

'Ha, O my horror!' Grotesque tragedy in John Webster's *The White Devil*¹

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We use the word grotesque to describe the weird and unexpected, with particular emphasis upon unpalatable combinations – things that unsettle us because they don't belong together. The word descends from the same Italian stem as 'grotto' (*grottesca*), which was used to describe the cavernous galleries popular among the aristocracy in Renaissance Italy. Like those preserved at the Boboli Gardens in Florence, Italian Renaissance grottos were decorated with wall paintings of sensationally hybrid mythological figures and creatures (like centaurs), designed to both delight and repulse their visitors. Michel Jenneret traces the hybrid forms that adorned these spaces as exemplary of the early modern fascination with metamorphosis, flux and change:

When serpent is crossed with man, column with flowers, bird with foliage, the door is open to any and all alliances. People cut off from religious and magical thought might see the grotesques as amusing, ornamental caprices; to the sixteenth-century mind these composite figures represent a world animated by continuous metamorphosis, where all parts communicate and combine: whether delighted or horrified by this nature deprived of stable structures and predictable evolution, they certainly did not disqualify it.²

So the original function of the Renaissance grotesque was to delight and horrify through hybrid forms, in an age characterised by artistic responses to cultural change. And when John Florio translated the word grotesque in 1598 as 'a kinde of rugged unpolished painter's work', he also termed it an '*anticke* work'.³ Equivalent to the Italian *grottesca*, derivations of *antico* originally applied to 'fantastic representations of human, animal, and floral forms, incongruously running into one another', and was used to define the 'uncouthly ludicrous', decorative things 'grouped or figured with fantastic incongruity', and of faces having 'the features grotesquely distorted ... grinning'.⁴ The 'antic' also had important theatrical applications ('a performer

who plays a grotesque or ludicrous part' (*OED, adj. & n., 4a*) from around 1568, and his performance was – according to John Ford's *Love's Sacrifice* (1633) – expected to embody 'newness strange, and much commended' (III.ii.19–21).⁵ The staged grotesque encapsulated the unusual and the new through paradoxical combinations, interweaving forms of fantastical doubleness in ways that simultaneously attracted and repulsed.⁶

This grotesque effect was in full vogue on the Jacobean stage, and found most powerful expressive paradoxes within revenge tragedy. Moments of gallows humour surround famous scenes like Hamlet's sojourn in the graveyard, Macbeth's Porter and Lear's Fool, but other revenge tragedies reach levels of grotesquery that threaten to derail them from the tragic genre entirely. In these performances, early modern playgoers were confronted with confusing moments of grotesque violence that moved beyond tragicomedy, veering towards chaos and lunacy. Consider D'Amville clownishly braining himself with his own axe in *The Atheist's Tragedy* (1611), Ferdinand handing his sister the severed limb of her (apparently) murdered lover in *The Duchess of Malfi* (1614), or Vindice wielding the poisoned skull of his fallen beloved in *The Revenger's Tragedy* (1606). Such moments of horror-comedy are often made all the more baffling by their intrinsic associations with themes of lust. In his dying utterance, for instance, the hapless D'Amville scorns how, 'The lust of death commits a rape upon me, / As I would ha' done on Castabella' (*The Atheist's Tragedy*, V.ii.265–6).⁷ Grotesque fusions of violence and laughter present an inherently sexualised union of opposites, which has long been associated with forbidden (and even bestial) urges.⁸ So like the subjects who enjoyed the *grotesca* paintings and sculptures of Renaissance Florence, Jacobean playgoers were invited to marvel at performances that deliberately fused the incompatible.

Of all surviving Jacobean revenge tragedies, the violence employed in John Webster's *The White Devil* (1612) is perhaps the most consistently weird, horrible and funny; and, in relation to the above etymologies and definitions, the play is certainly an archetype of the grotesque. Webster's play confronts its audience with a dizzying array of violent deaths, including strangulation, two counts of poison-asphyxiation, four stabbings (and one further attempted stabbing), a fake execution at gunpoint (immediately followed by a body seemingly being trampled to death), and an undeniably strange murder-by-vaulting-horse. By coupling its vicious moments with dark comedy at almost every stage, *The White Devil* epitomises the grotesque fusion of generic opposites, exuding 'horrid laughter'⁹ and sitting uncomfortably even within the capacious 'shifting values and ironic double-visions of tragicomedy'.¹⁰ A recent literary encyclopaedia entry goes so far as comparing Webster's style to that of iconic filmmaker Quentin Tarantino, finding parallels in their 'mordant wit, grotesque caricatures of the human body, and cheery good humor at (other people's) torture' – reading his art as, in some respects, more attuned to revenge *comedy*.¹¹ But if Webster's play deliberately unsettles

through its chaotic blends of violence and amusement, why does it do so? What, beyond sensationalism, did Webster hope it to achieve? In this chapter I pose an answer these questions by looking beneath *The White Devil's* grinning façade, to find a committed intellectual attachment to a classical philosophical debate. I argue that *The White Devil's* weirdness stems from a central (grotesque) 'cut and shut' of opposing philosophical ideas – and that Webster clashes them to trigger an explosive finale centred upon his favourite topic: the experience of death. Anchoring my reading on the play's most violent antagonists (Flamineo and Lodovico), I trace philosophical ties to the ancient Greek traditions of Stoicism and Epicureanism, which *The White Devil* uses to reflect upon the individual's perception, experience and acceptance of death.

Black laughter

Ancient Greek and Roman traditions fascinated Renaissance thinkers, and two dominant 'life philosophies' – that is, rules that an individual might try to live by, in the hope of attaining happiness and peace – were categorised under the rubrics of 'Stoic' and 'Epicurean'. Echoes of these opposing philosophical standpoints informed intellectual cultures of early modern England in important ways, and preoccupied Stuart thinkers to the extent that Reid Barbour describes them as 'diacritically obsessed' with their reinvention: 'apart from and in relation to one another'.¹² However, to understand how these concepts function in Webster's grotesque tragedy, we must first unpack how they were perceived in relation to emotional experience and control.

The Stoic ethos insisted upon control of passions through reason, and asserted that the subject must 'deeply and rightly ponder the nature of man and of one's self in order to rise above Fortune and attain peace'.¹³ This emphasis upon complete emotional control was satirised by Thomas Nashe in 1589, writing of 'the old question ... whether it were better to have moderate affections, or no affections?', Nashe quipped that 'The Stoics said none'.¹⁴ But the principles of curbing emotionality became important measures of piety, class and masculinity for English Protestants, so influenced by Jean Calvin's ostensibly Stoic teachings about devotional behaviour.¹⁵ Thus the literary afterlives of great Stoics like Seneca and Cicero in the tragedies of Marlowe, Shakespeare and Jonson animated theatrical mediations upon the nature of Stoic belief, and its complex connections to Calvinist English subjectivity.¹⁶ Yet at a time at which, Samuel Schoenfeldt argues, 'the early modern regime seems to entail a fear of emotion', Stoic principles of control were deconstructed through comparative readings of their notional philosophical opposite: Epicureanism.¹⁷ With decisive origins in the essays of French Catholic Michel de Montaigne, writers probed 'the compelling yet fraudulent relationship between Christianity and Stoicism'¹⁸ (with increasing

recourse to the philosophical system of Epicure and the atomists), which was perceived to *encourage* the pursuit of bodily and emotional pleasure.¹⁹ For in contrast to the emotional retardation favoured by the Stoics, followers of Epicurus believed in the importance of relieving oneself of pain and suffering, and finding peace in and through pleasure.²⁰ Epicurus wrote of the need to escape pain and suffering through the pursuit of pleasure, advocating a life free from fear, including (and especially) fear of the gods and death. Epicurus taught that escaping fear of death through material, sensory pleasure offered the subject the prospect of a peaceful and happy life, because the gods took no interest in human affairs; and Epicurus denied the immortality of the soul and any notion of a celestial afterlife. Perceptions of the Epicurean emphasis on pleasure led to the philosophy being held up for ridicule, as hedonistic and atheistic anathema to Christianity – being especially scorned for its conceptual remoteness from the Stoic principles of Calvinist Protestantism. As Adrian Streete explains, the ‘term “Epicurean” and its cognates were commonly used in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as catch-all terms to refer to any kind of skeptical philosophy’, and were employed ‘as a general term of approbation and abuse in early modern writing’.²¹ Like Jonson’s ludicrous Sir Epicure Mammon, to be termed an Epicurean was (for many) to embody hedonistic folly – in both philosophical grounding and intellectual capacity.

Nevertheless, Webster’s *The White Devil* situates its interest in Epicurean philosophy within its opening lines:

LODOVICO: Banished?
 ANTONELLI: It grieved me much to hear the sentence.
 LODOVICO: Ha, ha, O Democritus, thy gods
 That govern the whole world: courtly reward,
 And punishment. (l.i.1–4)²²

Lodovico’s snarling amusement at his Roman exile invokes the grotesque smiling face of the Greek atomist and forefather to the Epicurean school, Democritus (c. 460–380 BC).²³ So-called ‘laughing philosopher’ for his perceived emphasis upon materialist pleasure (‘courtly reward’), his symbolic smile fascinated European thinkers and artists. In the Baroque period, Democritus became an important subject of portraiture, including a range of works by Johannes Paulus Moreelse, Rembrandt, Rubens and Velázquez.²⁴ Such pieces render Democritus’s (at times ghoulish) grin, overseeing and overshadowing the globe, and often mirrored in contrast to the weeping (pre-) Stoic Heraclitus.²⁵ Smiling Democritus embodies the act of laughter as unique to humanity; mirth is a fundamental and exclusive property of mankind, and assumes an important epistemological function: that we might follow Democritus’s example and laugh at our own existential folly.²⁶ In this way, Democritan laughter operates as a unifying epistemological principle of man, especially when contrasted with a world of hardship, fear and pain.

Such fascination with Democritan mirth draws upon the energies of Rabelais in Mikhail Bakhtin's famous study of the carnivalesque. According to Bakhtin, laughter 'has a deep philosophical meaning, it is one of the essential forms of truth concerning the world as a whole, concerning history and man; it is a peculiar point of view relative to the world ... laughter is just as admissible in great literature, posing universal problems, as seriousness'.²⁷ And Democritus's importance to this school of thought was vital:

In the 'Hippocratic novel' the laughter of Democritus has a philosophical character, being directed at the life of man and at all the vain fears and hopes related to the gods and to life after death. Democritus here made of his laughter a whole philosophy, a certain spiritual premise of the awakened man who has attained virility.²⁸

The idea of the rejuvenated man, awakening to find his virility, is explored in *The White Devil* – where laughter becomes an important (anarchic) escape from fears of death, divine judgement and aspects of providence, which were heightened in Webster's Jacobean context. Calvinistic influence had by then culminated in an English devotional culture saturated by the doctrine of double pre-destination, and Webster's audiences had been long steeped in pressures of deterministic logic, both through the theology of Calvin and the Aristotelian principles of tragic narrative.²⁹ For audiences accustomed to the bleak prospect of gazing forwards to a future moment of fixed salvation/damnation, with what John Stachniewski termed 'the persecutory imagination', it is perhaps unsurprising that where we do find moments of laughter among the tragic debris of *The White Devil*, they can feel awkward, unsettling and pressurised – at times heightening rather than relieving violent tones of death and loss.³⁰

Through his repeated reversion to providence and emotional restraint, the play's chief malcontent Flamineo most often embodies Stoic resolve. He disdains emotionality of other characters, and pointedly states his inability to 'counterfeit a whining passion' for Isabella (III.ii.303–4), in whose murder he colluded. In his ensuing attempts to appear 'a politic madman' (III.ii.308) to deflect attention from his emotional detachment, Flamineo inflates his Stoic resolve by insisting that 'We endure the strokes like anvils or hard steel, / Till pain itself make us no pain to feel' (III.iii.1–2); and he later scorns that

Fate's a spaniel,
We cannot beat it from us: what remains now?
Let all that do ill take this precedent:
Man may his fate foresee, but not prevent. (V.vi.173–6)

Here Webster plays with the Stoic insistence of the subject's helpless subjection to the forces of providence:

[Zeno and Chrysippus] themselves emphasised that everything was according to fate using the following example, that if a dog is tied, as it were, to a wagon, then

if the dog wishes to follow, it will both be pulled and follow, acting by its own choice together with the necessity; but if it does not wish to follow, it will in any case be compelled. The same I suppose applies to human beings; even if they do not wish to follow they will in any case be compelled to go where fate decrees.³¹

Set against the crushing pressures of fate, *The White Devil's* weirder parts more closely resemble what Bakhtin terms 'the world of Romantic grotesque' – in part because they are characterised by the alienating fusion of horror and mirth.³²

That Webster thought incorporating laughter important for the play's success is suggested by revenger Francisco's plotting lines – 'My tragedy must have some idle mirth in't, / Else it will never pass' (IV.ii.118–19), and a jarring synthesis of comedy and horror runs through a range of the play's important scenes.³³ While it is difficult to speculate about what an early modern audience might have found funny, the concept of wicked laughter is explored quite extensively at a thematic level. According to Pearson, 'laughter echoes through [Webster's] plays', and is most deliberate and prominent in *The White Devil*, with 'grotesque comedy modifying even the play's treatment of romantic love'.³⁴ Indeed most of the play's laughter gravitates around moments and themes that marry forms of graphic violence with sexual release. In the opening act Flamineo crudely baits his sister about her infidelity: 'So now you are safe. Ha ha ha, thou entanglest thyself in thine own work like a silkworm' (I.ii.178–9) (where he adapts Vittoria's thread-/semen- spinning pun several lines hence).³⁵ Brachiano's use of the interjection 'Ha?' immediately follows Flamineo's wordplay: 'we fear / When Tiber to each prowling passenger / Discovers flocks of wild ducks' – which he uses to slander Vittoria as prostitute (II.i.84–93). And when the hysterical Brachiano slumps closer to death he imagines the devil at the very brink of sexual release: 'Ha, ha, ha, / Look you his codpiece is stuck full of pins / With pearls o'th'head of them' (V.iii.99); and he then fails to recognise Vittoria: 'Ha, ha, ha. Her hair is sprinkled with arras powder, that makes her look as if she had sinned in the pastry' (V.iii.116–17). Elsewhere Francisco anticipates the risible spectacle of Isabella fulfilling her pledge for scorpion-whipping revenge: 'To see her come / To my lord cardinal for a dispensation / Of her rash vow will beget excellent laughter' (II.i.273–5); and in the dumb show the conjurer Doctor Julio and his assistant '*depart laughing*' after poisoning Brachiano's portrait – in anticipation of Isabella's bizarre death by osculation. When Francisco (in Moorish disguise) courts Zanche, he too invokes laughter and emotional excess: 'When I threw the mantle o'er thee, thou didst laugh / Exceedingly methought ... And cried'st out, / The hair did tickle thee' (V.iii.235–7), evoking the same pleasure–pain dichotomy as Flamineo's warnings of the 'Machiavellian' who 'tickles you to death, makes you die laughing' (V.iii.194). Bridget Escolme's recent study of emotional excess emphasises that 'laughter in the early modern theatre is ambivalent and multi-directional rather than simply excessive and cruel',³⁶ and the consistency of its deployment

alongside themes of lust and grotesque death suggests a measure of careful and deliberate design. Throughout the play, moreover, facial appearances are untrustworthy emotional and/or moral barometers. For example, Flamineo pokes fun at the Spanish Ambassador who ‘carries his face’s ruff, as I have seen a serving-man carry glasses in a cypress hat-band, monstrous steady for fear of breaking’ (III.i.71–2), and again seeks Stoic appearance: ‘this face of mine / I’ll arm and fortify with lusty wine / ’Gainst shame and blushing’ (I.ii.312–14). Laughter and emotional excess lurk especially within the play’s darkest characters and moments.

The exiled revenger Lodovico is, however, the character most animated by themes of dark laughter. Following his reference to Democritus in the opening lines of the play, his companion Gasparo reflects upon how the Roman court ‘Laugh at your misery’ (I.i.24); and he is elsewhere associated with emotional excess by the Conjuror, as one who ‘did most passionately dote’ upon the fallen Isabella (II.ii.33). When he clashes with the Stoic Flamineo in Act III, Scene iii, Webster heightens Lodovico’s Democritan mirth and uses the quarrel to stage a coded philosophical debate. Just before Marcello marks the ‘strange encounter’ (III.iii.60) in an aside to the audience, Lodovico states his intent to ‘wind’ (III.iii.53) Flamineo. The ambiguous transitive verb ‘wind’ could, in early modern parlance, have referred to moving or steering something by force (*OED*, *v.*, 1.6b, 1.8b), to draw something out with a twisting motion (*OED*, *v.*, 1.10), and to ‘bring (a thing) in by insinuating methods’ (*OED*, *v.*, 1.16c).³⁷ Rhetorical manoeuvring here resonates with Aristotle’s precepts of ‘delighting the hearers, and stirring them to laughter’, whereby the comical ‘turning of a word ... doth often move the hearer’, and in which an orator who will ‘move sport’ must know within ‘what compass he should keep, that should thus be merry. For fear he take too much ground and go beyond his bounds’.³⁸ Unconcerned about transgressing boundaries of social etiquette, Lodovico’s intent to wind Flamineo seems to be to provoke from him an emotional response. It makes sense, then, that when the verbal sparring begins Flamineo reacts to Lodovico as if he were smiling:

FLAMINEO:	The god of melancholy turn thy gall to poison, And let the stigmatic wrinkles of thy face Like to the boisterous waves in a rough tide One still overtake another.	
LODOVICO:		I do thank thee
	And I do wish ingeniously for thy sake The dog-days all year long.	
FLAMINEO:		How croaks the raven?
	Is our good Duchess dead?	
LODOVICO:		Dead.
FLAMINEO:		O fate!
	Misfortune comes like the crowner’s business, Huddle upon huddle. (III.iii.61–9)	

laughter scurvily becomes your face; / If you will not be melancholy, be angry. [*Strikes him*] / See, now I laugh too' (III.iii.115–17). Here Lodovico 'winds' Flamineo into a fury that wrenches him away from the detached Stoic reserve that we see him assume elsewhere in the play. And this prolonged, fiery exchange is the first of only two encounters between the play's philosophical polarities; when they cross paths again (in the tragedy's crescendo) their conflict swerves violently into bloodshed.

I have argued elsewhere that Webster's play is animated by a deliberate jarring of Calvinist and Montaignian models of introspection.⁴² And while Webster undoubtedly derived much of his interest in and knowledge of Epicureanism through Montaigne, earlier works might also have piqued his interest. In 1573, for instance, James Sanforde translated *The Garden of Pleasure* by Florentine merchant and writer Lodovico Guicciardini (1521–89) – a scrapbook of quotations and philosophical positions from Socrates to Erasmus, including a range of references to both Epicurus and Democritus. Guicciardini was a controversial figure, and was imprisoned several times on the continent for political collusion with reformers, and then also for his alleged involvement in the assassination plot against William the Silent, Prince of Orange in 1582.⁴³ His inclusion of Democritus places importance upon the dualism of laughter and misery in relation to the (pre-Stoic) monist Heraclitus: 'the one considering ye follies of men did ever laugh: the other considering their miseries, did always weep' patched against Andrea Alciato's Emblem 152: 'Thee Democrite also laugh I more to see, / Than thou art wont, thy hand doth point to me'.⁴⁴ Heraclitus held important influence over the development of Stoicism, and was also used by Montaigne as a counterpoint to Epicurean mirth in his essay 'Of Democritus and Heraclitus'.⁴⁵ Montaigne describes how Democritus, 'finding and deeming human condition to be vain and ridiculous, did never walk abroad, but with a laughing, scornful and mocking countenance: whereas *Heraclitus* taking pity and compassion of the very same condition of ours, was continually seen with a sad, mournful, and heavy cheer, and with tears trickling down his blubbered eyes' (I.50). Exploring dialectics of folly and melancholy through the forefathers to the Epicurean and Stoic schools was a conventional trope in contemporary philosophical discourse, and Montaigne finds preference in Democritus's materialism: 'not because it is more pleasing to laugh, than to weep; but for it is more disdainful, and doth more condemn us than the other'. The Democritan laughing condition brings Webster's chief influence to a point of grotesque fascination with man's 'risible', 'ridiculous' fallen state (I.50). And learning to laugh at one's existential deficiency brings Montaigne another step closer to his central (Epicurean) aim: to learn how to escape the fear of death. This impulse animates *The White Devil* too, and in Webster's attempts to dramatise Montaigne's concerns, the clash between horror and comedy fulfils an important philosophical role.

Colliding atoms

Given the affinity between Webster and Montaigne, it seems reasonable to read Lodovico and Flamineo's clash as one that resembles the Democritus–Heraclitus dualism.⁴⁶ If these characters do represent the opposing extremes of Epicurean emotionality (with particular emphasis upon pleasure and laughter) and Stoic restraint, it is worth considering how far, and to what ends, Webster pursues this motif.⁴⁷ Both characters are, of course, most obviously associated with their violent acts, which can often only be described as grotesque. A full production of *The White Devil* sees at least seven staged murders: four stabbings, two poison-asphyxiations, and Camillo's undeniably weird neck-break-by-vaulting-horse; these are followed by one pseudo-execution at gunpoint and an unspecified body-count in the closing scene when the conspirators (including Lodovico) are shot by Prince Giovanni's guards. All of these acts of violence involve Lodovico or Flamineo, and the frenetic – and at times comical – waves of violence seem again to emulate Montaigne. In his essay 'That to Philosophie is to learn how to die' (I.19), Montaigne marvels at 'How many several means and ways hath death to surprise us', listing a series of bizarre, accidental fatalities including those of French kings John II, who was 'stifled to death in a throng of people', and Henry II, who died in a tournament – along with an 'ancestor' of the latter, who died 'miserably by the chocke [violent knock⁴⁸] of a hog'. He also lists Aeschylus who was 'struck dead by the fall of a tortoise shell', and 'another [who] choked with the kernel of a grape' before recounting the slapstick deaths of '*Lepidus* with hitting his foot against a door-sill' and '*Aufidius* with stumbling against the council-chamber door' (I.19) – both of which make more than passing resemblance to *The White Devil*'s Camillo, who is tripped and knocks himself unconscious against the vaulting horse in the second dumbshow at the start of Act II, Scene ii. These deaths are not just curiosities to Montaigne, he uses their randomness and perversity to treat death as something ludicrously inescapable, and to render fear of death as therefore illogical. Within Webster's play, Flamineo's assurance that 'My death shall serve mine own turn' (V.vi.50), and his resolution to 'Defy the worst of fate, not fear to bleed' (V.vi.277) anticipates a dramatic philosophical swerve from Stoic to Epicurean principles (set in motion by the interventions of his philosophical opposite Lodovico).

To grasp the dynamics of this swerve, it is necessary first to explore the latent presence of the writings of Roman Epicurean and atomist Caius Lucretius within Webster's tragedy. Lucretius was an inheritor of the Epicurean school, and foremost among the ideas articulated by his long poem *De Rerum Natura* (*On the Nature of Things*), was a central belief in atomism. All matter, Lucretius contended, consists of microscopic, indestructible, indivisible parts: 'Matter, atoms, generative bodies, elements, and seeds, / And first-beginnings since it is from these that all proceed' (I.60–1).⁴⁹ These atoms

move relentlessly through space, cascading back and forth randomly, colliding and combining en masse to create compounds of what humans perceive in the world around them.⁵⁰ A range of important critical works have stressed the influence of Lucretius over Jacobean intellectual culture (with heavy emphasis on Shakespearean drama), paving the way for the Pulitzer Prize winning claims of Stephen Greenblatt's *The Swerve: How the Renaissance Began* in 2011.⁵¹ Deeply influenced by Democritus, Lucretius denied that the gods took any interest in human affairs, and rejected any notion of spiritual afterlife whatsoever. After death, Lucretius claimed, the spirit atoms departed into the atmosphere and settled in other organisms, maintaining a perennial cycle of life and death. *The White Devil* animates similar ideas in relation to Vittoria's death in at least three places: when Brachiano threatens to cut her 'into atomies / And let th'irregular north-wind sweep her up / And blow her int' his nostrils' (IV.ii.40–2); when Lodovico terms her 'glorious strumpet' and threatens that 'Could I divide thy body from this pure air / When't leaves thy body, I would suck it up / And breathe't upon some dunghill' (V.vi.202–5); and again when he threatens her that 'fear should dissolve thee into thin air' (V.vi.218).⁵² When, however, immediately before his mock-execution Flamineo 'acts out' what Pearson terms 'a grotesque fiction of his own death',⁵³ he too invokes atomist discourse:

Whether I resolve to fire, earth, water, air,
 Or all the elements by scruples, I know not
 Nor greatly care – Shoot, shoot,
 Of all deaths the violent death is best,
 For from our selves, it steals our selves so fast
 The pain once apprehended is quite past. (V.vi.111–16)

William M. Hamlin describes Flamineo's apparent death as a 'particularly complex example of Webster's illusory violence', because his subsequent (pseudo) resurrection becomes 'a dramatic *volte-face* that must inevitably strike audiences as comical'.⁵⁴ But the weird comical tone should not be overlooked, and seems to relate to his Epicurean choice of verb: for 'resolve' means to move between solid, liquid and vapour forms (*OED*, *v.*, 1). So Flamineo imagines dissolving into particles of elemental purity, 'by scruples' – that is, measurements: weight and angles of movement *he knows not*.⁵⁵ And, crucially, Flamineo fails to grasp the fifth element – that of the soul, which according to Lucretius 'consists of very tiny seeds / Bound up in sinews, flesh and veins'.⁵⁶ Unlike Democritus, Lucretius argued that the atoms of flesh and spirit were distinct, and did not alternate (see III.370–6). For Lucretius, the spirit atom is far smaller and more mobile than the flesh: 'its texture is a gauzy one, / And that its particles are tiny – tinier for that matter / Than are the particles of fog, or smoke, or liquid water – / For it is nimbler by far' (III.426–9). The size and speed of the spirit atom 'drives the body forward' (III.160), transmits messages from the sensory organs to the mind, and

regulates unconscious activities like dreaming (by moving images around). The atoms were interspersed (and widely spaced) throughout the body, and were continually in motion. Lucretius uses the extreme examples of how the body can fail to sense the ‘flimsy threads’ of a spider’s web, ‘Nor feel its shrivelled remnant dropping down upon our heads’ (III.383–5); yet, the body can withstand the mutilation of losing limbs (III.403–15) without losing its spirit – both explicable by the ‘ceaseless motion’ (III.34) of the atoms, which can retreat and relocate in response to degrees of sensory stimulus.

These ideas fascinate Montaigne, whose essays are pervaded by an appreciation and fascination with perpetual change and flux wrought by the ceaseless shifting nature of the world: ‘The world runs all on wheels: all things therein move without intermission; yea the earth, the rocks of Caucasus, the pyramids of Egypt, both with the public and their own motion. *Constancy it self is nothing but a languishing and wavering dance*’.⁵⁷ When he uses his own near-death experience (of being trampled by a horse) to contemplate the function and consistency of the soul, Montaigne fixates upon the self-estrangement experienced through extreme physical trauma: ‘I could not believe that at so great an astonishment of members, and *de’failance* of senses, the soul could maintain any force within, to know herself; and therefore had no manner of discourse tormenting them, which might make them judge and feel the misery of their condition’.⁵⁸ In the aftermath of the near-death experience, the soul and sensory system are jolted, and result in ‘motions in us which proceed not of our free will’:

There are many creatures, yea and some men, in whom after they are dead we may see their muscles to close and stir. All men know by experience, there be some parts of our bodies which often without any consent of ours do stir, stand, and lie down again. Now these passions, which but exteriorly touch us, cannot properly be termed ours; for, to make them ours, a man must wholly be engaged unto them. (II.6)

Montaigne reads the uncanny agency of the involuntary reaction (from instinctively raising one’s hands during a fall, to the convulsions of the epileptic) as proof that ‘our members have certain offices, which they lend to one another, and possess certain agitations apart from our discourse’ (II.6); and he accords this agency to the soul in a momentary state of flux, a state that it must assume with finality at the brink of death. Montaigne makes repeated reference to Book III of Lucretius’s *De Rerum Natura* in this sequence. Here Lucretius places special emphasis on the capacity of the badly injured body to annihilate its fear of death:

So when the bond is put asunder between body and soul
The two from which we are composed into a single whole,
Nothing can befall us, we who shall no longer *be*,
Nor move our senses, no, not even if the earth and sea
Were confounded with one another, and the sea mixed with the sky.⁵⁹

of his assailant Lodovico. That ‘seas do laugh, show white, when rocks are near’ once again frames the jarring blend of laughter and perilous violence. To underscore the hybridity, moreover, this fleeting shift to Epicurean thinking is drawn from the neo-Senecan closet tragedy, William Alexander’s *Tragedy of Croesus* (1604).⁶² So rather than leave his Stoicism behind, Flaminio’s detaching, dying self uses and builds upon it to reach a distinctly Epicurean freedom from fear of death and the afterlife.

The weirder parts of *The White Devil* do, then, seem to bridge important connections to the writings of Montaigne and the resurgent interest in the atomist Epicurean tradition in the early seventeenth century. In this play Webster’s grotesque fusion of horror and comedy is not merely gratuitous or sensationalist; or, at least, it is not just those things. *The White Devil* has a deep philosophical interest in issues of death and soteriology, and its strange generic blends echo the dialectical nature of early modern philosophical deliberation more generally. In Montaigne, Webster and his contemporaries found a model of self-exploration that used the Epicurean atomist tradition to probe the limits and flaws of their Stoic Calvinist devotional cultures. Just as Montaigne uses Heraclitus and Democritus to think dialectically about issues of providence, free will, death and soteriology, Webster embeds this paradigm in his tragedy, and clashes Lodovico’s Epicureanism with Flaminio’s Stoicism. That Webster was thinking in these terms does not, however, suggest that his audiences and peers were also doing so. In his preface to the play he famously complained that the playgoers who received (and apparently maligned) the play’s first performance at the Red Bull ‘resemble these ignorant asses (who visiting stationers’ shops, their use not to enquire for good books, but new books)’;⁶³ so his Epicurean-Stoic grotesquery may well have escaped the attention of his audiences, just as it has evaded his later critics. Nevertheless, Webster’s engagement with Lucretius does raise further questions about the dynamic relationship between playwriting, philosophy and spirituality in these years – and concepts like the grotesque can help us identify previously unnoticed forms, fusions and patterns in even the blackest shadows of early modern tragic discourse.

Notes

- 1 Many thanks to Adrian Streete for alerting me to some Lucretian shapes in the evidence of a *White Devil* conference paper that I delivered at Northumbria University in April 2013.
- 2 Michel Jenneret, *Perpetual Motion: Transforming Shapes in the Renaissance: From da Vinci to Montaigne*, trans. Nidra Poller (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), pp. 139–40. And see Jenneret’s fascinating wider discussion of Renaissance ‘Grotesques and Monstrosities’, pp. 104–43.
- 3 John Florio, *World of Words* (London: 1598; STC 11098), Sig. O1r.

- 4 *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (hereafter OED), 'antic', *adj.* & *n.*, etym., 1., 2. www.oed.com (accessed 7 June 2016).
- 5 See Walter W. Skeat, *An Etymological Dictionary of the English Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910), p. 251. Florio's use of antic relates to remains 'found in exhuming some ancient remains (as the Baths of Titus) in Rome, whence extended to anything similarly incongruous or bizarre' (OED, 'antic', *adj.* & *n.*, etym.). *The Works of John Ford*, ed. William Gifford and Rev. Alexander Dyce, 3 vols. (London: James Toovey, 1869), III, p. 61. Gifford and Dyce read Fernando's use of 'antic' here in relation to 'anti-masque': 'in which the characters were always grotesque and extravagant' (fn. 9).
- 6 See C. T. Onions (ed.), *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1966), p. 416.
- 7 *Four Revenge Tragedies*, ed. Katharine Eisaman Maus (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).
- 8 Markku Salmela and Jarkko Toikkanen, 'Introduction: Reading the Grotesque through the Unnatural', in Salmela and Toikkanen (eds), *The Grotesque and the Unnatural* (Amherst and New York: Cambria Press, 2011), pp. 1–16 (p. 3).
- 9 Nicholas Brooke, *Horrid Laughter in Jacobean Tragedy* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1979).
- 10 Jacqueline Pearson, *Tragedy and Tragicomedy in the Plays of John Webster* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980), p. 60.
- 11 Ceri Sullivan, 'John Webster', in David Scott Kastan (ed.), *The Oxford Encyclopedia of British Literature*, 5 vols (Oxford University Press, 2006), V, p. 260.
- 12 Reid Barbour, *English Epicures and Stoics: Ancient Legacies in Early Stuart Culture* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), p. 2.
- 13 Robert S. Miola, *Shakespeare and Classical Tragedy: The Influence of Seneca* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 54.
- 14 Thomas Nashe, *Anatomy of Absurdity* (London: 1589; STC 18364), sig. C1v.
- 15 On Calvin's initial sympathies with and subsequent antagonism of the Stoic tradition see Charles Partee, *Calvin and Classical Philosophy* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1977; rpr. 2005), pp. 95–145.
- 16 See Miola, *Shakespeare and Classical Tragedy*, pp. 53–67. For a useful introduction to Renaissance European interest in Stoicism see John Sellars, *Stoicism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), pp. 139–50. On early modern English poetry (Golding, Marlowe and Herrick) and these classical traditions see Gordon Braden, *The Classics and English Poetry: Three Case Studies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978).
- 17 Samuel Schoenfeldt, *Bodies and Selves in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 15–16. Schoenfeldt's emphasis on restraint has been somewhat revised and nuanced by Richard Strier's *The Unrepentant Renaissance: From Petrarch to Shakespeare to Milton* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2012).
- 18 Barbour, *English Epicures*, p. 2.
- 19 On Montaigne's Stoicism see Geoffrey Miles, *Shakespeare and the Constant Romans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 86–90.
- 20 For an overview of the school of Epicurus see R. W. Sharples, *Stoics, Epicureans and Sceptics: An Introduction to Hellenistic Philosophy* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996; rpr. 2002), pp. 5–8; 59–66; 84–99.

- 21 Adrian Streete, 'Calvin, Lucretius, and Natural Law in *Measure for Measure*', in David Lowenstein and Michael Witmore (eds), *Shakespeare and Early Modern Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 131–54 (p. 133).
- 22 All references from *The White Devil*, 3rd edn, ed. Christina Luckyj (London: New Mermaids, 2008).
- 23 To my knowledge, only one critic has unpacked the significance of the reference to Democritus. See Norma Kroll's neglected 'The Democritan Universe in Webster's *The White Devil*', *Comparative Drama*, 7.1 (1973), pp. 3–22.
- 24 See Peter Paul Rubens, *Democritus and Heraclitus* [Oil on canvas] Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando, Madrid (1603); Rembrandt, *The Young Rembrandt as Democritus the Laughing Philosopher* [Oil on copper] Private collection, England (c. 1628); Diego Velázquez, *Democritus* [Oil on canvas] Musée des Beaux-Arts et de la Céramique, Rouen (c. 1628–29); Johannes Moreelse, *Democritus, the Laughing Philosopher* [Oil on canvas] Mauritshuis, The Hague (c. 1630).
- 25 On the importance of Heraclitus to Stoicism see A. A. Long, *Stoic Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 35–57; and Matthew Colvin, 'Heraclitus and Material Flux in Stoic Psychology', *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 28 (2005), pp. 257–72.
- 26 On ancient Greek cultures of laughter and mirth see two essays by Stephen Halliwell, 'The Uses of Laughter in Greek Culture', *The Classical Quarterly*, 41.2 (1991), pp. 279–96; and 'Greek Laughter and the Problem of the Absurd', *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics*, 13.2 (2005), pp. 121–46.
- 27 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 66.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 77.
- 29 On the protagonists and devotional environs of preaching predestination see Leif Dixon, *Practical Predestinarians in England, c. 1590–1640* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014).
- 30 John Stachniewski, *The Persecutory Imagination: English Puritanism and the Culture of Religious Despair* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).
- 31 Hippolytus, *Philos.* 21 = LS 62A. Cited in Sharples, *Stoics*, p. 77.
- 32 Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, p. 38.
- 33 Marcello's later line, 'Publish not a fear / Which would convert to laughter' (V.ii.8–9) perhaps suggests the difficulty faced by tragedians' attempts to incorporate laughter in their works.
- 34 Pearson, *Tragedy and Tragicomedy*, pp. 65–7. Pearson counts 'Forty examples of laughter and of the words "laugh", "jest", "smiling", "merry", "laughter", "laughing", "mirth", "ridiculous", "sippers", "smiles", and "ridiculously". This compares with thirty in *Duchess of Malfi*, twenty-four in *The Devil's Law Case* ... and twenty in *A Cure for a Cuckold*' (p. 139, n. 11).
- 35 See *The White Devil*, ed. Luckyj, p. 19, n. 164.
- 36 Bridget Escolme, *Emotional Excess on the Shakespearean Stage: Passion's Slaves* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 57.
- 37 There is also a parallel with Cornelia and Zanche's literal winding of Marcello's corpse. See stage directions at V.iv.60–1.
- 38 *The Art of Rhetorique*, trans. Thomas Wilson (London: 1553; STC 25799), p. 77r; p. 75v.

- 39 Montaigne draws the point from Hippocrates in his essay ‘Of Anger and Choler’ (II.31). All references to Montaigne’s *Essays* from *Essays of Michel Lord of Montaigne*, trans. John Florio, 3 vols (London: Grant Richards, 1898). See also Escolme’s brief discussion of Montaigne and emotional repression and display (*Emotional Excess*, pp. 15–18).
- 40 Montaigne, *Essays*, II.16, p. 431.
- 41 *Pharsalia*, trans. Jane Wilson Joyce (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993).
- 42 ‘Unbridled Selfhood in *The White Devil*: Webster’s Use of Calvin and Montaigne’, *The White Devil: A Critical Companion* (Bloomsbury, forthcoming 2016). On Webster’s use of Montaigne see also R. W. Dent, *John Webster’s Borrowings* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960), *passim*; and Robert Freeman Whitman, *Beyond Melancholy: John Webster and the Tragedy of Darkness* (Salzburge: Institut Für Englische pp. 159–91).
- 43 Lee Sorensen, ‘Guicciardini, Lodovico’, in Sorensen (ed.), *Dictionary of Art Historians*, <https://dictionaryofarthistorians.org/guicciardinil.htm> (accessed 24 October 2015).
- 44 *The Garden of Pleasure containing most pleasant tales, worthy deeds and witty sayings of noble princes [et] learned philosophers, moralized. No less delectable, than profitable*, trans. James Sandforde (London: 1573; STC 12464). The collection was reprinted (corrected, enlarged and retitled as *Hours of Recreation, or Afterdimmers, which may aptly be called The garden of pleasure*) in 1576 (STC 12465). See also Geoffrey Whitney’s inclusion of the dualism in his similar *Choice of Emblems* (London: 1586; STC 25438), p. 14.
- 45 See note 23 above.
- 46 See note 37 above.
- 47 Webster *may* have borrowed this trope from Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice*. See George Coffin Taylor’s claims in ‘Is Shakespeare’s Antonio the “Weeping Philosopher” Heraclitus?’, *Modern Philology*, 26.2 (1928), pp. 161–7.
- 48 Textual gloss from Peter J. Platt, *Shakespeare’s Montaigne: The Florio Translation of the Essays*, ed. Platt and Stephen Greenblatt (New York: New York Review Books, 2014), p. 358, n. 32.
- 49 Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, trans. A. E. Stallings (London and New York: Penguin, 2007), p. 5.
- 50 On ‘The Dance of the Atoms’ see Don Fowler’s magnificent *Lucretius on Atomic Motion: A Commentary on De Rerum Natura, Book Two, Lines 1–332* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
- 51 See Jonathan Gil Harris, ‘Atomic Shakespeare’, *Shakespeare Studies*, 30 (2002), pp. 47–51; William Hamlin, *Tragedy and Scepticism in Shakespeare’s England* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005); Eric Langley, *Narcissism and Suicide in Shakespeare and his Contemporaries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Jonathan Goldberg, *The Seeds of Things: Theorizing Sexuality and Materiality in Renaissance Representations* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009); R. Allen Shoaf, “‘if imagination amend them’: Lucretius, Marlowe, Shakespeare”, in David Schalkwyk (ed.), *The Shakespearean International Yearbook* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), pp. 257–80; Stephen Greenblatt, *The Swerve: How the Renaissance Began* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011); and most recently: R. Allen Shoaf, *Shakespeare and Lucretius on the Nature of Things*

- (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2014). For a more comprehensive list see Streete, 'Calvin, Lucretius, and Natural Law', p. 131, n. 1.
- 52 The word 'particel' is also used at IV.ii.232 when Flamineo describes Vittoria's ingratitude with the crocodile and bird analogy.
- 53 Pearson, *Tragedy and Tragicomedy*, p. 60.
- 54 William M. Hamlin, *Tragedy and Scepticism in Shakespeare's England* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), pp. 217; 218.
- 55 OED, 'Scruple', *n.*, 1: 1.a: 'A unit of weight = 20 grains, 1/ 3 drachm, 1/ 24 oz. Apothecaries' weight. Denoted by the character ℥'; 1.b: 'Alleged values of doubtful authority'; 2: 'One-sixtieth of a degree; a minute of arc'.
- 56 Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, III.218–19.
- 57 Montaigne, 'Of Repenting', III.2, p. 29. Emphasis in original.
- 58 Montaigne, 'Of Exercise or Practice', II.6, p. 61.
- 59 Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, III.838–43.
- 60 Brooke, *Horrid Laughter in Jacobean Tragedy*, p. 46.
- 61 Gunnar Boklund, *The Sources of The White Devil* (Copenhagen: Ejnar Munksgaard; and Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957), p. 176.
- 62 Luckyj notes this allusion (p. 163, n. 246–7), but does not quote these lines fully: 'Each surge, we see, doth drive the first away, / The foam is whitest, where the Rock is near, / And as one grows, another doth decay, / The greatest dangers oft do least appear ... A secret destiny does guide great states'. *The Monarchic Tragedies Croesus, Darius, The Alexandraean, Julius Caesar* (London: 1607; STC 344), Sig. B2r.
- 63 'To the Reader', 7–9 (*The White Devil*, ed. Luckyj, p. 5).