we are drawn to them and give them our "measure of sympathy."

Then Webster begins to cut through the ambivalence. Vittoria narrates the dream of the harmless yew, and we are gradually cognizant that not only adultery, but also murder, is involved. Flamineo interrupts the dream:

Vit. Lord how methought
I trembled, and yet for all this terror
I could not pray.
Flam. No the devil was in your dream. (I, ii, 247-250)¹⁶

Although dreams were usually considered to arise from some imbalance of humors, the idea of diabolically instigated dreams still lingered in superstition. Flamineo's line is not far fetched. According to Mashe, the Devil, when he could not attack men united, would "one by one assail them in their sleep."¹⁷ Burton quotes Jason Pratensis: "The Devil, being a slender incomprehensible spirit can easily insinuate and wind himself into human bodies . . . terrify our souls with fearful dreams, and shake our mind with

¹⁶All quotations taken from John Webster, The White Devil, ed. John Russell Brown (London, 1960).

¹⁷Terrors of the Night in Works, I, 343.

furies" (I, II, i, 2). Scot lists three types of diabolically inspired dreams.¹⁸ Most significantly, the passage relates to the medieval superstition that demons could induce lewd thoughts in the minds of sleeping women, as well as carry on sexual relations.

Flamineo, catching on to Vittoria's method, shifts the allusion:

Excellent devil.

She hath taught him in a dream
To make amay his duchess and her husband. (I, ii,
256-259)

For the first time, the audience is told that Vittoria is playing the title role. The allusion to things diabolical is muted, but continued. Cornelius approaches: "Woe to light hearts--they still, fowerun our fall" (268). Flamineo replies, "What Fury reis'd thee up? away, away!" (270). The superstition that witches often blighted crops and gardens leads Cornelius from "Never dropt mildew on a flower here" to

O that this fair garden
Had with all poisoned herbs of Thessaly
At first been planted, made a nursery
For witchcraft; rather than a burial plot,
For both your honours. (274-278)

By implication, what is happening here is worse than witchcraft. Cornelius continues her condemnation, terming Vittoria's betrayal "Judas-like." Vittoria exits with "O, me accurst."

Adultery is linked with the demonic, with witchery, and with Judas. Together with Cornelius's prophesy of destruction, the images help us regain control of our ethical valuations. We are

¹⁸The Discoverie of Witchcraft (Carbondale, Ill., 1964), Bk. X, ch. iv. First published in 1584.

dealing with a white demon, which, because of its alluring qualities, is worse than the black. It is no accident that the scene ends with an archetypal allusion linking adultery, deception, and the power of Satan with what will follow. Neither is the kissing of cibilians in lines 351-353 accidental.

We are engag'd to mischief and must on
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. (346-354)

In the next scene, Webster balances the purity of Isabella against the indifferent infidelity of Brachiano. In an elaborate metaphor, Isabella compares the power of her love to the power of unicorn's horn. Just as a circle of pulverized horn, when placed around a poison spider, could "force it to obeying," so she hopes to charm her unfaithful husband. The unicorn's horn was considered as a general preventative and antidote against any type of poison, and a small portion placed in the mouth could protect the user. In 1661 the Royal Society attempted to carry out the same experiment that Isabella refers to figuratively. We can assume that it did not work for the Royal Society, and ironically, not only does the charmer fail to control the "spider," but she dies of poison. The unicorn's horn was considered a tool for "white magic." The work of the magician in the next scene is clearly the opposite.

Webster's method of revealing the deaths of Canillio and Isabella serves several purposes. While letting the audience know what has happened, the dumb show keeps the murders removed,

the audience uninvolved, and the action uncluttered. To my knowledge, the effect the conjuror would have had on the Jacobean audience has never been noted. This fellow is no juggler of cards, but a skilled, semi-professional nigromancer. He begins by insisting that, unlike many who pretend sorcery, he is truly skilled in black art. He refers to those who seem to conjure with cards, and to those who "raise up their confederate spirits / 'Bout windmills, and endanger their own necks [the penalty for witchcraft was hanging], / For making of a squib" (II, ii, 11-13). These are exactly the types of tricks exposed in The Discoverie of Witchcraft.¹⁹ The conjuror alludes to Mr. Banks' counting horse, rumored by some to be a familiar spirit, as typical of such fakery. With a minimum of incantation, the conjuror demonstrates the reality of his art. The vision which follows (depicted by the dumb show) relates to two types of "diabolicall dreames" mentioned in Scot, "When the divell sheweth revelations to them that have made request upon him therefore. . . . and when magicians by art bring to pass, that other men dreame what they will."²⁰ For the audience, such "black art" was clearly initiated by the Prince of Darkness and punishable under the witchcraft law of 1604. Webster is linking adultery and murder with the powers of blackness. During this scene Brachiano is under the control of Satan. His line, "Noble friend, you bind me ever to you . . ." is not without forcefulness.

¹⁹ See especially Bk. XIII, chs. xii-xv, and chs. xxvii ff.

²⁰ Bk. X, ch. iv.

To discuss in any detail the chain of demonic allusions associated with Vittoria would be to dote on the trivial to prove the obvious. The heaping up of images is far from accidental. Vittoria's sin is a "black lust" and her seduction of Brachiano is a "black concatenation." Monticelso's indictment is ridden with accusations. "I am resolved/ Were there a second paradise to lose/ This devil would betray it" (III, ii, 68-70). In his character of a whore, she is "true material fire of hell"; and he reminds us that "next the devil, Adult'ry,/ Enters the devil, Murder" (III, ii, 107-108). Frustrated by Vittoria's clever evasions, Monticelso counters with "If the devil/ Did ever take good shape behold his picture". (III, ii, 216-217). The line is a general echo of 2 Corinthians, xi, 14: "Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light," an attribute which many Jacobean demonologists discuss.²¹ One might compare Nashe: "Lucifer entred, imitating in goodly stature the huge picture of Laocoön at Rome."²² Brachiano, angered at the contents of Francisco's intercepted letter, speaks of himself as being bewitched, and for a moment wishes that he could loose Vittoria like a hawk and let her "fly to the devil" (IV, ii, 83). Flamineo describes his and Brachiano's situation: "we lay our souls to pawn to the devil for a little pleasure, and a woman makes the bill of sale" (V, vi, 161-163).

This chain of associations extends through the entire play. Only a few of the allusions deserve any comment. Brachiano's

²¹ See, e.g., King James, Daemonology, p. 39, and Gifford, f. E2^r

²² Terrors of the Night, in Works, I, 239.

line: "Your beauty! O, ten thousand curses on't"/ How long have I beheld the devil in crystal?" (IV, ii, 87-88) has always caught critical attention. The allusion is to a conjuration in which a spirit, a witch, or as in this case, a devil, is made to reveal himself in crystal rock or glass. Scot gives three supposed incantations for this purpose, and many treatises on witchcraft allude to the practice.²³ Brachiano sees Vittoria's beauty as a type of crystal in which the Devil has, for some time, been revealed. Another chain of images linking Vittoria to things jeweled and crystalline runs through the entire play, and here the two chains fuse in a striking metaphor.²⁴

The figure of the Devil with a jeweled codpiece is a mutation in the chain of figures linking the demonic with lust and adultery. There is a sense in Brachiano's distractions, just as there is a sense in the ramblings of the mad Lear. Brachiano's self depreciation, "Has't ever known the devil/ Rail'd against cloven creatures?" (V, iii, 89-90), his ramblings about poison quail and the dog-fox Florence, his picture of Flamineo walking the tight-rope, his idea of an aged Vittoria who has sinned "in the pastry," can be read as his distorted reflections of reality. The same is true of his devil image. "Look you his codpiece is stuck full of pins/ With pearls o'th' head of them" (V, iii, 100-101). Evil and sex are fused in the image of the great codpiece, forming an arresting reflection of Brachiano's psyche, and providing a faint echo of

²³ Scot, Ms. H7, chs. xii, xvi, and xix. See also Gifford, Q2V ff.

²⁴ E.G., I, ii, 221; III, ii, 240-245, 204, 294.

the trading of jewels in Act I, scene ii. This tormenting hallucination, like his other illusions, grows from his sense of a disordered, immoral life. Although I have found no exact source for the image of the "devil's codpiece" in Jacobean folklore, two possible origins suggest themselves. The first is the style of tights termed "devils-breeches" with which the codpiece was worn.²⁵ The second is general conception of the Devil as a sexually potent figure who seduced maidens in churchyards, entered into incubus with sleeping women, and insisted on sexual relations as part of the witch-pact.

The Duke's last articulation before the "priests" begin last unction is of six gray rats without tails crawling up the pillow. As Brown mentions in a footnote to the speech, witches could transform themselves into any animal--but the animal would be without a tail. If this is what Webster intended, Brachiano's mind is made to shift to the diabolical once again. He pictures his court as a covert of vermin.

The "devil adultery" is not applied only to Vittoria's action. The affair between Flamineo and Zanche echoes in miniature the relationship between Vittoria and Brachiano. Zanche's sensuous nature, her "rank blood," parallels that of her mistress, and again the demonic applies. Marcello, speaking of Zanche, derides his brother, "Why doth this devil haunt you? say,"

²⁵ Nashe uses the term twice: In The Unfortunate Traveller in Worms, I, 172, and in Pierce Penilesse in Worms, II, 223. Webster uses the former passage as the basis for Act II, scene ii, lines 35-49 of The Duchess of Malfi.

to which Flamineo replies:

I know not.
For by this light I do not conjure for her.
'Tis not so great a cunning as men think
To raise the devil: for here's one up already,
The greatest cunning were to lay him down. (V, i, 86-90)

Later, Flamineo says, "I do love that Moor, that witch, very constrainedly" (V, i, 152-153). Imitating Brachiano, Flamineo kills to protect his mistress. Imitating Vittoria, Zanche narrates a dream to gain a new lover, Francisco. These are distorted echoes of the main plot, in which the black devil is imitating the white.

A discussion of Vittoria reveals only one side of Webster's demonology. We might change Monticelso's line to read, "Next the devils adultery and murder, enters the devil revenge." The revenge plot connotes diabolism as much as Vittoria's lust. The revenge, as such, begins in Act IV, scene i with Florence's pretended indifference. Monticelso exhorts him to seek vengeance not by open violence, but by concealment. The Cardinal's book of criminals is brought forth:

And some there are which call it my black book:
Well may the title hold: for though it teach not
The art of conjuring, yet in it lurk
The names of many devils. (IV, i, 33-36)

The term "black book" was used to designate a book used to list rogues and villains (C.E.D.) as well as a book of necromancy.²⁶ Machiavelli, Satan, and vengeance are fused in the figure of the "black book." In itself, this has only minor significance. However, conjuration as a metaphor for the summoning of revenge

²⁶-L. Lucas, ed. The Complete Works of John Webster. (New York, 1937), I, 352 (note).

is repeated several times in the events that follow.

Francisco, to sharpen his desire for revenge, attempts to form a picture of Isabella. The apparition that appears is clearly the product of melancholy, as Francisco indicates, and not a real ghost. The psychology is conventional enough. Lewes Lavater's attitude: "True it is, that many men doo falsly persuade themselves that they see or heare ghosts: for that which they imagin they see or heare, proceedeth eyther of melancholie, madness . . . or of some other perturbation,"²⁷ is paralleled in many psychological treatises. Yet this scene has pronounced sinister overtones. Francisco reads through a book of "necromancy," and when he is finished, a spirit appears. The action has a definite, ironic echo of a conjuration. Francisco himself invites the comparison:

Thought, as a subtle juggler, makes us deem
Things supernatural, which have cause
Common as sickness. 'Tis my melancholy,--
How cam'st thou by thy death?-- (IV, 107-109)

The word "juggler" is, of course, synonymous with "conjuror"; and Francisco, in spite of his better knowledge, begins to question the apparition much as one would at a conjuration. He exits with an invocation to the powers below: "Flectere si nequeo superos,
Acheronta movebo." Revenge, during this scene, has been sharpened not by a sense of justice or reason, but by melancholy--the black humor. We see a mind unbalanced and twisted into a desire for blood.

²⁷ Of ghosts and spirites walking by nyght, and of strange noyses, crickes, and sundry forewarwyntes, whiche commonly happen before the death of menne, great slaughterers, & alterations of kyngdomes, trans. R. H. (London, 1572), p. 9.

The allusion to conjuration is repeated thrice. Monticelso, making his second entrance as Pope, confers with Lodovico. He knows what is plotted: "I know you're cunning. Come, what devil was that/ That you were raising?" (IV, iii, 88-89). He exists with a condemnation of revenge, cast in the same terms:

And so I leave thee
With all the Furies hanging 'bout thy neck,
Till by thy penitence thou remove this evil,
In conjuring from thy breast that cruel devil.
(IV, iii, 124-127)

The scene ends with:

Now to th' act of blood;
There's but three Furies found in spacious hell,
But in a great man's breast three thousand dwell.
(IV, iii, 151-154)

This is clearly not the same type of "revenge for honor" as was typical of Elizabethan revenge tragedy. Francisco is not presented to us as a sympathetic hero bent on bringing justice and preserving family honor. Rather, Webster is balancing one evil against another. The law has failed to bring adequate punishment, the church has washed its hands of the matter, and vengeance will be enacted without sanction of the church, court, or conscience. In Christian literature, revenge has always been associated with the satanic. In his Daemology, James speaks of it as one of those passions of man most facilitating to the Devil. The Devil works, "Even by these three passiones that are within our selves: Curiosite in great ingines: thirst of revenge, for some tortes deeply apprehended: or greedie appetite of geare, caused through great poverty" (p. 8). James expresses the same idea again: "Such persons as though riche, yet burnes in a

desperat desire of revenge, bee allures them by promises, to get their turne satisfied to their hartes contentment" (p. 29). As Burton records, the fourth rank of devils comprises the "malicious, revenging devils, and their prince is Asmodaeus" (I, II, i, 2).

The subtle machinations that lead to the death of Brachiano are handled with marked ritualistic overtones.²⁸ The revengers begin by taking the sacrament to confirm their vow of blood, thus perverting the Eucharist to seal evil, rather than to work sanctification. Gasparo and Iodovico disguise as Franciscans. Francisco dresses as the black Mulinassar and stands in the background as the architect of revenge, or as the high priest for an inverted ritual. Iodovico suggests poisoning Brachiano's prayer book or rosary, or better his tennis racket. Instead, the Duke's helmet is poisoned. The ritual climaxes in a damning perversion of the sacrament of last unction. Asking all to leave that they may whisper some "private meditations" to the dying Duke, Gasparo and Iodovico remove their disguises. With the crucifix and hallowed candle still beside Brachiano, they torture the Duke with his own sins, then strangle him. Gasparo's "for charity,/ For Christian charity, avoid the chamber," (V, iii, 172-173) is a stroke of terrifying irony. Vittoria enters, then runs from the chamber: "O me! This place is hell."

Noting the presence of a black priest and the inversion of papist ritual, James R. Hurt makes the natural association between what happens here and the "black mass" of Devil worship.²⁹

²⁸Hurt, p. 45.

²⁹Hurt, pp. 46-47.

Although the dramatic action bears little detailed correspondence to the actual ritual of the Sabbath,⁵⁰ the association is certainly evident. In both black mass and Websterian ritual, the rites of the church are perverted to serve the Prince of Darkness and enforce damnation. What is equally significant, those persons whom Webster characterizes as diabolical often pervert some religious ritual or sacrament. It was Vittoria's "black lust" that led to a double violation of the sacrament of marriage, and it was Brachiano's compliance with that lust that led to an inversion of the marriage ceremony itself in Act I, scene iii. In a slightly different sense, Isabella's nightly ritual of love (kissing her husband's picture) becomes the means for her death, and again we have an inversion.

The images drawn from demonology have one last function in the play: they become a means to express a concept of conscience. During the final scenes, Brachiano, Vittoria and Flamineo are (at times) poignantly aware of the "devil within" and afraid of eternal damnation. The flashes of fear are sharp, but the pain does not endure long enough to check evil. Actually, Vittoria has a chain of conscience pricks: "O me accurst," "I am lost," "This place is hell," and, in her last scene, she enters with a prayer book. Nevertheless, Vittoria persists in her evil. Brachiano's vision of the Devil reveals an awareness of evil,

⁵⁰ Montague Summers, The History of Witchcraft and Demonology (New York, 1956), pp. 110-169. Summers claims to give an accurate description of the Sabbath and its historical development. The presence of a high priest and the use of holy candles are the only details that correspond to Webster's ritual.

but his last words are a call for Vittoria. Vittoria's lines to Flamineo can be taken as an expression of sincere fear, a moment of self awareness:

O the cursed devil
Which doth present us with all other sins
Thrice candied o'er; despair with gall and stibium,
Yet we carouse it off; [aside to Zanche] cry out for help--
Makes us forsake that which was made for man,
The world, to sink to that was made for devils,
Eternal darkness. (V, vi, 58-64)

And who can forget her vision of Judgment; "Millions are now in graves, which, at last day/ like mandrakes shall rise shrieking" (V, vi, 66-67). A few moments later she is characterized as a devil again. With Zanche she treads on her brother and consigns his soul to hell. Earlier, Flamineo's question to the ghost, "What religion's best/ For a man to die in?" (V, iv, 129-130) had expressed a religious fear similar to Vittoria's. When Flamineo counterfeits death, he imagines the pains of hell-- perhaps searching to feel what life after death is like.

No hope of salvation is offered to any of the characters. Their only recourse is to enforce their identity at the moment of death, to die nobly, with a rhetorical flourish.

We can consider the entire play as a pattern of demonic images. Adultery, beginning with a diabolical dream, leads to the double murder of Camillio and Isabella; and the dumb show used to reveal the murders is presented as a form of black art. Vittoria, mimicked by Zanche (a devil of a different hue), plays her title role to the last. Appropriately, all flashes of conscience bear reference to devils and damnation. Against Vittoria and Brachiano is balanced revenge "conjured" from Francisco's hate. He becomes a black devil

bent on sending his victims to eternal damnation. Webster pits evil against evil until all order collapses and the arch Machiavellian triumphs. In more general terms, Gunnar Ekelund describes the play as a "world without a core" spiraling to chaos.³¹ The pattern of images reinforces this description. We are accustomed to picture the Elizabethan world as a chain extending from God's throne to the lowest of insensible objects, and in the spiritual realm, to the feet of Lucifer. Webster snaps the chain at man, casts aside the super-structure, and leaves only the natural world, hell, and men who damn themselves.

The Duchess of Malfi is, of course, a much different play, and the pattern of images helps us grasp the key difference. As in The White Devil, the demonic details are attached to deceit, revenge, or sex. Here, however, they are associated primarily with two men: Ferdinand and the Cardinal. An opposing sense of things celestial, not found in The White Devil, is balanced against the demonic, giving this play a "core" and hinting that order is possible in a disordered world. The pattern of images is clearly definable. Again, it sharpens the essential conflict and accents the structure.

Webster begins The Duchess of Malfi with deft strokes, and within three scenes all major characters have been revealed in some depth. Smoothly weaving the genre of character writing with dramatic exposition, Webster reveals the Cardinal as a "melancholic churchman; the spring in his face is nothing but the engendering of

³¹See The Sources of The White Devil (Cambridge, Mass., 1957), p. 104.

toads . . ." (I, i, 157-158).⁵² The Cardinal is a Machiavellian with "flatterers, panders, intelligencers, atheists, and a thousand such political monsters" (I, i, 161-162) as his tools. The reader never forgets Bosola's unsavory simile comparing the two brothers to crooked plum trees bearing infected fruit beside stagnant water. Bosola also describes the Cardinal as a man "able to posses the greatest devil, and make him worse," (I, i, 46-47) and a few lines later Antonio uses similar terms:

They that do flatter him most say oracles
Hang at his lips: and verily I believe them;
For the Devil speaks in them. (I, i, 184-186)

Webster lets the audience know, in no uncertain terms, who is to be considered the villain. Antonio has come a long way from the fixed order of the French court.

Although the Cardinal appears in only four scenes, he is a significant character and (by his own admission) counsels Ferdinand's punishment of the Duchess. As Elizabeth Brennan points out, we become so fascinated with Ferdinand that we forget about his counterpart.⁵³ In truth, the Cardinal is a difficult character to deal with, for he possesses what appear to be contradictory traits. He is a melancholy cleric and a playboy, moralist and lecher, priest and soldier. These apparent contradictions are resolved, in part, if we note the role that guilt plays in his motivation. The Cardinal condemns most vehemently those sins of which he himself is guilty. This suggests a type of guilt complex, an irrational

⁵²All citations are taken from The Duchess of Malfi, ed., John Russell Brown (Oxford, Mass., 1957).

⁵³"The Relationship Between Brother and Sister in the Plays of John Webster," MLR, LVII (1962), 469.

compensation for his own latent culpability. He denounces remarriage as sinful, but in his next appearance he carries out an adulterous affair with Julia. She fears that the Cardinal may prove to be an inconstant lover, to which he replies: "You fear/ My constancy, because you have approv'd/ Those giddy and wild turnings in yourself" (II, iv, 10-13). I am suggesting that this analysis applies to the Cardinal as well as to Julia, that we have an example of what the modern psychologist would term "projection." The Cardinal's part in the Duchess' death could well grow from this neurotic guilt, just as Ferdinand's grows from latent incestuous desires.

This gives us a consistent interpretation of the Cardinal. His melancholic temperament could well result from his sense of guilt.³⁴ Later, he accuses the Duchess of using religion as her "riding hood," while being guilty of the same thing. Guilt leads to fear: he kills Julia to silence her, he fabricates an elaborate story to hide the nature of Ferdinand's madness. He is close to despair when he says, "O my conscience! I would pray now: but the devil takes away my heart/ for having any confidence in prayer" (I, iv, 27-29). Troubled with the tediousness of a guilty conscience, he expresses confusion about the doctrine of hell. He gives us a striking metaphorical description of his tormented mind:

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

This description, drawn from Lavater's Of Ghosts and Spirits (p. 39), reminds us very much of the vice of the morality plays who entered

³⁴Burton discusses the relationship between fear, guilty conscience, and religious melancholy in III, IV, ii, 3.

with a hoe to carry a soul to hell.

Besides this corruption in the religious order, Webster portrays a twin corruption in the order of the state. Ferdinand uses the law as a spider uses a cobweb. Like the Cardinal, he hides a perverse nature beneath what appears mirth and hearty laughter. Part of the perversity, we learn, is his incestuous desires, and the seeds of a psychic maladjustment that will lead to lycanthropy. Webster identifies him, also, with the demonic in a lengthy chain of allusions. When, at his brother's instigation, Ferdinand attempts to hire Bosola as a spy, Bosola reacts with:

Bos. It seems you would create me
One of your familiars.
Ferd. Familiar! what's that?
Bos. Why, a very quaint invisible devil, in flesh:
An intelligençer. (I, i, 253-260)

These lines have been slightly misread. Bosola's pun is not in reference to "familiar spirits" (any demon serving a witch or sorcerer),³⁵ but to a "familiar," a demon in the shape of a small animal, usually a dog or cat, and quite literally, "an invisible devil in flesh." Bosola is thinking of Ferdinand and the job he offers in terms of a devil-pact. Again he uses a pun:

Take your devils
Which hell calls angels: these curs'd gifts would make
You a corrupter, me an impudent traitor,
And should I take these they'd take me to hell.
(I, i, 263-266)

When Bosola is offered the provision of the horse, he replies: "thus the devil/ Candies all sins o'er; and what heaven terms vile/ That comes he complimentary" (275-277). When the agreement is

³⁵ See, e.g. Brown's note.

completed, Bosola is still thinking of the pact with the devil. He summarizes the contract: "The provisorship o' th' horse? say then, my corruption/ Grew out of horse-dung: I am your creature" (285-287). "Corruption" is a pun with theological overtones, and the word "creature" is a faint echo of "familiar." He enters the contract with full knowledge that the position and money offered will lead to dishonor:

Let good men, for good deeds, covet good fame,
Since place and riches oft are bribes of shame--
Sometimes the devil doth preach. (I, i, 289-291)

Bosola is an ambiguous character. On the one hand, he is looking out for himself above all else. He would like to grow fat by hanging onto the Aragonian brothers, and he is very much concerned about receiving just reward for services rendered. On the other hand, he is concerned with honor and is fearful of his "corruption." The potential for virtue exists in him, as can be seen by Antonio's words to Bosola: "You would look up to heaven, but I think/ The devil, that rules i' th' air, stands in your light" (II, i, 94-95).

As one would expect, most images of hell, devils, and sorcery relate to Ferdinand and his machinations. Antonio's description is typical:

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, 21-24)

One of the major images is witchery. Ferdinand admonishes his sister:

be not cunning:
 For they whose faces do belie their hearts
 Are witches, ere they arrive at twenty years--
 Ay: and give the devil suck. (I, i, 308-311)

Witch-pacts often involved sexual intercourse and suckling of the devil, either with milk or blood. In the witch trials of 1612, Mother Sawyer was convicted chiefly on the evidence of certain paps found at various points on her body. When Ferdinand hears of his sister's remarriage, he cries, enraged: "It is not your whore's milk that shall quench my wildfire,/ But your whore's blood" (II, v, 47-48). The Cardinal turns the metaphor, telling Ferdinand that his wrath torments him "As men convey'd by witches through the air,/ On violent whirlwinds" (50-51). When Bosola suggests that the Duchess has been bewitched into loving, Ferdinand disagrees: "The witchcraft lies in her rank blood" (III, ii, 78). When he hears of his sister's children, he approaches the Cardinal in stunned silence. Delio comments: "In such a deformed silence, witches whisper/ Their charms" (III, iii, 58-59). In his last interview with the Duchess before her imprisonment, he calls her a witch, "So you have some virgins/ That are witches:--I will never see thee more" (III, ii, 140-141). During her imprisonment, Ferdinand presents her with a dead man's hand. Witchery frequently practiced with members exhumed from dead bodies,³⁶ and the Duchess replies: "What witchcraft doth he practise that he hath left/ A dead man's hand here?" (IV, i, 54).

³⁶See, e.g., Scot for the use of a harlot's body (bk. XIII, ch. x), or more specifically, Summers, for a history of witchery worked with a dead man's hand (p. 161). Also, when Ferdinand refers to boiling the Duchess' bastard to a cullis and giving it to Antonio to renew his sin (II, v, 70-73), he is apparently describing the type of witchcraft described in Scot (bk. XII, ch.x).

The pattern is not difficult to discern. In each case, witchery is related to abnormal or illicit sex.³⁷ Bosola describes the old woman's attempts to beautify herself as witchery. To Ferdinand, the Duchess is a "lusty widow" who will turn herself into a cunning witch. To him, her marriage is detestable, a sin of witchcraft in rank blood. His jealousy and tormented rage seems motivated by witches, and his contemplation of revenge is like the silence "in which witches whisper their charms." The thirst to satisfy his jealousy is expressed in the witchery of a dead man's hand. Witchery as a metaphor for love is extended through much of Webster's work.³⁸

I am not suggesting, of course, that Webster uses only the satanic in conveying Ferdinand's temperamental maladjustment. Images of animals, especially wolves and reptiles are linked with the Duke, as well as fire, poison, and blood. Silvio's line, "he lifts up's nose, like a foul porpoise before a storm" is one link in a lengthy chain of tempest imagery. At times, Webster intertwines two chains. After the Duchess' death and Ferdinand's insanity, Grisolan, Roderigo, and Malatesta provide a fitting summary:

Gris. 'twas a foul storm tonight.
Rod. The Lord Ferdinand's chamber shook like an osier.

³⁷ Brown presents a corresponding idea in his introduction to The Duchess of Malfi, p. xliv.

³⁸ For example, witchery as a metaphor for love occurs in The Devil's Law Case. Jolente speaks of her enforced marriage to Leono as "bewitching." In the same play, Leona's jealousy and vengeance is linked not with witchery but with sorcery, "the raising of a devil" in the form of a law case.

Mal. 'Twas nothing but pure kindness in the devil
 To rock his own child. (V, iv, 18-21)

If something approaching absolute evil exists in Ferdinand, nearly the opposite (at least for Antonio) exists in the figure of the Duchess. His first description of her bears religious overtones.

For her discourse, it is so full of rapture
 You only will begin then to be sorry
 When she doth end her speech; and wish, in wonder,
 She held it less vain-glory to talk much,
 Than you penance to hear her: whilst she speaks,
 She throws upon a man so sweet a look,
 That it were able raise one to a galliard
 That lay in a dead palsy, and to dote
 On that sweet countenance: but in that look,
 There speaketh so divine a continence
 As cuts off all lascivious, and vain hope.
 Her days are practis'd in such noble virtue
 That sure her night--nay more, her very sleepes--
 Are more in heaven than other ladies' shrifts.
 (I, i, 190-203)

Even though the comparison between woman and saint is highly conventional in courtly love poetry (Donne mixes a dash of divinity with the most secular of love poems, and Romeo approaches Juliet in the habit of a pilgrim), this description takes on a different significance, for it is placed against a black arras. Webster is establishing a moral framework for the drama that will unfold.

If the playwright were to continue accenting the Duchess' saintliness, he would produce something similar to a morality play. When we meet the Duchess, she is not a saint, but a very real woman, willing to transgress social code and incur the wrath of her brothers in order to marry the man she loves. She describes herself: "This is flesh, and blood, sir;/ 'Tis not the figure cut in alabaster/ Kneels at my husband's tomb" (I, i, 453-455).

Webster associates a variety of images with the Duchess and her marriage. The union begins with an allusion to the music of the spheres and the image of "loving palms, Best emblem of a peaceful marriage" (I, i, 485-486). She asks heaven to bless the sacred Gordian of marriage. Everything outside the circle of their embrace is discord. Nevertheless, the pair is venturing into what the Duchess has described as a wilderness, a place where the order and law of the court do not apply. Birds are frequently associated with her. Antonio cleverly describes her kisses as Venus' soft doves. She replies to Ferdinand, "Alas, your shears do come untimely now/ To clip the bird's wings that's already flown!" (III, ii, 84-85). She uses the metaphor again after her banishment:

The birds that live i' th' field
On the wild benefit of nature, live
Happier than we; for they may choose their mates,
And carol their sweet pleasures to the spring. (III, v, 11-21)

Bosola describes her captivity: "The robin-readbreast, and the nightingale,/ Never live long in cages" (IV, ii, 13-14). At the beginning of her torment she appears as a "shape of loveliness. More perfect in tears than in her smiles" (IV, i, 3-9), and at her death the saintliness anticipated by Antonio's first description is realized. The contrast to the fire and tempest of Ferdinand is significant.

Although the Duchess' marriage to a steward may be a violation of social degree, it is difficult to find her guilty of any grievous sin.³⁹ In fact, we are constantly drawn to her side. Her "spirit

³⁹The ethics of the Duchess' second marriage is a complex problem. Robert Ornstein, The Moral Vision of Jacobean Tragedy (Madison, 1960), p. 141, terms her remarriage a "disastrous mistake" and considers Antonio contemptible. Gunnar Boklund in The Duchess of Malfi (Cambridge, Mass., 1962) presents an excellent summary of issues involved (pp. 63-69), followed by a sensible and convincing defense of the Duchess (pp. 39-97).

of woman," courage, endurance, and compassion give her a tragic greatness. Here is a nobility of character not found in any other of Webster's plays. In the end, her death does mean something--to Bosola, to Ferdinand, and to the Cardinal. The meaning of her death is conveyed, in part, through the theological images. Let us approach those events leading to her torture and execution.

There is not much hope for the pair of lovers from the very beginning. They have no tragic flaw, but they do make an error in judgment: they feel they can escape the professional Machiavellianism of the Cardinal, Ferdinand, and their spy. Antonio, honest and idealistic as he might be, is no match for the cunning intelligence of Bosola. The birth of their first child is discovered. At Bosola's suggestion, they use a pilgrimage as a cover to escape--and they play into Ferdinand's hands.

A series of inverted rituals and marred sacraments follows. The Cardinal descends from cleric to soldier, the pilgrimage is turned into banishment. The Duchess' wealth is confiscated by order of the Pope, the wedding ring is torn from her hand and husband and wife are irreparably separated. All takes place under the shrine of Our Lady of Loretto.

A few moments later the masked captors trap the Duchess. When she learns she is to be imprisoned, she reacts:

I have heard
That Charon's boat serves to convey all o'er
The dismal lake, but brings none back again. (III, v,
107-108)

The foreshadowing is accurate, but the Hades into which she is conveyed is closer to Dante's than Homer's.

In the scenes which follow, the Duchess and Ferdinand remain flesh and blood characters, but there is an overtone of cosmic forces, good and evil, interacting. Ferdinand turns into a fiend, creating a world of torment which both the Duchess and Bosola describe as hell. His intention is to bring his sister to despair or insanity. Despair was, of course, a sin punishable by damnation, for it denoted that all hope of divine mercy had been abandoned. Ferdinand is a demon whom Burton would have placed with the eighth rank of evil spirits with the devil "Diabolos, that drives men to despair."⁴⁰ Satan enacts his revenge on God's creation to bring man to despair, the world to chaos. Nashe writes: "The only peace of minde that the diuell hath is dispaire, wherefore wee that liue in his rightly kingdome of darknes, must needs taste some disquiet. . . . hee is an auncient malecontent, and seeketh to make anie one desperat like himselfe."⁴¹

This idea is accented first by Bosola. He perceives that the Duchess is close to abandoning all hope when she says: "That's the greatest torture souls feel in hell--/ In hell: that they must live, and cannot die" (IV, i, 70-71). Bosola replies, "O fie! despair? remember/ You are a Christian." Shortly thereafter, Ferdinand openly states that his intent is "to bring her to despair" (IV, i, 116). Bosola attempts to save the Duchess:

⁴⁰ I, III, i, 2.

⁴¹ Terrors of the Night in Works, I, 356.

Faith, end here;
And go no farther in your cruelty--
Send her a penitential garment to put on
Next to her delicate skin, and furnish her
With beads and prayer-books. (IV, i, 116-121)

But Ferdinand is not interested in her salvation. His revenge is to be complete: "Damn her! that body of hers. . . ." His punishment has begun with a dead man's hand and the waxen images of Antonio and the children. The Duchess described it as a piece of sympathetic magic, as if a waxen image had been made of her and placed in a dunghill to rot.

The howl of madmen belling and bawling their parts follows. This fantastic gibberish, bawdy and devil-ridden, could have been written by Ferdinand himself. It is certainly what Ferdinand would consider an appropriate punishment. The prattling opens with an astrologer, insane because doomsday would not come; he cannot sleep because of the porcupines in his pillow. It reminds us of the Duchess' situation, for she has asked twice for a speedy death, yet must remain alive and awake in her torment. The metaphorical description of hell as a glass house in which devils continually blow up women's souls on hollow irons (a phallic symbol) could have come from Ferdinand. The lewd suggestions that follow--of a priest mating his "rounds," a doctor looking at dirty pictures in his peep-viewer, a cleric showing tombs with one hand and reaching into a wench's placket with the other--all remind us of Ferdinand's mind, haunted with sexual fantasies. Webster's art is approaching the expressionistic, and even though many of the madman's speeches are satiric topical allusions, much of their

raving reflects the mind of the man who instigated the scene.

The elaborate tortures induced by a man on the verge of insanity do not, however, bring the woman to despair or madness. Instead, the ritual is turned into a rite of purification, which is evident in her emotional transitions. Feeling the pain of an unendurable hell, she is ready to curse the stars and heaven for her fate. She longs for a speedy death, but when she realizes that still more torment must be endured, she progresses to a state of acceptance. "Necessity makes me suffer constantly,/ And custom makes it easy" (IV, ii, 29-30). After the madmen have finished, Bosola does the only charitable thing he can do while still remaining Ferdinand's servant: he helps her become ready for death. With a series of cynical remarks, he enacts a rite of mortification by reminding her that man is nothing more than "a box of worm-seed," the body "weaker than those paper prisons boys use to keep flies in; more contemptible, since ours is to preserve earth-worms" (IV, ii, 126-128). She insists that she is Duchess of Malfi still, yet Bosola offers a convincing argument that position is now meaningless: "Glories, like glow-worms, afar off shine bright, / But look'd to near, have neither heat, nor light" (IV, ii, 144-145). After showing the Duchess her last "presence chamber," he acts as a bellman, whose function both in reality and in the drama is to prepare the soul:

Of what is't fools make such vain keeping?
Sin their conception, their birth weening;
Their life a general mist of error,
Their death a hideous storm of terror.
Strew your hair with noyters sweet,
Don clean linen, bathe yourfeat,
And (the foul fiend more to check)
A crucifix let bless your neck. (136-193)

She is ready for a complete negation of life, willing to reject all of "a general mist of error" and "a little cruddled milk, fantastical puff-paste" that is human life. Unlike Vittoria, her hope of heaven is assured, and she enters on her knees. Readiness for death is accented by the contrast shown in Cariola's struggle.

There is a curiously saintly (or perhaps Protestant) quality to the Duchess' death. Unlike Cariola, she is not concerned with confession, nor with last unction. She speaks of entering directly into heaven. Such a thing as purgatory does not exist for her. She has no fear of death, nor of damnation. Unlike Vittoria, she knows the destiny of her soul. Her words to her executioners, "I forgive them," are almost Christ-like, and she enters heaven humbly, on her knees, with words drawn from the Anglican Book of Homilies.⁴² One is tempted to say her death is simply "Protestant," but Webster draws on Papist ritual so extensively in the corpus of his work, that here the absence of confession and last unction is conspicuous. "Martyr" or "saint" would be a better term.

To Bosola, she is saint, even savior:

I would not change my peace of conscience
 For all the wealth of Europe:--she stirs; here's life:
 Return, fair soul, from darkness, and lead mine
 Out of this sensible hell . . .
 her eye opes,
 And heaven in it seems to one, that late was shut,
 To take me up to mercy. (IV, ii, 340-349)

And after she dies:

O sacred innocence, that sweetly sleeps
 On turtles' feathers, whilst a guilty conscience

⁴²In lines 230-235. See G.P.V. Akrics, "John Webster and The Book of Homilies," *X & Q*, n.s. VI, 217-218.

Is a black register, wherein is writ
All our good Deeds and bad, a perspective
That shows us hell! (IV, ii, 355-359)

The Duchess' death contradicts his former cynicism, and his change in attitude is a result of the Duchess' suffering and death. George Bernard Shaw wrote that every age needs a martyr and saint. The Duchess fills that position. Bosola feels his conscience bite sharply. He is led from the pit of deceit and brutality to a sense of nobility in selfless compassion and endurance. He has an awareness of heaven and, consequently, of his own sinfulness.

I do not see the last act of the play as an anticlimax. With Bosola as the unifying character, the act traces the effects of the Duchess' death.⁴³ Webster felt compelled to demonstrate what such a death meant to the leading characters, and this is exactly what the last act accomplishes. Indeed, the play would be incomplete without it.

"Ruin" becomes the dominant image. Ferdinand, overcome with grief, goes insane. The voice of the Duchess echoes from a ruined abbey, giving us a figure "in action" that is almost symbolic of her death. Under cover of night, appearance and reality become hopelessly mixed, and Antonio is killed accidentally. The Cardinal is slain by a raving madman. Here again is a world with the strings untuned.

Within the debacle there is a growing sense of conscience, and all characters are forced to come to terms with their sins. The diabolical images serve their final purpose. Conscience is

⁴³Boklund, The Duchess of Malfi, p. 167.

again portrayed as an awareness of damnation. Ferdinand, his conscience twisting inside him, speaks of bribing his way to hell. The Cardinal enters with a prayer book, puzzled about the doctrine of hell. He dies in a moment of self deprecation: "I pray, let me/ Be laid by, and never thought of" (V, v, 89-90).

The play closes with the reconciling figure of the Duchess' child, suggesting not only a hope for a better world, but also a world in which an "image" of the Duchess will rule. Delio's last sentence praises men who become "lords of truth" and value "integrity of life." The religious connotations are obvious. The horrible forecast in the horoscope cast by Antonio is now irrelevant. Not only have the malicious characters vanished, but the malignant influence of the stars has been averted.

I am not suggesting that any complete interpretation should rest entirely on a pattern of images. However, this aspect of Webster's rhetoric has very much to do with the meaning of the plays, for it helps us focus on a moral and theological framework. Through the images of witches, devils, and hell-fire, we see the forces of evil--lust, revenge, deceit, and brutality--leading to destruction. Through the same images we see the battles with conscience and the search to find a center in a world without a center made articulate. In The White Devil, we watch men completely encompassed by Satan. With the church withdrawn, the world is without hope, driven like a ship in a black storm--we know not where. In The Duchess of Malfi, there is a hope, for the Duchess does give a moral center to the play. In the end,

we feel that it is possible to "make noble use of this great ruin." Integrity, compassion, honesty, and order can exist. Even though the church is corrupt and men such as Ferdinand given completely to the powers of darkness, salvation can be attained.

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JOHN WEBSTER'S DEMONOLOGY

by

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B. S., Concordia Teachers College, 1962

AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S REPORT

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY

Manhattan, Kansas

1963

John Webster drew from a variety of sources when composing his plays. We are surprised with quotations from Montaigne, echoes from Philip Sidney's Arcadia, repetitions of popular proverbs, and enactments of spectacular rituals. Also fascinating is the manner in which he weaves carefully chosen images and metaphors into the texture of his plays. Images of poison, tempest, fire and blood, besides an intricate mass of figures dealing with appearance and reality, are used repeatedly, each time in a different context or with a new turn. Webster was also fond of drawing images and allusions from folklore and demonology, and references to hell, devils, witchcraft, and darkness recur with arresting frequency. This study focuses on the chain of demonic images and allusions as it occurs in The White Devil and The Duchess of Malfi. The purpose of this study, first of all, is to establish that a clear pattern of image and allusion exists; and secondly, to define the exact relationship of such images to the totality of each play. Once the pattern is exposed, we can see the essential conflict of each play brought into clearer focus and the structure drawn in cleaner lines.

In both The White Devil and The Duchess of Malfi Webster's imagination repeatedly associates diabolism with certain sins-- lust, brutal revenge, Machiavellianism, and sacrilege. A definable pattern of image and allusion emerges. In The White Devil, Vittoria is obviously playing the title role, because a rich network of allusions drawn from folklore and demonology are associated with this woman and her adultery. She is branded "a devil" by friends and enemies alike. Webster subtly demonstrates that her lover,

Brachiano, is under the influence of something satanic, and at his death he is tormented with images of the devil and of witches. Against this diabolical pattern is balanced a second series of demonic images relating to Francisco's vengeance. Overtones of a conjuration surround his formulation of revenge. He is not satisfied until Brachiano's soul is sent to hell. Thus the essential conflict of the play, evil against evil, is brought into sharper focus. Webster balances one form of diabolism against another until they virtually destroy each other.

In The Duchess of Malfi, the lines of revenge, deceit, and lust merge in the tormented psyche of Ferdinand. At times, his mind seems to dwell on witchcraft, blood, and wolves, and he is described with devil and tempest imagery. He attempts to drive the Duchess to the sin of despair, creating a world of torment which both Bosola and the Duchess describe as hell. The Cardinal, the man who stands in the background wielding greater power, is also appropriately described as a devil. In contrast, the Duchess is associated with bird imagery, her marriage with the music of the spheres. Her death has saintly overtones. Again, the essential conflict of the play is underscored. All who had a part in her death are afflicted with the torment of a guilty conscience. Here, as in The White Devil, conscience is portrayed as an awareness of an inner diabolical nature, and a fear of God's punishment.

There is an essential difference between the two plays. In the former, we have a world without a core, evil fighting evil until all order collapses. In the latter play, the Duchess'

death proves that integrity, virtue, and nobility are possible
in a world of evil.