
Explore and analyse Webster's treatment of women and their status in society as presented in *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*

Webster's decision to cast strong female characters as the protagonists in his two most popular plays could have been considered highly controversial and unexpected by the audiences of his time. This unintended effect immediately seems to prompt a critical questioning of his rationale. The initial reaction of the modern theatre-goer prompted by the contentious discussion surrounding the strong central female characters in *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi* may be to question whether Webster's presentation of women in his plays is an accurate one, and if so, what the theatrical and social implications of this might amount to. However, perhaps a more relevant debate - and one that might have been more interesting to the contemporary theatre-goer - might take into account the playwright's presentation of the Duchess and Vittoria, but ultimately focus on whether Webster objectively had a social and moral purpose in furthering the rights of women at all (as it has been suggested). Alternatively, the argument that Webster was in fact merely a flamboyant showman wallowing in spectacular gore and death as part of an exciting plotline is another issue that should be considered when analysing the contentions of those critics that stand by the idea that Webster wrote simply to entertain his audiences, with no polemic in mind.

Both the Duchess in *The Duchess of Malfi* and Vittoria in *The White Devil* display a failure, or at least a marked resistance, to conform to contemporary societal expectations, and yet they do so in quite different ways. While the Duchess seems to be presented as a virtuous and noble woman, Vittoria, appears at times to be more corrupt even than her unquestionably flawed society. However, the presentation of both female characters and their interactions with their male counterparts serve to highlight an intensely patriarchal society, apparently grounded in the strongly misogynistic streak particularly perceptible in the earlier Mediaeval Christianity. Ferdinand's very first orders to Bosola,

'To live i'the' court, here: and observe the Duchess

To note all the particulars of her 'haviour

What suitors do solícite her for marriage

And whom she best affects: she's a young widow,

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I would not have her marry again' (I, ii: 176 - 179), alert the audience to Ferdinand's domineering, suspicious character. Even if convention held that noble widows should remain chaste after their husbands' deaths, Ferdinand's controlling nature may have seemed rather extreme even to the audiences of the time. Even Bosola questions, 'No sir?' (line 180), but Ferdinand's prompt rebuke, 'Do not you ask the reason: but be satisfied, I say I would not' (181 - 182), is indicative of the threatening menace behind his actions. Evidence for this cruelty is found in Act III, scene ii, when Ferdinand hears from the Duchess that she has acted against his wishes and has remarried. His exceptionally hostile reaction to this information is to call her a 'vile woman' (line 100) who should 'cut out [her] own tongue

Lest it bewray him [Antonio]' (108 - 109). This response is part of a virulent attack that incorporates images of traditionally ominous night-time animals such as the 'wolf', the 'screech-owl', 'dogs', and 'monkeys'; all animals frequently perceived as 'wicked'. Directly associating these creatures with the lovers has the cumulative effect of insulting their honour and reputation in a very dark, threatening way.

In a similar vein, Flamineo attempts to take control of his sister out of selfishness. Flamineo's actions, however, contrast with Ferdinand's command that the Duchess remain chaste. Flamineo seduces Vittoria in order to curry favour and further his career as the Duke's secretary. In doing so, he corrupts his sister's reputation; just as Ferdinand insulted Antonio's honour, Flamineo slights Camillo: 'So unable to please a woman that like a Dutch doublet all his back is shrunk into his breeches' (I, ii, 33 - 34). Vittoria is also subject to vitriolic abuse in the trial scene in Act III: Monticelso, the Cardinal, labels her a 'whore' (line 77), expounding upon that by describing whores using a number of grotesque similes: 'They are worse/Worse than dead bodies, which are begg'd at gallows/And wrought upon by surgeons, to teach man/Wherein he is imperfect' (95 - 98). The grotesque image of a rotting corpse juxtaposed against the clinical background of a surgeon's table could be seen to mirror the situation in two ways: not only does it refer to Monticelso's metaphorical dissection of Vittoria as he publicly humiliates her, but it also reveals his belief that he is exposing her guilt. The latter interpretation seems to suggest Webster's implicit undermining of Monticelso's perception of Vittoria.

Webster compounds the apparent injustice against women by creating female protagonists who are intelligent, honourable and valiant even at the moment of death. Nowhere is this seen more clearly than in Act IV, scene i of *The Duchess of Malfi*, in which the Duchess, imprisoned and awaiting her inevitable murder, is subjected to a number of gruesome and cruel methods of psychological torture, including being forced to kiss a dead man's hand, see artificial figures of her Antonio and her children appearing as if they were dead, and having a group of madmen unleashed around her. However, her response to this persecution, though naturally one of horror, is always marked by extraordinary dignity. She courageously speaks out in defiance of Bosola's feigned reverence ('All comfort to your Grace' [line 18]), declaring almost insolently 'I

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will have none.

Pray-thee, why dost thou wrap thy poison'd pills

In gold and sugar?' (18 - 20). She displays her fortitude and strength of character when she aligns herself with Christ by forgiving her executioners and fixing her mind not on her imminent death, but on 'th'other world' (IV, ii, 213). Her intelligent powers of reasoning remain evident as she calmly explains to Bosola that she cannot be afraid of 'the manner of [her] death' (213) with a 'number of astute rhetorical questions:

'What would it pleasure me, to have my throat cut/With diamonds? or to be smothered/With cassia? or to be shot to death, with pearls?' (216 - 218). The Duchess's courage is also exemplified by her clever inversion of the horror of physical strangulation: she wills the executioner's ropes to pull harder, wishing to figuratively pull heaven down towards her. In the audience's eyes, she dies the death of a martyr, slain at the hands of villains.

Similarly, Webster seems to imbue Vittoria with an intelligence and calm endurance during her trial that contrasts sharply with the blustering lawyer and the venomous Monticelso. This serves to highlight the injustice being perpetrated against her. It is suggested that Vittoria's rhetorical strategy of creating the impression of heroic scorn ('That my defence of force like Perseus' [135]) and innocence will convince the audience of her truthfulness, as she shrewdly comments, 'Temptation to lust proves not the act' (199). Her insistence that the lawyer speaks in the vernacular, not in 'hard and undigestible words' (37) makes a pedantic fool of him; he stands in direct contrast to her marked lack of pretension. The injustice being perpetrated against Vittoria seems to be exacerbated by Webster's presentation of her as judicious and incisive, not a 'whore'.

In creating *The Duchess of Malfi* and *The White Devil*, Webster draws on conventions endorsed by specific genres and various events from history, but transforms them for his own ends. One possible reason for these transformations is Webster's desire to comment on the status of women, an endeavor that would have been impossible to achieve under traditional conventions. The Duchess's initiation of the wooing and marriage to her steward is indeed unconventional, as she herself admits when she says, 'For I am going into a wilderness,/Where I shall find nor path, nor friendly clew/To be my guide' (I, i, 281 - 283). This is a clear inversion of the Jacobean constraints of both gender and class. The traditional structure of a Jacobean drama is also significantly altered when the eponymous protagonist dies an entire act before the end of the play. Webster also chooses to significantly alter the historical scenarios behind his plots; these amendments frequently expose his desire to propel a more coherent, consistent 'message' than that which could be conveyed with pure historical accuracy. For example, he chooses to allow the Duchess's eldest son to inherit the rank of his mother, thereby deviating from the source in

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order to authenticate her nonconformist marriage. Furthermore, in *The White Devil* Webster presents Isabella as virtuous and undeserving, pledging to pray for Bracciano and take on herself the blame for their separation, in hope of inspiring his repentance: 'I will make/Myself the author of your cursed vow' (II, i, 217 - 218). However, the real Isabella was not nearly so virtuous - indeed, she had another lover of her own. Similarly, Webster intentionally omits the fact that Camillo (whose real name was Peretti) is actually very young: by transforming him into a feckless adult, he almost gives Vittoria an excuse for her adulterous behavior. While Webster's deviations from traditional conventions and the original historical sources may simply be consequences of his desire for a different, perhaps more exciting, plot, it could also be suggested that the playwright wished to accentuate the virtuous characteristics of women and the negative attributes of men, thereby drawing attention to the gender divide.

However, in exploring Webster's treatment of the status of women in sixteenth-century Britain, it is important to look beneath the surface in order to avoid oversimplifying either the characters or our reactions to them. Closer analysis reveals that Webster actually created the Duchess and Vittoria not only as stock 'oppressed female' characters, merely illustrations of the social constraints placed upon women at the time, but also as realistic, 'human' characters with a value that transcended mere representations of 'typical', noble, sixteenth-century Italian women. He does this by creating complex, multilayered characters: while stock characters would fit into a single mold (for example, 'tragic'), these characters exhibit contradictions that seem to reveal their humanity. In examining this, we realize that 'the Duchess is a simpler...figure than Vittoria' (although both exemplify 'human' qualities). For example, while Vittoria is ultimately presented as a victim, swept up in the corruption of court life by the ambitious men around her, she herself is actually an adulterous woman who should most likely be vilified by the audience of the time. However, the audience is led to pity Vittoria, since the play's viewpoint is ambiguous. At times, Webster confuses our viewpoint in an effort to prompt us either to take an unconventional or unprecedented view, or enhance ambiguity by not explicitly instructing us about which viewpoint to take. For example, the play's perspective on the Duchess's re-marriage is ambiguous, and seems to emphasise her courage rather than her foolhardiness. The Renaissance was a time during which the individual was emphasized: this can be extended, although in a far more limited sense, to an increased emphasis placed on women, as well. In Webster's works, the female protagonists' actions are initially presented as heroic. However, the fate of the Duchess complicates this view, suggesting that female heroicism in such a patriarchal society has its limitations: were her actions really worth her death? The play's overt tragedy is often undermined by its subtle satire: quite often, this satire is perpetrated by Flamineo. This tragicomic aspect adds to the ambiguity that surrounds Webster's presentation of an entire society steeped in exploitation and deception. It is perhaps because of this Webster was able to prevent the audience from sympathizing with individual characters, instead drawing our attention to the corruption of the society as a whole.

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One might easily conclude that Webster did not write either *The Duchess of Malfi* or *The White Devil* as a treatise on women's rights. While the sixteenth century did see the beginnings of the challenge to the status quo, and assertive female characters began to appear in dramatic works, 'actual changes for the better in the position of women at this time were distinctly limited.' Dollimore suggests that rather than presenting a case for female emancipation, most Jacobean tragedy - including Webster's - actually underscored the oppression of women, since this exploitation was part of the social order observed by the playwright. Webster, one might conclude, was not a radical - he was not really trying to alter the perceived status of women. Instead, Webster harnessed the baser human instincts of his characters to show two sides of humanity - positive and negative. It is thus possible to view his plays more as an observational commentary on society than as a radical polemic.

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