

## The Machiavel and the Virago: The Uses of Italian Types in Webster's *The White Devil*

Anthony Ellis

*And canst thou thinke that an English Gentleman will suffer an Italian to be his Rivall? No, no, thou must either put up a quarrell with shame, or trye the Combat with perill. An English man hath three qualyties, he can suffer no partner in his love, no straunger to be his equal, nor to be dared in any.*

—John Lyly, *Euphues and his England*, 1580<sup>1</sup>

When Lyly's *Euphues*, an Athenian, counsels his friend Philautus, an Italian, to exercise caution while courting ladies in England, his traveler's advisory directs our attention to two significant sources of English male anxiety in the early modern period. First, the Englishman had at some level to acknowledge how much of his cultural patrimony derived from both classical and Renaissance Italy, a debt which interfered with any claim that "no stranger [was] to be his equal." The most foundational aspect of this inheritance meant to account for England's very origin: creative genealogy established Aeneas' great-grandson Brutus as the founder of what later became London.<sup>2</sup> This mythical link to ancient Rome had an enduring legitimizing function, from the twelfth-century Britons who required a self-promoting myth on the heels of the Norman conquest, all the way up to James VI, who rested his claim to the English throne on a spurious lineage dating back to Brutus himself.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, through the centuries, the allure of locating British origin in the leading figures of the classical world's greatest empire must have been close to irresistible. But the Jacobean imagination could be exercised by contemporary Italian city-states as well, particularly by Venice, whose impressive history of (relatively) stable republicanism contrasted with Lancastrian and Yorkist bloodbaths.<sup>4</sup> It mattered little that, as Viviana Comensoli remarks, in the last decades of the sixteenth century the once-powerful Venetian empire was deteriorating; she argues that during this time "the ruling patriciate revitalized the myth of Venetian stability

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and harmony”—largely via a careful ideologizing of the arts—and thus managed to maintain “a popular sense of contentment.”<sup>5</sup> And this self-portrayal appears to have been convincing to outsiders: according to R. B. Parker, Venice remained for Elizabethans “the exemplar of wealth, sophistication, art, luxury, political cunning, and stringent government.”<sup>6</sup>

Striking, then, in the context of the above litany, is J. R. Hale’s summing up of this pattern of borrowing: “While it is difficult to think of a department of [early modern English] social and intellectual life that was uninfluenced by Italian example, it is still harder to find an acknowledgment of it.”<sup>7</sup> The shades of denial here suggest a considerable resentment of Italian cultural dominance. To be sure, this English ambivalence—admiration evident as *mimesis*, animosity expressed as refused attribution, or more volubly, the commitment to the ideological construction of “Italian vice”—is by now an historian’s commonplace. For example, Andreas Mahler writes of the emerging dominance of “Italophobia,” at the expense of a vestigial “Italophilia,” at the turn of the seventeenth century, and believes we can best perceive this trend at work in the drama.<sup>8</sup> But what needs to be stressed is the sense of competition that underlies such a complex English reaction. For one thing, after the Reformation divided the two regions along religious lines, the idea of an inimical, Catholic Italy slowly came to supersede the intellectual, humanist conception more reconcilable with English values.<sup>9</sup> Many English found Italian statecraft objectionable as well, inasmuch as the former associated the latter with Machiavellianism. Even accounting for the irony in Lyly, then, we can trust Euphues that the Englishman could brook no stranger as an equal, though an Italian might give him something to worry about.

The other warning given Philautus informs him that the Englishman tolerates “no partner in his love,” a sentiment the Neapolitan should understand, given that Italian daughters and wives endured the status of property as surely as their English counterparts. Karen Newman, describing the English symbolic capital invested in chastity, asserts that the female body’s value resided precisely in its ability “to reproduce fit subjects for church and commonwealth whose lineage is assured by chaste marriage.”<sup>10</sup> And in marriage, a wife’s duties, besides chastity, included subjection, obedience, and silence, according to marital handbooks.<sup>11</sup> It is true that some English intellectuals wrote defenses of women’s equality, some ironic, others sincere. In the popular press, however, conservative writers attacked the ongoing reevaluation of women’s social role, and these reactionary texts circulated more widely than did dense humanist treatises.<sup>12</sup> These conservatives feared an emergent discourse that championed women as more than the helpless, ethically challenged property of men. The result, in the first decades of the seventeenth century, was a new wave of antifeminism advocating the reassertion of chastity and obedience as values.<sup>13</sup> A letter written by John Chamberlain, which refers to James’ plea for “order” in 1620, epitomizes the unease inspired by recent, visible examples of

female self-assertion:

Yesterday the bishop of London called together all his Clergie about this towne, and told them he had express commaundement from the King to will them to inveigh vehemently and bitterly in theyre sermons against the insolencie of our women, and theyre wearing of brode brimd hats, pointed doublets, theyre haire cut short or shorne, and some of them stilletaes or poniards, and such other trinckets of like moment, adding withall that yf pulpit admonitions will not reforme them he wold proceed by anothr course; the truth is the world is very far out of order, but whether this will mend yt God knowes.<sup>14</sup>

If chastity is to persevere as a virtue in practice, it depends on the maintenance of a political system in which women know and remain in their place. But just as the Italian belies facile categorization as an evil “other,” the woman all too easily challenges her construction as a tractable, modest and chaste subject. Chamberlain’s letter expresses the fear that some women may come close to annihilating certain markers of otherness, of gender difference. “Insolencie” would strike the writer as unfeminine enough, but the cross-dressing (the doublet, the poniard) and a short, mannish haircut must have shocked him even more profoundly.

I yoke together these two othering processes—the xenophobic demonization of Italy and the sexist domination of women—due to the startling similarity of their terms, and because their juxtaposition may enhance our understanding of certain Italianate plays of the English Renaissance. These plays, after all, staged an Italy that was, in Jacobean extradramatic reality, England, and female characters who, underneath their costumes and makeup, were male actors. In the case of John Webster’s *The White Devil* (1612), this revenge tragedy portrays a charismatic, powerful woman who exhibits stereotypically masculine traits (Vittoria) and a Machiavel figure (Flamineo) who, we will see, bears his own marks of gender indeterminacy. One thing Webster achieves, through the interaction of these two complex personae, is to reveal the constructed nature of supposedly biological gender attributes. As he does so, he exposes the groundlessness of the misogyny present in his own text and by extension, the illogic behind the practice of Italy bashing, itself founded on ingrained stereotypes.

Flamineo is an especially key figure in this study. Too often he gets classified as a mere stage convention, a Vice-like malcontent bearing little resemblance to the historical Niccolò Machiavelli. But even a reductive, distorted version of Machiavelli may retain vestiges of two elements of his thought, *residua* which suit Webster’s didactic purposes. These are: one, the malleability of the concept of gender, evident in Machiavelli’s political texts, and two, his preference for

describing perceived reality (“*quello che si fa*”) over some ideal state (“*quello che si dovrebbe fare*”).<sup>15</sup>

In the case of Vittoria, Webster’s powerful woman is doubly “other”: she combines the transgressive female and the dangerous Italian in one body. This figure, whom we may call a virago,<sup>16</sup> threatens to seduce not only her love interest in the play, but also a male audience with ample reason to fear her. Application here of Robert Weimann’s concept of dramatic *Figurenposition* will suggest that Webster’s Machiavel, largely via interaction with the virago, directs the staging of Italy as female for an English audience. This same stage dynamic calls attention to—and quickly disrupts—the prescriptive gender categories on which that construction is founded.

In addition, this essay considers the forms of gender indeterminacy that occur in Machiavellian texts available in Renaissance England. This approach emphasizes the affinity between the literary/historical Machiavelli and the stage Machiavel on two grounds. First, both figures realize that the self must be manipulable to respond to contingency, and thus is well advised at times to adopt behavioral strategies antithetical to stereotypical constructions of masculinity. Second, they are both proto-empiricists, by which I mean they anticipate a movement dedicated to basing knowledge on experience rather than on received, untested wisdom.

And here a caveat is in order. In no way do I mean to imply that any but the most learned Jacobean spectators would have appreciated the nuances of the Machiavellian texts available in England, or their permutations in Webster’s Machiavel. What I do wish to insist upon is that both authors reject rigid constructions of gender while clinging to the social utility of chastity, and this paradox leads to much of what troubles us about their texts. Webster and Machiavelli show us on one hand the desirability of fashioning an identity responsive to one’s concrete circumstances, rather than to abstractions. On the other, they attest to the resiliency of myth and the extent to which an ordered society relies on its sustaining certain entrenched beliefs. For Machiavelli, the most famous example of such a convenient fiction is religion, which is indispensable to the formation of obedient subjects.<sup>17</sup> The structure of gender relations is another such example, and if it is one thing for thinkers to probe the internal machinery of a system that needs to polarize chaste women and whores, it is quite another to overturn it. Reading Machiavelli illuminates Webster because both experiment with irreverence; the Machiavel affords the English playwright a tool to test the limits of irreverence under the cover of corrupt Italian “otherness.”

### **I. Italy as Female in the English Imagination: Foul Whore, Clever Seductress**

Jacobean England’s popular cultural construction of Italy, while as amorphous as the non-unified Mediterranean collection of city-states, borrowed heavily from a

vision of imagined femaleness. Catholic Italy was the “Whore of Babylon” and the home of the cult of Mary; licentious Italians gave free reign to the insatiable sexual desire commonly attributed to women; deceptive and skilled in the use of poison, they preferred effeminate (often termed Machiavellian) dissimulation to martial valor, as their recent military record illustrated. Of course, such representation exaggerated wildly, to the point that, as G. K. Hunter remarks, “The real Italy of the turn of the seventeenth century is not one that appears in the [English] plays.”<sup>18</sup> Critical awareness of this fact has spurred what Keir Elam has called “a move from topological to typological criticism,” as comparatists have recognized that Italy stood as “a kind of ideal geopolitical space” for dramatists “which they could then transform to represent their own English interests.”<sup>19</sup> When one of these interests was the threat of female independence, as in Webster, the choice of an Italian location, already fraught with connotations of dangerous, seductive femininity, made perfect sense.

The name “Whore of Babylon,” frequently applied to Rome as the locus of papal corruption, sums up the religious aspect of English prejudice following Henry VIII’s break with the Catholic Church. Although the laudable memory of classical Rome persisted in England, the Reformation lent immediate weight to the notion of “the corrupt popish Babylon of Foxe’s martyrology, a Jezebel to be feared rather than studied.”<sup>20</sup> As Arthur Marotti has shown, English Protestant thinkers strove to define themselves against a feminized Catholicism. For instance, Protestants had no use for the cult of Mary and discarded the entire canon of saints, many of whose female members occupied (and continue to occupy) a lofty, highly sentimentalized place in the minds of many Catholics. English religious ceremony eschewed also the lavishness of Catholic dress and ornamentation, the kind of excess on display in Webster’s portrayal of papal election in *White Devil* 4.3.<sup>21</sup> Although James was raised as a Protestant, the memory of his mother Mary emblemized for some the destabilizing potential of Catholicism. Alvin Kernan relates how ideologically intertwined were the queen’s faith, gender, and moral failings among her enemies: after her deposition in 1567, he recounts, Mary was “driven out of the kingdom as a scarlet Whore of Babylon, a red flag of Rome, whose Catholicism threatened the Presbyterian settlement and whose flagrant immorality was said to outrage public virtue.”<sup>22</sup>

The English anti-Italian discourse that identifies a voracious Mediterranean sexual appetite reminds one of nothing so much as the antifeminism assigning all women the same insatiableness. Roger Ascham’s *The Schoolmaster* (1570) claimed that in Italy “sin, by lust and vanity, hath and doth breed up everywhere common contempt of God’s word.”<sup>23</sup> Half a century later, Peter Heylyn agreed in his *Microcosmus* (1621), in which he lists first among Italian vices that “in their lustes they are unnaturall.”<sup>24</sup> On occasion this genetic predisposition—believed to provoke female infidelity and violent flights of male jealousy—is blamed on a kind

of geographic determinism. According to this argument, revived by Jean Bodin and others, because the Italians lived in a warmer climate than the English, all their passions, including the sexual, naturally ran hotter.<sup>25</sup> This stereotype underlies the traditional dramatic depiction of the Italian, who is quick to love and as quick to avenge any injury. Meanwhile English plays tend to establish a parallel libidinal contrast along *gender* lines. As H. B. Parkes observes, “most of the dramatists” represent the sex drive as “stronger and more insatiable in women than in men” while they tend to regard its effects as destructive.<sup>26</sup> In doing so, they remain faithful to medical doctrine that on one hand considered extreme sexual desire as constitutively female and on the other diagnosed it as a “monstrous abnormality.”<sup>27</sup>

Italians and women shared not only the imputed deadly sin of lust in English male discourse, but an habitual duplicity. English attacks on women in this period repeatedly mention this fault. Likewise, Thomas Nashe, in *The Unfortunate Traveller* (1594), alleges that Italians practice deception as often for sport as for gain and that the English, “the plainest dealing soules that ever God put life in,” will “devoure anie hooke baited for them.” In Ascham’s account, Italian deceit takes on an unmistakable feminine seductiveness, as in this caution to the impressionable young Englishman: “Some Siren shall sing him a song, sweet in tune, but sounding in the end to his utter destruction. . . . Some Circe shall make him, of a plain Englishman, a right Italian.”<sup>28</sup>

Of course, the English commonly associated this cunning quality of the “right Italian” with Machiavelli. At first look, the author of *The Prince* may seem to have little to do with the fear of female sexuality that inspires misogynistic discourse or the depiction of Italy as an irresistible Circe. On the contrary, though, Machiavelli’s advocacy of dissimulating both with one’s allies and adversaries borrows from a notion of “feminine” changeableness whose power can outstrip “masculine” stolidity of character. And Machiavelli is himself aware of the gender bending involved when he suggests that princes should modify their behavior, in essence to mimic a fickle, anthropomorphized *donna fortuna*. Simply put, it is often wiser to be conniving than to be valorous or committed to Nashe’s ethic of the “plainest dealing soule.” Machiavelli states this opinion most famously in *The Prince*, which circulated in England in Latin editions and English manuscript translations from early in Elizabeth’s reign. In Chapter 18, he stresses that the shrewd prince knows when to use the lion’s brute force and when the fox’s cunning. Knowledge of the latter is indispensable, for “it is necessary to know how to color one’s nature, and to be a great simulator and dissembler,” for “the deceiver will always find someone who will let himself be deceived.”<sup>29</sup>

The prince, then, must be deceitful if he is to maximize his strength, and he must also be changeable so that he can adapt to new circumstances. This second sort of readiness allies the prince with the feminine force, *fortuna*, whom he must imitate—if he cannot first conquer her. Chapter 25 confronts the issue of how men

can oppose fortune. Those who are inflexible in their ways do not stand a chance when their luck changes, although like Cesare Borgia, they might prosper for years before a major crisis occurs. To weather a storm, one must “fit his manner of proceeding with the nature of the times.”<sup>30</sup> Most leaders, however, will succumb to unpropitious fortune simply because stubbornness is a typical masculine trait: “because fortune varies and men’s ways remain fixed, men are happy while the two are in harmony, and when they are not, unhappy.” Contradicting himself somewhat, Machiavelli goes on to write that “because fortune is a woman . . . it is necessary, if one wants to keep her down, to beat her,” an assertion that seems to leave room for a violent, masculine domination of female *fortuna*. He concludes the chapter by declaring that young men will fare better than old men against her, for they are “more ferocious” and, he does not quite say but one can infer, more virile.<sup>31</sup> This passage has provoked divergent critical interpretations, with its complex treatment of gender. Immediately after stating that man must adapt himself to fortune, Machiavelli implies that at least some men might make her submit after all. Interpretation hinges on the idea of “keeping her down” (“*tenere sotto*”) and what he means by this expression. Perhaps young men can better oppose fortune because they tend to be less set in their ways, less guilty of the obstinacy that blocks constructive self-transformation. Or maybe Machiavelli intends that “ferocity” can only forestall, rather than prevent, destruction when the ways of fortune and the ways of men clash. Whichever is the case, the author is convinced that most men do not manage to change their actions or attitude to meet the occasion, in short, to be fickle like a woman. He is equally convinced that such a trait is worth cultivating, as he endorses it for the prince’s behavioral repertoire.

Clearly, then, anyone striving to follow Machiavellian principles must know how, like Shakespeare’s Richard III, to “change shapes with Proteus for advantages”; that is, he must assume and discard roles as expertly as a stage actor does.<sup>32</sup> The Machiavel’s inherent theatricality surely helps account for the figure’s frequent incarnations in the English drama. While his multiple façades allowed a virtuoso actor to show off the range of his talents, his machinating mind propelled the plot forward. If, however, the Machiavel, with his ability to “change shapes,” appears paradigmatic of the resourcefulness of the stage actor, the actor’s self-transformative power also motivated numerous attacks on the immorality of the theater, attacks which stigmatize dramatic performance as effeminizing. Laura Levine’s examination of anti-theatrical literature discusses the resistance to theatrical practice whose cardinal sin was to put men and boys in women’s clothing in the service of illusion. To some voluble critics, such as Stephen Gosson and William Prynne, cross-dressing threatened literally to turn men into women. For Levine, their texts “exhibit the fear that femininity is neither constructed nor a superficial condition susceptible of giving way to a ‘real’ masculinity, but rather the underlying default position that masculinity is always in danger of slipping into.”<sup>33</sup> And the contamination these writers fear in the cross-dressed actors also



jeopardizes the spectators, for theatergoers could easily decide to imitate the sartorial atrocity they see on stage. Levine muses that gender might rightfully be placed among those things that exist only by virtue of their being, in one sense or another, performed by society.<sup>34</sup> If so, the uncertainty surrounding the concept of fixed gender attributes stands as but one manifestation of a related doubt about the validity of any form of knowledge.<sup>35</sup> At this point, we have reached the by-now familiar epistemological dilemma faced by the anti-theatricalists: how can one be sure of what one knows, when the theater threatens to expose the contingent basis of all knowledge?

At this point, the relevance of Machiavelli (and the English Machiavel) to a study of the gender dynamics in English Renaissance drama should become clear. Machiavelli instructs on the personal advantage to be gained via faulty self-representation; drama shows us how *all* representation is untrustworthy, as everything that appears on stage, from actor to property, must stand for something else. Predictably, the perceived threat to reliable sexual differentiation in an era of mandatory theatrical cross-dressing particularly troubled the English anti-theatrical polemicists. The boy actor who assumed a female role was thus the most visible source of concern. Yet the Machiavel, we recall, could take on almost limitless roles, and might for this reason have better embodied a crisis in what could be known or asserted with confidence, about human relations, or about Italy.

## **II. *The White Devil*: Webster's Machiavel and the Rapacious Italian Woman**

*The White Devil* features on its surface the major stereotypes of Italian vice then popular on the English stage: a corrupt, very ceremonial Catholicism; rampant lust; and Machiavellian deceitfulness. Vittoria Corombona, styled on the title page "the famous Venetian Curtizan," embodies dangerous female sexuality in its most degenerate Mediterranean form, while her brother Flamineo both personifies the treacherous Machiavel and provides much of the play's misogynistic discourse vilifying women like his sister.<sup>36</sup> Robert Weimann's analysis of Shakespeare's use of Figureposition can help us understand how these characters fashion the two dramatic worlds that coexist on Webster's English stage: a highly illusionistic Italy and a nonillusionistic England evoked via the actor's direct address to an audience spatially close to him.

Weimann defines Figureposition as "the interplay of theatrical and verbal conventions" that take into account both "the actor's physical position on stage" and, more broadly, his achievement of "a unique stage presence that establishes a special relationship between himself and his fellow actors, the play, or the audience, even when direct address has been abandoned."<sup>37</sup> Of course, as Michael Shapiro warns, little can be reconstructed for certain about the deployment and movements of actors on the Renaissance stage.<sup>38</sup> Many of Weimann's concepts, however,



especially the dramatic *locus* and *platea*, grounded as they are on the facts historians have established about the design of theaters in this period, explore convincingly the “split” sense some critics detect in Webster, namely, the not always harmonized mix of “naturalism” and “convention.” When the drama is “naturalistic,” it strives for illusionistic effect and the spectator (at least theoretically) can forget that he is watching a performance at all. When it is being “conventional,” it makes use of practices such as direct address to the audience, asides, instances of simultaneous staging, and various metatheatrical events that break the illusion’s spell over the audience by reminding it that a play is taking place. So mimesis occurs—and thus characters are represented somewhat plausibly—but in an important sense, conventions contaminate its plausibility, at moments when the dramatist chooses to depart from realistic portrayal. It is this interplay between modes that leads T. S. Eliot to call Elizabethan drama an “impure art.” He objects that in it “there has been no firm principle of what is to be postulated as convention and what is not,” a problem that results for Eliot in a troubling disjointedness.<sup>39</sup> But where Eliot charges Shakespeare with confusion, Weimann praises him for flexibility, the talent to achieve multiple effects.<sup>40</sup> Webster, whom Eliot pointed to as a model “case” of “impure art,” mixes naturalism and convention. If we are to appreciate the design behind such “impurity,” we need to account for the dramatist’s use of Figurenposition, something which, according to Weimann, helps also to disclose the many links between the drama and society.

Weimann argues in his consideration of the Elizabethan platform stage that the period’s flexible, steady use of the main stage reflects an effort to keep in close touch with the audience’s response. Its commitment to doing so enlarges on native popular traditions, such as the morality play’s staging in the round, which too strove for intimacy and flexibility, often at the expense of theatrical illusion.<sup>41</sup> According to Weimann, Elizabethan drama achieves many of its effects by the reciprocal influence of an upstage locus and a downstage platea. The locus refers to “a symbolic location,” in which “a more illusionistic, localized action” occurs, often involving the use of “a discovery space, scaffold tent, or other loci.”<sup>42</sup> In theatrical history, the scaffold has commonly served as locus, where it has elevated the actor above audience level; a recurring example is the king on a raised throne who “[does] not function on a level of direct audience contact.”<sup>43</sup> Meanwhile the platea is “the neutral, undifferentiated ‘place’ . . . accommodat[ing] action that is nonillusionistic and near the audience.”<sup>44</sup> As Weimann is careful to make clear, between these two extremes lies a wide range of dramatic modalities, and one should not polarize them carelessly. The dialectic between locus and platea, though, consistently works to draw the audience into the dramatic action. The former, as the fictional setting of the performance, may fascinate the spectator as a remote, possibly exotic world, fearsomely so in the case of certain Italianate plays. The latter, with its nonillusionistic effects, seduces the spectator in a different way.

As the actor speaks directly with the audience, he acknowledges basic agreement with its tastes and ideas.<sup>45</sup> While in the *platea*, the actor can interpret the actions taking place in the *locus* as if he himself were another spectator, due to his close physical proximity with the audience. Having established this connection, he can resemble less “one of them,” in the differentiated play-space, than “one of us,” in the mind of a spectator.

The actor moving into the *platea* may attract an audience profoundly because, as Weimann’s examples demonstrate, his changed position often corresponds with an alteration in “expressive modes.” His downstage position facilitates the adoption of direct address, more simplified diction, and the articulation of proverbs offered as the wisdom of the common people.<sup>46</sup> One of Weimann’s most helpful illustrations is his analysis of *Troilus and Cressida* 5.2, in which Troilus and Ulysses discover Cressida’s unfaithfulness with Diomedes while Thersites in turn spies on all of them.<sup>47</sup> The first two verbal exchanges here (Cressida-Diomedes and Troilus-Ulysses) represent “*locus*-centered dialogue,” although the latter pair’s voyeurism associates them more closely with the spectator’s role. Thersites, who “view[s] most nearly what the audience views,” occupies the *platea* position and appropriately speaks his opinion not in flighty rhetoric, “but in unpretentious direct address.”<sup>48</sup> To some degree, then, we can say that two “worlds” exist here, the illusionistic one of the Greek camp at the end of the Trojan War, and the unlocalized here and now, within which the audience forms judgments as to what it sees on stage. Thersites acts as a bridge between these worlds. Weimann acknowledges that such paradigmatic examples of “complementary perspective” in Shakespeare are actually quite rare, that elements of *locus*- and *platea*-acting actually coexist much more subtly.<sup>49</sup> Because the two constantly play against each other, it is “ultimately impossible to assign to *platea* and *locus* any consistent and exclusive mode of acting.”<sup>50</sup> What Weimann notices about the *platea*-inhabiting Thersites, however, has particular bearing on Webster’s Flamineo, another sardonic commentator who, like his Shakespearean counterpart, suggests the close relation between alleged truth and one’s perspective:

Like Apemantus and the Vice figure before him, Thersites is a *provocateur* of truth, not a moral judge. And like the characters whose madness, feigned or real, forces dormant truths to the surface, his debunking and skeptical commentary serves to offer viable alternatives to the main or state view of things. In this sense characters like Apemantus and Thersites help point out that the ideas and values held by the main characters are relative to their particular position in the play, while by projection the audience realizes that this is equally true of the counterperspectives offered by the plebian intermediaries who occupy a *platea*-like

position.<sup>51</sup>

Not surprisingly, in an endnote Weimann asks rhetorically if Flamineo is not “a most complex and devastatingly original response to the popular Vice?”<sup>52</sup> Flamineo, who does at one point feign madness in part because “this allows my varying of shapes,” debunks conventional wisdom as surely as Thersites, if less openly at first.<sup>53</sup> Throughout the play, he applies cynical *sententiae* and rehearses the most dogmatic form of misogyny, but eventually the limits of his convictions become clear to him (and to us). His own “counterperspectives,” opposed to Vittoria’s and others’, come to be seen as “relative to [his] particular position,” an insight valuable exactly because it distances provisional truth from moral judgment. This very Machiavellian apprehension is dangerous within a society committed to maintaining a semblance of order. Consequently, Webster portrays his chief demystifiers, Flamineo and Vittoria, as also diabolical, ensuring their ultimate destruction. Unheroic, they can challenge the spectator intellectually yet remain safe for the dramatist politically.<sup>54</sup>

Webster’s divergence from his main sources in constructing these two characters underscores the exact dramatic purposes he intends them to serve.<sup>55</sup> While in the historical record Vittoria Accoramboni’s character is undeveloped and her motives unclear, Webster emphasizes her seductiveness and leaves no doubt that she convinces Brachiano to arrange her husband’s death. Webster also makes her headstrong, intelligent, and courageous, yet manages to let her retain the air of mystery she has in the source material, a combination that lets her fully embody both the transgressive female and the exotic Italian. Although Accoramboni did have a younger brother Flamineo, Webster’s version is almost entirely his own creation, as the sources divulge very little about this figure. The playwright develops this Machiavel, then, to answer a demand the narrative could not meet as he found it: the need for an intermediary between the participants in the Italian locus and the audience.

Flamineo’s status as intermediary in two senses becomes clear in 1.2, where his panderism brings together his employer Brachiano and his sister Vittoria, while his remarks from the platea position interpret the terms of their relationship for an English audience. In this scene involving the duping of Vittoria’s husband Camillo and her subsequent adultery, many speeches go unheard by those not meant to hear them. A sequence of whispers, asides, exits, and entrances limits what every character besides Flamineo knows of the proceedings. Only he (and the spectator, of course) is privy to the entire scene, and only he ever addresses the spectator directly. In the first few lines, his whispering to Brachiano that Vittoria approaches, unheard by the attendants who are quickly dismissed, anticipates the scene’s pervasive air of secrecy. When the two are alone, Flamineo states that they may “talke freely” and offers his first of many misogynistic statements, an assessment

of her “coynesse”: “Thats but the superficies of lust most women have . . . O they are polliticke, they know our desire is increas’d by the difficultie of injoying.”<sup>56</sup> Immediately, Flamineo “others” women using two well-worn female stereotypes, insatiable sexual desire and deceitfulness, whose correct comprehension can assist mail suitors. Flamineo continues in this vein with Camillo, whom he counsels on how to curb his wife’s sexual appetite. He advises that a husband’s decision to lock up his wife at home backfires because “[t]hese polliticke inclosures for paltry mutton makes more rebellion in the flesh” than any imaginable aphrodisiac.<sup>57</sup> Flamineo’s words are a trick, of course, designed to make Vittoria available to Brachiano, and Camillo foolishly falls for it, even handing over the key that will let the pander lock him in his chamber.

Even though we know that Flamineo speaks falsely, his dehumanizing language about women (“paltry mutton”), as well as his steady use of misogynistic commonplaces, may have a cumulative, persuasive effect on an audience, inasmuch as for him is reserved the opportunity to insinuate himself from the platea position.<sup>58</sup> Between Brachiano’s exit and Camillo’s arrival, Flamineo speaks an aside, heard only by the theater audience, deprecating Camillo’s character.<sup>59</sup> We become more knowing as a result of this soliloquized opinion, and Camillo’s idiotic behavior soon corroborates Flamineo’s assessment. By such means Flamineo becomes established as a spokesman of sorts, as Weimann’s “*provocateur* of truth,” and if he is right about Camillo, one might begin to believe, why might he not be right about women, especially considering the largely negative example Webster provides in Vittoria? Even the lie to Camillo reflects a specific male image of Italian females that at the time might have seemed ethnographically validated. Fynes Moryson’s popular *Itinerary* disclosed that Italian men locked up their wives at home while they consorted with courtesans. Despite their imprisonment and enforced modesty (their faces were “covered with a veil, not to be seen”), the wives were unfaithful anyway “because women thus kept from men, think it simplicity to loose any opportunity offered.”<sup>60</sup> Thus, a deliberately distorted attack on women, invented to cuckold a man who does not know any better, approximates the “truth” of travelers’ accounts.

Here I should reassert the relevance to Figureposition of both the actor’s physical position on stage and his less tangible “stage presence,” which involves his relationship with the other actors and the audience, even in the absence of direct address.<sup>61</sup> Flamineo’s asides discussed above may not be spoken from a downstage position, but they do momentarily break the dramatic illusion as voluble utterances that, following dramatic convention, other characters near him cannot overhear. They also initiate Flamineo’s process of ingratiating himself with the audience, which is always privy to his interpretation of both the ongoing action and the moral status of women. While Flamineo sets up the plan enabling Vittoria to cuckold Camillo in 1.2, he speaks now to husband, now to wife, using asides and carefully worded phrases that mean one thing to him, another to her.

He manages to do so by shifting the referent of the deictic “he”: Vittoria knows that the “he” refers to her suitor Brachiano, whereas Camillo assumes the pander refers to him, as when Flamineo says, “He will give thee a ringe with a philosophers stone in it,” a metaphoric reference to Brachiano’s genitals that Camillo believes refers to his own “studying Alcumye.”<sup>62</sup> Here stage position is less important than stage presence. In this scene, Camillo, like Flamineo, does indeed speak asides to the audience, enough to put him (momentarily) in the platea, by definition. The difference between him and the pander, quite simply, is that Camillo knows much less than the audience does about what is going on. We laugh at Camillo, who asks us to participate in his anticipatory delight—as in Camillo’s aside “Now he begins to tickle her”<sup>63</sup>—but the knowledge we share with Flamineo causes us to identify more fully with him.

After Camillo exits and Brachiano enters, the lovers take center stage, while Flamineo returns, mostly silent, to the platea during the Duke’s wooing of Vittoria. The few lines spoken by the pander further demonstrate his function as the scene’s interpreter for the audience. Unheard by the lovers, he repeats two of Brachiano’s seducing lines—“His Jewell for her Jewell, well put in Duke” and “she must wear his Jewell lower”<sup>64</sup>—giving them an incantatory quality that draws in the audience, much as Vittoria is drawn in by Brachiano’s virility, visibly superior to the doddering Camillo’s. In addition, Flamineo clarifies the extent to which Vittoria actually controls the seduction that transpires here, as it is she who spurs Brachiano to murder their spouses. Her evil and cunning become most pronounced in the description of her “foolish idle dreame”:

Me thought I walkt about the mid of night,  
 Into a Church-yard, where a goodly *Eu* Tree  
 Spred her large roote in ground. Under that *Eu*,  
 As I sat sadly leaning on a grave,  
 Checkered with crosse-sticks, their came stealing in  
 Your Dutchesse and my husband; one of them  
 A picax bore, th’other a Rusty spade,  
 And in rough termes they gan to challenge me,  
 About this *Eu*. . . .  
 When to my rescue there arose me thought  
 A whirlwind, which let fall a massy arme  
 From that strong plant,  
 And both were strucke dead by that sacred *Eu*  
 In that base shallow grave that was their due.<sup>65</sup>

The yew/you pun is clear enough, associating Brachiano’s masculine strength with a force of nature that can “rescue” Vittoria from the ill intentions of their

spouses. Only, as the spectator knows, neither Camillo nor Isabella has any ill intentions toward her at all. The dream is pure fiction. Even more, Flamineo's commentary, again unheard by the principals—"Shee hath taught him in a dreame / To make away his Dutchesse and her husband"<sup>66</sup>—leaves no doubt that it is she who brings about the carnage to follow. She is an "Excellent Divell," adept at inciting her lover to evil she misrepresents as an act of self-defense. Brachiano accepts his duty at once without questioning his recent estimation of her as an "Excellent Creature" who is "so mercifull" in love.<sup>67</sup> We also emerge from this scene sympathetic to this "[m]ost happie union," as Flamineo calls it, if only because Webster has contrasted this couple's charisma and daring with Camillo's haplessness and the stridency of Vittoria's mother Cornelia, who interrupts the lovemaking as a lonely voice of morality.<sup>68</sup> The problem is that her uprightness, though sympathetic, pales beside Vittoria's compelling sensuality. As David Gunby suggests, Vittoria threatens to win over a large percentage of the audience despite her obvious malignity; it is difficult not to be disappointed that Cornelia truncates the highly erotic scene brother and sister have contrived with something as "un-Italian" as integrity.

When Vittoria convinces Brachiano to undertake the murders, her actions associate her unmistakably with the Biblical Eve, whose tasting of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge preceded Adam's own act of transgression. Her dream, after all, features a female tempter at a tree located in a sacred place, "a Church-yard." To be sure, Vittoria's deportment leading up to her vision of Brachiano's sin (the murders) is not prelapsarian: tellingly, she admits that earlier in the dream she "could not pray."<sup>69</sup> We know that these two have already fallen long before Brachiano's temptation takes place. Vittoria's is a distorted Edenic narrative, then, one whose terms the eavesdropping Cornelia chooses to extend. According to Cornelia, their illicit plans "forerun our fall" while tainting a plot of land where, ostensibly, "[n]ever dropt meldew on a flower . . . till now."<sup>70</sup> Eve acts in ignorance, Vittoria in full knowledge of what their mutual "fall" portends. This being the case, her manipulation of Brachiano with this dream is as Machiavellian as anything in the play. It is no wonder that the Machiavel Flamineo discerns immediately what she is doing. Presumably, many early modern spectators would have equated Vittoria's dangerous, manipulative sexuality with Eve, one of whose dominant Renaissance characterizations Arlene Saxonhouse describes as follows:

Eve, the temptress, was, in Tertullian's famous phrase, "the gateway to hell." She was sexually provocative, arousing the male's carnal passions and thus preventing his total devotion to the divine spiritual world. The sexuality of Eve *and the female in general* gave her a power that threatened the male, that caused the original Fall, and continued to make men act as they should not.<sup>71</sup> (*italics mine*)

We might say that the Edenic language in this scene associates Vittoria's sexuality with Eve's while Flamineo's misogynistic discourse offers his sister as a negative model for "the female in general." Vittoria, then, becomes established by the end of the first act as embodying all that is dangerous about women, and in fact, about Italy. She has extreme carnal appetites, threatens social corruption and practices deception. Concerning the third behavior—deception—Flamineo, whose prosperity depends largely on his "varying of shapes," attributes female origin to his own Machiavellian prowess at it.<sup>72</sup> When Vittoria rebukes her brother's panderism with "O yee dissembling men!" he responds, "Wee suckt that, sister, / From womens brestes, in our first infancie."<sup>73</sup> Thus, allegedly, the act of nursing pours deceitful inclinations into the male, a sort of condition of motherhood. At root, this belief is only another permutation of the Genesis readings that frame man's foremother, Eve—and by extension, all womankind—as Tertullian's tempting "gateway to hell." Much of Flamineo's platea commentary aims to represent Vittoria as a daughter of Eve, that is, as every inch the typical woman, as he sees her. Cardinal Monticelso, her prosecutor and judge, continues this process during the long trial scene.

If David Carnegie is right about the original staging of Vittoria's arraignment (3.2) at the Red Bull Theatre, Vittoria and Flamineo seem to have inhabited the locus and platea positions, respectively, although here the Machiavel remains mostly silent (speaking only three of the scene's 339 lines). Vittoria, accused of being a whore and of conspiring in her husband's death, remains the center of attention. In Carnegie's reconstruction of the 1612 performance, Monticelso and Vittoria occupy positions on opposite ends of the stage. Monticelso sits on a raised throne, elevated above any other seated character, while, significantly, Vittoria is the only character who remains standing throughout the scene.<sup>74</sup> As her stage position directs the spectator's eye toward her, her precarious legal position engrosses one's ethical sense. An adulteress and accessory to murder, she is able nonetheless to win sympathy while her accuser rails against her. Those commenting from the platea shape audience reaction, as when the English Ambassador declares to his colleague, "the Cardinals too bitter," and adds later, "Shee hath a brave spirit."<sup>75</sup> Carnegie believes that "Brachiano and Flamineo will be outside the formal rectangle of the court," seated very close to the audience and relegated mostly to being themselves spectators during the trial.<sup>76</sup> If the peripheral actors and the Red Bull auditory do blend in this way, Monticelso may be said to address them all *en masse*, as he attempts to impose on the crowd his valuation of the woman on display. This task had been Flamineo's in 1.2, and as it passes to Monticelso, it links him now functionally with the platea, despite his upstage position. Of course, it might be argued that the actor playing Vittoria would also make direct appeals to the audience/judicial assembly. Such would be, by definition, platea acting—and here it is wise to recall Weimann's admonition that "pure" examples of illusionistic and conventional dramaturgy are actually quite rare in drama of this period.<sup>77</sup>



Pivotal to this scene's Figurenposition is Vittoria's status as the one character subject to unrelenting scrutiny, the one figure who, physically and in the exchange of rhetoric, stands alone. (Even Brachiano abandons her at line 179, after some brief bluster.) Monticelso attempts to fix her "perfect character" as he "expound[s] whore" to the assembly, cataloguing in overblown fashion the sins with which a fallen woman afflicts man.<sup>78</sup> One of his main points is that whereas such a woman may appear salutary, involvement with her always leads to ruin, like "Sweete meates which rot the eater."<sup>79</sup> Once she shows her true colors, man can learn from her the same lesson he might take from viewing a corpse: he sees "[w]herin hee is imperfect," to wit, in being a creature of flesh.<sup>80</sup> The association here of femininity with carnality, and of carnality with death, suggests the fear sexually aggressive women such as Vittoria could provoke. Monticelso stamps Vittoria as valueless, "the guilty conterfettet coine" against which, presumably, chaste women stand as good currency.<sup>81</sup>

Thus, Monticelso, delineating the whore's "perfect character," purports to distill her essence in much the way Flamineo generalizes about women elsewhere in the play. The Cardinal, by dint of his religious authority, uses the elevated language of sermons, the pander a more aphoristic style approximating the voice of the common man. But they both insist that Vittoria exemplifies the women they feel compelled to slander. As the drama unfolds, however, any basis for their rigid gender differentiation becomes undermined, and nowhere more noticeably than in Vittoria herself. Isabella, upon being discarded by Brachiano, wishes, "O that I were a man" so that she might exact vengeance upon her enemies.<sup>82</sup> But then she is only dissembling, playing the part of the wronged wife for the sake of onlookers; conditioned to chaste ideals, she contains no venom to "whip some with scorpions."<sup>83</sup> Vittoria, in contrast, does wield a strength—and license—that she and her society define as masculine, to the point that she almost realizes Isabella's wish. Monticelso senses her transgression, listing among her faults that her notorious revelries "did counterfet a Princes Court:<sup>84</sup> the word "counterfet," repeated subsequently in the "character of a whore" speech, emphasizes the deficiency he finds in her unchaste behavior. She may be willful, and enact a prince's "ryotous surfets," but the Cardinal denies her claim to phallic authority.<sup>85</sup> Monticelso knows intuitively that such "counterfet" pretensions, if reduplicated abundantly, would threaten the system of legitimate exchanges undergirding Italian social life.

In Francisco's opinion, Vittoria's transgressive behavior should also disqualify her from motherhood, as her children would only magnify her faults: "Her issue, should not providence prevent it, / Would make both nature, time, and man repent it."<sup>86</sup> Vittoria reminds us before her death that she is childless, as was the historical Accoramboni.<sup>87</sup> At times she needs to cultivate the "male" traits of the filial defenders she lacks. During the trial, she remarks that dire circumstances produce in her a behavioral sex change. In a manner that recalls Flamineo's "varying

of shapes,” Vittoria announces “[t]hat my defence of force like *Perseus* / Must personate masculine vertue.”<sup>88</sup> Later, in the play’s bloody final scene, Flamineo confirms that she indeed possesses “masculine vertue” equal to the “many glorious woemen” who have come before her.<sup>89</sup> Her bravery in the face of death impresses him as furnishing a model for those of the male sex: “if woeman doe breed man / Shee ought to teach him manhood.”<sup>90</sup> In both 3.2 and 5.6, then, we are told that she acts like a man. Complicating such pronouncements, however, Vittoria designates her courage at Lodovico’s sword’s point as innately *female*: fear will not vanquish her, for, she declares, “I am to true a woman.”<sup>91</sup>

In her deperiment before Lodovico stabs her to death, Webster diverges greatly from his source material—with the clear purpose of sustaining her as the “masculine” virago until the very end. According to the Fugger News-letter relating Accoramboni’s murder, Vittoria is praying when the conspirators find her; she asks only to make her confession, “and then do with me as you please.”<sup>92</sup> In a strange inversion, her dramatic counterpart—who had admitted that in the “Eu tree” dream “she could not pray”—would *act as confessor* to Lodovico: “Fall downe upon thy knees and aske forgiveness.”<sup>93</sup> If we consider Vittoria’s singular combativeness and irreverence, might we wonder if the playwright had a different historical figure in mind at this point? To this reader, Webster’s dying Vittoria brings to mind Machiavelli’s account of Caterina Sforza, Duchess of Milan in *The Florentine Historie*. Webster did borrow elsewhere from this chronicle in composing his play.<sup>94</sup> At the end of the 1595 Bedingfield translation, he would have encountered Caterina’s own decidedly unmaternal conduct, on display while she defended besieged Forli:

The conspirators having sacked the Earles houses, took the Countesse *Caterina* his wife, with all her children. Then remained onely the Castle (which being surprized) should happilie finish the enterprise. But thereunto the Captaine would not consent: Neverthelesse, this Countesse promised to deliver it, if she were let loose to goe into the Castle, and for hostages of her promise, she left with the enemyes her children. The conspirators believed her words, and gave her leave to depart. But so soone as she was within the Castle, she looked over the walls, and threatned the enemyes to be revenged of her husbands death. *Then they threatening to fley all her children, answered, that she had meane to beget others.* The conspirators dismayed, seeing they were not aided by the Pope, and hearing that the Lord *Lodovico*, Unkle to the Countesse, did send men in her aide, taking up all the goods they could carrie awaie, went unto the Cittie of *Castello*, whereby the Countesse recovered her state, and revenged her husbands death by all manner of cruelties.<sup>95</sup>

Vittoria, like Caterina, gets surprised by a band of political conspirators. Unlike Caterina, she cannot overcome them, although she defies them just as strenuously. And in doing so, she even manages to echo Sforza, if faintly: after Lodovico stabs her, she taunts, “Twas a manly blow; / The next thou giv’st, murder some sucking Infant.”<sup>96</sup> Caterina says, in essence, “Go ahead and murder children. I place politics over them.” Vittoria says, “Go ahead and murder children. Your lack of virility suits you for that task.” In both instances, the virago emasculates her captors using a rhetoric of surprise that rejects normal maternal sentiment.

In this play in which a woman appropriates masculine agency, her lover Brachiano takes his place among the effeminized men who contrast with Vittoria. He plays the Petrarchan lover in the early wooing scene, indulging in rather hackneyed, often hyperbolic wishes such as “I could wish time would stand still” and “if you forego me / I am lost eternallie.”<sup>97</sup> Surely, Brachiano’s inadequacies reflect the period’s negative image of the Petrarchan lover as ludicrous and of dubious virility. As Linda Woodbridge notes, Jacobean Englishmen had begun to denigrate this figure as little more than a smart manipulator of words who “had a smooth deceitful tongue—like a woman’s.” This newly current image, of “the male courtly/Petrarchan lover as an effeminate fop” finds its portrait in Brachiano.<sup>98</sup> Very quickly, he demonstrates his ineptness as both duke and lover. In 2.1, Francisco announces that Brachiano’s sexual dalliances have distracted him from the reported security threat of approaching pirates. Such carelessness in affairs of state parallels weakness in his personal life. As mentioned before, he abandons Vittoria during her trial, letting her accusers “prey the better.”<sup>99</sup> Before his death, he turns on his new wife irrationally, claiming “you have abus’d mee.”<sup>100</sup> And he is so fearful while his body succumbs to poison in 5.3 that his end belies Vittoria’s brave portrait of him in the wooing scene and contrasts with her own “masculine vertue” upon facing death.

A. J. Hoenselaars is worth quoting on the matter of Renaissance national stereotypes, for he contends that some English plays do more than simply rehearse them:

[P]erhaps, critics have tended to underestimate the dramatists’ conscious use of national stereotypes, and by extension their attempts to transcend them. . . . The late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries witnessed the sceptical reappraisal of national stereotypes. Bacon’s propagation of scientific experiment as a means of countering Aristotelian generalization is echoed both in the prose of the period and in the work of playwrights like Ben Jonson, where cliché assumptions are reassessed and, for lack of an alternative, often satirically debunked. This tendency may also be observed in the Italianate drama.<sup>101</sup>

The task of “reassessing” “cliché assumptions” falls to Flamineo in 5.6, the play’s final scene, and his new attitude toward clichéd ways of thought even reconciles him with his sister.<sup>102</sup> It hardly matters that he has just tried to kill her. As soon as he becomes able to view Vittoria as more than living proof of his earlier misogynistic commonplaces, he says, “Th’art a noble sister, / I love thee now,” and praises her “masculine vertue.”<sup>103</sup>

For five acts, Webster has presented his “*Auditory*” with a richly “*sententious Tragedy*.”<sup>104</sup> By this point in the play, however, many of the *sententiae* begin to ring hollow, such as Flamineo’s “of all Axiomes this shall winne the prise, / ‘Tis better to be fortunate than wise.”<sup>105</sup> Such moments evince Webster’s “fundamental flaw” for Ian Jack, who charges insufficient correlation between his play’s aphorisms and its unfolding events.<sup>106</sup> But surely Webster intends the jarring contrasts of speech and action produced by his misplaced *sententiae*. Inherited bits of wisdom and stereotypes entrench themselves as proverbial expressions. Now Flamineo utters them rapid-fire—probably a few dozen in 5.6, seven just in his final twenty-four lines—and winds up leaving us with the feeling that, in Jacqueline Pearson’s words, “the moral clichés of society do not count.”<sup>107</sup> The Machiavel finds his hyperactive mind go suddenly blank before death: he thinks “Nothing; of nothing: leave thy idle questions . . . I remember nothing.”<sup>108</sup> He now declares that thinking is a source of “infinet vexation,” but the subtext of one of his final *sententiae* suggests the kind of thinking he has come to value: “While we looke up to heaven wee confound / Knowledge with knowledge.”<sup>109</sup> These lines invert a passage from Alexander’s *Croesus* which states that earthly knowledge obstructs man’s apprehension of more valuable divine knowledge.<sup>110</sup> Flamineo offers the opposite meaning: we should not “looke up to heaven” for what we need to know because the divine can only “confound” the more practical lessons we need to survive on earth. This inverted hierarchy raises *scientia* above *sapientia*, knowledge over wisdom;<sup>111</sup> it is a vote for findings that can be tested empirically, as opposed to those that rest uneasily on faith.

The Machiavel improvises by nature, and as he does so, he tests a variety of behavioral propositions, thereby adding to his *scientia*. Interestingly, this process approximates the methodology behind the historical writings of Machiavelli himself. His objective—once he had assembled accounts of political figures, momentous events in Italian history, and various pieces of conventional wisdom—was to use induction to achieve greater knowledge of historical processes. His English translator Bedingfield appreciated the freshness of Machiavelli’s approach, namely, the Florentine’s “setting forth . . . causes and effects of every action,” instead of resigning himself to the typical historian’s indulgent “extoll[ing] and disgrac[ing].”<sup>112</sup> Surely if Hoenselaars sees the spirit of Bacon, the propagator of empirical science, in Italianate plays, we can detect too the early empiricist Machiavelli, even if he has to stand in the wide shadow of the devil Machiavelli.

We know, after all, that reading Machiavelli helped shape Bacon's thought.<sup>113</sup> Leslie J. Walker even credits the Florentine with inventing the inductive method, the Englishman with broadening its application.<sup>114</sup> But wherever the credit belongs, Machiavelli looks forward to a transnational Renaissance skepticism that doubted whether an "idealized and depraved essentialism" could fruitfully advance the dispassionate search for truth.<sup>115</sup>

Flamino and Vittoria, Machiavel and virago, dramatize the inadequacy of essentialist constructs in their most durable incarnations—proverbs and stereotypes. Such an achievement in debunking would seem to mark Webster's tragedy as a radical, even a visionary, play, yet it is not often discussed as such. More often, its gaudy, bloody façade diverts attention from its deeper structures. Yet *The White Devil* is rife with contradictions, reminding us with every inversion that nothing should be taken at face value, particularly fixed moral principles—a very Machiavellian warning.

## Notes

1. John Lyly, *The Complete Works of John Lyly*, ed. R. Warwick Bond, vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1902) 89.

2. The most influential Anglo-Saxon treatment of this subject is Geoffrey of Monmouth's inventive *Historia Regum Britanniae*, c. 1136, best known as a source for Shakespeare's *King Lear*. An accessible modern translation is Lewis Thorpe, trans., *The History of the Kings of Britain* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1966).

3. Graham Holderness, "What Is My Nation?": Shakespeare and National Identities," *Materialist Shakespeare: A History*, ed. Ivo Kamps (London: Verso, 1995) 224.

4. John Lievsay, *The Elizabethan Image of Italy* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1964) notes English travelers' admiration for Venetian republican government (4).

5. Viviana Comensoli, "Music, *The Book of the Courtier*, and Othello's Soldiership," *The Italian World of English Renaissance Drama: Cultural Exchange and Intertextuality*, ed. Michele Marrapodi and A. J. Hoenselaars (Newark: UP of Delaware, 1998) 90.

6. Qtd. in Leo Salingar, "The Idea of Venice in Shakespeare and Ben Jonson," *Shakespeare's Italy: Functions of Italian Locations in Renaissance Drama*, ed. Michele Marrapodi, et al. (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1993) 172.

7. J. R. Hale, *England and the Italian Renaissance: The Growth of Interest in Its History and Art* (London: Faber and Faber, 1954) 34.

8. Andreas Mahler, "Italian Vices: Cross-Cultural Constructions of Temptation and Desire in English Renaissance Drama," *Shakespeare's Italy*, ed. Marrapodi, et al. 50.

9. 50.

10. Karen Newman, *Fashioning Femininity and English Renaissance Drama* (Chicago: UP of Chicago, 1991) 6.

11. 9.

12. Pamela Benson, *The Invention of the Renaissance Woman: The Challenge of Female Independence in the Literature and Thought of Italy and England* (University Park: Penn State UP, 1992) 205-06.

13. Akiko Kusunoki, "A Study of *The Devil's Law-Case*: with Special Reference to the Controversy over Women," *Shakespeare Studies* 21 (1982-83): 3-9. Kusunoki writes that "the most scandalous incidents that took place in England in the second decade of the seventeenth century" involved the downfall of powerful men by their wives: the Countess of Somerset's participation in the death of Sir Thomas Overbury, the Countess of Suffolk's alleged instigation of her husband Thomas Howard's extortion, and the Lake-Roos incest case (3-4). She argues that these events precipitated a wave of extreme antifeminism (9).

14. John Chamberlain, *The Letters of John Chamberlain*, ed. Norman Egbert McClure, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1939), 334.

15. These phrases appear in Book 15 of Niccolò Machiavelli, *Il principe*, 13th ed. (Milano: Rizzoli, 1993) 147, in which the author counsels the prince that adapting one's actions to "the way things are done" leads to self-preservation, whereas adhering to "the way things should be" threatens self-destruction. Translations from *The Prince* are my own.

16. I use "virago" in the now archaic, yet historically relevant, sense of "a man-like, vigorous, and heroic woman." The term has come to designate "a bold, impudent (or wicked) woman; a termagant, a scold," which is unfair to Vittoria. Definitions are from the online *Oxford English Dictionary*.

17. For Machiavelli's belief in the political utility of religion, see (one of many examples) *Discourses* 1.12: "The princes of a republic or a kingdom must therefore maintain the foundations of the religion that they practice; and if they do so, it will be easy for them to preserve religious belief and consequently goodness and unity in the republic. And they must foster and strengthen all things that happen in its favor, even if they judge them to be false." See James B. Atkinson and David Sices, trans., *The Sweetness of Power: Machiavelli's Discourses and Guicciardini's Considerations* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois UP, 2002) 60.

18. G. K. Hunter, *Dramatic Identities and Cultural Traditions: Studies in Shakespeare and His Contemporaries* (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 1978) 105.

19. Keir Elam, chair, "Round Table: Conclusion," *Il mondo italiano del teatro inglese del Rinascimento: Relazioni culturali e intertestualità: Atti della terza e quarta sessione del Convegno internazionale, Palermo, 8-10 giugno 1995*, ed. Michele Marrapodi (Palermo: Flaccovio, 1995) 111-12.

20. D. R. Woolf, *The Idea of History in Early Stuart England: Erudition, Ideology, and 'The Light of Truth' from the Accession of James I to the Civil War* (Toronto: UP of Toronto, 1990) 171.

21. Arthur Marotti, "Shakespeare and Catholicism," *Theatre and Religion: Lancastrian Shakespeare*, ed. Richard Dutton, Alison Findlay, and Richard Wilson (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2003) 218-41.

It is interesting to ponder the staying power of the English notion of a "feminine" Catholicism, especially Italian Catholicism, beyond the Renaissance. In 1886, a short, educational "Play for Boys" was published in London called *The Wanderers; or, Faith's Welcome* (London: R. Washbourne). In it, a group of English boys chase two Italian brothers, Beppo and Pietro, near a school playground. The

Italians, fearing their tormentors, exude effeminacy. Beppo immediately thinks of their mother and Mary, another maternal figure:

Oh! for one moment to again embrace,  
 Or gaze in rapture on our mother's face;  
 To share her loving care, or once more be  
 Kneeling so calmly, childlike, at her knee,  
 Where we first learned our Pater, Ave, Creed,  
 [Takes out Rosary] And our small fingers learned to tell the bead!  
 Now all is changed, and in an unknown land,  
 [Weeping] Despised and hunted, we poor strangers stand.

Pietro responds by recalling the hardship of the saints as he holds up a cross attached to a Rosary.

In a surprising twist, the English boys, who turn out to be Catholic as well and their leader Frank, soon beg forgiveness of the wronged foreigners. The playlet ends with the wish that “the Grace of Faith” would spread unimpeded throughout England. Significantly, only the Italian boys betray signs of Catholic “effeminacy.”

22. Alvin Kernan, *Shakespeare, The King's Playwright: Theater in the Stuart Court 1603-1613* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1995) 93.

23. Roger Ascham, *The Schoolmaster*, ed. Lawrence V. Ryan, Folger Shakespeare Library Publications (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1967) 61.

24. Peter Heylyn, *Microcosmos, or A little description of the great world. A treatise historicall, geographical, political, theological* (Oxford, 1621) 90.

25. A. J. Hoenselaars, “Italy Staged in English Renaissance Drama,” *Shakespeare's Italy*, ed. Michele Marrapodi, et al. 39-41.

26. H. B. Parkes, “Nature's Diverse Laws: The Double Vision of the Elizabethans,” *Sewanee Review* 58 (1950): 409.

27. Dympna Callaghan, *Woman and Gender in Renaissance Tragedy: A Study of King Lear, Othello, The Duchess of Malfi and The White Devil* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1989) 140.

28. Thomas Nashe, *The Unfortunate Traveller or The Life of Jacke Wilton*, ed. H. F. B. Brett-Smith, *The Percy Reprints 1* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1920) 62.

29. Machiavelli, *Il principe* 156.

30. 187-88.

31. 190.

32. William Shakespeare, *Richard III, The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, 4th ed., ed. David Bevington (New York: Longman, 1997) 3.2.193.

33. Laura Levine, *Men in Women's Clothing: Anti-theatricality and Effeminization, 1579-1642* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994) 139.

34. 8.

35. 19.



36. This essay refers to the edition of *The White Devil* published in *The Works of John Webster*, ed. David Gunby, David Carnegie, and Antony Hammond, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995). The text of the original title page appears on page 139.

37. Robert Weimann, *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theater: Studies in the Social Dimension of Dramatic Form and Function*, ed. Robert Schwartz (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978) 230. I am indebted to Manfred Pfister for the idea of applying Weimann's concepts to elucidate English Italianate plays in new ways. His "Shakespeare and Italy, or, the Law of Diminishing Returns," *Shakespeare's Italy*, ed. Michele Marrapodi, et al. 295-303, urges the adoption of new methodologies for studying the Italian influence in Renaissance England, for positivistic, influence-hunting research cannot unearth much that has not already been laboriously detailed.

38. Michael Shapiro, "Annotated Bibliography on Original Staging in Elizabethan Plays," *Research Opportunities in Renaissance Drama* 24 (1981): 45.

39. Qtd. in Weimann 250. For a more recent defense of Webster's dramatic structure, intended as a response to the many critics who have found this aspect of his plays wanting, see David Gunby, "'Strong commanding Art': The Structure of *The White Devil*, *The Duchess of Malfi*, and *The Devil's Law-Case*," *Words That Count: Essays on Early Modern Authorship in Honor of MacDonald P. Jackson*, ed. Brian Boyd (Newark: U of Delaware P, 2004) 209-21.

40. Weimann, *Shakespeare* 250.

41. On the staging of morality plays, see J. L. Styan, *The English Stage: A History of Drama and Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996) 42.

42. Weimann, *Shakespeare* 212.

43. 221.

44. 212.

45. 214.

46. 217.

47. 227-28.

48. 227.

49. 227.

50. 81.

51. 228.

52. 286. This is one of only two brief occasions in which Weimann mentions Webster in *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition*. Obviously, detailed consideration would have taken him off topic in a book on Shakespeare.

53. Webster, *White Devil* 4.2.237.

54. I owe this sentence to Jonathan Dollimore, who writes that "a writer can be intellectually radical without necessarily being politically so," in *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology, and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and His Contemporaries*, 2nd ed. (Durham: Duke UP, 1993) 22. English drama had to be politically conservative—or at least have a conservative veneer—to evade the censors. My point is that Flamineo is potentially as subversive as Machiavelli himself, but his evilness places his radical separation of ethics and pragmatism out of harm's way.

55. The editors of the Cambridge Webster admit some uncertainty concerning all the sources of *The White Devil*. They conclude that the evidence points to his familiarity with three documents in

particular: John Florio's translation "A Letter lately written from Rome, by an Italian Gentleman, to a freende of his in Lyons in Fraunce" (1585); Hierome Bignon's "A Briefe, but an Effectuall Treatise of the Election of Popes" (1605); and several of the Fugger News-letters that describe the murder of Vittoria Accoramboni (1585-86). See *The Works of John Webster* 1: 361-75.

56. Webster, *White Devil* 1.2.17-21.

57. 1.2.89-90.

58. Flamineo persists in uttering misogynistic commonplaces throughout the play, and it would be tedious to enumerate them fully. Two more examples will suggest the flavor of his proverbial speech: "What a damn'd impostume is a womans will! / Can nothing breake it? . . . Women are caught as you take Tortoises, / Shee must bee turn'd on her backe" (4.2.145-48); and "O Men / That lye upon your death-beds, and are haunted / With howling wives, neere trust them, they'le re-marry / Ere the worme peirce your winding sheete" (5.6.151-54).

59. 1.2.44-47.

60. Fynes Moryson, *Shakespeare's Europe: Unpublished Chapters of Fynes Moryson's Itinerary. Being a Survey of the Condition of Europe at the End of the 16th Century*, ed. Charles Hughes (London: Sheratt & Hughes, 1903) 410. Whether Webster read Moryson is unknown. It is interesting to note, however, that Moryson describes how nunneries could provide "relief" for the misery of an aging courtesan (411). Monticelso, at the end of the trial in 3.2, banishes Vittoria to a "house of convertites" where she is to learn repentance.

61. Weimann, *Shakespeare* 230.

62. Webster, *White Devil* 1.2.138-39.

63. 1.2.122.

64. 1.2.209, 212.

65. 1.2.215-24, 234-38.

66. 1.2.239-40.

67. 1.2.239, 195, 197.

68. 1.2.199.

69. 1.2.233.

70. 1.2.251, 254.

71. Arlene Saxonhouse, *Women in the History of Political Thought: Ancient Greece to Machiavelli* (New York: Praeger, 1985) 153. Saxonhouse's chapter on Machiavelli discusses the opposition of Mary and Eve in medieval thought. But although the excerpt reproduced above refers explicitly to the Middle Ages, she goes on to write that this characterization of Eve persisted into the Renaissance (154).

72. Webster, *White Devil* 4.2.237.

73. 4.2.178-79.

74. David Carnegie, Theatrical Introduction, *The Works of John Webster* 1: 103.

75. Webster, *White Devil* 3.2.108, 140.

76. Carnegie, Theatrical Introduction 1: 103.

77. Carnegie notes that in 3.2, "the accused is in a strong position to play to the gallery (as Vittoria clearly does), even to the theoretically worst-placed spectator," thanks to the layout of the Red Bull (1:103). The Cambridge Webster marks none of her lines in 3.2 as outright asides, but of course this does not preclude direct appeals to spectators, which *would* probably result in a more dramatically effective

scene. If Vittoria really succeeds in seducing a large percentage of an audience despite itself (as Gunby argues), her decision to eschew illusionistic acting temporarily in order to address playgoers might be one weapon of allurement. (As we would expect, the mostly silent Flamineo speaks two of his three lines as asides in 3.2, a continuation of his intimate audience relationship from earlier in the play.)

78. Webster, *White Devil* 3.2.79-80.

79. 3.2.81

80. 3.2.99.

81. 3.2.100.

82. 2.1.242.

83. 2.1.244.

84. 3.2.76.

85. 3.2.77.

86. 2.1.349-50.

87. 5.6.30.

88. 3.2.135-36.

89. 5.6.239-40.

90. 5.6.237-38.

91. 5.6.219.

92. "The Murder of the Signora Accoramboni," *The Works of John Webster* 1:375.

93. Webster, *White Devil* 1.2.232, 5.6.209.

94. The Cambridge Webster cites as an instance of direct borrowing Monticelso's speech at 3.2.257-61, which is derived from Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Florentine Historie*, trans. Thomas Bedingfield (London, 1595) 140. Webster's editors also connect, more loosely, Francisco's speech at 4.1.5-7 to *Florentine Historie* 66.

95. Machiavelli, *Florentine Historie* 220. Machiavelli recounts this incident much more graphically in *Discorsi* 3.6: "And to prove that [Caterina] did not care about her children, she showed them her genitalia, announcing that she still had means to make new ones." See Atkinson and Sices, trans., *Sweetness of Power* 281. Whether Webster ever saw an English manuscript translation of Machiavelli's *Discourses* is unknown.

96. Webster, *White Devil* 5.6.229-30.

97. 1.2.185, 190-91.

98. Linda Woodbridge, *Women and the English Renaissance: Literature and the Nature of Womankind, 1540-1620* (Urbana: UP of Illinois, 1984) 185.

99. Webster, *White Devil* 3.2.180.

100. 5.3.81.

101. A. J. Hoenselaars, "Italy Staged in English Renaissance Drama," *Shakespeare's Italy*, ed. Michele Marrapodi, et al. 42-43. *The White Devil* is not one of Hoenselaars's examples of this debunking of stereotypes. He cites instead William Davenant's *The Cruel Brother*, George Chapman's *All Fools* and Thomas Dekker's *Patient Grissil* (43-44).

102. Jacqueline Pearson remarks on Flamineo's changed attitude in *Tragedy and Tragicomedy in the Plays of John Webster* (Totowa, New Jersey: Barnes & Noble, 1980) 80.

103. Webster, *White Devil* 5.6.236-37, 240.

104. Webster, *White Devil*, "To the Reader" 140 (l. 16).
105. Webster, *White Devil* 5.6.177-78.
106. Ian Jack, "The Case of John Webster," *Scrutiny* 16 (1949): 39.
107. Pearson, *Tragedy* 80.
108. Webster, *White Devil* 5.6.198, 200.
109. 5.6.201, 254-55.
110. See the editors' annotation in *The Works of John Webster* 1:358.
111. Gunby calls attention to the distinction between *scientia* and *sapientia* in his Critical Introduction 78.
112. Machiavelli, *Florentine Historie*, Epistle Dedicatorie 2.
113. Robert K. Faulkner, "The Empire of Progress: Bacon's Improvement upon Machiavelli," *Interpretation* 20 (1992): 38.
114. Leslie J. Walker, Introduction by the Translator, *The Discourses of Niccolò Machiavelli*, trans. Walker (London: Routledge, 1975) 92.
115. In his chapter of *Radical Tragedy*, "Anti-Essentialism in Political Theory and Renaissance Scepticism," Dollimore explores common ground in the thought of Machiavelli, Bacon, Montaigne, and Hobbes (see esp. 170-74).

# PRAXIS

