WHITE DEVIL, BLACK MAGIC: REMNANTS OF OCCULT PHILOSOPHY IN THE DRAMA OF JOHN WEBSTER

by

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ABSTRACT

John Webster's most widely studied and performed plays, *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*, are both rife with images that are drawn from what can generally be termed "occult philosophy"—a belief in esoteric spiritual knowledge, magic, supernatural forces, astrology, and the conjuration of spirits. Using occult philosophy's reverence for the inherent powers of language as a backdrop, this thesis will examine Webster's incorporation of these conspicuous images. I contend that Webster himself is interested in the magical possibilities of language, not in the context of the occult however, but in the context of the theatre. He conceives of language as inherently possessing the potential to enchant, which means that the conjuring forth of images and the art of persuasion form the foundation of the relationship between the characters on stage, as well as between playwright, actor, and audience.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.......................................................................................................................... ii  
Table of Contents........................................................................................................... iii  
Acknowledgements........................................................................................................ iv  
Introduction..................................................................................................................... 1  
Chapter One: Occult Philosophy.................................................................................... 5  
Chapter Two: The White Devil....................................................................................... 20  
Chapter Three: The Duchess of Malfi.......................................................................... 52  
Conclusion....................................................................................................................... 85  
Works Cited...................................................................................................................... 87
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Introduction

It is rare to find a lengthy modern study of John Webster that does not at some point cite T. S. Eliot's dark fascination with the playwright's talents:

> Webster was much possessed by death
> And saw the skull beneath the skin;
> And breastless creatures underground
> Leaned backward with a lipless grin.

> Daffodil bulbs instead of balls
> Stared from the sockets of the eyes!
> He knew that thought clings round dead limbs
> Tightening its lusts and luxuries. ("Whispers of Immortality")

Eliot's morbid reverence is fitting: it is certainly true that Webster's most widely studied plays, *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*, are both well known for the striking images of horror and scenes of suffering that they contain. Eliot's reference to "Daffodil bulbs" staring "from the sockets of the eyes" is an allusion to a scene in *The White Devil* in which Flamineo is visited by the ghost of his recently murdered master, Bracciano, who comes bearing "A dead man's skull beneath the roots of flowers" (5.4.133).¹ This ghostly visitation is not unique to Webster's drama: often his visceral images are drawn from what can generally be termed an "occult philosophy"—a belief in esoteric spiritual knowledge, magic, supernatural forces, astrology, and the conjuration of spirits. While studies of Webster frequently focus on the disturbing, graphic moments of death and torment in his plays, existing surveys of the occult and magic on the Renaissance stage leave Webster conspicuously unaccounted for. This paper will examine his two greatest tragedies through the lens of occult philosophy, a reading that Webster implicitly suggests through his repeated use of occult image-patterns.

The impetus for what follows is the importance of metaphor and analogy—highly literary devices—within occult discourse. Occult philosophy uses metaphor—or, more accurately, attempts to do without metaphor—in very specific ways. Brian Vickers, examining the relation between occult and scientific discourses, explains:

In the scientific tradition... a clear distinction is made between *words* and *things* and between literal and metaphysical language. The occult tradition does not recognize this distinction: words are treated as if they are equivalent to things and can be substituted for them. Manipulate the one and you manipulate the other. ("Analogy" 95)

In other words, “The occult tradition moves from analogy to identity, from suggestion to assertion. Instead of ‘A is like B,’ we have ‘A is B’ (Vickers “Analogy” 115). From the conjuration of spirits and devils, to the translation of ancient texts, to the ineffable wonders of the Tetragrammaton, power and influence in occult philosophy are dependent upon skilful manipulation of letters and language; words become indistinguishable from actions in a relationship that offers unique opportunities for comparison and contrast with the symbiosis of words and actions in Webster’s drama (and drama in general). I contend that in both *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*, Webster is greatly interested in the types of tensions inherent in language that Vickers describes, tensions that readily lend themselves to exploration in a theatrical setting: rhetoric versus action, outward forms versus inward essences, analogy and metaphor versus essential identities. There is a tremendous fear in both plays of secrets being vocalized, of the truth that words represent—a fear and intense respect for the power of language. Certain characters express a desire for their words to become deeds, for their rhetoric to transform into action; as the Vickers quotation suggests, such a privileging of words and language is integral to occult philosophy. Frequently in both plays, language is used in such a way that words *are* given the ability to effect change in the world: there are numerous references to words being able to physically harm or soothe, to poison, or to raise powerful storms. Webster shapes his plays and seems to conceptualize the
theatre in a manner that suggests he has great reverence for these performative aspects of language. He conceives of language as inherently possessing the potential to enchant, which means that the conjuring forth of images and the art of persuasion form the foundation of the relationship between the characters on stage, as well as between playwright, actor, and audience. In Webster’s drama then, the theatre is a magical place in the sense that its language has affective power—words are more than symbolic or representational, they are at times transformative. Such a conception of language has its ramifications, which we see worked out in Webster’s characters: certain characters thrive on language’s performativity, while others hide behind language’s suggestiveness, or suffer for believing in language too completely. Although Webster privileges language, for the most part, he fills his plays with earthly, depraved characters doing earthly, depraved things; consequently, while violent or disturbing rhetoric is wielded as an affective tool, in the face of worldly, physical violence, the moral power of words is often revealed to be ephemeral. Thus Webster’s examinations of transformative language are dynamic, ranging from contexts in which words bring about harm and punishment, to those in which words are the only recourse in the face of danger and torment.

As the Vickers quotation implies, a historically sensitive reading of early modern texts would most likely uncover a relationship between occult philosophy and more scientific mentalities that suggested that the two methodologies were contradictory and in opposition, or that argued for a type of natural progression or evolution from one mode of thinking to the other. While my thesis will tangentially locate Webster’s plays within such a historical discussion, my aim is not to position his texts within these two paradigms; Webster is doing something intentional and purposeful with his language, and though the philosophical winds of change are swirling around him, I will not argue that he is attempting to directly address the issues of his day. By folding occult philosophy back over these plays, I hope to bring
into relief Webster’s explorations of rhetoric, affect, imagination, and the senses, and thus get to the heart of his dramatic and literary motivations. Webster expects his audiences to revel in the aesthetic wonders of the stage, yet in his mind, fully realizing the potential of his plays also means that audiences contemplate the implications of what they see and hear. Webster wants his audiences to be haunted: not only by ghosts, devils, and the “skull beneath the skin,” but also by the very matters they are willingly charmed into contemplating.
Chapter One: Occult Philosophy

As I begin my exploration of early modern occult belief systems and their relation to the theatre, a warning from Nicholas Clulee echoes in my mind: “there was hardly a single monolithic ‘occult philosophy.’” Generalizing about Renaissance magic, its characters, sources, and relation to other developments including science [and presumably literature] is difficult and treacherous” (239). I fear, however, that in my case, when dealing with such a remarkably broad topic like the occult, generalizing (and its subsequent difficulties) is inevitable. Simply put, a comprehensive history or summary of this topic is well beyond the scope of this paper. That being said, my focus on language does help to overcome some of the potential difficulties of generalization by giving a useful overall “feel” of occult philosophy. The use of language, the manipulation of letters and words is, in essence, at the very core of occult belief. Thus while I admit to being highly selective in my citation of primary sources, drawing almost exclusively on those portions of texts that deal with language, I am selectively representing what I deem to be occult philosophy’s fundamental level, from which the myriad permutations of occult belief—magic, conjuration, alchemy, etc.—all stem.

In order to discuss Webster’s explorations of affective language, his use of occult imagery, and the role of these things in his conception of the theatre, it is crucial to first establish occult philosophy’s reverence for language. I return now to consider at greater length the quotation from Vickers’ essay, “Analogy vs. Identity: The Rejection of Occult Symbolism, 1580-1680”:

In the scientific tradition . . . a clear distinction is made between words and things and between literal and metaphysical language. The occult tradition does not recognize this distinction: words are treated as if they are equivalent
to things and can be substituted for them. Manipulate the one and you manipulate the other. ("Analogy" 95)

Vickers is at the very root of the matter: occult perspectives are unique not only in terms of their metaphysical and spiritual outlooks, but in their philological outlook as well. An empirical position (what Vickers terms “scientific”) would hold that “while ideas and words change, there must be some anchor, some constant reality” ("Analogy" 96)—words and reality operate independently. Not so in the occult tradition, where words and reality are bonded symbiotically, with changes to one realm having the potential to enact change in the other. Instead of a firm demarcation between signifier and signified, occult power is necessitated not on the removal of such a barrier, but on the belief that the barrier is never there in the first place.

This conception can be traced back to the conviction that man’s first act of speech was a magical one: Adam securing dominion over creation by bestowing names. In De occulta philosophia (first published in 1533 and translated to English as Three Books of Occult Philosophy in 1651), Henry Cornelius Agrippa writes

Adam, therefore, that gave the first names to things, knowing of the influences of the Heavens and properties of all things, gave them all names according to their natures, as it is written in Genesis, where God brought all things that he had created before Adam, that he should name them; and as he named any thing, so the name of it was; which names, indeed, contain in them wonderful powers of the things signified. (209)

Treating words and things as one and the same is an attempt to unlock the prelapsarian potential of sign and signifier being one and the same, with the ultimate goal being to access the inherent power that such a formulation promises. In Agrippa’s mind,

That the proper names of things are very necessary in Magical Operations, almost all men testify. For the natural power of things proceeds, first, from the objects to the senses, and then from these to the imagination, and from this to the mind, in which it is first conceived, and then is expressed by voices and words. [. . .] Hence magicians say, that the proper names of things are certain rays of things, everywhere present at all times, keeping the power of things, as
the essence of the thing signified, rules, and is discerned in them and know the things by them, as by proper and living images. (209)

This conception of the power of language is applied to situations from the metaphysical to the mundane, contemplated in highly abstract, philosophical ways as well as for reasons of everyday pragmatism. The wide range of this branch of occult philosophizing is most likely due to the relative simplicity of the core concept: the absence of distinction between sign and thing signified. If words hold inherent power over the things they name, then the possibilities—what one has power over—are limited only by one's conceptualization of just how far those possibilities might extend. Some apply the concepts to the physical world—to control over weather, or for medicinal purposes; others have much more heavenly aspirations, seeking knowledge of the divine realm.

Keith Thomas identifies three main types of occult exploration: “natural magic, concerned to exploit the occult properties of the elemental world; celestial magic, involving the influence of the stars; and ceremonial magic, an appeal for aid to spiritual beings” (223). Most rituals involving any of these three types of magic at some point involve a very specific set of words or sentences that must be spoken or written (or both) in order for the desired end to be reached. Today, we would most likely term any such utterance a “spell,” although Agrippa takes the time to specify the various headings these “spells” might fall under:

Besides the virtues of words and names, there is also a greater virtue found in sentences, from the truth contained in them, which hath a very great power of impressing, changing, binding, and establishing, so that being used it doth shine the more, and being resisted is more confirmed and consolidated; which virtue is not in simple words, but in sentences, by which anything is affirmed or denied; of which sort are verses, enchantments, imprecations, deprecations, orations, invocations, obtestations, adjurations, conjurations, and such like. (210-11)

His inclusion of “verses” and “orations” is worth noting, for they seem somewhat out of place—being potentially more rhetorically inert—on a list that otherwise contains uses of language that are unambiguously affective. Verses and orations are not normally thought of
as inherently magical in any way, although there was a line of thought in the Renaissance—which I will examine later—that associated the persuasive powers of skilled orators with something akin to magical influence. Suffice it to say at this point that from the perspective of occult philosophers, the contexts in which the power of language could be implemented were without limit.

Here, for example, is a description from 1592 of one Elizabethan magician’s remedy for a toothache:

First he must know your name, then your age, which in a little paper he sets down. On the top are these words, In verbis et in herbis, et in lapidibus sunt virtutes. Underneath he writes in capital letters, AAB ILLA, HYRS GIBELLA, which he swears is pure Chaldee, and the names of the three spirits that enter into the blood and cause rheums, and so consequently the toothache. This paper must be likewise burned, which being thrice used is of power to expel the spirits, purify the blood, and ease the pain. (qtd. in Thomas: 180)

To comprehend how such a ritual would be successful, or perhaps more importantly from a modern perspective, how one might believe such a ritual would work, involves the difficult task of conceptualizing a non-scientific discourse that is without metaphor. Words don’t suggest or merely relate to things; words and things (in this case, spirits) are one and the same. The hitherto invisible spirits are identified by name, and these identities are rendered (momentarily) permanent and tangible as they are scrawled in ink. Reducing the paper to ash is not meant as a symbolic action—burning away the spirits’ names is equivalent to burning away the spirits. Recalling Vickers’ words, “Instead of ‘A is like B,’ we have ‘A is B’” (115). S. J. Tambiah explains in greater detail:

Every metaphor or symbol contains both truth and fiction: if it is taken literally it misrepresents, but it is more than just a conventional sign because it highlights a resemblance. [...] the metaphoric use of language exploits the procedures of selection and substitution by which words or ideas replace one another in terms of semantic similarity.

Contemplate what implications this device may have for ritual, which has for its aim the actual transfer of an attribute to the recipient. The spell can
exploit the metaphorical use of language, which verbally and in thought makes the transfer. ("Power of Words" 189)

In magical ritual, then, metaphors do not exist, yet in some way, the persuasiveness of the ritual—its feasibility and believability—is contingent upon an awareness of how metaphors work. Put simply, to believe that burning away the spirits’ names is not meant metaphorically requires some vestigial conception of "metaphorically". "A is like B" is the \textit{a priori} condition behind "A is B", not the other way round. The same connections and resemblances between words or ideas that are suggested by metaphor are still made, minus the tool of connection and resemblance: the metaphor itself. One's degree of belief in magic is a product of the ability to make this conceptual leap of faith that leaves metaphor behind; metaphor, therefore, is both an integral element in occult philosophy's belief in the power of language, and the means by which that philosophy can be questioned. Writing in 1618, for instance, Francisco Torreblanca Villalpando is disparaging of Cabalists' claims that when God presented the Law to Moses, he also gave him the secret meaning of that Law, which was subsequently rooted esoterically in the Hebrew language:

Kabbalah embraces the whole of philosophy, divine and human, as well as natural, and contains, mystically and symbolically, the teaching of everything [. . .]. But almost all this swarms with vanities and superstitions, not to mention lies, for it is incredible that the sun, moon and other stars, the elements and the things derived from them, since they lack reason, feel that divine power which lies hidden in Hebrew's words, and are so affected thereby and so moved that they obey a person simply because he wills it [. . .]. It must be said that no names, whether pronounced mentally or aloud, naturally and of themselves have such a power . . . I speak only of Kabbalistic words, since they say that the names are rays which stem from those things they signify because it was God who imposed those names on them. (qtd. in Maxwell-Stuart 138)

Villalpando simply doesn't believe that language works in this way; names or words and "those things they signify" remain independent in his mind.

Reginald Scot, whose \textit{The Discoverie of Witchcraft} (1584) was a work devoted to debunking escalating charges of witchcraft, is doubtful of the validity of magic for similar
reasons. Large portions of Scot’s deconstruction of the practice of witchcraft are based on his disbelief in witches’ abilities to manipulate words in the manner they claim to do, or are accused of doing:

If I should go about to recite all charmes, I should take an infinite worke in hand. For the witching writers hold opinion, that anie thing almost maie be therby brought to passe; & that whether the words of the charme be understandable or not, it skilleth not: so the charmer have a steddie intention to bring his desire about. And then what is it that cannot be done by words? (237)

For Scot, it is the potentially infinite scope of such a system that renders it illogical. If all that is required to wreak havoc is mere words, then witches could literally do anything; Scot, then, is dubious of claims that old women have infeebled and killed children with words, and have made women with child miscarrie; they have made men pine awaie to death, they have killed horses, deprived sheepe of their milke, transformed men into beasts, flowne in the aire, tamed and staied wild beasts, driven all noisome cattell and vermine from corne, vines and hearbs, staied serpents, &c: and all with words. (237)

Part of Scot’s scepticism stems from his belief that, if witches actually had the abilities they claimed and anything could be brought about by words, they would be doing a lot more with them than depriving sheep of milk:

If it were true that witches confesse, or that all writers write, or that witchmongers report, or that fooles believe . . . one old witch might overthrowe an armie roiall: and then what needed we any guns, or wild fire, or any other instruments of warre? A witche might supplie all wants, and accomplish a princes will in this behalfe, even without charge or bloodshed of his people. (72)

Interestingly, Scot ultimately believes that witches’ power does stem from their use of language, though in a different way than theorized by occult philosophers. He eventually concludes that “words . . . which are thought so necessarie instruments for witchcraft (as without the which no such thing can be accomplished) are but bables, devised by couseners, to abuse the people withal” (390). Witches use words not to access latent magic, but to trick,
fool, and persuade; their language *is* powerful, but not for the reasons that have them being burned at the stake.

Another example of this sentiment comes from an undoubtedly more familiar and popular writer, James I, in his *Demonologie*—first published in Scotland in 1597, and reissued in 1603 upon his arrival in England. *Demonologie* is James’ attempt to “resolue the doubting harts of many; both that . . . assaultes of Sathan are most certainly practised, & that the instrumentes thereof, merits most severly to be punished” (xi). The text is formulated as a dialogue between the curious Philomathes and the wise Epistemon. James believes in the black magic of witches, and in the following passage, he asserts that the Devil’s fundamental power is that of language:

PHILOMATHES. Bvt I pray you likewise forget not to tell what are the Deuilles rudimentes.
EPI[STEMON]. His rudimentes, I call first in generall, all that which is called vulgarly the vertue of worde, herbe, & stone: which is vsd by vnlawful charmes, without naturall causes. As likewise all kinde of practiques, freites, or other like extraordinarie actions, which cannot abide the true toutche of naturall reason.
PHI. I would haue you to make that playner, by some particular examples; for your proposition is verie generall.
EPI. I meane either by such kinde of Charmes as commonlie dafte wiues vses, for healing of forspoken goodes, for preseruing them from euill eyes, by knitting roun-trees, or sundriest kinde of herbes, to the haire or tailes of the goodes: By curing the Worme, by stemming of blood, by healing the Horse-crookes, by turning of the riddle, or doing of such like innumerable things by wordes, without applying anie thing, meete to the part offended, as Mediciners doe . . . (11-12)

James’ mention of “the vertue of worde, herbe, & stone” echoes the Latin version of the phrase in the toothache ritual mentioned above: *In verbis et in herbis, et in lapidibus sunt virtutes*. Of these three innately powerful elements, James seems most fearful of witches’ use of words. When Philomantes asks Epistemon to make the definition of the devil’s rudiments “playner,” Epistemon focuses on the “Charmes as commonlie dafte wiues vses . . . [and] such like innumerable things by wordes, without applying anie thing.” Words can
operate without things, because words and things are one and the same. Part of the fright of
the power of such charms and words is that the ability is theoretically accessible to anyone—
from kings to commoners. The authority lies not in who is using the words, but how those
words are used.

Despite his belief in witchcraft and the anxiety that this causes, in reading
_Demonologie_, one gets the sense of a lingering doubt in James’ mind—he believes, but not
wholeheartedly. This doubt manifests itself in Epistemon’s statement that the actions he is
describing are “extraordinarie” for the very reason that they “cannot abide the true toutche of
naturall reason.” This “naturall reason” includes James’ awareness of metaphor, like
Villalpando, his cognizance of how language works. James cannot completely bring himself
to conceptualize a world without metaphor because metaphor is too essential a weapon in his
political arsenal: “It is, to put it briefly, in language that the king represents himself; it is in
language that power is displayed” (Goldberg 153). Take, for example, the oft-quoted
passages which, appearing in both the first and third books, frame his _Basilikon Doron:_

For Kings being publike persons, by reason of their office and authoritie, are
as it were set (as it was saide of olde) upon a publike stage, in the sight of all
the people; where all the beholders eyes are attentivelie bent, to look and pry
in the least circumstance of their secreatest driftes. (12)

It is a true olde saying, That a King is as one set on a stage, whose smallest
actions and gestures, all the people gazingle doe beholde: and therefore,
although a King be never so precise in the discharging of his office, the people
who seeth but the outward part, will ever judge of the substance . . . (163)

James is using this metaphor of the player king in a traditional way: to invite a comparison,
to suggest a different way of thinking about something—in this case, kingship. Yet
obviously James cannot move beyond metaphor to a realm where words and things are one
and the same, as he does in his discussion of witches. Kings are _like_ players “set on a stage,”
but James does not want to suggest that kings _are_ merely players acting out their parts. To
suggest that kings and players are one and the same would be tantamount to claiming that
kingship is an act which anyone could perform. Sometimes metaphors are just metaphors—from James’ perspective, they have to be. Jonathan Goldberg writes that

James’s two uses of the metaphor of the player king point in a number of directions. First he reveals a divided king, convinced on the one hand of his integrity, on the other of a disparity between ‘outward appearance’ and ‘inward intention.’ Second, he reveals conflicting beliefs about ‘outward appearances’: in the first instance, ‘secretest drifts’ inevitably surface; in the latter, ‘inward intention’ cannot be read rightly. The source of these conflicts lies in the king (who both believes and disbelieves in the transparency of his show) and in his audience. (Goldberg 115)

The conflicts that James strikes on (‘outward appearance’ versus ‘inward intention’) are akin to those explored by Webster; both men are concerned with perceptions of performance. James in his writings, and Webster in his drama, consciously manipulate language that is in some sense magical—not words that effect substantial change (as they do in the occult), but words that effect the appearance of change when used in specific contexts (political, theatrical). What Goldberg refers to as “the transparency of [the] show” is crucial to James’s and Webster’s respective authorities: James has a vested interest in being the only party aware of any “transparency”—he is paranoid that his audiences will see through any “outward appearance” to his “secretest driftes” or “substance”; conversely, Webster—as will be discussed in the chapters that follow—requires his audiences to be complicit in any “transparency,” to be aware of the aesthetic and introspective consequences of his artifice.

As is clear from the quotations above, James’ distrust of witches and Scot’s doubts as to their very existence are due, at least in part, to the fact that the witches in question were of low social standing. Magic was a means to greatly alter the social fabric; in theory, users of magic could topple monarchs or surpass them in influence. This possibility haunts James; indeed, the second half of Demonologie—Newes from Scotland—deals with James’ anecdotal account of an actual witch trial that brought to light magical charms against his
person and the subsequent executions of the accused. In Scot's mind, the fact that such magical assaults against monarchs are so infrequent is evidence against the prevalence of witches—if people wielded such powers, they would not fear to use them in such grand fashion. If anything, Scot believes, the authority of so-called witches lies in their ability to cast not magical, but rhetorical spells—to use their mere "babies . . . to abuse the people withal" (390). One can see here that these concepts—the manipulation of language in occult discourse and language’s ability to manipulate in rhetorical discourse—have the potential to overlap. Words are as powerful to the orator as they are to the occult philosopher, although for a subtly different reason: in the realm of rhetoric, words do not have the potential to affect change in the world, they have the potential to affect change in other people—listeners. The authority shifts from the words themselves to those that can employ those words skilfully; the attraction and the trepidation—the (ab)use of language to bring about one’s desires—remain the same.

Wayne A. Rebhorn notes the tensions surrounding the employment of persuasive rhetoric in the early modern period. His description of the anxieties raised by the social ascent of dextrous rhetoricians parallels the chaos that magicians and witches could potentially introduce into social hierarchies:

Here stands revealed the deep fantasy that motivates so many Renaissance rhetoricians: the dream that through a mastery of the art, a presumably baseborn orator can achieve a glorious ascent, going from the lowly position of peasant . . . to the heights of power and prestige [. . .]. That the proponents of rhetoric in the Renaissance embrace the idea of social mobility should not really be surprising. After all, virtually all of them were men on the make, men who came from the lower and middling orders of society and sought advancement that many of them, in fact, achieved. [. . .] By contrast, when Renaissance critics of rhetoric denounce this fantasy of upward social mobility, they stigmatize the social and political pretensions of the orator as both ludicrous and dangerous, pronouncing him a mountebank, a charlatan, a juggler, or a rope dancer. The critics see rhetoric as the art of lying and insistently identify it as makeup and masquerade. Mockingly, they remind rhetoric’s defenders that Mercury, who was often claimed as the patron of eloquence, was also the god of thieves. (Debates 6)
The charges levelled by the critics of rhetoric are strikingly similar to those raising accusations of magic use: the orator or magician is stigmatized as a fraud or perhaps even demonized as a danger to the larger social fabric. Positions in either debate will obviously reflect social standing, but, like discussions of the occult, also come down to how much stock one puts in words. The anxiety and the allure of rhetoric comes from the same nagging question that surrounds the occult, only now that question seems much less metaphysical and abstract: *These words that they use can't possibly do what they claim, can they?*

Henry Peacham included a dedication in the second edition of his dictionary/handbook of rhetorical and grammatical terms, *The Garden of Eloquence* (1593); it serves as a useful example of the more grandiose claims made by the proponents of rhetoric. In it, he states that

> so mighty is the power of this happie vnion, (I meane of wisdom & eloquence) that by the one the Orator forceth, and by the other he allureth, and by both so worketh, that what he commendeth is beloued, what he dispraiseth is abhorred, what he perswadeth is obeyed, & what he disswadeth is auoided: so that he is in a maner the emperour of mens minds & affections, and next to the omnipotent God in the power of perswasion, by grace, & diuine assistance. (iii)

He also stresses that words are swords, declaring that figures of speech “are as martaill instruments both of defence & invasion, and being so, what may be either more necessary, or more profitable for us, then to hold those weapons always readie in our handes . . . ?” (iv). Words here are earthly tools that can yield the most tantalizing of results: dominance over the minds of other individuals. Peacham’s analogy of the orator assuming heavenly influence relates to another common bond with occult philosophy: the prelapsarian abilities of man. Thomas Wilson’s *The Arte of Rhetorique* (1553) includes a preface with the title “Eloquence first given by God, and after lost by man, and last repaired by God againe.” (qtd. in Vickers, “Persuasion”: 413) This echoes the occult belief that the power of words dates back to
Adam’s naming of the things in God’s kingdom—this was the first magical act for many occult philosophers, and the first act of eloquence for those studying rhetoric.

For the opposing view of rhetoric, recall Agrippa’s somewhat strange inclusion of “verses” and “orations” in his listing of the permutations of magical language. Writing in *On the Uncertainty and Vanity of the Arts and Sciences* (1531), Agrippa is troubled by the notion of words being manipulated by the wrong tongues—not necessarily in an overtly magical sense, although his anxiety is certainly a product of his belief in the inherent power of words. Persuasion is his fear here:

To know how to speak precisely, ornately, gravely, and copiously is certainly beautiful, delightful, and always useful, but it is sometimes base and inconsiderate, more often dangerous, and always suspect. That is why Socrates himself thinks orators are unworthy of admiration and should never obtain power in a well-ordered state. Plato thought they should be excluded from his republic together with tragic actors and poets, and surely this is right, for nothing is more dangerous to civic functions than this art, since it produces prevaricators, shifty tricksters, perverters of the law, sycophants, and all kinds of men with wicked tongues. Equipped with it, many people plot against the state and foment sedition, while by means of their artful loquacity, they betray others, attack them, satirize them, flatter yet others, and obtain something like a tyranny over the innocent. (qtd. in Rebhorn, *Debates*: 78-79)

Looking back on *Occult Philosophy*, one can see hints of Agrippa’s interest in language’s ability to be implemented both magically and rhetorically:

Words, therefore, are the fittest medium betwixt the speaker and the hearer, carrying with them not only the conception of the mind, but also the virtue of the speaker, with a certain efficacy, unto the hearers; and this oftentimes with so great a power, that often they change not only the hearers but also the bodies and things that have no life. (207-8)

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2 Although *On Occult Philosophy* was written first and circulated for perhaps as many as twenty years in manuscript, it was not published until after *Uncertainty and Vanity*—a text which argues that all sciences, including the occult are vain pursuits—had reached print. As such, it is difficult to explain why Agrippa sends such conflicting messages when it comes to the employment of language. On one hand, words are wonderful gifts from Adam with the potential to do nothing less than access the secrets of the heavens; on the other hand, words are too common and earthly, too readily perverted by those who wish to do ill. Rectifying one text with the other is a mystery for an Agrippan scholar, although it seems to me that part of the impetus to publish *Uncertainty and Vanity* must have been to neutralize some of the accusations of necromancy that Agrippa must have known *On Occult Philosophy* would draw; Agrippa could claim that he didn’t truly believe the things he wrote in *On Occult Philosophy* (definitely not those portions that deal with conjuration), and point to *Uncertainty and Vanity* as his proof.
In terms of his specific discussions of language in both texts, although his tone definitely changes, Agrippa’s belief never wavers—his reverence for language and his fear of its misuse are two sides of the same coin. The link between his occult and rhetorical concerns is at one point made explicit in *Uncertainty and Vanity*: “If, thanks to nature, each thing is expressed by means of an appropriate word, what pursuit is more pernicious than that of false words?” (qtd. in Rebhorn, *Debates*: 80).

As Agrippa suggests, the orator’s powers of persuasion, while not explicitly magical *per se*, are nevertheless believed by some to be an esoteric form of enchantment. The right words, combined with the appropriate accompanying actions can make an audience of listeners do or believe anything. Drawing the parallel between the magician-orator figure and the actor (or playwright-via-actor) enrapturing a theatre is irresistible. Webster himself makes such a connection in 1615 when he contributes a number of short prose pieces to a collection of “New and Choise Characters”. Here’s a portion of Webster’s character of “An excellent Actor”:

> Whatsoever is commendable in the grave Orator, is most exquisitely perfect in him; for by a full and significant action of the body, he charmes our attention: sit in a full Theater, and you will thinke you see so many lines drawne from the circumference of so many eares, whiles the Actor is the Center. [. . . ] By his action he fortifies morall precepts with example; for what we see him personate, we thinke truly done before us: a man of a deepe thought might apprehend the Ghosts of our ancient Heroes walk’t againe, and take him (at severall times) for many of them. (*Complete Works* IV 42-3)

The actor, the magician, and the orator merge here to form a symbiotic union: the “excellent” actor who is able to cast “charmes” from the stage by combining the linguistic talents of the “Orator” with “significant action of the body”. The potential effects of this merger on the audience are impressive: from helping to instill “morall precepts” to manipulating their very senses into mistaking actors for the actual heroes they represent. Webster’s image of “so many lines drawne from the circumference of so many eares, whiles the Actor is the Center”
is taken from rhetorical discourse, further evidence that he believes the most excellent actors to be those that are most persuasive in their delivery of (his) words. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, there existed a tradition of images representing Hercules with chains stretching from his tongue to the ears of his followers. A symbol of both eloquence and authority not based on physical strength, the image became a popular allusion in rhetorical discourse, used to represent the rhetorically dextrous speaker and the rapt audience held in thrall. George Puttenham refers to the “pretie devise or embleme” of this Hercules in The Arte of English Poesie: “a lustie old man with a long chayne tyed by one end at his tong, by the other end at the peoples eares, who stood a farre of and seemed to be drawen to him by the force of that chayne fastned to his tong, as who would say, by the force of perswasions” (qtd. in Rebhorn, Emperor: 72-3). John Milton genders Rhetoric as female in his Third Prolusion, and uses this trope of the enslaved audience to stress that her power “so ensnares men’s minds and so sweetly lures them with her chains that at one moment she can move them to pity, at another she can drive them to hatred, at another she can fire them with warlike passion, and at another lift them up to contempt of death itself” (qtd. in Rebhorn, Emperor: 73). This is the image that Webster is alluding to: the eloquent actor (and by extension, playwright) having the audience enchained to his every rhetorical whim. While the image obviously has connotations of slavery, Webster isn’t using it to dehumanize or exploit his audience; the chains from tongue to ears represent the importance of both parties in the implicit theatrical bargain. The actor at the height of his powers will lead the audience where he wills; conversely, the actor without such powers of persuasion will be at their mercy.

Webster feels that the magic generated by the talented actor is a largely esoteric phenomenon: it requires a “man of deepe thought” to truly comprehend and appreciate what is happening on stage. This encouragement of thinking is crucial to Webster’s brief sketch of
the theatre; it isn't enough for the audience to merely receive sensory information passively and be charmed into feeling certain things, although excellent actors in excellent plays will make this happen. Audiences must also think about what they are experiencing, perhaps even question it. Marion Trousdale (using a now familiar analogy) stresses that Webster is not looking for blind faith from his audiences:

To believe language real... is to allow the mind to be made captive to the point that the judgment is in chains. Webster does not use his orator's skill in that way. Instead, the heightened verbal awareness that makes up the texture of the play invites us, by making us aware of the art, to meditate by means of such elusive doubleness upon the significance of things. (171)

That being said, his claim that the "man of deepe thought" might mistake the excellent actor for the ghost of an ancient hero is certainly hyperbolic. Surely such a man does not truly believe that actors channel or conjure the spirits of the dead; however, for the duration of the performance, Webster is asking his audiences to do just that—to relinquish their disbelief and believe in such an impossible substitution, to not struggle against the chains of eloquence they might feel lashed to their ears. The best theatre will use metaphor to tempt the audience into leaving metaphor behind; for the enchantment to be complete, the audience must use the figurative language and actions of the theatre to help them make this leap of metaphoric faith: That's not Richard Perkins on the wooden stage of the Red Bull, it's Flamineo in a sumptuous Italian court. (Even though I know it's really Richard Perkins on the wooden stage of the Red Bull). Such a conceptualization in the theatre is reminiscent of that made in occult circles: utilizing a metaphoric-type substitution while not necessarily accepting the metaphor in question. In this sense, Webster's claim of ghosts on stage is wholly plausible. It is ghosts that I turn to in the chapters that follow: the occult imagery and philosophy haunting Webster's plays.
Chapter Two: *The White Devil*

"How strange these words sound"

By his own admission, Webster's first solo effort as a playwright was a failure. In an address "To the Readers" in the first quarto printing of *The White Devil* (1612), Webster writes that his play "was acted in so dull a time of winter, presented in so open and black a theatre, that it wanted (that which is the only grace and setting out of a tragedy) a full and understanding auditory" (3-6). There is an undeniable element of rancour in Webster's prefatory note, a bitterness, a darkness. Frustrated by *The White Devil*’s lack of success—a frustration no doubt intensified by the fact that he was admittedly "a long time in finishing this tragedy" (24)—Webster rails against both his theatre audiences: "most of the people that come to that playhouse [The Red Bull] resemble . . . ignorant asses" (6-8), and his critics: "Detraction is the sworn friend of ignorance" (32). Using a metaphor that readers will soon find in various incarnations throughout the play that follows, Webster goes so far as to claim that "the breath that comes from the uncapable multitude is able to poison" (20-21) even "the most sententious tragedy that ever was written" (16-17). Webster’s disappointment with the reception of *The White Devil* is that it was as much a rhetorical failure as a theatrical one: audiences and critics alike have missed his point—they were not “understanding,” they were “ignorant,” they were "uncapable". It is worth noting that his frustrations with the audience are a product of the very relationship he reveres in his character of “An excellent Actor”: that of the actor physically linked to the audience’s ears. While this image assigns much authority to the actor, it is important to remember that the actor is as much enslaved to his audience as they are bound to him:

The image of the chain stretching between Hercules’ tongue and the ears of his followers can be given yet further twists. It can, for instance, be taken not as an indication of Hercules’ dominance but as a sign of linkage, of mutual attachment, between the hero and his people, an indication that neither
Hercules nor his subjects can maintain their positions and identities independent of one another. [ . . . ] Ironically, one who is bound to rule because of his mastery of the art of rhetoric may well appear bound to rule in a different sense, the sense that he is bound to and by his subjects. (Rebhorn Emperor 74)

The persuasive powers of the actor will only manifest themselves in the presence of an audience that is willing to listen to what he has to say.¹ In this case, the audience in question was not particularly interested in the words that Webster put in the mouths of his players; without a willing audience, the influence of both actor and playwright is neutralized. As good as Webster believes his play to be, if people aren’t going to watch and listen, he is rendered rhetorically impotent.

Webster laboured to hone a play that failed to be appreciated once put on stage; what then, in Webster’s mind, was The Red Bull audience lacking? In crafting his plays, what does Webster expect from his audiences? Richard Allen Cave believes—correctly, in my opinion—that Webster dismissed the coarse responses of the Red Bull audience because what they wanted was only . . . intensity and sensationalism. The ‘full and understanding auditory’ he appealed to must reach beyond that to appreciate the metaphysical dimension that the plays inhabit which forms a ground swell to the action, surfacing poignantly in the characters’ sudden consuming anguish. (12)

Whether Webster’s dismissal of the play’s original audience is valid or accurate is impossible to ascertain; what is clear, however, is that Webster does feel that his dramaturgical skills have gone unappreciated—his artistry has not been recognized. Intensity and sensationalism abound in The White Devil, yet Webster is confident that if only what Cave terms “the metaphysical dimension” of his play had been understood—if the “man of deepe thought”

¹ Ironically, Webster includes an epilogue to the printed text of The White Devil which applauds the “action” (i.e. acting) in general, and “my friend Master [Richard] Perkins” in particular. Such a conspicuous addendum echoes Webster’s genuine appreciation for good acting in “The excellent Actor,” and reinforces his claims in the prefatory note that it was the original audience that was to blame for the play’s failure on stage. It is difficult to discern which part Perkins played; Webster writes that “the worth of his action did crown both the beginning and the end”. The general assumption is that he played the part of Flammeo, but if Webster intended to be taken literally, it is Lodovico who begins and ends the action of the play.
that he mentions in “An excellent Actor” was to have seen the play—then his work would not have failed on stage. Later in the address, as he champions the craftsmanship of fellow playwrights, Webster not-so-subtly reminds his readers of the importance of being able to identify greatness:

For mine own part I have ever truly cherished my good opinion of other men’s worthy labours, especially of that full and heightened style of Master Chapman, the laboured and understanding works of Master Jonson; the no less worthy composures of the both worthily excellent Master Beaumont, and Master Fletcher; and lastly (without wrong last to be named) the right happy and copious industry of Master Shakespeare, Master Dekker, and Master Heywood, wishing what I write may be read by their light . . . (32-40)

In printing his play, Webster, knowing that a playhouse performance with the ideal “full and understanding auditory” is no longer a possibility (if it ever was), now turns to private readers for appreciation and more importantly, understanding. His address reveals his expectations of not just reading audiences, but audiences generally. The participation of an acting troupe is lost when the play becomes a text to be read, but whether spoken aloud or pressed in ink, Webster takes solace from his words remaining the same.² He insinuates that these words will be able to impress (in both senses of the word) a reading audience; thus for Webster’s play to “work” requires the imaginative powers of the playwright combined with those of his audience in presumably any setting, theatrical or otherwise—the performative aspects of language (here implicitly formulated by Webster as a constant whether acted or read) are the means of connection between playwright and spectator. The success of Webster’s tragedy depends on both parties: Webster provides the language; the audience must temporarily believe in the transformative powers of this language and yield to its persuasiveness. One assumes that the original theatrical audiences did not submit to the

² Webster appears to have been involved in preparing both The White Devil and The Duchess of Malfi for print. See J. R. Brown’s "The Printing of John Webster’s Plays," —3 parts: Studies in Bibliography 6 (1954): 117-40; 8 (1956): 113-28; 15 (1962): 57-69. Brown believes that Webster was also actively involved in making press-corrections to both plays. The prefatory materials—the note to The White Devil and the dedication of The Duchess of Malfi—are highly personal in tone and make strong assertions of ownership, which would support such an argument.
persuasiveness of Webster's language (or did not find him persuasive), and thus did not provide the imaginative commitment that he expected.

It is fitting that Webster highlights the discrepancy between his play as written and his play as received, for *The White Devil* is a play very much concerned with the tension between words and deeds. As mentioned earlier, this tension also bubbles beneath the surface of much philosophical writing on the occult. Of course, Webster need not have been familiar with the philosophical debates going on around him to exploit such a readily dramatic theme, and I do not intend to argue that he was. It is quite possible (and more likely) that Webster's treatment of this tension between words and deeds, rhetoric and action, is more a coincidental cross-fertilization of ideas than a conscious harvesting of potentially useful material. When Webster's exploration of this tension within his play manifests itself as physical and rhetorical violence, the reasons for this are most likely artistically, rather than philosophically motivated. Brian Richardson remarks of Jacobean playwrights in general:

> Indeed, the baroque cruelty often predicated of them may ultimately have less to do with changes in politics and ideology than with a slight aesthetic shift of intent from the heroic to the spectacular, from psychological consistency to theatrical efficacy. (161)

While this quotation stresses that what makes for good theatre does not always go hand-in-hand with contemporary politics or ideology, it is still important to remember that the two—theatre and philosophical context—are not mutually exclusive either. Ideas and debates (especially contentious ones) will always permeate between forums and artistic genres, ignoring political and religious sympathies or social standing; Webster's evident fascination with the tension between words and deeds is no exception. Occult philosophers debated it, as did numerous Renaissance writers when discussing the use and abuse of rhetoric, and the theatre itself, to a certain degree, is founded on the interplay between language and action—
any and every play, it seems to me, inherently involves the relation between what characters say and do on stage and the audience’s interpretation of what they see characters saying and doing. Thus the theatre is eminently suitable for an exploration of such a debate, for at its core, drama is part words, part action; the dramatic possibilities are rich indeed if characters are questioning how these two things work in unison and in opposition, ripping up the bricks from beneath their feet to examine the ground they walk on. While *The White Devil* is concerned with theatricality (the spectacle of Vittoria’s arraignment, the antics of Flamineo as he feigns a “mad humour” (3.2.305), and the costumes of the disguised Francisco and Lodovico quickly come to mind), it is probably more accurate to claim that the play is concerned with the very essence of theatricality: the nuts and bolts of the machine, the saying and the doing. A bewildered Francisco, after participating in the trial of Vittoria, faces a barrage of veiled threats from Bracciano and asks himself, “How strange these words sound. What’s the interpretation?” (3.2.301). His question hangs over the entire play, and when it comes to Webster’s exploration of words and actions (which often manifests itself in occult-based images), I will do my best to answer it.

**Flea bites**

In an essay examining Webster’s imagery, Hereward T. Price is struck by the playwright’s synthesis of words and action:

> If we then ask what really distinguishes Webster from other Elizabethans, we find it in his consistent use of a double construction, an outer and an inner. He gives us figure in action and figure in language. These he fuses so intimately as to make the play one entire figure. [...] The verbal images dovetail into one another exactly as they closely parallel the figure in action, rising and falling with it, inseparable from it. (719)

Price’s claim that Webster is unique in this respect cries out for refutation, but his central argument, that “Webster especially uses imagery to convey the basic conflict of his drama,
the conflict between outward appearance and inner substance or reality” (720), is infinitely more sound and defensible. Webster’s focus on outward actions and inward motivations and desires (expressed in language through persuasive rhetoric or vivid images) is a constant throughout _The White Devil_. The outward and inward are inextricably linked: actions inform language and language informs actions. This begins with the first word of play: “Banished” (1.1.1) for numerous murders and other unnamed crimes, Lodovico’s language in this opening scene operates on various levels (judicial, philosophical, astrological) despite facing charges of the most base of crimes. As his language becomes more fantastic, the simple depravity of his character is brought into relief. He can (and does) split rhetorical hairs, but he cannot deny any of the murderous deeds he has committed with his own hands, nor does he attempt to do so. After his striking opening line begins the play, Lodovico quickly curses his fate: “Fortune’s a right whore. / If she give aught, she deals it in small parcels, / That she may take away all at one swoop” (4-6), identifies his enemies with vicious beasts: “Your wolf no longer seems to be a wolf / Than when she’s hungry” (8-9), then curses them as well: “The violent thunder is adored by those / Are pashed in pieces by it” (11-12). Lodovico’s sadistic imagery mirrors his nature. His interlocutors, Gasparo and Antonelli, sensing that Lodovico is losing perspective on things, attempt to rationalize with him. Antonelli feels that Lodovico is “justly doomed” (13), for he has “in three years / Ruined the noblest earldom” (14-15), while Gasparo reminds Lodovico that he has “acted certain murders here in Rome / Bloody and full of horror” (31-2). The reality and accuracy of Gasparo’s statement seem to deflate Lodovico’s bombast; he admits to the charges, softening his rhetorical thunder: “Las they were flea-bitings: / Why took they not my head then?” (32-3). Lodovico realizes that rhetorical flourishes will not undo what he has done; flea-bitings or not, blood has been spilled, and he is being banished for justifiable reasons. While his indignation remains—“I’ll make Italian cut-works in their guts / If ever I return” (51-2)—he
also realizes that he must be "patient" (52). Just as cursing the gods, denigrating his enemies, or rationalizing his murders will not wash his hands clean, neither will merely vowing revenge; he must "grow familiar / With the knave hangman" (54-5), and be ready at enact retribution when the time is right. This opening scene speaks to the tension at the heart of the entire play: despite attempts to the contrary, Lodovico's rhetoric cannot erase his violent actions, nor can violent rhetoric replace decisive action at a later date. Robert Ornstein writes of this first scene that

[Lodovico] rips apart [Antonelli and Gasparo's] cant with the logic of an experienced murderer who knows that dukes need not fear 'gentle penance.' The other heroic figures in The White Devil are cut to Lodovico's measure. They listen impatiently to the voice of morality as one listens to the foolish babbling of a child; and when they answer, they silence it. (137)

Although banished, ultimately Lodovico is not moved by "painted comforts" (1.1.50) like morality, virtue, or justice; he puts his faith in things he deems less ephemeral: violent rhetoric and violent action. Murder is his talent, not philosophy, and he trusts that his words and actions will speak louder than anything else.

The feast of images that occur in this opening scene set the table for the rest of the play. In addition to Locovico's ominous imagery, Gasparo refers to Lodovico as a poison, "unnatural and horrid" (17), that has been swallowed by his followers, and later states that noblemen perceive Lodovico as an ominous "idle meteor" (25). Antonelli contributes to this initial characterization of Lodovico, claiming that many believe him to have been "begotten in an earthquake" (27). These notions of poison and taint, of astrological events and omens, and of the fierce, natural power of the earth are used by Webster throughout The White Devil. If, in the first scene's references to poison, astrology, and the earth's inherent power Webster seems to show the inklings of belief or interest in the occult, this is quickly undercut.

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3 Charles Forker notes that Lodovico is "Associated from the beginning with images of disruption (thunder, earthquakes, meteors, vomiting, butchery)," which makes it "richly ironic that this embodiment of chaos—emotional, moral, and civic—should specialize in the aesthetics of revenge" (266).
in the play’s second scene. With the introduction of the cuckold Camillo, it soon becomes clear that Webster is more interested in using the occult as a source for the figurative impulses that drive the play than he is in earnestly exploring the occult itself. What is interesting about Camillo is that Webster adds seemingly superfluous detail to his character. For whatever reason, Camillo is associated with intellectual pursuit: Flamineo makes reference to his knowledge of Aristotle (1.2.65), chastises him as a “mathematically jealous coxcomb” (88-9), and flatters him with the title of “excellent scholar” (127). One of his scholarly pursuits is rather unique: Camillo admits “Indeed I am studying alchemy” (144) after Flamineo (falsely) promises Vittoria a gift from her husband of “a ring with a philosopher’s stone in it” (143). Camillo, completely oblivious, is ruthlessly ridiculed by Flamineo for a number of things in addition to his alchemical pursuits: his appearance, his stupidity, and his (lack of a) sexual relationship with his wife. Camillo is the quintessential cuckold, and after Flamineo gets through with him, clearly he is meant to be a laughable figure on stage. Thus while alchemy is referenced by Webster, it is used only as a means to other ends: the scene is more about Flamineo’s rhetorical abilities and Camillo’s foolishness than anything else. Camillo’s death is crucial to the play, but Camillo himself is not; he is never anything more than pathetic, and while cruel, Flamineo’s characterization of Camillo—with no evidence to the contrary—must be assumed to be accurate. In a play that later features a vivid dumb-show conjured forth by a powerful magician, it appears that the alchemical branch of occultism, is, to borrow a term from Lodovico, a mere flea bite—nothing to be taken seriously.

Webster is equally cynical and satirical in his treatment of Dr. Julio, the “quack-salving knave” (2.1.289) and poisoner enlisted by Bracciano and Flamineo to kill Isabella. Able to “shoot pills into a man’s guts” or “poison a kiss” (2.1.295-96), Dr. Julio is evidently
skilled in his trade, and, as promised, he kills Isabella with precision and efficiency. His murderous dexterity is described to Bracciano:

'Twas her [Isabella’s] custom nightly,  
Before she went to bed, to go and visit  
Your picture and to feed her eyes and lips  
On the dead shadow. Doctor Julio  
Observing this, infects it with an oil  
And other poisoned stuff, which presently  
Did suffocate her spirits. (2.2.25-31)

Were this all we knew of Dr. Julio, he would seem a formidable character indeed; after all, it is not his murder of Isabella that draws the attention of the authorities, but Flamineo’s murder of Camillo; stage-directions describing the dumb-show of 2.2 indicate that Dr. Julio departs “laughing” (2.2.23.7) after laying his trap for Isabella, and there is no mention of him again in the play—presumably he is never apprehended, while Flamineo is captured immediately after Camillo’s body is discovered. We know more of Dr. Julio than just this, however. His stature is immediately deflated when he is first introduced to Bracciano:

FLAMINEO. A poor quack-salving knave, my lord, one that should have been lashed for’s lechery, but that he confessed a judgement, had an execution laid upon him, and so put the whip to a non plus.

JULIO. And was cozened, my lord, by an arranter knave than myself, and made pay all the colourable execution. (2.1.289-94)

Dr. Julio, to escape a whipping for charges of lechery, admits to a fictitious (and lesser) charge of debt, only to end up having to pay the non-existent debt after he is out-knaved by another individual who claims to be his creditor; Dr. Julio is cunning, but apparently not that cunning. The depth of Dr. Julio’s bathos is revealed as Flamineo finishes the introduction: “his masterpiece, because Ireland breeds no poison, [was] to have prepared a deadly vapour in a Spaniard’s fart that should have poisoned all of Dublin” (2.1.297-99). Despite the ease with which he eventually dispenses of Isabella, clearly an audience is not intended to take Dr. Julio entirely seriously; Webster asks us to laugh at the art of poisoning and to respect it, for as ridiculous as poisoning a fart sounds, Isabella’s swift death is testament to the fact that the
skill of Dr. Julio and the potency of his drugs are no laughing matter. Webster incorporates these elements of the occult not to elicit contemplation on the elements themselves, but to add texture and dimension to his own designs. Thus in the world of *The White Devil*, alchemy can be mentioned in passing as an avenue of study for foolish cuckolds, and poison can be utterly ridiculous and absolutely deadly by turns, for it is not the alchemy or the poison that matter to Webster but how he can manipulate them to drastically different purposes, from the ridiculous—adding to Camillo's laughable ignorance, inserting a cheap fart joke—to the sublime—killing off Isabella in a manner tragically and ironically dependent on her unwavering fidelity to Bracciano.

“Seeming to conjure”

In the figures of Camillo and Dr. Julio—both of whom are tangentially related to the occult as budding alchemist and assassin/arcane poisoner respectively—Webster approaches the occult equivocally, casually, and without discernable opinions or agendas on such topics. Despite this apparent apathy on Webster's part, *The White Devil* nevertheless takes place in a world in which magic, conjuration, and ghosts are all very real. Nowhere is this more explicit than in 2.2, when "one in the habit of a Conjurer" magically produces the two dumb shows in which Bracciano witnesses the murders of Isabella and Camillo. The Conjurer's magical prowess—his "strong-commanding art" (2.2.23)—is impressive: he is able to provide the dumb shows for Bracciano using nothing more than a "charmed" (2.2.21) night cap, and suddenly summon music "from this charmed ground" (2.2.36). Webster's use of the Conjurer is largely a matter of utility (like Dr. Julio, he is never again seen in the play), for in the conjured dumb shows, a telescoping of the play's action occurs. 

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4 Cave writes of Frank Dunlop's 1969 production of the play for the National Theatre: "in the murders of Isabella and Camillo it was the two dumbshows that were held centre stage and Brachiano was treated as merely
present the deaths of Isabella and Camillo in quick succession and without lengthy verbal exchanges, continuing his rapid advancement towards the arraignment of Vittoria and its tragic consequences—those are the scenes he seems most interested in writing and exploring in detail; he clearly has no great interest in Isabella or Camillo—the two are corpses almost as soon as their murders are planned, their bodies whisked away without lament.

Pragmatics of his plot aside, Webster curiously gives the Conjurer a rather lengthy speech for his otherwise minor role. Cave explains the significance of such an anomaly: “Generally, the energy of Webster’s verse is fitful, nervy, staccato, subservient always to the complex dramatic design of the play as a whole. The occasions when it expands into a lyrical outburst are so infrequent that they are dramatically distinctive” (19). The Conjurer’s speech is a diatribe against the pretenders to his “art” (2.2.2):

You have won me by your bounty to a deed
I do not often practise; some there are,
Which by sophistic tricks aspire that name
Which I would gladly lose, of nigromancer;
As some that use to juggle upon cards,
Seeming to conjure, when indeed they cheat;
Others that raise up their confederate spirits
‘Bout windmills, and endanger their own necks
For making of a squib; and some there are
Will keep a curtal to show juggling tricks
And give out ‘tis a spirit; besides these
Such a whole ream of almanac-makers, figure-flingers,
Fellows indeed that only live by stealth,
Since they do merely lie about stol’n goods,
They’d make men think the devil were fast and loose,
With speaking fustian Latin. (2.2.5-20)

Although there is obviously an aura of the ominous about him, he is trying to distance himself from those who claim to practice the black art of conjuring nefarious spirits and devils. Clearly doubtful of such claims, the Conjurer belittles all those that give him a bad name through their grifting and "juggling tricks". His main gripe with the pretenders (similar
to Scot's arguments against the feasibility of witchcraft) is that their actions do not (and cannot) match their claims; cutting through their "fustian Latin," almanacs, and figures reveals nothing more than lies, cheats, and squibs. Their words and their word mean nothing. Conversely, the language used by the Conjurer to invoke the dumb shows is extremely concise and efficacious: he simply says "I'll show you by my strong-commanding art / The circumstance that breaks your Duchess' heart" and "Camillo's far more politic fate" (2.2.22-3, 35), and the subsequent dumb shows relate exactly that. Deeds match words to the perverse delight of Bracciano. In this sense, Bracciano is the perfect audience for a magical experience: willing to be captivated and wanting to believe in what he witnesses. The theatre that the Conjurer brings forth for their viewing pleasure is grotesque and reprehensible, yet it seems to point to Webster's own conception of the theatrical experience. As horrific and uncomfortable as the experience may be, the audience's imaginative participation is required for the enchantment to be fulfilled. Webster as playwright is a type of conjurer, and his audience is filled with Braccianos—people who on some level (admittedly or not) have come to the theatre to be entertained by violence and suffering. The experience is more than just visceral, aesthetic pleasure, however, as the Conjurer is able to discern "by [his] art" (2.2.32) things that are not necessarily explicitly communicated through the dumb shows—things that Bracciano admits to "taste not fully" (2.2.39), yet the Conjurer claims are "most apparent" (2.2.39). The Conjurer knows that Lodovico "did most passionately dote / Upon your Duchess" (2.2.33-4), and that Francisco's forces are now coming "with purpose to apprehend / Your mistress, fair Vittoria" (2.2.49-50). Bracciano is not quite the model theatrical audience, for he is only concerned with the aesthetics of the Conjurer's theatre and as a result he misses some of its subtleties that demand more serious consideration; similarly, implicit in Webster's unspoken imaginative bargain with his audiences is the presumption that—in addition to taking pleasure from what is on stage—they will contemplate what they
are experiencing very carefully and consider its larger thematic and introspective implications. Webster is the conjurer behind the Conjurer, and ultimately, Webster’s magic is more important than his creation’s:

no matter the scope of magic [in drama]—it is always contained by art. The dramatist thereby beats back the magician’s challenge to be the prime explorer of the imagination—not artificial devils and evaporating ghosts, but living actors acting life; not monotonously rolling incantations, but poetry. (Ettin 290)

In the case of this scene, Webster weaves his artifice to ensure that despite arguments to the contrary, the Conjurer’s talents do inevitably lead to associations with the black arts (he cannot shake the name of “nigromancer”) in the minds of his customers and the audience. These associations serve to further taint the character of Bracciano, who rhetorically and economically swears his debt and allegiance to the magician:

Noble friend,
You bind me ever to you. This shall stand
As the firm seal annexèd to my hand.
It shall enforce payment. (2.2.52-5)

Presumably, the Conjurer’s recognizable “habit” would be black robes, and the sight of Bracciano binding himself to such a figure (perhaps even clasping hands, which “firm seal” suggests) would be striking on stage. Bracciano is giving his word at the end of this scene; as the drama plays out, the value of Bracciano’s words and his dependence on them are brought into relief.

“Spit thy poison”

Bracciano’s words are difficult to ignore, as he—moreso than even Lodovico—is a figure who revels in fustian displays of language. Although an imposing political and military figure (the consequences of a potential conflict between the Orsini and de Medici

— Flamineo has more to say than either Bracciano or Lodovico, but he is much less bombastic. See below, pgs. 39-44.
forces terrify both Isabella and Francisco himself) Bracciano relies most heavily on his rhetoric to wield his authority and to influence others. In short, he expects his words to stand as actions, and the manner in which he fashions his rhetoric reflects this belief: he frequently assigns affective qualities to his language and that of his interlocutors. When he threatens or is threatened, he conflates the very words being used with the threat itself. Nowhere is this more evident than in his initial encounters with Francisco and Isabella. He interprets Francisco’s accusation that Vittoria is his “strumpet” (2.1.57) as nothing less than a declaration of war:

Uncivil sir, there’s hemlock in thy breath  
And that black slander, were she a whore of mine  
All thy loud cannons, and thy borrowed Switzers,  
Thy galleys, nor thy sworn confederates,  
Durst not supplant her. (2.1.58-62)

It is true that Bracciano is speaking metaphorically here, but the metaphors that concern him have a self-reflexive focus on their very fabric: words. In Bracciano’s mind, Francisco’s words are indistinguishable from the things they suggest: Francisco’s charges are simultaneous interpreted as carrying the hint of military retribution for his sister’s sullied honor and as that attempt at retribution. Bracciano is as much offended by Francisco’s choice of words as he is by the allegation of infidelity; to combat this, Bracciano deflects Francisco’s language with figurative taunts and threats. Encouraged by Bracciano to “Spit thy poison” (2.1.68), Francisco is quickly baited into a verbal duel that he cannot win. Bracciano ensures that he always supplies a verbal counterstroke to Francisco’s thrusts, and the specific matter of his relationship with Vittoria is soon lost in their attempts to out-metaphor each other as they wage rhetorical war:

FRANCISCO. I shall not need, lust carries her sharp whip

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6 Equating words with poison is a metaphor that comes readily to Bracciano, thus increasing the irony that it is from his false lips (in the painting that Isabella kisses before bed each night) that poison is literally placed in the next scene. The stage directions are very clear that Dr. Julio “wash[es] the lips of the picture” (2.2.23.5) with poisonous oil.
At her own girdle; look to’t, for our anger
Is making thunder-bolts.
BRACCIANO. Thunder? in faith,
They are but crackers.
FRANCISCO. We’ll end this with the cannon.
BRACCIANO. Thou’lt get nought by it but iron in thy wounds,
And gunpowder in thy nostrils.
FRANCISCO. Better that
Than change perfumes for plasters.
BRACCIANO. Pity on thee;
‘Twere good you’d show your slaves or men condemned
Your new-ploughed forehead. Defiance! and I’ll meet thee,
Even in the thicket of thy ablest men. (2.1.69-78)

Realizing that the argument is resolving nothing and that the rhetorical violence threatens to elevate into actual violence, Monticelso warns the two dukes to end the histrionics: “My lords, you shall not word it any further / Without a milder limit” (2.1.79-80). This advice, combined with the appearances of young prince Giovanni and Isabella, results in the two men going their separate ways, but even then, Bracciano continues to speak of language in affective terms, claiming that Francisco has “charmed” (2.1.46) him into (feigning) a more peaceful mood.

Bracciano’s inevitable meeting with his wife involves similar behaviour. When the cloyingly loyal Isabella asks for “one kiss” (2.1.127) to welcome her arrival and soothe Bracciano’s anger, he makes it clear that he prefers words to action: “I do not use to kiss; / If that will dispossess your jealousy, / I’ll swear it to you” (2.1.157-9). Isabella continues to profess her genuine devotion to him; as he does with Francisco, Bracciano deflects such direct language with the metaphorical: “O your breath! / Out upon sweet meats and continued physic! / The plague is in them” (2.1.163-5). Again, Bracciano is willing to communicate, but only on his terms; he prefers the comfortable and relatively harmless realm of the figurative, and undermines any attempt to challenge him directly.⁷ He uses words as if they

⁷ Even the rhetorically-motivated Flamineo is aware of his master’s predilection for favouring language over action, at one point imploring, “My lord, supply your promises with deeds; / You know that painted meat no hunger feeds” (4.2.197-8). Bracciano’s association with language persists to his last breath: the manner in
can effect substantial change—as if they can conjure things into being—when in reality, the mere appearance of such change is the source of his influence. His words do not carry poison or gunpowder but figuratively suggesting that they could is enough to dissuade most verbal challengers. As seen in his interactions with Francisco and Isabella, such a conception of language causes Bracciano intense anxiety: if his threats of war and poison carry with them the potential to become a reality, then so do Francisco’s accusations of his infidelity and Isabella’s insistence of her “Devotion” (2.1.150). These statements also become true the moment they are uttered, and as Bracciano’s responses attest, they are truths he cannot bear to hear.

Bracciano’s anxiety over the transformative powers of language is due, at least in part, to his political position. Like James, Bracciano clearly depends on rhetoric for expressing his authority, yet language’s very suggestiveness—its ability to imply transformation and substitution—is paradoxically a great threat to that authority. Thus in the *Basilikon Doron* James uses the metaphor of the king-as-player to advance his arguments regarding the nature of kingship and the challenges he faces, while implicit in this metaphor is his unease with having to rely on such figuration; kings are like actors, and hence their outward actions and appearances are always scrutinized in relation to their inward intentions. The underlying current to James’s assertion (and the thought that seems to nag at him) is that giving voice to something makes it so (as James believes it does in the realm of magic), and hence kings might actually be actors—perceiving a king’s artifice then becomes a means of removing his power. For this reason James hesitates to privilege his own language in the same way that he privileges that of witches; Bracciano, however, thrives on incorporating

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which he is described on his deathbed—full of “brainsick language” (5.3.71)—conflates his state of being with the words he uses; he rambles on about the political duties that we do not see him involved in during the play: “He talks of battles and monopolies, / Levyng of taxes” (5.3.69-70); and his feverous description of his final vision includes a curious assertion of the rhetorical capabilities of the devil: “I’ll dispute with him. / He’s a rare linguist” (5.3.102-3).
language in a manner that approximates the magical by constantly suggesting that words can be substituted for things. James’s anxiety is a product of trying to keep occult and political discourses separate, while Bracciano’s anxiety is a result of conflating discourses—he believes in the performativity of language too readily and in too many contexts: the theatrical with Conjurer, the political with Francisco, the private with Isabella.

“how strong / Imagination works!”

Francisco, the other powerful political leader in the play, is another key figure in Webster’s exploration of the tension between words and actions. Fittingly, Francisco—like Bracciano—is involved in a scene that has overtones of the occult. In 4.1, Francisco, newly-informed of his sister Isabella’s murder, is encouraged by Monticelso to seek revenge; Francisco, however, doubts his own willingness to follow such a course: “Shall I defy him [Bracciano], and impose a war / Most burdensome on my poor subjects’ necks, / Which at my will I have not power to end?” (4.1.5-7). Monticelso hints that revenge need not be taken on such a grand scale—“undermining more prevails / Than doth the cannon” (4.1.13-14)—and proceeds to bring forth a book in which he has “quoted, by intelligence, / The names of all notorious offenders / Lurking about the city” (4.1.30-2). The cardinal immediately feels it necessary to address the rumours that his infamous book is somehow magical:

And some there are which call it my black book.
Well may the title hold, for though it teach not
The art of conjuring, yet in it lurk
The names of many devils. (4.1.33-6)

It’s a brilliant metaphor to deflate what is already an awkward conversation between the two conspirators; Monticelso is playing with names, rendering them equivocal: the book is black, but it isn’t black; the book doesn’t conjure devils, it conjures devils. He is stressing to his Duke that Francisco is in a position where words and titles matter little—it is a time for
action and results, for “th’bloody audit” (4.1.19) to be settled. Much like the Conjurer’s scene, Webster is implementing notions of the occult for pragmatic, thematic purposes rather than contemplative ones. The talk of black arts, black books, and devils is sufficient to darken the figure of Monticelso, and more importantly, to elicit his witty rhetorical side-step around the hanging question of why exactly he possesses such a “general catalogue of knaves” (4.1.60). The manner in which the two men use Monticelso’s book actually subvert his insinuations; names do matter, for once your name is scrawled in the book, you are forever a knave and this becomes your only identity: “the knaves are the knaves still” (4.1.84). Words are thus more definitive than Monticelso would have Francisco believe. Beyond the list of names and their crimes, there is nothing more that is known, or is necessary to know, about these men: “A man might study all the prisons o’er, / Yet never attain this knowledge” (4.1.61-2). In terms of Monticelso’s conception of his book, words and titles matter little, but they do in fact still matter, and Francisco eventually finds the page with the unequivocal title that he is looking for: “Murderers. / Fold down the leaf, I pray” (4.1.62-3).

Francisco is left alone to study the contents of the black book, and with the reference to conjuration still hanging in the air, his thoughts turn to Isabella. Up until this point in the scene Webster has only hinted at the supernatural, focussing instead on the earthly matters of rogues, revenge, and murder; curiously, as the memory of Isabella washes over him, Francisco seems to conjure forth her spirit:

Let me remember my dead sister’s face.
Call for her picture? No, I’ll close mine eyes,
And in a melancholic thought I’ll frame
Her figure ‘fore me.

8 Forker notes that most of the categories mentioned in Monticelso’s “general catalogue”—“intelligencers,” “pirates,” “rogues,” “politick bankrupts,” “murderers”—apply literally to Lodovico. (266).
9 Where Monticelso emphasizes action over deliberation and procrastination, Francisco ultimately expresses a middle ground between thought and action at the end of the scene: “He that deals all by strength, his wit is shallow: / When a man’s head goes through, each limb will follow” (4.1.128-9).
Enter Isabella’s Ghost

Now I ha’ t. How strong
Imagination works! How she can frame
Things which are not! Methinks she stands afore me,
And by the quick idea of my mind,
Were my skill pregnant, I could draw her picture. (4.1.96-103)

It is a difficult moment for an audience to comprehend: has Francisco rather unwittingly summoned the spirit of his dead sister? Or are we meant to be seeing—as Francisco clearly believes—merely a figment of his “strong” imagination and “melancholy” (4.1.106)? The stage direction makes it clear that the figure appearing to Francisco is not simply Isabella, but something that should be easily interpreted by the audience as her ghost. Francisco’s calm in the face of the apparition is almost as unsettling as the thing itself, and perhaps the audience is to take their cue from him; he never doubts for an instant that the figure is anything more than an image in his mind. The ghost says and does nothing; it cannot hurt him, but it cannot help him either—Francisco quickly chides himself for beginning to interrogate it: “How idle am I / To question mine own idleness. Did ever / Man dream awake till now?” (4.1.107-9).

From the moment Isabella’s ghost appears, Francisco remains in complete control of himself and the situation at hand; the apparition vanishes precisely when he decides he can look at it no more:

Remove this object,

Out of my brain with’t. What have I to do
With tombs, or death-beds, funerals, or tears,
That have to meditate upon revenge? (4.1.109-12)

Whether Isabella’s ghost is “real” or not is, in the end, a moot point: if there is any conjuring being done, it is ultimately done by Webster, not Francisco. This scene nicely illustrates the visibility and function of Webster’s artifice within his play. The sudden appearance of the

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10 With this, a familiar plot device of revenge plays is turned on its head: Francisco, denying Isabella’s ghost supernatural status, decides that he does not need a figure from beyond the grave to judge him, nor to spur him to action. It is worth noting, as Lee Bliss does in *The World’s Perspective: John Webster and the Jacobean Drama*, that Francisco’s rather quick dismissal of the apparition might be wise, “for as ‘real’ ghost the Isabella who perjured herself to preserve Bracciano and his subjects’ weal would make an unlikely proponent of revenge” (119).
ghost serves to remind the audience of Webster’s presence as the playwright controlling all of the action—Francisco’s initial puzzlement at being abruptly faced with the fantastic mirrors their own. If Francisco does in some way stand for the audience, then he stands as testament to the authority that Webster assigns to them. An image appears in Francisco’s sight and mind, and while he does not necessarily believe it to be real, he momentarily embraces the experience and recognizes the importance of “the quick idea of [his] mind” in making the experience powerful. Francisco is reminiscent here of Webster’s description of the ideal audience member in his character of “An excellent Actor”: momentarily flexing his imaginative muscles (an exercise the audience of the play must undertake with him), Francisco allows himself to believe in ghosts, but not at the cost of matters requiring “deepe thought”. When his imaginative indulgence has run its course, Francisco returns to actively seeking retribution, drafting a phoney love letter to Vittoria, and choosing as “The engine for my business, bold Count Lodovic” (4.1.130). Similarly, the audience of The White Devil are asked to momentarily indulge in Webster’s affect, but not get lost in it—they are free to recoil from Isabella’s ghost, or be moved by her silence, or feel something else entirely; ultimately though, like Francisco, they are expected to move past it.

“To raise the devil”

A second, much more demonstrative ghost—that of the poisoned and strangled Bracciano—appears later in the play. The paranoid ravings that Bracciano’s ominous spectre elicit from Flamineo stand in sharp contrast to Francisco’s calm, measured response to Isabella’s benign and inert ghost. Quite unlike Francisco’s spontaneous, imaginative summoning of his sister, Flamineo hints on more than one occasion at his desire to be able to physically conjure and control the devil. The first instance is brought about by a discussion of his lover, Zanche, whose dark skin elicits frequent allusions to witches, devils, and
gypsies. Flamineo’s love for Vittoria’s servant is admittedly perverse and stressful: “I do love that Moor, that witch, very constrainedly; she knows some of my villainy. I do love her, just as a man holds a wolf by the ears. But for fear of turning upon me, and pulling out my throat, I would let her go to the devil” (5.1.146-50). Frustrated that Zanche will not leave him alone, Flamineo declares, “’Tis not so great a cunning as men think / To raise the devil, for here’s one up already; / The greatest cunning were to lay him down” (5.1.86-8).

“Cunning” here means magical expertise, something Flamineo wishes he had more of. The second example of Flamineo’s desire for skill in conjuring occurs soon after Bracciano’s death; Flamineo would risk much to converse once more with his Duke and conspirator:

Ud’s death, I would fain speak with this Duke yet.

I cannot conjure, but if prayers or oaths
Will get to th’speech of him, though forty devils
Wait on him in his livery of flames,
I’ll speak to him, and shake him by the hand,
Though I be blasted. (5.3.205, 207-11)

Considering that conjuring involves some type of verbal invocation, contacting the devil is a fitting desire for Flamineo to have, as he spends much of the play exhibiting his rhetorical talents. Flamineo is a linguistic parasite, at his best (and at his happiest) when whispering in the ears of others to manipulate them to his own ends. Indeed, Flamineo admits quite freely to his mother that he owes his university degree—“Conspiring with a beard [i.e. older student or professor] / Made me a graduate (1.2.315-16)—and his advancement up the ranks of Bracciano’s court—“then to this Duke’s service; / I visited the court, whence I returned, / More courteous, more lecherous by far” (1.2.315-17)—to his Machiavellian abilities. Born with “want of means” (1.2.313), but a fierce desire for wealth and power, Flamineo is the social hurdler that so many detractors of rhetoric feared, gaining influence not with swords or
armies, but with his tongue. Interactions with easily gullible fools like Camillo in 1.2 show Flamineo at the height of his powers, while dealing with those less likely to be rhetorically bullied—Francisco, Vittoria, Zanche—prove frustrating to him. His desire for the affective powers of language that summoning devils would require is thus the logical extension of his dependence on rhetoric: instead of merely suggesting or insinuating, such magical language would literally make things happen.

Flamineo’s wish to see Bracciano once more is fulfilled, but despite his expressed desire to be in control of Bracciano’s supernatural reappearance, this is not the case. Flamineo does not conjure Bracciano at all, but is confronted by Bracciano’s ghost when he least expects it, and finds himself unprepared for, and shaken by, the ghost’s treatment of him. Once again, Webster’s presence within the play becomes explicit as a spectre wanders on stage without warning, and once again the audience is given a figure on stage that experiences the fantastic with them, with whom they can compare their responses—such moments only serve to remind the audience of the artifice inherent in the entire theatrical experience. These highly theatrical moments are crucial to Webster’s construction of his play: the artifice serves to move the play forward, but does not distract from the drama itself or eclipse the characters. “Understanding” Webster’s play (its themes, its characters) and enjoying it aesthetically are, to Webster, part of the same experience. For his characters and audience to momentarily believe in ghosts does not render his thematic explorations illegitimate by creating merely a “sensational” or “horrific” piece of theatre; instead, such belief is another permutation of the very themes he is interested in and another means for exploring them. Here, despite the appearance of the ghost, Flamineo is Webster’s focus—his

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11 Flamineo’s dependence on rhetorical skills to advance his schemes allows Webster to use him as both antagonist and as a satirical, sarcastic third-party commentator for the scenes in which he is on stage. His commentary leads Elizabeth Brennan to claim that “Flamineo simply dares us—as he once dared Lodovico—to defy him. Viewed objectively, he excites disgust and arouses condemnation for his villainy; viewed subjectively, he appears the most intelligent and amusing person in the play” (xxvii).
reaction to the ghost broadens our conception of his personality. The reason for Flamineo’s fright is not the ghost’s physical appearance, for this hardly seems to bother him at all: “Ha! I can stand thee. Nearer, nearer yet. / What a mockery hath death made of thee?” (5.4.120-1); instead, it is the ghost’s unwillingness to speak. Where Francisco is prepared for Isabella’s ghostly silence, Flamineo is horrified by Bracciano’s:

No? Not speak?
Pray, sir, resolve me, what religion’s best
For a man to die in? Or is it in your knowledge
To answer me how long I have to live?
That’s the most necessary question.
Not answer? Are you still like some great men
That only walk like shadows up and down,
And to no purpose? say. (5.4.124-31)

Bracciano’s ghost eventually “throws earth upon him and shows him the skull” (sd. 131) he carries, but Flamineo seems oblivious to this evil portent, and continues to beg the ghost for some type of verbal communication: “I pray, speak, sir” (5.4.134). Flamineo’s limited power and influence are entirely language-based; when Bracciano’s ghost greets him with silence and will not play the role of interlocutor, Flamineo is faced with the frightening proposition of having no one but himself to talk to. Facing the (dead) silence of Bracciano removes any possibility of altering his fate, as Bracciano has long been the vehicle for Flamineo’s success; able to speak, but without anyone to influence, Flamineo is terrified.

Flamineo’s encounter with the ghost drastically alters his character and propels him forward; with the door to social advancement now closed to him, Flamineo is forced to become a man of action and confront Vittoria to “claim / Reward for [his] long service” (5.6.7-8) to Bracciano. Vittoria and Zanche try to calm Flamineo with “gentle language”

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12 A ghost of Bracciano that looks fittingly terrifying, however, would only serve to highlight the recklessness of Flamineo’s casual dismissal of its appearance. In Michael Lindsay-Hogg’s 1976 production at the Old Vic, “James Villiers, an unctuously suave Brachiano, became a genuinely frightening ghost, his face and scalp half-eaten away by poison, through the stark contrast of a modern gentleman transformed into a timeless symbol of mortality” (Cave 45).
43

(5.6.23), but he will have none of it; rhetorical jousts are no longer his concern—he comes on
"worldly business" (5.6.2) and is frustrated by their attempts at verbal persuasion:

Leaves your prating,
For these are but grammatical laments,
Feminine arguments, and they move me
As some in pulpits move their auditory
More with their exclamation than sense
Of reason, or sound doctrine. (5.6.67-72)

Pistols in hand, Flamineo decides that the time for talking is over. It is thus richly ironic
that—although he fittingly claims to have "lost my voice / Most irrecoverably" (5.6.270-1)—
Flamineo’s most lyrical and genuine poetry is lost on the ears of the dead (Zanche), the dying
(Vittoria), and the damned (Lodovico, who is to be imprisoned and tortured for his crimes,
although neither he nor young prince Giovanni seem to care whether it is "The rack, the
gallows, [or] the torturing wheel" (5.6.295) which exacts the states "justice" (5.6.292)\textsuperscript{13}). As
he bleeds to death, Flamineo is struck by a rare moment of personal insight:

   I do not look
    Who went before, nor who shall follow me;
   No, at myself I will begin and end:
   While we look up to heaven we confound
    Knowledge with knowledge. O I am in a mist. (5.6.255-9)\textsuperscript{14}

The speech is profound in its simplicity: Flamineo realizes that all he can know is himself—
the metaphysical questions that he demanded from Bracciano’s ghost no longer matter now
that the end is actually near. If this is an epiphany, it is too overdue to redeem him in the
eyes of the audience; it seems more just an expression of contentment—for the first time in
the play, Flamineo is speaking without ulterior motives or equivocation. He displays his

\textsuperscript{13} Prince Giovanni’s demeanor and treatment of Lodovico are crucial in performance: if he seems to impose
calm, authority, and some sense of royal dignity to the chaotic stage he finds at the end of the play, then perhaps
the audience can take him at his word that he is indeed restoring "justice"; if not, then his sentence of Lodovico
could potentially be seen as the cycle of violence and retribution continuing unto the next generation. During
his brief discussion with Bracciano and Francesco in 2.1, Giovanni clearly values virtuous behaviour, but this
scene is more a testament to his wit than it is to his ability to rule.

\textsuperscript{14} The importance of lines 258-9 (While . . . / . . . knowledge) were emphasized in all four original quarto
editions (1612, 1631, 1665, 1672), which marked them with inverted commas.
ability to wax philosophic much too late however, and he cannot resist one last rhetorical quibble before he dies: his last request that "no harsh flattering bells resound my knell" (5.6.274) surely goes without saying.

"O woman's poor revenge"

The final character to be examined in detail is Vittoria, who has her own conception of language that is quite different from the other figures in the play. Unlike other (male) characters, Vittoria uses language as a weapon not by choice, but because it is the only option in her arsenal. Lodovico rants and raves but also possesses murderous talents that seemingly all of Italy live in dread of; Bracciano threatens, but these threats are contingent on his powerful political position to back them up; Francisco has the luxury to either debate or take action—disguising himself as the Moor Mulinassar—as he sees fit; Flamineo chooses to blow whispers into the ears of others as a way of fashioning his identity and his fortune. Vittoria, however, exists in a much different context, one in which language is her only means of staying afloat in the chaotic sea of The White Devil.

When it comes to her relationship with her lover and second husband, for instance, it is her bold manner of speech that attracts and frustrates Bracciano. Their mutual attraction is obviously sexual to a certain extent, but it is also based on their verbal sparring, leading Forker to claim that "The passionate relationship" between Bracciano and Vittoria "expires in a total breakdown of communication" (261). This is a fitting assessment, as their final moments together are first frustrated by Bracciano's poisoned mind, then by Lodovico and company, who deny Vittoria access to her husband as they prepare to strangle him. The lack of genuine interaction between the two as Bracciano slips away highlights the strange relationship they share throughout the play, in which they "fuel their passion for each other
through acts of physical and verbal aggression” (Forker 257). Their first extended
discussion in the play is Vittoria’s cryptic description of her dream, which is filled with
images of death, destruction, and violent “whirlwinds” (1.2.241); this nightmarish vision is—
perversely—what Bracciano interprets as Vittoria’s assertion of her commitment to their
love. The manner in which their passion for one another manifests itself in their dialogue
continues in this harsh vein, vacillating between metaphorical and emotional extremes. After
he is unknowingly duped by Francisco’s letter to Vittoria, Bracciano confronts her with his
typical bluster:

    Your beauty! O ten thousand curses on’t.
    How long have I beheld the devil in crystal?
    Thou hast led me, like an heathen sacrifice,
    With music, and with fatal yokes of flowers
    To my eternal ruin. Woman to man
    Is either a god or a wolf. (4.2.84-9)

Proving she is his linguistic equal, Vittoria responds to Bracciano in kind, first defending her
virtue, then hammering away with bizarre, graphic images as he attempts to apologize for his
mistake:

    What have I gained by thee but infamy?
    Thou hast stained the spotless honour of my house,
    And frighted thence noble society;
    Like those which, sick o’th’ palsy and retain
    Ill-scenting foxes ‘bout them, are still shunned
    By those of choicer nostrils.

    Fare you well, sir; let me hear no more of you.
    I had a limb corrupted to an ulcer,
    But I have cut it off, and now I’ll go
    Weeping to heaven on crutches. (4.2.105-10, 117-20)

Unlike Bracciano, Vittoria has no political power to back up her verbal posturing; she cannot
insinuate that deeds will replace her words, she can only continue to heap one image on top

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15 It seems easy to forget that in fact they never share the stage privately. Their interactions—even the most intimate—are always mediated in some way (usually by the parasitic Flamineo).
16 It is only after she threatens to “speak not one word more” (4.2.188) that their argument is eventually resolved with a kiss—the promise of future arguments is apparently more appealing to both Vittoria and Bracciano than not arguing at all.
of another, expanding the range and magnitude of her curses: the “infamy” is her own, then that of her house, then a factor in all society; she has an ulcer, her entire limb is amputated, she is dead and limping to heaven. Her metaphors of taint and decay recognize both the corruption in the world and her own complicity in that corruption. Bound to the realm of the figurative, her language divorced from action, it is appropriate that Vittoria does not have a supernatural experience in the play as Bracciano, Francisco, and Flamineo do—her perception of her own words is that they can never do anything more than suggest. This does not mean, however, that her language is not persuasive or influential, for it most certainly is. Through Vittoria, Webster suggests that language, while weak in comparison to definitive action and violence, is a necessity if life is to have any chance of thriving. In her unapologetic expression of her passion and indignation (which make her very much a forerunner of the Duchess in The Duchess of Malfi), Vittoria manages to function admirably in a brutal world; unlike the Duchess, however, Vittoria never realizes just how powerful her language potentially is.

Vittoria’s frustration over her dependence on language comes to the fore during her trial in 3.2.\(^{17}\) Having no recourse to armies, poisons, hired murderers, or elaborate disguise, she has nothing more than her argumentative abilities to defend herself against the charges of “Exorbitant sins” (3.2.34) and alter her fate. In this sense, 3.2 is a spectacular debate—an exercise in rhetoric. Vittoria is not only attempting to sway her accusers, but those audience

\(^{17}\) Although none of the original quartos have act and scene divisions, the beginning of this scene is given the heading “THE ARRAIGNMENT OF VITTORIA” in all four texts. It is possible that Webster had marked the section with this title in his original manuscript. Such a heading flags the scene as important, but for whom the title was intended—actors, compositors, readers—is unknown. Perhaps Webster merely highlighted it for his own benefit during composition. Judging from his extant works, he was clearly interested in the workings of the law, as lawyers, lawmakers, and trials appear with conspicuous frequency. Despite the fact that the name was extremely common in early-modern London, one biographical theory holds that the playwright was the “John Webster” who appears in the admission records of the Inns of Court in 1598; an education at this institution would obviously help to account for his interest in the law. This particular “John Webster” would fit especially nicely, as he was never called to bar—perhaps because he turned to writing plays? Although this theory is impossible to prove, the Inns of Court connection would also allow for Webster to meet and strike an early friendship with John Marston and John Ford—two fellow playwrights attending the Inns of Court at the same time who eventually collaborated with Webster throughout his career. See Forker, 32-39.
members—on stage and off—watching the proceedings. It is for this reason that she objects to the lawyer’s use of Latin as he begins his opening statement:

VITTORIA. Pray, my lord, make him speak his usual tongue; I’ll make no answer else.
FRANCISCO. Why you understand Latin.
VITTORIA. I do, sir, but amongst this auditory Which come to hear my cause, the half or more May be ignorant in’t.
MONTICELSO. Go on, sir.
VITTORIA. By your favour, I will not have my accusation clouded In a strange tongue. All this assembly Shall hear what you can charge me with. (3.2.12-19)

Her emphasis is on the clarity of communication—the weapons in this contest must be fair.

While the lawyer is intended as a satirical jab at legalism in general, his much more important function is to set the tone for this crucial scene; H. Bruce Franklin notes that “He focuses attention on the various characters’ rhetorical styles, puts the audience on its rhetorical guard, and gives it a rhetorical yardstick. The audience will be able to measure ensuing rhetoric partially by comparing it to the lawyer’s” (39). When the lawyer relents and switches to complex judicial jargon, Vittoria remains unsatisfied; she then shrewdly (and ironically) uses a conventional argument of opponents of rhetorical persuasion by claiming the lawyer’s language has affective qualities:

Surely, my lords, this lawyer here hath swallowed Some pothecary’s bills, or proclamations. And now the hard and undigestible words Come up like stones we use give hawks for physic. Why, this is Welsh to Latin. (3.2.35-9)

What comes out of the lawyer’s mouth is influenced by what he puts in it (the esoteric writings of an apothecary); his words, in turn, prove to be “undigestible,” both to him, and to those forced to consume them. She later uses the same argument against Monticelso’s persistent allegations of her being a “whore and murd’ress” (3.2.149): “they proceed from you, / As if a man should spit against the wind, / The filth returns in’s face” (3.2.148-50).
Monticelso exploits Vittoria’s dependence on language with taunts that connect such dependence to what he believes to be her whorish nature:

I shall be plainer with you, and paint out
Your follies in more natural red and white
Than that upon your cheek.

O how your trade instructs your language!

I am resolved
Were there a second paradise to lose
This devil would betray it. (3.2.51-3, 62, 68-70)

Monticelso’s linguistic bullying leaves much to be desired from a rhetorical or judicial point of view, but his arguments eventually win out. He produces a pilfered letter—physical evidence in the face of Vittoria’s ephemeral pleas—that Bracciano had sent to arrange for a rendezvous, and Vittoria is caught off balance. Finally cornered, Vittoria can only call on an ancient witness: “Casta est quam nemo rogavit” (3.2.200)—She is chaste whom no one has solicited; her recourse to the Latin that she so chastised the lawyer for using signals her rhetorical failure to the audience.

Vittoria’s frustration reaches its peak when her lamentation on being limited to the domain of language only serves to reinforce such restrictions: “For since you cannot take my life for deeds, / Take it for words. O woman’s poor revenge, / Which dwells but in the tongue” (3.2.282-4). She wishes that her words could become actions, but is simultaneously exasperated by the impossibility of such a proposition. In The White Devil, a play full of vindictive plots and retribution, a woman’s revenge is what she can fashion in her language, which turns out to be not much at all—words that no one will listen to, words that can never

\[\text{\footnotesize 18 Monticelso’s conflation of Vittoria’s rhetoric with lascivious female behaviour or characteristics was a fairly common argument against the use of persuasive language. Some (male) opponents of rhetoric (writing in books to be read by other men) stressed that its alluring, persuasive qualities were sensual in nature, and therefore effeminate. Rhetoric was often formulated as the deceptive, wanton woman who enticed men to their regret. The emphasis by proponents of the art on the masculinity of the rhetorician—describing rhetoric as a tool, weapon, or invading army (as Peacham does, see above pg. 15)—can be seen as the logical response to such accusations. See Rebhorn, Emperors 133-96.}\]
be deeds. Vittoria is arguably the strongest, most likeable character that the audience confronts—her self-defense in this arraignment scene is a display of conviction, virtue, and integrity that no other figure possesses, yet Webster’s sobering message seems to be that when poisons, swords, pistols, and torture carry the day, such strength—however admirable—matters little. As Franklin writes, “She is not persuasive enough to prove that she is not evil and not a devil. But she is sufficiently eloquent enough to demonstrate that she is not the worst of the devils [in the play]” (51). More importantly, Vittoria never completely convinces herself that her words matter and this is why her struggle and indignation cannot evoke pathos to the extent that the tribulations of Webster’s Duchess of Malfi later do. As Vittoria prepares to meet her death, she remains concerned with attempting to perform actions that she deems brave: “Yes, I shall welcome death, / As princes do some great ambassadors; / I’ll meet thy weapon half way” and “I will not in my death shed one base tear, / Or if look pale, for want of blood, not fear” (5.6.218-20, 224-5). Where the Duchess turns inward and expresses a confidence that her words can constitute a meaningful identity, Vittoria makes one last attempt at outward show. “I am too true a woman” (5.6.222) she claims in this final scene, but as her attempts at manly bravery suggest, this declaration holds no definitive, constitutive meaning for her—she remains convinced that words are not the best way to fashion an identity. Instead of a final assertion of self to provide inner peace and to serve as her immutable legacy, Vittoria finds that her “soul, like to a ship in a black storm, / Is driven I know not whither” (5.6.247-8).

Part of the allure of The White Devil is the mystery of who is meant to be the titular devil-in-disguise, the figure that can paradoxically represent virtuous qualities yet commit

19 The frustration is not limited to Vittoria; Isabella expresses a similar sentiment during her conversation with Bracciano: “O that I were a man, or that I had power / To execute my apprehended wishes, / I would whip some with scorpions” (2.1.242-4).
chaotic, malevolent deeds. "As in this world there are degrees of evil, / So in this world there are degrees of devils" (4.2.57-8), says Flamineo, and in the world of this play, he is right. There are certainly no unambiguously black devils in the play; even those who should be clearly repugnant are not: the poisoner Dr. Julio is bathetic, and the Conjurer speaks at length to legitimize his pursuits. Bracciano claims of the devil while raving on his deathbed, "He's a rare linguist" (5.3.103)—more than one of Webster's characters possesses the rhetorical dexterity and moral ambiguity to be considered a hypocritical white devil. Vittoria is the most likely candidate, but there are others, most notably Flamineo, Francisco, and perhaps even Bracciano.\(^{20}\) Ornstein writes of the play that

while virtue is not an illusion, it breeds disastrous illusions about the meaning of marriage or the bonds of family love. It is defenceless against the violence that threatens it because it depends on words for protection against the passions of men who have contempt for words and who have no illusions about themselves or others" (133, emphasis added).

This grim assessment is ostensibly accurate, but Ornstein's vision of the play is too bleak. While it is true that words and virtue cannot stand up to the violence and death—"the anarchy of human passion" (Ornstein 133)—permeating The White Devil, words themselves become something to live for. Language provides the tantalizing possibility of affecting change in a decadent world; words, while ephemeral, nevertheless always have the potential make things happen—be they brief, permanent, good, or evil. This is evidenced by the characters in the play that rely on language to help them negotiate through the brutality of their respective situations, and in Webster's very conception of his play's functionality—recalling Webster's prefatory note, he is confident that while his play did not succeed on

\(^{20}\) Vittoria is referred to as a "devil" throughout the play, including three times in her arraignment scene. Her position as the white devil of the play's title is perhaps solidified early on: after relating her dream of Isabella and Camillo (interpreted by Bracciano and Flamineo as an insinuation to murder them), Flamineo calls her "Excellent devil. / She hath taught him in a dream / To make away his duchess and her husband" (1.2.245-7). Vittoria's motives for describing the dream, as well as her awareness of Bracciano's and Flamineo's interpretation of it, are left ambiguous. This ambiguity only enhances the white lustre of her devilishness. That being said, "devil" is also used in reference to both Flamineo and Bracciano, while Francisco literally paints himself black, brings about numerous deaths through his machinations, and escapes punishment—a white devil hiding in plain sight, perhaps?
stage, it can still perform the work it was meant to do with the proper (reading) audience.

Even Lodovico, purveyor of carnage and destruction, cannot resist attempting to immortalize himself as the play ends:

I do glory yet,
That I can call this act mine own.

Here's my rest:
I limned this night-piece, and it was my best. (5.6.293-4, 296-7)

Lodovico’s claims of ownership force the audience to step back and once again acknowledge Webster’s presence: it is the playwright that has limned this “night-piece,” the playwright that has brought about this experience. The theatrical experience itself—the conjuration of images, the suspension of disbelief—has passed, but the audience is left with this more lasting reminder of Webster’s artifice and its influence on them. As it turns out, Webster’s best was yet to come in the form of The Duchess of Malfi, where he continued to advance his exploration of the linguistic tensions introduced in The White Devil.
Chapter Three: *The Duchess of Malfi*

The world of *The Duchess of Malfi* is as dark and horrific a “night-piece” as the world of *The White Devil*, but where Webster’s first play looks outward at the consequences of murder and revenge, *The Duchess of Malfi* turns that gaze inward, toward the ramifications of these crimes on the consciences of murderers and victims alike. As in *The White Devil*, language remains Webster’s central concern, although in this regard, he likewise shifts his attentions inward, from the tension between words and action to the ability of words to assign and constitute essential identities. Elements of the occult once again permeate Webster’s drama, in part because the sinister environment which tests and torments his characters is largely created through images rife with occult references (like werewolves, ghosts, and witches); the magical is pervasive in another, more fundamental sense, similar to that found in *The White Devil*: Webster once again explores the notion of affective language, words that make things a reality. In keeping with his shift in concentration from words versus deeds to externalities versus internalities, however, this means that what is frequently spoken of or assumed by the characters as being conjured into being are not observable actions, but otherwise indistinct notions like identities and essential natures.

The play’s early textual history serves as a useful analogy for its thematic content. The title-page to the first quarto printing of *The Duchess of Malfi* (1623) is curiously paradoxical: it proclaims the text of the tragedy to be “*As it was Presented priuately, at the Blackfriers; and publiquely at the Globe, By the Kings Maiesties Seruants*”. Connecting a printed play to its theatre history or to specific acting companies was (and is) a common marketing tool used by publishers—in this case, the first performances of the play were some nine or ten years in the past, so such an announcement might have been necessary to spur the memories of potential customers; what makes this title-page intriguing is that its first
proclamation is followed by a second, seemingly contradictory one: "The perfect and exact Copy, with diverse things Printed, that the length of the Play would not beare in the Presentment". The title-page would have it both ways: the text that follows is the play as it was presented on stage; the text that follows is the play that, because of certain elements that it contains, has technically never been performed. The title-page is confused as to what exactly constitutes *The Duchess of Malfi*: is it the play as performed? The play as written? Or is it an amalgamation of the two—something that exists in the realms of print and theatre simultaneously? Ultimately, the title-page seems to unintentionally suggest this last option, although it is hard to imagine the publisher being deliberately obscure or trying to promote rigorous contemplation on the essence of plays and play-texts; the point of the title-page, after all, was (merely) to sell the text. Pragmatics of bookselling aside, the title-page proves that the "identity" of the play was a rather slippery notion: *The Duchess of Malfi* was what Webster originally conceived and scrawled in manuscript form, what the King’s Men made of it, what the private audiences at the Blackfriars and the public audiences at the Globe made of it, and also what the reader made (or will make) of it—it was all of these things and somehow more, the sum of the play being greater than its constituent manifestations.¹

This fluidity of the play's identity mirrors themes in the play itself, where matters of human identity become Webster’s focus; just as the title-page suggests that the play is somehow more than what it appears to be on stage or in ink—that a spirit of the play exists, but is unlocatable and ephemeral—so too do the central characters in the drama struggle with the tension between external appearances and internal essences. Questions surrounding the

¹ The listing of "The persons of the play" in Q1 (1623) and Q2 (1631) is unique among sixteenth- and seventeenth-century play-texts in that it uses numerals to distinguish between two actors playing the parts of Ferdinand, Cardinal, and Antonio respectively (see Weis, 387n). This listing of two different casts suggests that there were at least two different productions of the play before 1623. These cast lists in Q1 and Q2 omit the roles of Castruccio, Old Lady, Roderigo, and Grisolan, while including Forobasco (a ghost character) as a speaking part; such anomalies serve to highlight the discrepancy between performance and printed versions of the play.
fashioning of identity are integral to the play: What is the basis for determining one’s character? Is one’s identity determined by an innate sense of self, or by what others deem one’s identity to be? How are reprehensible actions rectified with one’s inner conscience or soul? John Ford’s commendatory verse preceding the play expresses an awareness of Webster’s concern with the fluidities and fixities of identity; Ford declares that Webster has created

\[\text{a masterpiece:}\]
\[
\text{In which, whiles words and matter change, and men}
\]
\[
\text{Act one another, he, from whose clear pen}
\]
\[
\text{They all took life, to memory hath lent}
\]
\[
\text{A lasting fame, to raise his monument. (2-6)}
\]

Words, matter, and men are all mutable, but from this changeability springs something immutable and worthy of celebration: Webster’s great tragedy; likewise in the play itself, characters (the Duchess and Bosola in particular) wrestle with the capriciousness of words and human whim while seeking to locate and foster the inherent elements of humanity within themselves and others.

**Ferdinand: “A most perverse, and turbulent nature”**

On November 24, 1919, the London-based Phoenix Society—a group devoted to putting “classic” authors on the English stage—produced that city’s first twentieth-century revival of *The Duchess of Malfi*. It was literally a laughable production, one that killed subsequent productions of the play for the next sixteen years. Theatre critic William Archer had this to say of the performance:

With the death of the duchess, the interest of the play is over; for Antonio is admittedly a shadowy character as to whose fate we are very indifferent; and though we are willing to see Ferdinand, the Cardinal, and Bosola punished, we could quite well dispense with that gratification. Webster, however, is not the man to leave any of his dramatis personae alive if he can help it ... There is scarcely any room on the stage for all of the corpses; which is perhaps the
reason why, in the Phoenix revival, Ferdinand stands on his head to die, and waves his legs in the air. (qtd. in Moore 91)

Although a lifelong detractor of Webster’s drama, Archer seems to have accurately captured the general consensus regarding the production. The *London Times* reported that “just when the author . . . wants to make your flesh creep he is more likely to provoke you with laughter” (qtd. in Moore 152). Surely the responses to this production (and the production itself) say more about the separation of modern audiences from the historical context in which Webster wrote than they do about the playwright’s skill. As the bodies pile up in the bloody final scene, Webster is not attempting to elicit laughter; Ferdinand is definitely mad by the final act, but the decision to have him die in such a comic fashion is a disservice to both Webster’s play and his most monstrous creation. Ferdinand is the embodiment of perversity and horror; his movements through the play leave only chaos in their wake. The extremity of his actions will perhaps produce titters from the audience, but this is a sign of their (understandable) discomfort in the face of such evil; such a response is a nervous one, a defensive reaction to Webster’s proficiency in creating such a malevolent character and world, not a deliberate comment on his lack of such proficiency. From the moment he sets foot on stage, Ferdinand moves as a body with immense gravitational mass, drawing the eyes of the

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2 Moore reports that Archer “was repelled by Webster’s inability to write like Ibsen” (152).
3 All directors of Webster face the challenge of this nervous response. A review in the *New Statesman* of a 1935 production at the Embassy Theatre (the next production in London after the Phoenix Company’s debacle) nicely summarizes the difficulty: “Can modern players . . . hope to compass the full-blooded fury of Webster, or even Ford? This charnel house atmosphere to a modern audience is dangerously quaint, and when the number of bodies on the stage exceeds two, the titters begin, titters which not even Webster’s packed bitterness can silence. Blame the audience or blame the players, the result is the same, a slackening of dramatic tension which assuredly is there, a sensation of good humoured curiosity rather than the emotional exaltation which is so fine a poet’s due” (qtd. in Moore 154). It seems to me that a director who treats the material with the seriousness that it deserves must live with jittery laughter from the audience. Cave writes, “Those productions [of Webster] have succeeded best which have placed their main focus on emotional and moral realism rather than on realism of sensational effect in violence and spectacle. [. . .] productions remarkable for their economy, restraint and discipline have come closest to realising the dense texture of implication in the tragedies” (70). For an extended discussion of the challenges facing Websterian directors, see Lois Potter’s “Realism Versus Nightmare: Problems of Staging The Duchess of Malfi.”
audience and other characters alike, sucking the energy of those he comes in contact with.

He is meant to produce fear and loathing, but never laughter.

This dread that Ferdinand instils in others, as well as his own frustrations and motivations throughout the play, all stem from his conception of externalities and internalities. For him, externalities and internalities are irrevocably linked notions; when one changes, the other changes accordingly. This conceptualization manifests itself in a number of ways: in his paranoia regarding words and gossip; his fascination with faces; his obsession with the Duchess’s “name”; even the strange bestial regression of his body which coincides with the rotting of his mind—all of these things are a product of his view that appearances and essences perfectly mirror each other. His association with this mindset is made clear in the play’s opening scene. Asked to describe Ferdinand, Antonio responds,

The Duke there? A most perverse, and turbulent nature:
What appears in him mirth, is merely outside—

He speaks with others’ tongues, and hears men’s suits
With others’ ears; will seem to sleep o’th’ bench
Only to entrap offenders in their answers;
Dooms men to death by information,
Rewards by hearsay. (1.1.160-1, 164-8)

Antonio’s description stresses Ferdinand’s reliance on language: mere “information” or “hearsay” constitutes sufficient proof in his mind—words are to be trusted completely, and without question. Words do not suggest, they assert, they reveal. Ferdinand’s method of processing language effects both his production and collection of information: he “speaks with others’ tongues” and listens “With others’ ears”, evidently assuming that those in his court treat language the same way he does, and fearing the very associations—between words and speaker, words and subject—that he so readily makes. This paranoia is evidently justified, for the stock that he puts in appearances is ironically used against him in this initial description when Antonio makes it clear that he is well aware that Ferdinand’s mirthful
appearance “is merely outside”; Ferdinand’s efforts to mask his own schemes and intentions only serve to ensure that his true, fiendish character is common knowledge.  

Related to Ferdinand’s reliance on language to reveal all are his boasts of being skilled in what can best be described as physiognomy; claims are made early in the play by Ferdinand of his ability to know a man or woman just by studying his or her countenance. His interest in faces is first made apparent with a jest to Castruccio: “I would then have a mathematical instrument made for her [Castruccio’s wife’s] face, that she might not laugh out of compass” (1.1.131-2). This is a rather awkward image, but the basic insinuation is that the map of wrinkles on Castruccio’s wife’s face is proof of her immoderate laughter. Ferdinand later makes the comment to Bosola that “Maybe some oblique character in your face / Made him [the Cardinal] suspect you?” (1.1.225-6), the implication being that Bosola’s appearance marks him as an untrustworthy rogue (just the type of individual that Ferdinand is looking for). In his string of thinly-veiled threats to his sister, Ferdinand warns her to

be not cunning,
For they whose faces do belie their hearts
Are witches, ere they arrive at twenty years;
Ay, and give the devil suck. (1.1.299-302)

In this image, faces do no match essences (“hearts”), yet Ferdinand asserts that he will be able to perceive such incongruity: reading one’s face is akin to reading one’s heart, and while the Duchess may fool others, he perceives her to her very centre. Ferdinand, assuming that his sister desires another husband, is warning her not to be devious in her actions at court; simultaneously, his words warn against being physically deceptive by wearing make-up in an attempt to alter her face, look younger, and attract a new mate. The underlying implication in Ferdinand’s counsel is that any deception on her part would be futile, as he has the ability

Bosola, too, knows better than to trust Ferdinand. While his initial confrontation is with the Cardinal, he is aware of both brothers’ corrupt natures before Ferdinand enlists his services: “He [the Cardinal] and his brother are like plum-trees that grow crooked over standing pools; they are rich, and o’erladen with fruit, but none but crows, pies, and caterpillars feed on them” (1.1.47-9).
Angela Woollam writes, "Ferdinand claims that identity is essential and knowable and that he has the power to know and declare it" (17). This claim is the driving force behind his condemnation and subsequent treatment of his sister. Eventually, Ferdinand’s convictions regarding internalities and externalities seem to influence even his own physical state; as he descends into madness, his own language mirrors the corruption of his mind, his outward “frenzy” (5.1.59) and inward “melancholy humour” (5.2.9) meshing with eerie perfection. The Cardinal describes his lycanthropic brother as “alter’d much in face / And language” (5.2.95-6), and it is evident in the penultimate scene that “hear[ing] him in his violent fit[s]” (5.4.6) has become a commonplace occurrence to those at court.

Ferdinand’s references to “cunning” and witches giving the devil suck when attempting to bully the Duchess carry with them a suggestion of the occult. His association of deceptive appearances with witches and devils suggests a belief in such things on his part, but this is not the case—Ferdinand is using these images as threatening metaphors, nothing more. A conversation with Bosola in 3.1 reveals that Ferdinand puts little faith in things supernatural. Bosola makes the mistake of suggesting that perhaps the Duchess’s behaviour is due to “some sorcery” which “make[s] her dote on some desertless fellow / She shames to acknowledge” (3.1.63, 65-6). Ferdinand refuses to believe the fantastic explanation that “there’s power in potions, or in charms” (3.1.67) and proceeds to obliterate Bosola’s suggestion:

Away, these are mere gulleries, horrid things
Invented by some cheating mountebanks
To abuse us. Do you think that herbs or charms
Can force the will? Some trials have been made
In this foolish practice; but the ingredients
Were lenitive poisons, such as are of force
To make the patient mad; and straight the witch
Swears, by equivocation, they are in love.
The witchcraft lies in her rank blood. This night
I will force confession from her. (3.1.70-9)

Ferdinand’s belief in the force of one’s “will” prevents him from entertaining Bosola’s suggestion; in his mind, one’s actions utterly reveal one’s character. Alibis, excuses, or justifications (magical or otherwise) for actions will have no bearing on his interpretations of others. Ferdinand dismisses the possibility of magical charms and witches, but appropriates the images for his own rhetorical needs: “The witchcraft lies in her rank blood”. This line reduces Bosola’s extraordinary hypothesis to a corporeal level by suggesting that her sins are innate, conflated with her very substance. He claims to know the Duchess to her core: the blood beating in her veins. Having already condemned her based on rumour, Ferdinand’s trip to her bedchamber is less a fact-finding mission or an attempt to compel an admission of guilt than it is a move to confront the Duchess with his version of the truth (a version which gains authority the moment he gives it voice). That he intends to “force a confession from her” in person is a sign of his desperation, for the audience knows that he prefers to listen and speak with the ears and mouths of others, and has inexplicably waited for the Duchess to birth “three bastards” (3.1.59) after vowing to “not stir” until he discovered “who leaps my sister” (2.5.80). Ferdinand thus represents a flip-side to the occult philosophy that words and actions are indistinguishable: he rejects elements of the occult, while applying its underlying

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5 “lenitive” comes from the Latin “lenis” meaning “gentle,” “mild,” or “smooth”; the seemingly paradoxical “lenitive poisons” is often cited as evidence of Webster’s scant knowledge of Latin, but the expression makes sense: Ferdinand is simply referring to poisons that are mild or even pleasant to taste, yet which nevertheless lead to insanity. Webster’s ability to read and write Latin is, however, open to debate. Forker writes that “he never used a foreign work when he could find an English translation, and we cannot be positive that he ever read a continental book in the original. Though he loved to deck out his prefaces, title-pages, and dedications with a show of classical learning . . . most of his appropriations are either commonplace Latin tags, mottoes, and legal terms, or borrowings at second or third hand from the preliminary matter of contemporaries such as Dekker and Jonson” (32). For an extensive study of Webster’s borrowings, see R. W. Dent’s aptly-titled *John Webster’s Borrowings*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: U California P, 1960.

6 Ironically, Ferdinand’s metaphor works against him: if the Duchess and Ferdinand are in fact twins, as he claims at 4.2.259, any witchcraft in her blood is presumably in his as well.
philosophies of language to earthly matters like sexuality, reputation, and force of will. In
the end, his misguided horror that the Duchess's actions have tainted her good name is a type
of superstition that he so vehemently denies in this scene: his deeply rooted beliefs make his
worst fears a reality in the realm of his tortured mind.

It is this obsession with the Duchess's reputation that causes Ferdinand much of his
agony. His initial arguments against her remarriage include a claim that such action “will
poison your fame” (1.1.299); once it is apparent that the Duchess has ignored his wishes, his
paranoia regarding her name intensifies exponentially. This paranoia is closely related to
Ferdinand's perceptions of language: he lives in fear of rumours, fear that merely whispering
of things make them an actuality. Upon first learning that the Duchess has given birth to a
child, Ferdinand immediately jumps to the conclusion that “Rogues do not whisper 't now,
but seek to publish 't, / As servants do the bounty of their lords, / Aloud” (2.5.5-7). He then
immediately seizes upon a metaphor spoken by the Cardinal and in a brief fantasy of
substituting words for deeds, personifies himself as a tempest:

Would that I could be one,
That I might toss her palace 'bout her ears,
Root up her goodly forests, blast her meads,
And lay her general territory as waste
As she hath done her honours. (2.5.17-21)

The affective power of language will not only confirm the Duchess's fall from grace, it will
bring it about—persuasiveness is one of the characteristics he distrusts most in the Duchess's
potential suitors. Third on Ferdinand’s list of traits for the Duchess to be worried about (after
“youth” and “high promotion”) is “eloquence” (1.1.286), for “What cannot a neat knave with
a smooth tale / Make a woman believe?” (1.1.330-1). When confronting the Duchess in her
chamber, the taunts he directs at her and the hidden Antonio reflect his concern with male

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7 Comparisons between Ferdinand and tempests or storms are common. By my count, aside from this instance,
he is associated with storms seven other times in the play. The analogy is fitting: in many ways, Ferdinand acts
as a violent force of nature, leaving chaos and death in his wake.
eloquence and the inherent power of names. Learning Antonio’s name is a more satisfying form of vengeance to Ferdinand than laying “violent effects” (3.2.94) upon him:

use all means
I never may have knowledge of thy name.

Let dogs and monkeys
Only converse with him, and such dumb things
To whom nature denies use to sound his name.
Do not keep a paraquito, lest she learn it.
If thou do love him, cut out thine own tongue
Lest it bewray him. (3.2.96-7, 104-09)

To Ferdinand, knowing Antonio’s name means knowing him entirely—a violation that is somehow worse than doing him physical injury.

Ferdinand gives his most extensive assessment of the Duchess’s mistreatment of her name during their bedchamber confrontation.⁸ Surprising her, Ferdinand wastes no time in getting to the point:

FERDINAND. Virtue, where art thou hid? What hideous thing
Is it that doth eclipse thee?
DUCHESS. Pray, sir, hear me.
FERDINAND. Or is it true, thou art but a bare name,
And no essential thing? (3.2.72-5)

His claim here is that the Duchess has ruined her name, which is the equivalent of ruining her person; having stripped her name of any value, her very character is also rendered worthless,

⁸ Although I have not made it an area of focus in this essay, Ferdinand’s obsession with his sister’s virtue and sexuality carries incestuous overtones. While for the most part his incestuous desires are more subtle, here they are less so, as Ferdinand—most likely finding the Duchess in some state of undress as she prepares for bed—brandishes a phallic poniard which he “gives [to] her” with instructions to “Die then, quickly” (3.2.71). When he first learns of The Duchess’s pregnancy, his vivid imagination fills his head with perverse visions of his sister “in the shameful act of sin,”

Haply with some strong thighed bargeman,
Or one o’th’ wood-yard, that can quoit the sledge,
Or toss the bar, or else some lovely squire
That carries coals up to her privy lodgings. (2.5.41-5)

Needless to say, Ferdinand’s claim as he views the dead body of the Duchess that the “main cause” (4.2.278) of his actions was his “hope” that “Had she continued a widow, to have gained / An infinite mass of treasure by her death” (4.2.275-7) rings hollow. J. R. Mulryne makes the compelling point that Webster’s refusal to treat the incestuous theme explicitly (Ferdinand himself seems unaware of his desires) actually “helps to make the Duchess’s tragedy [more] unnerving” (qtd. in Forker 305).
“a bare name” and “no essential thing” become conflated descriptors of what he perceives to be her lecherous state. Woollam interprets the passage thus:

His response to the Duchess’s falling away from absolute truth indicates his view that the only alternative to referential language is semantic anarchy. Since the Duchess’s name no longer fits her self (since her conventional reputation no longer fits her being), it has become a meaningless signifier. [. . .] He also expresses his belief that since there has been a rift between the Duchess’s name and the human being that it should signify, the result is a loss, or absence, of an essential self. (18)

Ferdinand refuses to privilege the Duchess’s language in the same way he privileges his own, first by ordering her “Do not speak” (3.2.75), then by completely disregarding her attempts at communication; “It is the Duchess’s use of constitutive language, emanating from a creative will informed by open engagement with the world, that her persecutors deny; they deny her love as much as they deny the possibilities for language and the making of meaning by her enactments” (Woollam 17). Her rational objections to his accusations—“Why might I not marry? / I have not gone about, in this, to create / Any new world, or custom” (3.2.109-11); “My reputation / Is safe” (188-9); “I have youth, / And a little beauty” (140-1)—are completely devoid of meaning to Ferdinand’s ears. While he finds her words empty, Ferdinand fills his own with connotations of violence and suffering, as he responds only with a series of bizarre images: “a basilisk” (3.2.87), “a wolf” (88), “a hollow bullet / Filled with unquenchable wild-fire” (115-6), and “witches” (142). Ferdinand ends their ominous meeting with a lengthy anecdote on “Reputation, Love, and Death” (3.2.123), concluding, “You have shook hands with Reputation, / And made him invisible” (3.2.135-6). So tainted is the Duchess’s name and body that he cannot bear to directly associate himself with her any longer; thus he promises, “I will never see thee more” (3.2.142).
Ferdinand stays true to this promise—his remaining interactions with the Duchess are either through the intermediary Bosola, or under cover of darkness, hidden from her senses. Despite this lack of direct contact, his brutal scheme to fool the Duchess with wax figures in the shape of her dead family ensures that his sister is brought “to despair” (4.1.116) before her murder. The use of these fake bodies “framed in wax” (4.1.112) is a fitting implement of torture for one so obsessed with external appearances. Ferdinand takes immense delight in the Duchess mistaking the empty vessels for “true substantial bodies” (4.1.115), as if her being fooled is yet another confirmation of her own lack of an essential self. Her name is without semantic value, and now her inability to distinguish real flesh from wax only seems to verify Ferdinand’s belief that such externalities (names and bodies) mirror internal essences. His use of the wax figures is a theatrical presentation, and his interpretation of the Duchess’s reaction is telling: “she’s plagued in art” (4.1.111), he says, revealing the extent to which he thrives on the power of affect; just as words and names either disclose identities perfectly and completely or not at all, here the response to artifice can reveal one’s true nature—the outward and inward are inextricably linked. When Bosola suggests that the torments should end—“go no farther in your cruelty” (4.1.118)—Ferdinand refuses, focusing on the worthlessness of the Duchess’s body: “Damn her! That body of hers, / While that my blood ran pure in’t, was more worth / Than that which thou wouldst comfort, called a soul” (4.1.121-3). Ferdinand uses aesthetics of horror—these wax corpses, the severed hand, the procession of madmen, Bosola’s dirge—to torture the Duchess throughout her imprisonment.

9 The Duchess of Malfi is a play with much symbolic darkness, but also much literal darkness as well. Numerous scenes take place at night, and Ferdinand and Bosola are both creatures of the dark, constantly lurking in shadows. While the bearing of torches and certain lines like Ferdinand’s “Where are you?” (4.1.29) were inserted by Webster as imaginative aids for daylight audiences at the Globe—“When the stage really is dark Ferdinand tends to sound embarrassed rather than sinister” (Potter 187)—it seems clear that Webster was also making much of the potential lighting effects available to him at the indoor Blackfriars theatre. J. R. Brown writes that “What would be difficult, clumsy, and grotesque at the Globe, could be thrilling and sensitive in the darkened auditorium of the Blackfriars” (qtd. in Potter 186).

10 Ferdinand’s solace in the Duchess’s inability to see through his charade proves ironic, for his own mind and body eventually betray him and rot away; he dies raving of images suggesting fracture: “I am broken-winded”
and though the audience is repeatedly shocked along with her, Webster “plagues them in art” in a slightly different way; the difference between the two levels of audience (the Duchess, and those in the theatre) is that the Duchess is literally a captive and unwilling audience, while those in the theatre are both willing to be spectators and (ideally) willing to be captivated. The visceral experiences are what “plague” the Duchess, but for the paying audience, these moments of terror are only part of a larger experience; as Peter Murray writes, “Webster’s handling of [the] scenes of torment is superb. When the play is staged, our attention is drawn not to the horrors but to the Duchess’s reaction to them: she beholds horror, and we behold her” (132). What “plagues” the theatre audience then, is partially the sheer aesthetic shocks, but also contextualizing these moments (and the ramifications of these moments) within Webster’s entire play—believing in (and enjoying) things like “the Ghosts of our ancient Heroes” while holding firm to “deepe thought”. As the audience voyeuristically experiences Ferdinand’s perverse theatrical experiments, they are doubly haunted: once by the very sights and sounds, and once by the effects of freely succumbing to, and contemplating Webster’s artifice. Both Ferdinand and Webster are pursuing a kind of “magical” outcome: Ferdinand in his attempts to prove sign (name) and signifier (identity) are one and the same; Webster in his utilization of language to affect.

**Bosola: “a fantastical scholar”**

Murray provides an excellent character sketch of Webster’s Bosola, one that speaks to the playwright’s enhancement of what is basically just a name in his source(s).\(^{11}\)

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\(^{11}\) The source material for *The Duchess of Malfi* has a straightforward lineage: the story of the tribulations of the fifteenth-century Duchess of Amalfi is first found in a novella by Matteo Bandello (1554), which was greatly expanded in François De Belleforest’s *Histoires Tragiques* (1565). Webster’s main source was the English translation of this French version, William Painter’s *Palace of Pleasure* (1567). In all three original versions of
Bosola is well aware that worldly rewards are corrupt and corrupting, but he cannot resist trying to get them, for, like Flamineo, he has studied at the university and learned both knowledge and ambition there. He is always quoting the truths that he has read in books, but in the course of his life he has seen those truths flouted and scorned by the men who rule the world. He is convinced that integrity is nowhere to be found. The thought he expresses most frequently is that men advance in the world only through evil. He cannot refrain from making comments on the action that reveal his basically moral nature, yet he has so thoroughly convinced himself that morality is impossible that he accepts a course of evil for himself. (169)

The comments that Bosola makes throughout the play frequently draw attention to the ornamentation that he finds rampant in the world around him; as Murray suggests, Bosola harbours his own conception of “the truth,” and he is disgusted by the attempts of those around him to deny this “truth” through pretence and disguise. He believes that corruption and evil are at man’s inherent core—attempts to mask this taint either physically or through eloquence only serve to infuriate him. In drawing attention to these theatrical aspects of his environment, Bosola simultaneously highlights Webster’s use of figuration in crafting his play. Through Bosola, Webster asks his audience to recognize the illusions intrinsic to theatrical performance—to appreciate the function of artifice—but also to consider that there is more to the theatre than just illusion, that introspection is just as integral to the theatrical experience. Bosola is fully conscious of the world in which he lives: a world of hierarchies, of masters and minions, of duty, recognition, and advancement. The underlying premise of such a world is that a man can make his own place by conforming or rebelling as he sees fit; Bosola becomes increasingly disillusioned with the path he has chosen to follow within this system—if a man can make his own place in the world, what does it say about a man (and the world) if he chooses deceit and murder to do so? His hands are bloody from the first moment he steps on stage and Bosola makes no attempt to deny this. He has spent “seven years in the

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the Duchess’s tragedy, Bosola (called Daniele da Bozolo) is introduced only at the end and plays a relatively minor role, killing Antonio at the request of the Duchess’s vengeful brothers; the Bosola of The Duchess of Malfi is thus very much Webster’s creation, an “amalgamation of the various instruments of the Aragonian brothers” (Forker 117) who becomes a fully-realized figure.
galleys / For a notorious murder" (1.1.65-6)—and although he sarcastically expresses an interest in the simpler existence of a “flattering pander” (1.1.50), he is resigned to his life as what he calls a “soldier” (1.1.56), but what is probably more accurately described as a rogue and assassin. When first presented with a bag of gold, he seemingly knows of only one way to earn such a payment, asking “Whose throat must I cut?” (1.1.240); such bloodlust surprises even Ferdinand: “Your inclination to shed blood rides post / Before my occasion to use you” (1.1.241-2).

As the only character to play a significant part in all five acts, and by interacting directly with all of the other major figures—the Duchess, Ferdinand, the Cardinal, and Antonio—Bosola is the audience’s window into the play. He is a near-ubiquitous presence in the action: plotting, commenting, observing, and actively participating in every death. Unlike *The White Devil*, *The Duchess of Malfi* is devoid of ghosts, but perhaps this is because Webster created all the ghost he needed in the form of Bosola; he is a haunting figure in the play in the sense that he exists primarily in darkness and shadow, emerging to unnervre the other characters as well as inflict psychological and physical torture. Wherever he persists, he never fails to elicit passionate responses from those he interacts with. As the medium through which the audience perceives much of the drama, however, Bosola provides a vision of the play that is complex for them to process. Bosola’s language frequently contains scholarly references that sound somewhat peculiar coming from a man whose greatest talents are espionage and murder. His initial rant against the treachery of the Aragonian brothers includes the claim that “nothing but a kind of geometry” (1.1.57)—hanging stiffly from crutches or a noose—awaits those who do their dirty work. In his misogynistic attack on the Old Lady, he taunts her with the question, “Didst thou never study the mathematics?” (2.2.17-18), which he defines as knowing “the trick how to make a many lines meet in one
centre” (2.2.20-1). Even after receiving his own death wound, his final blast against the
Cardinal is a conflation of philosophy and geometry:

\[
\text{I do glory} \\
\text{That thou, which stood' st like a huge pyramid} \\
\text{Begun upon a large and ample base,} \\
\text{Shall end in a little point, a kind of nothing. (5.5.75-8)}
\]

Such dialogue helps to establish Bosola as a thinking man’s assassin; his conscious decision
to lead a life of villainy appears more disturbing in light of his scholarly achievements. Delio
clarifies Bosola’s academic talent (which involves research in rather obscure topics):

\[
\text{I knew him in Padua: a fantastical scholar, like such who study to know how} \\
\text{many knots was in Hercules’ club, of what colour Achilles’ beard was, or} \\
\text{whether Hector were not troubled with the toothache. He hath studied himself} \\
\text{half blear-eyed to know the true symmetry of Caesar’s nose by a shoeing-} \\
\text{horn; and this he did to gain the name of a speculative man. (3.3.41-6)}
\]

With this description, Bosola becomes infinitely more interesting: he is a killer with a
pensant for books, a scholar with a taste for blood. The source of so much of Bosola’s
frustration is his realization that even if he were to foster this scholarly side of his
personality, the same, sinful enticements—money, station, power—would remain. In his
words, “Let good men, for good deeds, covet good fame, / Since place and riches oft are
bribes of shame; / Sometimes the devil doth preach” (1.1.280-2). Even devils will preach,
even ostensibly “good” men will be tempted by, and succumb to, evil. Regardless of one’s
station or title in life—assassin, fantastical scholar, “court-gall” (1.1.23), or provisor of
horse—corruption will remain pervasive in one’s environment and inherent in one’s heart.
Bosola chooses to embrace this evil within himself and in the world around him—
“blackbirds fatten best in hard weather” (1.1.37)—rather than deny it. Although his identity
is inseparable from his murderous abilities, on some level, he clearly wants to distance
himself from them, longing for recognition as “a speculative man”. He cannot deny the

12 Rick Bowers argues that “many lines meeting in one centre” is a metaphor for strangulation—“clearly the
preferred assassination technique throughout the play—which involves the literal encircling and constricting of
the throat” (374).
appeal of murder (it serves as his vehicle for social advancement), but his intellectual nature also means that he can contemplate matters other than the base and primal. In a sense, Bosola—who witnesses nearly all of the Duchess’s tribulations along with those in the theatre—is an approximation of Webster’s ideal spectator: Bosola thrills and thrives in the carnage (and is complicit in most of it), but takes from the experience more than just visceral stimulation. He can accept and appreciate the horrors that he commits and witnesses, but he is moved to ponder these actions, and is ultimately changed by them.

Bosola’s belief that externalities—titles, names, appearances—do not necessarily correlate to internalities—motivations, essential identities—is reflected in his rhetoric. As Woollam writes,

> Throughout the play Bosola oscillates between an absolutist view of names and an anarchic one. Although he sometimes uses names in ways that indicate his belief that they can refer definitely, he often draws attention to the very act of naming to indicate that names are contingent and that what they signify is indefinite. (22)

Thus Bosola often highlights the arbitrary nature of certain signifiers. He tells Ferdinand, “Take your devils / Which hell calls angels” (1.1.254-5), and later, “Thus the devil / Candies all sins o’er; and what heaven terms vile, / That names he complimental” (1.1.266-8).

Devils, angels—these names are all a matter of perspective, and even more abstract concepts like morality are no less arbitrary. His diatribe against the Old Lady’s use of make-up becomes a rant against the “outward form of man” (2.1.41) in general:

> But in our own flesh, though we bear diseases
> Which have their true names only ta’en from beasts,
> As the most ulcerous wolf, and swinish measle;
> Though we are eaten up of lice and worms,
> And though continually we bear about us
> A rotten and dead body, we delight
> To hide it in rich tissue. (2.1.48-54)

The “true names” of diseases seem to suggest a stable referential system of language, but the examples he gives—“ulcerous wolf” and “swinish measle”—are metaphors “ta’en from
beasts”; the truth of language, then, is that it lacks absolute signification, that semantic ambiguity is unavoidable. Similarly, if humans have a true form, it is one composed of rot and taint, hidden behind “rich tissue,” where “any vestige of life is cosmetic and any appeal to authenticity constructed” (Woollam 23). Bosola is enraged by the Old Lady’s attempts to divorce her appearance from the truth that is her aged and wretched condition; he, on the other hand, spends the majority of the play garbed in black, a colour befitting his state of mind. This matching of outward appearance with inward thoughts is something that Ferdinand notices when recruiting Bosola: “Keep your old garb of melancholy; ’twill express / You envy those that stand above your reach, / Yet strive not to come near ’em” (1.1.269-71). Bosola’s melancholy garb is a paradoxical symbol of his acceptance of man’s dark desires as well as his utter frustration with the world that thrives on them. His dark clothing is testament to his personal philosophy that the only truth is that man denies what is true. As mentioned above, Bosola is Webster’s primary commentator on the action; in this role he draws the attention of the audience to the figuration that is ever-present in what they are witnessing. The theatre audience, like Bosola, must accept and understand the workings of illusory language and actions and also find a way to negotiate through them; Webster is not necessarily intending for the audience to reach the same misanthropic conclusions that Bosola does, but he is implying that they are to contemplate matters beyond those of just externalities.

At times, Bosola attempts to separate himself from the workings of the base world that he claims to know only too well. He does so by figuring his own body as ephemeral and fluid. Where others do their best to merely disguise their corrupt bodies and minds, Bosola seems to deny that he has a corporeal body to corrupt at all, and instead imagines himself as a wraithlike being that simultaneously exists within and without the world around him. His first line in the play is directed to the Cardinal: “I do haunt you still” (1.1.29)—these words
immediately characterize him as a ghostly figure lurking in the shadows, emerging to interact when he sees fit. Similarly, in his initial conversation with Ferdinand, Bosola claims that if he accepts the duke’s offer, he will become nothing more than Ferdinand’s “familiar”—“a very quaint invisible devil, in flesh” (1.1.251); in other words, Bosola will be a spirit waiting to be conjured forth to do Ferdinand’s bidding, “in flesh” only when asked to act upon the world, but otherwise existing in limbo. He reinforces this description after agreeing to Ferdinand’s offer by describing himself as something not quite human: “I am your creature” (1.1.278). Later, the Duchess extends this notion of Bosola’s unearthly body, asking, “What devil art thou, that counterfeits heaven’s thunder?” (3.5.100). His decision to confront (and murder) the Duchess while disguised as a tomb-maker is a product of his belief that his body is so indistinct that he can consciously alter his appearance. After torturing the Duchess with the wax figures and being ordered by Ferdinand that he must see her again, Bosola immediately declares, “Never in mine own shape” (4.1.134)—he will attempt to forgo the guilt of having to confront her in his true physical form by shifting his outward appearance.

His rant against the Old Lady and her “scurvy face-physic” (2.1.22) is surely meant to echo in the audience’s mind at this point, with Bosola’s awareness of the ramifications of his shape-shifting—his awareness of what he is hiding—all that distinguishes the two. Just as in previous instances, Webster is not interested in exploring the existence of ghosts and spirits, or the conjuring of devils; instead, these images provide him with useful metaphors to help flesh out his characters. In this case, Bosola becomes a spectre in the dark, haunting the other figures in the play by consistently confronting them when they are least prepared for him, all the while revelling in his ephemeral state, as if this somehow divorces him from the

13 Fittingly, when taken unawares at the end of the play, the Cardinal remarks to Bosola “Thou look’st ghastly” (5.5.8), which seems to pun on “ghostly”.
atrocities he commits. Again, Bosola is in some sense reflecting Webster’s larger audience; he is complicit in the aesthetic experience, but also needs to be able to divorce himself from it in order to apply the introspective consequences of the aesthetic. Like Bosola, the audience is expected to experience the play both within and without. It is significant that Bosola eventually reverses this self-perception: his resolution to kill the Cardinal is accompanied by his concession that “I will not imitate things glorious, / No more than base: I’ll be mine own example” (5.4.80-1). Being his “own example” means no longer relying on the artificiality of outward forms of any kind, be they melancholy garb, disguises, or the cover of shadows. Any type of outward appearance is a disguise of some sort (some more revealing than others), but Bosola comes to believe that the true measure of a man is what lies behind these appearances: his own sense of identity. Similarly, Webster’s audience must first embrace the figurative within his play before moving past it; they too are expected to recognize the illusory, contemplate what they see, and formulate their own sense of understanding.

Bosola is continually exasperated in his attempts to reconcile himself with the inherent evil he finds in his heart and the heart of all mankind: his forays into scholarship prove meaningless for this reason, as do his hypocritical attempts to physically disassociate himself from his sins. His only solace comes not from examining, nor denying, nor even accepting that evil, but from actively working against it—by setting right his wrongs. In this play, man must generate his own values and from these decide on his course of action. This, for Bosola, is commitment to a cause. What emerges from his dying reference to a ‘just’ cause is not justice, but rather the choice of a cause felt to be just. (This is quite different from the hope, at least, of ‘justice’ which Giovanni held at the end of The White Devil.) Bosola’s final words, confirmed by Delio, are the reduction of the play’s ideas. (Berry 149-50)

14 The haunter eventually becomes the haunted, however, for after the Duchess’s death, Bosola cannot shake her influence: “Still methinks the Duchess / Haunts me” (5.2.340-1).
This commitment to a cause occurs very late in the play, only after Bosola has accidentally slain Antonio; up until this point, Bosola’s only flirts with reformation. The resolve of the imprisoned Duchess certainly affects Bosola, but only gradually. When she is first taken prisoner, Bosola is impressed with her fortitude, remarking that she bears her captivity “Nobly”:

She’s sad, as one long used to’t, and she seems
Rather to welcome the end of misery
Than shun it; a behaviour so noble
As gives a majesty to adversity. (4.1.2-6)

Although Bosola has respect for the Duchess and at one point claims, “Now, by my life, I pity you” (4.1.88), any empathy he might harbour is subverted by his treatment of her. As Woollam notes, “Like Ferdinand, [Bosola] disavows the authenticity of the Duchess by refusing to name her; he persistently defers straightforward naming with metaphoric descriptions of her lifelessness” (23). The Duchess’s requests for validation of her authenticity reach a high point in 4.2; distraught, she asks Bosola, “Who am I?” (4.2.118), only to be met with figurative deflections which suggest that she is already dead:

Thou art a box of worm seed, at best, but a salvatory of green mummy.
What’s this flesh? A little curdled milk, fantastical puff-paste; our bodies are weaker than those paper prisons boys use to keep flies in; more contemptible, since ours is to preserve earth-worms. (4.2.119-23)

Undaunted, she tries again, asking “Am I not thy Duchess?” (4.2.127), but Bosola continues to respond with metaphors which evade her question and suggest that the only authentic aspect of her being is its corrupt state:

Thou art some woman, sure, for riot begins to sit on thy forehead, clad in grey hairs, twenty years sooner than on a merry milkmaid’s. Thou sleep’st worse than if a mouse should be forced to take up her lodging in a cat’s ear; a little infant that breeds its teeth, should it lie with thee, would cry out, as if thou wert the more unquiet bedfellow. (4.2.128-33)
After ordering her murder and ensuring its completion, Bosola is surprised to find that the unhinged Ferdinand will not pay him for his loyalty. Bosola is shaken by the Duchess’s death—“Other sins only speak; murder shrieks out” (4.2.253)—but his greatest concern remains “The reward due to my service” (4.2.286). Bosola has changed by the end of this scene, but he is not yet the character that will seek out the Cardinal in 5.4. His concerns remain primarily monetary: the anger he directs at Ferdinand after the duke’s betrayal is not so much because Ferdinand will “not weep” (4.2.252) at his sister’s death, nor is it because he feels that in killing the Duchess he has murdered “sacred innocence” (4.2.347); Bosola resents Ferdinand’s “ingratitude” (4.2.285), and admits to being “angry with myself” for so long being taken with “a sweet and golden dream” (4.2.316-7). Even his remorse is put in economic terms: “What would I do, were this to do again? / I would not change my peace of conscience / For all the wealth of Europe” (4.2.331-3). Bosola obviously repents what he has done, but all he can think to do for the Duchess is to bear her body “to the reverent dispose / Of some good women” (4.2.363-4); the rest of his plan involves racing off to do nothing in particular: “Then I’ll post to Milan / Where somewhat I will speedily enact / Worth my dejection” (4.2.365-7). His uncertainty as to what exactly this “somewhat” (i.e. something) is suggests that he has yet to understand what accepting his share of responsibility for the Duchess’s fate will require him to do.

Back in Milan, Bosola soon discovers that the Cardinal had a hand in ordering the murder of the Duchess and her children. In a scene strikingly similar to Ferdinand’s initial recruitment of Bosola, the Cardinal asks Bosola to kill Antonio, providing him with “the master-key / Of our lodgings” (5.2.322-3), and claiming to have “honours in store” (5.2.300) for his assassin. Bosola verbally accepts the mission, but has no intention of completing it—his mistrust of the Cardinal and the pangs of conscience preclude him from seeing it through. Bosola is no longer interested in playing the murderer-for-hire, yet his plans for reparation
remain vague and half-hearted. He will warn Antonio of the imminent danger he faces and
"put [him] into safety from the reach / Of these most cruel biters" (5.2.335-6), but Bosola is
unwilling to commit to more than that:

\[\text{It may be} \]
\[\text{I'll join with thee [Antonio] in a most just revenge.} \]
\[\text{The weakest arm is strong enough, that strikes} \]
\[\text{With the sword of justice. (5.2.337-40)} \]

"It may be" is hardly the voice of vengeance personified, and though the "weakest arm" may
be able to wield "the sword of justice," the audience remains dubious of such a weapon being
in Bosola's arsenal. The turning point for Bosola comes when he accidentally slays the man
he is trying to save (perhaps the only man left in the play worth saving). As Antonio dies, he
speaks of death setting him free, knowing that he will soon be with the Duchess once more,
this time without the need for secrecy: "I would not now / Wish my wounds balmed, nor
healed, for I have no use / To put my life to" (5.4.61-3).

The inner peace with which Antonio dies moves Bosola to take definitive action; with
no one left to save, he will try to save himself. He immediately declares vengeance on the
Cardinal, and although he uses figurative language, he does not equivocate: "O my fate
moves swift! / I have this Cardinal in the forge already, / Now I'll bring him to th' hammer" (5.4.77-9). Tellingly, when Bosola is discovered and asked to explain the carnage of the last
scene, he is finally able to name what he could not before: "Revenge, for the Duchess of
Malfi" (5.5.80). After witnessing the graceful passages of the Duchess and Antonio, Bosola
is ready to admit that he has misjudged the essence of humanity. He confesses to being "an
actor in the main of all / Much 'gainst mine own good nature, yet i'th' end / Neglected" (5.5.84-6). Dying amongst the chaos he has wrought, these lines referring to his "good
nature" drip with irony; nevertheless, his message is clear: there is inherent goodness inside
men, just as there is inherent evil. Bosola dies a changed man, but it must be noted that his
“final speeches move back and forth between social aphorisms and a deep vision of futility, which casts doubt on the efficacy of his own actions. The underlying tension in Bosola that rises to the surface lies at the heart of the play itself” (Luckyj 146). His admission of being merely an “actor” in the play’s events still seems somewhat irresponsible, as does his claim that the Duchess was “murderèd / By th’Aragonian brethren” (5.5.80-1)—like Flamineo, one final semantic quibble. He declares that “worthy minds [should] ne’er stagger in distrust / To suffer death, or shame for what is just” (5.5.102-3), but the audience is left to decide this for themselves. Bosola’s actions and rhetoric throughout the play have cast doubt on the definitiveness of words and appearances; to have him now speak of such things as moral worth and justice renders the play’s conclusion frustratingly equivocal, though characteristically Websterian. Webster asks his audience to progress with Bosola throughout the play, but provides no easy answers as to what that progression should result in. The playwright provides the stimulation—the affect—from which the audience is free to extrapolate their own opinions. Bosola’s moral development throughout the play is almost as frightening as the Duchess’s fate; to the end, his life remains filled with bloodshed—he never stops killing, he just starts killing for different reasons. Audiences are forced to measure the nobleness or futility of his actions for themselves, as Bosola, muttering about “what is just” (5.5.103), dies on a corpse-strewn stage that perhaps balances the scales, perhaps tips them into oblivion.

**Duchess: “For her discourse, it is so full of rapture”**

The Duchess finds herself alone in more ways than one. As Lynn Enterline writes, “A masculine discourse is productively at work in the play to define what a woman ‘is’ and what ‘women’ on this definition, may desire. Webster represents this discourse as surrounding the Duchess on all sides. She appears to us on stage or in the text largely mediated through male
praise or suspicion” (88). It is the Duchess’s self-perception versus the perceptions of her male protagonist (Antonio) and antagonists (Ferdinand, the Cardinal, and Bosola) that is the central conflict in the play. The Duchess differs from Vittoria of *The White Devil* in that she is a more physical presence on stage: we see her woo Antonio, distressed by her pregnancy, in the privacy of her bed chamber, on the run from her brothers, and struggling against her captors; she is akin to Vittoria in that her primary weapon against her aggressors is language. Unlike Vittoria, the Duchess does not lament the inefficacy of this tool, but instead learns to wield it in a manner that provides her only solace in times of distress and anxiety. This approach to language is what sets her apart from the other figures in the play; Woollam explains that

The Duchess uses language positively to constitute meaning. That often entails her using rhetoric to perform her belief that meanings, identities, and values can be created through individual and communal acts of will. Ferdinand and Bosola deny the constitutive use of language and consequently they deny all that she creates through it. (12)

It is perversely fitting that Ferdinand associates the Duchess’s sexuality with witchcraft, for she herself refers on more than one occasion to conjuring, to the affective powers of language. Time and again the Duchess escapes to the safety of a linguistic realm that separates her from the pains inflicted on her body and mind. It is her unshakable resolve, the force of her conviction that she can fashion an authentic identity in the face of persecution and horror which makes her such an effective tragic figure. As external forces beat on her and attempt to deny her this ability, it is the Duchess’s immutable sense of self—her essential being—that comes to the fore, conjured into being by her own strength of will.

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15 In this regard, I certainly give more credit to audiences than does Lisa Jardine, who believes “the male interpretation of female action must colour the audience’s own response: only men surround the Duchess; the audience can do little more than accept their version of her behaviour and motives” (72). I would argue that the audience can do more, and Webster expects them to. I simply do not believe that any modern audience would passively accept the bombastic accusations of Ferdinand and the Cardinal and ignore the measured, rational justifications of the Duchess, simply on the basis of gender. The rhetoric of Ferdinand and the Cardinal reveals *their own* behaviour and motivations, not the Duchess’s. This rhetoric must be weighed and considered by an audience, but to inertly believe their claims that the Duchess is nothing more than a “lusty widow” (1.1.331) is to do Webster and his play a disservice.
The most detailed descriptions of the Duchess occur in the opening scene, as Antonio, Ferdinand, and the Cardinal all take the opportunity to express their perceptions of her.

Antonio’s depiction of his future wife is telling:

For her discourse, it is so full of rapture,
You only will begin then to be sorry
When she doth end her speech; and wish, in wonder,
She held it less vainglory to talk much,
Than your penance to hear her. Whilst she speaks,
She throws upon a man so sweet a look,
That it were able raise one to a galliard
That lay in a dead palsy, and to dote
On that sweet countenance; but in that look
There speaketh so divine a continence
As cuts off all lascivious and vain hope. (1.1.181-91)

This is the first account of the Duchess, and coming from a man obviously physically attracted to her, it is somewhat curious (though it makes greater sense as the play progresses).

It is not the Duchess’s beauty or grace—her outward appearance—that Antonio first mentions; long before he gets to her “sweet countenance,” Antonio focuses on her smooth and mellifluous way of speaking, that something innate that comes from deep within her. When he eventually gets to her features, Antonio cannot separate the Duchess’s persuasive rhetoric from her physical being, describing her appearance in terms of utterance: “but in that look / There speaketh so divine a continence”. The audience learns early on that the Duchess values language, for she believes that talking too much is “vainglory”; rhetoric, evidently, is a precious princely commodity. Her reverence for language is confirmed during Ferdinand and the Cardinal’s initial barrage regarding her “discretion” (1.1.282); the Duchess is noticeably reticent in this exchange with her brothers, content to hear their paranoid rant, and doing her best not to inflame them further. She will not waste her words bombastically. While they berate her over and over with the same message—“They are most luxurious / Will wed twice” (1.1.288-9)—even after she (sarcastically) acknowledges their “terrible good counsel” (1.1.303) the Duchess is frustrated that they will not be swayed by her
response: “Will you hear me? / I’ll never marry” (1.1.292-3). Their refusal to take her at her word—in a sense, to accept her conjured image—unnerves her, puts her on the defensive.

The Duchess expresses her exasperation with her brothers’ thinly veiled threats during her mock-wedding scene with Antonio, combining this sentiment with her irritation over her own dependence on language as a woman of power:

We are forced to woo, because none dare woo us;
And as a tyrant doubles with his words,
And fearfully equivocates, so we
Are forced to express our violent passions
In riddles, and in dreams, and leave the path
Of simple virtue, which was never made
To seem the thing it is not. (1.1.432-8)

Her point here is that rulers must mask genuine feelings (from fear-inducing to passionate) in the appropriate princely rhetoric; all emotion is thus muted as it is expressed verbally. She longs for speech that is direct and emotionally pure; recall that she was offended her brothers’ “counsel” was not heartfelt but “studied” (1.1.320)—well-practised, mechanical, and shrouded in figuration. The Duchess works against this linguistic trap by doing her best to avoid equivocal language when expressing her love; she describes her feelings and motivation in a manner profoundly simple and unambiguous:

I do here put off all vain ceremony,
And only do appear to you a young widow
That claims you for her husband, and like a widow
I use but half a blush in’t. (1.1.446-9)

Despite her station in life, despite her wealth, despite Antonio’s lower social standing, the Duchess will not use language to mask what she is: a widow in love who wishes to remarry. No disguises, no self-loathing, no semantic misdirection. This is not to say that the wooing scene is devoid of figurative language and histrionics: “The Duchess’s theatricality and rhetoric—her metaphors of writing a will, of increasing value, and of rising—cohere with the meaning of what she is saying and doing: the marriage will be legitimized through her own
willed desire, and Antonio must play an active part in actualizing their mutual will” (Woollam 15). The Duchess’s language and passions combine—she gives voice to her desires, and by doing so, hopes to ensure that they are fulfilled. Her pronouncements will her union with Antonio into being: “raise yourself, / Or if you please, my hand to help you” (1.1.408-9), “We now are man and wife” (1.1.482), and “for now we are one” (1.1.487). Her use of language borders on the magical: utilizing a metaphoric substitution of things or concepts, but intending for the figurative substitution to become a reality. Clearly wanting to avoid the fearful equivocation and riddles that figurative language can produce, the Duchess does not intend for her words to suggest, but affect. Antonio seems to pick up on this theme, providing a fitting analogy when the Duchess presents him with a wedding ring:

ANTONIO. There is a saucy and ambitious devil
    Is dancing in this circle.
DUCHESS. Remove him.
ANTONIO. How?
DUCHESS. There needs small conjuration, when your finger
    May do it: thus, is it fit? (1.1.402-5)

Affective language is in the air, and Antonio (like a conjured spirit or devil) finds himself charmed by it and potentially bound in a circle.16 The Duchess’s resolution of the analogy is critical: by putting the ring on Antonio’s finger, she simultaneously allows him to free himself (“Remove him”) and moves beyond the realm of language, privileging action as much as more talking (“conjuration”). If she has enchanted him into devotion, she now releases him from any bonds of servitude; the analogy ends when she slides the ring on his finger—this act suggests that although their love may involve figurative speeches, it will not

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16 Magic circles were a crucial element in the conjuration of spirits. Richard Kieckhefer writes that they “may be traced on the ground with a sword or a knife, or else inscribed on a piece of parchment or cloth. Sometimes they are simple geometrical forms with perhaps a few words or characters inscribed about the circumference. More often, however, they are complex, with inscriptions and symbols of various kinds inside” (159). It seems that some conjurers believed that standing inside these circles kept them safe from whatever it was they were summoning, while others thought that what they were summoning would appear within the circle and be bound there. The raising of spirits involved both oral and ocular components: “If the circle . . . is the main visual element in the necromancer’s techniques, the conjuration is the key oral component. The conjuration usually revolves about one or another imperative verb for ‘command’: the necromancer addresses the spirits with the order, ‘I adjure you’ or ‘I conjure you’ to appear and carry out some deed” (Kieckhefer 161).
be founded on it. The Duchess’s rhetoric and actions are harmonized and directed to the end of bringing about her desires. As Price claims, “The whole love-scene is so strong because the image in word is completely fused with the image in action” (732). As the play progresses, however, the audience is forced to witness the Duchess’s opportunities for action dwindle and her confinement to the realm of language become much more restrictive; consequently, she becomes increasingly reliant on verbal assertions of self to exhibit her identity.

After her secret marriage and children are revealed to her brothers, the Duchess is forced to take definitive action, “feign[ing] a pilgrimage / To the Lady of Loreto” (3.2.309-10). It is a momentous act: the Duchess will leave her people and her state behind as she opts to pursue personal happiness and safety with Antonio in the state of Ancona. For all intents and purposes this “feigned pilgrimage” (3.2.320) is also her final action in the play: she and Antonio are soon banished by the Cardinal and Ancona, and the Duchess spends the remainder of the drama not taking action, but responding to actions directed at her. As she begins to feel the world close around her, the Duchess accepts the fact that she must now draw her strength not from her acts, but from her own ideals and sense of self. Admitting that she “suspect[s] some ambush” (3.5.56) from the pursuing Bosola, the Duchess sets Antonio free once more, using language that echoes their wedding scene: “Therefore, by all my love, I do conjure you / To take your eldest son, and fly towards Milan” (3.5.57-8). This is the last time she will ever see her husband, and in this sense, it is a fitting metaphorical flourish: the Duchess reclaims the affective power of language that Antonio has so long associated with her, ironically sending him away instead of charming him to her. She utilizes figurative language not to obfuscate or misdirect, but for clarity; it is no surprise then that the Duchess remains disgusted with her brothers’ transparently ominous invitations for her and Antonio to return home: “The devil is not cunning enough / To circumvent us in riddles”
(3.5.40-1). The Duchess is straightforward with her lover, but she responds to her captor Bosola in kind, providing him with an ambiguous message: “Man is most happy when’s own actions / Be arguments and examples of his virtue” (3.5.120-1). Ostensibly, this suggests that actions speak louder than words, but the Duchess’s extended anecdote on the salmon and the dog-fish which follows subverts this claim. What one says or does doesn’t matter as much as what one intrinsically is; be thankful for the time that you have managed to “have passed the net” (3.5.135), for everyone’s fate is the same—“the cook and the fire” (3.5.139)—where saying and doing and matters of difference become moot. The Duchess’s insinuation is that perhaps man shouldn’t be happiest in revelling in actions or titles—gratification and contentment should come from somewhere else.

As Bosola bears the Duchess away, she claims to be “armed ’gainst misery” (3.5.142). Her scenes in captivity explain what this means. Asked to report how the Duchess bears her imprisonment, Bosola first replies with only a single word: “Nobly” (4.1.2). He then describes her at length:

She’s sad, as one long used to’t, and she seems
Rather to welcome the end of misery
Than shun it; a behaviour so noble
As gives a majesty to adversity.
You may discern the shape of loveliness
More perfect in her tears than in her smiles;
She will muse four hours together, and her silence,
Methinks, expresseth more than if she spake. (4.1.3-10)

First in speaking, and now in silence, the Duchess remains powerful. Just as in the opening scene, Webster gives us a description of the Duchess from an enchanted observer; instead of providing rapturous eloquence, the Duchess now speaks very little, yet remains no less captivating. Her serenity enrages Ferdinand, who is amazed that her “melancholy seems to be fortified” (4.1.11). Ferdinand succeeds in fracturing her tranquility, presenting her with a severed hand and wax corpses of her family. The Duchess is rattled by these terrors, but she
turns the tables on Ferdinand and Bosola by claiming that she looks forward to her imminent demise, she does not live in fear of it. She modifies the proleptic rhetoric that Bosola had used on her earlier, not referring to her death as a thing already done, but longing for that death to take place: “let me freeze to death” (4.1.69), “I’ll starve myself to death” (4.1.76), and “I long to bleed” (4.1.109). By appropriating the doom they intend for her and directing it at herself, she pre-emptively determines her fate rather than having it dictated. The Duchess’s language in this scene is rife with affect: she wishes that merely giving voice to her death will bring it about. Accordingly, she at one point describes her words as tangible objects. After she vows to “curse the stars” (4.1.96), Bosola tries to undermine her figurative use of language by telling her that “the stars shine still” (4.1.100); the Duchess responds by claiming, “O, but you must / Remember, my curse hath a great way to go” (4.1.100-1), as if her words must physically travel a great distance before her curse is realized. Once again the Duchess is using language in a distinct manner: her words simultaneously contain both metaphorical flourish and implied literal meaning. Earlier in the play she brought her language and action into concord as she wooed Antonio; now imprisoned and without the possibility of taking action, the Duchess assigns her language the ability to take action on its own. From not speaking, to threatening, to cursing, her language becomes more than her means of communication, it becomes her only remaining source of power and comfort; her survival and her legacy come to depend on the belief of those observing her (her captors and the theatre audience) that her words and her person are one and the same.

Just as Ferdinand’s emblems of death backfire by putting the Duchess at peace with her fate, the collection of madmen he sends to drive her insane only makes her aware of the unshakable integrity of her mind. She makes it clear to Cariola that externalities will not destroy her mental calm: “I am not mad yet, to my cause of sorrow. / Th’ heaven o’er my head seems made of molten brass, / The earth of flaming sulphur, yet I am not mad” (4.2.24-
6). The Duchess remains remarkably serene to the end; she gives absolutely no verbal response to the parade of madmen, and claims to be terrified "Not a whit" (4.2.207) by the appearance of her executioners. It is the regal calm with which the Duchess meets her doom that draws the attention and sympathy of an audience—in a play that seems to function and thrive on only inhumanity, the Duchess provides a resilient alternative that is recognizably human. Flawed, indignant, dignified, and unapologetically passionate, the Duchess’s death educes pity because we see that her spirit is able to transcend a world intent on stamping it out. Bosola’s attempts to deny the Duchess an authentic identity elicit from her the definitive line of the play: “I am Duchess of Malfi still” (4.2.134). This statement in the face of death is an affirmation of life—a life unashamedly declared to be well lived. The outward persona and the inward essence of the Duchess are synthesized in this declaration of self—her identity is definitive, and it is definitive because she determines what that identity will be. Other figures in the play work to prove the mutability of words, but the Duchess rises above this, rendering her identity immutable through her manipulation of words within a “philosophy of the constituent power of language” (Woollam 16). Webster, ever equivocal, ensures that the Duchess’s declaration is not without ambiguity however: her pronouncement is, as Nigel Alexander comments,

one expression of that continual declaration of human independence which proclaims the unique value of a particular human existence in the face of the inevitable and eternal triumph of death. This self-assertion is both necessary and vain. (qtd. in Luckyj 140)

The Duchess’s death, while cruel and tragic, is inevitable. This renders her affirmation “both a strong, valid self-assertion, and the lost wail of Everyman confronted with his necessary end” (Luckyj 140). In dying, the Duchess inspires and horrifies—her spirit does transcend the brutal world but this transcendence is ultimately fleeting; audiences are left to determine whether or not this means the verification of her identity is futile. That Webster leaves such
a decision up to his audiences is a testament to his dramatic skill and artistic consciousness. His drama provides no easy answers and nowhere is this more evident than in the Duchess’s death scene. This is a highly theatrical scene in a highly theatrical play: the death scene includes a procession of madmen giving brief character sketches, disguises, a song, a dirge, and hidden bodies, while the remainder of the play contains wax corpses, a dumb show, and Antonio’s strange encounter with the Echo. Webster incorporates all of these elements, manipulates them to his artistic design, and fashions a scene that nevertheless draws its dramatic force from language. Theatrical trappings aside, all that matters in the end is what the Duchess says, and how an audience interprets it. Trousdale writes, “The ways in which language could be manipulated, and in that manipulation enjoyed as language separate from the matter it embellished, become particularly evident in Webster, where the res of his story is always separate from his art” (169). Webster’s artifice is visible in this scene and throughout the play; however, this does not preclude meditation on his themes, it encourages it. “I am Duchess of Malfi still” manages to encapsulate the essence of Webster’s play because his vision of the dramatic experience is one of equal parts aesthetic stimulation and serious contemplation. Recall one last time Webster’s character of “An excellent Actor”: “a man of deepe thought” allows himself to be charmed by actors into believing “the Ghosts of our ancient Heroes walk’t againe”, while the player himself is both “grave Orator” and man of “significant action”. Only when the audience submits to the persuasive language of the actor—when they revel in Webster’s artifice—is the latent magic of the theatre fulfilled. The Duchess haunts us because even if we wish to dismiss her assertion as futile, we must first allow ourselves to believe that what she says has the potential to be true.
Conclusion

Perhaps *The White Devil* would have originally been a success had there been more T. S. Eliots at the Red Bull. The poet seems to be the type of audience member that Webster writes for; in “Whispers of Immortality,” Eliot focuses on the visceral aesthetics of Webster’s drama—“breastless creatures,” “a lipless grin”—yet it is apparent that Eliot is moved by more than just visual horrors. Eliot finds himself captivated by Webster’s art *and* compelled to contemplate that art (in a poem); he is haunted by the “dead limbs,” but more importantly, the “thought” that “clings” to them, “Tightening its lusts and luxuries”. The shocking images are what initially capture Eliot’s attention, but the introspection generated by these images is what holds it.

It seems that in the subject matter and characters of his two major tragedies, Webster is working through and writing his own literary theory. The manner in which he crafts his plays suggests that he has a firm conception of what drama can do to, and for, his audience, and what he expects his audience to do for him: the action and language supplied by the playwright combined with the willing audience member symbiotically weave a profound type of enchantment, as sensory experience yields rigorous introspection. Expanding my thesis in a future project would entail exploring the extent to which Webster is in some sense anticipating tenets in modern literary theories derived from speech-act theory, discourse analysis, theories of performance and performativity, and finally, phenomenological theory on perception, the senses, and the function of affect. Throughout this essay I have leaned heavily on Webster’s prose character sketch of “An excellent Actor”; to solidify an understanding of Webster’s conception of the theatrical experience and of his own goals as a writer would require an examination of his entire dramatic and non-dramatic canon. His
short poem that prefaces Anthony Munday’s translation of The Palmerin of England (1602),
for example, suggests a few particularly tantalizing directions:

The sighes of Ladies, and the spleene of Knights,
The force of Magicke, and the Map of fate:
Strange Pigmey-Singlenes in Giant-fights,
Thy true translation sweetly doth relate.
Nor for the fiction is the worke less fine:
Fables have pith and morall discipline. (Complete Works III 259, 1-6)

Webster hints here that he conceives of literature doing a specific kind of “worke,” one that
is not undermined or weakened by matters of “fiction” or “Fable,” but perhaps enhanced by
them. In the context of this paper, it seems telling that Webster believes Munday’s “worke”
to be founded, at least in part, on “The force of Magicke.”


