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Movin' on up: Sodomy in Service in *The White Devil*

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Senior Seminar: Revenge Tragedy

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Movin' On Up: Sodomy in Service in *The White Devil*

Renaissance England was marked by change. From the late 15th century through the early 17th century, the social atmosphere in England was thrown out of order. The rise of the middle class gave people money who weren't supposed to have money. This deteriorated the established hierarchies of the time, blurring the lines between classes. Critics of John Webster's *The White Devil* (1612) have yet to address these issues in conjunction with the homoerotic tones throughout the play. Webster is using sodomy as a trope to illuminate how mobility in service is a destructive, chaotic force. By exploring these concepts together, readers can gain a better understanding of the play's portrayal of these social anxieties and their meanings.

This anxiety over social mobility can be seen in *The White Devil*. Early on, Flamineo reveals why he is trying to marry his sister to his master. He says to his mother, "I would fain know where lies the mass of wealth / Which you have hoarded for my maintenance, / That I may bear my beard out of the level / Of my lord's stirrup."¹ He is concerned not only with money but also status. Because, in his view, he has no other option, Flamineo tries desperately to marry his sister to his master. As Cornelia rightly observes, Flamineo's actions are sinking their house to ruin.² Despite her chastisement, Flamineo insists on continuing his pandering. Flamineo feels forced to take these actions because he treads the line between classes – although his father was a

¹ John Webster, *The White Devil*, ed. by Christina Luckyj (London: A&C Black, 1998), 1.2.309-312.

² *Ibid.*, 1.2.216-217.

gentleman, the family has no money left, as it has been spent since the death of his father, putting Flamineo and his family in the fallen gentry.³ For them, both upwards and downwards mobility are possible, sometimes looming. Flamineo's struggle for advancement "is not vulgar social climbing but a desperate bid for a place in an increasingly corrupt and mobile society."⁴ He is simply looking for a stable position.

Flamineo's desire to climb the social ladder is matched, if not surpassed, by his fear of falling down further. He asks his mother, "Pray what means have you / To keep me from the galleys, or the gallows?"⁵ There are two interpretations here. The galleys represent one of the lowest forms of work during this time. Flamineo's mind immediately drops to the worst case scenarios – he can choose between unpaid physical labor or hanging. This pairing is figurative – one way or another, being poor will break him. Another interpretation is a more literal one. The galleys and the gallows are actual punishments for stealing. Webster could be implying that Flamineo would continue to pursue wealth until the law prevents him. Either way, he is scared to death of being poor.

His attempts to raise his rank and his fear of socially falling further show just how desperate he is. He recognizes Vittoria's requirements for marriage before Brachiano does, saying, "She hath taught him in a dream / To make away his Duchess and her husband."⁶ This realization, though, does not turn Flamineo away from the match. Rather, he approaches Brachiano with a plan to kill them and introduces the Doctor to him. He then willingly murders

³ Ibid., 1.2.315-316.

⁴ Christina Luckyj, introduction to *The White Devil*, by John Webster (London: A&C Black, 1998), xvi.

⁵ Webster, *White Devil*, 1.2.313-314.

⁶ Ibid., 1.2.255-256.

Camillo.⁷ Flamineo does not show any signs of protest to killing his brother-in-law. His coolness demonstrates the lengths he is willing to go to for social improvement.

Flamineo's desire for power traps him and forces him into a bind when Brachiano rejects Vittoria. Intending to harm Brachiano, Francisco writes and sends a fake love letter to Vittoria.⁸ When Brachiano gets hold of the letter and reads it, he reacts violently and rejects Vittoria. Because he is using his sister as his way into gentility, Flamineo necessarily must defend her and her honor. What follows is an incredibly tense confrontation between Brachiano and Flamineo:

FLAMINEO: [*Facing him*] What me, my lord, am I your dog?

BRACHIANO: A bloodhound: do you brave? Do you stand me?

FLAMINEO: Stand you? Let those that have diseases run,

I need no plasters.

BRACHIANO: Would you be kicked?

FLAMINEO: Would you have your neck broke? ...

BRACHIANO: Do you know me?

FLAMINEO: O my lord! Methodically.

As in this world there are degrees of evils:

So in this world there are degrees of devils.

You're a great Duke; I your poor secretary.

I do look now for a Spanish fig, or an Italian sallet daily. ...

BRACHIANO: Do you face me?

⁷ Ibid., 2.2.37 s.d.

⁸ Ibid., 4.1.125-138.

FLAMINEO: O sir, I would not go before a politic enemy with my back towards him, though there were behind me a whirlpool.⁹

In this back and forth, these characters' true thoughts about the other are revealed. Brachiano calls Flameneo a bloodhound, which means not only a dog – a common name used by masters for servants during this time – but also “a person who pursues someone or something with (ruthless) tenacity.”¹⁰ Brachiano recognizes Flameneo's mercenary qualities and pursuit of money but does so while reminding him of his place – underneath his master's feet like a good dog. At the same time, Flameneo recognizes the Duke's wickedness. Flameneo's reminder that he had recently killed for Brachiano has no effect on him. Brachiano retorts menacingly, prompting Flameneo to voice his fear of his master – he expects to be poisoned and refuses to turn his back to him.

In spite of this tension, Flameneo still leads Brachiano to his sister. At this point, Flameneo has no other choice but to continue on if he hopes to raise his status. Vittoria and Brachiano fight; Brachiano rejects and curses Vittoria, prompting her to tirade against him. After all of this fighting, Brachiano has a sudden change of heart and tries to mend the situation.¹¹ These outbursts evidently affected Vittoria more than Brachiano, and she does not accept Brachiano back. Immediately, Flameneo starts his pandering again, insisting she turn to listen to and make up with Brachiano.¹² He also pairs himself with Brachiano again, working to convince Vittoria to forgive and forget.¹³ Flameneo's only method to get him out of his position

⁹ Ibid., 4.2.48-69.

¹⁰ *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “Bloodhound.”

¹¹ Webster, *White Devil*, 4.2.126ff.

¹² Ibid., 4.2.133.

¹³ Ibid., 4.2.136, 146-190.

as a servant is this marriage. Although this reward is by no means guaranteed to come his way, as he puts it, he is “engaged to mischief and must on.”¹⁴ In his mind, it is this or the gallows.

Although Flameneo does have ulterior motives, some of his actions do reflect positively on him as a servant. He not only works tirelessly to hook up his master with a lover, Flameneo is also acutely aware of his position. As was expected during this time, Flameneo is silent when around other lords or gentlemen, talking only to Brachiano or when spoken to.¹⁵ This silence is pointed, as Flameneo constantly speaks his thoughts and feelings. He has by far the most lines in the play, enough that Webster felt inclined to include an excuse for the actor’s vocal strain.¹⁶ Even though he does have ulterior motives for being quiet – he is a sneaky character and doesn’t want to get noticed without meaning to – Flameneo still makes for a good servant in this sense.

However, Flameneo’s qualities are largely negative, as contemporary audiences would have recognized. The most readily apparent quality is his debauchery. Flameneo’s speech is peppered with sexual puns and innuendos after announcing his loose talk.¹⁷ Although viewers would be used to this sort of bawdy language, Flameneo sticks out in this play as one of the very few with a filthy mouth. Moreover, Flameneo’s focus on the sexual aspect of Brachiano and Vittoria’s relationship – indeed, it’s all he cares about – is strange. To speak so openly and to encourage a woman to have an affair on her husband is unorthodox, to say the least. As he describes it, he is engaged to mischief, which meant evildoing or wickedness.¹⁸ It also meant need, want, or poverty, which is a fitting double entendre – the Corombona family is quite

¹⁴ Ibid., 1.2.345.

¹⁵ This can be seen throughout the play before the last act but especially in 2.1 and 3.2.

¹⁶ Webster, *White Devil*, 5.6.268-270.

¹⁷ Ibid., 1.2.17ff.

¹⁸ OED, s.v. “Mischief.”

familiar with the threat of poverty. Cornelia knows the family is poor but rejects Flamineo's viciousness, his corrupt, depraved, immoral, and reprehensible behavior.¹⁹

Flamineo also makes his duplicity well-known to the audience. Although his sneakiness can be entertaining at times – for example, his double-speak to Camillo and Vittoria that moves between compliments and insults²⁰ – this quickly changes, and he shows how strategic his dishonesty is. After murdering Camillo, Flamineo is taken in by guards. While the Lawyer and his brother talk to him, Flamineo says, “I do put on this feigned garb of mirth / To gull suspicion.”²¹ He intentionally hides his feelings in order to fool the others. While this is a cunning idea, it reflects poorly on his character – during this time, duplicity is typically associated with femininity. Later, after the arraignment, Flamineo says, “Because now I cannot counterfeit a whining passion for the disgrace of my lady, I will feign a mad humour for the disgrace of my sister, and that will keep off idle questions. Treason's tongue hath a villainous palsy in't; I will talk to any man, hear no man, and for a time appear a politic madman.”²² Once again, Flamineo is announcing to the audience the poor aspects of his character. The difference in behavior between this scene and his next, which he plays “*as distracted*,” are stark. He can be played as almost a different character, changing costume and gestures. On a larger level, the audience would almost necessarily need to expect Flamineo's duplicity. His true character, which is revealed throughout the play, would not be readily accepted by others in the Duke's court. As such, nearly all of his interactions must be artificial or fake, which makes the audience ask: What is Flamineo really like?

¹⁹ OED, s.v. “Vicious.”

²⁰ Webster, *White Devil*, 1.2.123-158.

²¹ Ibid., 3.1.28-29.

²² Ibid., 3.2.304-310.

Perhaps the most disturbing of Flamineo's characteristics is his atheism. Webster reinforces this in several ways. Symbolically, Flamineo rejects the cross – as a young child, he broke his mother's crucifix while he was nursing.²³ Directly after this is revealed, Flamineo rushes on stage and kills his brother.²⁴ His disregard for religious and moral tenets is highlighted when his mother is onstage. More directly, Flamineo's speaks his views on religion. When confronted with Brachiano's ghost, Flamineo asks, "Pray, sir, resolve me, what religion's best / For a man to die in?"²⁵ He sees religion as a tool to use; his only faith is in strategy to improve his status. His mercenary attitude negates the point of religion, stripping away salvation for advancement. He regards religion as "grammatical laments, / Feminine arguments" that move listeners "more with their exclamation than sense / Of reason or sound doctrine."²⁶ Webster creates this godless character to emphasize his break with traditional society. Flamineo does not fit in with the society portrayed in the play.

All of these traits – Flamineo's corruption, debauchery, duplicity, and atheism – are also attributes of the sodomite. Edward Coke, a leading contemporary legal scholar, called sodomy "a detestable, and abominable sin, amongst Christians not to be named, committed by carnal knowledge against the ordinance of the Creator, and order of nature."²⁷ According to Alan Bray, a respected scholar on queer history, sodomy was not:

part of the chain of being, or the harmony of the created world or its universal dance. It was not part of the Kingdom of Heaven or its counterpart in the

²³ Ibid., 5.2.11-13.

²⁴ Ibid., 5.2.14 s.d.

²⁵ Ibid., 5.4.125-126.

²⁶ Ibid., 5.6.66-70.

²⁷ Edward Coke, *The Third Part of the Institutes of the Lawes of England: Concerning High Treason and Other Pleas of the Crown and Criminal Causes* (London: E. and R. Brooke, 1797), 57.

Kingdom of Hell ... It was none of those things because it was not conceived of as part of the created order at all; it was part of its dissolution. And as such it was not a sexuality in its own right, but existed as a potential for confusion and disorder.²⁸

Those living in Renaissance England were taught to view sodomites as monsters. The idea of sodomy was closely linked to debauchery and temptation, atheism and Popery, and duplicity. Anyone could fall into the practice of sodomy, through temptation, drink, sometimes even while dreaming.²⁹ To use Jonathan Goldberg's term, sodomy is "that utterly confusing category."³⁰ Renaissance authors could use sodomy in several different ways; just as Shakespeare's Rosalind gets laughs as Ganymede in *As You Like It*, so too does Marlowe's Gaveston get hate in *Edward II*. Sodomy functioned as a reference point that conjured up all of these negative associations.

With all of these associations to sodomy, it isn't surprising to see more obvious references to it peppered throughout the play. Consistently, Flamineo's interactions with others have homoerotic undertones. Flamineo admits early on that "conspiring with a beard / Made me a graduate" at university in Padua.³¹ In a footnote, Christina Luckyj points out, "Flamineo earned his degree, probably by simply reaching physical (rather than intellectual) maturity or possibly by conspiring with an older man."³² However, she misses the implication of this to contemporary audience members. To conspire means to "combine privily for an evil or unlawful purpose; to

²⁸ Alan Bray, *Homosexuality in Renaissance England* (London: Gay Men's Press, 1982), 25.

²⁹ Ibid., 13-32.

³⁰ Jonathan Goldberg, *Sodometries Renaissance Texts, Modern Sexualities* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 1-26.

³¹ Ibid., 1.2.321-322.

³² Ibid., 1.2.321-322 f.n.

agree together to do something criminal, illegal, or reprehensible.”³³ To conspire with a beard can only mean a few things.

These references get more explicit later in the text. Flamineo introduces the Doctor to Brachiano to begin to plot against Isabella and Camillo. After the Doctor calls Flamineo merry, Flamineo exclaims, “Let me embrace thee toad, and love thee.”³⁴ He then curses, “O thou abominable loathsome gargarism, that will fetch up lungs, lights, heart, and liver by scruples.”³⁵ Brachiano then compliments him for being an “honest doctor.”³⁶

This scene is suspicious. Obviously, Flamineo’s exclamation is odd – this display of intimacy seemingly comes from nowhere. This is complicated by the Doctor’s line before it. During this time, merry meant to be in a happy or joyful state, but it also meant attractive or pleasing to behold.³⁷ In this light, Flamineo’s reaction is understandable. If the Doctor is calling Flamineo attractive and really is a toad – anything hateful or loathsome³⁸ – then Flamineo’s advances would have seemed invited. After the embrace, Flamineo curses a gargle, presumably in his body and not in the Doctor’s. Although Flamineo could be calling the Doctor himself a gargle for his work with poisons, gargarism is a double entendre. Flamineo is speaking of the most essential parts of his body – indeed, those that give him life – being expelled from his body. Moreover, each of these parts holds immense significance. During this time, the lungs were associated with lovers’ sighs, the heart with love, and the liver with passion. The only unsaid essence of life is the semen. Indeed, semen is the only manifestation of the fire of the liver, the

³³ OED, s.v. “Conspire.”

³⁴ Webster, *White Devil*, 2.1.308.

³⁵ Ibid., 2.1.309-311.

³⁶ Ibid., 2.1.312.

³⁷ OED, s.v. “Merry.”

³⁸ OED, s.v. “Toad.”

love of the heart, and the propulsion of the lungs. In other words, this interaction is a linguistic orgasm and, depending on the staging, perhaps a more physical one as well. It is also curious why Brachiano would call the Doctor honest, meaning respectable and honorable, right before and after discussing the Doctor's skill with poison, one of the least honest ways to murder. Brachiano must be referring to an action that occurs onstage: the Doctor's rejection of Flamineo's advances, which prompts the frustrated curse. The undertones of homoeroticism are undeniable in this scene.

Sodomitical undertones crop up throughout the text. A later interaction between Flamineo and Lodovico is even stranger:

FLAMINEO: Misfortune comes like the crowner's business,

Huddle upon huddle.

LODOVICO: Shall thou and I join housekeeping?

FLAMINEO: Yes, content.

Let's be unsociably sociable.

LODOVICO: Sit some three days together, and discourse.

FLAMINEO: Only with making faces;

Lie in our clothes.

LODOVICO: With faggots for our pillows.

FLAMINEO: And be lousy.

LODOVICO: In taffeta linings; that's gentle melancholy.³⁹

³⁹ Webster, *White Devil*, 3.3.73-81.

Flamineo's lines "huddle upon huddle" prompts Lodovico's question. Lodovico's jump from an image calling forth bodies on top of bodies to propositioning Flamineo to join households and spend alone time together carries overt sexual connotations. The two want to be "lousy" together – vile, filthy, contemptible, obscene.⁴⁰ On top of this, they intend to spend this interaction in their underwear. Generally, two adult servants would not make plans to spend time together practically naked. Their interaction is blatantly sexual. It is telling that Webster calls his audience to "mark this strange encounter" before it begins.⁴¹

Examining Flamineo's name adds to this conversation. Flamineo is a derivative of the Italian name Flaminio, which means "keeper of the flame" in Latin.⁴² Lodovico's comment refers to the "flaming" nature of Flamineo – he is excessive and flagrant, as can be seen by his characteristics – and is a harmless joke.⁴³ But the image he mentions isn't so harmless. Faggots were bundles of wood used for fuel but also specifically referred to the practice of burning heretics at the stake. This begs the question: what exactly is Lodovico proposing that would require such a punishment? Obviously, this is another reference from Webster about sodomy. It is also important to note that although Lodovico does recant his vow to never part from Flamineo and the two fight, this is only after he is pardoned and restored to his noble position.⁴⁴ In other words, once he is reestablished in the order of society, he drops the disorder that sodomy brings. Only Flamineo remains in this tentative serving position.

⁴⁰ OED, s.v. "Lousy."

⁴¹ Webster, *White Devil*, 3.3.65.

⁴² Babynamespedia, "Flaminio," Babynamespedia.com, <http://www.babynamespedia.com/meaning/Flaminio> (accessed April 2, 2013). Ironically, the name is derived from an ancient Roman family name associated with the priestly duties of tending to ceremonial fires.

⁴³ OED, s.v. "Flaming."

⁴⁴ Webster, *White Devil*, 3.3.97ff.

Perhaps the most explicit reference to sodomy comes hand-in-hand with religion.

Francisco, disguised as Mulinassar, talks to Flamineo about the uselessness of being a soldier at peace, when Flamineo offers his own take on preferment:

FLAMINEO: Give me a fair room yet hung with arras, and some great cardinal to
lug by th'ears as his endeared minion.

FRANCISCO: And thou may'st do – the devil knows what villainy.

FLAMINEO: And safely.⁴⁵

Flamineo does not simply wish to be in the service of some great cardinal – he wishes to be his minion. This word has a very explicit connotation during this time. Many people mocked King Henry III of France for his “minions” at court, which were his young, attractive sexual favorites. In *A History of Gay Literature*, Gregory Woods comments, “This charming fantasy of being fucked from behind by a corpulent prince of the Church has at least as much pragmatic humour in it as distaste ... It is a serious joke.”⁴⁶ This reading dismisses Flamineo’s comment as a joke, but that’s writing it off too quickly. It is also significant that Francisco can’t even bring himself to say what Flamineo has in mind, which is also fitting – sodomy is, according to the leading law expert during this time, Edward Coke, the “sin not to be named by Christians.”⁴⁷ Flamineo’s addition would be the scariest for contemporaries. His hope is to literally be the great cardinal’s secretary, keeping the biggest secret of all without fear of discovery – due to their physical and emotional closeness, Flamineo would be able to indulge in this homoerotic behavior whenever he wanted to, as they would be bedfellows.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 5.1.122-125.

⁴⁶ Gregory Woods, *A History of Gay Literature: The Male Tradition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 78-79.

⁴⁷ Coke, *Institutes of the Lawes*, 57.

Aside from these bigger scenes, homoerotic references pervade the play. The stage directions instruct Flamineo to strip before he kills Camillo, which is itself an oddly, physically intimate murder.⁴⁸ A scene later, Marcello recognizes Flamineo's path to preferment will also be his ruin.⁴⁹ As Flamineo goes on to critique Marcello's way of life in favor of his own, Marcello interrupts him to urge him "for love of virtue [to] bear an honest heart."⁵⁰ Flamineo alludes several times to grip, hands, and fluid, and Marcello is unable or unwilling to listen to what his brother is describing. Later, Flamineo agrees to ultimate servitude – a lease on his life that must be renewed daily – with Brachiano.⁵¹ This agreement happens at Brachiano's "pleasure," and Flamineo says his "will is law now." This language is vague yet sexually suggestive enough to bring homoeroticism to mind. This is especially relevant, considering Brachiano is about to perform in a ceremonial joust in full armor – his alpha show of masculinity, complete with an unwieldy lance, makes for good staging.

As presented, Flamineo should not function in society. Contemporary audiences would see him as a power-hungry, double-faced sodomite. What was Webster's purpose in characterizing Flamineo this way? To add to his problems socially, Flamineo's familial relations are strained throughout the play. Although he is engaged to Zanche, the relationship is obviously artificial. Flamineo admits that he only loves her "constrainedly" and that he "made to her some such dark promise and in seeking to fly from't I run on."⁵² Flamineo has one reason be in this relationship: "she knows some of my villainy; I do love her, just as a man holds a wolf by the

⁴⁸ Webster, *White Devil*, 2.2.37 s.d.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 3.1.34-35.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 3.1.36-61; 56.

⁵¹ Ibid., 5.2.75-80.

⁵² Ibid., 5.1.152; 5.1.167-168.

ears.”⁵³ Even though he does not want to marry her, Flamineo stays with her to keep her from revealing whatever his villainy is. As for Zanche, she recognizes his desire for other men, saying, “A little painting and gay clothes / Make you loathe me.”⁵⁴ In other words, when she accentuates her femininity, Flamineo rejects her.

Even though the relationship is feigned, Flamineo’s family cannot accept that Zanche is a moor and a servant herself. Both Cornelia and Marcello physically abuse her and reprimand Flamineo for agreeing to marry her.⁵⁵ Once again, Flamineo is in a bind, unable to choose either Zanche or his family, and he fights bitterly with Marcello. This results in Flamineo killing his brother, which makes his mother go mad.⁵⁶ It is important to note that Flamineo doesn’t kill or stab Marcello but rather runs him through. This sort of penetration is suggestive of the family’s critique on Flamineo as a whole.

According to some critics, these family scenes are unnecessary. Harold Jenkins, in “The Tragedy of Revenge in Shakespeare and Webster” in the *Shakespeare Survey*, “deplores Webster’s ‘fatal tendency to complication’ in *The White Devil* and contrasts it with *The Duchess of Malfi*, in which ‘there is now no ghost, no mad wailing mother, no good brother to be killed by a bad.’”⁵⁷ Similarly, in “Webster’s *The White Devil* and the Jacobean Tragic Perspective” in *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, Larry S. Champion contends that “Marcello’s murder and Cornelia’s madness are never effectively integrated into the major action.”⁵⁸

⁵³ Ibid., 5.1.152-153.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 5.1.169-170.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 5.1.184-200.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 5.2.13 s.d.; 5.2.56-57, 5.4.64-109.

⁵⁷ Luckyj, introduction to *White Devil*, xv, f.n. 11.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

These critics do not take the implications of Flamineo's sodomy into account. As stated previously, sodomites disrupted the natural order of life. During this time, the family was generally recognized to represent society at large. According to Lena Cowen Orlin in *Elizabethan Households: An Anthology*, "Elizabethan social thinkers recognized the place that households had to play in the public order of the period ... both the monarchy and the new church of England turned to the household as the institution in which order was to be created, modeled, and enforced."⁵⁹ Flamineo tears his family apart – he kills his brother, drives his mother mad, and plans to kill his sister. By having Flamineo destroy his family to this extent, Webster is showing how destructive sodomy and social mobility can be.

The breakdown of the metaphorical society is reinforced later, when Flamineo interacts with the "real" society of the play, which is even more frightening. After Brachiano dies, Flamineo becomes a "masterless man" and practically has free reign⁶⁰ (Neill, 15). This is an issue, as service was the defining concept of English society and hierarchy. English society was structured by the hierarchical Great Chain of Being, and this structure of service not only "provided the model by which all relationships involving power and authority were understood but ... it was almost impossible to conceive of a properly human existence outside the hierarchy of masters and servants that made up the 'society of orders.'"⁶¹ The social position of each individual in England "was to some degree determined by his servant dependence upon a more powerful master. In this construction society consisted of an unbroken chain of service that

⁵⁹ Lena Cowen Orlin, *Elizabethan Households: An Anthology* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995), 22.

⁶⁰ Michael Neill, *Putting History to the Question: Power, Politics, and Society in English Renaissance Drama* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 15.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 21.

stretched from the humblest peasant to the monarch who owed service only to God.”⁶² Everyone owed service upwards. Because Flamineo falls outside of the system after Brachiano dies, he is able to interact with others outside of this hierarchy.

As such, after he is masterless, Flamineo is free to disrespect the nobility. He disobeys Giovanni’s order to leave him alone, even though he is now the Duke.⁶³ Indeed, Flamineo mocks Giovanni lightly, calling him merry when he is in mourning and offering an insensitive view of Brachiano’s death.⁶⁴ Flamineo also orders Francisco to do as he says. Although Francisco does not want to lead Flamineo to his mother and Zanche, Flamineo repeatedly says, “I will see them.”⁶⁵ This isn’t a request; Flamineo does not give Francisco an option. On top of this, Flamineo instructs Francisco to leave him alone.⁶⁶ Even though Francisco is disguised as Mulinassar, his status does not change. This interaction is still a servant bossing around a duke. Most abstractly – and perhaps most scandalously – Flamineo confronts Brachiano’s ghost.⁶⁷ Not only does he face him once again, Flamineo calls him a mockery.⁶⁸

Flamineo embraces the sudden agency that comes with his masterless condition. Flamineo rushes in on Vittoria and Zanche, saying, “You are my lord’s executrix and I claim / Reward for my long service.”⁶⁹ He takes command and insists on payment, going against the

⁶² Ibid., 21-22.

⁶³ Webster, *White Devil*, 5.4.10.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 5.4.11-19.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 5.4.51-61.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 5.4.112.

⁶⁷ Luckyj believes Flamineo’s speech is quick and desperate throughout this confrontation. I disagree with her reading. To me, the lines do not lend themselves to this emotional state. Reading it slower establishes Flamineo’s presence in the scene and provides a tenser – yet ultimately positive – confrontation between Flamineo and his previous master.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 5.4.121-122.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 5.6.7-8.

assumption during this time that “a servant did not seek a reward” from a close master.⁷⁰

Additionally, he tells Vittoria that both of them must die with Brachiano.⁷¹ But he makes a point to make it known that he will be dying voluntarily, and Flamineo is resolved to have things go his way – as he puts it, “My life hath done service to other men; / My death shall serve my own turn.”⁷² This is surprisingly accurate – even though Vittoria and Zanche want to kill Flamineo, they wait until his order.⁷³ Essentially, he is giving the go-ahead to his own shooting squad.

The ultimate anxiety is exposed after Flamineo is shot by the two women. Although he falls to the ground, he rises from seeming death, revealing that the guns were loaded with blanks.⁷⁴ This is not simply a metatheatrical joke, as Luckyj asserts; this is Flamineo had the height of his disorder and disruption.⁷⁵ In this scene, Flamineo has metatheatrical control over the others onstage and the audience. Rather than immediately react to his sister’s betrayal, Flamineo acts his death out. He is able to play with the characters’ as well as the audience’s perception as he sees fit. This is not the sort of power a servant should be given onstage. The only way for Webster to resolve Flamineo’s behavior is to literally upstage him with Lodovico and his gang. The rush onstage more than doubles the number of characters previously, visually stripping control from Flamineo. It is fitting that the one to put Flamineo back in his place is Lodovico, who was restored to order himself earlier. This final interaction establishes and reiterates the proper social order.

⁷⁰ Alan Bray, “Homosexuality and the Signs of Male Friendship in Elizabethan England,” in *Queering the Renaissance*, ed. Jonathan Goldberg (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 50.

⁷¹ Webster, *White Devil*, 5.6.32-37.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 5.6.49-50.

⁷³ This is yet another way Flamineo demonstrates his control over the stage. With such a long, drawn-out farewell, the women are forced to listen to what he has to say. Rather than shooting him, as they had intended, they must wait through his long, patronizing speech.

⁷⁴ Webster, *White Devil*, 5.6.147-148.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.6.148 f.n.

Webster intentionally characterized Flamineo, a power-hungry and mobile servant, in the worst way he could. Flamineo is made corrupt, debased, duplicitous, and atheistic in order to make him a prescriptive figure, not a descriptive character. His qualities are used as tropes – sodomy is being hinted at onstage, not represented – to illuminate the anxiety over social mobility during this time. *The White Devil* shows the social chaos and disorder that comes from upwards and downward mobility. Because of all the connotations it carries, Flamineo is coded as a sodomite to more easily convey this idea of social destruction. It is important for readers of *The White Devil* today to be more in touch with the influences on Webster and contemporary thought surrounding the play, as these dramatically affect our understanding of the text. Further readings of *The White Devil* should focus on Zanche's role in this configuration, as that was outside the scope of this paper.

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