without fixed identity ‘much ’gainst mine own good nature’ [v v 86], is his eternal shame.

5 Webster’s Purposeful Theatricality

The one vein of imagery that runs consistently throughout Webster’s tragedies developing and refining our perceptions of the worlds and the characters he portrays relates to theatre, performance, acting. It has been argued (initially by Lord David Cecil) that Webster presents the world as a great stage of actors because, pursuing a Calvinist philosophy, he saw life as an illusion beside the Ultimate Realities of death, heaven and hell. Certainly Webster, like many of his dramatist-contemporaries, was conscious of the Morality tradition that the Renaissance theatre inherited but to stress a Calvinist approach risks losing a proper appreciation of the complexity of sympathy and insight that has gone to the creating of Vittoria, Bosola, Ferdinand; to ignore the carefully defined social and political dimensions in the plays is to miss the pathos of Flamineo’s predicament, Isabella’s or Julia’s. Webster meticulously avoids simple moral categories; and it is here that the subtlety of his concern with the processes of theatre as symbolic is most apparent. He repeatedly places his characters in situations where they must act and the quality of their response to this necessity sharpens our perception to a remarkable degree of the innermost reaches of their psyches. What impresses is the astonishing range of identities he so defines and the intricacies of discrimination this excites in us. When, for example, Isabella enacts a public separation from Brachiano [II i 225–77], she speaks a script dictated already by him [ll. 192–214]; as proof of her devotion, submissive to his every whim, she plays the ‘phlegmatic’ duchess that she knows it flatters his egoism to see her as being. She is always the woman he chooses her to be, a model of duty, at the cost of those ‘killing griefs which dare not speak’ [l. 277]; and Brachiano takes a cruel advantage of her. ‘Acting’ here with extreme
succinctness imparts a wealth of insights – social, psychological, emotional; paradoxically it shows us Isabella’s real self.

Webster’s purposeful theatricality extends further than this: he exploits the whole arsenal of styles and dramatic forms available to the Renaissance dramatist, but always to facilitate his psychological explorations, particularly into the nature of evil. Vittoria induces Brachiano to kill her husband and his duchess by recounting a studiedly allegorical dream; the murders are shown in dumb-show, an appropriate form since mime that, as here, has to convey a complicated narrative must proceed at a meticulously regulated pace, slower and more deliberate than action accompanied by dialogue and the resulting effect is otherworldly yet inexorable, timeless like nightmare. The dumbshows are conjured forth for Brachiano’s exclusive viewing (which has the effect like the mime of distancing the horror); this allows us to study his mind as the deviser and director of these ‘shows’. Murder to Brachiano is entertainment, an art whose refinements he savours richly: ‘’Twas quaintly done, but yet each circumstance / I taste not fully’ [II ii 38–9]. This is the real horror of the scene – his gratuitous pleasure. The ‘theatre’ metaphor – the play and its aristocratic audience – renders with considerable economy the nature of Brachiano’s sensibility and perverse imagination. Ironically his own death is to partake of nightmare: poisoned while jousting at his own wedding celebrations by a helmet that burns the flesh from his face in a ‘show’ of Francisco’s creating. The idea of theatre brings a poetic logic to the developments of the plot, but invariably the prime focus is psychological: that the characters all converge on Brachiano’s palace, that Flamineo is spurred on to release the bravado in his nature and Lodovico to uncage the beast in his, that the confederacy of the lovers, Flamineo and Zanche is riven apart by suspicion is wholly Francisco’s doing. The last two acts represent the processes of mind that constitute his diabolical genius.

Similarly there is Ferdinand’s method of attempting to harrow the Duchess’s soul to despair in what is the most consciously wrought ‘show’ of all. As Inga-Stina Ewbank first argued, this partakes of the form, as a Jacobean audience would have been aware, of a court masque with its anarchic prologue