

VERBAL REPETITIONS IN JOHN WEBSTER'S TRAGEDIES

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Abstract:

The article is dedicated to the analysis of the subordinate role of repetitions in John Webster's tragedies. Repetition is a means of emphasis and the matter emphasized is a guide to a person's character. The connection between a dramatist's use of repetition and his dramatic powers is close.

Key words: repetition, speech, subordinate role, character, irony, poetic.

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Webster stands closest to Shakespeare in his style and method of working. He combines the intense intimacy and realism that with a feeling for beauty, and a richness of imagery that we find nowhere else outside Shakespeare.

Thus even in the similarity of the trait the characters retain their individuality, they are still clearly differentiated from one another. But this differentiation is not achieved, in the main, by differences in the quality of the repetitions. The speech music does not change with the speakers, nor is it especially well adapted to the irony of the speech. It is, in fact, realistic repetition, following the forms of ordinary conversation, not poetical, creating a more vivid reality. The irony is given by the situation and by the intonation of the actors, not by the repetition itself, which merely serves to underline it. It is by differences in the situations or the contents of the speech, not by changes in the speed and tone of the speech music, that the characters are differentiated. Therein lies, perhaps, a great part of Webster's inferiority to Shakespeare, that with him the possibilities of the speech music are less fully exploited: and also, of course, his tragedies are spoiled by his disability to produce a fifth act that concentrates the interest of the play instead of dissipating it. For in the power and beauty of his imagery, in the vividness of his imagination, in the force of his language Webster is second to none.

However, even though repetition with Webster tends to play a subordinate role and is often dependent for its effect on the thoughts that it underlines rather than on its more purely musical qualities, as in Hamlet's Words, words, words, or Othello's But yet the pity of it, Iago! O! Iago, the pity of it, Iago! yet Webster is, in his use of repetition, much superior to most of his contemporaries and does not entirely neglect the speech music, although his effects are less subtle than those of Shakespeare. Thus Vittoria is differentiated from the other characters not only by the use to which she puts her ironical repetitions, but by the very limited use she makes of the figure, for, apart from the cool, calculating examples given above and her cries for help in the last act, Vittoria has no repetitions, and she is stamped in that way as a cold, unemotional

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nature no less surely than Macbeth. The two men, both in their different ways fiery and emotional, display a greater variety of types. Brachiano's harsh commanding tone, which is in harmony with the domineering note in his irony, has been mentioned in connection with his use of come, come. One finds it too in his insolent reception of Cornelia's reproaches — Fie, fie, the woman's mad. I ii 319. And there is further his quick anger as he tears open Florence's forged letter — I have found out the conveyance. — Read it, read it! V i 24. Even the fear of death cannot tame it as he calls for someone to tear off the helmet that is killing him — An armourer! ud's death, an armourer! V iii 1, where the retarding effect of the tmesis is more than counteracted by the oath that is inserted. The words with which he divorces himself from his wife — Henceforth I'll never lie with thee, by this, This wedding-ring, I'll never lie with thee. II i 193 — are unusually solemn and weighty for his abrupt manner, but they are needed to impress themselves on the audience, since Isabella, as she takes the blame for the separation on herself, has to repeat those very words, with the change only from thee to you. The repetition here serves to underline a theatrical effect, it is independent of character. For the rhetorical ring of the amplification in: That hand, that cursed hand, which I have wearied With doting kisses! IV ii 27 there is no such explanation.

Flamineo's repetitions, in contrast with Brachiano's, tend, in the last act, at least, to have a slow, brooding note, brought out in the speech music in cases where the repetition is not dictated by too strong excitement: it is at its simplest in, I come to you 'bout worldly business. Sit down, sit down. V vi 2, with its end position and falling, despondent melody, — more emotional, and with a stronger note of weariness in his answer to the question What dost think on?, as he awaits his death — Nothing; of nothing: leave thy idle questions. V vi 203, again a falling melody, since it is an answer, and with a retarding amplification. Also his answer to his mother in her madness, as she prepares to sing her dirge, — Do, an you will, do. V iv 99 — with its heavy tmesis, has the same slow melody, a fore-taste, possibly, of the melancholy of death. But Flamineo has also repetitions, chiefly imperative forms, of a sharp ringing tone: Away, away, my lord! I ii 51, What fury raised thee up? Away, away! I ii 292; and of especial interest for the stoical contempt for danger that they display are his Ha! I can stand thee: nearer, nearer yet! V iv 129, addressed to the ghost, and his Shoot, shoot: of all deaths the violent death is best. V vi 114, where, however, the sentiment is false, for he knows that there is no danger. Altogether, excepting Shakespeare alone, no other dramatist has succeeded in conveying such complexity and depth of portraiture in just some dozen phrases. And it is the vividness of the personalities created by strokes such as these no less than the haunting poetic beauty of their language that gives to Webster's dramas their peculiar power.

In *The Duchess of Malfi* the number of repetitions has sunk, for reasons similar to those in *Macbeth*, to less than half those of the earlier play. For here the two protagonists, the duchess and her husband Antonio, are drawn, though not as cold and insensible, yet as gentle and remote from all passion, and correspondingly averse from repetition. Nor does Webster seem to employ the figure for pathetic effects, although pathos is the very essence of the tragedy. Thus the duchess has only 4 examples of repetition, of which only two are emotional — See, see, like to calm weather At sea before a tempest, false hearts speak fair. III v 24, and That's the greatest

torture souls feel in hell, In hell, that they must live and cannot die. IV i 67, and Antonio only a purely conventional Fie, fie, the physicians Will then flock to her. II i 180. -The only really excitable character is Ferdinand, though even his 7 repetitions are by no means excessive, in spite of the comparative smallness of his part. On the whole he tends toward sharp, quick repetitions coming at the beginning of a sentence, though not usually at the beginning of a speech — In, in, I'll go sleep. II v 74, That, that damns her. III iii 62 etc. Only two slightly more complex examples occur: My sister, O my sister! there's the cause on't. II v 71, and Rhubarb, oh, for rhubarb To purge this choler! II v 12, — none are especially individual, while the 5 examples of the villain, or tool, Bosola, are still less expressive — So, so; no, no; go, go; come, come; and on, on. Not infrequently one has the impression in Elizabethan drama that the protagonists tinge in some way the secondary characters. Some of Hamlet's cadences are echoed by Claudius and Polonius, and in Macbeth one is astonished to find scenes of great excitement, as the murder of Lady Macduff, developed without a single repetition. Here too it seems as if the character of the protagonists had subdued the whole tone of the play, making a very marked contrast with the richness of *The White Devil*.

Bradley noticed that the stylistic device of repetition is widely used in moments of great emotion. According to Bradley verbal repetition is a means of individualization has two points: as an idiosyncrasy of speech and as a striking characteristic [2]. Webster represents the application of repetition to portraiture.

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