The White Devil

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JOHN WEBSTER

Other than the fact that he was born and raised in London, very little is known of John Webster's life. His father was a carriagemaker and his mother was a blacksmith's daughter; Webster himself probably made carriages, though records show that he also dabbled both in acting and in legal studies. In 1605, Webster married the 17-year-old Sara Peniall (who was seven months pregnant at the time), and they had several children together. In addition to *The White Devil*, Webster wrote a host of poems and seven other plays, the most famous of which is the 1613 tragedy *The Duchess of Malfi* (which, like *The White Devil*, is set in Italy). Webster also frequently collaborated with other playwrights of the era, writing a few different history and comedy plays, though many of these were never produced. *The White Devil* was booed upon its 1612 premiere, but fortunately for Webster, his reputation was redeemed a year later when *The Duchess of Malfi* proved to be a huge hit.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Stylistically, the violence in this piece reflects a larger trend in English playwriting. In the aftermath of the 1606 Gunpowder Plot—in which a disgruntled young man tried and failed to blow up King James I and Parliament—Jacobean drama became darker and more murderous than it had been just decades earlier. In terms of plot, *The White Devil* is based on an actual historical scandal: there was a real woman named Vittoria Accoramboni, and she really did marry the soon-to-be-Pope's nephew. When Vittoria's younger brother Marcello began working for the Duke of Bracciano (who years earlier had murdered his wife Isabella), Marcello and Vittoria saw another chance to advance their family's standing. Marcello and Bracciano then had Vittoria's first husband murdered, and they all fled to Padua, where Vittoria and Bracciano were married. Soon after, Vittoria was stabbed to death by a man named Ludovico Orsini, a relative of Bracciano's who nursed a deep hatred for Vittoria.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Webster was writing in the heart of the Jacobean period, which spans from roughly 1603 to 1625. William Shakespeare is perhaps the most well-known playwright of this time (though he began writing well before, in the Elizabethan era), but in fact Webster had a number of important contemporaries. Webster's closest collaborator was Thomas Dekker, with whom he wrote the 1603 satiric play *Westward Ho*—a work so impactful that it inspired renowned writer Ben Jonson to respond with his own piece *Eastward Ho*. But while Webster dabbled in comedy (and worked at the Red Bull Theater, known for Dekker's lighter touch), *The White Devil* is more in line with the era's bloodier plays. These include the 1622 play *The Changeling* and much of Shakespeare's darker works, like *Othello* (1603) and *Macbeth* (1606). Like *Macbeth*, *The White Devil* is considered "a tragedy of action," meaning that more of the drama comes from plot points than from individual suffering.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The White Divel; or, the Tragedy of Paulo Giordano Ursini, Duke of Brachiano. With the Life and Death of Vittoria Corombona the famous Venetian Curtizan
- **When Written:** 1611–1612
- **Where Written:** London, England
- **When Published:** 1612
- **Literary Period:** English Renaissance (Jacobean)
- **Genre:** Drama
- **Setting:** Courts and courthouses in Rome and Padua
- **Climax:** In disguise and acting on behalf of Duke Francisco, Count Lodovico poisons Brachiano's helmet. Brachiano then collapses in the middle of a staged fight.
- **Antagonist:** Everyone is a villain.

EXTRA CREDIT

Poison Galore. Poison plays a big role in this particular play, and that's because death-by-poisoning was in fact a Webster trademark. In other works, Webster had his characters poison books and tennis rackets in addition to pictures and helmets. And indeed, Webster's love of violence is so essential to his persona that when he makes a brief appearance in the 1998 film *Shakespeare in Love*, his only action is to torture mice.

A Red Bull Redux. Nearly four centuries after Webster's play premiered at the Red Bull Theatre in London, a group of New York City theater artists founded their own Red Bull Theater, dedicated to producing new versions of beloved classics. In 2019, the New York City Red Bull did its own gory production of *The White Devil*, allowing Webster's play to come full circle.

PLOT SUMMARY

Count Lodovico is devasted to have been banished from

Rome—though he admits that he committed crimes (including murder) to warrant this punishment. Antonelli and Gasparo, Lodovico's friends, promise Lodovico that they will get the banishment commuted as soon as they can.

Back in Rome, the Duke of Brachiano is desperate to get out of his marriage to Isabella and to get into bed with the beautiful Vittoria, who's married to Camillo. With the help of Vittoria's brother Flamineo, Brachiano plots to get rid of Camillo. Vittoria's maid Zanche and Cornelia, Vittoria and Flamineo's mother, overhears the conversation. Horrified, she interrupts, scolding her children for bringing shame upon their family. But Flamineo counters that he has no other choice: he was born without money, and the only way to get rich is to do the bidding of a wealthy man like Brachiano, no matter how immoral that bidding might be.

Meanwhile, Isabella returns to Rome after traveling. She discusses her marriage with her brother, the Duke Francisco of Medici, and with a cardinal named Monticelso. Francisco has heard about Brachiano's romance with Vittoria, and he is angry that Brachiano is treating his sister so carelessly. Francisco and Brachiano meet, and Francisco threatens to go to war to protect Isabella. Before violence breaks out, however, the two men are interrupted by Brachiano's winning young son Giovanni. Because of Giovanni's charm, Brachiano and Francisco (temporarily) agree to a truce.

Brachiano tells Isabella that he wants to end their marriage. Ever devoted, Isabella decides to protect Brachiano from Francisco's wrath by pretending that she is the one who has asked for a divorce.

Meanwhile, Camillo learns that someone has thrown **horns** through his window, a sure sign that the villagers now view him as a cuckold (a man who has been cheated on by his wife). Monticelso convinces Camillo to go away for a while, with the hopes that time apart will increase Vittoria's desire for her husband. Once Camillo leaves, though, Monticelso and Francisco reveal their true plan: with Camillo out of the way, Brachiano will act on his lust, and they then will be able to catch him in the act.

That night at midnight, Brachiano meets with a conjurer who helps him plan the murders of both Camillo and Isabella. To kill Isabella, the conjurer will have his assistants **poison** the picture of Brachiano she always kisses before bed; as soon as Isabella's lips touch the poisoned picture, she will die. To kill Camillo, Flamineo will arrange to go to a horse-vaulting contest with his brother-in-law—Flamineo will break Camillo's neck, making it look like an accident that the horse caused. Brachiano approves of these plans. The conjurer also tells Brachiano that Lodovico is secretly in love with Isabella and that he will be determined to avenge her death.

A few days later, both Isabella and Camillo are dead and everyone is panicking about Camillo's death. Francisco and Monticelso suspect Vittoria is at fault, but they have only circumstantial evidence tying her to the crime. However, Marcello—Vittoria and Flamineo's other brother—knows that Flamineo is guilty, and he chastises his brother for committing such a heinous crime.

Francisco takes Vittoria to court, where a pretentious lawyer questions her. When Vittoria refuses to answer the lawyer's convoluted questions, Francisco and Monticelso take over, calling her a "whore." Monticelso shows the court a scandalous letter Brachiano has written to Vittoria—but Vittoria points out that a letter doesn't prove she slept with Brachiano. Still, the jury—made up largely of ambassadors from other European countries—sides with Francisco, and Vittoria is sentenced to a house of convertites (a house for "penitent whores").

Using a secret list of criminals that Monticelso has compiled, Francisco comes up with a plan: he will hire Lodovico, a known murderer, to assassinate Brachiano. Before he does that, however, he hopes to turn Brachiano against Vittoria by writing a fake love letter to her. When Brachiano sees the letter, he is initially furious at Vittoria, but she defends her honor and the two gradually make up. Moreover, Brachiano—gaining inspiration from ideas written in Francisco's letter—decides to escape with Vittoria to Padua, where they can get married in peace. Flamineo vows to follow them, reflecting that "knaves do grow great by being great men's apes."

The Pope dies, throwing all of Rome into confusion. Vittoria and Brachiano seize this moment to quietly make their exit, and Monticelso is named the new Pope. When he learns that Brachiano and Vittoria have escaped, he orders them excommunicated. Later that day, Lodovico tells Monticelso that he and Francisco are plotting to assassinate Brachiano—and though Monticelso pretends to be horrified, Lodovico learns from Francisco that the new Pope is actually helping to fund the plan.

In Padua, the tension between Flamineo and Marcello escalates, and Flamineo kills Marcello. Grief-stricken, Cornelia tries to stab Flamineo—but she cannot bring herself to do it. Instead, she descends into madness, and Flamineo starts to feel real guilt.

Brachiano is visited by a handsome Moor named Mulinassar—who is secretly Francisco in disguise. Lodovico and Gasparo have also come to Padua, dressed as capuchin monks. Lodovico quietly poisons the front part of Brachiano's helmet (the beaver), and as soon as Brachiano puts on the helmet he collapses. Before Brachiano takes his final breath, Vittoria learns that he has left his entire fortune to her. Young Giovanni immediately takes his father's place as duke, and Flamineo notes that the young man has already become "villainous" like the other powerful men.

Fearing that he'll be found out, Flamineo tries to convince Vittoria and Zanche that they should join him in a triple suicide

to avoid being tortured or killed. Privately, Zanche and Vittoria conspire to ensure that only Flamineo dies—they will persuade him to shoot himself first, and then they will escape from Padua with Brachiano's money. Flamineo shoots himself, and Vittoria and Zanche rejoice. But Flamineo reveals that he was merely testing them, and that the gun he used was fake.

In the play's final moments, Lodovico and Gasparo come to execute Vittoria, Flamineo, and Zanche. Flamineo is overcome with sadness and regret, while Vittoria and Zanche stay bold in the face of death. Giovanni, now a duke himself, surveys the bloody scene and plans harsh punishments for all involved.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Flamineo – Flamineo is Cornelia's son, Vittoria and Marcello's brother, and Brachiano's aide. Having grown up in a family that's not particularly wealthy, Flamineo is determined to increase his social standing, whatever the cost. To accomplish this goal, Flamineo attaches himself to the obscenely rich Brachiano, becoming his henchman; at one point, Brachiano dispatches Flamineo to murder his brother-in-law Camillo, while at another moment, Brachiano forces Flamineo to accuse his own sister of being a "whore." Because of this willingness to commit even the vilest acts, Flamineo becomes an object of shame for Cornelia and for the younger Marcello. Indeed, by the end of the play, Flamineo's relationships with all of his family members have collapsed: he kills Marcello in a fit of rage, causes Cornelia unspeakable grief, and finds himself betrayed by Vittoria and her maid Zanche (his former lover). Though he is not one of the titular characters, Flamineo is arguably the character who learns the most over the course of *The White Devil*. After observing firsthand the pain he has caused his mother, and after seeing the corrupting effects on money and power on people like Brachiano and his young son Giovanni, Flamineo is able to reflect and express regret for his own behavior ("I have lost my voice irrecoverably," he laments). Flamineo thus demonstrates the corrupting influence of money and the human capacity for change and repentance—when such change comes from within.

Vittoria – Vittoria, identified in the play's title as being based on "Vittoria Corombona the famous Ventian Curtizan," is Camillo's wife and Brachiano's adulterous lover. She is probably also the titular "white devil": she insists she's innocent—her "white" exterior—while inside she is a "devil," plotting to elope with Brachiano and to bring about her brother Flamineo's ruin. Most fascinatingly, Vittoria is the vertex for the play's complex gender politics. Once her affair is discovered, Francisco and Monticelso take Vittoria to court, chastising her for being a "whore" and sentencing her to a house of convertites—while Brachiano suffers no legal consequences for the same behavior. On the one hand, Vittoria point out the hypocrisy of this situation: "you read [Brachiano's] hot love to me," Vittoria complains, "and expect my frosty answer." But on the other hand, by the end of *The White Devil*, Vittoria shows herself to be just as inconstant and treacherous as she is accused of being, as even Webster ultimately frames her as a "curitzan" (a courtesan, or a sex worker). Adding even one more layer, Vittoria also represents the intersection of gender and class inequities: one of the reasons Monticelso labels her a "strumpet" is because her mother Cornelia could not afford to provide Vittoria with a dowry. Vittoria's characterization is thus very contradictory. She is simultaneously sympathetic and villainous, dignified and dishonorable.

Brachiano – Brachiano, whose full name is Paulo Giordano Orsini, is married to Isabella—but unfortunately for everyone involved, Brachiano is in love not with his wife but with the beautiful Vittoria. In pursuit of Vittoria, Brachiano orders both Isabella and Vittoria's husband Camillo murdered, a goal he accomplishes with the help of Flamineo and a nefarious conjurer. Brachiano then escapes with his new lover to Padua, where they are safe from the wrath of rival duke Francisco. Eventually, however, Brachiano's crimes catch up to him, when he is **poisoned** by Lodovico. When Brachiano dies, his son Giovanni succeeds him—but Brachiano's failure to provide a good example of leadership for his son means that this cycle of corruption will continue. Brachiano's ability to maintain his leadership position illuminates some of the double standards in Italian Renaissance society: whereas Vittoria is publicly humiliated and punished for her lust, Brachiano escapes any sort of legal or public scrutiny. Similarly, while lower-class men like Flamineo and Marcello must get involved in the details of Brachiano's various murderous schemes, Brachiano is wealthy enough to distance himself from the nitty-gritty of these crimes. Brachiano's journey through the play thus demonstrates the privilege of being both male and wealthy in this time and place—until the very end, when all his misdeeds catch up to him.

Francisco/Mulinassar – Francisco de Medici is the duke of Tuscany and one of the most powerful men in all of Italy. As a member of the real-life Medici family, Francisco had connections to many European leaders, from the heart of Italy to Vienna, Austria. In the play, Francisco is shown to be a loyal family member to his sister Isabella: when her husband Brachiano cheats on her with Vittoria, Francisco puts Vittoria on trial and has Brachiano killed by the hired assassin Lodovico. To observe his plans in action, Francisco also appears at Brachiano's court disguised as Mulinassar, a militaristic Moor. His murderous and manipulative ways suggest that Francisco is a Machiavellian leader, gaining power through deception and fear instead of through inspiration and love. Notably, Francisco is more aware of class differences than his counterparts—but while he reflects on the inequity of the justice system, he does

nothing to actually alter it.

Monticelso – Monticelso is an ally of Francisco's and a prominent cardinal in the Roman church—until, midway through *The White Devil*, he is made the Pope. This high religious standing would make it appear that Monticelso is capable of rising above (or even putting a stop to) the conflict and intrigue around him. But while Monticelso outwardly touts his purity, he is just as involved in scandals as everyone else; he grows obsessed with the titillating details of Vittoria's sex life, and despite protesting Francisco's plans to murder Brachiano, he secretly helps to fund them. Perhaps more than any other character, then, Monticelso represents the idea that there is "**poison** under [...] gilded pills"—that the people who make outward shows of goodness and righteousness are in fact the most manipulative underneath.

Lodovico – Count Lodovico begins the play as a murderer and drunkard in exile; he has been kicked out of Rome after participating in one too many scandals. But at the urging of his friends Antonelli and Gasparo, Lodovico uses his banishment to look inwards, and when he is eventually allowed to return to Rome, he does so as a (slightly) more principled man. Those principles do not stop him, however, from acting as Francisco's hitman—motivated both by money and by a secret love for Brachiano's wife Isabella, Lodovico agrees to disguise himself as a Capuchin monk and **poison** Brachiano. Lodovico's complicated trajectory in the play demonstrates that true change can only come from within; by the end of the piece, Lodovico is reflective, willing to acknowledge—and repent for—his various crimes. But at the same time, money and power remain corrupting outside influences, causing even the reformed Lodovico to act out.

Camillo – Camillo is Vittoria's husband and Monticelso's nephew. Because Vittoria is openly having an affair with Brachiano, Camillo becomes a source of mockery for Flamineo and his friends: they tease Camillo that he is a "cuckold" and torment him with emasculating **horn** imagery. Camillo has no real allies or supporters, as even his uncle Monticelso is more concerned with revenge than with defending his nephew—he is willing to risk Camillo's life to get evidence of Brachiano's guilt. Flamineo ultimately murders Camillo on behalf of Brachiano, killing him during a horse vaulting competition. But though Camillo is victimized, he is not an entirely sympathetic character; he is portrayed as gullible, silly, and dull, quick to anger and unable to comprehend the complex plots that are unfolding around him.

Isabella – Isabella is Brachiano's wife, Giovanni's mother, and Francisco's sister. A Medici by birth, Isabella belongs to one of the most powerful families in all of Renaissance Italy. But as soon as she marries Brachiano, Isabella finds herself reduced to the role of a devoted, ignored wife. Though Isabella is aware of her husband's wandering eye, she tries to avoid flying into fits of jealous anger; even when Brachiano ends their marriage, she helps protect him from Francisco's wrath. Isabella dies after kissing a picture of Brachiano she keeps in her bedroom—Brachiano has hired men to **poison** the picture, and so Isabella is quite literally killed by her love for her husband. Isabella provides a stark contrast to Vittoria: while Vittoria is impure but strong, Isabella is chaste almost to a fault, as her devotion eventually becomes a source of weakness.

Giovanni – Giovanni is Brachiano and Isabella's son and heir to his father's dukedom. At the beginning of *The White Devil*, Giovanni is witty and selfless, and he charms both his father and Francisco with his desire to lead as a man of the people. Even as a young man, however, Giovanni recognizes that he needs an "example" to learn from. But no example ever comes—his only models of governance are corrupt and manipulative—and Giovanni struggles to figure out what kind of an adult he wants to be. By the end of the play, when Brachiano has died and Giovanni has taken over his dukedom, he has become "villainous" like his father.

Marcello – Marcello is Cornelia's son and Vittoria and Flamineo's sibling. Unlike his older brother Flamineo, Marcello feels that decency and honesty are more important than wealth; he does not approve of Flamineo's scheme to kill Camillo and Isabella, nor does he approve of Vittoria's affair with Brachiano. By contrast, Marcello allies himself with Francisco, hoping to earn higher standing through more traditional means. Despite his noble aspirations, however, Marcello is just as impulsive as his siblings: when Flamineo teases him about his youth, he threatens to kill his brother. Before Marcello can act, however, Flamineo pre-emptively stabs him. Ultimately, Marcello's life and death demonstrate the near-impossibility of class mobility in such a stratified social system.

Cornelia – Cornelia is Flamineo, Marcello, and Vittoria's mother. According to Flamineo, her husband died when her children were young, leaving the family without any money. Still, Cornelia feels strongly that her family's lack of means does not justify any cruel or manipulative behavior, and she is horrified that both Vittoria and Flamineo resort to such extreme means to better their circumstances. Though at first it seems Cornelia cares more about her reputation than about her children, her profound grief at Marcello's death—and her inability to hurt Flamineo even in her rage—shows that she really does care deeply for her children.

Zanche – Zanche is Vittoria's friend and lady-in-waiting; she's also a Moor. Before the play begins, she and Flamineo were romantically involved, and he has promised marriage to her; by the end of the play, however, Flamineo has begun to distance himself from her. Zanche listens in on many of Vittoria and Brachiano's conversations, and when she meets Mulinassar—who is really Francisco in disguise—she falls in love with him, sharing all the secrets she has learned in a bid to earn his affection. Though Zanche is portrayed as inconsistent

and fickle for much of the play, at the end, her bravery in the face of death redeems her.

Gasparo – Gasparo is Lodovico's best friend. He promises to help Lodovico get his banishment shortened, but he also urges Lodovico to use his time in exile to reflect on his wrongdoing. Later in the play, Gasparo accompanies Lodovico to Padua, where the two men dress as Capuchin monks. While in disguise, Gasparo helps Lodovico to **poison** Brachiano and to condemn Vittoria, Flamineo and Zanche. For these crimes, Gasparo is ultimately sentenced to be tortured.

Hortensio – The only named character not included in the character list, Hortensio enters the play in Act V. He appears to be one of Flamineo's closest friends, and he often acts as Flamineo's confidante when it comes to matters of the heart (particularly Zanche). However, despite trying to spy on behalf of Flamineo, he never follows through with bringing any of the information he learns to his friend.

Lawyer – The lawyer is hired by Francisco and Monticelso to question Vittoria; he believes that if they can prove she kissed Brachiano, then they can prove she killed Camillo and Isabella. However, when it comes time for the lawyer to actually question Vittoria, he does so either in Latin or in multi-syllabic English, causing Vittoria (and many others in the court) to grow frustrated with him.

Conjurer – Brachiano hires the conjurer, alongside Doctor Julio and Christophero, to ensure that the murders of Isabella and Camillo go off without a hitch. The conjurer is proud of his craft; he laments that many people advertise themselves as conjurers or necromancers without having the skills to back it up. In addition to showing Brachiano "dumb shows" (or pantomimes) of the murders to come, the conjurer also reveals that Lodovico is in love with Isabella.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Antonelli –Antonelli is another one of Lodovico's closest friends. Like Gasparo, he tries to get Lodovico's exile reduced, though (also like Gasparo) he understands that Lodovico deserves to be punished for his crimes.

Doctor Julio – Doctor Julio is an expert in **poisons** and other forms of murder. After being introduced to Brachiano by Flamineo, Doctor Julio is responsible for poisoning the picture of Brachiano that Isabella kisses every night; he seems to take great pleasure in doing this.

Christophero – Christophero is Doctor Julio's assistant, who—as is laid out in the conjurer's dumb show—helps him **poison** Isabella.

Matron – The Matron is the older woman in charge of the house of convertites, where Vittoria is sentenced for her alleged crimes.

TERMS

Beaver – A beaver (also known as a "bevor") was the front part of a metal helmet, designed to protect the throat and mouth. In *The White Devil*, Lodovico dabs some **poison** onto the beaver of Brachiano's helmet; when Brachiano puts it on a few moments later, he is almost instantly killed.

Capuchin Monks – The Capuchins are a particularly strict order of Catholic monks, one of several groups modeled in the Franciscan tradition (after St. Francis of Assisi). Beginning in the 16th century and gaining popularity in the early 1600s, the Capuchin monks were known for their simple brown robes and their habit of going barefoot. Given the highly religious nature of the Capuchin order, it is ironic that Lodovico and Gasparo dress as Capuchin monks in order to commit murderous crimes.

Cuckold – Throughout the English Renaissance, the word "cuckold" was used to describe any man whose wife had committed (or was suspected of) infidelity. Often, a ram's **horns** were used to symbolize cuckoldry. Frequently, "cuckold" was used as an insult to denigrate or emasculate men, just as Francisco uses it against Camillo.

Distraction – Throughout *The White Devil*, various characters fall into "distraction," meaning that because of an extreme emotional or physical state (grief, anger, **poisoning**), they temporarily descend into madness. For example, Cornelia becomes distracted when she loses her son Marcello, and Brachiano's dying speeches are all distracted in the sense that they are incoherent. However, distraction can also be faked as a way of shirking responsibility—and Flamineo does exactly that, pretending to be insane so that no one associates him with Brachiano's crimes.

Extreme Unction – Extreme Unction, also known as the Last Rites or the Anointing of the Sick, is a Catholic sacrament given to those who are very ill or dying. In the play, Lodovico and Gasparo, in disguise as Capuchin monks, pretend to offer Brachiano Extreme Unction—only to, at the last moment, reveal their true identities as his mortal foes.

House of Convertites – A house of convertites is, as Cardinal Monticelso himself defines it, a house for "penitent whores." Though there is no real record of such a thing existing outside of John Webster's play, Webster imagines that such houses would be fairly lax, governed only by an older Matron. Though Vittoria is sent to a house of convertites as punishment for her affair with Brachiano, she is seemingly allowed to leave at will.

Machiavellian – To call someone "Machiavellian" is to compare them to Niccolò Machiavelli, a Renaissance Italian philosopher famous for writing the political doctrine *The Prince*. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli argues that princes should focus on power and conflict, opining that "it is better to be feared than loved." Though in reality Machiavelli's political theory was much more

complex and humane than popular culture gave him credit for, in *The White Devil*, Flamineo uses the word Machiavellian purely as an insult; when he says that Francisco is Machiavellian, he is insinuating that the duke is manipulative, deceitful, and power-crazed.

Moor – The term Moor was used as a catch-all to refer to people who were either (or both) Black and of North African descent, or Muslim. Zanche is described as a Moor.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

EXTERNAL VIRTUE VS. INTERNAL TRUTH

Many of the characters in John Webster's *The White Devil* go to great lengths to demonstrate their outward virtue. Low-ranking soldier Flamineo showers his boss with compliments, noblewoman Vittoria asserts her purity, and Cardinal Monticelso constantly asserts the value of prayer and penitence. But beneath these exemplary exteriors, each of the characters is much less innocent than they appear. Flamineo is treacherous and manipulative, flattering others only to advance his own position; Vittoria is adulterous and a liar; and Monticelso is fascinated by the very sins he claims to detest. These characters, alongside vengeful Duke Francisco and murderous Count Lodovico, demonstrate that no person is ever completely virtuous or good, no matter what their noble title or reputation might suggest.

On the one hand, then, *The White Devil* shows just how much deception individual characters are capable of. But the play is treacherous on a structural level, too. In the first act, the script introduces a clear set of villains (like the exiled Count Lodovico) and heroes (like Cardinal Monticelso); by the fifth and final act, Lodovico faces certain torture with grace and honesty whereas Monticelso, now the Pope, reveals himself to be lecherous and easily bribed. By subverting audience expectations in this way, John Webster teaches his viewers to distrust appearances—to look beneath elaborate flattery and grand declarations to the motivations underneath, and thus to "discern **poison** under [...] gilded pills."

DOUBLE STANDARDS OF DESIRE

Over the course of *The White Devil*, a 1612 play by Englishman John Webster, every man in noblewoman Vittoria's life calls her a "whore.". Indeed, when the show begins, Vittoria does betray her husband Camillo by having an affair with the Duke of Brachiano. But while Brachiano, despite being just as married as Vittoria is, faces almost no consequences for his behavior—society takes Vittoria to court for her slip-up, publicly humiliates her, and eventually sentences her to a house of convertites (a kind of jail cell for "penitent whores"). Similarly, though prominent men like Cardinal Monticelso and Count Lodovico pry into the most intimate details of Vittoria's private life, these very same men then fault Vittoria—and all women—for their inappropriate "lust." It's no wonder, then, that Vittoria sees the accusations against her as deeply hypocritical; as she puts it, "if a man should spit in the wind, the filth return in [his] face." In other words, labeling Vittoria a "strumpet" and a "whore," allows these powerful men to project their own desire and guilt onto a less powerful woman.

But while the play condemns this patriarchal hypocrisy, *The White Devil* is not free from the very misogyny it critiques. Though Vittoria defends herself with dignity at her trial, ultimately, the play reveals her to be nearly as craven and manipulative as her accusers claim: she is fickle to her lover and attempts to betray her brother Flamineo, who only sees through her ruse because he (unlike most of the other male characters) feels no attraction to her. Fascinatingly, then, the play condemns the unjust, harmful, double standards men use to judge female desire—while also replicating those same double standards on stage.

CLASS AND CORRUPTION

On the surface, John Webster's play *The White Devil* is a dramatic story of lust and revenge, as lovers Vittoria and the Duke of Brachiano plot to kill their respective spouses. But beneath this thrilling exterior, there is also a more complicated story about the privileges that come with having money—and about the challenges those without resources face. Three of the show's main characters (Brachiano, Duke Francisco, and Cardinal Monticelso), all men of great wealth and influence, commit horrible crimes or blatantly abuse their power. But though these powerful leaders do horrible things, their wealth allows them to escape consequences, instead pawning the blame off on the lower-status people around them; as one character explains, "princes give rewards with their own hands, but death or punishment by the hands of another." By contrast, those in the play without status—and particularly Flamineo, a soldier and servant—must spend every moment of their lives focused on social climbing for material gain. Flamineo is constantly scheming, attaching himself to wealthy patrons and doing their dirty work in the hopes that they will leave him some small part of their fortune. But by the end of the play Flamineo is overcome with guilt, reflecting that in his quest to be rich he has lost sight of his true self. In humanizing (and critiquing) both the ruling classes and the people that serve them, *The White Devil* thus shows that

both power and greed are equally corrupting forces—and that stratified class systems harm all of the people within them.

LEADING BY EXAMPLE VS. LEADING BY FORCE

Though there are very few heroes in *The White Devil*, the character who is most consistently decent is the young Prince Giovanni. As Giovanni comes of age over the course of the play, he gets plenty of advice from both his father the Duke of Brachiano, and from his father's rival, Duke Francisco. But while each of these prominent men instructs Giovanni in the bravery and selflessness needed to be a successful leader, neither manages to live out in practice the virtues that he preaches. Without a role model to learn from, Giovanni begins to lose his boyish generosity; by the end of the play, other characters feel that Giovanni is as harsh and cruel as the uncle he was "taught to imitate." Giovanni's trajectory thus demonstrates the play's most important political message: with great power comes great responsibility, and princes should be "examples" not only for their family members and successors but for the communities they govern. Or as Cornelia (Vittoria, Flamineo, and Marcello's mother) says, "the lives of princes should like dials move, whose regular example is so strong, they make the times by them go right, or wrong".

This emphasis on leading by example is especially fascinating given the early-modern period in which Webster was writing. In 1612, the concept of organized government was still relatively new, and people were passionately debating how the leaders of these governments should behave. One of the most prominent voices in this conversation was Italian philosopher Niccolò Machiavelli, who believed that rulers should govern with fear and manipulation and who *The White Devil* mentions by name (when Flamineo labels Francisco "a Machiavellian"). By contrast, in emphasizing the importance of good "examples," Webster suggests an anti-Machiavellian approach to governance—one in which leaders pass down good behavior to their subjects and future generations of leaders.

PUNISHMENT AND REPENTANCE

The White Devil, John Webster's play about lust and murder in 16th century Italy, begins with a banishment and ends with torture. For characters like the duke Francisco de Medicis or the cardinal Monticelso, punishment is both a tool and an obsession; choosing to inflict—or withhold—execution, jailtime, or forced penance is the primary way that these leaders exercise their power. But rather than affirming this eye-for-an-eye worldview, *The White Devil* consistently challenges the idea that harsh punishment is effective or useful. First of all, the play demonstrates that this early modern "justice" system is in fact anything but just: wealthy people bribe their way out of punishment, while "poor rogues pay." And perhaps even more importantly, the threat of punishment tends to *corrupt*—not correct—characters like Flamineo, a low-ranking soldier and criminal. For example, when Flamineo fears arrest or trial, he responds by telling more lies and committing more crimes to cover up his original wrongdoing; only when he must directly face the people he has hurt does Flamineo legitimately repent. By examining the moments when punitive leadership fails, therefore, Webster's play suggests that harsh punishment does more harm than good—and that true moral change can only come from within.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

HORNS

In *The White Devil*, and in the English Renaissance period more broadly, a ram's horns were a symbol of a "cuckold"—a man who had been cheated on by his wife. Being cuckolded was seen as supremely shameful and emasculating, so costume horns were often used to mock married men. In Webster's play, Camillo—whose wife Vittoria is, indeed, having an affair with another man—is surrounded by horn symbolism. From the earliest moments of the play, Flamineo teases Camillo for having horns and "large ears" (linking the horn symbolism to Camillo's tendency to engage in gossip); later on, Camillo finds that someone has thrown a pair of horns through his window, which Monticelso interprets as a sign that "'tis given out you are a cuckold" (that is, everyone knows Vittoria is cheating on him). But interestingly, though Isabella similarly picks up on her spouse Brachiano's infidelity, she distances herself from horn imagery, explaining that "I do not as men to try the precious unicorn horn." The difference between Camillo's obsession with being cuckolded and Isabella's quiet sadness reveals a great deal about how differently the play portrays suffering infidelity for men and women: whereas infidelity was seen as shameful, public, and almost humorous if a man is the victim, for women, betrayal is a more private and personally devastating event.

POISON

Poison, a common cause of death for the play's characters, is also a symbol of deception—what looks safe or familiar, the play warns, might actually be toxic and deadly. There are two major uses of poison in the play. First, Brachiano plots with a conjurer to kill his wife Isabella by poisoning his own picture, which she kisses each night before bed; in doing so, Brachiano reveals the gap between Isabella's adoring image of her husband and his murderous reality. The

second poisoning happens to Brachiano himself, when Count Lodovico (dressed as a Capuchin monk) poisons the front part—the "beaver"—of Brachiano's helmet. The armor meant to protect Brachiano then becomes the source of his downfall, just as the monk, supposed to be a healing figure, becomes a harmful one.

In other words, *The White Devil* uses these events to show that there is poison behind even the prettiest gestures. When she is on the stand at her trial, Vittoria goes so far as to make this symbolism overt: "I discern poison under your gilded pills," she tells Francisco, assuring him that lofty rhetoric and a good reputation cannot hide his true nature forever. And along the same lines, the presence of poison throughout the entire play—from Rome to Padua, from a conjurer to a count—suggests that the entire "gilded" society is in fact corrosive and corrupted underneath.

TREES

Throughout *The White Devil*, many characters use the image of a tree to symbolize Vittoria and Brachiano's adulterous relationship. Crucially, however, just as the characters disagree about the nature of the relationship itself—is it a boundary-breaking true love? A hideous, indulgent passion?—none of the characters can agree about what kind of tree best captures this amorous duo. Vittoria herself dreams that her love with Brachiano is symbolized by a strong and lovely yew tree; because yew trees would often grow in graveyards, Vittoria's dream suggests that this new relationship is growing out of the death of two marriages. Incidentally, yew is also extremely **poisonous**—and the lovers only take their relationship public once Brachiano has his wife Isabella poisoned. Francisco sees the adulterous couple as an even more nefarious kind of plant life: "like mistletoe on sere elms spent by weather," he reflects, "let him cleave to her, and both rot together." Whereas Vittoria sees her love as a triumphant (if toxic) yew tree, Francisco sees their love as "rotting" and parasitic. Tracing the different symbolism of trees in the play thus shows how the same event or pairing can, viewed through a different lens, have a completely opposite connotation.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin Classics edition of *The Duchess of Malfi, The White Devil, The Broken Heart and 'Tis Pity She's a Whore* published in 2015.

Act 1, Scene 1 Quotes

GASPARO:
O my lord,
The law doth sometimes mediate; thinks it good
Not ever to steep violent sins in blood.
This gentle penance may both end your crimes,
And in the example better these bad times.

Related Characters: Gasparo (speaker), Lodovico , Antonelli

Related Themes:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

Count Lodovico, having been banished from Rome for lechery, drunkenness, and murder, wonders why he has been exiled instead of executed. Here, his best friend Gasparo emphasizes the importance of laws that make peace ("mediate") instead of shedding more "blood." Rather than hurting Lodovico the way he hurt others, this "gentle" punishment gives him time to reflect on his bad behavior—to do "penance" not under duress but of his own accord. Banishment, Gasparo suggests, may "end [...] crimes" because it creates genuine remorse in the criminal, something violent punishment cannot do.

Even more importantly, however, Gasparo establishes that moderate punishment sets an important "example": when a ruler uses exile instead of torture or execution, they show their followers how to make things "better" instead of worse. From the very first moments of the play, then, Webster emphasizes that the best leaders govern by acting as role models, demonstrating mediation and patience for their subjects. But while such "gentle penance" is the best method of leadership (at least to Gasparo and Antonelli, Lodovico's other closest friend), it is not the dominant one—clearly, Rome is in the midst of "bad times," where violence and an eye-for-an-eye mentality reign supreme.

Act 1, Scene 2 Quotes

FLAMINEO:
It seems you are jealous: I 'll show you the error of it by a familiar example: I have seen a pair of spectacles fashioned with such perspective art, that lay down but one twelve pence a' th' board, twill appear as if there were twenty; now should you wear a pair of these spectacles, and see your wife tying her shoe, you would imagine twenty hands were taking up of your wife's clothes, and this would put you into a horrible, causeless fury.

CAMILLO:
The fault there, sir, is not in the eyesight.

FLAMINEO:
True, but they that have the yellow jaundice think all objects they look on to be yellow. Jealousy is worse; her fits present to a man, like so many bubbles in a basin of water, twenty several crabbed faces, many times makes his own shadow his cuckold-maker.

Related Characters: Flamineo, Camillo (speaker), Brachiano, Vittoria

Related Themes:

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

Flamineo's sister Vittoria is cheating on her husband Camillo with the wealthy Duke Brachiano—and because Brachiano is Flamineo's boss, it is Flamineo's responsibility to discourage Camillo's suspicions of adultery. To do this, Flamineo makes Camillo doubt his own "perspective": he suggests that paranoia—like jaundice—is its own kind of illness, capable of distorting the world so that even one's own "shadow" becomes suspicious. Of course, Camillo is totally correct in his suspicions, which makes Flamineo's trick even more impressive (and deceitful). In a play where nothing is at it seems, Flamineo gets Camillo to distrust even the things that are right in front of him.

This focus on the "errors" of perception was a particularly salient issue in the 16th and 17th century, when Webster was writing. In the century before *The White Devil* premiered, scientists like Galileo Galilei and Leonardo da Vinci were pioneering new theories of optics; all of a sudden, "eyesight" was both more complex and less trustworthy than people had previously believed it to be. Visible proof was thus an obsession for the English dramatists of the time: in Shakespeare's *Othello*, for example, written about 10 years before Flamineo describes this warping "pair of spectacles," Othello repeatedly demands "ocular proof" of his wife's alleged affair. Vittoria really is committing adultery, while Othello's wife Desdemona is completely innocent—but since all the characters doubt their own perceptions, it is impossible for them to tell truths from falsehoods, and Camillo wrongfully sees innocence while Othello wrongfully sees guilt.

Finally, in both plays, marriage is where "eyesight" is both most important and most vulnerable. In this exchange, Flamineo teases Camillo about being a "cuckold," a man humiliated and emasculated by his wife's affair. But if there is nothing worse for a man of this time than being cuckolded—and if there is no way besides faulty "eyesight" to establish whether such an affair was actually going on—how could anyone ever escape Camillo's painful paranoia?

FLAMINEO:
Come, sister, darkness hides your blush. Women are like cursed dogs: civility keeps them tied all day, but they are loose at midnight. Then they do most good or most mischief.

Related Characters: Flamineo (speaker), Vittoria, Brachiano, Camillo

Related Themes:

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

As soon as Vittoria sees Brachiano, her entire demeanor changes—instead of being cold and contained, as she was with her husband Camillo, she now reddens with excitement. To Flamineo, this shift is a sign that women are fundamentally "cursed" and dishonest, capable of "hid[ing]" their lustful natures in the daytime only to reveal themselves "at midnight." On the one hand, then, this passage illustrates the complex rules of sexuality that Renaissance women had to navigate: social norms ("civility") demanded that they not express feelings of attraction or longing in public, yet society simultaneously expected women to be objects of desire for the men around them.

On the other hand, however, this passage both captures and exemplifies the misogyny of the time period. Flamineo lumps his sister in with all women and then compares all women to "dogs," suggesting that female sexual feelings are more animal than human. In addition to that degrading comparison, Flamineo also takes agency away from women—rather than acknowledging female desire as an

independent entity, he frames it in term of "doing good" or "doing mischief" to men. This short line thus demonstrates the contradictions within Webster's writing: even as Webster exposes the cruelty of misogyny, he also espouses sexist rhetoric.

CORNELIA:
The lives of princes should like dials move,
Whose regular example is so strong,
They make the times by them go right or wrong.

Related Characters: Cornelia (speaker), Flamineo, Brachiano, Vittoria, Lodovico

Related Themes:

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

Cornelia, having overheard her daughter Vittoria plot with her lover Brachiano, is disgusted to learn that a man of such high status would stoop to such crass schemes. To scold Brachiano, Cornelia compares leaders to sundials—just as people looked to a sundial to determine how they should act (whether it was time for breakfast or dinner, whether they should prepare for bed or prepare for work), they look to "princes" and dukes for a similar "example." Therefore, when leaders act "right," modeling kindness and consistency, their subjects behave similarly. But when someone like Brachiano behaves terribly, they make the world around them go "wrong," just as a faulty sundial would throw the people who relied on it into chaos.

And just as Gasparo reminded his friend Lodovico that cruel leaders have landed Rome in "bad times," Cornelia similarly asserts that "the times" imitate the people in the charge of them. Given that nearly all of the dukes and counts in Webster's play are murderous liars, Cornelia's comment suggests that Italian society (at least as Webster sees it) is just as corrupted as the people in charge of it.

CORNELIA:
What! because we are poor
Shall we be vicious?

FLAMINEO:
Pray, what means have you
To keep me from the galleys, or the gallows?
My father prov'd himself a gentleman,
Sold all 's land, and, like a fortunate fellow,
Died ere the money was spent. You brought me up
At Padua, I confess, where I protest,
For want of means--the University judge me--
I have been fain to heel my tutor's stockings,
At least seven years; conspiring with a beard,
Made me a graduate; then to this duke's service,
I visited the court, whence I return'd
More courteous, more lecherous by far,
But not a suit the richer. And shall I,
Having a path so open, and so free
To my preferment, still retain your milk
In my pale forehead? No, this face of mine
I 'll arm, and fortify with lusty wine,
'Gainst shame and blushing.

Related Characters: Flamineo, Cornelia (speaker), Brachiano

Related Themes:

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

When Cornelia learns that her son Flamineo is helping the wealthy Duke Brachiano plan a murder, Flamineo's defense is that he has no other option—as a poor man in a highly stratified society, how else can he hope to better his standing? Cornelia believes that poverty is no excuse for "vicious[ness]," but Flamineo (and perhaps the play itself) complicates this straightforward moralism.

In this long monologue, Flamineo reflects on his many failed attempts to raise his own status through legal, legitimate, means. He worked for much of his young adult life to earn his degree and serve as a "tutor," but teaching barely paid him enough to survive; he then entered the military, putting himself into great danger in the hopes of gaining wealth, but still returned "not a suit the richer." Since honest methods have failed him, Flamineo explains, he no longer feels any "shame" at being dishonest.

Though Flamineo is by no means a purely heroic figure, *The White Devil* is quite sympathetic to his plight. After all, Flamineo is not poor through any fault of his own (he says

here that his father sold the family's assets, spent all their money, and then died, leaving them penniless.) And poverty is not just an inconvenience but a liability. Without money, Flamineo will either be forced to work as a criminal on a "galley" (a pirate ship) or he will be executed in the "gallows." In this scene, Webster thus seems to suggest that stratified class structures create criminality: with no other way to achieve upward social mobility, Flamineo turns to murder not out of choice but out of necessity.

FLAMINEO:
The duchess come to court! I like not that.
We are engag'd to mischief, and must on;
As rivers to find out the ocean
Flow with crook bendings beneath forced banks,
Or as we see, to aspire some mountain's top,
The way ascends not straight, but imitates
The subtle foldings of a winter's snake,
So who knows policy and her true aspect,
Shall find her ways winding and indirect.

Related Characters: Flamineo (speaker), Isabella , Brachiano

Related Themes:

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

When Flamineo learns that Brachiano's wife Isabella is returning to Rome, he grows anxious—Brachiano is determined to get rid of his wife some way or another, and as his servant, Flamineo will likely now be responsible for killing her. So, in this act-ending speech, Flamineo reflects on the difficulty of returning to honesty once he has been "engag'd to mischief." He frets that each new lie requires more lies, as he and Brachiano must cover up their misdeeds. But he also fundamentally links social and financial ascent to deception: to get to the "mountain's top," he must take not the "straight" and narrow path but the serpentine, dishonest one.

Crucially, Flamineo's speech reflects a Machiavellian view of "policy." Italian philosopher Niccolò Machiavelli believed that the only truth in politics was deception; he argued that leaders should frighten and lie to the people they governed, keeping their subject on their toes and thus ensuring their loyalty. Having survived a difficult life, it is perhaps unsurprising that Flamineo feels the need to adopt a Machiavellian view of the world. Trust and optimism have never gotten him anywhere, so now he feels that the only way to continue "on" is to be "winding and indirect," relying not on people's goodness but on their stupidity.

Act 2, Scene 1 Quotes

MONTICELSO:
It is a more direct and even way,
To train to virtue those of princely blood,
By examples than by precepts: if by examples,
Whom should he rather strive to imitate
Than his own father? be his pattern then,
Leave him a stock of virtue that may last,
Should fortune rend his sails, and split his mast.

Related Characters: Monticelso (speaker), Giovanni , Brachiano, Francisco/Mulinassar, Gasparo

Related Themes:

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

Just as Brachiano and Francisco are about to come to blows, Cardinal Monticelso stops them, instead urging them both to model good behavior for Brachiano's young son Giovanni. Earlier in the play, characters like Cornelia and Gasparo have asserted that princes and dukes must act as examples for the people they rule over. But here, Monticelso suggests a more intimate definition of leading "by example": before Giovanni can govern others, he must learn to govern himself, and who better for him to learn from "than his own father?" This idea that people become virtuous through "imitation" thus takes on both a political and a familial meaning—and just as Brachiano's impulsivity is a bad model for his city, Monticelso warns that it will have the same negative effects on his son.

At the same time, however, audience members will soon learn that despite the noble values he preaches, Monticelso is anything but exemplary. Indeed, even as he lectures Brachiano on the necessity of teaching "by examples" rather than "by precepts" (rules), Monticelso does exactly the opposite: the cardinal lays out admirable rules for others but lies and bullies in his own private life. In addition to underlining the need for positive examples, then, Webster uses this moment to foreshadow the incredible hypocrisy of this society overall.

Act 2, Scene 2 Quotes

CONJURER:
Both flowers and weeds spring when the sun is warm,
And great men do great good or else great harm.

Related Characters: Conjurer (speaker), Brachiano

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 52

Explanation and Analysis

After a midnight meeting with the wealthy Duke Brachiano, the conjurer speaks directly to the audience, informing them that the actions powerful people ("great men") have outsized impacts. When these great men choose to do "good," they both act as highly visible role models and help large numbers of people through policy choices. But when they choose to do "harm," they have at their disposal armies (sometimes literally) to help them carry out whatever cruel whim they might be possessed by. The conjurer's statement thus reflects the dangers of an inequitable society, where a few "great men" are given power far beyond their less moneyed or titled counterparts.

It is also worth noting that the conjurer invokes natural imagery of "flowers and weeds" to make his point. Frequently in *The White Devil*, various characters muse that what looks like healthy growth might quickly turn to rot—when a tree grows too fast, too big, or too close to another plant, it can become sickly and strange. Similarly, the conjurer understands that not all things that grow are useful: both beautiful "flowers" and gnarly "weeds" come from the same source, just as great men can, with a word, either help or hurt their subjects.

Act 3, Scene 2 Quotes

MONTICELSO:
Shall I expound whore to you? sure I shall;
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 treasuries 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.

Related Characters: Vittoria, Monticelso (speaker), Brachiano, Lodovico

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 62

Explanation and Analysis

Having decided to try Vittoria for adultery, Monticelso takes the lead in questioning her. In this exchange, Vittoria's refusal to be labeled a "whore" causes Monticelso to launch into this high-spirited tirade against the "character" of such women. And it is only women that Monticelso sees in this way: a whore is always a "she" in his formulation, and so while he spews anger and accusations at Vittoria, he makes no mention of Brachiano (who is guilty of the exact same behavior).

In addition to the blatant sexism in this speech, there are a few other details worth taking in. First, Monticelso tries to paint deception as a trait exclusively belonging to "whores"; lying, he suggests, is a feminine characteristic. In his mind,

"whores" are "flattering" and "counterfeited," turning their interior evil into their external beauty through cruel "alchemy."

Second, Monticelso builds his definition of the word "whore" on the metaphor of "poison'd perfumes." Even though poison in the play often symbolizes falsehood, Monticelso's comparison here is ironic—in *The White Devil*, only men (namely the conjurer and Lodovico) actually poison people. And third, Monticelso uses this monologue to suggest that women should remain in poverty, fully dependent on the men in their lives: "rich" women are inherently criminals, he argues, having earned their money solely through "extortion."

As a reader, it is important to picture this extremely vitriolic text spoken aloud; in its venomous language and hefty length, this speech suggests to both the jury and the audience that Monticelso is worryingly obsessive in his hatred of women. And indeed, this future Pope—ostensibly a leader and role model in the community—blames all male shortcomings on the women around them: a "whore," he inadvertently suggests, is frightening mostly because she is able "to teach man wherein he is imperfect."

VITTORIA:
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.

Related Characters: Vittoria (speaker), Monticelso , Brachiano

Related Themes:

Page Number: 64

Explanation and Analysis

After Monticelso launches into hateful accusations, Vittoria responds with surprising dignity and strength. In this line, she elegantly labels Monticelso (and, by association, his ally Francisco) as a hypocrite. Monticelso might call Vittoria "names," but in doing so, he reveals his own fixations with sex and murder; the angrier he gets, Vittoria hints, the more his anger reflects back on him, just as spit in the wind only lands on the spitter. In addition to defending her position as a woman, Vittoria turns the accusations of deception back around to Monticelso: maybe it is he who is the "painted devil" of the title, not she.

This line adds important texture to the major themes of the book, but it also complicates Vittoria's characterization. When we first meet her, she is lustful and untrustworthy, pressing Brachiano to murder her husband and his wife; at the end of the play, she is similarly manipulative, tricking her brother into killing himself. But in this in-between moment, Vittoria shows herself to be honest, eloquent, and strong in a way almost no other character in the play is. Webster's apparent assertion that no one is as they seem bodes well for Vittoria here—she may seem to be simply a liar, but in fact she contains much more depth and contradiction than first meets the eye.

FRANCISCO:
My lord, there's great suspicion of the murder,
But no sound proof who did it. For my part,
I do not think she hath a soul so black
To act a deed so bloody; if she have,
As in cold countries husbandmen plant vines,
And with warm blood manure them; even so
One summer she will bear unsavory fruit,
And ere next spring wither both branch and root.
The act of blood let pass; only descend
To matters of incontinence.

VITTORIA:
I discern poison
Under your gilded pills.

Related Characters: Francisco/Mulinassar, Vittoria (speaker), Monticelso

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 67

Explanation and Analysis

After the jury starts to grow skeptical of Monticelso's venom, Francisco steps in, trying to provide a more balanced perspective. But while outwardly Francisco seems to give Vittoria the benefit of the doubt (saying there is "no sound proof who did" the murder), he also completely denies her agency. Using the tree imagery so prevalent throughout the play, Francisco suggests that the only way Vittoria could have committed "a deed so bloody" is if she were put up to it by someone else (like a tree planted with warm "manure"). Subtly, and with much more tact and skill

than Monticelso, Francisco implies that Vittoria is not only guilty but weak—and because of his subtlety, Francisco manages to remain sympathetic even as he accuses.

No wonder, then, that Vittoria (in one of the most famous lines in the entire play) does not accept this logic, instead shooting back, "I discern poison under your gilded pills." What seems like an offering from Francisco is actually a condemnation; his pretty language and calm demeanor only make him all the more dangerous. In this exchange, poison—a literal tool for murder in most of the text—also becomes a potent symbol for hidden harm, making clear that the things which appear to be helpful ("gilded pills") are actually the most destructive.

Act 4, Scene 1 Quotes

FRANCISCO:
And thus it happens:
Your poor rogues pay for 't, which have not the means
To present bribe in fist; the rest o' th' band
Are razed out of the knaves' record; or else
My lord he winks at them with easy will;
His man grows rich, the knaves are the knaves still.
[…] That in so little paper
Should lie th' undoing of so many men!
'Tis not so big as twenty declarations.
See the corrupted use some make of books:
Divinity, wrested by some factious blood,
Draws swords, swells battles, and o'erthrows all good.

Related Characters: Francisco/Mulinassar (speaker), Monticelso , Brachiano

Related Themes:

Page Number: 86

Explanation and Analysis

As he plots his revenge on Brachiano, Francisco borrows a book of names—which is really a list of all kinds of suspected criminals—from Monticelso. But as Francisco flips through the list of usurers and adulterers, corrupt lawyers and murderers, the injustice of his own justice system appalls him. It's not important whether the people in this book are innocent or guilty—the only thing that matters is whether they are rich enough to "present bribe[s]" to people like Monticelso, thereby protecting their reputation. Only people who are not wealthy (whom Francisco labels as "poor rogues") actually suffer punishment for the crimes they commit.

Francisco also notes with disgust the "corrupted use" Monticelso makes of this book—he gets rich by promising to "raze" people out of his own personal criminal record and keeps his own reputation spotless through his pretense to "divinity." Rather than becoming a tool to keep people honest, this book of names "o'erthrows all good": it makes it impossible to tell who is innocent and who is merely wealthy enough to get away with it, and it adds even more inequity to the already siloed class structure.

But crucially, Francisco—a duke and one of the most important people in all of Rome—does not take any steps to eliminate this book or to condemn Monticelso for his use of it. Instead, he uses the book for his own personal gain (finding an assassin for Brachiano), musing about injustice while remaining passive. In a way, then, this passage serves as the ultimate testament to Francisco's corruption: he is cruel not because he lacks awareness of the problems in his government but because he does not care enough to be better.

FRANCISCO:
Oh, the fate of princes!
I am so used to frequent flattery
That, being alone, I now flatter myself.

Related Characters: Francisco/Mulinassar (speaker), Flamineo, Monticelso , Marcello , Brachiano, Gasparo , Antonelli , Lodovico , Vittoria

Related Themes:

Page Number: 88

Explanation and Analysis

Francisco, writing a fake love letter to Vittoria, makes this passing comment in jest. But there is a great deal of truth to what he says. Francisco is constantly surrounded by "flatterers" like Monticelso and Marcello, just as Brachiano always has Flamineo and Vittoria to bolster his ego. And Francisco seems to realize that "flattery" is itself a form of deception; rather than telling him the truth (as Gasparo and Antonelli do for the less powerful Lodovico), the yes-man that surround Francisco are willing to tell him whatever he wants to hear. Over time, this deception distorts his reality—and his conscience.

More subtly, this line resonates with a line at the end of the play, where Flamineo laments that he is "irrecoverably" lost to himself. In a society so filled with manipulation and backstabbing, no one seems to know how to be honest with

even themselves; Francisco has spent so much time pretending to be false versions of himself that even "alone," he has no idea who he truly is. Ultimately, this loss of self becomes *The White Devil's* final tragedy—a less tangible but no less painful form of death than the show's many murders.

Act 4, Scene 2 Quotes

FLAMINEO:
Lo you, sister!
Stay, my lord; I 'll tell you a tale. The crocodile, which lives in the River Nilus, hath a worm breeds i' th' teeth of 't, which puts it to extreme anguish: a little bird, no bigger than a wren, is barber-surgeon to this crocodile; flies into the jaws of 't, picks out the worm, and brings present remedy. The fish, glad of ease, but ungrateful to her that did it, that the bird may not talk largely of her abroad for non-payment, closeth her chaps, intending to swallow her, and so put her to perpetual silence. But nature, loathing such ingratitude, hath armed this bird with a quill or prick on the head, top o' th' which wounds the crocodile i' th' mouth, forceth her open her bloody prison, and away flies the pretty tooth-picker from her cruel patient.

[...]

FLAMINEO:
No, my lord.
You, sister, are the crocodile: you are blemish'd in your fame, my lord cures it; and though the comparison hold not in every particle, yet observe, remember, what good the bird with the prick i' th' head hath done you, and scorn ingratitude. It may appear to some ridiculous
[Aside] Thus to talk knave and madman, and sometimes
Come in with a dried sentence, stuffed with sage:
But this allows my varying of shapes;
Knaves do grow great by being great men's apes.

Related Characters: Flamineo (speaker), Brachiano, Vittoria

Related Themes:

Page Number: 100

Explanation and Analysis

Before Flamineo, Brachiano, and Vittoria make their escape to Padua, Flamineo offers this strange fable to the group. The anecdote of the crocodile and the fish preaches gratitude, but it is a very specific kind of thanks that Flamineo is talking about; he is urging Brachiano and Vittoria to *publicly* recognize all the different kinds of help they have gotten, even when to do so would be shameful. It's no wonder, then, that Brachiano assumes Flamineo is asking to be "rewarded"; after all, Flamineo has done a lot of secretive dirty work for the adulterous couple, who have promised him wealth and admiration that he has yet to receive.

Flamineo seems to deny that he is asking for payment, lest he risk irritating Brachiano. But in the next breath, he reveals in an aside to the audience that he is merely "varying...shapes"; in other words, though he will pretend otherwise, the crocodile story was in fact intended to remind his sister and her lover just how much they owe him. At every moment, Flamineo confides, he must be playing contradictory games: he must flatter Brachiano even as he prods him, playing both "madman" and "knave" at the same time.

And has been the case throughout *The White Devil*, Flamineo's need to shape-shift is directly related to his lack of wealth and status. Like the little bird, he attaches himself to Brachiano, hoping that he will "grow great" by association. But unlike the little bird, Flamineo has no sharp point on his head with which to punish Brachiano and Vittoria if they fail to pay him. Instead, he has only the audience to whisper to and persuade, taking his revenge by shoring up his viewers' loyalties.

Act 4, Scene 3 Quotes

LODOVICO:
Why now 'tis come about. He rail'd upon me;
And yet these crowns were told out, and laid ready,
Before he knew my voyage. Oh, the art,
The modest form of greatness! that do sit,
Like brides at wedding-dinners, with their looks turn'd
From the least wanton jests, their puling stomach
Sick from the modesty, when their thoughts are loose,
Even acting of those hot and lustful sports
Are to ensue about midnight: such his cunning!
He sounds my depth thus with a golden plummet.
I am doubly arm'd now. Now to th' act of blood,
There 's but three furies found in spacious hell,
But in a great man's breast three thousand dwell.

Related Characters: Lodovico (speaker), Monticelso , Francisco/Mulinassar

Related Themes:

Page Number: 108

Explanation and Analysis

When Monticelso finds out that Lodovico is working as Francisco's hired assassin, he acts disgusted, condemning such amoral behavior—and actually causing Lodovico to change his mind. But before Lodovico can call off the plan, he learns that Monticelso (despite his outward performance) is actually sponsoring the murderous plan (his "crowns," a form of currency, "were told out, and laid ready"). Monticelso's goodness is only an act—a testament to his "cunning" as a political operative.

There are two especially salient ideas in this passage. First, as Lodovico processes Monticelso's deceit, he immediately reaches for a comparison in female sexuality: Monticelso is like "brides at wedding dinners," who pretend to be "modest" in public while secretly thinking of the sex ("those hot and lustful sports") they will engage in later. Though he echoes Flamineo's early comment that women only show their true natures at midnight, Lodovico does so not as a comment on gender roles but merely as a metaphor. And in using Lodovico's misogynistic thinking as a literary default, Webster also gives a new kind of weight to this rhetoric.

Second, the extent of Monticelso's authority (and his abuse of power) comes through particularly clearly here. As the new Pope, Monticelso should (in theory) have tremendous power and moral knowledge—and Lodovico might have changed his behavior and abstained from killing, had Monticelso simply stood by all his fiery words. But because Monticelso secretly funds the mission, Lodovico is "doubly arm'd now," less prone to reflection and now sure that the state will back him.

Act 5, Scene 1 Quotes

FRANCISCO:
I shall never flatter him: I have studied man too much to do that. What difference is between the duke and I? no more than between two bricks, all made of one clay: only 't may be one is placed in top of a turret, the other in the bottom of a well, by mere chance. If I were placed as high as the duke, I should stick as fast, make as fair a show, and bear out weather equally.

Related Characters: Francisco/Mulinassar (speaker), Flamineo, Brachiano

Related Themes:

Page Number: 113

Explanation and Analysis

Duke Francisco, in disguise as a fictional soldier named Mulinassar, uses his anonymity to discuss class and power with the lowlier Flamineo. In this moment, Francisco gestures toward the fruitlessness of class divides: all people, he suggests, are "made of one clay," and the only difference is they have been "placed" (meaning, what kind of life they have been born into). Francisco-as-Mulinassar also emphasizes that there is no difference in moral standing or leadership capabilities between those of different classes; if a soldier were "as high as the duke," he would be as clever, as strong, and as just.

Of course, the irony of all of this is that Francisco is actually the duke himself—and because of that, he has the power to obliterate all these status differences he complains of. But while he speechifies (more than once) about the harms of inequity, Francisco takes no concrete action; his words do not reflect the example he sets. And read through this lens, Francisco's words achieve a crueler, more comic effect. Rather than being a radical statement about pointless class divides, one can interpret Francisco's words as an affirmation of his power: there is no difference between himself (as Mulinassar) and the duke—not because all human beings are equal, but because this particular human has been lucky enough to be born into dukedom.

Act 5, Scene 2 Quotes

MARCELLO:
There are some sins which heaven doth duly punish
In a whole family. This is it to rise
By dishonest means. Let all men know
That tree shall long time keep a steady foot
Whose branches spread no wider than the root.

Related Characters: Marcello (speaker), Flamineo, Cornelia

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 121

Explanation and Analysis

Marcello, having been stabbed to death by his brother Flamineo, utters these devastating deathbed words. "This is it," Marcello asserts, "to rise by dishonest means." Ultimately, all of Flamineo's violence and deception can only end in the destruction of his nearest and dearest. And to drive his point home, Marcello appeals to the tree symbolism that has permeated the entire piece. Flamineo has overreached, growing too "wide" to support himself; in

doing so, he has abandoned the family history that kept him "root[ed]." Once again (though the word "rot" is not used here), the sense of decay is palpable in Marcello's language.

It is also interesting to note the emphasis that Marcello places on family rising or falling as a cohesive "whole." Flamineo has been born into his family; that same family, with his father's lack of wealth and his mother's struggle to provide, is what determined his status in life. Marcello's accusation that Flamineo has tried to rise is in part about dishonesty, but it's also about leaving behind the family (and life) he was born into. It is possible, therefore, to read a defense of the class system in Marcello's dying words, even though this class system has exploited Marcello and his siblings.

CORNELIA:
Let me go, let me go.

She runs to Flamineo with her knife drawn, and coming to him lets it fall.

The God of heaven forgive thee! Dost not wonder
I pray for thee? I 'll tell thee what 's the reason,
I have scarce breath to number twenty minutes;
I 'd not spend that in cursing. Fare thee well:
Half of thyself lies there; and mayst thou live
To fill an hour-glass with his moulder'd ashes,
To tell how thou shouldst spend the time to come
In blessed repentance!

Related Characters: Cornelia (speaker), Flamineo, Marcello

Related Themes:

Page Number: 122

Explanation and Analysis

After Flamineo murders his younger brother Marcello, Cornelia's love for one son almost causes her to stab the other. But she is unable to bring herself to kill one of her children—unable to engage in the eye-for-an-eye retribution so common in the play—and so Cornelia calls Flamineo to look for punishment within himself. "Half of thyself lies there," she says; onstage, she would indicate Marcello's limp body, forcing Flamineo to look on the beloved life he has taken. Rather than taking Flamineo's capacity to think and feel from him, Cornelia gives him "the time" to come to terms with what he has done; "mayst thou live," she announces, to find "blessed repentance."

Not for the first time, Webster's work emphasizes that rather than harsh, corporal, punishment, true guilt and "repentance" can only come from reflection—from the time and space to look inward. But also, in Cornelia's deathbed wailing, the play also starts to turn its attention to heaven and the idea of judgment beyond the grave. To ensure his entrance into heaven, Cornelia declares, Flamineo must pray for forgiveness from both earthly and godly figures. So instead of supporting his attempts to rise through the ranks of nobility, Cornelia tries to reorient her son to another kind of higher power.

Act 5, Scene 3 Quotes

Here, the rest being departed, LODOVICO and GASPARO discover themselves.

LODOVICO:
Devil Brachiano, thou art damn'd.
[...]You that were held the famous politician,
Whose art was poison.

GASPARO:
And whose conscience, murder.

LODOVICO:
That would have broke your wife's neck down the stairs,
Ere she was poison'd.

GASPARO:
That had your villainous sallets.

LODOVICO:
And fine embroider'd bottles, and perfumes,
Equally mortal with a winter plague.

GASPARO:
Now there 's mercury—

LODOVICO:
And copperas----

GASPARO:
And quicksilver----

LODOVICO:
With other devilish 'pothecary stuff,
A-melting in your politic brains: dost hear? [...]
And thou shalt die like a poor rogue [...]
And be forgotten
Before the funeral sermon.

Related Characters: Lodovico , Gasparo (speaker), Brachiano, Isabella

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 133

Explanation and Analysis

To escape unnoticed in Padua, Lodovico and Gasparo dress as Capuchin monks—and use their disguises to secretly poison Brachiano's helmet, killing him. As he dies, the two men promise to give Brachiano extreme unction, helping him transition into the afterlife. But instead of doing so, they "discover" (reveal) themselves as his murderers. As a stage picture, the sight of monks tossing off their garments to proudly boast of murder functions as a potent critique of religion; it also visually reiterates Webster's theme that no one is how they appear to be.

The other fascinating part of this exchange is the attention it gives to the mechanics of poison. In addition to emphasizing the poetic justice of Brachiano's death (he will die just as he killed his wife Isabella), Lodovico and Gasparo are fascinated by the very substances that kill: copperas and mercury and quicksilver, that "devilish [a]pothecary stuff." Intriguingly, many of these substances are close to precious metals (copper and "copperas," silver and "quicksilver"). Once more, what seems beautiful and precious is adjacent to—and indistinguishable from—what is toxic and deadly.

And lastly, Lodovico closes this scene by telling Brachiano he will be "forgotten." Though legacy has not been a major theme in the play up to this point, Brachiano's lack of longevity now (literally) takes center-stage. Though he has had people flock around him in life, desperate for his money or his status, those things will vanish in death, when he can no longer offer anyone anything. And as his brains "melt," so will the memory of the life he lived.

FLAMINEO:
Had women navigable rivers in their eyes,
They would dispend them all. Surely, I wonder
Why we should wish more rivers to the city,
When they sell water so good cheap. I 'll tell thee
These are but Moorish shades of griefs or fears;
There 's nothing sooner dry than women's tears.
Why, here 's an end of all my harvest; he has given me nothing.
Court promises! let wise men count them curs'd;
For while you live, he that scores best, pays worst.

FRANCISCO:
Sure this was Florence' doing.

FLAMINEO:
Very likely:
Those are found weighty strokes which come from th' hand,
But those are killing strokes which come from th' head.
Oh, the rare tricks of a Machiavellian!
He doth not come, like a gross plodding slave,
And buffet you to death; no, my quaint knave,
He tickles you to death, makes you die laughing,
As if you had swallow'd down a pound of saffron.
You see the feat, 'tis practis'd in a trice;
To teach court honesty, it jumps on ice.

Related Characters: Flamineo, Francisco/Mulinassar (speaker), Vittoria, Brachiano, Zanche

Related Themes:

Page Number: 135

Explanation and Analysis

Brachiano perishes, Vittoria wails, and Flamineo and Francisco-as-Mulinassar look out on the carnage. As Flamineo reflects once more on the deceptiveness around him, the true extent of his prejudice comes into view. First, he labels women's tears as "cheap" and dishonest, drying as soon as they are no longer in public view. He then extends that prejudice to Moors, reflecting both religious and racial biases; false "griefs," he argues, are "Moorish."

But if Flamineo sees dishonesty in women and in Moors, he also asserts that the political machine of Renaissance Italy is no more truthful. Duke Brachiano has not left Flamineo any money after his death, despite his suggestions that he would; in an untrustworthy court, "court promises" are not really promises at all. Moreover, in reflecting that Francisco is "Machiavellian," Flamineo is calling him manipulative and crafty—able to hurt people before they can realize that they are in danger, and thereby "tickl[ing]" his enemies "to death."

And the most important thing to realize is that while Flamineo sees Francisco's Machiavellian leadership as a

"feat," a "rare trick," he is much more critical of the kind of dishonesty that Vittoria (and later Zanche) practice. So in yet another way, a double standard emerges: women and men can both lie, but what is impressive in a man's world is "cheap" in a woman's.

Act 5, Scene 4 Quotes

FLAMINEO:
I have a strange thing in me, to th'which
I cannot give a name without it be
Compassion.

Related Characters: Flamineo (speaker), Cornelia , Marcello

Related Themes:

Page Number: 146

Explanation and Analysis

After Cornelia urges Flamineo to seek "repentance" for murdering his brother Marcello, Flamineo puzzles out this thoughtful, uncharacteristic line. For most of *The White Devil*, Flamineo has been concerned only with his own status: he fights with his brother, insults his mother, and betrays his sister in an effort to impress her wealthy lover. But now he feels "compassion," shifting his focus from his personal success to the lives and experiences of others.

This brief, lyrical passage contains a few especially salient details. The line breaks here are telling—from the Renaissance to today, the way lines are distributed on the page has been a tool for playwrights to communicate intention to actors and directors. So, by putting "compassion" on its own line, Webster is signaling that the actor playing Flamineo should give that word a lot of weight. And in general, it appears that Flamineo is suddenly struggling to articulate himself. Though he normally has just the right words (or rhymes or rhetorical flourishes), here, he finds himself in a "strange" position, unable to completely "name" the things he is feeling.

Finally, it is worth emphasizing Flamineo's sense that this feeling of compassion is "in" him. All through the play, dukes and counts have been trying to create external punishments (like poisoning and banishment). But it is only when Flamineo is forced to look "in," to truly be retrospective, that he may consider behaving more selflessly.

Act 5, Scene 6 Quotes

FLAMINEO:
Whither shall I go now? O Lucian, thy ridiculous purgatory! To find Alexander the Great cobbling shoes, Pompey tagging points, and Julius Cæsar making hair-buttons, Hannibal selling blacking, and Augustus crying garlic, Charlemagne selling lists by the dozen, and King Pepin crying apples in a cart drawn with one horse!
Whether I resolve to fire, earth, water, air,
Or all the elements by scruples, I know not,
Nor greatly care.

Related Characters: Flamineo (speaker), Vittoria, Zanche

Related Themes:

Page Number: 154

Explanation and Analysis

In an almost farcical turn near the end of the play, Flamineo fakes his own death in the hopes that Vittoria and Zanche will actually kill themselves. But in the midst of this chaotic scene, Flamineo's fakery contains a crucial peek inside his brain—and specifically, into the complex feelings about class that have plagued him for his entire life. In this strange monologue, he pictures meeting great emperors like Julius Caesar and Augustus (Roman) and King Pepin and Charlemagne (French) in the afterlife. But there's a twist: instead of being rich and powerful, these men are now members of the working class, "crying" (selling) various food items or struggling to make a living as cobblers or hairdressers. In other words, Flamineo's ultimate fantasy is of a leveled playing field; his only hope for heaven is that it does not have the class divides he was so burdened by on earth.

With slightly different language, then, this 'dying' comment reflects Francisco's earlier declaration that human beings are "all made of one clay." After all, Flamineo says, everybody is just "elements," born into different stations but made up of the same basic materials—and at the end of life, they will return to that classless, "elemental" form.

VITTORIA:
If Florence be in the court, would he would kill me.

GASPARO:
Fool! Princes give rewards with their own hands,
But death or punishment by the hands of others.

Related Characters: Vittoria, Gasparo (speaker), Lodovico , Brachiano, Francisco/Mulinassar

Related Themes:

Page Number: 158

Explanation and Analysis

Vittoria, facing execution at the hands of Gasparo and Lodovico, cannot help wishing that Duke Francisco would kill her instead. This desire to be killed by a powerful man instead of by his minions reflects, perhaps, that even in her dying moment, Vittoria is obsessed with status. But more interestingly, Gasparo's claim reflects the privilege of being a duke or "prince": Francisco can claim good behavior as his own and outsource bad behavior to his underlings.

In a play that has so consistently emphasized the importance of leading by example, Francisco's willingness to distance himself from the effects of his actions is particularly crafty—he can appear lenient and generous to his subjects even as he engages in murderous schemes behind the scenes. After all, he never goes to jail; it is Gasparo and Lodovico who, moments later, will be tortured for murdering Brachiano and Vittoria. And so this final deception represents one more way in which poor people can never elevate their status, while rich people remain comfortably at the top. No matter how much dirty work he wants done, Francisco's "hands" will always remain clean.

VITTORIA:
Oh, thou art deceived. I am too true a woman:
Conceit can never kill me. I'll tell thee what,
I will not in my death shed one base tear,
Or if look pale, for want of blood not fear.

Related Characters: Vittoria (speaker), Lodovico , Gasparo , Monticelso

Related Themes:

Page Number: 161

Explanation and Analysis

When Gasparo and Lodovico threaten Vittoria, they expect her to collapse—but she refuses, instead asserting her own dignity to the very end ("I will not in my death shed one base tear"). On the one hand, then, this final act of defiance adds a grace note to the misogynistic view most of the play has taken. Vittoria is strong not in spite of her gender, but because of it: she is "too true a woman" to faint into fright. And just as she did in her face-off against Monticelso at court, Vittoria emerges as a rich, contradictory character, simultaneously greedy and brave, eloquent and deceptive.

Moreover, Vittoria directly uses the word "deceived" in this moment. Lies and shocking reveals have been an essential part of *The White Devil* throughout the play. But here, deception is not about dishonesty; instead, Vittoria is calling out her male attackers' silly stereotypes, and the unfounded beliefs that guide their treatment of her. Deception, she suggests, is not always an act of trickery perpetrated by one person against another. Instead, people can deceive themselves, buying into the easiest (or most hateful) narratives as Lodovico and Gasparo have done with her.

FLAMINEO:
'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!

Related Characters: Flamineo (speaker), Marcello

Related Themes:

Page Number: 162

Explanation and Analysis

In this, the penultimate moment of the play, Flamineo uses his impending execution to reflect on his life of "black charnel" (a charnel is a house of death.) But even more than he regrets his various murders, Flamineo seems to mourn the time he spent lying to other people. In a strange, beautiful, metaphor, Webster compares a life of dishonesty to an "everlasting cold": just as a cold would cause Flamineo to lose his "voice," deception has caused him to lose his sense of self.

At last, Flamineo has looked inward. And here, he builds on the newfound, repentant "compassion" he experienced after seeing his mother's grief at Marcello's death. Flamineo's obsessive climb to the top—in which every moment was about bettering his own status or gaining more wealth—now feels to him "busy" and "vain." Flamineo emphasizes that he has lived a pointless life not only in his apparent celebration of his death (which he believes has

"goodness") but in his refusal to have a funeral. Nothing "flatter[ing]" that might be said about him at a funeral would be true, and Flamineo is done (at last) with lies.

Finally, it is important to note that this passage (like many of the most important quotes in the play) is written in verse—and in rhyming verse, at that. In Jacobean dramas like *The White Devil*, rhyme often gave weight to a character's words, especially when those words contained a lesson of some sort. So in Flamineo's final two couplets, Webster gives audiences a straightforward moral: to lie is not just to hurt others but to lose one's sense of self, and that is the most "irrecoverabl[e]" tragedy of all.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

ACT 1, SCENE 1

Count Lodovico has been banished from Rome. As he laments his bad fortune, his friends Antonelli and Gasparo remind him that he only has himself to blame for this tragic turn: Lodovico has been extravagant, drunk, and even violent. Worst of all, he has committed several horrifying murders in Rome.

Right away, the play shows that even those with fancy titles or high social standings—like the prominent Count Lodovico—can commit horrific crimes. Unlike most of the characters in the piece, however, Lodovico has an honest, loyal, support system in Antonelli and Gasparo.

Lodovico wonders why the court chose banishment instead of execution as his punishment, and Gasparo reflects that "this gentle penance may both end your crimes, and in the example better these bad times." At the same time, Lodovico resents that he is being punished while the Duke of Brachiano, widely known to be pursuing a married woman named Vittoria, faces no such charges.

Gasparo emphasizes that people learn by "example": because the court has punished Lodovico gently, perhaps other leaders will follow suit and treat their criminals with similar kindness. But while he appreciates the relative laxness of his punishment, Lodovico resents the court's inconsistency: Brachiano gets away with the crimes Lodovico is exiled for because he is wealthier and more powerful.

Antonelli and Gasparo urge Lodovico to use his time in exile to become a better person. Lodovico agrees, and his friends promise that they will work to end his banishment.

If Lodovico becomes a better person in exile, his friends suggest, it will be because he has time to reflect and look inward, not because of torture or other extreme forms of punishment.

ACT 1, SCENE 2

The scene now shifts to the Roman court. Just as Lodovico said, Brachiano is desperate to have sex with Vittoria. Flamineo, one of Vittoria's brothers, encourages Brachiano to pursue his sister, assuring him of Vittoria's desire. Flamineo explains that Vittoria is simply being coy, because she knows that men's "desire is increased by the difficulty of enjoying; whereas satiety is a blunt, weary, and drowsy passion."

As the play shifts back to Rome, it introduces its most complex trio: as Brachiano's servant and Vittoria's brother, Flamineo often plays go-between for this adulterous pair. Here, he lays out a misogynist theory of sexual longing: women must make themselves "difficult" to attain, because as soon as a man has easy access to a woman, he becomes "weary" of her.

Brachiano frets that Vittoria's husband Camillo will get in the way, but Flamineo promises that Vittoria has no sexual feelings toward Camillo. Flamineo also suggests that Camillo no longer desires his wife because he cannot please her sexually.

This man-to-man conversation between Brachiano and Flamineo puts the burden on women to simultaneously curb their own sexual desire, excite their male partners, and be ready for whatever sexual acts men desire of them.

Camillo enters the room, interrupting Brachiano and Flamineo's conversation. Brachiano promptly exits. Camillo complains to Flamineo that he does not remember the last time he slept with Vittoria; she constantly points out his flaws and tries to distance herself from him. Camillo also suspects that Brachiano is trying to get into bed with Vittoria.

In contrast to what Flamineo has said, Camillo's wife does not tire him; in fact, the opposite is true. In addition to providing Camillo with evidence of the affair, Vittoria's refusal to have sex with someone she is not attracted to displays her determination to assert her own agency, even as a woman.

Flamineo mocks Camillo for his jealousy, telling him that it is in fact his fear of being made "cuckold" that his driving his wife away. After teasing Camillo for having **horns** and "large ears," Flamineo tries to convince him that all the evidence he has of Vittoria's unfaithfulness is merely paranoia.

A cuckold is a man who has been cheated on by his wife; in the English Renaissance, this was one of the easiest ways men could insults each other. Ram's horns were a symbol of cuckoldry, which is why Flamineo mocks Camillo for having both horns and "large ears" (as in, horn-like ears).

Vittoria enters, and Flamineo seizes the moment: though he is still loyal to Brachiano, Flamineo pretends to sing Camillo's praises to Vittoria. Loudly, Flamineo tells his sister of Camillo's high status and intelligence—but quietly, he whispers mockery to Vittoria, calling Camillo "lousy" and labeling him "a counterfeit diamond."

For the first time, we see Flamineo's expert deception in action: he presents himself as an ally to Camillo while disparaging Camillo to Vittoria (thus gaining favor with Brachiano). In addition to demonstrating how tricky external appearances can be, this comic moment also shows the extent of Flamineo's craftiness.


To give Vittoria time to see Brachiano, Flamineo then executes the final step of his trick: he tells Camillo to separate himself from Vittoria for a night, thereby increasing her desire. Flamineo even convinces Camillo to lock himself in his room so he's not tempted to go to Vittoria in the night. "I'll be your jailor," Flamineo coos.

Clearly, Camillo's intelligence is lacking: even though he was nervous about his wife's betrayal only moments ago, Camillo now agrees to be locked in his room at night…which will give Vittoria ample time to sneak off with Brachiano.


Camillo, excited by this plan, hurries off, and Brachiano returns. As soon as he does, Vittoria's face changes, prompting Flamineo to scoff that "women are like cursed dogs: civility keeps them tied all daytime, but they are let loose at midnight." Unbeknownst to anyone, Cornelia—Vittoria and Flamineo's mother—sneaks up behind the other characters, listening in to their conversation. No one else notices that she has arrived.

Again, while Flamineo normalizes—and even encourages—both Brachiano and Camillo's lust, when Vittoria expresses any sort of sexual excitement, her brother compares her to a "cursed dog." It is still worth noting, however, the sudden shift in Vittoria's demeanor: she is just as capable of deception as her brother is.


While Flamineo and Vittoria's maid Zanche look on, Brachiano and Vittoria flirt, admitting their feelings for each other. Cornelia panics, realizing that Vittoria and Flamineo are about to bring shame onto her entire family.

There is an element of surveillance here: Zanche and Cornelia are both taking all of this in. But while Zanche listens quietly, Cornelia feels she must intervene, as she is horrified to discover how devious and manipulative her children can be.



Vittoria tells Brachiano about a dream she had the night before. In the dream, Vittoria was sitting peacefully in front of a yew **tree** when Camillo and Brachiano's wife, Isabella, approached her. Without explanation, Camillo and Isabella began to chase Vittoria, telling her they wanted to uproot the yew tree and bury her alive. But before they could do so, a gust of wind blew over the yew tree, crushing and killing Camillo and Isabella.

Yew trees, an important symbol in the play, often grow in graveyards—so when Vittoria uses such a tree to signify her relationship with Brachiano, she is suggesting that their love grows out of the death of their respective marriages. And then she makes that death literal, describing (or perhaps fantasizing) about Camillo and Isabella's demise.

Flamineo, realizing that Vittoria is trying to convince Brachiano to kill her husband and his wife, applauds his sister as an "excellent devil." For his part, Brachiano promises to remove all the obstacles between himself and Vittoria, putting her "above law, and above scandal." Zanche, who has been setting up a picnic spread and listening in, exits.

As a woman in this time and place, Vittoria cannot openly plot murder—but Flamineo now sees that while his sister feigns purity on the outside, she is scheming like a "devil" within. Brachiano's response is also telling: his own status and wealth allow him to put his bad behavior with Vittoria literally "above" the law.

Cornelia reveals herself, telling her children she is deeply ashamed of them. Vittoria protests that the intensity of Brachiano's pursuit has made her feel that she has no choice but to give in to him. Cornelia scolds Brachiano, telling him that as a man of high status he should set an "example" for others, and she wishes death on her daughter. Cornelia also reveals that Isabella is coming to Rome later that day. Vittoria leaves in distress. Brachiano, too, heads home, ordering Flamineo to send for a mysterious figure named Doctor Julio later that night.

Once more, the idea of leading by "example" becomes important—and given Brachiano's wealth and influence, Cornelia feels that it is extra important that he act as a role model. Interestingly, while Cornelia has no real connection to Isabella, she favors her over her own daughter—perhaps because Isabella more immediately lives up to Cornelia's standards of womanly decency.

Now that Flamineo is alone with Cornelia, he explains that he is trying to help Brachiano so that Brachiano will make him a wealthy man. Cornelia cannot abide this logic, asking, "because we are poor shall we be vicious?" Flamineo reflects on the hardships of his life: after his father died and left the family penniless, he tried tutoring and working in various courts, but he was never able to become rich.

Cornelia's insistence on goodness in all circumstances is admirable. But the play is sympathetic to Flamineo, too: he has tried to earn money through honest means, but he has been unable to do so. Flamineo's turn to crime then happens in part because he is desperate to provide for himself and his family.

Cornelia tells Flamineo she wishes he had never been born, and Flamineo retorts that he would rather have "a common courtesan" as a mother. Cornelia leaves in anger, and Flamineo frets that Isabella is in town. Still, he recognizes that he must finish what he has started—but that the only way forward is to move like a "snake," "winding and indirect."

Misogyny is so much a part of the play's everyday language: when Flamineo wants to insult his mother, he does so by unfavorably comparing her to a "common courtesan" (a prostitute). Flamineo's focus on "snake"-like success once more reflects his deceptive nature.

ACT 2, SCENE 1

Isabella enters the court with her brother Francisco de Medici, the Duke of Florence. Francisco makes reference to Brachiano's wandering eye, but Isabella says that she would rather let her husband be than try to constrain him out of jealousy.

The fact that both Isabella and Francisco are Medicis by birth is important: historically, the Meidcis were one of the most powerful families in the Renaissance, ruling over huge chunks of Italy and Austria. It is also useful to see how Isabella's jealousy differs from Camillo's; whereas Camillo plans to change his wife's behavior, Isabella (likely constrained by her gender) works only to accept the facts as they are.

Along with Monticelso, a Cardinal in the Roman church, Francisco meets with Brachiano and Flamineo. Monticelso lectures Brachiano on acting out of passion, counseling that "when you awake from this lascivious dream, repentance then will follow." Francisco then more directly accuses Brachiano of having an affair with Vittoria.

Brachiano now emerges as a parallel to Lodovico: "lasciviousness" consumes them, and Monticelso asks both men to find "repentance." However, while Lodovico has begun to look inward, Brachiano is still at the height of his lustful "dream."

When Brachiano does not deny the accusation, Francisco is furious that Brachiano is treating Isabella so poorly. Francisco is anxious to "end this with the cannon," but Monticelso urges the men to take things more slowly. Just then, Brachiano's young son Giovanni enters. Monticelso knows that Giovanni is a source of great hope for both Francisco and Brachiano, and he encourages Brachiano to train his son "to virtue" by "example."

This passage shows Monticelso acting according to his religious bona fides: he tries to appease Francisco and Brachiano, creating harmony instead of tension. Monticelso is particularly concerned that no one should fight in front of Giovanni—because the young man will one day take over his father's leadership position, Monticelso believes it is crucial that Brachiano and Francisco act as "examples" for this future duke.

Giovanni and Francisco talk, and Giovanni expresses his desire to be a new kind of prince: he will ride into battle with his fellow soldiers, and he will set free all prisoners of war. Giovanni's bravery and wit so charm Francisco that he is temporarily able to make peace with Brachiano. Francisco leaves, but not before mentioning that Count Lodovico has now become a pirate.

In a highly stratified class structure, where dukes like Brachiano and counts like Lodovico abuse their power and wealth, Giovanni wants to do the opposite—he imagines leveling the playing field, acting as an equal to his subjects instead of elevating himself above them.

Returning home from her trip abroad, Isabella explains that her intense love for Brachiano has brought her back to Rome early. But while Isabella dotes on Brachiano, he treats her coldly—he insults her brother Francisco, and he vows that he will never have sex with her again.

It is interesting to observe how freely Brachiano scorns Isabella—especially in contrast to Vittoria, who must still go to bed with Camillo. In other words, society gives Brachiano's (manly) sexual preferences much more leeway than Vittoria's.

Isabella is deeply hurt, but instead of complaining to Francisco (as Brachiano expects), Isabella decides to make peace between the two men. As Francisco watches, Isabella pretends to be so consumed with jealousy that she can never touch Brachiano again. Using almost the exact same language Brachiano had just used, Isabella makes it look like *she* is the one who wants to end the marriage. Isabella's plan to smooth things over works: Francisco leaves Brachiano alone, instead accusing his sister of being weak and foolish in her jealousy.

More than perhaps anyone else in the piece, Isabella is generous and self-sacrificing, almost to a fault. Rather than using her family's power to chastise or change Brachiano, she merely tries to make him happy, even as he betrays her. And while Isabella's selflessness could be taken as a strength, for a leader as calculating and ruthless as Francisco, such generosity is only a sign of weakness.

Soon after, Flamineo pulls Brachiano to the side of the stage, introducing him to the nefarious Doctor Julio. The doctor plans to help with the murders of Isabella and Camillo; he explains that Camillo will die a public death with a "politic strain," while Isabella's murder will involve "small mischiefs."

In a production, this stage picture reflects Webster's overall conviction that evil often hides in plain sight: Flamineo and Brachiano hatch their diabolical plan only a few feet away from Isabella, one of their intended victims.

Camillo learns that someone has thrown **horns** through his window. Monticelso interprets this as a sure sign that Vittoria has betrayed her husband ("'tis given out you are a cuckold"). Francisco warns Camillo that if he is not careful, Vittoria will have children by her lover.

The horns return, once more symbolizing Camillo's cuckoldry—and revealing how much masculinity in this time period was tied to a wife's faithfulness. For the first time, moreover, Monticelso begins to be perhaps inappropriately interested in the details of others' private lives.

Monticelso believes that if Camillo spends some time away from Vittoria, his absence might make her long for him; to that end, he nominates Camillo to deal with the pirates on the Italian coast. Alongside Camillo, Monticelso also nominates Marcello, an aide to Francisco—who also happens to be Vittoria's other brother (younger than Flamineo).

Webster adds new layers to his complicated web of connection and status. Though Monticelso is a religious man, he seems to have a good deal of political/military power (as evidenced by his dispatching of Camillo). And while Marcello (like Flamineo) must work as a rich man's aide, his alliance with Francisco pits him against his siblings.

Camillo leaves, resolving to get drunk and forget his troubles. In his absence, Monticelso and Francisco reveal their real plan: now that Camillo is gone, Brachiano will show the extent of his lust for Vittoria, and they can catch him in the act. Monticelso also explains that Count Lodovico is not a pirate in the slightest; in fact, he is in Padua as they speak, writing letters to Isabella and begging to be let back into Rome.

Brachiano, Vittoria, and Flamineo are not the only schemers—now, even the religious Monticelso and the seemingly upstanding Francisco show their willingness to lie and manipulate. Almost no one, the play is beginning to make clear, is transparent or trustworthy.

Monticelso and Francisco consider that their plan might put Camillo in real danger—but Monticelso decides that he would "stake a brother's life, that being wrong'd, durst not avenge himself." Francisco and Monticelso leave to observe Vittoria (whom they call a "strumpet") and Brachiano in action. As they go, Francisco compares the adulterous couple to two sickly **trees**, which grow close and then "rot together."

Though he is ostensibly the novel's holiest, least materialistic character, Monticelso is willing to risk his own nephew's life for political gain (taking Brachiano down). Another detail worth catching: whereas Vittoria favorably compared her love with Brachiano to a tree, Francisco now uses the metaphor of a tree to suggest that this adulterous couple is "rotting."

ACT 2, SCENE 2

At exactly midnight, Brachiano meets in his home with a conjurer to plot out the mechanics of Isabella and Camillo's deaths. The conjurer explains that though there are many frauds, he really can help predict and shape the future. To that end, the conjurer shows Brachiano two pantomimes ("dumb shows") of what will happen to Isabella and Camillo.

Implicitly, the conjurer links two of the novel's major themes: fraud and deception, whether practiced by false conjurers or scheming servants, are often used by those who lack wealth.

In the first dumb show, Doctor Julio and his assistant Christophero enter Isabella's bedroom and approach the picture she has of Brachiano. Covering their eyes and noses with glass, the two men burn a variety of perfumes over the picture, laughing as they douse the image's lips in the foul substance. Moments later, Isabella comes in and kisses the picture, which causes her to collapse and die.

Structurally, the dumb show gives the play's audience insight into the murders without having to derail the action of the play—all while adding a layer of mysticism and magic to the proceedings. Moreover, there is tragic irony in the fact that devoted Isabella will die because of her love for Brachiano.

The dumb show ends, and the conjurer explains that Isabella always kisses her picture of Brachiano before she falls asleep—so poisoning the picture will be the perfect way to **poison** her. When Brachiano expresses his surprise that Count Lodovico has appeared in the dumb show, the conjurer explains that he has used magic to discover a surprising truth: Lodovico is secretly in love with Isabella.

Poison is an important symbol in the play: because poison is usually invisible, a little poison sprinkled in the right place transforms benign objects (a picture, a helmet) into dangerous ones. The reveal that Lodovico is in love with Isabella also suggests that exile is already changing him: no longer the lustful playboy he was at the beginning of the paly, he's now more patient, pursuing only one woman (albeit a married one).

In the second dumb show, Flamineo, Marcello, and Camillo all get drunk and compete to jump a vaulting horse. Just as Camillo is about to leap, Flamineo breaks his neck and makes it look like an accident that the horse caused. The conjurer tells Brachiano that both Flamineo and "the virtuous Marcello" are in on this plot. Satisfied, Brachiano promises to pay the conjurer, who reflects that "great men do great good, or else great harm."

Camillo and Isabella's deaths mirror their different reactions to their respective spouses' betrayals: whereas Camillo's murders target (and emasculate) him in public, Isabella dies in a private moment of love. More important, however, are the conjurer's act-ending words: if great men can only do "great good" or "great harm," then their actions (and the example those actions set) take on an extra weight.

ACT 3, SCENE 1

It's a few days later, and Camillo is now dead. At the court, Monticelso and Francisco try to figure out how they can connect Vittoria to his death—they are certain she is at fault, but they only have circumstantial evidence. Monticelso brings in various ambassadors and a lawyer to hear her case. The lawyer advises that if they can prove Vittoria and Brachiano "have but kissed one another," they can prove that Vittoria is guilty of her husband's murder.

The hypocrisy of Renaissance gender roles becomes especially clear here: though Vittoria and Brachiano are partners—and Brachiano is more responsible for the murders than his lover—Vittoria will take the fall because she is a woman. Indeed, the play suggests that lust is akin to murder.

Before the ambassadors show up, Marcello and Flamineo engage in a heated brotherly debate. Marcello is loyal to Francisco, and he does not support his sister's relationship with Brachiano. By contrast, Flamineo again emphasizes that he will do anything for material gain. Marcello reveals that he knows Francisco was involved in Camillo's death, though he himself abstained from the plot.

Money and power prove stronger than even familial bonds, as Marcello and Flamineo are now split along the same lines as the wealthy men they serve. Marcello also shows himself to be more virtuous and straightforward than his dishonest brother.

Ambassadors from France, Spain and England arrive, and the lawyer flatters all of them. In as aside to the audience, Flamineo reveals all of the lawyer's flattery to be bogus and instead makes fun of each ambassador.

Flattery, Flamineo suggests, is its own form of deception: to raise his own status, the lawyer gives out phony compliments galore (in what is meant to be a highly comic moment).

ACT 3, SCENE 2

The scene shifts to the courthouse, where almost all of the characters have come to see Vittoria's arraignment. Francisco and Monticelso try to keep Brachiano from the proceedings, but they are unsuccessful. The court calls Vittoria to the stand, and the lawyer Francisco has hired begins to question her.

Even from the start, a fair trial seems unlikely for Vittoria, as Francisco and Monticelso wield all their collective power to ensure a sympathetic jury of foreign ambassadors.

At first, the lawyer speaks in Latin, but Vittoria refuses to answer his questions. Though she understands Latin, she declares that "[she] will not have [her] accusation clouded in a strange tongue." The lawyer then begins to speak English, but he uses so many fancy words that Vittoria again refuses to answer him. Frustrated, Francisco dispatches the lawyer, and Monticelso steps in to accuse Vittoria in plain language of being a "whore."

The lawyer's refusal to use simple questions reflects another class divide—in relying on Latin and long words, he is trying to take advantage of what he (wrongly) assumes is Vittoria's lack of education. Even more importantly, when Monticelso does finally get to the heart of the trial, it becomes clear that he suspects Vittoria less of murder than of improper sexual behavior.

When Vittoria pushes back against Monticelso's attack, he launches into a monologue defining the word "whore" as he understands it (and comparing Vittoria to a "guilty counterfeited coin"). Some of the ambassadors begin to suspect that Vittoria really is guilty, while others feel that Monticelso is being too harsh.

In this crucial moment, Monticelso accuses Vittoria of "counterfeit[ing]" herself, linking female lust both to deception and to a lack of wealth (he compares her, after all, to fake money). But Monticelso is also not what he seems, as members of the jury are beginning to realize: neither his obsession with Vittoria's sexuality nor his willingness to pummel her with questions were behaviors they would have expected from a cardinal.

Francisco now jumps in, arguing that Vittoria's alleged adultery proves that she is guilty of murder. Francisco focuses on the strange circumstances of Camillo's death—how, Francisco wonders, could Camillo break his neck even though he only fell two yards?

If the scandalous details of the ordeal fascinate Monticelso, Francisco interest is more strategic. In turning his attention to the vaulting competition, the calculating duke also expands the slate of suspects, roping Flamineo into the mix.

For his part, Monticelso argues that Vittoria should be more mournful of her husband's death; Vittoria responds that she has just learned of it and has not had the time to process it. She then tells her accusers that "if a man should spit against the wind, the filth returns in 's face."

In declaring that Monticelso's "filth" will return to him, Vittoria directly names the hypocrisy she faces. As a man of religious standing, Monticelso is able to project all his own base impulses (his impure thoughts, his lies) onto Vittoria—until she turns the accusation back around.

Monticelso brings up the fact that Brachiano was staying with Vittoria the night Camillo died. Brachiano explains this away by saying that Vittoria was anxious about money—Camillo was in debt to Monticelso—and he had merely come to comfort her. Brachiano boasts of his own honor and scolds Monticelso for lying, then he exits in a huff.

Once again, no one is innocent; Monticelso is loathsome, but Brachiano is also every bit as adulterous as his accusers claim. Additionally, this passage further complicates the question of class, with Brachiano suggesting that Vittoria is financially vulnerable and that Monticelso is a predatory lender.

Francisco reflects that he does not think Vittoria could have orchestrated the murder on her own; once again, he compares her to a **tree** capable either of giving healthy fruit or rotting. But Vittoria is suspicious of Francisco's sudden generosity, telling him that "[she] discern[s] **poison** under [his] gilded pills."

Two of the text's most potent symbols (trees and poison) now recur. And more than that, Vittoria's statement—that pretty exteriors hide "poison," secret, truths—neatly encapsulates the play's central theme.

Now that Brachiano is gone, Monticelso produces one of his letters and shows it to the court because it is too "lascivious" to read aloud. Vittoria does not deny that Brachiano sent the letter, but she points out that "temptation to lust proves not the act […] you read his hot love to me, but you want my frosty answer." Monticelso, refusing to hear this defense, continues to compare Vittoria to the devil.

Monticelso seems to take deep pleasure in immersing himself in the pornographic details of Vittoria's rumored affair—while at the same time expecting total purity from Vittoria. Here, Webster allows his antiheroine to defend herself with eloquence and strength, pointing out that she should be allowed to be "tempted" (and perhaps implying that it should be Brachiano on trial for his "hot love" instead).

Monticelso then tells the court about the circumstances of Vittoria and Camillo's marriage: they met in Venice, Vittoria's hometown. Camillo spent lots of money courting her but received no dowry from Vittoria's father. To Monticelso, this lack of a dowry is further evidence that Vittoria is a "notorious strumpet."

Monticelso now more explicitly ties his sexual critique of Vittoria to a financial one; if Flamineo has illustrated how hard it is to be a man in financial trouble, being a woman without wealth brings an even more treacherous set of challenges.

The trial ends, and Monticelso assigns Vittoria and her lady-in-waiting Zanche to a house for "convertites," or "penitent whores." The court doesn't charge Brachiano, Flamineo, or Marcello with any crime. However, both of Vittoria's brothers are charged "sureties," or court fees; Brachiano pays for Flamineo's, while Francisco pays for Marcello's.

All of the legal rulings here are tremendously revealing. The court punishes Vittoria but concludes that the men in her life are innocent; the court also instructs Vittoria to feel "penitent" when in actuality she feels only anger; and Marcello and Flamineo become further indebted to their wealthier bosses.

The unfairness of this sentencing—Vittoria refers to it as a "rape" of justice—fills Vittoria with rage. Monticelso accuses her of madness. As Vittoria leaves the courthouse, she swears to Monticelso that in her heart, the house of convertites will become "honester [...] than the Pope's palace, and more peaceable than thy soul."

In Vittoria's anger, the gap between the intention of a punishment and its ultimate effects becomes clear—while Monticelso intends to shame her, Vittoria instead vows to find the kind of "honesty" and "peace" that Monticelso can only ever pretend to have.

Brachiano re-enters, looking distraught and speaking nonsense. Soon after, Giovanni appears dressed all in black—as he has learned to do from his uncle Francisco—and informs everyone in the court that his mother Isabella has been found dead. The news devastates Francisco.

Brachiano planned Isabella's murder, so it's clear that he's faking his grief and madness. Also worth noting: Giovanni is copying all kinds of behavior from the older men around him (like wearing black after a death), proving just how essential it is for a young person to have good "examples."

ACT 3, SCENE 3

In the aftermath of the trial, Flamineo feigns insanity—what the script calls "distraction"—in front of various foreign ambassadors. Since the ambassadors think it is clear that Brachiano and Vittoria have conspired to commit murder, Flamineo tries to distance himself from Brachiano, regretting that he ever worked for him.

Now that he has done all of Brachiano's dirty work, Flamineo realizes that he might get all of the blame—and none of the benefits. Like Brachiano in the previous scene, Flamineo fakes madness ("distraction") to hide his guilt.

Count Lodovico returns and confirms to Flamineo the news of Isabella's death. Flamineo pretends to mourn the loss, while Lodovico, along with his friends Antonelli and Gasparo, grieve sincerely. Antonelli informs Lodovico that Francisco has restored his citizenship, ending his exile.

Lodovico is in love with Isabella, so it makes sense that his tears for her are sincere. Furthermore, Lodovico's sudden return affirms the political nature of punishment: now that Francisco needs an ally to avenge Isabella, he is more than happy to forgive Lodovico and bring him back.

Like Francisco and Monticelso, Lodovico blames Vittoria for Isabella's death. As Flamineo continues to put on a show of sadness, Lodovico snaps at him: "your sister is a whore." The tension escalates, and Flamineo strikes Lodovico—but rather than engage in a full-out sword fight, Lodovico leaves, choosing instead to have a drink with his friends.

Just like Monticelso during Vittoria's trial, Lodovico and Flamineo redirect their own frustrations and shames to women like Vittoria (whom Lodovico attacks seemingly out of nowhere). At the same time, though, Lodovico has grown up a little in his exile: whereas once he might have murdered Flamineo immediately, now he takes time to cool off instead.

ACT 4, SCENE 1

Outside the courthouse, Francisco fumes: he wants to take revenge on Brachiano for his sister's death, but to do so would be to start a war, and he does not want to inflict such a conflict on his subjects. Monticelso urges him to be patient and wait for Brachiano to slip up.

Not for the last time, Francisco expresses some awareness (and even some guilt) about the stratified class system: after all, why should his subjects have to pay for him to deal with a personal matter?

Now that he is resolved to play the long game, Francisco asks Monticelso about the book of names he carries; Monticelso explains that he has created a list of every criminal in the town. Monticelso then agrees to let Francisco borrow the book. Privately, however, Francisco reveals that he distrusts even Monticelso, and he vows to keep his plan for revenge secret from everyone.

Just as the alliance between Flamineo and Brachiano is coming apart, Francisco starts to keep secrets from Monticelso. The fact that Monticelso has such a book of names is also telling—rather than forgiving people for their sins (as a cardinal would be expected to do), Monticelso instead keeps track of those sins for his private gain.

Monticelso's book of names reveals many kinds of secrets: he writes of pirates and usurers, adulterers and corrupt lawyers, and of women who dress as men. Francisco is most interested in the section about murderers, and he asks Monticelso to leave him alone with the book.

Most of the crimes in the book are either about money (piracy and usury, or illegal money lending) or about deceit and impersonation—thus reinforcing the idea that dishonesty and class division are this society's biggest issues. The fact that Monticelso keeps track of women who dress as men demonstrates the rigid nature of Renaissance gender roles.

Alone at last, Francisco reflects on in the inequity of the justice system; whereas wealthy men can afford to bribe someone like Monticelso to keep their misdeeds secret, poor people will face harsher punishments for their crimes. To keep himself focused on his revenge, Francisco conjures a mental image of Isabella, who appears onstage as a ghost. His grief quickly turns into anger, and he is more determined than ever to get back at Brachiano.

Flamineo now more explicitly addresses the problem of class: while wealthy men like himself are allowed to commit crimes with impunity, poor people—who might commit crimes out of necessity—are the ones society ultimately punishes. Rather than try and alter this system, however, Flamineo simply refocuses himself on his revenge plot, putting his personal needs over those of the people he governs.

Francisco at last confides his plot: he will use this book to hire murderers to kill Brachiano. And what better assassin than Count Lodovico, whom he has just pardoned? To accomplish this plan, Francisco writes a letter and instructs a servant to bring it to the house of convertites, where he suspects Brachiano will be.

Now, it becomes obvious why Francisco ended Lodovico's banishment. Francisco was never concerned with setting a good example; he just wanted an assassin he could trust.

ACT 4, SCENE 2

Flamineo and the Matron are now at the house of convertites, discussing important political news. They reveal that the Pope is on his deathbed, and all of Rome is in chaos. Francisco's servant interrupts this conversation to sneak the Matron his boss's letter, explaining that it is for Vittoria.

The Pope was the ultimate source of power in Renaissance Italy, so his death would have profound consequences for dukes like Brachiano and Flamineo (not to mention for a cardinal like Monticelso).

Brachiano arrives, and he and Flamineo demand to see the letter. To Brachiano's horror, it is a love letter, in which Francisco encourages Vittoria to escape with him to Florence. Brachiano is immediately consumed with jealously; he calls Vittoria a "whore" and vows to cut her into pieces. In his anger, Brachiano also turns on Flamineo—but in the hopes of working things out and saving his own skin, Flamineo offers to bring Brachiano to Vittoria.

Once more, Flamineo must remain more loyal to Brachiano than he does to one of his own siblings. But perhaps more notable is the ease with which Brachiano jumps to calling Vittoria a "whore"—even though he ostensibly loves her, he has no more faith in women than the other men in the play.

Still flustered, Brachiano shows the letter to Vittoria and demands to know the truth. Vittoria explains that she was never involved with Francisco and that the letter is a lie, meant to make her look guilty and unfaithful. Brachiano repents, and he apologizes to Vittoria, explaining that "[he] was bewitch'd; for all the world speaks ill of [her]."

In this exchange, Brachiano admits how much a person's reputation (how "the world speaks" of them) influences him. But as the play has shown many times, reputation is not a reliable source of information: just look at treacherous Monticelso.

Vittoria can't forgive Brachiano so easily. Instead, she laments that he has given her nothing but "infamy," roping her into this elaborate murder plot and getting her sent to this house of convertites. Vittoria throws herself on her bed and begins to sob, while Flamineo encourages her to forgive Brachiano; in turn, Vittoria snaps at her brother for "pander[ing]."

If flattery is one form of manipulation, "pandering" might be another—but if Flamineo wants to stay in his boss's good graces, what other choice does he have? So in this moment, as in many others, Flamineo must choose between being honest and making Brachiano happy.

After much persuading, Flamineo is eventually able to get Vittoria and Brachiano to join hands and come back together (though Vittoria still complains of "ye dissembling men!") Brachiano wonders about the motivations behind Francisco's letter—did he write it out of real love, or is it part of some larger plot?

The court tried and convicted Vittoria as a liar, yet it is the men around her who are constantly "dissembling." Moreover, though the play doesn't say so explicitly, Vittoria is just as financially dependent on Brachiano as Flamineo is—she cannot afford to alienate the wealthy duke either.

Moreover, though he loathes Francisco, Brachiano ultimately decides to adopt and adapt the plan laid out in the letter: instead of going to Florence, he will escape with Vittoria to Padua where they can live together as a couple.

Francisco's plan has backfired, and instead, he has become an inadvertent role model—inspiring Brachiano's escape and once more proving the important of leading by example.

Before the couple can escape Rome, Flamineo tells a story of a crocodile and a bird. The crocodile has something in its teeth, which the bird kindly picks out for him. The crocodile then becomes scared that he will be accused of not paying the bird for her services, so he tries to eat her. But the bird has a sharp point on her head, and she tears the crocodile's mouth.

On its surface, this story seems like it would be a metaphor for Flamineo's service to Brachiano: he has committed crimes to ensure that Brachiano stays out of trouble, and now he wants people to thank him for his service instead of throwing him under the bus.

Flamineo explains that in his analogy, Vittoria is the crocodile and Brachiano is the bird—she must not show ingratitude for what he has done for her. Flamineo then assures his sister of better days to come: "knaves do grow great," he promises, "by being great men's apes."

By shifting the interpretation of this story to depict Vittoria as the crocodile, Flamineo reiterates that women should be subservient to men. And in the final line of the scene, Flamineo clearly articulates his worldview: he is a "knave," but he hopes that by doing even the most despicable tasks for a great man like Brachiano, he too can become "great" by proxy.

ACT 4, SCENE 3

The Pope has died, and ambassadors from all over Europe have gathered to elect the next Pope. As a prominent cardinal, Monticelso is up for the position. Because the various candidates and ambassadors are busy sucking up to each other, however, they are paying less attention to day-to-day governance.

Webster was writing 15 years after the Protestant Reformation began, so it is unsurprising that he is so critical of the Catholic Church. Still, the play takes a remarkably bleak view of the papacy, suggesting that the Pope is not a particularly holy man so much as a skilled (or manipulative) politician.

A servant informs Francisco that Vittoria and Brachiano have seized on this political confusion to make their escape to Padua. Francisco laments that they have followed exactly the plan that he laid out in his letter to Vittoria, intended to break the couple up and not to draw them even closer together.

Francisco is now learning firsthand about the danger of setting bad examples—rather than letting Francisco destroy him, Brachiano has learned from Francisco.

Monticelso enters dressed in elaborate robes; the election has finished, and he has been made the new Pope (Pope Paul IV). In his first act as Pope, Monticelso calls for Vittoria and Brachiano's excommunication.

Monticelso has consistently abused his virtuous reputation for less-than-virtuous ends, and here, he does so yet again. More worrisome still is the fact that a man who is clearly deceitful and selfish can rise to become the Pope, ostensibly the highest source of moral authority in all of Europe.

Privately, Francisco confirms with Lodovico that he is willing to assassinate Brachiano. Witnessing this conversation (but not being able to hear it), Monticelso asks Lodovico what Francisco is plotting. Lodovico at first refuses to tell Monticelso the truth, which frustrates Monticelso greatly.

Like Brachiano, Francisco is able to outsource his dirty work. And Monticelso, probably wanting to update his book of names, is determined to figure out what's going on between these two men.

To make peace, Lodovico admits that he comes not as "an intelligencer, but as a penitent sinner": he was in love with the married Isabella, and he is determined to avenge her murder alongside Francisco. Monticelso is dismayed by this plan, and he gets up to leave—but before doing so, he compares Lodovico to the "black and melancholic yew **tree**" that grows in dead men's graves.

Though Lodovico's actions are still violent, his time in exile—time that he could look inward and reflect—has caused him to become "penitent," acting not out of impulsive desire but out love and protection. Monticelso's horror at this makes sense for a Pope…but is hypocritical, since audiences have seen this seemingly religious man obsess over revenge schemes of his own.

Francisco gives Lodovico a great deal of money, explaining that it is from the Pope. Lodovico realizes that though Monticelso pretended to be outraged at the idea of murdering Brachiano, he's actually helping to sponsor Francisco's plot. Lodovico reflects that Monticelso is deceptive like "brides at wedding dinners" who pretend to be modest while secretly thinking of "hot and lustful sports" for their wedding night. Monticelso's support reinvigorates Lodovico's quest for revenge.

Indeed, though Monticelso acted shocked, he is actually bankrolling the assassination. Lodovico now recognizes the giant gap between Monticelso's holier-than-thou exterior and his manipulative inner life. And tellingly, when Lodovico reaches for a metaphor for deception, he comes up with one that scorns women: the ultimate liar, in the count's mind, is a woman who pretends to be chaste while secretly fantasizing about sex.

ACT 5, SCENE 1

Now at the court in Padua, Flamineo confers with his friend Hortensio. Brachiano and Vittoria have gotten married and are holding court in Padua. An impressive young Moor named Mulinassar, accompanied by two young Capuchin monks from Hungary, has come to visit the couple. Hortensio wonders why Mulinassar has come, and Flamineo explains that he has arrived to offer his services to Brachiano should war break out with Francisco.

Hortensio reflects the sometimes-slapdash construction of The White Devil*: the character list doesn't mention him, and he is never really defined in relationship to the other characters. At the same time, though, since Flamineo so often lies to both his sister and his boss, it is important structurally that Webster introduces a new friend for him, giving Flamineo someone he can be honest with.*

Brachiano enters alongside Mulinassar, who is really Francisco in disguise. Brachiano pays great honor to Mulinassar, and he invites Mulinassar and the monks—actually Gasparo and Lodovico—to store their swords in his chapel.

Deception and disguise have been important thematic ideas throughout the piece, but now the play literalizes them. The word Moor *refers to someone of the Islamic faith (and specifically to people from Spain, Italy or North Africa); Capuchin monks were a particularly strict order of Catholics.*

Once Brachiano and Flamineo leave, the conspirators reveal themselves and plot their revenge. Lodovico wishes that they had come up with a more stylish kind of murder, but Francisco insists that their plan is the most direct and effective option.

The scene of monks plotting acts as a critique of Catholicism (in line with a playwright working in Anglican England during the Protestant Reformation).

Meanwhile, Zanche is following Flamineo everywhere he goes, and Flamineo is getting sick of it. Marcello points out that Flamineo has only himself to blame, as he had previously been involved with Zanche. Francisco (still dressed as Mulinassar) enters, and Zanche, herself a Moor, decides she wants to talk to her "countryman" in their shared language.

Moor was a broadly used term, but it generally signified anyone white, Christian Europeans saw as 'other.' Webster's decision to immediately link Zanche with Mulinassar then reflects his own highly racialized (and prejudiced) view of the world.

Flamineo, Marcello, and Francisco-as-Mulinassar discuss the difficulty of making a living as a soldier. Flamineo then complains to Hortensio that he had promised Zanche he would marry her; he no longer wishes to do so, but he is afraid of what Zanche will do to him if he betrays her. Zanche approaches Flamineo and accuses him of being distant to her—to which he replies that "lovers' oaths are like mariners' prayers, uttered in extremity."

Francisco's misogyny, previously applied to his sister, is also on full display in his own intimate relationships. Earlier in the play, he told Camillo that once men had "enjoyed" women sexually they grew tired of them; now, he embodies that theory in his treatment of Zanche.

Cornelia enters and strikes Zanche; when Zanche protests, Marcello joins in, kicking her and calling her a "strumpet." Flamineo then defends Zanche, and the two brothers begin to struggle. Flamineo makes fun of Marcello for being younger than him and exits in a rage. Equally angry, Marcello instructs his servant to murder Flamineo when he gets the chance.

Cornelia and Marcello, who have previously seemed more noble than their relatives, now show their own racial, gender, and class biases in their violent response to Zanche. Again, the plotting of the play (which has been the subject of much scholarly critique) is difficult to follow here: the violence escalates without clear motivations.

Meanwhile, Zanche has slipped away to talk to Francisco-as-Mulinassar. Almost immediately, she confesses her love to him; he explains that he has vowed never to marry. To win Mulinassar's love, Zanche promises to tell him all the secrets she has observed. After she exits, Francisco drops the disguise and tells the audience that "of all intelligence this may prove the best: sure I shall draw strange fowl from this foul nest."

Paralleling the character of Vittoria, the play portrays Zanche as simultaneously courageous and flighty, combatting sexist stereotypes while also playing into them. And once again, this exchange reminds audiences that Francisco is as selfish and manipulative as all the rest: he is not above using Zanche's romantic feelings to gain information about his enemies.

ACT 5, SCENE 2

Cornelia, having also made the trip to Padua, has heard that Marcello plans to fight someone, but she does not know whom. As she presses him for details, Flamineo enters and promptly stabs his brother with Marcello's own sword. Cornelia despairs, refusing to believe that her son is really dying.

The show makes clear in Marcello's death that violence (or threats of violence) beget violence. Rather than trying to make amends with his brother, Flamineo tries (and succeeds) in beating him to the punch, reflecting a quite literal kill-or-be-killed mentality.

As Marcello takes his last breaths, he recalls a moment when, as a young boy at his mother's breast, Flamineo snapped a crucifix in two. He laments that although Flamineo might gain wealth, this is not a noble way for their family to rise; instead, Marcello believes that a "**tree** shall long time keep a steady foot, whose branches spread no wider than the roots."

Tree symbolism has been prominent throughout the text, and here it takes on yet another layer: Marcello suggests that Flamineo has overreached, trying to "spread" in a way that his inner strength or history (his "roots") cannot support. Though Marcello does not specifically mention "rot," audiences will by now associate overgrown trees with illness and failure.

Brachiano enters and tries to make sense of the confusion. In her rage, Cornelia grabs the sword and runs at Flamineo as if to kill him—but she cannot bring herself to actually do the deed. Instead, Cornelia tells Flamineo to spend his life begging for "repentance." Brachiano orders his servants to clean up the scene, and he instructs everyone present that no one should tell Vittoria about what has happened.

For the first time in the play, Cornelia trades eye-for-an-eye punishment for a more nuanced approach: she cannot bring herself to continue the violence, so she instead begs Flamineo to do his own soul-searching and "repent" on his own time. By contrast, Brachiano's desire to clear the scene (and keep the news from Vittoria) shows his determination to cover up facts rather than face time.

Flamineo begrudgingly does what Brachiano has ordered, acknowledging that his "will is law now." Meanwhile, Lodovico—still in disguise as a Capuchin monk—secretly sprinkles the front part of Brachiano's helmet (which the script calls a "beaver") with **poison**.

Despite all his violence and deception, Flamineo has not risen any further; Brachiano still makes the rules of society, and Flamineo must still follow them. Visually, the image of a monk poisoning a helmet suggests that even the safest people and objects (religious figures, armor) are not to be trusted.

ACT 5, SCENE 3

Brachiano and his friends go to indulge in a staged fight, but as soon as the fight starts, Brachiano feels that his brain is "on fire"—and he realizes that someone has **poisoned** his helmet. To Vittoria and Giovanni's dismay, Brachiano begins to die. Flamineo frets that the ambassadors have been similarly poisoned.

In this climactic moment, a staged fight—supposed to be safe and entertaining—becomes deadly through the use of poison; once more, nothing is as it seems, and danger can come from the places one least expects.

As Brachiano collapses, he fumes that even though as a duke he has "given life to offending slaves, and wretched murderers," he cannot extend his own life. Vittoria wails, and Brachiano scoffs that it is "miserable [...] to die 'mongst women howling."

Even Brachiano's high status as a duke (and his prejudicial view of the lower classes) cannot save him from the visceral, bodily experience of death. Yet despite his intense pain, his sexism—his disgust at Vittoria's love and mourning—remains.

Lodovico and Gasparo enter, still dressed as Capuchin monks. Flamineo instructs them to administer the extreme unction, and they exit with Brachiano. Flamineo reflects that at the moment of death, princes are alone; "where are their flatterers now?" he asks. Flamineo confesses to Francisco, who is still dressed as Mulinassar, that he often "dissemble[d]" while working for Brachiano—in reality, he thinks Brachiano is a selfish and cruel leader.

In this fascinating moment, Flamineo acknowledges that status breeds "flattery," which is its own form of deception ("dissembling"). But since flattery is not truthful, it is also impermanent; in moments of crisis, followers like Flamineo—out for themselves—vanish. In other words, a world built on deceit is also a lonely world, and for the first time, Flamineo is able to recognize that.

Lodovico (in disguise) enters and explains that Brachiano is going mad, but that he has left his entire dukedom to Vittoria (until Giovanni comes of age). Brachiano then re-enters, cursing and talking nonsense. Even in his stupor, however, Brachiano is able to name Flamineo as Marcello's murderer. Flamineo worries that this continued association between himself and Brachiano will cause his doom.

After all he has sacrificed, Flamineo receives none of Brachiano's wealth—that goes to the object of his lust (and then, eventually, his son). Instead, Flamineo only receives the blame for his misdeeds, reflecting once again the impossibility of class mobility in this society.

Still dressed as Capuchin monks, Lodovico and Gasparo pretend to give the last rites to Brachiano. But before Brachiano takes his last breath, they reveal their true identities and tell him that he will die and be damned, "forgotten before the funeral sermon."

Brachiano is denied passage to heaven (as he does not receive extreme unction after all), but he is also denied an earthly legacy. After all, if flatterers desert their bosses in moments of crisis—and dukes surround themselves only with flatters—who would even be there to attend the funeral?

Brachiano finally takes his last breath, and Vittoria bursts into tears. Flamineo, skeptical that Vittoria is faking her sadness, comments that "there's nothing sooner dry than woman's tears." Francisco-as-Mulinassar speculates aloud that this was probably the work of the Duke of Florence (Francisco), and Flamineo agrees, as he thinks Francisco is "Machiavellian."

Flamineo's distrust of the world is now even stronger. His sister's (seemingly real) pain is to him a performance, so he has no faith in intimate relationships. But he is equally disdainful of political life, invoking famed philosopher Niccolò Machiavelli to suggest that Francisco and his underlings are deceitful, manipulative, bullies.

Zanche returns and flirts with Francisco-as-Mulinassar, and each pretends to have had a dream about having sex with the other. After the banter dies down, Zanche reveals what happened in the murders of Isabella and Camillo: Isabella's picture was **poisoned**, and "damn'd Flamineo" assaulted Camillo.

Here, the play portrays Zanche's desire as a source of political vulnerability (or gain), reflecting the play's more general sense of anxiety about women as sexual beings.

Still not realizing the true identity of Mulinassar, Zanche tells him she plans to rob Vittoria to and escape to the countryside, where she hopes they will get married. She leaves, telling Francisco-as-Mulinassar to meet her in the nearby chapel at midnight.

Though Zanche and Vittoria have some solidarity as two of the only women in this largely male world, their class difference—and Zanche's longing for Mulinassar—get in the way of any deep bond the women might maintain.

ACT 5, SCENE 4

Young Giovanni, admired by all, has now taken his father's place as duke. Though Flamineo tries to flatter Giovanni, the young boy sees through this ruse, and he advises Flamineo to study his prayers and "be penitent." Giovanni exits, but before he does so, he orders a courtier to keep Flamineo away from him. Flamineo reflects that Giovanni "hath his uncle's villainous look already."

Consistently, Giovanni and the older people around him have stressed the need for the young prince to have good "examples": how else can he learn to be a successful leader? But in the absence of role models, Giovanni's only example has been bad behavior, and he now takes on the "villain[y]" he has seen in the men around him.

Meanwhile, Cornelia is deep in mourning for Marcello. Alongside Zanche and other court ladies, she is "winding his grave," throwing dried herbs on top of his corpse. When Cornelia sees Flamineo, she enters into a kind of madness (or "distraction"). She calls on the plants and animals of the earth to take good care of Marcello's dead body, and she hopes that he will get into heaven.

Cornelia has always been less concerned with earthly status than the other characters, and perhaps that is because she (more than even Pope Monticelso) has a Christian view of the afterlife. In other words, rather than punishing or rewarding behavior on earth, Cornelia believes everything will shake out in heaven or hell.

Cornelia's profound grief disturbs Flamineo. And to make matters worse, Brachiano's ghost appears and throws dirt on Flamineo, who is overcome with "melancholy" as he thinks of the various people he has killed or wounded. Still, rather than repenting, Flamineo decides to kill Vittoria, believing that her death will "turn to good" all these previous wrongs.

Moreso than any threat of punishment, Flamineo's firsthand experience of his mother's grief causes him to feel guilt and "melancholy." But just as he vowed in the first act to continue down the "snake"-like path he had begun on, he now plots to kill Vittoria rather than accepting and apologizing for what he has done.

ACT 5, SCENE 5

Lodovico asks Francisco to leave Padua to spare himself any shame from the bloody events that are about to occur. Francisco agrees, promising to redeem Lodovico's reputation ("[I] shall in the ashes keep alive thy name"). Hortensio, Flamineo's friend, overhears some of this, and he decides to inform those in town of what he has just witnessed.

In contrast to Brachiano, Lodovico has repented and tried (to some extent) to reform. Unlike the fallen duke, "forgotten before the funeral sermon," Lodovico will remain "alive" in the memories of others. On a structural note, Webster once again does not know what to do with Hortensio, who overhears key gossip but never reports it to Flamineo

ACT 5, SCENE 6

Later that evening, Flamineo makes his way to Vittoria's quarters, where she and Zanche are recovering from Brachiano's murder. He asks Vittoria to give him some part of the great wealth she has just inherited from her husband, but she refuses; instead, she scolds Flamineo for being a "villain" and murdering Marcello.

Vittoria is no less hypocritical than the men around her: she egged Brachiano on to kill Camillo and Isabella, but now acts horrified at Flamineo's murder. Her outrage also allows her to keep Brachiano's money and status entirely to herself.

Flamineo then shows Vittoria and Zanche that he has brought pistols with him. Arguing that the courts will catch up them soon, Flamineo tries to convince the two women to join him in a triple suicide. Vittoria is horrified and afraid that Flamineo will shoot them all, but Zanche has a plan: if they convince Flamineo that they will kill themselves if he kills himself first, then once he is dying, they can escape.

The audience knows that this is a scheme, as Flamineo has revealed his plan to kill Vittoria. But just as Flamineo plots, Vittoria and Zanche plot too; no one seems to feel any real guilt or any real desire to come clean.

Vittoria agrees to the plan, and she pretends to prepare to join Brachiano in the afterlife; Zanche exclaims that she sees no purpose for life without her beloved Flamineo in it. Flamineo shoots himself and starts to die. However, instead of shooting themselves, Vittoria and Zanche drop their guns and go to "trample" Flamineo.

Now that Zanche has seen Francisco-as-Mulinassar, her love for Flamineo is totally fake, a ploy to get him to kill himself. It is important to note that this is the final scene, and so the final way we encounter the play's primary women is as murderous, treacherous, threats. Though Webster may challenge Renaissance misogyny to some degree, he also affirms it.

As Flamineo falters, he imagines life after death: he pictures Alexander the Great cobbling shoes, "and Julius Caesar making hair-buttons." But just as Vittoria and Zanche think they can celebrate their victory, Flamineo reveals that he is not dying after all—he was merely trying to test his sister and former lover. As he rises, he cries out "trust a woman? Never, never."

In his fake-dying moment, Flamineo envisions a classless world: one in which great emperors like Caesar are working-class men, and where there are none of the financial divides and broken systems that Flamineo has spent his life trying to escape. And then, after he shares this fantasy, Flamineo (himself profoundly dishonest) once again equates deception with femininity.

Lodovico and Gasparo enter dressed as Capuchin monks, but they quickly show their true identities to Vittoria and Flamineo. Both Vittoria and Flamineo face the fact that they are going to be executed, though Vittoria is surprised Francisco is not there to commit the deed himself. Gasparo then explains that "princes give rewards with their own hands, but death or punishment by the hands of another."

The jig is up—but fascinatingly, neither Francisco nor Monticelso is present at their moment of victory. Instead, Gasparo states one of the play's major critiques outright: those with wealth and high status can pawn off their misdeeds, keeping their hands clean at the expense of the poor and working-class people around them.

Surprising everyone around her, Vittoria stays calm in the face of death, insisting that she is "too true a woman" to collapse into panic. Zanche similarly shows her grit, telling Gasparo—who is about to execute her—that her blood is as red as both Vittoria's and Flamineo's.

If Webster has suggested that women are devious and cruel, he at least endows them with strength—Vittoria and Zanche prepare to die with much more dignity than Brachiano did.

As Flamineo prepares to die for real, he reflects on the role greed has played in corrupting his life. In particular, he is sad that he has grown so different from his true self: "I have caught an everlasting cold," he reflects, "I have lost my voice irrecoverably."

This beautiful monologue shows how much deception takes a toll on the deceiver. After a lifetime of lies and manipulations, Flamineo feels that he can no longer identify his true self—he is morally and spiritually sick (an "everlasting cold"), and he has no idea of his own values (his "voice"). But even as he is at last fully penitent, he is given no time to repent—rather than learning from his mistakes, he is to be tortured and killed for them.

At the last minute, Giovanni enters with a group of the ambassadors. Seeing the bloody mess, and learning of his father's crimes, Giovanni orders his people to torture Lodovico and Gasparo for having taken the law into their own hands. The play ends as Lodovico accepts his fate as justified, and Giovanni hopes for some kind of harsh justice.

At the beginning of the play, Giovanni tried to envision himself as a new kind of leader, one who prioritizes equality and sympathy with his subjects. But now, having had no good role models to look up to, Giovanni merely repeats the cycle of harsh judgment and cruel punishment that he learned from his father and Francisco, and the play ends bleakly.

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