Contextualising Vittoria: Subjectivity and Censure in *The White Devil*

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Reviewed Work(s):


Published by: [www.thisroughmagic.org](http://www.thisroughmagic.org)

Stable URL: [http://www.thisroughmagic.org/waudby%20article.html](http://www.thisroughmagic.org/waudby%20article.html)
John Webster’s *The White Devil* replicates in microcosm the women’s social limitations within a strongly patriarchal society: Vittoria is arraigned by powerful male interrogators and her right of response is negated by her gender. In this play, revenge is not executed for crimes that she is proven to have committed, but rather represents a damage-limitation exercise predicated on the necessity of containing female sexuality. The play was one of many pervasive and coercive texts about women in circulation, both mirroring and creating meaning within society. The play can, in fact, be read as a cautionary tale in which Vittoria is presented as the archetypal paradigm of the transgressive female as understood within the parameters of early modern patriarchy. Webster can be said to “characterize the existence, circulation and operation of certain discourses within a society” (Foucault 124).

The lengthy subtitle of the play is *The Tragedy of Paulo Giordano Ursini, Duke of Brachiano, With the Life and Death of Vittoria Corombona the famous Venetian Curtizan*, and indicates literary and cultural partiality, contriving to steer focus from Vittoria, who is at the core of the tragedy, to the perpetrator of the injustice. From the outset, her
reputation is denigrated and she is even denied the possibility of starring in her own
tragedy. To Webster and his audience, the catalogue of Vittoria’s misfortunes is
considered less than tragic due to cultural and dramatic conventions relating to class
and gender. From a modern perspective however, her situation may elicit a more
sympathetic response: impoverished but desired by a powerful member of the local
aristocracy and morally compromised by her own brother, she is denied the personal
agency necessary to avoid destruction—and possibly damnation—as the main title
intimates.

Although the sub-title of the play seems to attest to Vittoria’s immorality,
prefiguring the charges of her arraignment, in the opening act Vittoria has already been
married for up to seven years (I.i.138) and, despite Flamineo’s hints at her husband’s
lack of sexual prowess, there is no indication that she has broken her marriage vows,
despite a rather cool and functional attitude to her matrimonial role. Nor can she be
literally considered a prostitute as represented; the epithet rather represents patriarchal
censure on her alleged promiscuity. Her behaviour is often ambiguous, but the main
risqué interaction which appears in the play between Vittoria and Brachiano is the
double-entendre of the “jewel conversation” which he instigates in the first act. This re-
works the common metaphor of women as precious jewels, intended to flatter, but in
fact revealing their commodification as objects of exchange and commercial value in the
marriage market. The innuendo in this scene relies upon the notion of women’s
chastity, or “honour,” being their treasure. Hence, when Brachiano exchanges gems with Vittoria, he suggests that his jewel is pinned low on her bodice over her own “jewel” (I.ii.226). Vittoria is an important commodity within this economy of exchange, becoming both the catalyst and site of conflict between competing discourses of morality, personal agency and cultural expectations within a system of entrenched patriarchy.

**Cultural Contexts**

The era of the play’s production was preoccupied with biological determinism. The social conditioning which underwrote concepts of male and female offers a plethora of cultural signifiers which illuminate the play’s dominant themes. The anxieties of the period are written in its literary production and social conventions, as much as its formal documentation, alluded to in Foucault’s assertion that “[d]iscourse is … contained or expressed in organisations and institutions as well as in words; all of these constitute texts or documents to be read” (Scott 35). *The White Devil* was written within the first decade of James I’s reign, but as Hilary Hinds points out, even half a century earlier there was already concern regarding women’s increased agency and freedom, prompting legislation to regulate their speech outside the home (32). Although misanthropic raillery and debate about women’s nature had existed since classical times, the early Jacobean era saw a renewed interest in the subject, which
found expression in the popular and accessible works of the *querelle des femmes*, including printed ballads, raucous poems and pamphlets.

In 1589, a lost and unknown misogynistic diatribe prompted “Jane Anger” to write a response to such works, entitled *Jane Anger her Protection for Women*. Although it is not possible to ascertain if there was a female author behind the pseudonym, this is an important text in the public debate about women as it addresses a female readership and vehemently attacks men’s slanders from the perspective of women’s “common experience and shared identity” (McManus 198). A heated literary debate was precipitated by Joseph Swetnam’s *Arraignment of Lewd, idle, froward and unconstant women* in 1615, which reworked available negative iconography of women found in biblical sources, contemporary ballads, conduct books, and common parlance. The text was extremely popular to the extent that it was reprinted ten times in less than two decades and was still in demand at the turn of the century. The most prominent responses to Swetnam, all published in 1617, were Rachel Speght’s *A Mouzell for Melastromus*, Esther Sowenam’s *Esther hath Hang’d Haman*, and Constantia Munda’s *The Worming of a Mad Dogge*. The three texts take up challenges raised in Swetnam’s invective and counter his construction of femininity, often by using the same sources and themes, but wittily reversed. Of these pamphlet respondents, only Rachel Speght can be positively identified as female; the other texts may be male-authored and written in the spirit of satire. Alternatively, they may have been written by women anxious to
avoid the public exposure of revealing their true names, given the contemporary
censure of women’s public speech.

The debate concerning woman’s “true nature” was largely based in Christian
ideology, which identified woman as the source of man’s downfall. Her weakness and
susceptibility to the faults of her foremother, Eve, endorsed her subjection under the
authority of the male members of her family, as Hilary Hinds summarises:

[D]isorderliness can be seen to define woman’s nature: for in their bodies, the
lower, carnal elements ruled the higher, rational ones, and, if not strictly
contained, women would strive to reproduce this physiological disorderliness in
society by dominating men (31).

Religious and legal texts, contemporary conduct books, and especially “marriage
guides,” which delineated the appropriate roles of man and woman in marriage,
advocated an idealised model of obedient femininity. These precepts were formalised in
handbooks with titles such as A Bride-Bush (Whateley, 1617) and Of Domesticall Duties
(Gouge, 1622) in which women’s roles were predicated on the trinity of chastity,
privacy, and—if not silence—self-censored speech. In this economy, women’s public
speech was considered symptomatic of latent moral laxity, hence, the era’s proscription
on training women in the art of rhetoric. The exhibitionism concomitant with public
speaking was an anathema to the preferred model of female self-effacement and
containment.
Self-Determination Versus Self-Destruction

In some scenes of *The White Devil* Vittoria barely speaks, confining herself to one
line laments, and yet in the first act she responds to Brachiano’s banter with a sexual
awareness that may be manipulative. Despite her participation in this sexually-loaded
wordplay, however, in her arraignment, she is forthright in maintaining her integrity
and innocence:

Sum up my faults I pray, and you shall find,
That beauty and gay clothes, a merry heart,
And a good stomach to a feast, are all,
All the poor crimes that you can charge me with. (III.ii.207-210)

As Castiglione’s *The Book of the Courtier* (1528) confirms, these tensions could
compromise the integrity of female courtiers. Although women of the court were
expected to participate in verbal repartee and even amorous play, the edifice of purity
was also to be maintained:

[I]n a Lady who lives at court a certain pleasing affability is becoming above all
else, whereby she will be able to entertain graciously every kind of man ... with
such a kind manner as to cause her to be thought not less chaste, prudent and
gentle than she is agreeable, witty, and discreet: thus, she must observe a certain
mean (difficult to achieve and as it were, composed of contraries). (Castiglione
III:151)

Webster’s Vittoria is in an untenable position; the near-feudal dependence of her
husband and family means that she cannot refuse Brachiano’s advances, but if she were
to it would be regarded as arch coquetry, as Flamineo makes clear: “O they are politic!
They know our desire is increas’d by the difficulty of enjoying” (I.ii.22-23). Her situation
denies any possibility of self-determination, and even her own utterances are re-
interpreted to construe her as a temptress in a theatre of male desire. Vittoria’s dilemma
lies in the moral-commercial dichotomy; her proposed loss of honour must be reckoned
against the social and financial security of princely status. Her volubility is checked by
her mother’s speech, and her earlier pert repartee with the Duke dissolves into a series
of one-line utterances of seldom more than a few words, which are completely ignored
by the other characters. Trying to enter the dialogue that erupts around her, and
ultimately about her, she is denied access, eventually admitting defeat and exiting with,
“O me accurs’d” (I.ii.267-299). The topos of female speech is important in defining the
subjectivity of early modern woman and becomes crucial in the scene of Vittoria’s
arrainment as she attempts to assume authority in male-dominated discourse.

Although Vittoria’s supposed transgressions are urged by Flamineo,
representing male authority within her own family, as the audience would register, her
first duty is owed to her husband, Camillo. Through the combined pressure of her
brother and Duke Brachiano, she earns the condemnation of Camillo’s powerful uncle,
Cardinal Monticelso, and becomes embroiled in the inheritance politics of Brachiano’s
noble family which involve his young son, Giovanni; his duchess, Isabella; and her
brother, Duke Francisco of Florence.
Marginalisation and Commodification

The welfare of the Corombona family is extremely vulnerable; they are poor and displaced, since Cornelia’s husband died seeking favour at court, leaving them without land or fortune. Although “honourably descended / From the Vitelli,” a noble Venetian family (III.i.234-235), they are impoverished. Vittoria was married to Camillo, the nephew of a cardinal, who had prospects of becoming Pope, in a political and economic act of allegiance. Gunnar Boklund notes that in Webster’s sources explicit reference is made to this political aspect of the historical Accorombona-Peretti allegiance.[1]

Webster’s Camillo is denigrated by Flamineo as “a lousy slave that within this twenty years rode with the black-guard in the Duke’s carriage ‘mongst spits and dripping pans” (I.ii.129–132), indicating that he has no independent fortune but is dependent upon the Duke’s largesse. Monticelso, moreover, regards the time and fortune that his nephew spent wooing Vittoria as wasted. The language used and the sentiments expressed in this observation are those of the market place:

Monticelso: t’was my cousin’s fate –
Ill may I name the hour – to marry you:
He bought you from your father…
He spent there six months
Twelve thousand ducats, and to my acquaintance
Receiv’d in dowry with you not one julio:
T’was a hard penny-worth, the ware being so light. (III. ii. 235-241)

The relationships between these characters—Camillo and the Duke, Camillo and Monticelso, Camillo and Vittoria—all rest upon a social hierarchy which ultimately
depends upon the power of rank and wealth. Importantly, women’s status in this scheme of interaction is unlike that of men, in that the commodification of women is institutionalised. Without equal bargaining power, they have become goods, valuable or not, to be disposed of as their male relatives decide. Gayle Rubin terms them “the most precious of gifts,” remarking:

If it is the women who are being transacted, then it is the men who give and take them who are linked, the women being a conduit of a relationship, rather than a part of it….The relations of such a system are such that a woman is in no position to realise the benefits of her own circulation. (Rubin 157–210)

If Vittoria is held to have attempted to take control of her own destiny by rejecting the husband chosen for her and attempting to align herself instead with the amorous count, the violent denunciation which she encounters is understandable. The “White Devil” of the play’s title is generally interpreted to mean Vittoria, signifying her supposed embodiment of evil. As George Steiner writes in The Death of Tragedy, “In every case [evil] is only fully comprehensible within the values of a particular culture or tradition” (10). “Evil” amounts to transgression of the moral code of a particular society, its parameters are determined by the structures of power; therefore Vittoria is evil in these terms for her infringement against condoned cultural practice, whether or not she committed the crimes of which she is accused.

In Flamineo, Webster created another marginalised character, readily identifiable to his audience as a disaffected scholar without place or patronage. His experience of
poverty, both as a student and at the court, has embittered him towards his mother and her humble rectitude. To Cornelia’s appeal, “What because we are poor, / Shall we be vicious?” Flamineo responds with a furious account of his grinding poverty while at university, claiming that for seven years he had “been fain to heel [his] tutor’s stockings” and frankly admits that he has few hopes of advance by honest means (I.ii.312, 314-330). His aspirations toward wealth and preferment depend entirely upon pandering to the Duke. In a society where women are currency, his sister is an obvious asset. As Martin Wiggins points out, to prostitute Vittoria is merely the unsanctified mirror image of the legal negotiations of marriage (168).

However, to secure his position a casual liaison is not enough; Vittoria must marry Brachiano in order for Flamineo to attain permanent status in this prominent noble family. Webster, in fact, presents a premeditated murder scenario, within which there is no space for female negotiation. Unlike her mother, Vittoria has a possibility of advancement, but it rests solely on her sexual availability. The locus of power is firmly positioned with Brachiano, while issues of class and gender relating to the members of the Corombona family link them to the Duke and each other in a complicated web of subjection and duty. As Dympna Callaghan observes:

An important facet of the centrality and extensibility of the gender opposition is that all subjugated groups are structurally-situated in a similar relation to the dominant one, especially since neither gender ... nor class is a mutually exclusive category (11).
Flamineo, Vittoria, and their mother, Cornelia, all owe their loyalty and obedience to the Duke as a member of the ruling hierarchy, which ultimately reflects and represents that of God and his “several orders and states of archangels and angels” (“An Exhortation Concerning Good Order and Obedience to Rulers and Magistrates” in *Certain Sermons, or Homilies* (1559)). They are all in similar subject positions to Brachiano in regard to their joint lack of power in terms of rank. But their situations are further complicated on an individual basis. As a man, Flamineo has more personal agency; he is able to actively engage in seeking advancement through his courtly skills, initially arousing little public censure. The women can comply with the expectations of male relatives and social superiors either willingly or reluctantly, but ultimately do not have free choice.

As the voice of feminine decorum, Cornelia tries to resist the drift toward immorality, denouncing not only her own family members, but Brachiano also, by reminding him of his marital status and praying that Vittoria’s life be shortened if she brings dishonour to her husband’s bed (I.ii. 267-295). Her remonstrance with Flamineo is ineffective as it is articulated within a Christian and moralistic framework that he has abandoned in favour of a self-preserving pragmatism, reiterated later in his: “I made a kind of path / To her and mine own preferment” (III.i.33-34). Her criticism of Brachiano is courageous but couched in pious terms which aim to recall him to his proper role as a
moral exemplar and representative of social order, to which he patently does not subscribe:

The lives of princes should like dials move,
Whose regular example is so strong,
They make the times by them go right or wrong. (I.ii.285-287)

The senitentiae, which forms a rhyming couplet amid the blank verse, serves to distance the content from the speaker. Cornelia can therefore be simultaneously outspoken to a proper cause and yet keep her identity as a “good” woman reiterating a common aphorism.

**Inheritance Politics**

Marriage in this era was primarily a political alliance between families, the social tool by which the system was perpetuated by providing legitimate heirs. A woman perceived to undermine the sanctity of marriage, by fashioning her own destiny, became a social threat. The mechanism of human reproduction was imperfectly understood; hence, the policing of women’s sexual activity was of tantamount importance to the preservation of family name and assets. As historical records reveal, second families frequently caused bitter tensions in inheritance plans. Within *The White Devil*, which is based upon historical Italian sources, Vittoria represents a considerable threat to the economic viability of the Orsini family.
Women’s increasing power to inherit and control wealth and property caused anxieties which find expression in many of the dramas of the time (Jardine 78). Webster himself revisits this theme in his *The Duchess of Malfi*, when Ferdinand reveals that he hoped to gain “an infinate mass of treasure,” had his sister remained a widow (IV.ii.282). In *The White Devil*, Brachiano’s passion for Vittoria initially prompts him to divorce his wife before arranging her ingenious murder by means of a poisoned portrait. Webster’s audience would be acutely aware of the implications of the inheritance politics of Brachiano’s second marriage, as he indicates that he will circumvent the law, protecting Vittoria from public scandal, and promising, “I will advance you all: for you Vittoria, / Think of a duchess’ title” (IV.ii.216-217).

The disrupted inheritance expectations are alluded to in the final act, when Brachiano’s death wishes are revealed to the eager Flamineo as the duchy is left to the governance of Vittoria, until Giovanni reaches his majority (V.iii.80-82). Flamineo’s gamble seems to have paid off handsomely; he believes that his elevated status as brother of a ruling dowager duchess will ensure wealth and social stability. As a contemporary audience would appreciate, however, from the Orsini perspective the land, property, and wealth will become fragmented and diminished, providing living and pleasure for the socially-inferior Corombona family and their dependants. Webster’s spectacle of female disorder linked to the material disintegration of wealth rehearsed contemporary apprehensions relating to female inheritance and governance.
Women Interpreted and Ventriloquised

Although Vittoria is at the centre of the criminal actions and she is enmeshed in their consequences, on the evidence presented in the play she cannot be said to have consciously instigated them. Her speech and behaviour is often elucidated by Flamineo, acting as a Chorus figure, his interpretations and general insights reflecting the jaundiced view of women echoed in the contemporary “Woman Debate” pamphlets. The interpretation of Vittoria’s enigmatic dream is construed in keeping with each character’s own personal philosophy. Flamineo regards her as an “excellent devil” (I.ii.256) and believes that she alludes to the murder of Isabella at Brachiano’s hand; Brachiano himself believes it to be a plea for guarantees and protection; while Cornelia can only foresee disgrace and damnation, arising from unspecified evil acts. Her intervention enrages Brachiano to the extent that he divests himself of culpability, warning that he considers her responsible for his subsequent violent actions:

Uncharitable woman thy rash tongue
Hath rais’d a fearful and prodigious storm,
Be thou the cause of all ensuing harm. (I. ii. 303 – 306)

If it is Cornelia’s intervention that causes Brachiano’s violent solutions to his problems, rather than Vittoria’s encouragement, she cannot be considered culpable for the deaths. Webster creates a mesh of complex perspectives without overtly directing his audience in their interpretation. He relies instead upon a shared knowledge of
misogynistic *tropes* which facilitate the construction of Vittoria’s character as “[l]ewd … froward and unconstant” woman, in Swetnam’s terms:

> the beauty of Women hath beene the bane of many a man, for it hath overcome valiant and strong men, eloquent and subtill men … their brests is the vale of destruction, and in their beds there is hell, sorrow and repentance ….Then who can but say that women sprung from the Devill (15-16).

The dream episode serves as “evidence” in the case made against Vittoria, and this shaky foundation is augmented by bringing into play the familiar discourse of female depravity in the damaging character reference engineered in her trial. By the end of the first act, though she herself has appeared on stage only briefly and in ambiguous circumstances, Vittoria’s character has been constructed by the assumptions and interpretations of the characters who surround her. Her actions and intentions, though perhaps obscure to a present day audience, are sufficiently damning to her stage-contemporaries and an early modern audience for her to be designated “adulteress” if not “murderess.”

The lack of consistency in Vittoria’s character can be read as an illustration of her shiftiness or protean nature as the “White Devil” of the play’s oxymoronic title. Her character is complex, demonstrating both positive and negative aspects; nonetheless, she is frequently understood as a corrupt, immoral and manipulative woman to whom prostitution and even murder are only steps toward her social advancement. As Catherine Belsey points out, even by examining Vittoria’s position solely from the angle
of dramatic consistency, it is equivocal. Although other characters can be understood as representing types or quite consistent subject positions, Vittoria alone “seems to have no place intelligible to the audience as single and continuous, from which to speak, to be recognised” (Belsey 163). As a character, she is literally displaced; in fact, she becomes a cipher.

Essentialist and orthodox views of woman sought to frame her as by nature timid, passive, gentle, and pious. In these terms it followed that a self-assertive or garrulous disposition signified a disruptive, “unnatural” woman, capable of dangerously transgressive behaviour, hence, Vittoria’s astute and witty responses actually do her cause a disservice. As Dianne Purkiss points out, “powerful and institutionalised discourses of patriarchy […] sought to coerce both men and women in exceptionally well-marked social roles” (73). Women’s perceived moral inferiority was a particular threat to social stability, unless regulated. Even slight deviation from the bounds of respectability could result in a concatenation of moral decline. Vittoria’s insistence on replying to accusations and denying the slanders that Monticelso heaps upon her excites him to a misogynistic fury, and Vittoria’s impertinent response to a slight on her character propels him into an extended polemic against loose women. The syntagmatic slippage, surprising to a modern audience, reveals with great economy both the constructed nature of language and its entanglement with the discourse of power. An early modern consciousness would have no difficulty in bridging the gaps
between signifying labels and signified referent which first skims from alleged moral laxity to generate the label “prostitute,” which smoothly paves the way to “murdress”: “You know what whore is; next the devil, Adult’ry, / Enters the devil, Murder” (III.i.108-109). The tendency to conflate culturally available signifiers of female non-compliance into an escalating figure of transgression in this way is not novel to Webster, but a common trope in contemporary misogynistic texts. Thomas Tuke’s *A Discourse Against Painting and Tincturing of Women* (1616), for example, makes similarly outrageous claims that the use of rouge leads ineffably to “neighbour sins” including adultery, poisoning and witchcraft (Woodbridge 221 n14). Monticelso himself admits that there is little evidence to support the charge of murder with which Vittoria is accused, and that the court will rely instead upon destroying her reputation:

> For 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 To all our neighbouring kingdoms. (III.i.4-8)

Vittoria’s position throughout her arraignment is anomalous. She is in an untenable situation since, if she does not defend her case, she will be found guilty of the crimes as accused; but if she speaks her innocence she invites condemnation as a “public” woman, which in Webster’s culture attested her guilt. Vittoria’s character epitomises contrariety and paradox throughout the play.
Webster’s play interacts with the age-old themes discussed within the seventeenth-century “Woman Debate,” and his central character is accused of many of the faults that Joseph Swetnam decries in his pamphlet. A woodcut of a well-dressed gentlewoman, ornamented with ruff, embroidery, and jewels, holding a lavish fan, appears on Swetnam’s cover, and he frequently discusses female vanity and love of ostentatious consumption. The anadiplosis at the beginning of his second chapter creates a chain of events which promises that a woman whose delight is to “be deckt up in gorgeous apparel” will “pawne her honesty, to please her fantasie.” Warming to his subject, he rails against married squanderers of their husband’s wealth, claiming “what he getteth in seven yeares, a woman will spend … it abroad with a forke in one yeare” (Swetnam 15). This type of accusation of extravagance and wilful consumption of family assets is obviously concerned with household economy, but also demonstrates an anxiety about women’s circulation in public, un-chaperoned by male relatives, and particularly her pursuit of pleasure. In her trial Vittoria is similarly castigated by her social superiors for her lavish entertaining, considered in this rigidly hierarchical society to be inappropriate to her gender, wealth, or status:

[S]everal night by night
Her gates were choked with coaches and her rooms
Outbraved the stars with several kind of lights,
When she did counterfeit a prince’s court
In music, banquets and most riotous surfeits. (III.ii.73-77)
The underlying message is that although she is a married woman, her ineffective husband is not able to control her, demonstrating a failure of masculine authority. In these terms, Vittoria also represents a threat to notions of social order. Webster’s anti-heroine is a paradigm of Swetnam’s covetous and evil women who “pick thy pocket, and empty thy purse, laugh in thy face and cut thy throat” (16). Misogynistic habits of thought are apparent in both texts in the trope of readily available wanton women circulating as commodities, to be exchanged or bought according to male desire. Diane Purkiss points out that while denoting women’s only worthwhile contribution to society as being the [sexual] pleasure that they can offer, Swetnam represents the enjoyment as “polluting disease or waste” (78). Similarly, when Monticelso construes Vittoria’s frank speech and unbending character at her trial as indicative of her “trade,” he launches an invective against promiscuous women. By association she is described as “the first / Sweetmeats which rot the eater: in man’s nostril / Poisoned fumes” (III.ii.80-82).

The Cardinal’s vituperative attack on Vittoria’s honour is deliberately engineered to appeal to the type of a priori understanding of the evil nature of women which is reworked in Swetnam’s text. The “grave lieger ambassadors” assembled to hear her trial will predictably interpret the assembled circumstantial evidence as “proofs of her black lust,” as Flamineo observes (III.i.4-16). If they need further evidence to seal their verdict, this is supplied by Vittoria’s voluble presence in the dock. Contemporary belief
that a woman who usurped the male prerogative of public display and debate was “unnatural,” aids the case against her, as the persuasive rhetoric of the court emphasises her shockingly vocal response to the accusations. Recognising the untenable nature of her situation, Vittoria is compelled to deny the “modesty and womanhood” demanded of her station, her extremity compelling her to “personate masculine virtue,” as she appropriates the masculine privilege of public voice (III.ii.136). Despite the lawyer’s claim that she “knows not [the] tropes nor figures” of rhetorical oration, she nonetheless fiercely counters the attacks on her behaviour on their own terms (III.ii.40). In doing so, she compromises distinctions between negative models of female loquacity and privileged male oration, so embodying social discord.

Conclusion

Considering the reasons why Webster’s heroines merited their deaths, E. M. Brennan asks the question, “Can these women be trusted?” (xiv). This question articulates an acutely patriarchal viewpoint, however, perhaps somewhat surprisingly given Brennan’s own gender. In an early modern context, the question of “trust” arises through male anxiety caused by women who are perceived as being threatening by behaving transgressively. In Webster’s time, the female characters on the stage existed in a male-dominated stage-world: the plays were written by male playwrights and they were interpreted by male actors, viewed through the perspective of contemporary cultural codes. The interpretation of Webster’s heroines is still often filtered through the
lens of the overarching patriarchal ideology of the era, and Vittoria’s guilt, as charged of murder and prostitution, is accepted by most readers and audiences, although the dramatic action does not depict either offence. She does not witness either the dumb show in which Isabella’s murder is portrayed, or the second dumb show which depicts the death of her husband (II.ii). Neither is she complicit in the arrangements for either murder. She is arraigned for reasons of her unreliability, the fact that she is not trusted to act within the confines of her allotted role—in terms of rank, gender and matrimony—and not for the crimes of which she is accused. As in many texts of the era, in *The White Devil* female autonomy, and particularly a public persona, is equated with licentiousness. Vittoria’s suspected complicity in an illicit sexual relationship demonstrates the lack of patriarchal control within her marriage and the contemporary understanding of women—especially those who “know already what a man is”—as being sexually voracious (*Duchess* I.ii.215).

The entire action of the play hinges on the character of Vittoria. Although Webster gives her some stirring speeches and admirable qualities, she must be considered an anti-heroine, representing, as she does, characteristics antithetical to the era’s model of ideal femininity. No doubt Webster saw the commercial possibilities of exploiting elements of the topical “Woman Question” in his contemporaneous theatrical production. Vittoria’s arraignment is literally the centrepiece of the play and has great dramatic potential. Until this point, her character is defined by the interpretations of
others, but in Act III her vigorous denial of the circumstantial evidence against her briefly permits her progression through the axis of subjection to assertive subject.

Vittoria’s subject position and brief moment of agency is unsustainable not only in terms of her role within the play, however, but also in Webster’s own society. Cultural productions carry the imprint of the dominant ideology and have the power to perpetuate its ideals in coercive discourses of gender, in Foucault’s terms, “by defining cultural norms and excluding what-ever deviates from them” (107-108). Although Vittoria is permitted to meet her denouement with dignity, her death is demanded by dramatic convention and cultural expectation. Her actions are presented as a spectacle of transgression, within the play’s clearly defined parameters and dramatic traditions which demand that order is restored at the end of the play. In Raymond Williams’ terms, literary production is made to ratify the present in the interests of the dominant ideology (116).

Endnotes

[1] Writing of Vittoria Accoromboni’s marriage to Francesco Peretti [Camillo], F. Odorici states that it was “a ceremony to which the parents of that much-courted young lady consented in the hope that Cardinal Montalto would someday reach the pontificate” (Chronicle of l’Antonio del Campidoglio, 1562, quoted in Boklund 34).

[2] rhetorical chaining device
Works Cited


