John Webster, Thomas Middleton And Other Jacobean Dramatists – The Complexity And Irresolvability Of The Depicted Tragic Spectacle.

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What distinguishes criticism of The White Devil from criticism of The Duchess of Malfi is the fact that the heroines of ea ch play are regarded in a different light. Whereas Vittoria Corombona could well be a white devil herself, there is very little that is diabolical, as opposed to ill-advised, about the behavior of the Duchess. Consequently, the available moral option in *The Duchess of Malfi* are more focused, and paradoxically more critically divisive. There is always the possibility that Webster is merely writing dramas of sensation rather than thought. After all, the setting of Webster's plays is the familiar corrupt Italian palace filled with all the most sensational varieties of intrigue, hatred and lust, while the plots are melodramatic collections of violent incidents of murder, revenge, torture and madness.

James Calderwood is representative of number of critics who have defended Webster's practice as a tragic dramatist against the charge of artistic insincerity and incoherence. He suggests that:

> Webster, far from failing to present an 'internal scale to measure depravity', is entirely willing to test evil against good. His principal dramatic means to this end is his employment of ceremony and ritual for the evaluation of private action (134).

Calderwood does not concede either that the play is a dramatic failure or that Webster is morally despicable. He concludes his argument by saying:

> The view offered here is that the play is, among other things, a powerful and subtle articulation of thoroughly Elizabethan theme – the relationship between individual impulse and

> societal norms, specifically the religious and political doctrine of Degree (134).

C.G. Thayer draws a similar conclusion when he argues that the play is about a Bosola "struggling against and unyielding, darkly beautiful universe which produces evil, insists on virtue, but ultimately destroys evil and virtue alike" (171). As another piece of evidence, G. Boklund has demonstrated how Webster uses repeated ironic reversals for an entirely different purpose – namely, to demonstrate that it is 'chance, independent of good and evil' which governs events in *The Duchess of Malfi* ("The Duchess", 104). Likewise, Alvin Kernan, in *The Revels History of Drama in English*, compares *The Duchess of Malfi* to Webster's earlier play, The White Devil, and he draws a similar conclusion in terms of the plays' sittings and inner social words. He states that:

> In Webster's finest play, *The Duchess of Malfi*, the setting is again an Italian ducal palace with its intrigues, its struggles for favour on the slippery ice of court, its savage appetites, its desperate political and moral of all social values and traditional humane professions ("The plays", 396).

There are still many literary and dramatic elements relating to the play's structure and components which divide critics and pose a critical problem for its evaluation and classification into generic type. For instance, that the audience remains unsure of the kind of response called for by the play is unquestionable. The ambiguity of the characters, and their motivation, the grotesque image of its world, the vague nature of the conflict, and the dominant catharsis which the play should evoke, elicit the spectators' unpredictable, unsure response.

Confusion, equivocation and uncertainty of the reader/spectator regarding the key figure of the play have been admitted by scholars, and again one notes how those elements are seen as failings:

> Certainly no-one, I think, denies that the later play, *The Duchess of Malfi*, has an abundance of depravity and is embarrassingly rich in unintegrated comment or that there are excrescences of plot and inconsistencies of character (Calderwood, 134).

Adopting the widespread critical view which asserts that Webster's two main tragedies, The White Devil and The Duchess of Malfi, depict corrupt/corrupting courts; the degeneration of moral values; and the inherent evil in both individuals and the social and religious systems to which they belong; we are ultimately confronted with the following question: was Webster concerned merely with the depiction of social corruption and the triumph of evil in both church and state, or in finding a satisfactory resolution to this raging moral and social anarchy as well? To phrase the question differently, was Webster exploring the moral consequences of a world devoid of faith and moral codes, or did he intend to set that nightmare world against the positive values of faith and morality? I would absolutely argue that Webster's dark and nihilistic vision of humanity as portrayed in his plays serves a double purpose: not as a description of evil and a decadent, malevolent universe in which moral standards and ideas are almost shattered, but also an attempt to foreshadow an abstract, deterministic framework of divine justice which functions as a yardstick for judging human beings' disintegration, oppression and injustice. And that these contrasting concepts function simultaneously in the drama. Divine morality and godless evil remain antagonistically in the drama. Divine morality and godless evil remain antagonistically unresolved.

If there is no resolution of the disorder and chaos within the confines of the plays, we can speculate that the ordering element is suggested rather than expressed. It lies in an effect on the audience rather than in any overt expression. If we exclude this interpretation, we will end up with a nihilistic and desperate vision of humanity in which only spectacles of violence, death, deception and injustice constitute the condition of humanity. I think that dramatists of the period were fascinated by the diabolical and attempted to render it dramatically while seeing it as countered to some extent by the traditional view of moral order. They set out to dramatize various manifestations of social evil and moral disintegration which reflected, to a large extent, the conditions of their age. However, their dramatic portrayal of societies which are 'torn' by evil does not rule out that these dramatists upheld an implied moral vision and code which might correspond with the audience's response and belief even thought its presence, in contrast to Shakespeare's plays, does not emerge as final or even dominant. Thus, Webster relies on the audience's knowing, emotionally or conceptually, that God's redemptive grace and providence can reform the fallen society which is depicted in both plays.

Within the framework of the humanistic and Christian ideals of Webster's time, the disorder evident in the plays does not cancel out the idea of a first principle or deterministic divine order. In *The White Devil*, Webster explores a nightmare world in which moral characters, such as Cornelia and Marcello, are weak and pushed aside, to eventually collapse. However, Flamineo's description of his life as a "black charnel" (V. vi. 310) is preceded by:

> While we look up to heaven, we confound
> Knowledge with knowledge (V.vi. 306-307).

Does Flamineo's utterance refer to knowledge by faith that God exists or does knowledge imply scientific and rational knowledge of the astronomical universe? Ambiguous as it is, Flamineo's questionings presuppose the entire meaninglessness of the dark world around him but imply some sort of higher moral teaching or divine revelation which, I believe, Webster upheld, in the dialogic sense we have been pursuing.

In his role as satiric commentator, Vindice might well be compared to Bosola in *The Duchess of Malfi*. Bosola is characterized as helping to complicate the moral issues, since he can at once be engaged in activities which are morally dubious or unequivocally evil while being able to comment with insight on the corrupt practices of those in power namely Ferdinand and the Cardinal.

Like Vindice, the critical problem raised by Bosola's character has provoked a variety of responses. No one could deny that the most salient fact about Bosola is his ambiguity and spiritual depravity (I.i 32-33). Bosola seems to be compact of seemingly incompatible qualities as the playwright shifts the audience's perception of Bosola and his motivation. U.M. Ellis – Fermo's critical appraisal of Bosola's character is revealing since it casts light upon his development in terms of his conflicting and ambiguous roles in the play. She states that we are interested in Bosola "because of the strange discrepancy between the man he appears, the man he would be and the man that, unknown to himself, he really is… the slow permeation of his outer consciousness by his inner self…he stands for a moment as near to truth as a man can stand" (The Jacobean,176).

In this respect, Vindice, malcontent satirist like Bosola in *The Duchess Of Malfi*, is corrupted by the society he condemns because he is inescapably a part of that society. Both figures share estrangement from society, whether because of poverty, dispossession, unemployment, injustice or thwarted

ambition which provoke in them an aggressive and sadistic reaction. Robert N. Waston has drawn attention to the similar qualities of Bosola and Vindice. Struggling to maintain his integrity and balance, Bosola is depicted by him as a spiritual kinsman of Vindice since both of them have experienced that inhuman state of self-dispossession and dislocation effected by the devilish and lascivious courts teeming with corruption. Being " a malcontent revenger, whose strong moral instincts have been perverted by the decadent court…. He is described as the conventional 'railing' satirist, and his first words, a complaint of official neglect, mark him as the conventional malcontent" ("Tragedy", 342-343). For instance, Bosola becomes a sinister intelligencer, a spy (I.ii. 206-212) who is motivated until the end of the fourth act only by the need for material gain – payments for past services – for which he is willing, with very few qualms of conscience, to sell his soul. Similarly, Bosola is able to assume disguises symbolizing the conflicting positions which a human being is capable of adopting in the course of his natural life. In order to avoid "ingratitude" for Ferdinand's bribes, he feels morally constrained to do "All the ill man can invent" (I.ii. 194-196). Although he is depicted as a Machiavellian and corrupt character of significant internalization and rationalizing, yet he proves vulnerable to the Duchess' despair which brings about a change of his course of action – he vows revenge upon his villainous patrons and for the destruction of the 'scared innocence" exemplified in the Duchess' torture (IV.ii.349). Bosola's change expresses itself not only in a discovery of his own guilty conscience (IV.ii.356), but also in a significant dimming of his clear moral insight. Bosola claims "penitence" (V.ii.348) and uncritically claim to be taking part in a "most just revenge" (V.ii.343), apparently without recognizing the irony of revenging a crime which he has himself committed.

Bosola's fall is "tragic" and we sympathize with him; but our compassion is shrouded with a haze of ambiguity, the ambiguity of the

"mist" which so troubled his own mind. Bosola, like Vindice, dies at a moment of indecision in the audience's mind. We are scarcely over the shock which the death of the Duchess generated. We are horrified at the ironical death of Antonio. We are rejoicing over the death of the Aragonian brothers. Yet before we have time for surmise and analogy, Bosola, who needs all our intellect to fathom his mystifying behaviour, is himself slain, leaving to us the disentanglement of this confusing puzzle. That ambiguity in his character as well as his behaviour reinforces the impression that the Jacobean era at large, and certainly Jacobean drama in particular, were more responsive to the instability of the human characters, preferring to present it as an unreconciled anomaly.

In addition, the Duchess in Websters later 'tragedy' sustains her sense of her own identity not only by a kind of existentialist sense of integrity, but by resorting to religious belief and faith. At the very end of the play, Delio's speech is revealing in terms of the assumed notion that Webster upheld an implicit moral vision and an extratextual divine providence which may reform a rotten society. He moralizes:

> I have ever thought
> Nature doth nothing so great for great men,
> As when she's pleased to make them lords of truth
> Integrity of life is fame's best friend,
> Which nobly, beyond death, shall crown the end.
>
> (V.v.116-120)

Is integrity of life rewarded by fame in this world or by the crown of immortal life in the other world? Although Webster was writing in a period in which religious certainty had fallen away because it is was challenged by radical scientific rationalism, we can still argue that Webster implicitly adumbrates the redemptive grace of divine providence. To support my

critical stance, I would quote the Duchess's reply to Bosola who asked 'Doth not death fright you?' (IV.ii.206). She answers him with Christian piety: 'Who would be afraid on't?' (IV.ii. 206-208). There are also several occasions when the Duchess invokes heaven (III.v.75 and IV.ii. 218 and 228). If we take this in accord with the conservative Christianity of his time, Webster may be expressing a belief in God's redemptive grace, complemented by human reason and faith.

Viewed from this perspective, I would argue that both Webster's plays may be in some degree apocalyptic – a prelude to a resurrection of divine order whereby a new world and ideals will be born out of chaos. The distinctly desperate and pessimistic vision of the triumph of evil and the total collapse of moral codes may ultimately be transformed into an ideal condition by the operation of divine providence and justice. The permanent qualities of that ultimate order – such as eternity, perfection and magnanimity, may eventually redeem the moral disintegration of the fallen society depicted in these two plays. To express it differently, the pessimistic assessment of the human condition which is characterized by the collapse of social, human, moral and religious premises, is set against the view that moral anarchy will be replaced by the extension of God's grace. Only if we acknowledge the duality of that view as expressed within the play, can its full effect be perceived.

תקציר

באימוץ הדעה הביקורתית השלטת המראה ששתי הטרגדיות של וויבסטר John Webster , השטן הלבן ו הדוכסית של מלפי, מצויירת תמונה מכוערת ומושחתת של חצר המלוכה (courts corrupting\corrupted) בהתעוותות הערכים והרשע המוטמע ביחידים ובמערכות הדתיות והחברתיות שהם משתייכים אליהם ; אנו תמיד נתקלים בשאלה הזאת : האם וויבסטר היה טרוד רק בגילוי השחיתות החברתית ו בניצחון כוחות הרשע בכנסייה ובמדינה , או במציאת פתרון הולם לאנרכיה מוסרית –חברתית המאופיינת בהתנגשות ערכים והתחושה הכללית של העדר פתרון מנוקדת מבט מוסרית .
הייתי אומר ששני המחזות של וויבסטר הם במידת- מה אפוקליפטים - הקדמה להתערבות אלוהית שתכליתה להשליט סדר בעולם במקום האנארכיה .
הראייה המיואשת והפסימית של הניצחון על הרשע מאחד, וההתמוטטות של הקודים המוסריים מאידך- יכולים לבסוף לשמש כתנאים אידיאליים להתערבות יד הגורל והצדק . התכונות הקבועות לסדר הסופי כמו נצח ושלימות ואצילות נפש , יכולות לבסוף לגאול את התעוותות המוסר של החברה המתמוטטת כמתואר בשני המחזות האלה .

בלשון אחרת , ההערכה הפסימית באשר למצבו העגום של האדם כי מי שאיבד את הערכים החברתיים, המוסריים , האנושיים והדתיים , תוחלף בברכות של האל . ורק כאשר אנו מבינים את הדו-ערכיות של המראה במחזה , כי אז נוכל לחוש את המחזה במלוא עוצמתו ובממדיו הטקסטואליים ובתמלילי המשנה הנוגסים בערכם של הנושאים העיקריים המשקפים את מורכבותם המוחלטת של מצבי האדם .

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