

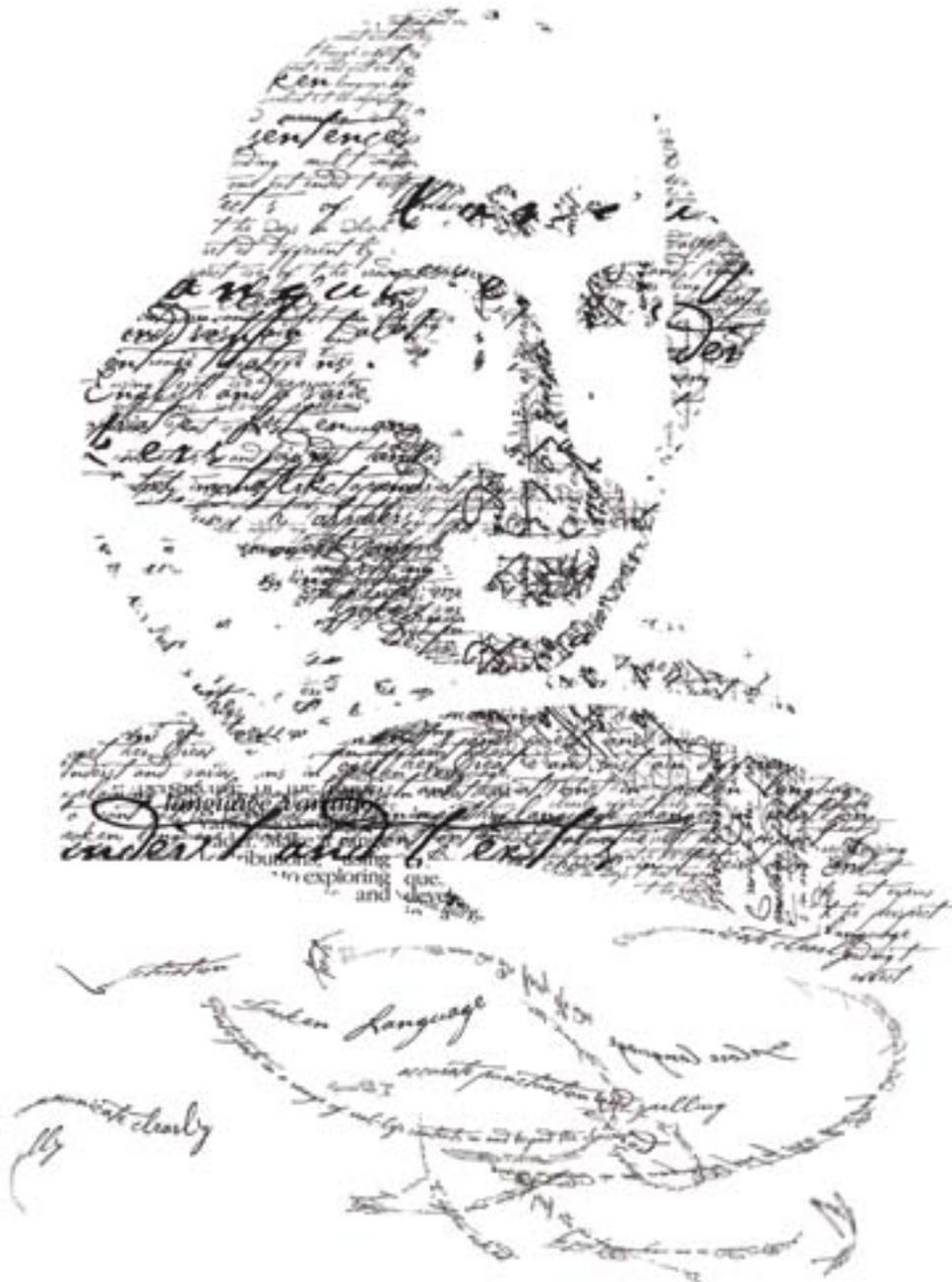
A LEVEL

ENGLISH LITERATURE H071 H471

INTRODUCTION AND GUIDED READING

THE WHITE DEVIL (1611)

Webster



Webster - The White Devil (1611)

From September 2012, OCR will be introducing new set texts for unit F663. To support you and your learners through this change, OCR has commissioned senior members of the examining team to write an introduction and guided reading list for each text in Section B. You can choose to use these materials with your learners as you see fit.

Webster THE WHITE DEVIL (1611)

Biography

Webster is best known in popular culture from his appearance as a grubby pre-adolescent in Marc Norman and Tom Stoppard's 1995 screenplay, *Shakespeare in Love*. We meet him in the early 1590s, torturing and killing animals, and prepared to carry tales (for money or gain) around the close-knit world of the Elizabethan Theatre. This may or may not be an accurate portrait of his formative years, of which nothing is known, but his plays certainly major in intrigue and bloodshed. He studied law, but does not seem to have been successful at it (no career ensued). So he moved on to the theatres. As a writer he collaborated, with a wide range of partners, but did not at first compose in his own right (or his plays were not staged). But he is named in Henslowe's *Diary*, so seems to have been well known to theatre stake-holders.

Stoppard's nasty young boy has exactly the mind the editor John Russell Brown discerned behind Webster's drama, 'brooding, persistent, perhaps fretting.' Webster's contemporaries thought this the explanation for his slow, obsessively careful working methods, and the infrequent delivery of his plays. One of them satirised him, rather surreally, as something between a rumbling cart and an anxious pregnant woman:

Crabbed Websterio,
The playwright-cartwright . . .
Was ever man so mangled with a poem?
See how he draws his mouth awry of late,
How he scrubs, wrings his wrists, scratches his pate.
A midwife, help!
(Henry Fitzjeffrey of Lincoln's Inn, 1618)

The shuddering cart reference is owing to Webster's lowly (but comfortable) origins as the son of a coach-maker.

Stanley Wells, *Shakespeare and Co* (2006) looks at Shakespeare in relation to each of his major contemporaries, including Webster. Profoundly learned but lightly and concisely written, this is an excellent resource at A2. It might be supplemented with the critically incisive *Faber Guide to Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama* (2006), edited by Simon Trussler.

AO4 Biographical contexts

The Man with The Common-Place Book

One of the reasons Webster's plays took him so long is that he seems to have taken almost every line from something he had read elsewhere, making the effect more like collage or anthology than original poetic composition. Like many of his contemporaries he kept a 'Commonplace Book' or note-book, collecting materials which he later edited and sharpened to form the dialogue of his plays. Genius in his case really does seem to have been 'an infinite capacity for taking pains'. He pointedly contrasts with his own methods, and praises, the 'right happy and copious industry of Master Shakespeare' (famous for writing quickly) in his preface to *The White Devil*

The Duchess of Malfi

The White Devil (1612?) is a kind of twin of the other canonical Webster play, *The Duchess of Malfi* (1612-13). An unkind but intriguing critical quip runs: 'Webster had a tragedy in him, and he wrote it twice.' *Malfi* has proved the more durable play in the theatre, because it is less chaotically plotted and because the heroine is more conventionally sympathetic. But both plays contain pictures of the corrupt courts of princes which are hedged about by ambition, malice, envy and (particularly) clerical ambition. The homicidal Cardinal in *Malfi* is even more uncompromising than his counterpart in *The White Devil*, Montecelso. The queasy hints of sexual attraction between Flamineo and his sister in *The White Devil* develop into Ferdinand's pretty explicit incestuous desire for the Duchess in *The Duchess of Malfi*.

'Court promises' (unpaid) are a strong theme of both plays. Much as Lodovico begins *The White Devil* deploring his banishment when he expected 'harvest' for dark deeds, Bosola, who has done time for his Master the Cardinal as a galley-slave, expects better pay for his sufferings than to be kept waiting about at Court. Flamineo's obsession with economic deficiency in *Devil* closely parallels that of Bosola. Flamineo has become enmeshed in a spider's web of intrigue designed to catch his sister a rich husband, doing time as a poor scholar at the University, graduating there, but not increasing his prospects of a comfortable lifestyle. Now he fears he will have to serve (like Bosola) in the galleys, or perhaps come to a bad end on the gallows (1:2 314-15; 320-23).

AO2 Writing methods

Webster's Sources

Webster drew the materials for his two great tragedies from relatively recent sources. In *The Duchess of Malfi* he used accounts from the early sixteenth century describing how the Duchess defied the Church and her powerful brothers by marrying and raising a family secretly. But where the original sources concentrated on the Duchess's unfeminine and even unchristian deviousness, Webster's play compassionates the Duchess, criticising instead the perverseness and cruelty of her brothers and the venality of the Catholic Church in Italy. Matters in *The White Devil* are much less clear-cut, not least because a bewildering number of published accounts of Vittoria's life and death (at least a hundred) were available to Webster, and the accounts dealt with more recent events (Vittoria died in 1585).

Nevertheless in this play, as in *Malfi*, Webster seems to have 'spun' his heroine's story to diminish, but not eradicate, the taint of slander. Vittoria emerges from *Devil*, at least in some readings and performances, as braver, more resourceful when cornered and possibly more religious than she is in any of his probable sources. Nevertheless it is also possible to play her as tainted, cowardly and hypocritical: the 'white devil' or 'whited sepulchre' of the play's title. Webster also went out of his way to gather large amounts of material from Bignon's *A Treatise on the Election of Popes* (1605), suggesting he wanted to satirise the tawdry hypocrisy of the Roman Catholic Church by means of its crowning ritual. Most of the action of the play takes place in the vicinity of Rome and so is subject to intervention from the secular power of the Papacy.

AO4 Historical context

The Italian Job

The White Devil is one of many Early Modern Plays which treat lurid events in a semi-fabular Italy. Playhouse (or 'hot-house') Italy offered a number of opportunities to 'Jacobethan' dramatists. This was the country of Renaissance artefacts and romance, and these could provide a patina of aesthetic authority. Shakespeare's *Two Gentlemen and Taming* are set there, and so is Ben Jonson's hit 'Italian' comedy, *Every Man in his Humour* (1598). If Italy supplied comedy with credentials, however, its main contribution to tragedy was illicitness. Italian settings permitted English audiences both to leer at and deplore unprincipled pragmatic politics such as were apparently advocated in Machiavelli's *The Prince* (c. 1513) (which few or no London playgoers had actually read). In *The White Devil* there is praise for 'the rare trick of a Machivillian' (*White Devil*, 5:3, 193). Unusual methods of murder and execution were also part and parcel of Stage Italy. In Marlowe's *Edward II* the hired killer Lightborn has been there and learnt:

... how to poison flowers;
To strangle with a lawn thrust through the throat;
To pierce the windpipe with a needle's point;
Or whilst one is asleep, to take a quill
And blow a little powder in his ears
(*Edward II* 5:4, 30-34)

Lightborn's school of homicide seems to have furnished Claudius with a way of killing old King Hamlet; *The White Devil*'s Dr Julio, an artist with 'stibium' and 'cantharides' (2:1 285-86), is adept at making Brachiano's portrait noxious with a 'fume'; Lodovico knows about insinuating poison into prayer books, rosaries, the pommel of saddles and even articles of armour; while the vaulting horse episode in the Act 2 dumb-show of *The White Devil*, where Camillo's neck is 'writhed about' and his death made to look an accident, is a perfect 'Italianate' stratagem. Vicious characters could also be identified and appreciated more quickly if they came from Italy. Shakespeare's most sophisticated villain, Iachimo in *Cymbeline*, is an Italian, as is his nastiest piece-of-work, Iago. Moral defectives could be pigeon-holed quickly by giving them Italian type-names, for instance, 'Spurio, a bastard' in *The Revenger's Tragedy* or 'Sordido' (a dissipated young man) in Middleton's *Women Beware Women*. Thomas Nashe summarizes the state of knowledge of Stage-Italy in a revealing passage:

O Italy, the academy of manslaughter, the sporting place of murder, the apothecary shop of poison for all nations: how many kind of weapons hast thou invented for malice?

AO4 Historical, geographical
and literary context

Decadent Catholics

Much the most important opportunity afforded by Italy as represented on the London stage, however, was to demonstrate the mixture of corruption and superstition generated by the Roman Catholic Church in countries where no blessed Reformation had yet been vouchsafed. Protestant worship had only finally been secured for England on Elizabeth I's succession in 1558, just 53 years (or 2-3 generations) before Webster wrote *The White Devil*. Disgruntled memories of a Catholic Clergy and the flames of Marian persecution could still be appealed to in the England of King James, and the Pope (popularly supposed to be Antichrist) was known, among other things, for having excommunicated Elizabeth herself (Pius V, 1570) and consequently for having sanctioned her murder (attempted, but not carried out). The scenes shadowing his investiture as Paul IV are the most sumptuous in *The White Devil*, and are also the only truly public scenes in an intimate play (4:3). Discerning questions are asked about procedural detail by the two ambassadors. This is for the benefit of an English audience who might miss the fruits of Webster's meticulous research. The effect in the theatre, rumbling with intoned Latin, is of insolent ritual: munificent, self-confident, foreign. The Gunpowder Plot of November 1605 was, of course, still fresh in English theatregoing minds. Discontented Catholic noblemen hatched a scheme to blow up King James and his government at the state opening of Parliament. The conspiracy was betrayed, and immediately used by Ministers for propaganda purposes, darkening the reputation of Catholics.

Decadent Europeans

Webster may have comparatively little to say about England at the time of his plays, but he says a great deal about how the nobility of Europe were viewed by the English. Note how the English Ambassador's responses in the 'Arraignment of Vittoria' counsel us to suspect foreign depravity and deceit (3:2, 107, 140). Italy at this time was not a unified country (that would not happen for the best part of three hundred years) and the collection of 'Italian' City States and petty kingdoms were much subject to foreign influence. The kingdom of Naples, for example, which features in Webster's *Duchess* and Shakespeare's *Much Ado* and *The Tempest*, had a Spanish ruling house and aristocracy. Foreign Ambassadors are pointedly introduced at the Arraignment of Vittoria. Moorish characters flit in and out of *The White Devil*, suggesting the proximity of the Ottoman Empire and 'Oriental' mystery. The final Act of the play, set in Padua, introduces the cosmopolitanism of the Venetian Republic, which administered the city. It is thus possible to argue, as some critics have done, that Webster's target as a satirist was Renaissance Europe class as a whole.

Some critics have suggested that under the cover of writing about remote regimes, Webster is actually glancing at the mixture of rottenness and external gloss that might be detected in the Jacobean court. The court masques represented a King whose effulgence might 'blanch an Ethiop and revive a corse' (Ben Jonson's text for *The Masque of Blackness*) but Sir Walter Raleigh (a victim of James's regime) declared that the court over which he ruled 'glows and shines like rotten wood.' The murder of Sir Thomas Overbury in 1613, for which James' favourite Robert Carr, Earl of Somerset was eventually convicted, was one of the most notorious episodes of corruption and cover-up.

AO4 Historical context

Revenge

The *White Devil* is not so obviously a revenge play as were the 'theatre of blood' plays of the 1590s such as Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* (1587) or Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* (c. 1594); nor does it allude to the characteristics of the genre as frequently as more-or-less contemporary semi-parodies such as *The Revenger's Tragedy* (1607). Nevertheless, the theme of revenge runs through Webster's play, relating it to the dramatic genre known as Revenge Tragedy. This was continuously popular in England from the moment a permanent professional playhouse was established until it was closed on the outbreak of Civil War in 1642. The most famous revenge play of all is of course *Hamlet* (c. 1601).

The main character of Webster's play, Flamineo, is a 'cholerick' man, one subject to mood-swings because of an excess of the choleric or 'angry' humour. He is typically tugged between constructive impulses and violent or bitter reactions. In his better moments a (vaguely) philosophic desire to prevent bloodshed characterises him; otherwise he pursues a more-or-less deliberate tendency to provoke others into acts of revenge which, as with *Hamlet's* affront to Laertes, eventually close in upon himself. As Webster's intricate plot unwinds, the following revenge scenarios declare themselves. Francisco seeks vengeance on Brachiano for the murder of his sister, Isabella. The cold, socially ambitious Monticelso demands revenge for the ingeniously broken-up Camillo. Their malice is turned against Vittoria (perhaps because she is an easier target than Brachiano, whose gender and social rank give him limited protection). Lodovico, the play's most charismatic and obsessive revenger (almost a 'professional'), has grievances against Brachiano and Flamineo, which keep him close to the seat of the action. Flamineo, as we have seen, is less explicitly committed to revenge, but his temperament ensures he draws it as tall buildings do lightning. Like *Hamlet* he cultivates detachment from the main adventures of the play, appearing for a while 'a politic madman' (3:2, 308).

In a traditional revenge play a contemporary audience, while morally unable to condone revenge, would have identified with the cause of the revenger, as happens with Hieronimo in *The Spanish Tragedy* and with *Hamlet* and *Horatio*.

However, in *The White Devil* all the revengers show moral flaws, from flesh-quaking Lodovico to the shades-of-gray *White Devil* herself, so it is difficult to sympathise fully with anyone, and, it follows, with the overarching design of 'revenge'.

AO4 Literary context

Wild Justice?

The most probing statement on revenge from the time of Webster is to be found in Sir Francis Bacon's essay *Of Revenge* (1612):

REVENGE is a kind of wild justice; which the more man's nature runs to, the more ought law to weed it out. For as for the first wrong, it doth but offend the law; but the revenge of that wrong, putteth the law out of office. Certainly, in taking revenge, a man is but even with his enemy; but in passing it over, he is superior; for it is a prince's part to pardon... The more tolerable sort of revenge, is for those wrongs which there is no law to remedy; but then let a man take heed, the revenge be such as there is no law to punish.

Bacon argues that revenge may, at some cost to the rule of law, succeed in righting wrongs, but it does so by taking the left hand path, possibly entailing further disasters. Kyd presents this idea crisply in *The Spanish Tragedy* when he writes of the 'endless tragedy' of 'revenger-on-revenger' hits stretching beyond the end of his text. A common examination question is 'how moral are revenge plays?' There are, of course, no easy answers to this question in the revenge plays themselves. *Hamlet*, notoriously, cannot make up his mind whether revenge is justified or not.

AO4 Moral and literary context

HELPING YOU BRING ENGLISH TO LIFE

Webster - *The White Devil* (1611)

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'Lamentable Tragedy, Mixed Full of Pleasant Mirth'

Given the 'mixed' moral standards of the Revenge Play, it is not surprising that readers and theatregoers often find it hard to gauge the tone of Webster's apparently 'tragic' writing. The White Devil is definitely not tragi-comedy, at least as defined by nearby dramatic examples: Beaumont, Fletcher and Shakespeare's 'tragicomedy' is a separate genre dominated by winding narrative and final, comic renewal, as in *The Winter's Tale*. To help us find our genre bearings, Webster did write a card-carrying tragi-comedy, *The Devil's Law Case* (1617), but its tone is nothing like that of *The White Devil*, except possibly in satirical handling of a trial.

Modern audiences sometimes think that as Webster calls his plays 'tragedy' (not 'tragicomedy') they should react to them in dignified silence. When moved to laugh, nervously or openly, they are uncomfortable, and may even feel – especially in the final scenes – that the production has failed. The truth is that Webster's tone is rarely solemn for long, but endlessly decorated with sorties into the quirky or camp, so the audience should probably feel confident about laughing whenever or however they are moved to do so.

There is sure to be another dark scene (or metaphor) along in a minute. For *The White Devil*, in common with most Jacobethan tragedies, comprises a mixture of genres. Even before Christopher Marlowe (1564-93) and Thomas Kyd (1558-94), English tragedy (such plays as *Gorboduc* (1562) or *King Cambyses* (1575)) was principally violent farce with a moral, and this tradition continues through the period 1580-1640. As Nicholas Brooke has pointed out in his book *Horrid Laughter in Jacobean Tragedy* (1979), the sustained serious tone of Shakespearean tragedy is the exception rather than the rule (and even at cathartic moments in Shakespeare we find comic relief, like the gravediggers in *Hamlet*, or the Clown carrying penis-jokes to dying Cleopatra). The only notable structural difference between Webster's tragedy and other contemporary tragedies is that he does not alternate tragic scenes with a comic underplot (as, for example, Middleton and Rowley do in *The Changeling*) or provide slots for the Clown (like the Porter-scene in *Macbeth*).

AO4 Literary context
A03 Multiple responses

Horrid Laughter

A mixed, even confused, response to the events of his tragedy is probably, therefore, one of Webster's aims. Laughter and horror form curious 'love-knots' (5:3 174-5) at its key moments. Early in the play Brachiano watches the murders of his wife and his rival, but gets confused over the details, needing clarification from a Conjuror, who is ludicrously transmitting these distant tragic events as if on a television screen. Another weird moment finds Francisco, after a solemn encounter with the ghost of Isabella, wanting to play football with Brachiano's head like a wild Irishman (4:1, 138). Then there is the grotesque double act with which Ludovico and Gasparo, disguised as Capuchin friars administering the last rites, taunt the dying Brachiano (5:3, 147-164). Torturers and murderers in *The White Devil* wind the nerves of their victims and the audience so tight, take such contorted delight in what they are doing, that our laughter may often be no more than an escape valve, much as Shakespeare at one point does not give dialogue to his tragic victim Titus Andronicus, but merely writes for him a dark chuckle: 'Ha, ha, ha!' (Titus 3:1, 264).

The most curious 'horrid laughter' effect is when Flamineo is pretending to be dying (a pretence of which not only Vittoria but the entire audience is unaware) and, seeing hell gape for him exclaims:

Oh, I smell soot,
Most stinking soot, the chimney is a-fire,
My liver's parboiled like Scotch holy bread.
There's a plumber laying pipes in my guts, it scalds...
(5:6.137-140)

Once we know that Flamineo is staging his death rather than dying in earnest his language can, in retrospect, seem comically exaggerated. But it also becomes a chilling parody of the conceits revengers use in the 'stage-play world' as carefully compiled by that literary magpie Webster. A good deal of theatrical revenge is, like this, a construct of rhetorical audacity, as Vindice's language in *The Revenger's Tragedy* parodies Hamlet's (the author's source) or Hamlet's own rant by Ophelia's grave piles 'Pelion' upon the 'Ossa' of Laertes' bombast (Hamlet 5:1). Such pastiche rhetoric is surely meant to be funny, and, if we are amused, we are usually impressed. So Webster's audience, like us, probably reacted to his most drastic effects with both tears and laughter.

AO4 Literary context
A03 Multiple responses

A Play of Paradox

The title itself is a paradox and, despite the subtitle, is assumed to refer to the nature of Vittoria. Is she vicious or virtuous? magnificent or vulgar? Is she a glamorous courtesan, an anguished moralist, or an impoverished noblewoman on the make? Her dignified manner gives us scant evidence on these points, yet the title page of the play, at least, confirms the centrality of her role, with a strong suggestion of hypocrisy, a 'devil in crystal' (5:2, 66) pretending to be pure, and therefore not what she seems. This sense of ambiguity, even duplicity is not confined to Vittoria. It is reflected in every major character of the play. What does Flamineo really think of his sister? His 'take' seems to alter in every speech. And even individual speeches are hard to interpret:

her coyness? that's but the superficialities of lust most women have; yet why should ladies blush to hear that nam'd, which they do not fear to handle? O, they are politic, they know our desire is increas'd by the difficulty of enjoying; ...
(1:2.18-22)

Is he helping here to catch more male moths for his sister's flame? Commenting on the frustrating complexity of sexual roles and double standards? Taking a high moral if not very brotherly line? Chaffing the reputation of 'sis' in male company when in private he adores her? Does he deserve, in short, that she should try to shoot him, and stamp on him when he's apparently dying?

AO3 Textual complexity/ ambiguity

AO2 Webster's characteristic literary effect

Not What I say, but What I do!

The double signals Webster's characters continually give out is partly owing to the 'mixed' nature of his tragic form. But some critics insist it is also due to the unusual nature of Webster's writing methods. Because he concentrates on a single plot, rather than balancing the upper-plot with a mirror image under-plot, his narrative becomes very intricate, and shaped to an unusual degree by the progress of external events. Webster is also constructing his dialogue from extensive consultation of books and documents, not (primarily) from first-hand observation of human behaviour. He needs to get the literary fruits of his researches into the available spaces in his text. The result is that Webster's interest is less in how the action of the play is developed by the inner life of his characters, as in Shakespearean tragedy, and more on how events and outcome might, after many windings and surprises, combine to establish a tragic figure, and how much of his meticulously gathered poetry that figure might then plausibly be made to speak. So, we should not ask, as with Othello's, is the tragic hero's behaviour in Act 5 congruent with his personality as presented in Act 1, but simply what, given he changes like a weathervane, will Flamineo do next? What is he capable of doing? Will he get away with it? Outcome, not motive, the strutting, fretting life (or 'not-death') of a stage persona, but by no means the novelistic motivation A.C. Bradley looked for in Shakespeare's tragic heroes, is thus the key to understanding Webster's 'characters'.

This experiential approach to personality is not necessarily a creative defect. It certainly suits Webster's tendency to write, or compile, poetry of peculiar glamour, falling from the lips of the players in unexpected patterns, like jewels deliberately unstrung, while he weaves the design of the play ever more delicately into his characteristic effect: crowded, decadent, brilliantly mismanaged. Webster, according to T.S. Eliot in Elizabethan Essays, was one of a generation of playwrights who desired to have 'every sort of effect together', who refused 'to accept any limitation and abide by it.' Verna Foster has pointed out the similarities

The Morality Tradition

Before permanent professional theatres opened in England in the late 1570s theatrical performances were given by itinerant companies, specialising in 'Morality' plays, often with characters clearly labelled as 'Vice' or 'Virtue'. A fossil of the tradition comes at *The White Devil* 3:2 108-09, where (metaphorically) 'next the devil, Adult'ry, / Enters the devil, Murder.' It follows that many of the plays of the Jacobethan repertoire were expected to convey firm 'morals', so Webster in *The White Devil* gives sententious moral statements (often set in italics in printed texts) to most of his characters (such as Vittoria's 'Through darkness diamonds spread their richest light' 3:2 294, or Flamineo's 'Glories, like glow-worms, afar off shine bright / But look'd to near, have neither heat nor light' (5:1 42-43). Giovanni, the moral anchor of the play's last moments, is particularly addicted to these sayings. As Thomas Heywood wrote in his *Apology for Actors* (1611), contemporary with the play,

'If we present a Tragedy, we include the fatall and abortiue ends of such as commit notorious murders, which is aggrauated and acted with all the Art that may be, to terifie men from the like abhorred practises.'

Yet such wise saws are repeatedly put into the mouths of characters whose actions contradict their statements. Despite the flag-waving conviction of its 'authority figures', moral ambiguity remains the play's prevalent note.

AO4 Literary context
AO3 Interpreting the text

Webster's Women

Of most obvious parallel interest in *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi* are the roles of the women, particularly Vittoria and the Duchess. In both plays women are frequently seen by men as mere commodity. The two heroines are accused of lust and infidelity, and men, under the guise of honour, are violent and/or derogatory towards them, partly through malice, partly through an imperial sense that the blood that beats in the veins of a 'sinful' female relation is literally their own. The Duchess, who is guilty of nothing beyond contradicting the dynastic ambitions of her brothers in this way, speaks a disillusioned minor key poetry of endurance rather than complaint. Vittoria is generally feistier, contradicting Lear's preference for a 'soft and low' voice in woman, and the advice of Dod and Cleaver's influential 1598 *Conduct Book*:

Silence is the best ornament of a woman and therefore the law was given to the man, rather the[n] to the woman, to shew that hee should be the teacher and she the hearer.

But Vittoria too is capable of passages of quiescent beauty if only equivocally of Christian resignation.

What strikes us immediately about Vittoria's role is its comparative brevity for a title character (just four scenes) and how different is her impact in each of them. In Act 1 she is resilient under sexist cursing, but seems to tempt Brachiano with a bottomless Gothic dream. In the trial scene she quickly dispatches the pretentious lawyer and 'personates masculine virtue' (3:2 136) in her lusty self-defence, blowing the Cardinal's calumnies back in his face like 'spit against the wind' (3:2, 150); she then regains her female voice to cry against a masculine rape of justice (3:2 274-5). Commentators often point out she explicitly assumes the qualities of both genders in this scene. But after all this robust speechifying she seems unexpectedly squashed by moral pressure in the House of Convertites (4:2), maiming herself, and her relationship with Brachiano, in the language of affliction (and Mark 9:45): 'I had a limb corrupted to an ulcer, / But I have cut it off'. It is not clear, however, whether her repentance proceeds from a Christian change of heart, or a desire to hide from further publicity and shame.

Continued

The final scene, leading to her death, finds her a poetic adventurer, trying on many modes and roles, from glimmering acceptance of her misfortunes, to dread of the 'eternal darkness' of hell, to fierce retaliation (as when she stamps on her apparently dying brother at 5:6, 119, and taunts him with hell's pains 5:6, 130, 137). Finally, after absorbing all the whiplash from the plot in this extraordinary scene, she dies a 'bad death' in early modern terms, with no words of true contrition or a sense of being heaven-bound: 'my soul, like to a black ship in a storm/Is driven I know not whither' (5.6. 246-7).

It is as though the woman re-makes herself radically between appearances, the snapshots Webster shows us covering decades, not months of her life. Actresses playing the role are sometimes disconcerted by it: as if they have to negotiate the sudden leap between the managerial Lady Macbeth of the banquet scene and the madwoman of Act Five not once but three times. Some would argue that most of the role, as written by Webster, is role-playing, and Vittoria is just as adept at it as her mercurial brother. Others have argued, with good reason, that her mercurial role reflects not a shifting or duplicit personality but the brutal transitions between accommodation and deceit demanded of all women if they are to survive in a patriarchy.

Indeed one approach for an actress might be to synthesise not a single composite personality but to play a series of distinct, raw (often damning) female 'stereotypes'.

The play's other main female roles reflect Vittoria's self-contradictions, albeit faintly. Zanche, inured to intrigue, promiscuity, theft and betrayal, is more a professional victim even than Vittoria: she has traded her emotions so long she seems only vaguely aware of them. Isabella, billed the chaste wife, is a cat's-paw for her powerful male relatives, and has unpleasantly punitive fantasies towards her rival Vittoria: 'dig the strumpet's eyes out, let her lie/Some twenty months a-dying' (2:2 246-47). Cornelia, the mother-hen, is not above favouritism and mercenariness. All these women seem victim-beneficiaries of a sexist society, showing 'masculine virtue' when challenged, but a tendency to exploit the role of 'wronged woman' when their going is easier.

AO4 Social context

The White Devil on Stage

A good study of Webster in performance is Richard Allen Cave, *The White Devil and The Duchess of Malfi* (Text and Performance Series, 1988). The play was originally tried before a rather down-market audience at the Red Bull, Clerkenwell, but seems to have done much better when taken indoors (and out of the inclement winter weather) at the Phoenix. In these more intimate, artificially lit productions the poetry would have had more chance of being heard. When the theatres reopened at the Restoration *The White Devil* briefly became a part of the repertoire, though the possibly simplified emphasis of these versions is suggested by the change of the play's title to *Vittoria Corombona* in 1672. Early in the eighteenth century Nahum Tate reworked the play to make the white devil much whiter and foist all the blame on Brachiano. Tate, who also provided an 'improved' acting version of *King Lear*, was the last to attempt to retrieve the play for the theatre until the twentieth century. Some critics have argued that the dearth of performances before and the relative frequency of revivals of the play since the First World War reflects Webster's status as the 'Laureate of Death' in a century that provided the machines and bureaucracy to deliver human mortality on an unprecedented scale. 'His muse drew nourishment from Bedlam,' wrote Kenneth Tynan in 1960 'and might, a few centuries later, have done the same from Belsen.'

Staging of *The White Devil* usually involves stylisation of sets and décor, either to suggest (ironically) the conspicuous consumption and aesthetic beauty of Renaissance Italy, or the chaos and darkness of a gangster world. Realistic staging often proves problematic, as the intricate plot consistently draws attention to its own artifice. As Rupert Brooke suggested in his *Master's Thesis on Webster* (1916), 'Webster's method does not really take cognisance of plot in the ordinary sense of the word. He is too atmospheric.' The most psychologically involved characters (Brachiano, Vittoria, Flamineo) are usually acted with verisimilitude, the other roles, especially Lodovico and Francisco, are generally stylised in accordance with the stereotype they embrace ('disguised as a Moor') or presented with gentle irony. Attempts to use Webster's texts as the basis for opera libretti have been very successful.

There have been notably fewer productions of the play in recent years than of *The Duchess of Malfi*, though Gale Edwards's 1996 production for the Royal Shakespeare Company was impressive, especially the superb performances by Richard McCabe as Flamineo, Philip Voss as Montecelso and (finest of all) Philip Quast as Lodovico. Geraldine James gave an excellent Vittoria at the Oxford Playhouse in 1981.

AO3 Impact of the play through different performances

Possessed by Death

TS Eliot declared Webster 'possessed by death', and 'a great genius directed towards chaos.' In a famous review of a 1946 production, Kenneth Tynan argued that the play 'had no message' and posed no problems: 'It has to do with Death, the opposite of life, 'Death as harsh poetic fact, not as sorrowful possibility.' Watching *The White Devil* it is hard to avoid a sense of the 'solving emptiness' of mortality, often only just under the playwright's words. At 5:4 123 a skull is lifted from among the lilies, a kind of motto for the whole play.

Webster's was an age that in many ways saw 'the skull beneath the skin' (or the lilies) as readily as does his drama. Puritan death-texts abounded, skulls grinned incongruously on lavish tombs, the plague cart rumbled periodically, John Donne, dying Dean of Saint Paul's, had himself sculpted in his shroud, and an influential moral tract, Robert Hill's *The Pathway to Prayer and Pietie* (1609) argued 'It is the art of all arts, the science of all sciences, to learn how to die.' No Webster character, holding time's hour-glass and a poisoned sword, could put it better. In any production of *The White Devil*, no matter how deft the stage-hands in clearing them away, there will be a sense of bodies accumulating. Some deaths, like Flamineo's, gratuitously duplicate themselves, as we have seen. This particular character seems so engrossed in the experience of death (or so resigned to it) that he takes time out (with some quirky aesthetic interest) to wonder if it will be 'a Toledo or an English fox' – kinds of sword blade – that will finish him off. The brazen Lodovico even claims that he has worked all his life (by killing people?) at a kind of grand, dusky painting, and his death will be its finishing touch:

'I limb'd this night-piece, and it was my best.'

Among the few characters to whom Death is less welcome, Brachiano's outburst is choice. The only way he finds of censoring the subject is to sentence anyone who broaches it to the 'infinite pains' it represents:

On pain of death, let no man name Death to me:
It is a word infinitely terrible (5:3, 39-40).

Flamineo, who has most to say on the subject of Death, typically cannot make up his mind about it. First he pretends to die, filling the air with blood-boltered poetry. Then he dies in earnest, and finds he has almost 'nothing' to say (which, on this subject, is saying perhaps everything). He, like Bosola, dies 'in a mist' (5:6, 260), confounding 'knowledge with knowledge'. His last thoughts are 'Nothing' and 'of nothing' (5:6, 202). He is the actor (he has performed, deceived, misrepresented most of his way through life) who has got a cushy part to learn at last; 'I am i'the way to study a long silence' (5:6, 203). Death: a 'long silence', or one of Pinter's pregnant pauses? Such confusion is symptomatic of Webster's world in which darkness, uncertainty and evil are ever-present and all-enveloping, unless Flamineo, who is, of course, never to be trusted, should give us a Websterian flash in darkness of something more:

I have a strange thing in me, to th'which
I cannot give a name, without it be
Compassion (5:4, 113-15).

AO2 Thematic
preoccupations of the play
AO4 Social context

Webster and Modernism

T.S. Eliot's fondness for quoting Webster has made the dramatist something of a patron saint of Literary Modernism. Not only is the poem 'Whispers of Immortality' in *Ara Vos Prec* (1920) substantially devoted to him; the Song from *The White Devil* 5:4 is quoted in Part 1 of *The Waste Land* (1922), and one of Webster's spiders appears in 'Gerontion'. It is often pointed out that Webster's preference for composing a literary 'mosaic' out of other texts anticipates the 'allusive' practices of Modernism, especially Eliot's own.

A Convenient Label

Throughout this material, the term 'Jacobethan' has been used to designate plays written for the English Theatre between the late 1580s and the early 1630s

AO2 Literary contexts



