

BEYOND MELANCHOLY

In Act V of *The White Devil* by John Webster, Flamineo is visited by the ghost of Bracciano. Unlike Macbeth or Hamlet, he is not in the least disturbed by the apparition but tries to engage the ghost in conversation. Instead of answering his questions, the ghost holds up a skull in one hand and throws earth on him with the other. Flamineo is unimpressed. 'This is beyond melancholy,' he says when the ghost withdraws. It is a throw-away line by one of Webster's archetypal villains, for whom the word *amoral*, since it did not then exist, had to be invented.

Of all the devils in *The White Devil*, Flamineo is the most cynical and self-aware. When, in Act V, he tells Vittoria, his sister, that he is about to murder her, he dismisses her pleas for mercy and justifies the act on the grounds that he made a promise to Bracciano and intends to keep it, first by killing her, then by killing himself.

'Pray thee, good woman, do not trouble me
With this vain worldly business. Say your prayers.
I made a vow to my deceased lord,
Neither yourself, nor I should outlive him
The numbering of four hours.'

In any case, he says, if a great lord isn't safe in his own court, what hope is there for them? To which she replies, 'This is your melancholy and despair.'

Only once in any of Shakespeare's plays do we see something ugly showing through the façade of melancholy, when, in *Twelfth Night*, Orsino's jealousy leads him to threaten Caesario with violence.

'Come, boy, with me; my thoughts are ripe in mischief:
I'll sacrifice the lamb that I do love,
To spite a raven's heart within a dove.'

The line between comedy and tragedy is, as everyone knows, finely drawn. In Shakespeare's comedies we catch an occasional glimpse of tragedy. In Webster's tragedies the opposite happens. Flamineo in *The White Devil* and Bosola in *The Duchess of Malfi* take us close enough to the line for us to see beyond it. It is not that Webster gives the devil all the best tunes, just that in these two he shows us, not the devil, but flawed humanity, shows us in fact ourselves.

There is something of Hamlet in Flamineo, as if the rottenness in the state of Denmark has gone so far that everyone is infected, himself included. He has no illusions and makes no apology. His self-awareness is theatrical, he can never resist the temptation of going for the laugh, like Sir Thomas More, who thanked the hangman for helping him up to the scaffold and told him he would shift for himself going down. His death speech, for which he waits until the others are dead so that he has the audience's full attention, is pure theatre. The maid dies, his sister dies, then he sits up, as he did from his simulated death a few minutes before, and re-introduces himself with the line:

'I recover like a spent taper, for a flash,
And instantly go out.'

The final couplet of his speech demands applause.

'Let no harsh flattering bells resound my knell

Strike, thunder, and strike loud to my farewell.’

Having already established his humanity and earned, if grudgingly, our sympathy, he is entitled to make the most of his ending. Tied to a pillar in the palace but still refusing to show any remorse, he laughs at his captors and gets the better of them in the exchange that follows.

‘Dost laugh?’

‘Wouldst have me die, as I was born, in whining?’

‘Recommend yourself to heaven.’

‘No, I will carry mine own commendations thither.’

And then, when asked what he is thinking, he reverts to the strain of melancholy, at which the audience cannot fail to be moved.

‘Nothing; of nothing. Leave thy idle questions,

I am i’t’h way to study a long silence,

To prate were idle; I remember nothing.

There’s nothing of so infinite vexation

As man’s own thoughts.’

There are many things in *The White Devil*, lines, incidents, theatrical effects, that are reminiscent of Shakespeare, which is hardly surprising since Webster’s career was beginning just as Shakespeare’s was ending. *The White Devil* and *The Tempest* both had their first performance in 1612. But more interestingly, he sometimes seems to prefigure later developments, often much later.

What he calls tragedies are to us more like black comedies or even theatre of the absurd. The constant interplay of prose and verse gives them a quality quite different from Shakespeare’s, suggesting that Webster was aiming at a new kind of drama, challenging the conventional Elizabethan boundaries. Shakespeare started it, of course, but Webster took it further, effectively rubbing out the line between comedy and tragedy altogether. Shakespeare’s plays had a political dimension that Webster’s lack. The dukes and cardinals that Webster presents are not there to teach us lessons about good government, but are metaphorical representations of the elemental forces which drive humanity. Good and evil are evenly balanced in Shakespeare’s world, though it sometimes takes a Prospero to keep them so. No such balance exists in Webster’s world.

Webster owes more to Marlowe than he does to Shakespeare. Marlowe is at home with anarchy in a way that Shakespeare never was. There is no redemption for Faust, only eternal torment, such as we see in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. Instead of a Shakespearean (and Elgarian) hope for the future at the end of the last act, all Marlowe gives us is the flames of hell. It is the same with Webster, at the end of *The White Devil*, has one of his villains taking pride in his villainy –

‘I do glory yet

That I can call this act my own. For my part,

The rack, the gallows, and the torturing wheel

Shall be but sound sleeps to me. Here’s my rest:

I limned this night-piece, and it was my best.’

– and the son of one of the other villains delivering a final couplet which, in the light of everything we have just seen, does not sound terribly convincing –

‘Let guilty men remember their black deeds

Do lean on crutches, made of slender reeds.’

The literary history of melancholy, as opposed to the medical history, drifts from one side to the other of the tragi-comic demarcation line, from self-pity to self-knowledge, from amused detachment to outright cynicism, from Orsino and Jacques to Hamlet and Iago, from Stephen Dedalus to Vladimir and Estragon. The melancholy character is the one who stands outside the action, disowning his own part in it, like Hamlet. A convenient alter ego for the omniscient and ambivalent narrator, leading the reader by the elbow as Virgil leads Dante.

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