Shakespeare's Italy
Functions of Italian locations in Renaissance drama

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ship of the supposed statue in Paulina’s chapel and praise of its sculptor’s art of extreme realism may be due to Shakespeare’s having heard tell that, in the early seventeenth century, intensely naturalistic life-size statuary flourished in towns in Lombardy and Piedmont, when they were likely to be seen by travellers and to give them their first impressions of the wonders of contemporary Italian artistry’ (p. 48). See also L. Barkan, ‘Living sculptures: Ovid, Michelangelo, and The Winter’s Tale,’ ELH, 48, 4, 1981, pp. 639–67; Andrew Gurr, ‘The bear, the statue, and hysteria in The Winter’s Tale,’ Shakespeare Quarterly, 34, 4, 1983, pp. 420–5.

Howard Felperin, in Shakespearean Romance, Princeton, 1972, has significantly pointed out: “That art, as Paulina makes clear, requires that “You do awake your faith” (V.iii.94–5); the faith which now revives Hermione as its absence had previously “killed” her, but also the imaginative faith by which the entire scene works on the stage […] by which we “credit [this] relation”, in Pericles’ phrase, “to points that seem impossible” even as we realize that there is no statue, that the art itself is nature, and that all can be rationally explained’ (p. 242).


The rhetoric of poison in John Webster’s Italianate plays

Mariangela Tempera

‘Italian sallet’

An accomplished craftsman on the Jacobean stage, John Webster commands critical attention for a very limited corpus of plays ascribable entirely to his hand: two tragedies and a tragicomedy, all set in Italy and written according to the same highly effective, though perhaps objectionable, formula. Even for an age that took a liberal view of plagiarism, Webster appears, in fact, to be unique in his extensive use of other people’s materials. The identification of specific sources for the vast majority of his dazzling lines has left critics in some doubt as to how the literary quality of his work should be evaluated. No such doubt, however, detracts from the appreciation that theatre audiences have repeatedly shown for The White Devil (1612) and The Duchess of Malfi (1614). No matter how infuriatingly derivative some professional readers may find his plays, or how puzzling some theatre historians may find his mixture of realism and allegory, it would take a very dull production indeed to alienate the favour of Webster’s audience.

Although ambition urged him to write with the praise of a sophisticated élite in mind, he had the talent of the professional for giving any audience what it wanted, in terms of plot, language and setting. At a time when Italian settings were fashionable, Webster promptly obliged, with a gusto that set his efforts apart from those of his contemporaries.

While it would be unwarranted to read into his settings a more than superficial familiarity with the Italian Renaissance, it would be equally unfair to judge his choice of location as purely instrumental, and to dismiss his forays into the dark deeds of the Italian aristocracy
as nothing but a ploy to comment on the contemporary London scene without running foul of censorship. After all, he introduced an aristocracy whose control over its possessions and whose relative freedom from central authority were much greater than those of their English counterparts. Brachiano and the Duchess of Malfi, hardly the highest ranking among Italian aristocrats, ruled their microcosms with a degree of autonomy that, in England, could only be compared to the king’s. The higher authority that finally brought them down was dispersed among degrees of secular and religious power that were not necessarily embodied in a single person. The absence of central authority further increases the malleability of the image, for it was only in a cultural sense that Italy was a “country” at all.\

The correspondence between Renaissance Italy and Jacobean England suddenly became relevant when a different class of characters entered the picture: the ‘aspiring gentry’, vying for office and status. Their plight was familiar to an English audience, and Webster turned them into the new protagonists of his stage. In a context of aristocratic hierarchy, he demands the deepest attention be given to those most out of place in this hierarchy, and least definable in terms of it. Flammeo’s Italianate ways turned what could have been a risky exposure of the values of Jacobean society into a harmless variation on an easily identifiable stock-character of the London stage – the machiavel. The extensive bibliography devoted to the misapprehension of Machiavelli’s thought in England fully accounts for Webster’s corrupt and equivocal courtiers. Stage representations of Italian moral decadence were rooted in historical fact: “The annals of the Italian age of despots describe tyrannies and atrocities, plots and revolts, which make the inventions of the Jacobean rather pedestrian.” They fed on an extensive body of travel literature relating the experience of English travellers on the Continent. Whether widely circulated or destined for a small circle of friends, such accounts tended to confirm and reinforce the opinion of Italy that the English had formed from historical and literary sources. The playwrights offered them a redefinition of ‘revenge’ that allowed them to revamp a tired cliché:

But the Italyans being still as impatient as euer to bear the least injurie, and hauing gotten this fayre pretence to avoyde equal Combatts [ ... ] from that tyne have exercised all revengevs vpon all advantages, of nombers, of weapons, and of places, with many followers and most deadly weapons asayling their enemies, though vnarmed and alone yea naked in bed and perhaps sleeping.\

Revenge for futile reasons, revenge delayed and often delegated to accomplices, became a standard feature of theatrical plots that endlessly combined fragments from sources where fact mixed with fiction:

For poysons the Italians skill in making and putting them to vse hath beeue long since tred, to the perishing of kings and Emperours by those deadly potions givne to them in the very Chalice mingled with the very precious blood of our Redeemer. [...]

In our tyne, it seemes the Art of Poysoning is reputed in Italy worthy of Princes practice.\

The traveller lent the credibility of experience to the sort of tale that would constitute the subject-matter of novelle and that would combine two basic ingredients of the Italian plot: poison and religion.

Jacobean censorship, carefully picking its way among religious factions, and required to assist the king on improving relationships with Continental powers, would not have welcomed an open indictment of Catholicism as such, but it had no objection to the exposure of the worst excesses of the Roman clergy. The popular drama, therefore, was ‘antipapal without being militantly anticatholic’. In Webster’s plays, the fragmented aristocracy and the aspiring gentry competed with a degraded political hierarchy in plotting and acting out deeds of ruthless violence with all the devious ingenuity that the Jacobean considered typically Italian. It was as if the Elizabethan infatuation with the Italian Renaissance had infected the nation with a ‘tingering poison’, whose effect was finally becoming apparent under King James. This dismal picture of Italian mores distinctly failed to impress at least one viewer:

Another time they represented the pomp of a Cardinal in his identical robes of state, very handsome and costly, and accompanied by his attendants, with an altar raised on the stage, where he pretended to perform service, ordering a procession. He then reappeared familiarly with a concubine in public. He played the part of administering poison to his sister upon a point of honour, and moreover, of going into battle, having first gravely deposited his Cardinal’s robes on the altar through the agency of his chaplains. Last of all, he had himself girded with a sword and put on his scarf with the best imaginable grace. All this they do in derision of ecclesiastical pomp which in this kingdom is scorned and hated mortally.
Poisoned kisses and poisoned fantasies

Carlola's promise to conceal the Duchess's secret 'As warily as those that trade in poison / Keep poison from their children' (Duchess of Malfi, I.i.353–4) opens up a perspective of awareness of the danger of poison and care in its handling that is belied by the three plots. Quite a few characters have ready access to poison, are familiar with its ingredients and effects, and put it, or at least fantasise about putting it, to rather extravagant uses. Webster alerts his audience not only to the danger of being unwittingly poisoned but even to the disquieting possibility of being unwitting poisoners: when the Duchess is violently sick after eating Bosola's apricots, he himself wonders whether they may not have been poisoned.

Death by poison is staged three times in Webster's tragedies, in ways that confirm the playwright's skill in including the audience's reaction into the overall effect of a scene. Isabella's and Brachiano's deaths are more than announced: the poisoned picture and the poisoned beaver are left on stage as a focus for the attention of an audience that is led to share the poisoners' thrill in watching, from a safe distance, the victims' fatal progress towards their deathtraps. It is a staging that plays on the element which, in England, made death by poison especially repulsive to the commonly accepted code of revenge and compelled public opinion to dismiss it as yet another damnable Italian practice: the surreptitiousness of the action and the comparative safety of a murderer who need never confront his target.

The audience which, in The White Devil, enjoys the vicarious thrill of sharing the murderer's knowledge of things to come is made to experience, in The Duchess of Malfi, the victim's point of view: the swiftness of the Cardinal's reaction to his lover's importunate questioning catches Julia and the audience completely unawares, and creates a context where suspense is forgone in favour of sudden shock. The indifference of the characters to violent death and their appreciation for the successful murderer are well conveyed by Bosola's comment to Julia's dying words: 'O foolish woman / Couldst not thou have poison'd him?' (Duchess of Malfi, V.ii.286–7, emphasis mine), a particularly callous reaction that made F. L. Lucas see in the epithet 'not merely the soul of Bosola himself, but all the ruthlessness of Renaissance Italy'.

Isabella's death is presented by means of a Jacobean dumb-show, not re-enacted in the dialogue. The presence of the conjurer brackets
the whole episode in a context of black magic well attuned to the ritual performed by Isabella. In a world that leaves no room for complete innocence, even Isabella, the long-suffering wife, is tainted with sin. While carefully mapping her approach to the fatal picture, the stage directions leave no doubt as to the questionable character of her nightly ritual. After leading a procession to a pagan altar, she worships the painted image of her husband as if it were a holy relic. She dies while committing the sin of idolatry, yet another much-deplored practice of Italian Catholicism.

The uncertainty which at the time surrounded the properties of poison is exploited by Webster, who plays upon a very real fear of his audience's in order to achieve the maximum effect on stage: all it takes to 'catch' death by poison, he seems to imply, is a kiss. In the corrupt world of his plays, even the most commonly staged token of love, reverence and trust can prove to be a fatal weakness. Julia dies of the kiss that should seal her holy oath, Isabella dies of her homage to Brachiano's 'dead shadow', Vittoria may be spared the same fate only because Brachiano prevents her from kissing his poisoned lips. Even Giovanni's regret at not being allowed to kiss his dead mother contributes to the overall impression that the slightest lip contact is enough to spread contagion.

Around these three poisonings and the unnerving dramatisation of the hazardous quality of kisses Webster weaves a complex web of references to the various aspects of the art of poisoning, as it was presented in his Italian sources, and then proceeds to colour the language of his plays further by drawing extensively upon a store of folk beliefs and classical reminiscences, from the 'poison'd darts' which Caesar avoided (Devil's Law-Case, III.i.93) to the 'poisoned herbs of Thessaly' (White Devil, I.i.275) evoked by Cornelia.

Poisoning a religious object which will then attract the lips of the victim is not the most ingenious, nor indeed the most original, practice suggested in Webster's plays (after all, a poisoned crucifix had already been featured in the all-English domesticity of Arden of Feversham). It is, however, the starting point for more daring flights into a nightmare world, where even more fantastical hypotheses are formed (although not actually tested on stage). As Flaminio puts it: 'he will poison a kiss, and was once minded, for his master-piece, because Ireland breeds no poison, to have prepared a deadly vapour in a Spaniard's fart that should have poison'd all Dublin' (White Devil, II.i.800-4). Doctor Julio's extraordinary skill makes receiving a kiss just as risky as giving it, thus further undermining the basis of trust in Webster's portrayal of interpersonal relationships, and contributing to validate a view of the world as a place where human beings should live in fearful dread of all contacts. Refraining from contact is not, however, enough to ensure safety: the bathos of the carnivalesque combines with topicality to inject this sinister tale with the harsh laughter of the grotesque, while, at the same time, establishing a link with London life.

The extravagance of Doctor Julio's reputation is easily topped by Romelio's fantasy of what his disguise as an 'Italianate Jew' will let him achieve:

To have as many several change of faces
As I have seen carved upon one cherrystone;
To wind about a man like rotten ivy,
Eat into him like quicksilver, poison a friend
With pulling but a loose hair from his beard, or give a drench,
He should linger of't nine years, and ne'er complain,
But in the spring and fall, and so the cause
Imputed to the disease natural.

(Devil's Law-Case, III.i.4-11)

The tragicomic mode ensures that Romelio's list of horrors will not have any consequence for the plot, and leaves his Marlovian Jew without anybody to kill. His speech, however, 'compose le portrait du parfait machiavel pour un Jacobéen, c'est-à-dire un Juif italianoisé'. As such, Romelio can indulge in a fantasy of mischief that distills the very essence of duplicity and deviousness: the poisoning of a friend, rather than the dispatching of an estranged partner or an enemy. Webster then plays again to the expectations of his audience by having his character introduce another trait of the Italian stereotype: the delayed revenge that betrays an unforgiving nature. Colourful tales of 'lingering poison' were frequent in literature and chronicles, but the possibility that a deadly substance might either progressively waste the body or lie dormant in the blood for years, and then be the cause of sudden death, resisted effective staging. To overcome this difficulty, Webster creates a lull in the action which offers Romelio the opportunity to sketch his little scenario for murder.

The notion of a 'lingering poison' is so well suited to enhancing the atmosphere of calculating perversion of the Roman Church that the language of the Cardinal goes back to it with relish in the course
of his final confrontation with Julia: she is the ‘lingering consumption’ of which he is about to be cured and, at the same time, the cause of her own ruin, since she chooses to ignore the sinister warning of his words:

Be well advis’d, and think what danger ‘tis
To receive a prince’s secrets: [ ... ] ‘tis a secret
That, like a ling’ring poison, may chance lie
Spread in thy veins, and kill thee seven year hence.

(Duchess of Malfi, V.ii.259–66)

Webster perfects here his portrait of the Cardinal as a Renaissance prince who wields absolute power and who is ultimately as dangerous to his friends as he is to his enemies.

Romelio’s Italianate Jew has unveiled the darkest side of treacherous murder performed with ugly cruelty, but it has also elaborated on the motif of ‘ingenious poisoning’, which the avengers in The White Devil had eagerly explored. Flammeo praises the subtlety of the ‘Machivialian’ (White Devil, V.iii.193) who kills without leaving any trace – ‘As if you had swallow’d down a pound of saffron’ (V.iii.197): elegance of execution is a worthy objective for the refined courtier, and breaking new ground in all fields appears to be the dream of the Renaissance man. It is a notion that Lodovico stretches to include murder:

’T have poison’d his prayer book, or a pair of beads,
The pommel of his saddle, his looking-glass,
Or th’ handle of his racket, – O that, that! [ ... ]
I would have our plot be ingenious,
And have it hereafter recorded for example
Rather than borrow example.

(White Devil, V.i.69–77)

Lodovico’s speech singles out the detail of a hand that is contaminated by poison simply by touching the most common objects: all acts of everyday life are fraught with danger in a world peopled with machiavels. The presence of the theatre audience allows Lodovico to sacrifice his yearning for acknowledgment without defeating the secrecy which should characterise the modus operandi of the poisoner. By the end of the play, he can die a happy man, having committed a series of exquisite murders; or rather, having created them. His pleasure is that of the artist revelling in his imaginative power’. As with the listing of Dr Julio’s exploits, an available link with Webster’s London is the starting point for a flight into fantasy, made possible by the freedom his countrymen associate with visions of Italy, a country whose ‘richer life, with its promise of adventure and blood-shed, gave free vein to their thoughts’.

At one level, Webster encourages the escapism of his audience by letting them glimpse some loose pages from a sort of Italian manual devoted not to courtly manners but to the fine art of poisoning; this experience has the excitement of voyeurism without the discomfort of self-recognition, since it is firmly grounded in a foreign culture, and only very loosely connected with the reality of the audience. At another level, however, he forces the spectators to confront their own reality, by bringing the imagery of poison to bear upon the far more disturbing issue of the frailty and inner corruption of the human body.

Poisoned remedies and poisoned bodies

‘Physicians, that cure poisons, still work / With counterpoisons’ (White Devil, III.iii.64–5): with these words Flammeo aptly brings the doctor’s trade into the same shadowy aura as the poisoner’s. Doctors are stock figures of abuse on the Jacobean stage, and Webster is no more original in his treatment of secondary characters than in his choice of quotations. In his plays, doctors are either introduced to proclaim the venom ‘most deadly’ (White Devil, V.iii.19), and their skills, therefore, quite useless, or to suggest the most far-fetched counterpoisons:

First surgeon: But let’s take heed he do not poison us.
Second surgeon: Oh, I will never eat nor drink with him,
Without unicorn’s horn in a hollow tooth.

(Devil’s Law-Case, III.ii.142–4)

Unicorn’s horn is the same all-powerful antidote that Isabella selected as the only term of comparison fit to describe the force of her love for Brachiano (White Devil, II.i.14–18), but it was already so thoroughly disqualified at the time as to justify its use in the context of a play where ‘the comically inverted health-giving functions of medicine and law reflect a deep-seated social malaise’. Inversion of the function of medicine is not, however, restricted to comic uses: Delio’s suggestion
that the Duchess may secure some privacy by pretending to use 'some prepar’d antidote of her own, / Lest the physicians should repoise
her' (Duchess of Malfi, II.i.171–2) is offered in all seriousness and does
not strike Antonio as particularly far-fetched.

The ingredients of medicine are 'counterpoisons' which are more
likely to kill than to cure, and can satisfy the Jacobean taste for the
grotesque. The apothecary who, allegedly, 'makes alun of his wife's
urine' (Duchess of Malfi, IV.ii.83–4) is akin to Doctor Julio, the 'quack-
salving knave' who specialises in outrageous ways of procuring death.
Only the Duchess, in this respect as in many others, is singled out as
living proof of the potential existence of a more humane world. In her
final recommendations to Cariola - 'I pray thee, Look thou givest my
little boy / Some syrup for his cold' (Duchess of Malfi, IV.ii.203–4) - she
lifts medicine above the disreputable space it occupies in Webster's
plays, and turns it into a healing symbol of motherly affection.

Even the effectiveness of the love-potion, a traditional device of
romance, is questioned, and ultimately denied: while Julia attributes
her sudden passion for Bosola to a 'love-powder' in her drink, Jolenta
firmly states that only drug-induced insanity could make her accept
Ercole as a husband:

Give me some potion to make me mad,
And happily, not knowing what I speak,
I may then consent to't.

(Devil's Law-Case, I.ii.84–6)

Julia implies that potions can have the positive effect of inducing
welcome feelings, but Jolenta exposes the dark side of forced consent,
the loss of self that the potions cause while they work their magic. And
the very notion of 'magic' as part of the effectiveness of potions, the
value of some esoteric knowledge that presides over the mixing of the
drugs and is ultimately responsible for their action is challenged by
Ferdinand:

do you think that herbs or charmes
Can force the will? Some trials have been made
In this foolish practice; but the ingredients
Were lenative poisons, such as are of force
To make the patient mad; and straight the witch
Swears, byequivocation, they are in love.

(Duchess of Malfi, III.i.72–7)

Ferdinand's 'scientific' approach to the causes of love breaks down the
magic potions into ingredients, which are then classified under the
heading 'lenative poisons' - substances used to alter the personality,
and potentially lethal. It is a definition well suited to Jolenta's plea: a
radical change of mind could be brought about only by the action of
chemicals on her body. It also makes Julia's mocking inquiry particular-
ly poignant, in the light of her imminent death.

Webster does not stop at introducing poison into his plays: he
breaks it down into ingredients, taking pleasure in sounding out their
mysterious names, 'mumia', 'alum', 'stibium', 'mercury', 'copperas',
'quicksilver', 'mandragora', 'hemlock', 'catharine' and the like: it is a
litany of evil that finds its way into the text as a counterpoint to the
deranged behaviour of characters whose evil actions are often rooted
in a cluster of natural elements that induce madness and death.

After evoking the deadly ingredients of potions, Webster follows
their devastating progress inside the human body, and borrows terms
from the scientific observation of the effects of poisons and
counterpoisons to introduce imagery that gives full scope to the
speaker's revulsion. Thus, in informing Lodovico of his sudden loss of
favour among his followers, Gasparo introduces, at the very beginning
of The White Devil, a brutally image:

Your followers
Have swallowed you like mumia, and being sick
With such unnatural and horrid physic
Vomit you up 'th' kennel.

(White Devil, I.i.15–18)

But it is in Victoria's defence of her right to be tried in plain English
rather than Latin that the image acquires its most pregnant sense:

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.

(White Devil, III.ii.35–8)

Lawyers and apothecaries share the ability to confuse people with
technicalities; it is only appropriate that their words should materialise
as something that cannot be digested.

Vomiting betrayed the secret action of poison. It signals to the
onlooker that something is rotting under the smooth surface of the body. Therefore, in verbal confrontation, it provides the speaker with a powerful image to reduce the being of the opponent to a receptacle of falsehood, which all the props of the seeming fail to hide. Only when witnessed in the Duchess does vomiting acquire a totally different meaning, which Bosola is quick to guess and turn to his advantage. It signals that her body alone protects a fertile womb, an inner soundness that is at the opposite extreme from the rotten core which is being exposed in other characters.

There is no mention of a life-giving womb in Monticelso's verbal autopsy of Vittoria, who loses all claim to individuality in the all-encompassing identity of whore:

[Whores] are first,
Sweetmeats which rot the eater: in man's nostrill
Poison'd perfumes. They are coz'ning alchemy [...] 
Worse than dead bodies, which are begg'd at gallows [...] 
Take from all beasts, and from all minerals 
Their deadly poison [...] 
I'll find in thee a pothecary's shop 
To sample them all.

(White Devil, III.ii.78–106)

The boy actor that stands to receive the full brunt of Monticelso's words is a neutral dividing line between two excesses: the artifice that makes the whore's appearance 'better than' living bodies, and the inner essence of corruption that makes them 'worse than' dead bodies: 'if Vittoria comes across as "less" (or indeed more) than a "natural woman"', it is because as a literary construction she distils English fantasies of Italianate excesses into an unstable personification of Venetian vice and allure.87

When his language lingers on the surface of Vittoria's beautiful body, Monticelso draws upon the submotif of 'artistic poisoning' for his choice of insulting words, with the 'poisoned perfume' to evoke the poisoned kisses, and to combine with 'sweetmeats' in isolating yet again the orifices as danger points of access to the body. The Cardinal's eloquence is briefly deflected from the whore to her victim, whose contaminated body begins to rot internally. Finally he focuses on the corruption of the whore: her body is dissected as public property and found to be the source of all the ingredients of death that pollute the text. When Brachiano, in his final ravings, refuses 'quails' (or prostitutes) because 'they feed on poison' (White Devil, V.iii.92), the circle is completed: the whore is completely inscribed within the field of poison, she produces deadly substances and is nourished by them.

This degraded view of the female body is not confined to The White Devil, where it would be in keeping with both the title and the unresolvable ambiguity of the heroine (fascinating in her beauty and resilience, but, without a doubt, accessor to the crimes committed around her). It is reiterated by Romelio in his exposure of his mother's duplicity:

Oh the violences of women! 
Why, they are creatures made up and compounded
Of all monsters, poisoned minerals,
And sorcerous herbs that grows.

(Devil's Law-Case, IV.ii.289–92)

While the whore is compared to 'alchemy' that appears to turn base metals into precious ones, women in general are said to be made of 'sorcerous herbs', which connect them with the despised art of witchcraft, so often evoked in the classic portrait of the evil woman.88

This is a cliché that provides Bosola's satirical vein with ample material, in his conventional handling of the theme of the 'lady's closet':

One would suspect it for a shop of witchcraft to find in it the fat of serpents, spawn of snakes, Jew's spittle, and their young children's ordure – and all these for the face [...] 
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.

(Duchess of Malfi, II.i.35–58)

While inner corruption is here extended to all humankind, women are singled out for their redoubtable practice of covering the body with yet more corruption. Once again, we have the sordid ingredients of medicine and witchcraft, combined, for maximum effect, with the Jewish religion, as it is reinvented in the horror stories whispered by people far less cultivated and more impressionable than the disappointed serviceman who voices them in this passage. Webster attributes to Bosola words that are, in content, beneath his intellectual
level, but he formally elevates them by closely following an Italian literary source, Ariosto’s satire, thus deploying them for the general Italianate flavour of the play.

This barren vision of the body as a receptacle for poison is ultimately reaffirmed by Bosola in his reply to the ‘all inclusive question which in one form or another is regularly posed in late Elizabethan and Jacobean drama’:89

Duchess: Who am I?
Bosola: Thou art a box of worm-seed, at best but a salvatory of green mummy: what’s this flesh? a little cruddled 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.

(Duchess of Malfi, IV.ii.129–8)

Bosola finds no trace of the lifegiving quality of the Duchess’s body, at the moment when the murderer’s hands are about to invade it. The phrase ‘Thou art …’ destroys any lustre that might still be attached to the Duchess’s social position, but ‘our bodies’ brings together audience, playwright and characters in a common acknowledgment of mortality. He momentarily defeats the Duchess’s quest for individual identity, by drowning her personal tragedy in the banality of a universal one, just as effectively as when Monticelo forced Vittoria back into the nameless crowd of the whores.

Such reworkings of the *memento mori*, strongly reminiscent of the morality play tradition in their form and yet fully baroque in their perverse taste for gory details, might make us feel that ‘the basic setting of these plays is not a country but the world, with heaven and hell rather than the Alps and the Mediterranean as its boundaries’.80 One should not, however, take them as reflecting the general mood of the plays. After all, ‘a petty Italian court is a poor mirror of the world’.81 Rather, these scenes shift the whole perspective of their religious models, by focusing on the dissolution of the body while clouding with uncertainty the destiny of the soul. The spectators watch the solid, and indeed sullied, flesh of the characters melt away, corroded by poison while they still inhabit it, or reduced to a ‘box of worm-seed’ after their lives have been violently and abruptly terminated. As for divine retribution, ‘the spectators – even when the stage is strewn with corpses – are not provided the easy assurance that virtue has prevailed on this or on the other side of the grave’.82 It is a pessimistic, and still potentially controversial, view of life, ‘signifying nothing’, made less risky by relegating it to another country, where, notoriously, a different world picture prevails.

**Poisoned minds and poisoned words**

Words can be constructed to kill just as irrevocably and subtly as deadly substances. In *The Devil’s Law-Case*, the ‘poisoned violence’ (IV.ii.239) that Leonora intends to use against her son is entirely verbal, but the presence of poison on Webster’s stage is so pervasive that it invites equivocation:

Winifred: Have you poisoned him?
Leonora: No, the poison is yet but brewing.
Winifred: You must minister it to him with all privacy.
Leonora: Privacy? It shall be given him
In open court; I’l make him swallow it
Before the judge’s face.

(Devil’s Law-Case, III.ii.382–6)

The exchange transfers the process of administering poison to the evil rhetoric of slander, and identifies both the common element (the slow, careful preparation of the deadly mixture) and the difference (verbal poisoning must involve an audience, a third party who is willing to be convinced by the words of the slanderer).

In plays where ‘evil is consistently located in the antithesis of appearance and reality’,83 language offers itself as a battlefield where rhetoric and truth fight for control over the characters.84 Verbal poison can be identified as such by the words of the victim, who divests its rhetoric of subtlety, and reduces it to the raw brutality of evil. The ‘gilded pills’ of rhetoric make language particularly dangerous. In her spirited self-defence, Vittoria was quick to identify them: ‘I discern poison / Under your gilded pills’ (*White Devil*, III.ii.190–1); but the Duchess did not acquire such clarity of vision until after she had lost her power: ‘Pray thee, why dost thou wrap thy poison’d pills / In gold and sugar?’ (*Duchess of Malfi*, IV.i.19–20). The awareness of the pervasive presence of poison can mislead a character into taking the parallel too far and thinking that wickedness can be isolated and purged, as in the case of Antonio: ‘It may be that the sudden apprehension / Of danger […] / May draw the poison out of him’ (*Duchess of Malfi*, V.ii.68–71). The Cardinal’s behaviour betrays a sickness of the mind that Antonio mistakenly connects to deadly
potions that alter the will. It is, rather, an inborn malevolence that will resist treatment.

'Poison' is such common currency in the verbal exchanges of Webster's characters that it can be handed out by the guilty as freely as by the innocent. With a foreboding of his own agony, Brachiano fends off Francisco's well-grounded accusations of mistreating Isabella as if they were generated in a section of Francisco's brain that has been polluted and needs purging: 'Spit thy poison' (Duchess of Malfi, II.i.69).

The same notion, condensed in one of those unforgettable lines that punctuate Webster's writings, is expressed by Brachiano when Francisco exposes his relationship with Vittoria:

Francisco: She is your strumpet, —
Brachiano: Uncivil sir there's his hemlock in thy breast.

(White Devil, II.i.58–9)

The same compulsion to draw his verbal weapons from the semantic field of poison resurfaces in his final rejection of Isabella:

Isabella: I do not come to chide; my jealousy?
I have to learn what that Italian means [ ... ]

Brachiano: O your breath!
Out upon sweet meats, and continued physic!
The plague is in them.

Isabella: You have oft for these two lips
Neglected cassia or the natural sweets
Of the spring violet.

(White Devil, II.i.160–7)

The exchange signals the subtle connections that can be traced in Webster's apparently loose texts. Like the 'Italian sallet', jealousy is rejected as foreign to the inner truth of characters, who repeatedly distance themselves from their Italian personae. Isabella's lips are isolated as the orifice through which she releases her poison into the air, and will eventually absorb poison from Brachiano's image. The language of love had imposed on Isabella's body an idealised beauty made of 'natural sweets'; the language of hatred destroys that beauty with the sinister artificiality of 'physic' and 'sweet meats' which echo Monticello's description of the whore and reduce Isabella to the same common denominator of dark corruption as her rival.

A more devious approach to verbal mischief is selected by those who aim at achieving that dreaded result of slander — the poisoning of a person's good name, Jolenta's for example:

Have you not made me yet wretched enough,
But after all this frosty age in youth,
Which you have witched upon me, you will seek
To poison my fame.

(Devil's Law-Case, III.iii.76–9)

Jolenta's complaint and her rejection of Romelio's plans reaffirm that the safeguard of one's reputation is a general concern at all levels of society. In the tragedies, the machiavels — Francisco, for example — know very well how effective the attack on a ruler is if conducted via the poisoning of his reputation:

Thy fame, fond duke,
I first have poison'd; directed thee the way
To marry a whore; what can be worse?

(White Devil, IV.iii.54–6)

The whole force of Francisco's eloquence has been employed to dress Vittoria in verbal finery capable of creating the illusion of a lady to cover the reality of a whore.

The fame of the Duchess is particularly vulnerable to verbal poisoning. She is herself, as Ferdinand's convoluted threats imply, guilty of hypocrisy:

You live in a rank pasture here, 'ith' court —
There is a kind of honey-dew that's deadly:
'Twill poison your fame; look to 't: 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.

(Duchess of Malfi, I.i.306–11)

The irony of the accusation is quite striking. Unlike Vittoria who, along with the vast majority of the characters in Webster, uses manners as protective colouring to hide the natural corruption of her being, the Duchess hides her true nature under a mask of conformity to the rules of behaviour that obtain for the aristocracy. But the outward flamboyance of her Italianate seeming is at odds with the inner domesticity of her English being, all spontaneity and yearning for the simple values of family life. Because it is so unusual, the Duchess's sentimentality proves far more threatening for the prevailing ethos of her society than the outright depravity of the Aragonese brothers.
The innuendos of the courtiers will deface the Duchess's reputation with words that ooze poison:

**Duchess:** [...] a scandalous report, is spread  
Touching mine honour.

**Ferdinand:** Let me be ever deaf to it:  
One of Pasquill's paper bullets, court-calumny,  
A pestilent air which princes' palaces  
Are seldom purged of.

*(Duchess of Malfi, III.i.47–51)*

While employing a jaded cliché, Webster tilts it on its axis, to give it a new connotation and to defeat, once again, any attempt at neatly interpreting his texts in terms of binary oppositions: court life is, indeed, rife with slanderous remarks, but in this case the accusations, like 'Pasquill's bullets', are quite accurate.

Thanks to his choice of an Italian setting, Webster is free to reiterate clichés of courtly corruption that might have been objectionable if aimed too near home. The ruler’s responsibility for the well-being of the commonweal is an ongoing concern. In Antonio’s words:

a prince's court  
Is like a common fountain, whence should flow  
Pure silver drops in general; but if 't chance  
Some curs'd example poison 't near the head,  
**Death, and diseases through the whole land spread.**

*(Duchess of Malfi, I.i.11–15)*

Antonio’s famous speech, which is given special prominence at the opening of the play, introduces the notion of poison issuing from the fountainhead that corrupts the whole land, while reaffirming, at the same time, that the accusation of corruption relates only to countries whose irresponsible leaders do not apply themselves to purging the 'pestilent air', and clearing away the 'rank pasture' - a negligence of which the Duchess could conceivably be accused, since throughout the play she seems to be blissfully oblivious to the political consequences of her behaviour.35

Brachiano’s court, even more than the Duchess’s, is poisoned ‘near the head’. We see very little of its life, but the words of the avengers recreate a bowdlerised version of Borgia-like depravity:

Lodovico: You that were held the famous politician;  
Whose art was poison.  
Gasparo: And whose conscience murder.  
Lodovico: That would have broke your wife’s neck down the stairs  
Ere she was poison’d.  
Gasparo: That had your villainous sallies –  
Lodovico: And fine embroidered bottles, and perfumes  
Equally mortal with a winter plague –  
Gasparo: Now there’s mercury –  
Lodovico: And copperas –  
Gasparo: And quicksilver –  
Lodovico: With other devilish pothecary stuff  
A-melting in your politic brains.

*(White Devil, V.iii.155–63)*

All the paraphernalia of Italian villainy is once again paraded before us, from the ’sallies’ to the fashionable items hiding death under the cover of beauty. Against this exotic backdrop, Webster stages a very Jacobean agony, which strips to the core both the body and the soul of the dying man. The metaphorical poison on which the machiavel’s mind once fed is destroyed by the actual poison that is consuming his brains. The process is monitored by the avengers, who rejoice in wording and rewording the ingredients that are at work inside Brachiano’s body, ultimately reducing them to a mesmerising string of sounds: it is indeed ‘disturbing to our moral sensibilities that the revengers of the piece are indistinguishable from the guilty ones in their Italianate methods’.36

The moral status of the avengers is too ambiguous to ensure a truly cathartic ending, which would clear the pestilent air of the court and neutralise the effects of all poisons. Rather, Webster seems to include the audience in a dismal vision of a world governed by poisonous reactions to all attempts at transcending the prevailing ethos. No matter how good a new play may be, ‘the breath that comes from the uncappable multitude is able to poison it’ *(White Devil, To the reader*, 21–2); in Webster’s London, even the works of the best artists could die an ignominious death – by poison, of course.


4 Webster’s use of Italian settings is examined in depth in Ferdinand Lagarde, John Webster, Toulouse, 1968.


10 Fynes Morison, Itinerary, unpublished chapters printed as Shakespeare’s Europe, ed. Charles Hughes, London, 1903, p. 403. The chapters of Morison’s Itinerary edited by Hughes had been prepared for publication by 1617.

11 Morison, p. 406. The ordinary Englishman did not abjure revenge as such, especially when the duel was the means of action. It was only when the more treacherous and Italianate features were added [ … ] or when accomplices were hired to revenge [ … ] that he considered revenge despicable (Fredson Bowers, Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy 1587–1642, Princeton, 1949, p. 37). See also Charles A. Hallett and Elaine S. Hallett, The Revenger’s Madness, Lincoln, Nebr., 1980.


17 ‘The absence of dialogue in the murder scenes makes them seem like cynical demonstrations of two particularly interesting and ingenious methods of getting unwanted people out of the way, an impression supported by Brachiano’s approving remark: “Twas quaintly done” (Dieter Mehl, The Elizabethan Dumb Show: the History of a Dramatic Convention, London, 1964, p. 141).

18 Brachiano’s curtained picture is positioned as an icon above an altar, and Julio and Christoforo, burning perfumes and anointing the picture’s lips, are perversions of the priests at the altar, preparing it for the celebration of communion (Frederick O. Waage, The White Devil’ Discover’d: Backgrounds and Foregrounds to Webster’s Tragedy, New York, 1984, pp. 47–8).


20 The editors see here an allusion to the offensive behaviour of a Spaniard in St Paul’s.

21 Isabel M. Damisch, Les Images chez John Webster, Salzburg, p. 287.


23 In this case, a presumed attempt on the queen’s life involving the poisoning of the pommel of her saddle.


34 ‘Webster’s fascination with double meanings, with the property of ambiguous words to endanger, threaten, corrupt, or destroy relationships, persists throughout his work’ (Charles R. Forker, The Skull beneath the Skin, Carbondale, 1986, p. 429). On Webster’s use of language, see also Alessandro Serpieri, John Webster, Bari, 1986.

35 For a view of the Duchess as guilty of overlooking her responsibility to the commonweal in favour of her private happiness, see Joyce E. Peterson, Curs d’Exemple: The Duchess of Malfi and Commonweal Tragedy, Columbia, 1978. However, the Duchess, like most of Webster’s characters, defies clear-
cut judgement, by oscillating between extremes of behaviour: 'while it might be far-fetched to associate the Duchess, rather than Ferdinand, with the "curs'd example" [...] it seems mere romantic infatuation with her acknowledged charms to free her of substantial responsibility for what happens, or to claim her as a model of "goodness"' (Robert F. Whitman, "The moral paradox of Webster's tragedy", *PMLA*, 90, 1970, p. 827).


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‘The soil alters; Y’are in another country’:
multiple perspectives and political resonances in Middleton’s
*Women Beware Women*

*Zara Bruzzi and A. A. Bromham*

Thomas Middleton uses very varied locales for his plays: contemporary London, ancient Greece, early Britain, Spain, and even a chess board. Throughout his career he also set a number of plays in Italy, of which the last and most psychologically powerful is *Women Beware Women* (1621). Middleton rarely evoked a place or period in history without a specific purpose, and, towards the end of his career, tended to use locale as a way of commenting covertly on contemporary political and religious concerns in England. His way with names has been examined but a full examination of his choice and use of settings has yet to be made.1 Despite detailed analysis of the political and religious subtext of other Middleton plays, the potential significance of the Italian setting in *Women Beware Women* has not been fully considered, for two possible reasons: the play is surprisingly domestic, not traditionally Italianate in language or overall dramatic style. Also, Middleton’s method of concealed political commentary is not obviously allegorical (apart from *A Game at Chess*). His plays do not lend themselves to a single and sustained political reading, for he creates characters and situations which only at specific moments suggest connections with the world outside the theatre.

The generally accepted date for *Women Beware Women* is 1621. It was an important year nationally: Parliament had been summoned and had revived the practice of impeachment in order to attack leading figures concerned in scandals of bribery and abuse of monopolies; King James’s son-in-law, the Elector Palatine, had been driven out of his elective kingdom of Bohemia, and his hereditary territories were under attack; the proposed marriage of the heir to the throne, Prince Charles, to the Spanish Infanta seemed a distinct possibility, and Calvinists were increasingly concerned at the growth of Arminianism within the