

## JOHN WEBSTER

- He studied law, but does not seem to have been successful at it as no career ensued.
- born close to 1578 in London, the son of a prominent coach-maker (also named John Webster)
- he published the white devil in 1612 though there have been three further editions published after (in 1631, 1665 and 1672)
- he wrote the play to offer a critique of contemporary society and to raise those universal issues connected with tragedy as a genre.
- Webster was no stranger to the extra-marital sex that appears in his works. His first child was born only two months after his marriage to Sara Peniall in 1606.

## SOURCES FOR THE WHITE DEVIL

- Webster kept a “commonplace book”, collecting materials which he later edited and sharpened to form the dialogue of his plays.
- As Webster constructs his dialogue from books and not necessarily from first hand observation of human behaviour, his interest is therefore less in how the action of the play is developed by the inner life of the characters but rather more on how the events and outcomes might combine to establish a tragic figure.
- Webster’s other play ‘the Duchess of Malfi’ is a kind of twin of the white devil. Both plays contain pictures of the corrupt courts of princes. The hints of sexual attraction between Flamineo and his sister develop into Ferdinand’s incestuous desire for the Duchess. Flamineo’s obsession with economic deficiency closely parallels that of Bosola.
- The play was set in Italy as it offered the opportunity to exploit examination of political corruption which would have been impossible, due to censorship, to be set in England. Italy was also linked with the writings of Machiavelli.
- The White Devil is based on real events that took place in Rome in the 1580’s. The beautiful Vittoria Accoramboni was the wife of Francesco Peretti (Camillo in the play). Bracciano admired her and he was married to Isabella. Isabella and Vittoria’s husbands were both murdered and the two lovers married shortly after. A scandal ensued and Vittoria was briefly imprisoned. Bracciano died of natural causes and Vittoria was murdered

## CONTEXT

- ❖ In 1603 Elizabeth I was succeeded by James I, thereby uniting for the first time the crowns of England and Scotland.
- ❖ There were some problems with James I’s reign, as demonstrated in the White Devil. He brought an aggressive approach and believed in the divine right of kings and the absolute

power of the monarch. The dangers of power are shown through Francisco and Monticelso (he wields the corrupt power of the Catholic Church)

- ❖ James strengthened his power by promoting favourites and this can link with the plight of the less privileged courtiers such as Flamineo and Lodovico as they fall out of favour.
- ❖ James was rumoured to have love affairs with male courtiers.
- ❖ James refused to allow divorcees to remarry. He also forbade violent revenge by banning private duelling because too many courtiers were being killed (though the social code of honour still supported the idea of a man taking revenge on behalf of a relative how could not defend themselves)
- ❖ Protestant Worship had only finally been secured for England on Elizabeth I's succession, just 53 years before the white devil was written and with James I coming in, Catholics felt more optimistic of tolerance while Protestants felt threatened.
- ❖ Protestants in the first audiences of the White Devil would have enjoyed the attack on Roman Catholic corruption as is evident in the words and deeds of Monticelso.
- ❖ The English Reformation, started by Henry VIII in the mid-sixteenth century and formalised under Elizabeth's reign, had severed all connections with the Catholic Church. Catholicism had become synonymous in Jacobean England with intrigue and corruption, underhand political deals and deceit.
- ❖ During the 1640's and 1650's the play could only be read out as public performances were banned during the English Revolution.
- ❖ In Webster's time London theatre was flourishing. The outdoor theatres could accommodate an audience of 3,000 and the audience's would have been a mixture of social backgrounds.
- ❖ When the white devil was first performed at the Red Bull, it was poorly received and this was written on Webster's preface where he blamed its initial failure on the weather, the theatre and the audience.
- ❖ Brachiano's pursuit of Vittoria in this context would have been immediately shocking to a Jacobean audience as a challenge to the status quo rather than merely a sexual dalliance as we may see it today.
- ❖ There were frequent outbreaks of plague, with regulations requiring the closure of theatres once reported deaths exceeded 50 in a week.