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A New Devil:

An Analysis of Character Shifts in a Production of Webster's *The White Devil*

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ABSTRACT

This essay focuses on the interpretation of characters in John Webster's *The White Devil*, comparing how they were intended to how they are portrayed today in order to exemplify the changes in our society. The play has several misogynistic views that were acceptable and favored in the time they were written, but that are no longer laughed at or shrugged away. Characters who represent those views cannot be played in the same manner as before because the audience will not receive them as readily as they once did, and this leads to a completely different play. I examine the roles of Vittoria and Flamineo and how alterations (or lack thereof) to their characters can create a completely different, more empowering production of *The White Devil*.

KEYWORDS

Christina Luckyj, Feminism, Representation, Early Modern, Theater, John Webster, production, artistic interpretation

The White Devil by John Webster is a play centered on the corruption of the Italian court, love and affairs, and the power dynamics between men and women. In classical productions of the play, the character that represents the titular ‘White Devil’ is Vittoria Corombona, a gentlewoman who assists in the murder of her husband and the Duke of Brachiano’s wife so that they can be together. She is played as a liar and a manipulator and, when produced in that way, is well-deserving of the title of White Devil. Today, however, we are able to open the play up to further interpretations and must ask the question: in our modern society, who do we really see as the White Devil? As Dorothea Kehler and Susan Baker state in *In Another Country*, “Texts are open to history and reinterpretation” (5). I submit that in a modern production, audiences are more inclined to interpret the White Devil as Flamineo, Vittoria’s brother, who commits the majority of the murders of the play and drives the plot as a servant trying to make his way up the rankings. How we have looked at *The White Devil* through critical theory and as performance, which will be discussed heavily throughout this paper, has changed over time due to new perspectives in our society. I have exemplified the ability to interpret the play in this manner by directing a more feminist production of the show, in which the White Devil was Flamineo, without losing any textual integrity.

To understand this change in interpretation we first need to understand the original point. *The White Devil* is a revenge tragedy written by John Webster in 1612 and is loosely based on the life of Vittoria Accoramboni. Many of the plot points are extremely similar to what happened to her: Vittoria’s husband is still the first to die and suffer from the affair in Webster’s dramatic retelling. The full historical events were that her brother, wanting her to marry the Duke of Bracciano, had her husband murdered, and it was thought Bracciano had his first wife killed so he could be with Vittoria. They were married shortly after, but the uncle of Vittoria’s first husband became pope and made his resentment and desire for revenge towards them known, so they fled Rome. The duke died and eventually, upon the division of his property, Lodovico Orsini had Vittoria assassinated and all complicit in that crime were put to death (Seiden).

In the play, there are three concurrent plots based on these events. The first is that of Count Lodovico, who is a notorious murderer attempting to repeal his banishment from Rome. The second plot is the romance of Brachiano and Vittoria, both of whom are married to other people. Flamineo is Brachiano’s secretary and Vittoria’s brother, who attempts to use his sister to raise his ranking in society. He pushes the two of them together in the hopes that Brachiano will

reward him, and to do this, he resorts to murdering both of their significant others. The third plot is that of Monticelso, a cardinal who later becomes Pope, and Francisco, the Duke of Florence. Monticelso is related to Vittoria's husband and Francisco is the brother of Brachiano's wife, Isabella. Theirs is the revenge plot, blaming the murders of their relatives on the secret couple and attempting to publicly shame and then kill them. We can see how all of the plots intertwine and lead to further development among each other. It is a very complex and interlocking play that is only made clear by the fact that the characters are constantly saying exactly what they are doing. Even then it is still confusing, and many critics agree that the play is clearer when looked at scene-by-scene, but tends to fall apart when examined as a whole for a moral code. While there are no good or bad people in the play, there is a group of people who vary in intent and who display the vices and motivations of the real people they are based on, making things ambiguous.

The White Devil premiered in 1612 and its first performance was not well-received. Pearson recounts that "John Webster's introduction to. . .The White Devil (1612), admits that the play had been a box-office failure" (53). It was performed by Queen Anne's Men, a group known at the time for playing relatively low-brow theater for a rowdy and lascivious audience. A rowdy audience in this time referred to "an audience constantly in need of taming. It might throw stones. . . .It often threw fruit" (Stern 26-27). It is clear to see why *The White Devil* failed, then, as an audience used to immediate gratification and humor would not sit well with a play as serious and complex as that being performed by actors who were unused to the style of material themselves. It went on a short hiatus because of that original reception, but it is also probable that it underperformed due to the growing discomfort with bloody revenge tragedies during the time it was written. It was brought back after a period of time and re-performed.

John Webster is an author who has continued, through time, to be analyzed. His plays are criticized as pieces that focus heavily on spectacle and in-the-moment action. They are said to be taken better on a scene-to-scene basis as they fail to represent a cohesive concept. Another way of putting it is that he is very good at creating small, concrete moments but terrible at creating a larger cohesive construct. There are many inconsistencies in his characters, and his ideas get meshed together. He is a writer very much of the moment, and *The White Devil* is a good example of that. The lack of cohesion in this case is typically due to issues with a lack of consistency among the morals of the play (Luckyj xviii-xxii). I do not see this as being as much

of an issue as it seems, and do not think it means that the play is problematic or does not make sense. In *The White Devil*, characters' morals change. They do not remain static as morals tend to in most revenge tragedies, where there are clearly bad and good sides. The most notable change is in the case of Monticelso, who wishes to repent for the plots he and Francisco made once he became Pope, but there are even smaller, subtler changes. The alliance of Lodovico changes frequently, and how he feels about his actions are in a constant state of flux, which makes his characterization complex and confusing. Those who critique the play's moral inconsistency compare it to other plays of the time such as *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare or even *The Duchess of Malfi*, another work by Webster. In these plays, there is a clear "good" side and a clear "bad" side that the audience is meant to identify and judge accordingly, but in *The White Devil* there is no good or bad side, there are just people acting on their own desires.

The fact that every character in the play is acting on their own desires and morals is critical to my argument. The fact that there is no clear good and bad to begin with makes it easy to reinterpret the order of who is better and worse in terms of morals, which shift over time. The order that was established at the time of the play's writing was clear—Vittoria Corombona was the titular "White Devil," arguably the most corrupt and insidious character in the entire play. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a "White Devil" is "the devil disguised as a virtuous being" ("white," special uses). A White Devil is one who masks their devilishness and cunning behind a curtain of innocence, the way Vittoria hides her adultery. They pretend to be weaker than they are when really they are the puppet master of a situation, are in complete control, and manipulate the beliefs and emotions of those around them to get what they want. That would also apply to a White Devil Vittoria who pretends to be scared to convince Brachiano to murder their spouses without ever having to tell him to. There are many White Devils in the play—arguably, almost every character is one—but there is always a character that fits the mold more than the rest depending on the situation. After all, it is not called "The White Devils"; while critical reception of the play can argue that there is a multitude, during a live performance we are meant either as director, actor, or audience member to decide for ourselves who the White Devil is, and that decision is based heavily on acting and directing choices as well as social context of our time.

As mentioned previously, the character meant to be the White Devil in the play is Vittoria Corombona. This is clear in the way other characters, including her own brother Flamineo, talk

about her, saying things like “she’s mad,” “She’s turned fury,” and addressing her as “Oh thou glorious strumpet” (Webster 3.2.275, 3.2.278, 5.6.203). This fits in with the social climate of the time and of the way the real-life Vittoria was viewed at that time. It is also clear in the way she responds to her treatment, most notably in the infamous Trial Scene.¹ As she is prosecuted she stands up for herself and dismisses all knowledge of the murders of her husband and Brachiano’s wife, plays and wins a game of wit with her over-spoken lawyer, and holds her head high as she is sent to what is ostensibly a whore house. In her word-game with the lawyer, as he is making several literary references, she responds in kind with references to powerful and innocent women. It matters whether or not she has knowledge of the murders because that is what she is subtly being interrogated for, but it is important to note that that is not what she is on trial for.

In the Trial Scene, Vittoria is on trial for adultery, not murder, even though that is what she is brought to the stand for. Before the trial Monticelso states, “Sir you know we have nought but circumstances / To charge her with, about her husband’s death; / Their approbation therefore to the proofs / Of her black lust, shall make her infamous” (Webster 3.1.4-7). The court, more specifically Francisco and Monticelso, use the murder of Vittoria’s husband and their ability to insinuate that it was her fault to put her on the stand and publicly shame her as a whore. During the scene in which Monticelso interrogates, or more plainly attacks, her, he has a page-long monologue describing what a whore is, saying such things as, “they are the true material fire of hell,” and, “They are worse, / Worse than dead bodies, which are begged at gallows / and wrought upon by surgeons, to teach man / Wherein he is imperfect,” which is enough to show the view of women at the time and how they are trying to paint Vittoria (Webster 3.2.86, 3.2.96-99). They attack her for not mourning her husband when, in the context of the play, they arrested her soon after his death when she was not there. Monticelso states to a jury of nobles, “And look upon this creature was his wife. / She comes not like a widow: she comes armed / With scorn and impudence. Is this a mourning habit?” (Webster 3.2.120-123). She is not persecuted as a person in her own right, but as a bad wife and she is attacked for defending herself against the slew of hate Monticelso throws at her. The fact that she defends herself and promotes her own agency reinforces the way the men treat her in the scene. It was thought that “All ‘ungoverned women’ . . . were a threat to the social order,” and Vittoria is ungoverned due to her husband’s death. It is not just that though. Laura G. Bromley writes, “Any woman whose behavior departs from the norms of passivity and silence is labeled and condemned as a ‘whore,’ ‘fury,’ or ‘devil,’” which

is exactly what Monticelso does to Vittoria as she assesses her situation and chooses to fight against the patriarchal control of her life and choices (50).

Because of that, no matter how we interpret her character, Vittoria is, in a modern sense, justified in her response to being prosecuted the way she is. What is important for this interpretation is how we now view her motives for dissent in contrast to how an early modern audience viewed her motives. We must decide how much Vittoria knows because it determines what she is covering up or what she is railing against. How justified she is in this scene, and how much she is aware and manipulating. If she does not know about the murders, she is completely justified in her outrage—she would have only just found out about her husband’s death, but she is treated like a harlot and blamed in front of the entire court. If she knew of the murder beforehand, and was part of it, she is not only lying about her affair, but she is also lying and manipulating the court to pity her. She states blatantly, “Had I foreknown his death as you suggest, / I would have bespoke my mourning” (Webster 3.2.122-123). Is this the truth or manipulation of the court? In the first case, she is not asking for pity from anyone and is, in a way, comes across much stronger because she does not purposely make herself look weaker, a clear instigation of the title of White Devil as explained in the *OED*. Either way, it is very important to know if she is implicated in the murders or not, as it affects the audience’s perception of her character greatly.

In her first scene with Brachiano, she describes a dream in which a large tree falls and kills both her husband and his wife as they were digging her grave. The interaction can be interpreted in various ways since the tree is described by Vittoria as a yew tree. So as she is speaking, saying phrases like, “This harmless yew,” and especially, “both were struck dead by that sacred yew,” she could be solely referring to the tree or she could be using it to subtly say “you,” to imply she meant Brachiano without directly saying anything to him (Webster 1.2.223, 1.2.236).

In early productions this was acted out as a moment in which she subtly persuades Brachiano to perform the murders by making him think it was his idea. The dream itself is not what reveals this the most, but rather Flamineo’s side comments. He explicitly says, “Excellent devil. / She hath taught him in a dream / To make away his Duchess and her husband” (Webster 1.2.238-240). This is the way throughout the play that other characters state she is plotting or being devious, and we once more see her brother referring to her as being a Devil. Unlike most

of the characters, we learn about Vittoria's motivations either clearly or skewed by those around her instead of from her directly. This sets her apart because everyone else either states what they do directly to other characters or to the audience in soliloquies or asides. Those moments are taken as truth to the audience watching simply because of convention. There is no one for the character to lie to, so when they clearly state their plans out loud to the audience in these moments, we accept that. In the case of Vittoria, she has none of those moments herself throughout the play. Her brother, Francisco, or Monticelso narrate her actions to us, or they are not spoken about and it is up to the audience to piece her motives together based on the actions we see. There are no trustworthy characters who convey her motives or thoughts.

Vittoria was written as the White Devil mainly due to the way women were viewed and treated at the time. A powerful woman was dangerous. If we were to write the play today and base it off the real events that Webster looked at we would get a very different play with a very different interpretation of Vittoria. It would be something closer to my own interpretation of the play that I will discuss later. Vittoria would not be the White Devil; she would be a victim, but because of the social climate at the time, she was painted in a negative light. To make it even clearer that she was set up to be a "bad woman," Webster utilized a convention popular in Early Modern Drama, a foil. A foil is a character acting differently than another character in order to highlight specific traits within the character of focus, normally the protagonist. Foils can be complete opposites from the protagonist or they can be very alike but with a defining trait that sets them apart. Vittoria finds her foil in Isabella, Brachiano's murdered wife.

Isabella is typically portrayed as a faithful and loving wife. She speaks lovingly to her husband even as he is spurning her for Vittoria, and has little agency of her own. She ultimately sacrifices everything for Brachiano and is murdered by her idolatry of him when she kisses a poisoned portrait of him that she visits nightly after he leaves her. She is not her own woman—we see her as a wife to Brachiano, a sister to Francisco, a mother to Giovanni. She is epitomized as a plot point and rarely gets spoken of by name. In the same scene Francisco says to Brachiano, "Thou hast a wife, our sister," and, "You know Vittoria" (Webster 2.1.64, 2.1.52). He blatantly refers to Vittoria by name, even though she is also married, but not once in the scene does he refer to Isabella by name. He keeps this separation throughout the play, frequently displaying the difference in agency of the two women. The intended preference of the women is made clear through the conventions of revenge tragedy. A virtuous woman dies early on in the play to

provoke revenge. We can see this multiple times: the Lady in *The Lady's Tragedy* kills herself halfway through the play, and Vindice's wife kills herself along with the wife of Antonio because of rape in *The Revenger's Tragedy*. Another Webster play, *The Duchess of Malfi*, sees the titular character killed before the end of the play. While most of these deaths are acted out by the virtuous woman in an effort to redeem herself after having been "tainted" by society, Webster's females are all murdered. Still, the reason for the murders of the Duchess and Isabella evoke sympathy. Isabella dies after kissing a picture of her husband, kneeling and praying to it as though he were a god.

The stage direction reads, "*she kneels down as to prayers, then draws the curtain of the picture, does three reverences to it, and kisses it thrice*" (Webster 49). It is methodical, practiced, and a perfect example of what people of the time would want in a wife, not speaking even as she dies. On the other hand, we see Vittoria being thrown down and stabbed to death, and even then, she delivers wit in the face of adversity saying to her murderer, "'Twas a manly blow. / The next thou giv'st, murder some sucking infant / And then thou wilt be famous" (Webster 5.6.227-229). The way they are killed, one gracefully fainting to the ground, and the other gasping and bleeding out slowly, clearly shows preference to Isabella as the good woman who should die in good circumstances and be avenged by her brother. In her book, *Women and Gender in Renaissance Tragedy*, Dymphna Callaghan states that "Female characters oscillate uneasily between their functions as objects of uncertainty and embodiments of perfect truth" (65). Vittoria embodies power in herself and that is dangerous to men at this time, whereas the representation of Isabella, played as her foil, a woman who would do anything to please her husband, including taking the blame for their marital issues to stop her brother from attacking him, embodies virtue, obedience, and purity. It is fitting that Brachiano, husband to both women, is the one who sums it up most succinctly in the play; "Woman to man / is either a god or a wolf" (Webster 4.2.87-88).

We no longer have those views of women. Our society as a whole is much more open minded and so we see more possibilities when we return to this play. We can see the value and messages we can send using what was a very misogynistic and patriarchal work and turning it into a feminist critique, reclaiming it in a way. Changes have been made in productions to shy away from the view of Vittoria as a central villain, and the easiest way to do this is to shift the focus to the character who has the most lines—Flammineo. I also want to argue that it is not

helpful to simply keep the affair plot in the background; vital to creating a modern interpretation of this play is shifting the audience's perspective of who the White Devil is, and the most obvious target for the title is Flamineo. Yes, Vittoria has an affair, but Flamineo murders to maintain it out of selfishness and greed.

Flamineo spends the entire play attempting to climb the social ladder at any cost, even within his own family. He commits several murders and deceptions under the guise of being a simple secretary. He plots, plans, and speaks directly to the audience so they know how two-faced he is and they can tell that he feigns many if not all of his emotional connections with those around him. While we can frame many characters as the White Devil based on the *OED* definition of it, Flamineo is by far the easiest, even surpassing Vittoria in sheer visibility of deceit and masking of it.

The reason it is so important to cast Flamineo as the White Devil is that he is the one who implicates Vittoria in the crimes. It is always Flamineo who points out that she may be manipulating the situation and so, in order to create a more justified Vittoria, we need to devalue Flamineo's input. The less the audience trusts him, the better. It is also important because Flamineo spends entire pages demoralizing and shaming women, especially Vittoria. While right in front of her while she is upset, he says to Brachiano, "What a damned impostume is a woman's will?...Women are caught as you take tortoises / She must be turned on her back" (Webster 4.2.144-47). In the Early Modern era, it would have been common for the main character to do this to women because that was how women were viewed. This can be seen in cases such as Vindice in *The Revenger's Tragedy*, in which he speaks several rhyming couplets—small phrases that rhyme that the audience could take away as a repeatable phrase—that comment on the lack of integrity of women and their evil and lustful natures. Stern says "Plays provided a source of jests and anecdotes; they supplied the quips and one-liners that could be used to spice up conversation later" (20). People went to plays for the same reason many watch popular shows on Netflix now: to find references that can apply to real life situations.

To transpose the motivation for seeing plays then to a modern setting, as I just did with Netflix-referencing, is easy, but it is impossible with this play and other plays with negative inlaid messages about women if we want to create the same type of reaction to the character. Those phrases that would make a character relatable and likable would now make them seem sleazy, untrustworthy, and hated—which is what happens when we now view Flamineo. He

connects with the audience through his asides and monologues still, but in a modern setting, he is not liked and has to be played very charismatically to be tolerated given the amount of stage time he gets. Instead of being the relatable servant attempting to do whatever he can to climb the ranks in an unfair society like he was in Early Modern productions, he becomes the character we love to hate. He is the one we do not want to succeed. He has to make the audience like him in some way, which furthers his representation as the White Devil because it adds another necessary level of masking his true despicable nature.

It is also important to consider the severity of his crimes when we think about why he is the White Devil now, but previously wasn't. In the Early Modern period, the concept of death was ever-present. An audience of the time would have been relatively desensitized to the concept of a dead body. Murder was a common plot convention in plays because at the time murders could happen with an ease that is not possible today. With all of that, the fact that Flamineo murders the spouses does not strike the audience very hard, especially due to the fact that they are the residents of the shadier side of London where these events are part of daily life. In contrast, today we do not use murder in modern plays with anywhere near the frequency we once did. The style of the dumbshow murders as graphic and taking place in the home or in sport would signal to a modern audience just how despicable Flamineo is.² He murders Isabella with poison as she kisses a portrait of her unloving husband, and breaks Camillo's neck as they compete on a vaulting horse. The showmanship of the murders is played to the extreme so the audience has no choice but to focus on them, and they are undeniably horrible in a modern context.

In many modern performances the concept of who the White Devil is may not even be brought up due to the flourish of the murders and other events. The play, because of its extravagant plot, is able to be played highly for spectacle, and can move very quickly when that is the focus. Every few scenes there are large and epic moments of tension and extravagance that, when laced together, keep the audience in a state of heightened emotion. The further along we get, the more we wonder how they can continue to get tenser. This is extremely important to make the viewing experience enjoyable because without it the audience can get confused if they miss one piece of information and the plot could fall apart for them. It is much easier to focus on spectacle and not question the issue of Vittoria and Flamineo, but that is not what I did when I staged it.

In the Fall of 2016, I put on a production of *The White Devil* with the What You Will Shakespeare Company. I cut as little from the script as I could in an attempt to retain the full plot. The majority of lines that were taken out were filler language and unnecessary repetition. The focus of the production was an interpretation of Flamineo as the White Devil and of Vittoria as innocent of the murders. Vittoria being innocent of the murders does not paint her as a saint; she still cheats on her husband with Brachiano while he is alive. She is not perfect, and if she were, she would not be in a Webster play. I was not concerned that people would view the change as being too easy on her. The major concerns I had with this interpretation were how well the first scene with Vittoria and Brachiano would translate. If it is not set up clearly that Vittoria is not planting the idea of murder in Brachiano's head on purpose, and that it is truly Brachiano and Flamineo who devise the murder of the spouses, then the audience will be left in confusion, or worse, miss the fact that Vittoria is not the White Devil altogether and just think she is very good at faking her emotions to manipulate. The pressure in that lies heavily on the actress who plays Vittoria being able to appear innocent and as if she is really just recounting a nightmare she had. For an audience with no prior knowledge or predisposed ideas of the play, this fares much better.

That would be impossible to achieve given staging conventions in the Early Modern Era. At that time, actors were extremely typecast. So in the case of Vittoria, the boy playing her would be the one who plays the older more devious style of woman, not the troupe ingénue.³ The audience would have a clear idea of what type of personality the characters are even before they start. These concepts are beneficial today if we are producing plays with archetypes in them from troupes that try to maintain traditional methods of performance (keeping the lights on, interacting with the audience, seating on stage, etc) who keep the same general cast and do several plays, because in that case we can incite the same personality relation that theater hinged on in the Early Modern period. The difference between now and then in these situations is that more and more the actress who is playing Vittoria is also playing the role of likable women in power or ingénues. Seeing an ingénue actress play Vittoria gives the character an immediate impression of innocence that counteracts presumptions of her character on the part of other characters like Flamineo and Francisco who attempt to shame her. Watching her played by someone who plays likable, powerful women gives her a sense of maturity and solid strength that

makes her interesting and beloved in the eyes of an audience increasingly looking for powerful women characters as role models.

While my goal was ultimately achieved, there are certain things in this interpretation that lose power. It can be argued that by removing her knowledge and involvement in the murder plot, this interpretation removes Vittoria's agency. The Trial Scene changes from a moment where she is controlling the entire situation and manipulating the nobles, lawyer, and Monticello into a scene in which she is acting in response. She is unfairly prosecuted and is unable to do anything to help her situation on her own. While I submit that that view has some value in it, I believe the benefits of the change outweigh the minor lack of agency it causes, especially because she gains agency in a different way. While losing her manipulative control of the Trial Scene, Vittoria gains a new type of superiority. She is completely and undeniably in the right in her indignation and in her condemnation of the male-oriented judgment during her sentencing, and the audience is on her side as she displays her dominant will over everyone else in the room. If she is played to be the White Devil, to be lying at that moment, then her banishment is a failure and a loss on her part to maintain power and control. If she is played as being honest and indignant, then her sentencing isn't failure on her part, but corruption on the part of the court that is sentencing her.

In today's society, we should condemn the depiction of women as this play originally presented them. This play can no longer be viewed the way it once was because our views on women and death are so drastically different now that attempts to reconcile them would lead to a problematic and diminishing performance. We still read this play today, and it is still performed, but the way we interpret the text has shifted to accommodate our altered views on the agency, power, and value of women, which shows that our views are still changing and progressing toward a better sense of equality.

NOTES

- [1] The Trial Scene is one of the most notable and famous excerpts from *The White Devil*. It is referenced through the Essay and is the entirety of Act 3 Scene 2 in the cited edition.
- [2] A dumbshow is a short, non-scripted enactment of an event within a play. It can be within the stage directions of a play as it is in *The White Devil* for the murder dumbshows (see pages 48-50) or it can be added by a director to reinforce their own artistic vision of a play.
- [3] In the Early Modern period, there were no women actors and so all female parts were played by younger men/boys who had yet to go through puberty. An ingénue is a typecast that represents young women who are innocent and pure, i.e., Bianca in *Taming of the Shrew*, Hero in *Much Ado about Nothing*, or Castiza in *The Revenger's Tragedy*.

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