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"John Webster's first independent play, *The White Devil*, originally performed in 1612, centres on the beautiful Vittoria Corombona and her lover, Duke Brachiano, whose passionate, adulterous affair unleashes the powerful revenge of their enemies. While clearly guilty of lust and murder, these unsavoury characters become startlingly heroic under pressure, challenging both conventional moral judgements and oppressive social forces." This revised student edition contains a lengthy new introduction with background on the author, date and sources, theme, critical interpretation and stage history. The introduction discusses Webster's radical experimentation with tragic modes, his interest in the heroic potential of women, and evaluates the handling of both in recent stage productions.

## **The White Devil Details**

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## From Reader Review The White Devil for online ebook

### Sieran says

\*spoilers\*

I actually felt really sad when Flamineo died in the end.

Maybe Flamineo was just such a well developed character, or maybe because he's so eloquent and talks in such a perky way, that he actually is my favorite character despite being so evil.

Also, I never expected Flamineo to be the main character--the protagonist!--I thought Brachiano and Vittoria would be the mains! Also, in the *Dramatis Personnae*, Flamineo was somewhere down near the bottom of the list. Usually, the protagonist is somewhere near the top!

Anyway, I love Flamineo! He is definitely my favorite villain ever!!

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### Steph says

‘The White Devil,’ written in 1612, was in fact based on the sensational story of the murder of Vittoria Accoramboni in 1585 and the events that it depicts are indeed shocking even by the standards of modern sensibilities. It has just about everything you could desire for a modern scandal of the kind one would expect to appear splashed for weeks across the front page of any of today’s tabloids: infidelity, sex, prostitution, murder, political corruption, law trials, and, of course, revenge.

Essentially the story begins with Vittoria, who, coming from an impoverished family is seeking any means possibly to secure a rise in her wealth and status even at the cost of her (evidently rather lose) morals and (even more pliable) body. She sees this possibility in the shape of Duke Brachiano although there is a slight impediment to her plans in the shape of his wife, Isabella, and her own husband, the cumbersome Camillo. Naturally, she must secure an ally in order to affect her seduction of Brachiano and encourage him to help her to rid herself of her aging spouse and his own wife. Well, who else should she engage in her effective self-prostitution than her own utterly villainous brother, Flamineo, who is equally determined to see his family rise in stature? Naturally our villains cannot be allowed to get away with their heinous acts of slaughter. Thus following the death of Camillo, Vittoria is promptly arrested and despite a significant lack of evidence, she is tried and promptly imprisoned in a house for penitent whores.

Well now you may be thinking that I have revealed far too much of the plot for your liking and spoilt it all. Let me assure you this really is just the beginning! The play goes on to follow labyrinthine twists and turns as the villains battle for survival and the audience wait to see whether there is anyone we can truly trust or whom we wish to finally be saved.

Many may be thinking that this sensationalist, tabloid style play that includes a lengthy law scene may not appeal at all to a modern audience. However, what it reminded me of was Andrew Lloyd Webber’s ‘Stephen Ward,’ which I saw a week ago at the Aldwych Theatre. This was a fascinating and really engaging depiction of the Profumo affair of 1963 which dominated the headlines. The production itself and performances were utterly superb as the scenes shifted swiftly between depictions of the shady sexual

shenanigans of the politicians in this era and then juxtaposed these with the innocence of the girls Christine Keeler and Mandy Rice-Davis enjoying the simple pass times of a teenager in Ward's flat. Racy, pacy and thoroughly engaging, what productions like 'The White Devil' and 'Stephen Ward' reveal is the constant public fascination with figures in power as well as the continual connection between political corruption and sexual transgression.

[youtube=<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hL8zY8...>]

I would not say that 'Stephen Ward' is Webber's best musical – it is subtle and incredibly contemporary in both style and topic, but it lacks the usual Webber show stopping number and the ambiguity in the character portrayal (which was quite deliberate) made it difficult to sympathise with any one individual with perhaps the exception of Valerie Hobson, Profumo's long suffering and forgiving wife. In fact, the musical style itself felt more reminiscent of Gilbert and Sullivan in the discordant, undulating nature of many of the set pieces and the manner in which songs felt almost spoken at times. It reminded me a little of their 'Trial by Jury' for instance in the final scenes of court room drama. I don't think it will be a long lasting Webber hit in the manner of 'Phantom of the Opera' but it was certainly interesting, at time humorous and at times, deeply moving. I know this has been a significant digression from 'The White Devil' but nonetheless, I think it shows the continued connection between theatre and politics and the way in which drama can be used to satirise and expose as well as entertain.

[youtube=<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Nm0K4...>]

Like 'Stephen Ward,' 'The White Devil' is a brave and exciting play that really is one of those dramas that would be far better seen on stage than read as the plot is so complex and often hard to follow when simply read. Much of the drama is naturally lost in not actually witnessing the horror of what is being depicted and I can well imagine how compelling this would be to watch whether in the seventeenth or twenty-first centuries. There is something truly chilling about the characters many of whom seem to have virtually nothing about them that is redeeming. It reminded me a little of Goneril and Regan's confederates in 'King Lear' where, with the exception of Albany, the sisters and their compatriots seem to embody all that is evil and self-serving in the name of sexual satisfaction and power.

For me, this did not stand up to Shakespeare, with whom given the age in which the play was written, comparisons are perhaps inevitable. It lacks the subtly of characterisation or the psychological depth of his best creations in my view and as such (with perhaps the exception of Vittoria especially given her wonderful courtroom speech that seems to pre-empt feminism by several centuries), they become rather more like pantomime villains than truly as terrifying as the likes of Iago with his 'motiveless malignity' or Tamora and her vengeful hatred. Nonetheless, this is a truly fascinating play that is well worth reading and it is great shame that it is not staged more often (the last time I can find seems to be some 18 years ago by the RSC). So bring back 'The White Devil' back and let us see it in its full sensational glory please, I am sure it will appeal to public sensibilities just as much today as it did over 400 years ago.

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### **Esdaile says**

John Webster's language is extraordinary. In the peculiarly special field of grotesque melancholy and pessimism, he achieves a style which is not matched in Shakespeare or indeed by anyone, although Beddoes tried, years later. He did not seem much consoled by thoughts of an afterlife, death taking the form of journeys into a sinister and nebulous unknown country, although elsewhere he compares the soul in the body

to a lark in a cage. The most memorable quality of Webster is his language: highly characteristic, grotesque, abundant in metaphor and simile, florid, baroque. "Thy sins show like leprosy, the whiter the fouler". A resounding epithet for an impending death: "I have caught an eternal cold". "I'll stuff thy throat with winter plums" a superb-grotesque description of shooting someone to death. Webster is so grotesque he is funny and it surprises me that more people are not struck by his humour (in this he resembles Bosch, whose demons are surely intended to be comic figures). The plot is convoluted ("The Duchess of Malfi" does better in this respect) but it is the language that counts. Anyone deaf to the poetry of "The White Devil" would be hard put to perceive much merit in the play, for without its poetry it would read like an extravagant, exaggerated Gothic romp. Thanks to the language however, the play is, as someone else said here, a Renaissance gem.

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### **Tony says**

THE WHITE DEVIL. (1612). John Webster. \*\*.

I'm sure to get lots of flak for rating this play so low, but the intent was to show how difficult the play was to read and understand. I read it twice. Between the first and second time, I spent some time reading 'about' the play from various reference sources. Once having that knowledge under my belt, I could go back and tackle it again. It didn't get any easier to read, but at least I had an idea of its purpose. Webster (1575?-1634?) was a contemporary of Shakespeare, though his plays were, apparently, not as popular. This drama and "The Duchess of Malfi" are his two best recognized works. This work was based on a true event that happened in Padua in 1585, where a love triangle turned deadly, and resulted in the murder of a woman, Vittoria Accoramboni. According to the story, Vittoria was married to the nephew of Cardinal Motalto. She later met Paolo Orsini, the Duke of Bracciano. The Duke fell madly in love with her and arranged that her husband be killed so that he could marry her. When the Pope found out about the murder, he ordered the two lovers to part and sent Vittoria to prison in the Castel Sant'Angelo. When a new Pope came into power, the lovers used the confusion to marry and flee Rome. Later, after only a short time, the Duke died and left his fortune to Vittoria. The Medici family didn't want that to happen, so they arranged for Vittoria to be killed. This is a fairly straight-forward plot, but it is difficult to follow through the play's dialogs. What amazed me was the frequency with which this play is produced – even today – and its apparent popularity. It obviously plays better than it reads. I have to apologize to all those English Lit majors who have had to work over this play for only giving it such a low rating – but that's how I saw it.

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### **Emily Weatherburn says**

I spent a long time reading and studying this play, and with each second that I spent on it, I enjoyed it a little bit more. I say this because, when I first read this play through, I hated it. Then I read it again and I simply disliked it, and then I read it through slowly, analysing every page. It was only then that I really came to appreciate The White Devil for what it is: a work of art.

The story is a little odd, and it's not quite up to the standards of Webster's more popular play, The Duchess of Malfi, but the ideas behind it are incredible. There are so many intricate links between the character of this play, and so many societal inversions, such as the evil cardinal (a repeated trope from The Duchess of Malfi) and the titular white devil, whoever that may be.

It's a little hard to follow at first, but it's probably an easier read than some of Shakespeare's plays; unfortunately, plays are one of the few things that don't belong in a book-format. *The Duchess of Malfi* was made to be performed, so if you really want to experience this fantastic story, that's probably the route you should take.

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### **Camille ? says**

Why do universities only want to make us read and study very depressing and tragic stuff

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### **Kyc says**

Nearly 40 (!) speaking parts in this play, the lurid complexity of the plot (poisoning, strangulation, a ghost, political intrigue) makes even *Hamlet* seem tame. It reads like a very complicated modern thriller, and I have had to constantly flip to the character list at the start to tell the mostly Italianate cast apart. This is very much like *The Duchess of Malfi* - you can tell it was written by the same person, with the same obsession with violence, sex and forceful imagery. I'm intrigued - who could have staged this drama, back in 1612 (who were the Queen Anne's men)? I also have a sneaking feeling Webster wrote this as much for the stage as for reading. Jacobean drama has always been somewhat intimidating to me, in awe of their language (apt metaphors and fancy flights of imagination seemed so easy to come for the Jacobean).

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### **Emre says**

3.5

"Kurt, kurt gibi görünmez karn? aç olmad?kça." Sf:23

"Depremler hiç olmazsa arkalar?nda  
Ta??, demiri, kur?unu b?rak?rlar;  
Gözü dönmü? ?ehvet ise hiçbir ?ey b?rakmaz geriye." Sf:37

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### **Laura says**

*From BBC Radio 3 - Drama on 3:*

*First performed in 1612, John Webster's revenge play is here set in a 1950s underworld of shifting alliances and sudden violence.*

*Adapted and directed by Marc Beeby*

*The wealthy Brachiano conceives a violent passion for the married Vittoria Corombona. Her brother Flamineo, Brachiano's secretary, plots to bring his sister and his master together, in the hope of advancing his own career. Their plans are impeded by the return to Rome of Isabella - Brachiano's wife, and sister to the powerful Francisco. Desperate for Vittoria, Brachiano arranges to have both Isabella and Vittoria's husband murdered. And in so doing makes an implacable enemy of the deadly Francisco...*

*The play was first performed in 1612, but this production sets the action in a murky underworld of the 1950s - a world that seeks to hide its shifting alliances, betrayals and sudden violence beneath a veneer of honor and respectability.*

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### **Bettie? says**

Flamineo ..... Patrick Kennedy  
Vittoria ..... Anna Maxwell Martin  
Brachiano ..... Shaun Dingwall  
Francisco ..... Peter Wight  
Monticelso ..... Sean Baker  
Ludovico ..... Harry Myers  
Isabella ..... Christine Kavanagh  
Gasparo ..... David Seddon  
Camillo ..... Sam Dale  
Cornelia ..... Frances de la Tour  
Marcello ..... Michael Shelford  
Giovanni ..... Lloyd Thomas  
Hortensio ..... Tony Bell  
Zanche ..... Pippa Bennett Warner  
Dr Julio ..... Jude Akuwudike

Adapted and directed by Marc Beeby

**BBC Description:** *The wealthy Brachiano conceives a violent passion for the married Vittoria Corombona. Her brother Flamineo, Brachiano's secretary, plots to bring his sister and his master together, in the hope of advancing his own career. Their plans are impeded by the return to Rome of Isabella - Brachiano's wife, and sister to the powerful Francisco. Desperate for Vittoria, Brachiano arranges to have both Isabella and Vittoria's husband murdered. And in so doing makes an implacable enemy of the deadly Francisco...*

The play was first performed in 1612, but this production sets the action in a murky underworld of the 1950s - a world that seeks to hide its shifting alliances, betrayals and sudden violence beneath a flaky veneer of honour and Broadcast on:

BBC Radio 3, 8:45pm Sunday 15th August 2010

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### **Jack says**

3/5

I read this for English Literature, and it was quite a nice change.

1. The characters of Flamineo (a really intriguing villain!), Brachiano and Vittoria were probably the most interesting - they were characterised in very precise ways through their speech. I feel like analysing these characters and their motives is going to be quite interesting.
2. The actual plot is really complex and fascinating - though I found it quite complicated to get my head

around at first (so I had to use some study guides/summaries), after reading it's a great one to think about, particularly with the themes, which I'm interested to study in more detail.

3. The language is hard - luckily with my edition there were some footnotes which explained some of the really obscure language, but I still had to look up some other stuff. So it took me a while to read and it was something I had to think about in more depth than usual - definitely not the kind of book I'd recommend to read for pleasure unless you like constantly searching for stuff. It's not a 'sit back and relax' kind of book, but I suppose the language used makes it good for analysis when I have to write about it in my exam...

4. Gothic! (Which is what my exam will be about...) Such an exciting genre, with themes and motifs of murder, mystery, lust, deceit, evil, devils etc.

5. Overall I think a 3/5 is a fair rating to give this book because the characterisation is great, the plot is really interesting and I think I'll enjoy looking at things in more detail when I start analysing. However, as a read outside of studying it didn't really have a huge level of enjoyment and I wouldn't necessarily recommend it to everyone because of that.

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### **Amira says**

Dear Webster, I truly hate you. And, I thought *The Duchess of Malfi* is one of the worst plays I have ever read. But man I was wrong.

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### **Rob says**

A tragedy full of terrible people calling each other cucks. Those Jacobean had some imagination!

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### **Bill Kerwin says**

T.S. Eliot aptly said that Webster was "a very great literary and dramatic genius directed toward chaos." I love this play almost as much as I love *The Duchess of Malfi*, but I find both of them difficult to write about. Each scene sings with poetic power and pulses with dramatic effect, but what themes organize this errant music, what lies at the center of this tumult of rhythmic discord?

I don't mean to say that the plays are without structure. Take *The White Devil*, for example. It is about the adulterous love between Vittoria and Duke Brachiano, and the first half--up to the magnificent trial scene (III.i)--presents the events leading to the murder of Vittoria's husband, and the last half explores the consequences of the murder of Brachiano's wife. After that, though, everything becomes cloudy and nebulous.

Whenever a Webster character makes a fine speech, we are never sure if she is truthful or lying. Filled with flashing poetry or vicious witticisms, the speech is the center of everything, speech is what enchants and compels. Is Vittoria's brother Flamineo a cold-blooded assassin, a posturing lunatic, or just a deeply disappointed man? Is Vittoria herself a heartless murderer, a complicit adulterer, or merely a woman swayed by love and circumstance? We cannot be sure, yet somehow Webster leads us to place our faith in the language itself: its passion, its metaphorical richness, its magnificent gestures. And this limited commitment of ours gives us one small thing to believe in, even now while we--like Webster's characters--are awash in

chaos, affirming our unfathomable selves, avoiding our unknowable fates.

Here follow three examples of Webster's art.

Monticelso, Vittoria's prosecutor, discourses on the word "whore":

*I 'll give their perfect character. They are first,  
Sweetmeats which rot the eater; in man's nostrils  
Poison'd perfumes. They are cozening alchemy;  
Shipwrecks in calmest weather. What are whores!  
Cold Russian winters, that appear so barren,  
As if that nature had forgot the spring.  
They are the true material fire of hell:  
Worse than those tributes i' th' Low Countries paid,  
Exactions upon meat, drink, garments, sleep,  
Ay, even on man's perdition, his sin.  
They are those brittle evidences of law,  
Which forfeit all a wretched man's estate  
For leaving out one syllable. What are whores!  
They are those flattering bells have all one tune,  
At weddings, and at funerals. Your rich whores  
Are only treasures by extortion fill'd,  
And emptied by curs'd riot. 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. What's a whore!  
She 's like the guilty counterfeited coin,  
Which, whosoe'er first stamps it, brings in trouble  
All that receive it.*

Vittoria defends herself:

*...all your strict-combined heads,  
Which strike against this mine of diamonds,  
Shall prove but glassen hammers: they shall break.  
These are but feigned shadows of my evils.  
Terrify babes, my lord, with painted devils,  
I am past such needless palsy. For your names  
Of 'whore' and 'murderess', they proceed from you,  
As if a man should spit against the wind,  
The filth returns in 's face...  
Condemn you me for that the duke did love me?  
So may you blame some fair and crystal river,  
For that some melancholic distracted man  
Hath drown'd himself in 't...  
Sum up my faults, I pray, and you shall find,  
That beauty and gay clothes, a merry heart,  
And a good stomach to feast, are all,*

*All the poor crimes that you can charge me with.  
In faith, my lord, you might go pistol flies,  
The sport would be more noble.*

Flamineo--ducal secretary, pander, and murderer--faces death:

*I do not look  
Who went before, nor who shall follow me;  
No, at my self I will begin the end.  
While we look up to heaven, we confound  
Knowledge with knowledge. Oh, I am in a mist!...  
I recover like a spent taper, for a flash,  
And instantly go out...  
'Tis well yet there 's some goodness in my death;  
My life was a black charnel. I have caught  
An everlasting cold; I have lost my voice  
Most irrecoverably. Farewell, glorious villains.  
This busy trade of life appears most vain,  
Since rest breeds rest, where all seek pain by pain.  
Let no harsh flattering bells resound my knell;  
Strike, thunder, and strike loud, to my farewell!*

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**Ana Rînceanu says**

Lord, this was macabre!

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