

Session Respondent: Dympna Callaghan, Syracuse University

“‘Shall I expound whore to you?’: the ‘Venetian courtesan’ and *The White Devil*”

Sally Barnden  
King's College London

On the title pages of both early quartos of John Webster's *The White Devil*, Vittoria Corombona (based on the historical Vittoria Accoramboni) is described as ‘the famous Venetian Curtizan.’ The description is surprising given what we know of both the historical woman and the dramatic character. Accoramboni was born in Urbino; Webster's character was ‘born in Venice, honourably descended,/ From the Vitelli,’ according to the Cardinal, but is not a courtesan in any literal sense. Brian Gibbons' note on the subtitle suggests that English readers were acquainted with the Venetian courtesan as an exotic stereotype featured in Coryat's *Crudities*, published in 1611. ‘Famous Venetian Curtizan’ makes sense as a title page descriptor: it promises sex and scandal in a long title otherwise concerned with the historical roots of Webster's play. To the extent that it is a synonym for ‘whore,’ this description of Vittoria echoes through the play as a slur. I am interested in the places where the figure of the courtesan in Coryat diverges from the all-purpose term of misogynist abuse - the courtesan as economic force and as expert rhetorician – and therefore the potential for Vittoria to be read productively as a surrogate for the ‘Venetian courtesan.’

Confinement and Movement in John Webster's *The White Devil*

Darlene Farabee  
University of South Dakota

In the opening line of John Webster's *The White Devil*, Ludovico exclaims, “Banished?” and sets the stage for a twisting, confining narrative, filled with characters constantly attempting and failing to control their own circumstances and locations. There are travelling characters, confined characters, and banished characters; amongst these are characters, especially Flamineo, who rely heavily on the language of travel, inflecting our readings of all the experiences in this claustrophobic play. As the characters become more enmeshed in the various plots and machinations, the entire play becomes suffused with the language of openings and closings, covering and uncovering, and finally extends beyond these binaries to attempt portrayals—or at least descriptions—of disintegration and dispersion. Characters involve themselves in the language of confinement at multiple levels. For example, when Antonelli assures Lodovico that, “We shall find time I doubt not to repeal / Your banishment” (1.1.58-9), Lodovico responds “I am ever bound to you” (1.1.59). His use of “bound” emphasizes the constricting nature of his circumstances, and he clearly refers to the binding ties of his indebtedness. But the word is also a directional marker, as Lodovico moves closer to Antonelli in this moment. At the level of the verse, another layer of contraction occurs as Lodovico finishes the line begun by Antonelli. Tracing the closely intertwined concerns of motion and constriction and the use of travel

**2019 Seminar Abstracts: Webster's *The White Devil*: New Directions**  
**Lara Bovilsky, University of Oregon**

language illuminates some of the ways Webster constructs this play that, like its characters, “entanglest thyself in thine own work like a silkworm” (1.2.78).

**“Directing the Devil:  
 Staging Challenges in John Webster's *The White Devil*”**

**David Gram**  
**Oakland University**

An initial question when approaching a new directing project is: “Why this play now?” Whether the play was written yesterday or 406 years ago (in the case of *The White Devil*), the goals are to ascertain how this play will engage a contemporary audience and then determine the most evocative and effective way to lift words and ideas off the page. This paper examines the challenges a 21<sup>st</sup> century director faces when mounting a production of *The White Devil*. In context, the paper references more recent and pivotal performances of the play and how those artistic teams met the tests of the text. Additionally, input from a projected interview with artists from Red Bull Theater's March/April 2019 production is intended for inclusion. *The White Devil* asks its director to navigate numerous textual, performance and production challenges. These include a complex plot, tonal shifts, dense heightened speech, taboo topics, unsavory characters, dumb shows, apparitions and the requisite revenge tragedy blood bath. Yet, those demands are exciting for a director and offer ample opportunities for designers and actors. This essay will explore the script's directorial demands and potential approaches in bringing *The White Devil* to a contemporary audience.

**“Blackness and Blackface in *The White Devil*”**

**John Kunat**  
**Sonoma State University**

This paper will examine how blackface is employed in a secondary, metatheatrical fashion in John Webster's *The White Devil*. Blackface had previously been utilized on the English stage to demonstrate the enticing quality of African men. In Shakespeare, Desdemona and Tamora are famously drawn to black lovers, as is Eugenia in *Lust's Dominion*, an attraction that ultimately leads all three women to their death. Webster inverts the racial dynamic inherent in these earlier couplings by having Zanche the Moor lust after the Duke of Florence when he appears in blackface as Mulinassar. Unlike Othello, Aaron and Eleazer, Mulinassar is not really a Moor but instead a white man self-consciously assuming the identity of an African. As such, he elicits the desire not of a white woman—as had been the case with Desdemona, Tamora and Eugenia—but of an African woman. The disguise, in other words, allows desire to remain interracial, even though one of the lovers is unaware of “difference” as the source of her attraction. As is the case with others drawn to the Stage Moor, Zanche's desire leads to her death, warning the audience about the perils of crossing racial lines, while also displaying its erotic inevitability.

**2019 Seminar Abstracts: Webster's *The White Devil*: New Directions**  
**Lara Bovilsky, University of Oregon**

**“Law, Legibility and the paradox of dramatic character in Webster's *The White Devil*”**

**Subha Mukherji**  
**University of Cambridge**

Law and the literary imagination in early modern England had shared stakes in the relation between face and intent, surface and significance, truth and semblance, nature and artifice. This paper will examine the paradox of 'character' in Webster's legally inflected drama in *The White Devil* as a symptom and expression of the larger paradoxes of the relation between law and the theatre, especially with regard to legibility and knowability. It will proceed to reflect on how the gaps and dualities of these relations are used by literary, especially dramatic, practice to conceptualise the dynamics between literary and legal epistemologies.

**“Female Agency and Male Sexuality in *The Duchess of Malfi*”**

**W. Reginald Rampone, Jr.**  
**South Carolina State University**

*The Duchess of Malfi* is a most peculiar text that one of its characters is a member of royalty who is enamored of her steward, Antonio Bologna. Throughout the play the duchess is very much in control of the relationship with Antonio. Moreover, she is a widow whose brother Ferdinand does not wish her to remarry. In many ways this play has deeply transgressive and subversive qualities because of not only the duchess's desires but also because of her brother Ferdinand's unstated, perhaps even unconscious ones. Antonio is envisioned as this handsome young man whom any woman would very wish to marry especially if he were of the proper social station. To be sure, the class differential between the duchess and Antonio is profoundly troubling to the duchess's brother, Ferdinand and the unnamed cardinal, who struggles to keep Ferdinand's irascible behavior in check. At the same time Ferdinand demonstrates a distinct fixation on male sexuality. He has a voyeuristic quality about him that desires to imagine an especially masculine and muscular man engaging his sister in sexual relations. In fact, he has an Iago-like quality about him in that he feels compelled to conjure up imaginings of a distinctive homoerotic nature. One is *almost* tempted to suggest that Ferdinand doesn't want his sister to have Antonio because he would like to have him. This paper seeks to investigate Ferdinand's fixation on male sexuality as well as the duchess's own sexuality as a means of giving voice to her own erotic feelings for Antonio.

**“‘More courteous, more lecherous by far’:  
 Dissolution and Subjectivity in *The White Devil*”**

**Gabriel Rieger**  
**Concord University**

In 1.2 of *The White Devil*, Flamineo responds to his mother's query “because we are poor, / Shall we be vicious?” with a lengthy monologue detailing his family history, rooted in the decadent material conditions of the Jacobean aristocracy. Flamineo recounts how his father “proved

**2019 Seminar Abstracts: Webster's *The White Devil*: New Directions**  
**Lara Bovilsky, University of Oregon**

himself a gentleman / Sold all's land, and like a fortunate fellow / Died ere the money was spent." (1.2.317-319) He goes on to construct a narrative of simultaneous dissolution and evolution, such that he emerges from the court "more courteous, more lecherous by far." (1.2.326) This essay will examine Flamineo's construction of his own subjectivity, specifically the ways in which he fashions a self out of his own degradation, and even his subjective dissolution. I intend to posit a subjective construction between Greenblatt's notion of "self-fashioning" and Cynthia Marshall's "shattering of the self" in order to interrogate current understandings of early modern self-hood. In addition to Greenblatt and Marshall, my study will likely draw upon the writings of Jonathan Dollimore and Kaja Silverman, as well as more recent scholarship.

**“Shall's fall a-dreaming?": Framing Revenge in Webster's *White Devil*"**

**Kayla Shearer**  
**University of Texas, Austin**

Vittoria and Bracciano prove themselves fluent in the long history of dream vision poetry when they discuss her dream at the beginning of their tryst. She uses the forms of the medieval philosophic and love vision traditions to relay her tale, and he responds in kind in his interpretation. However, the medieval tropes that mask the couples' flirting are re-interpreted by Flamineo, who sees the dream as a kind of witchcraft; with the devil in her dreams, he asserts, Vittoria "hath taught [Bracciano] in a dream/to make away his duchess and her husband" (1.2.246-7). In this scene and elsewhere, the play counterposes the dream vision's traditional modes of authority, engagement with poetic philosophy, and use of supernatural intervention with new ideas from proto-scientific research into the nature of the supernatural and demonology. Although by the time Webster was writing the dream vision genre had experienced a marked decline in popularity, *The White Devil* positions the dream vision in dialogue with early modern occult philosophy. As vision or witchcraft, the dreams in the play construct a form of medievalism that challenges both medieval literary traditions and early modern lines of inquiry.

**“Come sister, darkness hides your blush’:  
 Sibling Dynamics and Proprietary Rights in *The White Devil*"**

**Emma Whipday**  
**University College, London**

Early modern familial relationships were politically significant: conduct literature and legal treatises championed the hierarchical household as a microcosm of the state and the bedrock of society. Social order depended upon the subjugation of women within vertically-organised household relationships with fathers or husbands; horizontal brother-sister relationships challenged this ideal. Siblings were barely mentioned in the conduct literature, but their anomalous status gave rise to obsessive representation on the early modern stage.

*The White Devil* features doubled brother-sister relationships: the queasy familiarity of the relationship between Flamineo and Vittoria ends in a closely averted sibling murder; while an

**2019 Seminar Abstracts: Webster's *The White Devil*: New Directions**  
**Lara Bovilsky, University of Oregon**

alternative is offered by Francisco, who cares for his sister's honour, and eventually avenges her. Yet both brothers, in their different ways, claim proprietary rights to the bodies of their sisters, in the realms of marriage, sexuality, procreation, and death.

Tracing sibling dynamics in popular conduct literature, in surviving letters between elite siblings, and on the early modern stage, this paper will explore how *The White Devil* participates in a wider cultural conversation about the tensions between familial authority and female agency. I will argue that here, as in *The Duchess of Malfi*, Webster interrogates the tragic potential of brotherly authority and sisterly submission.