

THE WHITE DEVIL – CRITICAL COMMENTS / INTERPRETATIONS

it must be remembered that critical opinions, like the play itself, were formed, written and influenced by particular historical contexts.

RANDOM

John Ford – “so many of the minor characters...behave in unexpected and contradictory ways”

R.W.Dent – “we already know for certain that the extent of Webster’s borrowings was extraordinary even for the age in which he wrote”

Hereward Price – Webster “notoriously lifted his images from a large number of writers...but it is also true that he rarely borrows without improving on his source. His mind was a sieve through which only the essential elements passed”.

Kate Aughterson – “the dumb shows are the first direct visual intimation of the actual dark deeds which propel the play... their silent delivery reinforces...a world that is propelled by inner desire and demons which remain hidden by the surface world of courtiers and politics.”

Richard Cave – “the history of tragedies in performance is not a wholly satisfying one”

Charles Kingsley – “the whole story of Vittoria is one of sin and horror...the study of human nature is not Webster’s aim. He has to arouse terror and pity, not thought”. It is made up of the “fiercest and basest passions”

Addington Symonds – “the smallest and simplest thing is always turned sinister by Webster”

David Cecil – Webster’s version of the world is “a fallen place in which suffering outweigh happiness and all activities are tainted with sin; where evil is the controlling force, and good is inevitably quietest...it is also a place where the moral law cannot be thwarted indefinitely. So that finally evil destroys itself, justice is vindicated”

Dollimore – Webster’s plays are “always questioning and often subversive of orthodoxy”

T S Eliot – “Webster was much possessed by death”

MARGARET RANALD – “Webster is not afraid to portray women of power... who broadened the female horizons of the Jacobean era”

FEMINISM

Kate Aughterson – “Webster’s central characters are women”

Kathleen McLuskie – “Dramatised Misogyny, and its mirror image, the adulation of women, was (and is) undoubtedly part of the ideological process which sustained patriarchal power”

PLOT AND STRUCTURE

J.R.Brown – “we may say that the plot or structure of *The White Devil* is loose and rambling, a gothic aggregation rather than a steady exposition and development towards a single consummation”

Ralph Berry – the play’s structure is “essentially a pattern of evil-doers and of retribution”

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Travis Bogard – Webster deliberately blended “two almost incompatible genres, tragedy and satire”

Jacqueline Pearson – “the play is a tragedy which reaches its final statement through the language and forms of comedy and tragicomedy”

Kenneth Tynan – the play “had no message”

W A Edwards – he feels Webster doesn’t build imagery over a passage but rather employs 3 to 4 discrete images in a passage.

LANGUAGE

Ian Jack – “Webster’s...plays contain brilliant patches of poetry...but lack imaginative coherence”

Jacqueline Pearson – believed the man short saying in the play were “a source of pleasure to Webster’s first audiences and even today the sententia can obtain fine dramatic results”.

Ralph Berry - thinks the sententiae (short liners with moral maxims) signal a “lack of integration” and exist as “fragments of an older morality” and “entails an almost stylistic shift, from informal to formal”

Henry Fitzgeffery – complains of Webster’s clumsy and slow manner of writing

Abraham Wright – the “lines are too much rhyming” and it is “an indifferent play to read”

THEME OF LOVE AND DEATH

Charles Forker – “Webster seems to have been especially drawn to the motif, touching upon it both early and late and exploring its potentialities most profoundly in the three unaided plays that constitute his most finest and more distinctive achievement.”

T.S. Elliot – “Webster was much possessed by death”

VITTORIA

Charles Lamb found Vittoria’s performance in her trial to show her “innocence-resembling boldness”.

John Russell Brown – “her mood, or tone, is very different” in each of the scenes she appears in. “for an actress this presents a great difficulty, for this is no build-up of presentation; each of Vittoria’s scenes starts on a new note, with little or no preparation in earlier scenes”

Dena Goldberg – “she is the victim of a marriage arranged by her family in a futile effort to reverse the trend of economic decline initiated by a spendthrift father” “the marriage between this charming, knowledgeable, high-spirited woman and the silly, impotent Camillo has offended the natural order.”

Kate Augherson – her speeches “illustrate a strength and nobility of character which is actually enhanced by her own knowledge of her past wrong doing”. Her “lack of soliloquies is not a hindrance to characterization but illustrates how Webster constructs character through dramatic

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action". "one of the noticeable features of Webster's heroines is that they never address the audience directly". She "constructs herself indirectly as a martyr"

Waudby – "Vittoria's character epitomises contrariety and paradox throughout the play" her "character has been constructed by the assumptions and interpretations of the characters who surround her"

Alexander Leggatt - Vittoria becomes the white devil for she is a "combination of beauty and corruption"

LODOVICO

Alexander Leggatt – Lodovico is "an artist in murder".

GIOVANNI

Muriel Bradbrook – "for a minor part it is strongly highlighted"

CORNELIA

Jonathan Dollimore – Cornelia has "internalised her position as one of the exploited...by embracing the Christian ethic of humility and passive virtue" she "preaches to the Duke precisely the myth which ratifies his exploitation of subjects like her"

FLAMINEO

Dena Goldberg – "Flamineo...is blocked by a discrepancy between his aspirations and the means available for their fulfilment... Flamineo is caught between upper class expectations and the realities of the job market."

E M Forster – Flamineo is "perhaps the most interesting in the play"

Andrew Strycharski – "in violently protecting his sister's social standing, Flamineo simultaneously seeks to protect his own"

PLAY VERSIONS TAKEN PLACE:

1969 National Theatre, directed by Frank Dunlop – the play was in no fixed time period. It was a highly sexualised production, even the scenes with the cardinal and the murders of Vittoria and Flamineo. Vittoria's sexual assertiveness was also evident. In the trial scene Vittoria has a change in costume from a white gown to a scarlet red one

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1996 Royal Shakespeare Company at the Swan Theatre – this play showed similarities to the earliest Jacobean indoor playhouses and was close to some of the original staging directions. It stressed the themes of sexuality, lust and corruption

2008 Menier Chocolate Factory Theatre – the play was staged on a narrow stage (like a catwalk) which emphasised an intimate and voyeuristic atmosphere. They also decided to have the ghost of Isabella entwine herself with Vittoria and Brachiano during their marriage.

2010 Blue Elephant Theatre – it was shortened to 90 minutes and concentrated on the spectacular moments.