

observations about the play's inadequate first audience, and to answer the introductory questions, we are probably not any more deserving, or even capable of understanding his play, than the people attending its first performance in Clerkenwell in 1612. When we reach for our credit cards in order to see a violent tragedy played out by fellow human beings, as we do with *The White Devil*, we are probably reaching, in fact, for something grisly in nature, challenging and morally overwhelming, hopefully spoken beautifully by well-rehearsed performers who will make us think. This is something the economically driven prompting of successful stage presentations must have proved to be, from venue to venue, company to company, and concept to concept in each succeeding age. Trying to change or censor the play also proves this, as it must always be, in the end, Webster's play, to succeed. The reason to produce it is risked if overly cut or softened. Somewhere among the puzzling truths that a play like this represents lies – in my opinion – the answers to the question of why we go to the theatre at all.

3

The White Devil: The State of the Art

Brett D. Hirsch

Twenty-first century criticism of *The White Devil* has drawn attention to the material and economic conditions of the play's first publication in 1612, as well as its engagement with contemporary debates about race and nation, feminine sexuality and 'the nature of woman', legal jurisdictions and abuses of power and the tenuous boundary between social reality and performance. In addition to a striking variety of topical readings of the play, Webster's macabre fascination and metatheatrical treatment of death remain scholarly staples. Editorial work on *The White Devil* stands at the crossroads between an earlier bibliographical tradition in print and the new possibilities afforded by the emerging technologies of digital publication. These and other technologies, now ubiquitous, suggest the possibility of addressing critical lacunae in adaptation, source, and stylistic studies of *The White Devil*. I explore each of these recurring themes and areas of critical concentration in turn.

Textual studies and editions

The preface to *The White Devil* is more than an opportunity for its author to justify his delay and to complain that the play's failure on stage is because 'it wanted [...] a full and understanding auditory' at the Red Bull playhouse ('To the Reader', 4–6). It also offers tantalizing insights into the relationship between playhouse and printing house and the status of the 'author' in the early modern period. As Douglas A. Brooks argues, Webster turned to publication not only in an effort to 'legitimize the printed text of *The White Devil* by discounting the reception his play received in the theatre as the consequence of an inadequate performance venue and an inept audience', but also to engage in literary self-fashioning.¹ Webster seeks refuge from the ephemerality of the theatre in print and, by delivering his manuscript to Nicholas Okes, 'a printer who is beginning to rely on a set of typographic conventions' associated with works of 'high art' and literature, to appeal to an educated readership better equipped to 'accord it the kind of respect and appreciation its writer thinks it deserves'.² The 'distinctly literary features' of the 1612 quarto edition of *The White Devil* include 'singular authorial attribution' and a 'Latin epigram' on the title page,³ a preface written by Webster (and not his publisher) in which the *sententiae* are consistently marked from the text, and in the use of continuous printing, 'a compositional technique [...] in which verse lines broken between two speakers are set on one line to create a full metrical unit'.⁴

Zachary Lesser has since extended Brooks's analysis of the 1612 quarto, focusing instead on the playbook's publisher Thomas Archer, and its relationship to other titles in his catalogue. For Lesser, Archer's decision to publish *The White Devil* had nothing to do with Webster's literary aspirations and desire to recover the play from its failed theatrical debut: 'Archer chose the play for the same reason he chose his other plays [...] *The White Devil* is about a woman and the "woman

question".⁵ Thorough examination of Archer's output reveals that he engaged in what Lesser terms 'dialogic publishing', configuring his business to capitalize on 'the *querelle des femmes*, the long-running debate over the nature of woman that had a resurgence in England during the second decade of the seventeenth century' and agnostically publishing works on all sides.⁶ Archer's selection of plays, including *Sir Thomas Wyatt* (or *Lady Jane*; 1607), *Every Woman in Her Humour* (1609), *The Two Maids of Mortlake* (1609), *The Roaring Girl* (1611), and *The Insatiate Countess* (1613, 1616), shared 'a formal resemblance to the dialogic mode of the *querelle* itself and of Archer's publishing strategy'.⁷ Lesser's sophisticated reading of *The White Devil* in the context of Archer's publishing career begins with a consideration of Vittoria's doubleness as she 'shifts from the lustful adulteress of the first act to the powerfully persuasive defender of women and doting wife' of the later scenes, 'encoding [...] both sides of the *querelle des femmes* in a single character' who, at various points of the play, exemplifies 'both the vicious and the virtuous woman'.⁸ However, for Lesser, it is the trial scene that most clearly invokes the language and dialogic structure of the *querelle*, rendering it 'a trial of all women, or of the nature of woman'.⁹

Twenty-first century publishers have altogether different motivations for publishing *The White Devil*. Since the market for print editions of early modern plays continues for the most part to be driven by students, and not by scholars, twenty-first century editorial work on *The White Devil* has been motivated by the demand for student-friendly set texts. Some of these editions capitalize on particular curriculum requirements: Jackie Moore's 2011 edition in the Oxford Student Texts series, for example, is designed to meet the needs of high school students in England, Wales and Northern Ireland taking the OCR GCE (General Certificate of Education) Advanced Level English Literature specification.¹⁰ As with her edition of *The Duchess of Malfi* in the same series, Moore's edition of the play includes contextual information about Webster

and Jacobean England, discussion of major themes and interpretative strategies, and sample essay questions.¹¹ Other editions, such as David Bevington's for the Norton Anthology, cater more broadly to the needs of undergraduate readers.¹² Of these, Christina Luckyj's 2008 revised third edition for the New Mermaids series provides the most generous introduction to the play, notable also for its attention to modern productions and issues of staging in both the introduction and commentary.¹³

With Benedict S. Robinson's forthcoming edition for the Arden Early Modern Drama series excepted, *The White Devil* has yet to attract the comprehensive editorial treatment it received in the previous century.¹⁴ John Russell Brown's 1960 edition for the Revels Plays remains the most significant critical edition of *The White Devil* to appear in a single play volume, justly praised for its substantial introductory essay, thorough collation of textual variants and extensive commentary.¹⁵ Reprinted frequently, but only revised once, Brown's edition offers a wealth of information about the play and its critical reception, Webster's sources and imitations and editorial treatment of the text since the seventeenth century. However, Brown's coverage of stage productions is limited to a handful of professional productions staged in London and New York between 1925 and 1955. Twenty-first century students are also likely to find the critical framework underpinning Brown's edition rather old fashioned, given that it predates the advent of several critical movements that came to dominate literary and cultural studies, such as new historicism, cultural materialism, feminist and postcolonial literary criticism. As later sections of this survey and other chapters in this collection demonstrate, these and other theoretical approaches have shaped and continue to reshape critical and theatrical treatment of *The White Devil*.

Brown's text is also a product of its time and of the New Bibliography, a twentieth-century bibliographical approach that privileged an author's intentions and sought by analytical methods to establish the text of the underlying manuscript.

Since these manuscripts are, for the most part, no longer extant, the New Bibliographers reconstructed them by examining the printed playbooks and attempting to scrape away the multiple intervening layers of mediation by other hands in the playhouse and print-shop.¹⁶ As the intellectual authority of the New Bibliography and the veracity of its methods received intense criticism in the 1980s and 1990s, new models for textual studies and editing emerged, including the sociological and materialist bibliographies championed by D. F. McKenzie and Jerome J. McGann.¹⁷ The publication of the Oxford Shakespeare *Complete Works* in 1986 marked an important (and no less controversial) shift in editorial approaches to early modern drama, moving away from the New Bibliographical ideal of establishing a text as an author 'originally wrote' it in favour of 'a text presenting the play as it appeared when performed by the company of which Shakespeare was a principal shareholder in the theatres that he helped to control and on whose success his livelihood depended'.¹⁸

Prepared while the New Bibliography still held sway, Brown's edition of *The White Devil* is more conservative textually than other editions of the play – and, indeed, other works by Webster and his contemporaries – produced towards the end of the twentieth century. In this respect, the 1995 first volume of *The Works of John Webster* for Cambridge University Press is an anomaly, insofar as it exceeded the conservatism of Brown's edition in both form and content.¹⁹ 'Because this edition is directed in the main towards the sophisticated reader of seventeenth-century texts', the textual editors announced, 'it generally follows Greg's and Bowers's principles of copy-text', that is, the chief proponents of the New Bibliography, 'and presents the works in old spelling'.²⁰ When work on the *Works* began in the 1970s, such 'old spelling' critical editions were commonplace; however, by the end of the twentieth century, they had become something of an editorial oddity. The decision to prepare an old-spelling text severely limited the utility of this edition for classroom

use. The expense of the volumes, even when reissued later in paperback, rendered them library-only editions, priced out of the hands of most individual researchers, available primarily to the 'sophisticated reader' of seventeenth-century texts with access to dedicated research libraries.

Limited readership aside, the *Works* presents a monumental contribution to Webster scholarship, offering the most thorough historical collations to date, extensive commentary, and detailed critical, theatrical, and textual introductions. David Carnegie's theatrical introduction to *The White Devil* deserves further praise for its meticulous treatment of the play's stage history and attention to issues in performance, enriched with several contemporary illustrations. David Gunby's critical introduction, however, assiduously avoids engaging in contemporary debates about *The White Devil*, instead focusing exclusively on long-standing issues of character, plot, and structure. In light of the project's aim to establish an authoritative edition of enduring scholarly value, such exclusions are perhaps understandable. Nonetheless, these critical lacunae, along with the decision to prepare old-spelling texts, have denied the edition the scholarly impact it otherwise deserves.

On the question of why we need new editions of Shakespeare, R. A. Foakes responded, 'We can only understand Shakespeare in relation to our own time; his works are constantly being reinterpreted in relation to the concerns of our society, so that new insights demand new editions with new critical introductions'.²¹ The same is true for Webster: new editions of *The White Devil* will be required to situate the play in relation to shifting critical trends, cultural tastes and societal concerns. Of all the changes ushered in by the twenty-first century, perhaps the most radical has been the rise of ubiquitous computing. Ours is an increasingly digital culture and, although print remains the dominant medium for the publication of editions, early modern plays are already available in a variety of digital formats. An electronic critical edition of *The White Devil* has yet to appear, but given the

ways digital interfaces can support multiple texts and layers of annotation, integrate multimedia content, facilitate user interaction and customization, and incorporate new materials – contextual, critical, performance, user-generated – as they become available, it may only be a matter of time.²²

Race, cosmetics and colour

Racial studies in early modern literature has 'grown from a subtopic to a *sui generis* field' since the late 1960s.²³ The field has been sustained by critical interest in contemporary English perceptions of and contact with Islam and the New World²⁴ and invigorated, in recent years, by fresh archival research into the presence of black Africans in Tudor and Stuart England.²⁵ A number of post-2000 studies have explored constructions of race in *The White Devil*, paying particular attention to the ideological, as well as material performances of blackness in the play. Race, these studies suggest, is not a discrete category but a complex construct that intersects with other, often contradictory, discourses. For example, Francesca Royster considers the 'intersections between African and animal' in the play, arguing that Webster's depiction of Moors is framed by contemporary discourse about 'the ownership and domestication of animals'. Dogs, Royster contends, are 'protectors of the domestic space', 'faithful servants' and 'guards of the margins of civilization and the outside', but this privileged access to intimate spaces and bond of trust with their owners renders them all the more dangerous should they revert to their native state of wildness. Royster's reading of *The White Devil* connects these contrasting images of dogs with 'the Moor as a silent object' (as in the case of 'little' Jacques) and 'the Moor as a dangerous ally' (Zanche), to explore 'the tension around potential domestication of black people', and contemporary debates about their 'capacity for humanity, rationality, and social control'.²⁶

In her 2005 study, *Performing Blackness on English Stages, 1500–1800*, Virginia Mason Vaughan situates *The White Devil* within a longer theatrical history of blackface. Supposing that ‘a young black boy had been available to Queen Anne’s Company’, Vaughan identifies three levels of ‘mimesis and exhibition’ in the play’s portrayal of Moors: Jacques, ‘a black boy being a black boy’ who, without any dialogue and agency simply functions as exotic decoration; Zanche, ‘an English boy actor impersonating a black woman’; and Mulinassar, ‘an adult English male actor impersonating a powerful European male who disguises himself as a black Moor’. The audience’s knowledge that white actors are underneath the artificial black skins of these Moorish characters, Vaughan argues, gives rise to a ‘double consciousness’, in much the same way that impersonation of women on the early modern stage invokes tensions about the social construction of gender and sexuality.²⁷ In this instance, the underlying anxieties exposed both literally and figuratively are miscegenation and racial pollution – aspects of the play explored more fully in Celia R. Daileader’s study of interracialism. Daileader posits three generalizations about the theatrical treatment of interracial relationships: interracial sex ‘is a prospect to be avoided by all means’; when one party is English, the possibility of interracial sex is ‘rarely raised as a possibility’ and, if so, it is ‘emphatically thwarted’; and ‘interracial sex never involves a consenting and a sympathetic white woman’. The first and last of these apply to *The White Devil*, and Daileader characterizes Flamineo’s affair with Zanche as another instance in which ‘inter-racial sex is non-consensual’ and ‘the sexual aggressor is female’.²⁸

Vaughan’s suggestion that an actual black boy may have played the character of Jacques anticipates more recent studies in the wake of new archival research on the presence of Africans in early modern England. For example, Matthew Steggle has argued that this archival evidence not only ‘challenges assumptions about the all-white audience’, however, given the ‘fragmentariness of the theatre history’ and ‘racial history’, must also allow for the prospect of greater ‘black involvement

in early modern theatre’ itself.²⁹ Although Steggle is writing with Shakespeare’s *Othello* and *Titus Andronicus* in mind, with the tantalizing possibility that Henry Peacham’s famous drawing of the latter play depicts an actual black actor at work as Aaron, the implications for *The White Devil* are clear and future work on the play is certain to develop this line of inquiry further. Whether impersonated by white actors or acted by black ones, the Moorish characters in *The White Devil* are not the only racial figurations in the play. In a sophisticated reading, Lara Bovilsky analyses how ‘female sexual license is coded within the monochromatic antitheses of light and dark that attend and signal processes of racialization’, and how ‘stereotypes of Italian moral darkness combine with notions of Italian physical darkness’ to establish national differences as ‘constitutively racialized’.³⁰ By way of ‘involved disguise plots and fluid transnational and crossracial labeling’, the play stages ‘fluctuating racial difference’ through ‘tropes of gender and national otherness’, intersecting notions of ‘English’, ‘Italian’, and ‘Moorish’ and fracturing ‘any proposed contrast between Europeans and others’.³¹

Twenty-first century critics have also drawn attention to the material and metaphorical function of cosmetics in the play’s representation of gender, nation and race as impermanent, performative and socially constructed. In her study of skin colour in early modern England, Sujata Iyengar explores how practices of ‘blacking, blanching and blushing’ – that is, the use of cosmetics to darken, lighten and redden the skin, especially the face – break down ‘as signs of moral conduct, poetic power and national origin’ in *The White Devil*.³² For Iyengar, the play’s consistent linking of cosmetics with deception invokes the fears that ‘the white devil is *indistinguishable* from the black’ and that ‘truth is indistinguishable from fiction, painted color from permanent complexion’. But cosmetics also operate as a form of social control, such as when male characters in the play employ ‘paint and metaphors of cosmetic deception’ as a means of reasserting their ‘authority over women and their complexions’. Thus,

the various men who seek to control Vittoria's sexuality 'paint [her] blushes out of existence'.³³ By contrast, Farah Karim-Cooper argues that 'Webster constructs female characters as heroic within an atmosphere of misogynistic condemnation', that 'bold women' such as Vittoria 'wear cosmetics and fashion not only their physical appearances, but also their own lives'. In this way, the otherwise 'anti-cosmetic and misogynistic tenor' of the play 'is subverted by Webster's construction of femininity'.³⁴ Iyengar's and Karim-Cooper's studies were published a year apart, unaware of each other's divergent readings of the play, and may usefully be read as complementary. Like Iyengar, Karim-Cooper attends to the language of cosmetics permeating *The White Devil*, frequently glossing references otherwise missed by editors. Monticelso's description of whores as 'Shipwrecks in calmest weather' (3.2.83), for example, while 'not a terribly obvious cosmetic image' is nonetheless identified by Karim-Cooper as 'one often used by anti-cosmetic moralists to describe the attention and time spent on the "rigging" up of a woman's body'.³⁵ However, Karim-Cooper's study of the play is more than a glossary of its cosmetic terms. Hers is a project to demonstrate that images of 'art, Catholicism, witchcraft, traps, food, death, disease, medicine, skin, the body, colour, ships, tombs and effigies, nature, and animals', so pervasive throughout Webster's drama: all 'in some way speak to the contemporary discourse on cosmetics'. To re-evaluate Webster's 'indulgence in cosmetic metaphors' and 'references to cosmetic materials' is therefore to acknowledge how central they are 'to the verbal, visual and theatrical structure' of his tragedies.³⁶

As befits the play's title, moreover, a series of recent studies have explored colour symbolism in *The White Devil*. With the confrontation between Vittoria and Monticelso as her focus, Armelle Sabatier attempts to examine the role of colour in Webster's 'highly chromatic play'; but her treatment is invariably limited to the trial scene.³⁷ The topic receives fuller treatment in Natascha Wanninger's 'Theatrical Colours', in which *The White Devil* is read as participating in

contemporary debates linking colour with the visual deception of cosmetics and 'painting', the aural deception of 'painted rhetoric' and the theatre that routinely brought these elements together.³⁸ Apparently, unbeknownst to Wanninger, an earlier study by Subha Mukherji covers much of the same ground but with greater focus on the law and its processes, examining 'colour' in its 'legal, rhetorical, theatrical, theological and physiognomical senses' and in relation to notions of evidence during Vittoria's arraignment.³⁹ In 'A Darker Shade of Pale', the fourth and final of these studies, Annaliese Connolly and Lisa Hopkins offer compelling topical readings of whiteness in *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*. Pervasive images of winter and white-furred animals implicate Webster's tragedies in the social and geopolitical context of 'the first attempted land-grab of the Arctic' during the first half of James I's reign, 'desired not for its mineral resources but because of the hope that it would offer access to a north-east passage' to the Far East, 'and also for its wildlife, which was predominantly white' and prized as exotic commodities.⁴⁰ First mooted in 1612, this 'improbable' proposal to annex Russia was sufficiently advanced by 1613 when James hoped to send Sir Thomas Overbury as an embassy – a hope that died with Overbury in the Tower of London later that year. Given that both *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi* were 'being written and/or acted at the time that the aborted embassy to Russia was being discussed', and that Webster had known Overbury since their days at the Middle Temple (and perhaps even acted as Overbury's literary executor after his death), Connolly and Hopkins remark, it is 'not surprising that the plays should be haunted by thoughts of the white world of Russia'.⁴¹

James I's 1612 reburial of his mother, Mary, Queen of Scots, in a magnificent marble tomb in Westminster Abbey to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of her death, provides another topical context for the plays. In addition to the marble tombs, alabaster funerary sculptures and other conventional symbols of mourning it employs, *The White Devil* 'deliberately alludes

to a range of images of Stuart iconography' and contains 'strong parallels between the story of Vittoria, Brachiano and Camillo and that of Mary Stuart, Henry, Lord Darnley and Bothwell'.⁴² Drawing on Carol Blessing's article (discussed in the next section), Connolly and Hopkins persuasively argue that Webster's depiction of Vittoria – the titular 'white' devil – is informed by a well-established 'tradition of associating Mary [Queen of Scots] with the colour white', drawing on her figuration as the 'white rose of York' and the white mourning veil customary of the French court that became a well-publicized trademark. For the Jacobean, whiteness was, therefore, associated with mourning and death, on the one hand, and with wealth and power, on the other – this, Connolly and Hopkins conclude, 'is why there is a general fear and refusal of whiteness in both *The Duchess of Malfi* and *The White Devil*'.⁴³ As these studies suggest, there is more to colour in *The White Devil* than a simple juxtaposition between black and white: Webster's language and imagery spans a wide spectrum, vividly evoking a complex network of cultural, social, and topical associations.

The law and analogous cases

Webster's fascination with the law and its processes, perhaps betraying his formal legal study undertaken while at the Middle Temple, remains a staple of twenty-first scholarship on *The White Devil*. In particular, the arraignment scene (3.2) has fuelled considerable critical discussion. Luke Wilson's 'The White Devil and the Law' poses fundamental questions about the scene's structure and usefully teases out its various jurisdictional ambiguities: Is the court or theatre the place of judgement? Is the legal system represented Italian or English? Is the language of authority Latin or vernacular, and who is authorized to judge? Is the jurisdiction ecclesiastical, common law, or equity? Wilson works through these questions in turn,

demonstrating how Webster's depiction of the trial scene is informed by contemporary attacks on English ecclesiastical courts that were levelled on two fronts: by Puritans concerned that they were 'too lax on serious sins' and retained vestiges of the 'trans-national Catholic ecclesiastical apparatus' from which they originated, and by common lawyers who took issue with overlapping jurisdictional boundaries.⁴⁴

One of the recurring debates in legal readings of *The White Devil* concerns the play's relationship to notions of equity – a body of English legal principles that developed alongside the common law, characterized by 'painstaking inquiry and fair judgment in consideration of the particular circumstances of a case'. For example, Ina Habermann argues that *The White Devil* (alongside *The Duchess of Malfi* and *The Devil's Law-Case*) exemplifies 'a type of forensic drama which foregrounds equity by placing the issues of female characters at the centre of the action', such that 'as the law interrogates femininity, femininity interrogates the law'.⁴⁵ Central to Habermann's argument is Vittoria's petitioning of the audience, both on- and off-stage, to pity her and support her cause, since this invokes equitable principles and 'the practice of equity is relegated to the audience'. Vittoria's strategy fails, although it gains her a 'moral victory' and exposes her trial as 'a travesty of justice'. However, Habermann interprets this failure 'as evidence of Webster's nationalist and anti-Catholic stance' and not reflective of his position on competing legal principles and jurisdictions: 'legal proceedings in *The White Devil* are flawed because they lack the right kind of equity'.⁴⁶ Such an equitable reading of *The White Devil*, Wilson argues, is frustrated on two grounds. First, although the play 'may appear to reflect women's recourse' in the seventeenth century 'to the prerogative courts, especially the equitable jurisdiction of the Chancery', in practice 'the advantages were technical' and 'theatrical equity does not much resemble equity in its institutionalized forms'. Second, and more importantly, 'Vittoria's arguments in the arraignment scene are not distinctly equitable at all'. The 'revelation of interiority

as exculpatory', one of the hallmarks of equity, 'is almost entirely absent' and, arguably, 'knowing more about Vittoria would make her behavior seem less understandable and less forgivable'. If anything, Wilson concludes, *The White Devil* is 'an anti-equitable play, one that refuses to stand as a humanizing supplement to the law'.⁴⁷

Twenty-first century critics have also identified parallels between the dramatization of Vittoria's trial and those of other prominent aristocratic women. One of these figures is Lady Frances Howard, Countess of Somerset, who in 1616, along with her husband Robert Carr, Lord Rochester, and a favourite of James I, pleaded guilty to the murder of Sir Thomas Overbury, while he was a prisoner in the Tower of London three years earlier. Attributed to natural causes at the time, Overbury's death was reinvestigated when allegations of poisoning surfaced 'in the midst of a bitter court struggle' between Carr and James I's new court favourite. Alastair Bellany succinctly summarizes the lurid and widely publicized details that emerged in the trials that followed:

The crowds who packed the murder trials and gathered to witness the executions of the condemned heard fantastic stories of lust, betrayal, and murder; of ambitious men and ungoverned women; of witchcraft and poison; of pride and dissimulation; of popery, treason, and political assassination.⁴⁸

Stevie Simkin reads the portrayal of Vittoria in *The White Devil* as a theatrical antecedent to the construction of Frances Howard in the wake of the Overbury scandal. In addition to her function as 'the mainspring of the revenge plot', Vittoria's beauty, sexuality, inscrutability and duplicity – traits also attributed to Frances – firmly establish her as 'an early modern example of the *femme fatale* mythotype'.⁴⁹ The timing of the play's composition and performance extinguish the possibility that Webster drew inspiration for *The White Devil* directly from Frances's divorce from Robert Devereux, 3rd Earl of

Essex, or the Overbury affair that followed.⁵⁰ Nonetheless, Simkin outlines a range of parallels between Vittoria and Frances, including their grounds for divorce, refusal to be silenced, and determination to outface their accusers at court.⁵¹

Another figure whose 'famous trials became the stuff of legend, providing ripe material for Webster's law scenes' is Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots.⁵² Mary's first husband, François II of France, died in 1560 and her second marriage to Henry Stuart, Lord Darnley, came to an abrupt end in 1567 when Darnley was murdered. Although the identities of those responsible remain hotly contested, Mary's involvement in the conspiracy was strongly suspected at the time, fuelled by rumours that she was involved in an illicit affair with James Hepburn, 4th Earl of Bothwell, who she married in equally questionable circumstances later that year.⁵³ In a provocative reading, Carol Blessing traces Marian echoes in *The White Devil*, beginning with the play's title. 'Le Deuil Blanc', François Clouet's 1567 portrait of Mary wearing the customary mourning attire of the French court – 'a white veil flowing down from a headpiece' over a black mourning dress – suggests a possible influence: 'Although "deuil" in French means "mourning", in the context of mourning attire, its resemblance in print to the English word "devil" may have incited Webster to wordplay'.⁵⁴

Whether Webster saw this particular portrait or others in the same style is immaterial to Blessing's argument: Mary inaugurated a 'new style of mourning head-dress' in England, importing and adapting the *deuil blanc* 'French hood' in a form that would become iconographically synonymous with her.⁵⁵ In fact, as Blessing notes, Mary was 'essentially dressed in mourning from the age of seventeen onward', famously 'appearing in widow's weeds at her second and third marriages'. In addition to the possible wordplay of the title, Blessing identifies further parallels between the depiction of Vittoria and the life of Mary Stuart, 'whose infamous affairs mirror Webster's provocative heroine'.⁵⁶ Both women married two men in quick succession, and were accused of murdering

the first. Both are 'described overwhelmingly' in terms of their appearance, whose 'beautiful exteriors' deceitfully mask their deviant sexuality and inclination to murder exemplifying the contemporary proverb, 'the white devil is worse than the black'. A casket of letters was introduced as evidence in Mary's trial for adultery and murder to establish her affair with Bothwell; likewise, Monticelso produces a letter as evidence of Vittoria's unchastity at her arraignment, although she refutes it: 'Temptation to lust proves not the act' (3.2.199). Webster's identification of Vittoria with Mary, Blessing suggests, allows an opportunity for the on- and off-stage audiences to evaluate the actions and words of both figures.

Death and the dumb show

'Plenty of blood', says a young mouse-dangling John Webster in the 1998 film *Shakespeare in Love*, 'That's the only writing'.⁵⁷ This caricature exemplifies the popular perception of Webster as a macabre figure obsessed with images of decay, torture and madness, despite his acknowledged authorship of at least three comedies. Critics, too, have been drawn to Webster's fascination with death and his ability, in T. S. Eliot's words, to see 'the skull beneath the skin'.⁵⁸ In particular, recent scholarship has explored the metatheatricality of *The White Devil* in relation to the performance of violence and death.

The sequence of dumb shows in Act 2, Scene 2, through which Brachiano witnesses the intricate murders of Isabella and Camillo, has occasioned detailed critical interpretation and debate. Julie Sanders argues that Webster's use of the device 'to depict some of the most extravagantly engineered deaths of the play' allows 'what might have stretched the imagination if staged for real' to be 'both naturalised and heightened in its horror'. For Sanders, the effect of the dumb show to condense stage action and to render death 'pictorial and spectacular' explains the 'particular taste' for the device's

re-emergence in Jacobean tragedy.⁵⁹ In his study of theatrical representations of death in the context of Renaissance memory arts, William E. Engel suggests that these dumb shows' 'effect of emblematically collapsing time and space' renders them 'all the more memorable', since they are 'accorded a separate (and, as it were, impossible) space within which to transpire'.⁶⁰ Engel's likening of the scene's 'staging of double perspective' to 'a concealed closed-circuit television camera' in modern terms is adopted, but not acknowledged, in Zoltán Márkus's article on 'Violence in Jacobean Drama'. Márkus argues that the audience's shared viewing of the dumb shows gives rise to a temporary identification with Brachiano, broken only when he is turned 'from a fellow audience member into the object of their attention'. For Márkus, the dumb shows both enable and exemplify a larger theatrical and ideological focus of the play: '*The White Devil* is more interested in theatrical representations of its modes of dying than its modes of killing', betraying a greater fascination with the 'victims of revenge than the revengers'.⁶¹

Critics are divided, however, on the function of the dumb shows and the question of the audience's identification and/or complicity with Brachiano during this scene. Drawing on media theory, Katherine M. Carey argues that the dumb shows in *The White Devil* are instances of 'hypermediacy', allowing the audience to watch both murders occur while, at the same time, observing Brachiano's reactions: 'two frames within one theatrical frame'. The effect, according to Carey, is one of distancing and alienation: although the immediacy of the dumb shows 'evoke an even greater visual horror', their artificiality also serves as a 'very present reminder that the play is just a play'.⁶² For David Coleman, who approves Carey's analysis, this feature of the dumb shows demonstrates Webster's mastery of different theatrical techniques 'to effect audience engagement or detachment' as appropriate.⁶³ By contrast, David K. Anderson suggests that, rather than detachment, the dumb shows emphasize Brachiano's – and, therefore, also the audience's – 'complicit

spectatorship', thereby problematizing 'the ethical distance between the staged bloodshed and the customers who view it'.⁶⁴

The metatheatrical qualities of other deaths in the play give rise to similar questions about the slippages between fiction and reality. 'Death scenes' in Webster's tragedies, Roberta Barker argues, 'exposed the tenuous boundaries between character, actor and spectator in a society whose subjects were all performers'.⁶⁵ Barker quotes John Dryden as suggesting that short of *actually* dying on stage, the action of death is one that cannot be represented or 'imitated to a just height'. Barker suggests that Webster overtly acknowledges this theatrical impossibility in his depictions of death, but nonetheless 'raises the question of its potential in a world where unstable identities are grounded in ceaseless social change', while simultaneously underlining 'the familiar anti-theatrical trope that conflates acting with socially and spiritually destructive hypocrisy'.⁶⁶ Central to these arguments is Flamineo's 'double death' in the final scene (5.6), in which his feigned death at the hands of Vittoria to test her loyalty is followed by a 'real' death when Gasparo and Lodovico exact their revenge. Lisa Dickson has persuasively argued that this 'doubling of death scenes' is not only a 'confusion of the boundary between the real and the theater', but is also 'linked to the play's central epistemological crisis', namely, 'the instability of knowledge based on visible signs'.⁶⁷ It is not that the white devil is worse than the black, but rather that the two are indistinguishable. So, too, with 'mock death and real': the 'signs for both look the same' and 'Flamineo playing dead is indistinguishable from an actor playing a dead Flamineo'. As a result, Dickson suggests, 'Flamineo's status at the moment of his death – both of them – is tantalizingly unclear'.⁶⁸

Adaptation, source study and style

An interlude sketch in an episode of *The Young Ones*, first aired in 1984, depicts two Victorian prisoners conversing as they wait to board a prison ship:

FIRST PRISONER Transported for life in the colonies.
 And for what? Scum I was to that beak,
 Nothing but scum. 'Tis for my accent and
 My situation that I am condemned.
 'Tis for the want of better graces and
 The influence they bring that I am to
 Board this prison hulk.
 SECOND PRISONER And for all 'em murders you done.⁶⁹

When I first watched this exchange, I was struck by its similarity to the opening scene of *The White Devil*, in which Antonelli and Gasparo rehearse a litany of offences justifying Lodovico's banishment, culminating with 'certain murders here in Rome, / Bloody and full of horror' (1.1.31–2). Lodovico's dispassionate and dismissive response to this – 'they were flea-bitings' (32) – and the other charges betrays the same black humour at work: eloquent as they may be, both Lodovico and the first prisoner are seemingly oblivious to the full extent of their crimes. As Ceri Sullivan elsewhere remarks, this aspect of Webster's drama may explain the play's continued popularity with modern audiences 'versed in the filmmaker Quentin Tarantino's formal pleasures', namely, 'mordant wit, grotesque caricatures of the human body, and cheery good humor at (other people's) torture', conceived 'as revenge comedies, perhaps, more than revenge tragedies'.⁷⁰

Adaptation studies have gained significant critical ground in recent years. As might be expected, much of the fruits of this critical labour have attended to the multiple adaptations of Shakespeare's works across an equally staggering array of media formats, although so-called 'screen adaptations'

on film and television continue to dominate discussion.⁷¹ By contrast, adaptations of *The White Devil*, even at the fundamental level of allusion, have received scant critical attention. Scholars have identified allusions to *The White Devil* in the poetry of T. S. Eliot, Herman Melville and Allen Tate and also the prose of Margaret Drabble, Thomas Hardy and Virginia Woolf, among others.⁷² Beyond allusion-hunting, two articles exploring inter-textual, structural and thematic echoes of *The White Devil* in Amiri Baraka's 1964 political satire *Dutchman* and also in Anthony Trollope's 1861–2 serialized novel *Orley Farm*, signalled a brief twenty-first century spike in more detailed adaptation study of the play.⁷³

Perhaps the limited number of adaptation studies of *The White Devil* may simply reflect a paucity of materials to examine. This is certainly true in the case of film: although the script for Alex Cox's proposed 2006 screen adaptation of *The White Devil* is available and has occasioned some discussion,⁷⁴ a film of the play has yet to appear.⁷⁵ However, no detailed study of Nahum Tate's (apparently unperformed) theatrical adaptation of 1707, *Injured Love, or The Cruel Husband*, has appeared since Hazelton Spencer's primarily textual description of the play in 1934, and no account has yet been made of late twentieth- and twenty-first century adaptations and echoes.⁷⁶ For example, Justin Evans's 2011 novel *The White Devil* owes not only its title to Webster, but also elements of plot (including a vengeful ghost rehearsing lines for a school production of the play).⁷⁷ In an episode of the period drama series *Boardwalk Empire*, also first aired in 2011, the mob enforcer Jimmy Darmody (played by Michael Pitt) reminisces about his time at Princeton, with flashbacks to a classroom discussion about *The White Devil*.⁷⁸ With so little existing scholarship and an ever-expanding selection of derivative materials to consider, opportunities abound for adaptation studies of *The White Devil*.

Source study is another area that promises to offer fresh critical insights into a play that, according to James Shapiro, 'owes so much to Shakespeare' – and, we might add, other

authors – 'that it often hovers between plagiarism and parody'.⁷⁹ Critics have long recognized Webster's predilection for imitation: he has a 'tendency to recycle the same common-places frequently' and, at times, the dialogue of his plays simply devolves into an exchange of *sententiae*.⁸⁰ Generations ago, Gunnar Boklund and R. W. Dent published extensive studies of such 'borrowings' in *The White Devil* and Webster's other plays.⁸¹ In 1960, Dent remarked that 'more than three-fourths of Webster' could be traced to other sources, 'if only we had access to all the works he employed'.⁸² With the proliferation of large-scale full-text databases in the 1990s and 2000s, such as *Literature Online* and the *Early English Books Online Text Creation Partnership*, Dent's dream is much closer to becoming a reality than ever before. New theoretical models and computational methods for source study have also emerged, enabled by these digital resources and informed by critical turns in literary studies to book history and materialism.⁸³ Thus, only recently has a systematic study of sources, parallels, and other inter-textual echoes in *The White Devil* become a possibility, and with it, an opportunity to completely re-evaluate Webster's reading and writing practices.

By the same token, wider availability of machine-readable texts of Webster's works and those of his contemporaries, together with the development of increasingly sophisticated software tools for their analysis, provides twenty-first century scholars with the means to investigate elements of Webster's style – his lexical and grammatical habits, recurring images, and use of rhetorical devices – with greater precision than ever before. To date, scholarly efforts in this area have focused entirely on authorship attribution studies, such as MacDonald P. Jackson's thorough analysis to establish Webster's canon for the Cambridge *Works*, work that continues now that the editors have decided to include Webster's collaborative plays as an additional fourth volume.⁸⁴ While computational studies of Shakespeare's language beyond questions of authorship have begun to appear, similar analysis of Webster and *The White Devil* remains to be written.⁸⁵

Coda

Asked from where inspiration came for the song 'My White Devil', lyricist Ian McCulloch of British post-punk outfit Echo and the Bunnymen replied that, in desperation, he turned to his girlfriend's exercise book only to find a single page with writing on it:

It was about this bloke John Webster who I hadn't heard of – not being that great an English student – and the first line was 'John Webster was' and it all fitted like that!⁸⁶

Reviewers of the album were just as desperate to discern Webster's presence in the song, much to McCulloch's amusement: 'they imagined I was some great literary freak or something'.⁸⁷ The obtuse lyrics perhaps better reflect prejudicial accounts of Webster's writing than the writing itself. Henry Fitzgeffrey, for example, scorned Webster's laboured and slow composition in a satire of 1617, confident that any retort would 'be so obscure / That none shall understand'.⁸⁸ Even so, it is possible to strain glimpses of Webster between the wandering lines and distorted guitar noises. The chord progression in a major key is at odds with the dark psychedelia of the lyrics, a dissonance mirrored in the juxtaposition of grotesque imagery: love 'upside down' and 'monkey brains' laughing, for example. Although the lack of erudition and *sententiae* would certainly have irked him, this is not necessarily that far removed from Webster's art. The alternating lyrics of the chorus – 'change in the never' and 'chancing forever' becoming 'changing the never' and 'chance in forever' – are instances of the homophonic wordplay that Webster frequently revelled in.⁸⁹ Vittoria's reference to Monticelso's 'pistol' (3.2.211), a homophone for 'pizzle' (penis), provides a bawdy example.

Such artificial parallels aside, if McCulloch did not find inspiration in *The White Devil*, he, nonetheless, found in

'John Webster' a name to conjure with. Not to belabour an already overwrought reading, the shift in title between the play and the song, between 'the' and 'my' *White Devil*, oscillating from the abstract to the individual, neatly encapsulates how Webster's tragedy continually resists universal interpretation. If Shakespeare's works could be characterized as they are in the 1623 First Folio as 'not of an age, but for all time', Webster is the opposite. As the twenty-first century criticism surveyed in this chapter suggests, it is only ever 'the' or 'my' – and never 'our' – *White Devil*.