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蛯原, 啓

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Moral Vision in Webster: From Flamineo to Bosola

Hiroshi Ebihara

John Webster has been traditionally regarded as the greatest tragic dramatist after Shakespeare and often compared in dramatic intensity with him. There is, however, little agreement about the nature and meaning of his tragedies. It is true that evil is rampant and innocence is defenceless against atrocious violence in both of his Italian tragedies, but the sense of moral chaos, which shows itself everywhere in *The White Devil* is much weakened in *The Duchess of Malfi*. In fact, the shift of emphasis upon moral awareness is definitely there in his later tragedy. Webster underwent considerable development between the two plays, although they appear to have been written within a few years of each other. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the development of his moral vision with special reference to his treatment of the two tool-villains, Flamineo and Bosola, who, though not tragic protagonists, symbolize his tragic vision in its different stages of development.

I

The world of *The White Devil* is ruthlessly dominated by evil-doers, but it is not correct to say that the play wholly lacks traditional moral values. There are, for instance, Cornelia, Isabella, Marcello and Giovanni, who are all good characters and command

our sympathy. There is no need to find tault with them, but we must admit that these moral figures are lamentably helpless against the virulent attack of violence. Although Webster provides us with these virtuous characters, he seems to have little interest in them. In *The White Devil*, at least, he is not so much intrerested in the familiar conflict between good and evil as in a vigorous clash between evil and evil.

Even more significant, Webster went so far as to give Vittoria a certain charm by inducing in our mind an ambivalent response to her. No doubt she is evil and guilty, but her superb defiance which she shows to Machiavellan authority in the trial scene offers us a magnificent example of what J. R. Mulryne calls "moral alchemy" by which she almost succeeds in converting her guilt, "through sheer force of personality, into something that commands admiration."[1] Indeed we may admire her for her masculine energy, but it does not mean that we can trust and approve of her. Nor can we rely upon those characters who represent traditional morality because they are too frail to assert their moral positives. In fact, the absence of any character to whom we can look for sane judgement creates ambiguity in the moral vision of the play. As Roma Gill points out, this ambiguity is perhaps deliberate on the part of the dramatist.[2]

It is more or less agreed that Flamineo is the most interesting character in *The White Devil*. Like Lodovico, he is a malcontent and tool-villain. He is the tool of Brachiano while Lodovico is that of Francisco. They are both murderers, sharing considerable similarities.[3] There is, however, this marked difference between the two, that, while Lodovico is a merciless murderer wholly indifferent to any ethical criterion, Flamineo occasionally shows something like

moral awareness, though in a very limited sense.

As has often been pointed out, Flamineo is "the chief commentator on the action and on the world in general."[4] What he has to say is often so true and penetrating that Clifford Leech goes so far as to regard him as the author's mouthpiece.[5] Flamineo strikes the keynote of the play when he comments: "As in this world there are degrees of evils:/ So in this world there are degrees of devils" (IV. ii. 58-9).[6] In other words, Flamineo is fully aware of the corrupt society in which he lives and what he is doing there. Instead of trying to redress social injustice, he takes full advantage of the rotten prodigality of court life. He does not feel the least hesitation not only in pandering to his master's lust but also in murdering for material gain and personal advancement in the courtly world. Vittoria's acceptance of Brachiano, therefore, is a "Most happy union" (I. ii. 215) for him, because it opens up a path to his preferment, Vittoria's beauty being only a means to his desired end. This is, of course, unbearable to their mother, who deplores her son's shameful conduct and predicts the ruin of their house, but Flamineo gives no ear to her admonition.

> … shall I,
> Having a path so open and so free
> To my preferment, still retain your milk
> In my pale forehead? no, this face of mine
> I'll arm and fortify with lusty wine
> 'Gainst shame and blushing. (I. ii. 327-32)

From this, it is evident that he is not unaware of the evil he is doing, but moral principles are quite irrelevant to Flamineo who acts only from expediency. He even curses his mother for making

no provision for him and for interfering with his 'efforts' towards his and his sister's advancement. He is a determined agent of unrestrained appetite.

Flamineo succeeds in effecting the marriage between Brachiano and his sister, which "Confirms" him "happy" because it is "a good assurance" of his prosperity (V. i. 2-3). He does not care about their happiness in the least. This becomes clear in the scene where the Duke is poisoned to death. Vittoria obviously takes it "heavily" (V. iii. 180), but Flamineo shows no emotion whatsoever but that of contempt. He is flippant and coarse, making fun of his sister's tears. What he has to say about his master's death is only this:

> Why here's an end of all my harvest, he has given me nothing—
> Court promises! Let wise men count them curst
> For while you live he that scores best pays worst.
>
> (V. iii. 187-89)

With the death of Brachiano, however, his fortune begins to wane. He is immediately banished from the court by Giovanni. In fact, this is the first thing the young Duke does after his father's death. He has already started to rid his corrupt court of vermin.

As the result of Flamineo's treacherous murder of Marcello, Cornelia's mind has gone to pieces. The heart-rending sight of her madness, it should be noted, exercises a humanizing effect upon him, who for the first time feels pity stirring in his heart: "I would I were from hence"(V. iv. 91).

> I have a strange thing in me, to th'which
> I cannot give a name, without it be
> Compassion,...

This night I'll know the utmost of my fate,
I'll be resolv'd what my rich sister means
T'assign me for my service: I have liv'd
Riotously ill, like some that live in court;
And sometimes, when my face was full of smiles
Have felt the maze of conscience in my breast.

(V. iv. 113-21)

For the first time Flamineo recognizes something like a guilty conscience. Too much must not be made of this, however, for, while it is quite true that he has "liv'd/ Riotously ill," there is no evidence in the text to prove that he has "sometimes ... felt the maze of conscience" in his breast. W. W. Greg is surely wrong when he says that Flamineo "is in ceaseless conflict with his conscience."[7] Nor does this confession lead to any repentance or indeed any change in his attitude towards life. He is utterly incapable of development. His encounter with Vittoria in the last scene shows that he is the same villain as ever. It is ironical, therefore, that Flamineo, who is generally a keen observer and "the contriver of action,"[8] should be outwitted and trapped by Francisco and his followers who plot together under the guise of religion. His power of observation fails where most necessary, and he is deceived by appearance.

Nowhere else are Flamineo and Vittoria more like brother and sister than in their death scene. This scene is extremely important in that it throws a great deal of light upon the moral structure of the play. After her final defiance of the conspirators she comes to acknowledge her sin, saying: "my greatest sin lay in my blood./ Now my blood pays for't" (V. vi. 240-41). Flamineo, too, admits

that "'Tis well yet there's some goodness in my death,/ My life was a black charnel" (V. vi. 269-70). These two individualists with a keen eye to their own interests begin to sense the existence of spiritual values of which they have not been quite aware. Vittoria's lines: "My soul, like to a ship in a black storm,/ Is driven I know not whither" (V. vi. 248-49) are further developed into Flamineo's more philosophical lines:

I do not look
Who went before, nor who shall follow me;
No, at myself will I begin and end:
While we look up to heaven we confound
Knowledge with knowledge. O I am in a mist.
(V.vi. 256-60)

Now he vaguely realizes the existence of a spiritual world besides the courtly code of aristocracy, but he cannot define it. Thus he finds himself "in a mist," and in such moral confusion he dies, admitting, nevertheless, that there is some goodness in his death. But his moral awareness, if any, ends here. Like a true villain, his dying words are once again those of defiance: "Let no harsh flattering bells resound my knell,/ Strike thunder, and strike loud to my farewell" (V. vi. 275-76). In other words, he shuts his mind to his inner promptings and dies in defiance of his fate. He remains a thorough villain, incapable of change or development, until his death.[9] He is, after all, an embodiment of Websterian moral chaos.

The play ends on a highly moral note and with the hope of a new order. Compared with the great moments of defiance and self-assertion, which are characteristic of the play, Giovanni's con-

cluding speech is conventional moralizing, and admittedly weak and perfunctory.[10] But at least the suggestion of a new order is definitely there.

Ⅱ

Whereas moral anarchy is the main theme of *The White Devil*, moral discoveries are the basic issues of *The Duchess of Malfi*. Webster's concern is now with a conflict between good and evil.[11] It is true that evil is still the dominating force of the play, but amoral defiance and self-assertion have completely disappeared. In *The Duchess of Malfi* the emphasis is placed on the possibility of goodness as well as on the actions of evil-doers. Even more significant, Webster's conception of character has become much more complex, so much so that we have one of the most interesting examples of case study in psychology in the person of Ferdinand. Although inner struggle, which is so characteristic of Shakespearian tragedy, is still lacking in Webster's view of life, moral awakening gives some coherence to the structure of the play. Some form of moral awareness comes to most of the characters.

The most striking example of this can be found in the conversion of Bosola. Like Flamineo, he is a malcontent and tool-villain, bnt he is also a revenger. As Robert Ornstein points out, he may lack Flamineo's high-spirited wit, but he is essentially different from Flamineo in that he is capable of true moral feeling,[12] thereby embodying "the moral argument of the play."[13]

At the beginning of the play we are told that Bosola is "The only court-gall" (I. i. 23) and that he "Would be as lecherous, covetous, or proud,/ Bloody, or envious, as any man,/ If he had

means to be so" (I. i. 26-28). He has been "seven years in the galleys,/ For a notorious murder" (I. i. 70-1). He is "neglected" (I. i 75) and therefore melancholic, and this is poisoning "all his goodness" (I. i. 77). It is, of course, doubtful whether he has any goodness in him until his conversion takes place at the end of Act IV. At least there is no textual evidence to prove this. But what we should notice about him is the way in which he accepts his offered task. He never undertakes evil of his own accord. He always shows some aversion to what Ferdinand tells him to do.

The first task Bosola is offered by Ferdinand is that of an intelligencer, under the guise of the provisorship of the horse, whose duty it is to spy on the Duchess and to find out whether the Duchess is thinking of a second marriage. It is with some distaste that he accepts the work:

O, that to avoid ingratitude
For the good deed you have done me, I must do
All the ill man can invent! (I. i. 273-75)

From the very first he is well aware of what he is about. Antonio suggests the potentialities of goodness in Bosola when he says: "You would look up to heaven, but I think/ The devil, that rules i'th'air, stands in your light" (II. i. 94-5), but Bosola remains unaffected. When he discovers that the Duchess was delivered of a son, he is quite faithful to his mission and, without hesitation, sends a letter by Castruchio to the Aragonian brothers, expecting that the news will "make her brothers' galls/ O'erflow their livers" (II. iii. 74-5). And this is exactly what happens in Act II, scene v, where Ferdinand's morbid reactions are very skilfully contrasted with the Cardinal's imperturbability.

Although the name of the Duchess's husband remains unknown for some time,[14] Bosola manages to find it out by practising on her credulity. When Antonio is 'accused' of a crime, Bosola suspects that there is something awkward in the whole affair. He thinks "This is cunning" (III. ii. 171) on the part of the Duchess and begins to lavish praise on Antonio in order to see how she takes it. She is caught in the trap and confides in him, revealing the whole truth. He pretends to be sympathetic and promises to keep her secret, even suggesting that she should "feign a pilgrimage/ To our Lady of Loretto" near Ancona where her husband has already gone, "so may you depart/ Your country with more honour, and your flight/ Will seem a princely progress" (III. ii. 307-8; 309-11). Cariola makes a protest against "this jesting with religion" (317), but the Duchess does not doubt Bosola's sincerity. It makes his betrayal all the more frightening. When left alone, he says:

What rests, but I reveal
All to my lord? O, this base quality
Of intelligencer! why, every quality i'th'world
Prefers but gain or commendation:
Now, for this act I am certain to be rais'd,
And men that paint weeds to the life are prais'd.

(III. ii. 327-31)

He comments on the baseness of his task almost with self-hatred, but he decides to pursue it for his own advancement without any struggle in his mind. When he meets the Duchess again, he speaks of Antonio as "this base, low fellow" (III. v. 117) and of his virtue as "A barren, beggarly virtue" (III. v. 122). This is quite the opposite of what he said about him earlier in Act III, scene ii.

Enraged by the Duchess's patient acceptance of her suffering, Ferdinand, who is obsessed with burning sexual jealousy, begins to torment her in a most morbid manner. When she is told that her husband and children are dead, she has no wish to live and even thinks of suicide. Observing her noble patience in adversity, even Bosola is moved and begins to feel sympathy for her. He asks Ferdinand to "end here:/And go no farther in your cruelty" (IV. i. 117-18). He no longer wants to see her as her tormentor:

> Never in mine own shape,
> That's forfeited by my intelligence,
> And this last cruel lie: when you send me next,
> The business shall be comfort. (IV. i. 134-37)

"Thy pity is nothing of kin to thee," says Ferdinand (IV. i. 138), for he is convinced that Bosola is an unfeeling villain. From what Bosola has said to his master by way of protest, we should naturally expect something more humane of him, but nothing happens. When we meet him next, he is disguised as an old man and is now charged with slaughter on an extraordinary scale. Under his direction the Duchess, her children and Cariola are mercilessly murdered. Throughout the murder scene, it must be stressed, Bosola shows neither hesitation nor aversion to what he does as Ferdinand's tool-villain.

From all this, it is evident that there is always a world of difference between what he says and what he actually does. Once he becomes Ferdinand's tool, although with some distaste, he carries out whatever orders his master gives him. There is no actual struggle in his soul in spite of his occasional railing.[15] No matter how often he talks about his qualms, they do not influence

his choice. In fact, as Gunnar Boklund points out, "Bosola remains a determined but expertly rationalizing egoist until his conversion takes place."[16] S. W. Sullivan makes the same point when he says that Bosola, like Flamineo and other villains in *The White Devil,* is "a villain who plays a malcontent role in order both to conceal and rationalize villainy,"[17] for the evasion of moral responsibility is one of the important themes in Webster's tragedies.[18]

The death of the Duchess in Act IV, scene ii is the turning-point in Bosola's career. Unlike the loose widow of Belleforest and Painter, Webster's Duchess is described with great sympathy, although, of course, the dramatist does not entirely approve of her conduct. For example, she marries secretly, and that beneath her station; she tells a number of lies to keep her secret; she jests with religion: these are perhaps not the actions expected of a noble lady. This does not mean, however, that she deserves for them the barbarous punishment imposed upon her by her brothers. On the contrary, with all her faults, she is meant to be the main object of our sympathy. By suffering relentless and unjustified persecution she reveals spiritual growth and develops into a tragic figure. She blames neither Bosola nor any other person for her suffering. Unlike other characters, she bears entire responsibility for her own conduct, and accepts her fate as if she deserved it: "O Heaven, thy heavy hand is in't" (III. v. 78). She even achieves tragic grandeur through her patience under afflictions and her calm acceptance of death.

It is through his direct contact with the Duchess that Bosola is awakened to the sense of guilt and moral responsibility. "I am angry with myself, now that I wake" (IV. ii. 325), says Bosola to

Ferdinand, who refuses to give him "the reward due to my service" (IV. ii. 294). Bosola protests further:

> Let me know
> Wherefore I should be thus neglected? sir,
> I serv'd your tyranny; and rather strove
> To satisfy yourself, than all the world;
> And though I loath'd the evil, yet I lov'd
> You that did counsel it; and rather sought
> To appear a true servant, than an honest man.
> (IV. ii. 327-33)

But now he would not change his peace of conscience "For all the wealth of Europe" (IV. ii. 341). With tears in his eyes, he shows a great tenderness for the dying Duchess, and even tells a lie about Antonio in order to comfort her departing soul. And, most significant thing of all, he now admits, strangely with Ferdinand (IV. ii. 278), her "sacred innocence" (IV. ii. 355), regretting sincerely that he was unable to shed "These penitent fountains while she was living" (IV. ii. 365). The body of the Duchess is "As direful to my soul as is the sword/ Unto a wretch hath slain his father" (IV. ii. 367-68). He makes up his mind:

> I'll post to Milan
> Where somewhat I will speedily enact
> Worth my dejection. (IV. ii. 373-75)

For the first time in his career he ceases to be a tool and becomes an independent man, acting upon his own judgement. Bosola's mental processes are most skilfully presented in this conversion scene.

It is worthy of passing note that Bosola's motive for conversion is not without moral ambiguities. His chief motive for turning to

the cause of virtue may be his desire for personal revenge on the Aragonian brothers for their "ingratitude" to him, because he remains loyal to them until Ferdinand refuses to reward him for his "service."[19] Be all this as it may, there can be no doubt that his conversion does take place and that his moral discovery, unlike Flamineo's discovery of "compassion" which leads him nowhere, actually determines the course of his action in Act V and makes a major contribution to the structure of the play. This awakening of moral responsibility, as suggested above, is made possible by the moral example furnished by the Duchess.

The Duchess's death has an immediate impact upon Ferdinand as well as Bosola. His lycanthropia may be "intended by Webster as a final confirmation of his characterization as a jealous lover,"[20] but we are surely meant to take it as the result of remorse for the murder of his sister and consequently as "a fatal judgement" fallen upon him (V. ii. 85). The Cardinal, too, is afflicted by "a guilty conscience" (V. v. 4), but he remains a determined Machiavellian until he is murdered by Bosola and Ferdinand.

The importance of Act V is at once recognized when one gives due consideration to Bosola's repentance and conversion at the end of Act IV. The presence of the dead Duchess makes itself felt everywhere as that of the dead Julius Caesar in Shakespeare's play.[21] Led by the spirit of the Duchess, Bosola tries to rescue Antonio from the fangs of the persecutors.

Well, good Antonio,
I'll seek thee out, and all my care shall be
To put thee into safety from the reach
Of these most cruel biters, that have got

Some of thy blood already. It may be
I'll join with thee, in a most just revenge.
The weakest arm is strong enough, that strikes
With the sword of justice:—still methinks the duchess
Haunts me: there, there!—
'Tis nothing but my melancholy.
O Penitence, let me truly taste thy cup,
That throws men down, only to raise them up.

(V. ii. 338-49)

It is, therefore, an irony of fate that Bosola should accidentally kill Antonio, the very person "I would have sav'd 'bove mine own life" (V. iv. 53). This is Bosola's tragedy. But at last he takes vengeance upon the Aragonian brothers. In the final shambles the Cardinal dies, saying: "O Justice!/ I suffer now, for what hath former been" (V. v. 53-4), and Ferdinand dies invoking his sister. Bosola, too, is mortally wounded, but he is quite calm, for he now feels sincerely that it is "no harm to die/ In so good a quarrel" (V. v. 99-100). In other words, they all acknowledge just retribution for their sins.

Bosola's death, however, does not gain our sympathy simply because his struggle with his better self is not of sufficient magnitude. It would be a gross misrepresentation of Bosola to claim, as C. G. Thayer does, that he is "a major tragic protagonist."[22] But the importance of Bosola as a man divided against himself cannot be overstressed, for it is mainly through the spiritual influence which the Duchess has exercised upon him that Webster's moral vision manifests itself during the play. The spiritual awakening of Bosola represents a remarkable advance over the moral

confusion of Flamineo before his death. In *The Duchess of Malfi* we are shown that goodness can be found even in a villain and that there are still positive values which lead men to salvation. In other words, Webster's concern is now not so much with evil as with the possibility of goodness in man. As was the case with *The White Devil,* Webster concludes the play on a note of hope for a new order and generation, but the ending of *The Duchess of Malfi* has a more positive moral, with no Francisco fleeing from the sword of justice. The presentation of the only surviving son and heir of the Duchess and Antonio has also a greater meaning than that of Giovanni who is the son of the notorious Brachiano.

Notes

1 J. R. Mulryne, ed., *The White Devil,* Regents Renaissance Drama Series (London: Arnold, 1970), p. xxiv.

2 Roma Gill, "'Quaintly Done': A Reading of *The White Devil,*" *Essays and Studies,* 19 (1966), p. 55.

3 See P. M. Murray, *A Study of John Webster* (The Hague: Mouton, 1969), p. 116.

4 Elizabeth Brennen, ed., *The White Devil,* The New Mermaids (London: Benn, 1966), p. xxvii.

5 Clifford Leech, *John Webster: A Critical Study* (1951; rpt. New York: Haskell House, 1966), p. 49.

6 All quotations are from J. R. Brown's Revels editions of *The White Devil* (London: Methuen, 1960) and *The Duchess of Malfi* (1964).

7 W. W. Greg, "Webster's *White Devil*: An Essay in Formal Criticism," in *The Collected Papers of Sir Walter Greg,* ed. J.

C. Maxwell (Oxford, 1966), p. 13.

8 Clifford Leech, *John Webster: A Critical Study*, p. 49.

9 C. V. Boyer, *The Villain as Hero in Elizabethan Tragedy* (1914; rpt. New York: Russell & Russell, 1964), p. 158.

10 J. R. Mulryne, "*The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*," in *Jacobean Theatre*, eds. J R. Brown and B. Harris, Stratford-upon- Avon Studies 1 (London: Arnold, 1960), p. 214. According to Flamineo, Giovanni "hath his uncle's villainous look already,/ In *decimo-sexto*" (V. iv. 30-31), but this is surely a prejudiced view, for he is described as a sympathetic figure throughout the play.

11 D. C. Gunby, "*The Duchess of Malfi*: A Theological Approach," in *John Webster*, ed. Brian Morris, Mermaid Critical Commentaries (London: Benn, 1970), p. 185.

12 Robert Ornstein, *The Moral Vision of Jacobean Tragedy* (Madison and Milwaukee: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1965), p. 143.

13 Gunnar Boklund, *The Duchess of Malfi: Sources, Themes, Characters* (Cambridge: Harvard Uuiversity Press, 1962), p. 167.

14 According to the text, they have already had three children, which means they have been married for more than three years. And yet Bosola, the intelligencer, has not discovered who her husband is; nor has the "intemperate" Ferdinand started to take revenge on her. Realistically this is all ridiculous, but when the play is put on the stage, it causes no serious difficulty, for time moves, as in Othello, at more than one rate. (see Robert Ornstein, p. 130.) Another example is the surviving son of the Duchess and Antonio, who is already referred to as "this young hopeful gentleman" at the end of the play.

15 Jane M. Luecke, "*The Duchess of Malfi*: Comic and Satiric Confusion in a Tragedy," *Studies in English Literature*, 4 (1964), p. 281.

16 Boklund, *The Duchess of Malfi*, p. 144.

17 S. W. Sullivan, "The Tendency to Rationalize in *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*," *The Yearbook of English Studies*, ed. T. J. B. Spencer, Vol. 4 (1974), p. 80.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 84.

19 Boklund, *The Duchess of Malfi*, p. 144. Clifford Leech, *Webster: The Duchess of Malfi*, Studies in English Literature, No. 8 (London: Arnold, 1963), p. 59.

20 Elizabeth Brennen, "The Relation of Brother and Sister in the Plays of John Webster," *Modern Language Review*, 58 (1963), rpt. in *John Webster: A Critical Anthology*, eds. G. K. and S. K. Hunter (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969), pp. 294-95.

21 Leech, *Webster: The Duchess of Malfi*, p. 39.

22 C. G. Thayer, "The Ambiguity of Bosola," *Studies in Philology*, 54 (1957), p. 167.