

JOHN WEBSTER'S *THE WHITE DEVIL*: A STUDY IN BLACK
HUMOR AND LAUGHTER AS AUDIENCE RESPONSE

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Laughter at the comic in comedy, though generated by a variety of sources, is primarily meant to entertain. In tragedy, particularly the Jacobean tragedy of blood, the problem of laughter is far more difficult to resolve. Here, the scholars have been confronted with a very disturbing question: How is it possible to laugh at death and evil, and yet evade the risk of destroying the tragic effect of a play? It is not surprising, therefore, that almost all theatre reviews of Jacobean tragedies have been pervaded with a discussion of the comic elements in those plays and the audience's reaction to them. The main problem for the directors and critics (and perhaps for the audience, too) was how to reconcile the comic (or the laughable) in those plays with the tragic (or horrid). Critics have often been baffled when in the middle of a tempestuous tragedy the audience betrayed "nervous" laughter, the fact immediately associated with the playwright's (or director's) inability to control the tragic mood. Recently a critic wrote:

Laughter is the actor's reward in comedy, the actor's torment in serious drama... Nervous laughter is familiar in life, it has its counterpart in the theatre. Inevitably, it means that the performance has failed. (Cameron and Gillespie 1980:65)

Objections to audiences' laughter in tragedy have a longstanding tradition¹ but were raised most violently after the 1966 Royal Shakespeare Company's production of *The Revenger's Tragedy*. Trevor Nunn, the director, was accused of "burlesquing or parodying the play" (Walls 1976:127). The reviewers found particularly unacceptable the scene in which Lussurioso unexpectedly enters the Duke's chamber and the Duchess is revealed as hairless. This rather power-

¹ Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, for instance, was at first discredited for its comedic elements, and the play was thought to have been written in collaboration.

full syphilitic image evoked the audience's laughter, which broke out, but was immediately held back.²

The blending of laughter and repulsion, even at the tragic denouement, is one of the distinguishing characteristics of this late Renaissance drama. This fact has often been ignored by a large body of traditional scholarship, tending to separate the comedic material in the plays from the tragic. Similarly, it was not uncommon for the theatrical reviews to find laughter as a threat to the success of a production. After the second New York professional staging of *The White Devil*, a *New York Times* critic wrote:

If *The White Devil* were not played with so much fire and conviction... it would be tempting to smile at the endless perfidy and vileness as Webster poured them on. (*The New York Times Theatre Reviews*, Dec. 7, 1965)

Even more pronounced was the opinion of another reviewer who, unaware of the morality play tradition, excludes laughter as a reaction to evil.³ He observed that:

Whenever the villainy threatens to become laughable, an authoritatively able cast keeps the drama under sobering control. (*Time*, Dec 17, 1965)

It is interesting to note that even though reviewers claimed there was no hint of laughter on the part of the audience, they, by overemphasizing the fact, involuntarily drew our attention to it.

Nicholas Brooke in his recent book, *Horrid Laughter in Jacobean Tragedy*, argues convincingly that the peculiar kind of laughter in *The White Devil* "is not dismissive, it becomes an essential part... of an imaginative mode of perception" (Brooke 1979:47). He further advances his claim saying that "to eliminate laughter from the response to death, by stressing exclusively the 'nobility' of tragedy for instance, is to evade an essential knowledge" (Brooke 1979:47). But to deal satisfactorily with the question why the projection of certain scenes of sheer horror evokes the audience's laughter, we would have to enter the province of psychology and this could well become a subject of a separate study. The spectators' response to what they see on the stage depends on a variety of determinants, which are complex and cannot be easily analysed. We have to agree with Brooke, however, that despite the apparent extremity

² Since I did not see this production I am greatly indebted to Prof. Margaret Tocci who at the Annual Comparative Drama Conference (University of Florida, Gainesville, 1983) presented an illuminating analysis of the 1966 RSC production of *The Revenger's Tragedy*. Her comments on the audience's reaction have afforded me a great deal of inspiration for this paper.

³ Old Morality Vice, in spite of its evil, provoked laughter. The audience not only laughed at it, but also with it. See Bernard Spivack's treatment of this tradition in *Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil* (1958), or Charlotta Spivack's *The Comedy of Evilhood Shakespeare's Stage* (1975).

of emotions governing fear and laughter, the former is as allied to the latter as are tears or hysteria (Cf. Brooke 1979:24).

Without getting into further detail of an issue where problems are heaped one upon another, we will attempt to justify the peculiar presence of laughter in *The White Devil* by pointing out its affinity with black humor techniques. Some critics today claim that viewing certain sixteenth century tragedies as analogous with the content of today's black comic works is a key to understanding the unsettling nature of Jacobean humor.⁴

Black humor in literature, as Leslie Fiedler points out is "the only valid contemporary work... 'Black humorist' fits anyone worth reading today". In his extremely pessimistic view of reality he concludes: "You can't fight, or cry, or shout or pound the table. The only response there is left is laughter" (Fiedler 1965:94). A revival of interest in some Jacobean plays is very symptomatic here.⁵ More recently, Leonard Feinberg in his article *The Secret of Humor* argues that black humor, despite its enormous range of meaning, "always expresses aggression... 'One gets a sense,'" he continues, "of hopelessly frustrated individuals, striking out angrily at whatever is near them" (Feinberg 1978: 104). But we also see that these individuals are forced to face a basically hostile reality in which "everything is rotten -- mother is rotten, God is rotten, the flag is rotten"⁶ (in Hill 1979:59). This quotation states the principle by which black humor operates. It also very accurately describes the tenor of Webster's play. In *The White Devil* love, familial bonds, justice and religion are all subjects of ridicule. The voices of orthodox morality (Cornelia in the play), so firmly established in Shakespeare for instance, now are quickly silenced, and moral littleness has no counterpart in moral grandeur. The black-comic hero, unlike other Elizabethan villains, does not suffer from any serious conflict of values. Psychomachia, which again Shakespeare so perfectly brings into expression, finds little place in Webster's stage-world. The hero leaves the scene as he had entered it arrogant, unrepentant and focused on himself (Flammineo nearing his death says: "at myself I will begin and end" (V, vi, 258)).

In this new dramatic perspective no character stands out as spiritually significant. Even the innocent victims, Isabella and Marcello, are thought to be guilty (Cornelia distorts the truth of her son's death and in so doing defends

⁴ Relevant discussion on the thematic parallel between some Jacobean revenge tragedies and the novels of such American writers as Heller, Vonnegut or Pynchon is to be found in John Boni's "Analogous Form. Black Comedy and Some Jacobean Plays". *Western Humanities Review* 28, 1974. 201-215.

⁵ See note 4.

⁶ This credo of black humor, formulated by Lennie Bruce (quoted in H. Hill 1979) strikingly resembles the spirit of disbelief in value system expressed in John Donne's frequently quoted lines from *The First Anniversary*: "The Element of Fire is quite put out... 'Tis all in pecces, all coherence gone;... Prince, Subject, Father, Sonne, are things forgot" (11.206, 213, 215).

Flamineo, the murderer. As it were, Isabella makes herself the author of Brachiano's brutal treatment of her). Characteristically, none of the characters dying at the denouement deserves the clearing of his name to the world. The glimpses of a brighter future, which in Shakespeare are provided by the so-called "continuing characters" (Frye 1973:284), are in Webster blackened by uncertainty and disorder. In *The White Devil*, although the young duke, Giovanni, declares that the guilty "shall taste our justice/As I hope heaven" (V, vi, 292—293), we see that in this world criminals go unpunished (The duke of Florence, a corrupt avenger, will remain at large). Moreover, Lodovico and Flamineo imply that rottenness stays in the family since, as they believe, evil is inheritable. To Flamineo, Giovanni not only has "his uncle's (bloodthirsty Francisco's) villanous look already" (V, iv, 28), but also is the son of a murderer.

Laughter at such a nihilistic vision is a reaction to the characters' awareness of the lack of values in the moribund world, and their essentially comic attitude to such a recognition. Love is feigned, so is faith. Treachery and deceit take the place of loyalty and justice. The comic recognition of the absence of those values which are necessary for society's basic functions lies at the heart of *The White Devil*.

A sense of outrage and indignation, often mingled with nervous laughter, is the effect of black humor upon those exposed to it. It is also exactly what Webster's play does to its modern audience. *The White Devil's* cosmic pessimism, its obsessive sense of evil and a vision of "hopelessly frustrated", militant heroes, who throughout the play are kept busy cheerily murdering each other for no or little reason, all place the tragedy in a black-comic framework.

Flamineo, Webster's central hero-villain and a full-fledged black humorist is, like Bosola of *The Duchess of Malfi*, "Renaissance forgotten man" (Bogard 1965:106). Disillusioned, Flamineo believes in the omnipotence of evil which he makes the object of his comic-ironic commentaries. Comic, rather than satiric, since satire always implies reform, and reform is incompatible with the black humor formula. Change and regeneration in the world where evil is the norm are abnormal. Flamineo's grim joking as he addresses his mother goes far beyond satire:

I would the common'st courtesan in Rome
Had been my mother, rather than thyself.
Nature is very pitiful to whores,
To give them but few children, yet those children
Plurality of fathers: they are sure
They shall not want. (I, ii, 327—332)

Throughout the play Flamineo acquits himself superbly in the role of a black humorist, which, according to Hamlin Hill, "doesn't seek the sympathy or alliance of his audience, but deliberately insults and alienates it" (Hill 1979:59).

Death and evil are the two materials that black humor depends on most. Death is always approached with terror and fear, but is at the same time looked on as a spectacle or even a hilarious joke. In *The White Devil* almost all death scenes are transformed into some kind of a macabre performance where the executioner both invites laughter and himself laughs at the result of his murderous manipulations. The artistry of killing starts with Brachiano's duchess, Isabella, soon to be followed by the murder of Vittoria's husband. We witness two dumb shows which depict their deaths. The murderers of Isabella enter her chamber and smear with "poisoned stuff" the picture of Brachiano. It was Isabella's "nightly ritual of love" to kiss it. The killers, anticipating a delightful spectacle "depart laughing" and Brachiano, who watches the event, calls it "excellent". When the duchess dies after kissing the poisoned picture, the duke's callous declaration still rings in our ears. Divorcing her he said: "Your hand I'll kiss/This is the latest ceremony of my love" (II, i, 193). This final "ceremony of love" marks the beginning of a series of deaths.

The removal of Camillo from the scene (the second dumb show) is done with no lesser ingenuity. In the company of his brother-in-law (Flamineo) and some two "captains", he prepares for a sport exercise. Stage directions say that:

... as Camillo is about to vault, Flamineo
pitheth him upon his neck, and, with the help of the
rest, writhes his neck about; seems to see if it be broke,
and lays him folded double, as 't were under the horse... (II, ii)

Again, the spectators, Brachiano and his companion, the conjurer, express gleeful satisfaction at what they see: "Twas quaintly done" — exclaims the duke.

But it is important to realize that although the fiendish gaiety of the witnesses of the crime contributes significantly to the total effect of those scenes, it is Flamineo whose demonic mockery of the doctor-murderer gives a humorously macabre touch to the events in question. He, again like Bosola, controls the laughter in the play and defines it for the audience. The dumb shows as such do not provoke laughter. Isabella dies quietly while she prays, and even Camillo's basically ludicrous appearance (G. Boklund sees him as a "butt for bawdy ridicule" (Boklund 1957:155)) hardly raises a laugh at the moment of his death. Laughter at the dumb shows comes from an earlier source. It is channeled to the audience through Flamineo's gory and suggestive language in the lines preceding the "executions". The way Flamineo describes the doctor has a horrifying effect on the spectators, but the power of the visual images at one and the same time releases our uneasy laughter. The fierceness of his utterances is almost horribly funny:

O thou cursed antipathy to nature-look, his eye's blood-shed like a needle a surgeon sticheth a wound with — let me embrace thee toad, and love thee, O thou abominable loathsome gargarism, that will fetch up lungs, lights, heart and liver by scruples. (II, i, 304—308)

The same kind of monstrous humor pervades Flamineo's rendering of the doctor's originality in delivering death:

He will shot pills into a man's guts shall make them have more ventages than a cornet or a lamprey; he will poison a kiss; (II, i, 297—299)

Such moral and psychological perversions which find physical representation in bodily abuse, are frequently the methods employed by black humor. In *The White Devil* savage but cheerful annihilation of the victims, rendered in almost clinical detail, is epitomized not only in Camillo's ugly death, but most effectively in Brachiano's. Here, the ironic belittling of human life results in a peculiar blending of laughter and fear. The duke is murdered twice, first poisoned and then strangled by disguised Capuchins. This most hideous "execution" was contrived by Lodovico, Gasparo and Francisco (high ranking members of the sick society) to "have it hereafter recorded for example/Rather than to borrow an example" (V, i, 74—75). We are told that Brachiano, fatally infected by a poisoned helmet "goes through several kinds of destructions" (V, iii). In piteous horror he starts out crying for help. Furious, he orders that his armourer be tortured, then sends for the physicians who he insults, and finally, pouring out his bitter anger on Vittoria, loses his sanity. Brachiano's agony is projected as actual horror. Even Lodovico, his destroyer, finds it repulsive

Such a fearful end
May teach some men that bear too lofty crest.
Though they live happiest, yet they die not best. (V, iii, 74—76).

But it is again Flamineo's black humor that in the midst of this shuddering scene elicits our nervous laughter. An insolent cynic, for whom the self-destructive society is the perfect comic foil, will remind us that to "speak well of the duke" is "palpable lying" (V,iii,64, 66), since:

He was a kind of statesman that would sooner have reckon'd how many cannon-bullets he had discharged against a town, to count his expense that way, than how many of his valiant and deserving subjects he lost before it. (V, iii, 60—63).

If black humor leaves no values inviolable it is perhaps best articulated in the scene to follow. Now the duke, nearing his death, is about to be strangled by the feigned monks. What takes place on the stage is a parody of the final sacrament of extreme unction, where the departing soul, instead of being commended to God, is commended to the devil. Such a reverse of formal Catholic practice, termed by James R. Hurt "an inverted ritual" (Hurt 1962: 42—47), begins with the request of the hired killers that everyone should leave the duke's

chamber. By doing so they should permit for "some private meditations":

Lodovico: He is departing; Pray, stay all apart,
And let us only whisper in his ears
Some private meditations, which our order
Permits you to hear. (V, iii, 144—147)

The murderers here invert the sacramental rite that calls for those present to join in prayers for the soul of the dying person. When left alone, Gasparo and Lodovico with fascinated thrill whisper a sadistic message into Brachiano's ears, commending him to hell:

Gasparo: Brachiano —
Lodovico: Devil Brachiano. Thou art damn'd.
Gasparo: Perpetually.
Lodovico: A slave condemn'd and given up to the gallows
Is thy great lord and master.
Gasparo: True; for thou
Art given up to the devil
.....
Lodovico: ... And thou shalt die like a poor rogue.
Gasparo: And stink
Like a dead fly-blown dog.
Lodovico: And be forgotten
Before thy funeral sermon.
.....
Gasparo (aside): Strangle him in private. (V, iii, 147—150, 162—166)

In fact, Lodovico's prediction that Brachiano will soon be forgotten proves to be true when just a few lines later, in full display of the duke's body, Francisco and Zanche recall their sexual encounter of the previous night.

At the close of this overpowering theatricality, the intensity of suffering (Branchiano's despairing call for Vittoria) and savagery (Lodovico's command to strangle the duke "in private") increases, and laughter becomes the only reaction to the ghastly tortures. Subsequently, the spectators come to see the strangulation of the duke which is performed with the now notorious relish and fascination. The physical ugliness of that moment is reflected in Lodovico's words expressing pride in his workmanship:

The snuff is out. No woman-keeper i'th' world
Thought she had practic'd seven year at the pest-house,
Could have done't quaintlier. (V, iii, 172—174)

Justifying the presence of laughter in the scene of Branchiano's death, a *New York Times* reviewer has written:

If the audience laughs when one of the characters strangles the duke who is already dying of poison it is not to ridicule the play. It is to express delight in the gory abundance of Webster's imagination. (*The New York Times Theatre Reviews*, Mr 15, 1955)

To my knowledge it is the only theatrical review in which its author sees laughter as a possible and valid reaction of the spectators, discrediting neither the play nor its director (whatever the critic's understanding of the nature of laughter is).

The black humorist views the world as a stage of horrors on which he is one of the best performers. Flamineo's game of suicide with Vittoria and Zanches in Act V, Scene vi, is a great rhetorical show. The particular event that triggers a response of laughter is Vittoria's and Zanche's grotesque trodding on Flamineo's seemingly lifeless body. This act is salted with Vittoria's biting satire on Flamineo's sinfulness, indicating her joy in ridding herself of the loathsome brother. Both Flamineo and Vittoria express macabre delight at what takes place, although each for a very different reason. For both of them, however, the experience is triumphant and pleasurable, but just as it is stretched almost far enough to become farcical, Flamineo rises from the floor and we realize that it was only a preposterous joke. This way he has proven Vittoria's "ingratitude" and has learned about her unwillingness to share the inheritance. As soon as the theatrics are over the spectators' uneasy laughter is mixed with fearful anticipation of the events to come. We must not forget Flamineo's sinister intentions before he had encountered Vittoria and Zanche and feigned his death. What he really has in mind is to "sum up all these horrors," as he declared only a few lines earlier:

Now to my sisters lodging,
And sum up all these horrors: the disgrace
The prince throw on me; next the piteous sight
Of my dead brother; and my mother's dotage;
.....
All these shall with Vittoria's bounty turn to good.
Or I will drown this weapon in her blood. (V, iv, 143-148)

By this time the audience has witnessed the stabbing of Marcello (Flamineo's brother), strangulation and poisoning of Brachiano, and the despairing madness of Vittoria's and Flamineo's mother. All these facts, along with Flamineo's typically black humorist suicidal drive (to Vittoria's "Do you mean to die indeed?," he replies — "With as much pleasure/As e'er my father gat me" (V, vi, 52-54)) significantly alter the semi-comic tone of the mock-suicide scene. The comic is drowned in the tragic because we realize the actual death is close upon the characters.

No doubt Flamineo, the joker with an acute self-knowledge, is serious about anticipating his death. He knows (and so does the audience after all the massacre scenes) that the world is a mess, and that death *might* be the only deliverance from such absolute disorder:

We cease to grieve, cease to be fortune's slaves,
Nay, cease to die, by dying...
.....
This busy trade of life appears most vain,
Since rest breeds rest where all seek pain by pain.

(V, vi, 253-254, 274-5)

Black humor, too, is serious in its message, that many things in life are absurd or abnormal, and if the audiences laugh during the realization of this absurdity it is because they understand the message.

The laughter we have attempted to define through the play's affinity with the techniques of black humor emphasizes the blackness of Webster's vision rather than the power of his "gory imagination." Here, as in Tourner or Marston, the comic verges on the macabre, and the relief that is said to constitute the essential cause of laughter is nowhere to be found in Webster's Italianate thriller.

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