

## Portraits of Women in Renaissance drama (A- López-Varela)

Criticism of the Renaissance drama has been increasingly occupied with forces of heterogeneity, contradiction, fragmentation and difference in society.

Ania Loomba believes that the refusal of Renaissance drama to comply with the drive towards moral and poetic closure is closely related to its foregrounding of disorderly, or at least problematic women.

For Kate Belsey the discursive instability in the texts about women has the effect of withholding from women readers any single position which they can identify as theirs. "The literary representation of women emerge as both constructed by and radically disruptive of an authority which was historically simultaneous being consolidated and in crisis". (Belsey, p.197) "The dynamics of stage action make it unlikely that a female figure will be able to remain emblematically virtuous for long -once the tableau moves, she becomes a woman of character (and hence instantly capable of malice and vice), no longer a female figurehead". (Jardine p.180)

In Renaissance drama female transgression, both real and imagined, is repeatedly and ruthlessly oppressed by the family, state, church and judiciary. In the *White Devil* we witness the combined operation of these three forces against the deviant woman, Vittoria. But all of them, Webster's *Duchess of Malfi*, Bianca in Middleton's *Women Beware Women* (1621), Annabella in John Ford's *'Tis a Pity She's a Whore*, Beatrice-Joanna in Middleton and Rowley's *The Changeling* (1622), break the rules of female conduct and are punished.

The spiritual chaos of Jacobean Drama implicitly connected female disobedience with a degenerate social order, and thus contributed to silencing any notions of disobedience which women in the audience might have had.

Lisa Jardine's chapter on Renaissance Education and Reformed Religion opens with a quote of the book of Proverbs 31.10-29. The key attributes for the Christian virtuous wife were: submission to her husband, obedience and silence.

Who can find a virtuous woman? for her price is far above rubies.  
The heart of her husband doth safely trust in her, so that he shall have no need of spoil.  
She will do him good and not evil all the days of her life.  
(...)  
Strength and honour are her clothing; and she shall rejoice in time to come.  
She openeth her mouth with wisdom; and in her tongue is the law of kindness.  
She looketh well to the ways of her household, and eateth not the bread of idleness.(...)

Sermons of the period held two charges against women: women are *garrula et vaga*, they talk and wander too much, and are foolish and wander away from convention. (based on Vulgate reading of the Proverbs VII. 11.)

Jardine points out how the tone and content make it clear that the household's harmony depend upon the gracious acceptance on the part of the wife of her serving role in the family.

In *The Duchess of Malfi* Webster uses imagery of children and birds to represent a kind of nostalgic feeling for goodness and innocence. These children are helpless and cannot defend themselves against evil. The presence of children is important because it shows a change of plot, from a tragedy of love to a tragic family story. Marriage acquires protagonism in the play from the end of Act I to the middle of Act IV. The importance of family and women's role in it is clearly emphasized.

Jardine again points out that although some Protestant reformers stressed the democratic impact of religious change, for example on the issue of women's education and literacy, opponents to reform stressed the disruptive, and potentially uncontrollable consequences of allowing women access to the text of Scripture. She maintains that whilst Protestant women could participate in services, and were encouraged to

read the Scriptures, purity and obedience were essential attributes expected of them, just as they had been in the Catholic faith. "Humanism and humanist education both encouraged them in theory, and commended them on their practice". (Jardine, p.51)

Ania Loomba affirms that Protestant and humanist doctrines were more inconsistent than traditional misogyny because by stressing that women are equal to men and still not the same, by advocating mutual affection in marriage and frowning on passion, by advancing holy matrimony as an ideal and yet tightening parental control, by excluding women from the new emphasis on self fulfillment (which itself was apparently paradoxical in view of state authoritarianism), the dominant ideologies tried to redefine women's status in the changing circumstances, but actually they opened up irreconcilable contradictions... (Loomba, p.72)

Belsey also sees women in this period as floating between two subject positions: the role of mother/mistress and the role of wife/servant. The quote "*Honour thy father and thy mother*" (Exodus 20:12), Belsey affirms, seems to imply that children owe obedience to both parents equally, but at the same time one parent (the wife) owes obedience to the other.

Humanistic education, in its nature a program for the leisured, became closely associated with the appropriate training of the courtier. "*Education was only available to high-ranking women, and it was regarded as an ornament, along with beauty, manners, needlepoint and music*". (Jardine, p.51). The downgrading of the courtier during the rule of James I resulted in a corresponding loss of status for the lady. Kingship, feudalism and courtly love in the Middle Ages had guaranteed women's independence to a certain point. It was a sort of "concession" to women, since given their property rights at that point, land consolidation required female support. This initial sexual permissive stage could be tolerated because of the relative indifference to illegitimacy that accompanied primogeniture, where younger children posed no threat to patriarchal lineage (Kelly, pp. 22-30)

The subsequent transformation of courtly love into a chaste ideal is an indication that adultery has begun to threaten patriarchal institutions. Against a background of peasant disorders and the fleecing of an entire national economy by a parasitic court through monopolies, tax-farming, etc the reinforcement of social stratification, including female inferiority, was imperative. Renaissance women entered a relation of almost universal dependence upon her family and her husband.

Another fact, the abolition of convents during Protestant reform had the accidental effect of removing a sphere of separatist, independent activity for women, leaving them with the only option of marriage/family.

That there was an emergent feminism in Renaissance society, and consequently in the plays, is challenged by Jardine. The belief that Reformation dignified the position of the wife and granted women greater freedom in the marriage relationship of mutual aid, comfort and companionship can be read, affirms Jardine, as an added burden to the woman, increasing her responsibility for how the marriage turned out. "Wifely obedience was necessary to ensure the purity of the bloodline for inheritance". (Peggy Knapp. Routledge, 1990)

In the face of unprecedented social mobility, religious and political crisis there was "a polarization and hardening of doctrine, a reiteration of orthodoxy in the form of providentialist belief, monarchic absolutism and misogyny" (Singfield, p.8)

The political and ideological necessity to redefine the nature and status of women becomes obvious in the face of unprecedented changes that included gender relations.

The texts and plays of the time foreground the efforts at consolidation of patriarchal authority. Punishment of assertive femininity on the stage served as a warning against transgressive women.

However, to read these plays either as straightforward documents of women's liberation or elaborate devices for containment is to erase the conflicts and complexities of the Renaissance politics, discourses on women, the position of the popular theatre and that of playwrights, affirms Sinfield.

But we should consider why the drama becomes increasingly preoccupied with the disorderly woman; why woman can no longer be presented as a stable entity; and why the stories themselves become deeply contradictory and contestable.

*"O woman's poor revenge which dwells but in her tongue".*

Belsey affirms that it is tempting to read these plays as exalting human integrity, as intrinsically heroic, but that instances of self-assertion are simultaneously intelligible in their contexts as ironic and pathetic rather than heroic. (Belsey, p.36). *"It is difficult, then, to read these plays simply as humanist texts, endorsing the unified human subject or affirming a continuous and inviolable interiority as the essence of each person"* (Belsey, p.40) I agree with Belsey in that the unified subject of liberal humanism is a product of the second half of the seventh-century, an effect of the revolution, when the bourgeoisie is installed as the ruling class. (Belsey, p.33)

For Belsey discursive instability in the texts is evident in the utterances attributed to women: *"they speak with equal conviction from incompatible subject-positions, displaying a discontinuity of being, an inconstancy which is seen as characteristically feminine. This inconstancy is the result of their rights fluctuating with their marital status"*. (Belsey, p.149)

Female heroes like Bianca in Middleton's *Women Beware Women*, Beatrice-Joanna in Middleton and Rowley's *The Changeling*, Vittoria in Webster's *The White Devil* and his *Duchess of Malfi* appear as "strong" in their passion, sensuality, courage, cunning, ambition. However, as Jardine points out, we must not forget that these female heroes move in a masculine stage world. Portrayal of female psychology is given from a distinctively male viewpoint. Women characters are scripted both by a male author and by men within the plays. They are always defined in their relationships to men: sister, daughter, mistress, widow. The female attributes that make them appear admirable in their strength are, almost without exception, morally reprehensible: cunning, duplicity, sexual rapaciousness.

It is male characters who perceive free choice on the part of the female character as inevitable sign of irrational lust, prelude to disaster. In the "dagger scene", Ferdinand presents the Duchess the dagger, in the manner of a personified Despair figure, common in the medieval Morality Plays. (Actus III. Scene ii)

Other male characters point out women's sins to the audience. Bianca's husband, Leantio, tells why his wife has been seduced by wealth and licentiousness. For him a woman is "affections", "wills", "humours", "a kind of spirits soon raised" (=easily sensually stimulated), "a woman's belly is got up in a trice" (pregnancy is considered the inevitable outcome of willing or unwilling intercourse). (Actus I. Scene I)

Despite the appearance that patriarchal attitudes are contested by the women, their voices, when heard, appear unreliable, even in the case of the innocent wife. Isabella, in Webster's *White Devil*, whose husband Bracciano has just privately renounced her and technically divorced her in favour of his mistress Vittoria, publicly pretends it is she who renounced her husband, II.i.229-65. Jardine here, cites John Russell Brown commenting on this passage, "because she appears a defenceless woman speaking in a submissive tone,..., the natural tendency is to side with Isabella. (...) yet when she does put the blame on herself, she does it with such abandoned hatred towards Vittoria and in a manner so calculated to infuriate Bracciano that we may be tempted to think she is indeed that which she seems, a foolish, mad, and jealous woman, perhaps deceiving herself". (Jardine, p.47-48)

Beatrice-Joanna also reflects an upbringing where women are taught that their power lies in their ability to cajole and chide men into favouring them. Initial confidence in their own persuasiveness and their methods coquetishly insistent, as is the case of Vittoria's, owe something to the illusion of female power in the medieval ethic of courtly love. However, it slowly gives way to the more sobering reality of the power of the husband over the wife.

The "echo scene" in the *Duchess of Malfi* establishes that the Duchess's influence persists beyond the grave, but her influence is powerless to alter events. Antonio ignores the warning and goes to his death.

Jardine mentions that the scolding woman traditionally represents the irrational and uncontrollable and that shrews are always women. She adds that the fate of such ill-natured wives was not uncommonly to be accused of witchcraft. Many times the cause of a woman's downfall was her tongue. "Women were best quiet" as Nicholas Breton pointed in *The Good and the Badde* (1615) p.273. However, "witch" was a



and "duty", the Duchess of Malfi asserts her sexual self. That she is sexually aware brands her as Eve/Mary Magdalene as opposed to Mary, mother of Christ. She is metamorphosed from ideal mirror of virtue into lascivious whore. Thereafter her strength lies in her fortitude in the face of doom she has brought upon herself. "Majesty" in the female hero is here at its most reassuring and admirable when associated with the patient suffering and resignation. Webster's *Duchess of Malfi* explores the value of affliction both through the implications of its action and the explicit voices of its characters. "*One of the more subtle ideas in both Christian and classical (stoic) teaching on guilt and retribution is that punishment does not follow sin but is born the same instant via the operation of the sinner's conscience*" (Montaigne, "Of Conscience" cited by Wymer p.39) Several scenes illustrate this: the scene when the Duchess and Antonio talk for the last time as they part.

Duchess. The birds, that live i'th field  
 On the wild benefit of nature, live  
 Happier than we, for they may choose  
 their mates,  
 And carol their sweet pleasures to the spring.  
 (Actus I. Scene V)

Jacobean drama is clearly indebted both directly and indirectly to medieval traditions of suicide in its two faces, dignity and despair. "In tragedy, the sense of paradox, the importance of conflict and contradiction is very sharp and the action is organized in a way which brings into conflict a whole series of polarities: sense of suffering, failure and despair combined with an assertion of human dignity in the face of death" (Wymer p.4)

High moral sensitivity and steady conviction are required to resist the temptation to resolve the intolerable tensions of tragedy into the relaxed apathy of despair/suicide, but where is The Duchess's triumph of life over death?

Duchess (...)I'll starve myself(..)  
 Am I not thy duchess?

Bosola Thou art some great woman, sure, for riot begins to sit on thy forehead, clad in gray hairs, twenty years sooner than a merry milkmaid's. Thou sleepest 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 lie with thee, could cry out, as if thou wert the more unquiet bedfellow.

Duchess I am Duchess of Malfi still.  
 Bosola That makes thy sleep so broken.

The so called "wicked victim", Bosola, like Flamineo in the *White Devil*, instrument of satire, skeptical and ironic, shows himself as a man convinced of the wickedness of society. He shows no pity for anyone because he thinks no one is good, yet Bosola fulfils the role of Comfort and "saves" (spiritually) the Duchess from suicide "*Come, be of comfort, I will save your life*" (Actus IV. Scene i). He also makes clear the Duchess's guilt (grey hairs/sleepless nights) following her sinful behavior. Only her affliction expresses virtue. Her "majesty" lies merely in her resignation. Her nobility in her Christian confrontation with despair. Despite her high position in society, she is shown as a woman. Webster emphasizes her human dimension. Some critics have wanted to see here the triumph of the Duchess, but not Jardine. "She is not, despite her own protest to the contrary, Duchess of Malfi, still". (Jardine p.91) I think it is difficult to see a human dimension in a character who has no name. For Belsey (p.39) and for me the Duchess is claiming a political place, not a personal identity. Women are taught to function within men's private lives only. They lack a public life of their one because they are denied participation as producers and controllers of wealth or authority. It is significant,

then, that although the plays emphasize the private/inner/non movement sphere of women, woman's sexuality is publicly structured. In the "sister-tragedy" of *The White Devil*, Vittoria publicly confronts the judiciary as well as the Church, but only because her adultery, like the Duchess' remarriage, is not treated as a private issue but a public one. The language of patriarchy is also the vocabulary of political control. (Loomba, p.107)

Lacking both public and private space, physically as well as ideologically, woman has had to retreat further into her "inner" being in order to find spaces that are not publicly controlled... Secrecy and withdrawal can be seen as strategies to protect an inner life. (Loomba p.110) Isabella in *Women Beware Women* finds that her marriage to the foolish Ward can accommodate her secret affair with Guardiano. Beatrice-Joanna also tries to protect herself from exposure to the virginity text. Naturally this is shown as duplicity and transgression to the audience.

\* Emphasizes horrors. Great deal of naturalism. Tends to see the corruption and the loss of human values. He does not appear to believe in human justice and in the Institutions. In *The Duchess of Malfi*, the tyrants are powerful and hold important offices in public life. Their revenge is not conventional. It appears to be no moral justification for them to carry it out. The avengers are villains, thoroughly Machiavellian and rudderless. The Cardinal, the corrupt Church, even poisons his mistress Julia. Ferdinand is uncontrollably violent and brutal. (Anti-aristocratic values)

\* Antonio appears as a good and honest man who is genuinely in love with the Duchess but is inefficient and inadequate to control the situation. He is deprived of heroic qualities because of his status.

To speak from a place of independence, to be a subject, is to personate masculine virtue affirms Belsey (p.181). Elizabeth I repeatedly attempted to appropriate masculine identity in order to consolidate authority but she oscillated between her status as honorary man and weak female, a strategy to appropriate the public spaces denied to women and repudiate the private realm allocated to them. (Loomba p.110) Similar strategic employment of both masculine virtue and femininity will be noted in the case of Vittoria, speaking in her own defense, does so as both a humble woman and a brave=virtuous man.

Humbly thus,  
Thus low, to the most worthy and respected  
Lieser ambassadors, my modesty  
And womanhood I tender; but withal  
So entangled in a cursed accusation  
That my defence of force like Perseus,  
Must personate masculine virtue.

(III, ii)

Women, like Vittoria, speak with voices which are not their own, are unfixed, inconstant, unable to personate masculine virtue through to the end. The plays move towards increasing female fluidity. Beatrice-Joanna even acknowledges the "giddy turning" inside her (I, i).

## The Jewel at Home.

In Breton's quote as in the quote of the book of Proverbs we find women's virtues associated to jewels. Leantio calls Bianca "most unvalued'st purchase, matchless jewel" "best piece of theft" (Actus I. Scene i). Vittoria in *The White Devil* is referred to as "guilty counterfeited coin" (Actus III. Scene ii).

The repeated comparisons in the literature of the period of woman to gold, jewels, money and property point to the view of women as merchandise. Jardine points out in page 163 that any marriageable well-born woman possessed a number of attributes which gave her a "value": her dowry prospects, her title, her looks, her ability to produce heirs, above all her virginity and chastity which can be traced back to Queen Elizabeth I, conveniently associated with the Virgin Mary when the Anglican Reformation had technically outlawed her worship. *Once worth and intrinsic value are separated, says Jardine, and worth becomes "cash value", beauty and intrinsic virtue can no longer be comfortably assumed to go hand in hand.*

Loomba adds that these comparisons express also a notion of the unstable nature of wealth and women. "Images comparing women to property evoke the potential loss of both". (Loomba p.68) These concepts are obviously linked to the medieval notion of female changeability.

As female mobility increased in the transition from feudalism to capitalism (separation of home and workplace) and urbanization granted women new spaces, females appeared less confined. Physical and conceptual female mobility is emphasized by male characters who feel it a threat.

Bianca's sexual transgression in *Women Beware Women* is mapped in terms of her literal movement away from the home. *"She was but one day abroad, but ever since/She's grown so cutted, there's no speaking to her"* (Actus III, Scene i) Leantio and Bianca are initially a successful version of Romeo and Juliet. Their runaway marriage is evoked by both as an end to movement, a stability which Bianca breaks first. Although her propensity to sin is socially induced, she is raped, she is seen as both victim and participant, she shows a persistent discontinuity of behavior.

For Loomba patriarchal thought incorporates the possibility of females movement in order to control it, investing women's stability with moral values. Thus the wandering woman is evil, and Loomba affirms it is no accident that witches are mobile, riding through the air on broomsticks. Such an effort becomes particularly imperative in the context of Renaissance politics and its obsession with change. Bosola, the Cardinal, Flamineo, Alsemero, DeFlores are all preoccupied with the changeability of women.

This changeability is portrayed in *The Changeling* in the figure of Beatrice-Joanna. Her name indicates a dual personality: Beatrice is a Petrarchan name meaning purity and recalling Dante's chaste passion, and Joanna was apparently one of the commonest names among servant girls at the time. Her initial role is that of goddess: tragically unaware of her sexual vulnerability, arrogantly sheltering behind her spoilt and privileged upbringing that nourishes an illusion of power, and callous with all the innocence of her own distance from violence. Alsemero and Beatrice's relationship opens in a temple with promises of everlasting love. Like with Bianca, with Beatrice-Joanna the process of coercion is never fully outside her. She had declared both undying love for Alsemero and eternal hatred of DeFlores, but then: *"I'm forc'd to love thee now,/Cause thou provid'st so carefully for my honour"*. (V. i) Both naivety and arrogance are stripped from her by DeFlores's reminder that as a woman she is displaced from the privileges of her own class: *Push! Fly not to your birth, but settle you/In what the act has made you, y're no more now./ You must forget your parentage to me:/ Y'are the deed's creature; by that name/You lose your first condition, and I challenge you,/As peace and innocency has turn'd you out,/And made you one with me.* (Actus III, scene iv)

"A beautiful woman is for the most part costly and no good housewife" (Joseph Swetnam, The Arraignment of Lewde Women, 1615)

Jardine points out that decorativeness of all court dress, manners and behavior in this period is a signal of role loss. "*She is object not subject in the game of court politics*". (Jardine, p.56) "*Dress, in the early modern period, was regulated by rank, not by income.*" (Jardine p.141) There was actual legislation to ensure that burghers could not dress like the gentry. Women's dress was determined by the rank of their husbands. Economic dependence makes women vulnerable to the charge of irresponsible excess in clothing.

In drama, the woman who grasps power at the expense of men, Vittoria in *The White Devil*, Bianca in *Women Beware Women*, is characteristically also of expensive tastes. Vittoria is said to wear "*cloth of tissue*" (Actus II. Scene i) although her husband is a lord of poor fortune. The changed fortunes of both Leantio (lover to the wealthy Livia) and Bianca (mistress of the Duke) are manifested in the following dialogue:

Leantio Y' are richly placed.  
Bianca Methinks y' are wondrous brave, sir  
Leantio A sumptous lodging.  
Bianca Y' have an excellent suit there.  
Leantio A chair of velvet.  
Bianca Is your cloak lined through, sir?  
Leantio Y' are very stately here.  
Bianca Faith something proud, sir.  
Leantio Stay, stay, let's see your cloth-of-silver slippers.  
Bianca Who is your shoemaker? Has made you a neat boot.  
Leantio Will you have a pair? The Duke will lend you spurs.

(Actus IV. Scene i)

It appears that luxury becomes synonymous with lust. Preoccupation with dress was significant in a period when the King's clothes became increasingly elaborate and extravagant (James I had some homosexual traits). Moralists showed increasing alarm when the distinctions between male and female dress were being eroded. The taking of female parts by boy players in drama created considerable moral uneasiness.

The loneliness of the female tragic hero in Renaissance plays sprouts, I think, from the conflicting tensions within women, their lack of subject-identification. Isolation is not simply the result of their confinement or lack of companionship. Recurrent mistress-maid friendships in Renaissance drama such as Beatrice-Joanna and Diaphanta, *The Duchess and Cariola*, based on the concept of feudal loyalty, reflect the tensions of a world where all "natural" ties are fast eroding, a world of individuality. They emphasize women's desperate loneliness. Female solidarity is threatened in *Women Beware Women* when Livia acts on behalf of men as procuress so that Bianca's last words are that "*like our sex, we have no enemy*" (Actus V, scene ii)

The discontinuity of Jacobean heroines has long presented a critical puzzle, as Belsey indicates. (*The Subject of Tragedy*, p.160).

Consolidation. The politics of violence.

Loomba believes that violence against women is part of all patriarchal societies but it escalates during transitional phases of changing and conflicting ideologies. At such times violence appears necessary for patriarchal control. Women in Jacobean tragedy are not simply killed, but tortured by a combination of familial, judicial and religious authorities. Many end up begging for death as merciful release: "*Yes, I shall welcome death/As Princes do some great Ambassadors*", says Vittoria (Actus V Scene vi). The Duchess of

Malfi affirms that "It is some mercy, when men kill with speed". (Actus IV scene i)

By making women demand their punishment, are the playwrights seeking to incorporate violence committed on the female body into her own guilt and thus blur the edge of the sexual confrontation? (Loomba, p.80)

The fact that they are forced to experience themselves only in relation to men leaves them with the dichotomies of virgin/whore, intellect/body, reproductive vessel/decorative object. Stereotypes such as saintly, submissive, faithful, forgiving, silent/predatory, dominating, lustful, destructive, voluble define what the social body, a masculine one, endorses and what it wants to exclude.

Loomba sees in the non-linear, non-climatic, episodic structure of the plays a disclosure of the notion of identity and social relations. She explains how Bianca's rape scene in *Women Beware Women* is carefully framed within the chess game, and becomes associated to a courtly game. In *The White Devil* characters repeatedly overhear, watch and secretly observe one another, offering the audience different perspectives. Also the tradition of the play with the play works in the same way. Relationships are not private. Vittoria "private" interchange with Brachiano (I. ii) is watched by Zanche, Flamineo and Cornelia. The interplay of private and public is the theme of the play (Loomb p.124)

Lawyer My lord Duke and she have been very private  
Flamineo You are a dull ass; 'tis threat'ned they have been very public. (III.i)

All these considerations indicate that the foundations of order, in the Jacobean Age were crucially dependent on gender distinctions. This is clearly reflected in the drama of the age, which places gender issues on stage. In this drama, we find an extraordinary abundance of discourses about masculinity and femininity, which proves that gender ambiguity was probably the most significant force in the production of Renaissance Tragedy. In reading these tragedies we get the impression that characters constantly need to reassert their sexuality by means of their attitudes, utterances and silences. These texts are usually full of sexual connotations which seek to differentiate the genders with a clear moral intention. In Renaissance tragedy, women were constructed as instigators of transgression, it was they who took tragic decisions and men who carried out the tragic action. Masculine transgressions were thus frequently built in a way that the guilt was displaced onto women in the narrative.

In these plays, female characters were typically subdued in the tragic action, although they shone in some scenes where, as we have previously stated, they were the catalysts of the tragic action (Lady Macbeth, Cordelia...), their position within the dramatic action was, as that of Ophelia, commonly deprived of any protagonism. At the same time, in these tragedies, female characters tended to be identified with emotion, while male ones were typically identified with authority. It was precisely the inversion of these roles, i.e. the emotive force of some male characters, and the sense of self-assurance of some female ones, what brought a certain sexual ambiguity to the texts. This inversion is also present in Jacobean tragedy, but here, the very fact that we have female characters on stage, which ironically are still played by boys, is specially meaningful.

In Webster's most popular tragedy, gender is constructed by contrast between juxtaposed characters. Thus, Vittoria is constructed in terms of Isabella, Cornelia and Zanche. Vittoria's marvelous and courageous self-assertion in the memorable scene of her arraignment, contrast with the meek, total-submissive and scarifying Isabella; with the inflexible moralist Cornelia; and with her shadow side Zanche, the reckless pursuer of sexual gratification. Male characters are also juxtaposed, though their contrasts are not as well-defined as those between female ones, it is clear that Flamineo is constructed in terms of Brachiano, Camillo and Marcello; and Giovanni in terms of Lodovico, Francisco and Monticelso. Flamineo, the role-player par excellence, whose intellectual acuteness and caustic wit enables him to change his manner and tone with brilliant virtuosity to suit every occasion, contrast with the virile, tyrannical,

unscrupulous Brachiano; with the foolish and ridiculous Camillo, and with the innocent, virtuous and well-meaning Marcello. Giovanni, presented as an innocent figure escaping the corruption of his world, contrast with the bloodthirsty and savage Lodovico; with the controlling, phlegmatic and scheming Francisco, and with the malicious and hypocritical Monticelso.

Thus, there is a certain gradation within the femininity and masculinity of the characters, which is altered by each of their attitudes during the dramatic action of the play, so that in one act, or even in one scene, they act according to what the audience would expect from their gender, but in the next one, they overact, thereby braking with the principles imposed by society as the proper behavior for their sex. It is precisely this polarization what brings gender ambiguity to their characterization. This also produces an effect of great psychological realism, which is far in advance of Webster's time.

Another way of constructing gender in the play, is by the misogynous discourse of its male characters, with which we shall deal in the next section, and by the utterances and silences of its female ones. Female characterization is, as we have seen, completely referential, i.e. female characters don't speak too much, just because within that society a talkative woman was immediately branded "unchaste", that's why we don't find Ophelia or Cordelia pronouncing long speeches, nor brilliant soliloquies, their utterances are typically scanty and indirect. But in "The White Devil", we find a woman who is courageous enough, not only to speak, but to dominate and defy others by means of her brilliant eloquence. Her amazing display of wit and persuasion while facing her accusers, tempting her beholders to accept without question her version of events, is, from seventeenth century standards, proper to a man and not frequent in a woman, who should, in such a situation, feel abashed if not abased. This is noticed by Vittoria herself, who finds her defense "must personate masculine virtue" (III.ii.135), i.e. has to be benefited with a voice. The persuasive power of her discourse is such, that she even manages to rise our sympathies, though in her words, we immediately sense attraction and criminality in dangerous Jekyll-Hyde-like conjunction. Thus, her loquacity brings gender ambiguity to her characterization. If we look at the way characters die and how they confront their deaths, we also find a certain ambiguity which affects their sexual identities, for male characters, as Brachiano and Camillo, are dispatched by methods as poisoning and strangling, usually used in drama, to kill women, because of their less crudity, whereas female characters in the play, die crude and valiant deaths, Vittoria and Zanche are stabbed by the conspirators just as Flamineo. All these considerations show that Webster organizes his text around gender oppositions.

#### WHO'S THIS?. A TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF GENDER IN "THE WHITE DEVIL".

##### SENTENCE TYPE: THE IMPERATIVE.

This mode of discourse typically indicates hierarchiacal relationships, its use is associated with power and authority, so that those characters which are at the top of the social scale, namely Monticelso in his role as Cardinal, and afterwards as Pope, and Francisco as the overruling Duke, are the ones who more extensively use it. By using an imperative, what we do is to get somebody to do something or to modify her/his behaviour. So this is a powerful device to articulate gender oppositions in drama. But, as a perusal of "The White Devil" clearly shows, the use of the imperative is, in this play, totally ineffectual. Only orders which are given to attendants seem to be effective, those between the main characters are immediately ignored or reinterpreted; for example, at the beginning of the text, when Gasparo and Antonelli use the imperative to make Lodovico amend himself and admit his wrongdoings, he takes their words as "conforts" (I.i.50). Sometimes the imperative is more a counsel than a command, as when Flamineo mocks Camillo over Vittoria, advising him to gain his own purposes:

"Be wise: I will make you friends and you shall go to bed together; marry look you, it shall not be your seeking, do you stand upon that by any means; walk you aloof, I would not have you seen in't". (I.ii.119-122).

Other times, the use of the imperative is so inadequate that it becomes a supplication, for instance when Brachiano addresses Vittoria with the words of a courteous lover:

"Let me into your bosom happy lady,  
Pour out instead of eloquence my vow;  
Loose me not madam...". (I.ii.204-6).

The imperative may even have the form of a prophetic curse, as when Cornelia, trying to make Vittoria behave, to abandon her adulterous relationship with Brachiano, only succeeds in scaring her:

"If thou dishonour thus thy husband's bed,  
Be thy life short as are the funeral tears  
In great men's".  
...May'st thou be cursied during his short breath  
And pitied like a wetch after his death".  
(I.ii.292-8).

The imperative does not serve to indicate the submission of a wife to her husband, as shown by Isabella's recurrent refusals to Brachiano:

Brachiano: Take your chamber.  
Isabella: Nay my dear lord, I will not have you angry.  
(I.i.154-5).  
Brachiano: No more; go, go, complain to the great Duke.  
Isabella: No my dear lord, you shall have present witness  
How I'll work ...  
(I.i.214-5).

It may even rise irony when the character to which it is directed answers in blatant refusal:  
Marcello: Come, come.  
Flamineo: When age shall turn thee  
White as a blooming hawthorn".  
(III.i.56-8).

Or it may even be so ineffective, that it is immediately requited, as when Monticelso forbids Brachiano the entrance into the courtroom:

Monticelso: Forbear my lord, here is no place assign'd you.  
Brachiano: Forbear your kindness: an unbidden guest...  
(III.ii.1-5).

But surely the most clear example of the ineffectual use of the imperative, is provided by Vittoria, in the scene of her arraignment, where authority is inverted, and the accused turned accuser:

Vittoria: ..."If you be my accuser  
Pray cease to be my judge, come from the bench,  
Give in your evidence 'gainst me, and let these  
Be moderators".  
(III.ii.224-6).

So Webster's use of the imperative in this play, signals the crisis of authority and values which was really taking place at that time, to such an extent, that even sexual identities were confused; and it is one of the most powerful indicators of gender ambiguity in the play.

## RHETORICAL FIGURES

### METAPHORE AND SIMILE

These two, are by far, the most recurrent devices exploited by Webster, who shifts from one into the other, for the articulation of gender. Although the difference between these rhetorical figures is not always clear, metaphor implies a comparison between different ideas or phenomena by fusing them together so that one thing is described as being another thing; while simile interprets one phenomenon in terms of another by explicit comparison of similarities between them.

Both metaphor and simile are linguistic and cognitive devices by which we try to gain control of the unknown, to deprive it of all distressing elements and make it apprehensible just by naming it. Again there is a difference between them in their use, for using metaphor means being closer to the understanding and assimilation of the unknown, whereas using simile we are a step further from the comprehension of obscure phenomena.

The communicative contexts in which these devices occur, are also very similar, a character will typically use metaphor or simile, when trying to define something she/he cannot fully understand; but he may also employ them to provoke emotional responses, or even for ironic purposes. As T.S.Eliot remarked in one of his lucid essays, Webster's use of language affords some close comparisons with that of the metaphysical poets. His plays present a very complex imagery in the form of impressive and powerfully evocative words, which are discarded once their immediate effect has registered. But perhaps what is more striking in his extensive use of these devices, is their power to reflect the inner natures of his characters, so that, we can say, that the whole play could be taken as an extended metaphor of the psyche of its main characters.

A mere browsing of the text, clearly shows that the two characters with which Webster more recurrently employs these devices, are Flamineo and Monticelso. Flamineo, in his roles as pander, malcontent, and all-licensed fool, defines gender and class boundaries by his extensive use of a metaphorical language, in which he finds an excellent tool to challenge and mock. He is a kind of philosopher into the secret meanings of life; at the same time, he is the character who seems to be more aware of the incongruities of his world, and of the intimate connection between the economic and the sexual. The metaphor and similes with which he abuses Camillo, making cynical comments on his lack of virility, have usually, things as their vehicles, which as things, are genderless:

Metaphores

..."**the great barriers** moulted not more feathers than he hath shed hairs". (I.ii.29-30).

..."**a goodly foil**, well set out"...(I.ii.142-2).

similes

..."like **a Dutch doublet** all his back is shrunk into his breeches". (I.ii.34-5).

..."like **the fire at the glass-house**"...(I.ii.137).

In his jests on Vittoria's foolish and impotent husband, he also compares him to a series of animals which sex, because they are generic, is not stated:

metaphores

..."**an ass** in's foot-cloth". (I.ii.52).

..."**a capon** already". (I.ii.127).

..."**a maggot**". (I.ii.141).

All these examples create a certain gender ambiguity around Camillo, who is thus made an anomalous character. Flamineo's satirical comparisons sometimes serve to demystify masculinity and male honor, for example when he mocks his brother Marcello, by the simile:

Flamineo: Hum! thou art a soldier.

Followest the great Duke, feddest his  
victories,

As **witches** do their serviceable spirits,

Even with thy prodigal blood, what has got?"  
(III.i.39-42).

What we've told about Flamineo's metaphorical language, applies to his comments on Vittoria:  
Metaphore

..."**a false stone**, yon **counterfeit diamond**". (I.ii.142).

simile

..."like **a hound** in leon at your heels" (I.ii.81).

These comparisons graphically exemplify her ambivalent sexual and moral nature, her mutability.

Monticelso, himself a metaphor of malice and hypocrisy, is, together with Francisco and Flamineo, responsible for the misogynous discourse of the play. His long disquisition on whores, serves to construct female characters as opposed to male ones. Strangely enough, at the end of his long tirade, full of metaphors, against unchaste women, he uses a simile, by which the Cardinal compares a whore with a counterfeit coin, presumably trying to intensify the effect of his previous comparisons. Monticelso, by means of an impressive metaphorical language, identifies Vittoria with the devil:

Monticelso: ... "I am resolved  
Were there a second paradise to lose,  
This devil would betray it".  
(III.ii.67-9).

His attitude, as noticed by Vittoria herself, is not that of a Cardinal. In his severe accusations against her, he makes obscene remarks by using metaphors with obvious sexual connotations.

Vittoria's metaphorical use of language is no less impressive. The comparisons with which she wards off Monticelso's attacks, defending her personal integrity and individuality, show great imaginative energy, as those she applies to herself protesting her femininity:

Vittoria: "Condemn you me for that the Duke did lose me?  
So may you blame **some fair and crystal river**  
For that some melancholic distracted man  
Hath drown'd himself in't".  
(III.ii.202-5).

Her dream is in itself an extended metaphor. The vehicles she uses for the tenors implied, are all genderless ("...**a goodly yew-tree** spread **her large root**"..."**a withered blackthorn**..." (I.ii.230-253). If we assume the yew-tree to be Brachiano who is, as hinted by the text, to get rid of his Duchess and Vittoria's husband, though an exact explanation of the dream is impossible; again we find sexual ambiguity, caused by the possessive feminine "her", which makes direct reference to the yew, and so to Brachiano himself.

Comparisons are also a powerful device by which characters assert their sexuality. Brachiano provides an instance of this use when, in a scene where he threatens and defies Francisco, in a demonstration of power, he says:

Brachiano: "Have you proclaimed a triumph that you bait **A lion** thus?". (II.i. 82).

He is also the one who introduces the key-metaphors which recur in the text: those of hawking, jewels and diamonds, and horse-riding, which have obvious sexual connotations.:

Brachiano: "Do not like **young hawks** fetch **a course** about your **some flies** fair and for you". (II.i.6-7).

Thus, as proved by the evidence found in the text, and the strong sexual connotations of its complex

and striking imagery, metaphor and simile are the most powerful devices for the encoding of gender and gender ambiguity in "The White Devil". In fact the antithetical title is ambiguous if we identify the devil with Vittoria, for, in popular iconography, the devil is represented as a man with horns, cloven hoofs, and tail.

## SYLLEPSIS

Syllepsis is a rhetorical device which implies a metaphorical use of language, in which the vehicle of the comparison is the item which brings about ambiguity in meaning, and the tenor, which is not stated, one of the several meanings connoted by the vehicle. It is equivalent to a "pun" or "double entendre", which are commonly defined as "play on words". This is usually employed for comic, ironic or witty purposes, shearing in some respect, the attributes of metaphor and ambiguity. Of all the rhetorical devices exploited by Webster in "The White Devil", syllepsis is the one which has stronger sexual connotations. It normally appears in the form of obscene remarks by which a character mocks another one by hinting at some flaw in her/his sexual configuration; for instance, in Flamineo's sempiternal abuses on Camillo when he promises him he will use all his tricks to have Vittoria back on his bed:

Flamineo: ... "With a relish as curious as vintner going to taste new wine. I am opening your **case** hard.

Camillo: A virtuous brother, o' my credit.

Flamineo: He will give thee **a ring** with **a philosopher stone** in it".

(I.ii. 147-150).

We can even find an extended or persistent pun as in:

Flamineo: ...How now brother,

What, **travelling** to bed to your kind wife?

Camillo: I assure you brother, no. My voyage lies

More northerly, in a far colder clime;

I do not well remember, I protest

When I last lay with her.

Flamineo: Strange you should lose your **count**.

Camillo: We never lay together but ere morning

There grow **a flaw** between us.

Flamineo: 'T had been your fault

To have **made up that flaw**.

(I.ii.52-60)

But this device is not only used by low-class characters with which it is typically associated, upper-classes also participate in this depraved discourse, as is the case with Monticelso, who in his double role as judge and accuser, hinting at Vittoria's lasciviousness and promiscuity, asserts:

Monticelso: "Observe this creature here my honoured

lords,

A woman of a most prodigious **spirit**

In her **effected**".

(III.ii.57-9).

Or when Francisco jests on Giovanni's fondness for cavalry:

Francisco: What, practising your **pike** so young, fair coz?. (III.I.46).

The whole play is full with terms which always have obvious sexual implications, in fact words as "sword", "pistols", "arrow"...which recur once and again, could be taken as symbols of power and authority, and of its counterpart in those days, masculinity. Within this confusing, chaotic and ambiguous world, we find at least, an extremely effective device to codify sexual difference in the text.

## PLORE

Commonly defined as the repetition of a word within same clause or line. Plore is a rhetorical device which has a strong connotative value. As stated in our introduction, female characters were usually identified with emotion, whereas male ones were identified with authority. Plore is used in the play to describe the absolute state of despair, of hopelessness, to which some characters, generally the less self-assertive and psychologically stable, are subject. Cornelia is the one who provides more examples of this use. The device is very appropriate to portrait the feelings of a woman who pours her maternal lamentations at the loss of her child:

Cornelia: "O **you abuse me, you abuse me, you abuse me.**

How many have gone away thus for lack of tendance, **rear up's head, rear up's head.**

His bleeding inward will kill him".

(V.ii.31-34).

"**He lies, he lies,** he did not **kill him:** these                    have **kill'd him...**".

(V.i.48-9).

But while in this episode Cornelia typifies the all-loving mother, the reader cannot forget that other in which she cursed her daughter prophesizing her early death and wished she hadn't given birth to Flamineo. All these attitudes are very far from the one previously described. Thus, plore contributes to her ambivalent characterization, which is still more ambiguous when, later on she presumably tries to kill Flamineo.

Vittoria provides another interesting instance of the use of this device when, after receiving the sentence, she, in a state of furious impotence, screams:

Vittoria: "**A rape, a rape!**". (III.ii. 273).

But again a certain gender ambiguity is raised by the use of plore by some male characters as Brachiano, who, on receiving death by the hands of his cruel murderers, utters a shrieking dramatically ironic shout which reminds us of those of Clarence in Richard III:

Brachiano: "**Vittoria! Vittoria!**".(V.iii.169).

And even before that, in his last and madful "conversation" with Vittoria, which has evident echoes from King Lear:

Brachiano: "**Nothing?. Rare! Nothing!**". (V.III.109).

## STICHOMYTHIA

A rhetorical device in the form of a dialogue in alternative lines giving a sense of rapid but controlled argument between two characters, stichomythia normally indicates the preponderance in discourse of the second character which is also the stronger. This device is often used in tragedy as a means to move the audience's affections towards a certain character, which paradoxically enough, is able to maintain her/his authority in a conflictive situation. Stichomythia usually occurs in scenes which are central to the development of the tragic action. For instance, in IV.ii.131--9, where Vittoria, in violent quarrel with Brachiano which reveals their mutual distrust and antagonism, and attempting to recover his affections by feigning the attitude of a sweet girl who is rejected by her lover, resorts to crying and throws herself upon a bed; but she immediately recovers her personal integrity and promptly and acidly answers Brachiano's compliments, in a way which remind us of that other dialogue between Lady Anne and Richard III. Shifting to a more authoritative attitude by refusing to accept Brachiano's regrets, Vittoria consciously or unconsciously maintains an ambivalent behavior which affects her sexual characterization.

Another occurrence of this device, is found in the scene of her arraignment, where confronting Monticelso's bitterness, she courageously dismisses his accusations and still is capable of making some ironic comments:

Vittoria: "I fain would know if you have your salvation

By patent, that you proceed thus.

Monticelso: Away with her- Take her hence.

Vittoria: A rape, a rape!  
 Monticelso: How?  
 Vittoria: Yes; you have ravish'd justice,  
                   Forc'd her to do your pleasure".  
                   (III.ii.269-277).

So stichomythia is used by Webster as a useful rhetorical device to indicate not only authority, but also that shifting of attitudes and emotions of his characters, which makes them sexually and morally ambiguous.

## GENERIC FORM

### SENTENTIAE

Also known as maxim or aphorism, sententiae means the shaping of experience into proverbial moral or philosophical axioms. Webster was very fond of this generic form, which he mostly derived from the Anglo-Saxon tradition, in direct contrast to other playwrights who, as Marston, usually quoted from classic texts. Sententiae contains one or more comparisons, thus implying a metaphorical use of language. This device is used mostly by male characters which, by using it, try to reach for the assurance and command over experience, to seek comfort and security in proverbial wisdom, something which the audience knows to be but a vain illusion, so that the use of sententiae affords a powerful dramatic irony, an ironic comment on the tragic action of the play.

With the exception of Francisco, who grows into a most cunning machiavel controlling the situation from the moment he conceives his revenge, the rest of the characters seem insecure, afraid of something unknown which lurks in the shadows ready to prey on them. Besides showing the painful vulnerability of characters, sententiae also serves to expose the limits of their perception. Flamineo's extensive use of sententiae indicates his lack of self-assertion. Sententiae usually appears in the form of a couplet or latinism, and has a clear moral intention. It can serve to open a scene by preparing the audience to what is to follow, for instance:

"We endure the strokes like anvils or hard steel  
 Till pain itself make us no pain to feel".  
                   (III.iii.1).

Or to close it, to sum up the action of a whole scene and indicate a new thing is to follow, as Lodovico's hyperbolic:

"There's but the Furies found in spacious hell  
 But in a great man's breaths three thousand dwell".  
                   (IV.iii.151-2).

Or to leave the audience in suspense of what is announced, as Zanche's beautiful:

"Now blame me that this passion I reveal  
 Lovers die inward that their flames conceal".  
                   (V.i.231-2).

Sententiae serves thus as a device to describe the inner and outer natures of the characters, and so is a resourceful means to codify gender in the text.

As stated in our introduction, this paper was not intended to be a complete account of all the communicative and stylistic figures exploited by Webster for the articulation of gender in "The White Devil", reasons of space and time don't let us consider others as interrogation, negativity, atheism or even the generic form known as fable, which are equally relevant for the textual study of gender in the play, I hope the evidence found in the text proves that Webster situates gender issues at the center of its structure and that of his play

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