

# AESTHETICS OF DECEPTION ON THE STAGE : THE CONFLICT BETWEEN REALITY AND APPEARANCE IN JOHN WEBSTER'S THE WHITE DEVIL

Gülşen Sayın Teker  
Doğuş University

"Through darkness diamonds spread their richest light " (III.ii.294)

**Abstract:** John Webster (1580-1634), a highly sophisticated yet equally pessimistic playwright of Jacobean England, depicts a world of corruption in which there is no place for the conventional notions of good and evil. In Webster's tragic world traditional concepts appear with their opposites, and therefore, they create a sort of conflict between reality and appearance. A character or an event seems good in appearance, however, it turns out to be evil in reality; or a character can have the capacity for both good and evil, treachery and loyalty, honesty and dishonesty at the same time in his plays. In other words, the dominant theme in his plays is the fallacy of appearance. In this article, this characteristic of Webster will be examined in his first tragedy, *The White Devil* with reference to the historical background of the period and to some significant scenes and characters in the play.

**Key words:** *Jacobean Drama, deception, reality versus appearance.*

**Özet:** Oyunlarında geleneksel iyi ve kötü kavramlarına yer olmayan yoz bir dünyayı betimleyen John Webster (1580-1634) seçkin ancak oldukça karamsar bir yazardır. Webster'in dünyasında evrensel kavramlar karşıtlarıyla birlikte ele alınır. Bu nedenle, oyunlarında her zaman gerçek ile görünen arasında bir aldatmaca veya çelişki gözlemlenir. Başka bir deyişle, görünürde iyi olan bir kişi veya olay, aslında kötünün maske altında tanıtılan biçimi veya görünüşte kötü olan bir kişi veya olay da ayrıntıya girildiğinde saklı kalmış iyi olarak karşımıza çıkar. Bu bağlamda, kişilerin aynı anda iyi ve kötü, ihanet eden ve sadık, yalancı ve dürüst olarak birbirine koştur kavramlarla birlikte var oldukları görülür. Bu yazıda, Webster'in ilk oyunu olan *The White Devil (Ak Şeytan)*'daki görünenin aldatıcılığı izleği tarihsel zemin, oyundan bazı önemli sahneler ve oyuna yön veren karakterler bağlamında irdelenecektir.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** *John Webster, "Ak Şeytan", gerçek-görünen çelişkisi.*

Although there is much controversy over his artistic creativity and even less information about the facts of his life, John Webster is today regarded as one of the greatest Renaissance dramatists. Having started his theatrical career as an actor, Webster went on to write plays in collaboration with other playwrights of the period. According to drama historians, the first mention of his name as a playwright is dated 1602 in his collaboration with Middleton, Drayton, Munday and others in the play *Caesar's Fall*, which has been lost. In 1604, he collaborated with Dekker on two city comedies, *Westward Ho* and *Northward Ho*, and in the same year he published the introduction to Marston's *The Malcontent*. However, it is his independent tragedies - *The White Devil* (1612), *The Duchess of Malfi* (1614) and *The Devil's Law Case* (1620) which brought Webster a great reputation.

Like Shakespeare and Marlowe, Webster borrowed his subjects from popular contemporary texts and translations, and he wrote in the theatrical fashions of the day; *The White Devil*, his first independent play, introduced him as a highly unique and sophisticated writer. In this play Webster depicted a chaotic world which was surrounded by deceptions and was constructed around the conflict between reality and appearance in every stage of life. *The White Devil* presented a world in which there was no place for the conventional notions of good and evil as these concepts appear with their equivocal nature, with the fallacy of appearance. That is to say, characters are both good and evil, innocent and guilty, honourable and shameful and universal concepts revealing the themes of the play exist with their opposites such as love and hatred, loyalty and treachery, order and disorder. This is where the conflict between reality and appearance appears in the play.

As for the summary of the play, the Duke of Bracciano, a member of one of the noblest Roman families and the husband of Isabella, falls passionately in love with Vittoria Corombona, the wife of Camillo and seduces her with the help of his secretary, Flemineo, Vittoria's brother. Vittoria encourages Bracciano to kill her husband and his wife. While Bracciano poisons his wife, Isabella, Flemineo who hopes to get promotion from Bracciano, organizes the death of Camillo. However, Isabella was the sister of Francisco de Medici, Duke of Florence, and Camillo was the nephew of Cardinal Monticelso and so their murders bring the lovers powerful enemies both in Church and State. Vittoria is arrested and sent to a House of Convertites; however, she is taken away by Bracciano and they hide in Bracciano's palace at Padua where they secretly get married. Francisco, determined upon revenge, poisons Bracciano with the help of Lodovico. Meanwhile, Flemineo, who cannot benefit at all from this marriage kills his own brother, Marcello. Flemineo and Vittoria are killed by Lodovico, and Lodovico is killed by Giovanni, Bracciano's son.

As this brief summary suggests, the plot is extremely complicated, and the first impression left by the play is that Webster is aiming at a sort of contrast between surface grandeur and inward corruption. In other words, the corrupted world and values of great families, dukes, cardinals and judges is hidden behind their splendid appearance.

At this point, it is worth pointing out that the social and political background of the

period has an important role in the formation of the conflict between reality and appearance in *The White Devil*. As D.C. Gunby states, the first half of the seventeenth century was a period of rapid change, a time when the impact of new ideas and attitudes was felt particularly severely. Socially and economically, the England of the period witnessed a fundamental change from feudalism to the greater individualism of capitalism (Gunby, 1972: 21). This meant the shift of prosperity and power from the hands of the landowners (including the King) to the urban middle class of merchants, shipowners and entrepreneurs. The former aristocracy and the rich were the suffering class of the new system. This shift of prosperity and power disturbed the conventional hierarchical order of society and resulted in the topsy-turvy disruption of values and eventually to a loss of faith due to disillusionment with Renaissance ideals. Gunby also points to another source of confusion, the cosmological impact of the new astronomy. In the old Medieval theory of the universe, there was a "geocentric, hierarchic and immutable" world-view, yet, Copernicus and Kepler's new theories of "the earth to be but one planet orbiting one star" (22) challenged the old Christian dogma and led people to a pessimistic psychology resulting from the expectation that the world was approaching its end. Therefore, this world of pessimism, change and contradictions, confusing and shifting standards are all observed in *The White Devil* as the source of the conflict between reality and appearance. The world of the play, in Gunner Bouklund's terms, is a world where "mankind is abandoned, without foothold on an earth where the moral law does not apply, without real hope in a heaven that allows this predicament to prevail" (Boklund, 1976: 179-180).

The most successful scene where deception and false appearance are introduced in the play is Vittoria's trial scene. Francisco and Monticelso arrest Vittoria and put her on trial for her part in the death of her husband, Camillo. However, their fault is to accuse her of committing prostitution. Since Vittoria has not committed prostitution, she defends herself very well, with an attractive speech referring to some famous heroines in literature and history. Therefore, the more the judges try to blacken her for the sake of "justice", the more they arouse the antagonism of the jury members as well as the audience. Francisco and Monticelso, who are blind with revenge, are determined to send Vittoria to prison. This is the scene where some social institutions fundamental to human life, such as family, church, state, the law and the judicial system are seen in a state of "disintegration, honeycombed by viciousness, corruption, and hypocrisy" (Forker, 1986: 263). On the other hand, Vittoria, in this scene, is so innocent, virtuous, clever and courageous and her regret is so sincere that the jury members cannot help admiring her.

VITTORIA:       Who says so but yourself? If you be my accuser  
                       Pray cease to be my judge, come from the bench,  
                       Give in your evidence 'gainst me, and let these  
                       Be moderators. My lord cardinal,  
                       Were your intelligencing ears as long  
                       As to my thoughts, had you an honest tongue  
                       I would not care though you proclaim'd them all.

(III.ii.224-230)

However, although her boldness may seem like innocence, it is, in fact, rooted in falsehood (Pearson, 1980: 72). Similarly, in appearance, Monticelso and Francisco are the representatives of justice and Christian values, yet, in reality, they prove to be much more wicked than Vittoria as they have rejected the moral standards in order to indulge their desire for revenge. At the end of the trial Vittoria is sent to a House of Convertites while Flemineo, the murderer is set free.

Another scene in which the conflict between reality and appearance dominates is in Act IV, after Monticelso is elected Pope. The two evils of the court and church are seen in different masks here, which are the masks of piety and forgiveness. As Monticelso is the Pope now he pretends to have given up the idea of revenge as it is "damnable" and commands Francisco to give it up too. However, even in the first moment when he appears in his ecclesiastical robes, the theme of reality versus appearance dominates the stage as an ironical visual reminder. The audience realizes the fact that Monticelso is "making a show of Christian virtue, officially condemning violence and pretending an inclination 'to noble pity' (III.ii.259)" (Forker, 1986: 264). Francisco, in return, pretends to agree with Monticelso, humbly stating that the wicked will end up with destruction in their own webs of deceit at the end. However, in reality, he has already made his plan for murder. His moral attitude here is only an appearance and he soon reveals something of his real intentions by asking Monticelso for his black book of criminals' names - "a list of murderers,/Agents for any villany" (IV.i.89-90), showing particular interest in the murderers' page. By saying one thing and doing just the opposite, Francisco demonstrates a complete disregard for social, political and moral values. Monticelso and Francisco, who are manipulated by the motives of revenge and hunger for power and rank, are responsible for the destruction of the others in the play. So, it can easily be stated that these two death figures are, in a way, the tools in Webster's hands to show not only humankind's capacity for evil but also the roots of violence in the human psyche, the corruption and tyranny of political power, and unfortunately the destruction of the individual by this power.

Apart from the individual scenes, such characters as Vittoria, Flemineo, Cornelia and Isabella might be observed as the epitome of the conflict between reality and appearance. Vittoria is a character who combines such opposites as evil and good, love and hatred, treachery and loyalty, cowardice and courage. Throughout the play, to emphasise her equivocal nature, Webster uses some oxymorons like "glorious strumpet", "white devil" and so on. In the course of her life, she falls in love, commits adultery and murder, she lies, hates her enemies and is killed by them at the end; yet, she never loses belief in herself. "She dies with the same unconquerable spirit, not shaming in death" (Moore, 1981: 120). This personality trait of Vittoria is conceptualised by D.C.Gunby as "integrity of life", which is the individual's struggle to be true to himself/herself in the face of suffering and death (Gunby, 1972: 20). So, what makes Vittoria an interesting character is not her morality but her struggle to be true to herself; and what makes her sympathetic for the audience is her recognition of her fault in her own downfall.

VITTORIA: O, my greatest sin lay in my blood  
Now my blood pays for it.

(V.vi.237-238)

These lines demonstrate that even a devilish character might know what sin is and have sense of guilt and some regrets. Also this contradiction appears in the title "The White Devil": when she looks devilish she might be as innocent as a child, and when she looks innocent she might be as wicked as the devil. Charles R. Forker indicates that the oxymoron in the title "verbalises a world whose positive and negative values interpenetrate" (Forker, 1986: 286).

Flemineo, Vittoria's brother, the malcontent, the villain of the play who is free from all moral values, epitomises the theme of reality versus appearance as he manipulates almost everybody in the play with his smiling face and friendly words which cloak his Machiavellian intrigues. In hierarchical order he has the lowest rank, however, "while seeming to be great men's ape, he is really their master" (Boklund, 1976: 159). Pretending to be Camillo's friend, he persuades him to stay away from his wife, Vittoria, to increase her love for him. Here, his aim is not to help Camillo but to clear the path of his master, Bracciano, for adultery. He tries to do a favour for his master as he hopes to get promotion. Although he seems to be loyal to his master he has a hidden grudge against him. Besides, he never hesitates to be a pandor of his own sister and to kill his own brother for his own benefits. It can easily be said that Flemineo is a character who represents the materialistic values of the new capitalist system. As Boklund observes the only solid goods are material wealth and success to him; he is, moreover, a hedonistic Machiavellian figure who has a disbelief in human virtue, and mankind to him is made up of fools who struggle for their own ends (161). However, the fallacy of appearance is once more reinforced when even this seeming devil proves himself capable of compassionate feeling.

FLEMINEO: I have a strange thing in me, to the which  
I cannot give a name, without it be  
Compassion.

(V.iv.112-114)

Webster supports this equivocal quality of Flemineo by giving him both the role of the evil and the satirical observer, the chorus of the play.

Another point where we perceive the conflict between reality and appearance is in the good characters of the play, such as Vittoria's mother, Cornelia and Bracciano's wife, Isabella. In appearance, Cornelia severely reacts against the illicit relationship between Vittoria and Bracciano, and she becomes very unhappy when she hears about the fact that Flemineo is the pander of his own sister. However, as a mother she does nothing to stop them as she knows that she will share Bracciano's wealth if this relationship is legalised in the future, and so she prefers to be silent. In Webster's picture of valueless society Cornelia takes her part as a good mother in appearance and a selfish woman in reality.

Bracciano's wife, Isabella is another character who often seems to be good and selfless throughout the play as she is constantly in the role of the poor, lonely woman who has been left by her husband for another woman. However, it is obvious from some of her lines that she conceals her selfishness behind her boasted generosity because whenever she speaks, she tries to present Bracciano as a selfish, lusty man and herself as a selfless woman. She always praises herself and criticises Bracciano pointing out his weaknesses and reminding him of his duties towards herself. In appearance, she is ready to sacrifice herself to protect her husband putting the blame on herself for their divorce and everything which went wrong in their marriage. However, her real thoughts show that she is not sincere in her words and she is the person as she seems below:

ISABELLA: To dig the strumpet's eyes out, let her lie  
Some twenty months a dying, to cut off  
Her nose and lips, pull out her rotten teeth,  
Preserve her flesh like mummia, for trophies  
Of my just anger.

(II.i.245-249)

To conclude, throughout the play there is a dichotomy in some universal concepts. To some critics, these opposing principles are established and then they are ironically mocked. (Boklund, 1976: 178). To some others, Webster deliberately presents a complex and shifting world which can be described as a world without certainties, where moral terms are ironically redefined and are expressed in ambiguities and images of relativity (Pierson, 1980: 83). In other words, Webster is concerned with the deception of appearances, the unreality of the world, and with the shallowness of the conventional moral order in the play. He tries to show that the most vile characters, such as Vittoria and Flemineo may have redeeming qualities, while apparently virtuous and selfless individuals may be morally corrupt. That is to say, *The White Devil* is a dramatic symbol of moral confusion, the impossibility of distinguishing appearance from reality in a world in which evil wears always the mask of virtue and virtue is lost or hidden under the mask of materialism.

## REFERENCES

- BOKLUND, G. (1976), *The Sources of the White Devil* Uppsala: Appelbergs Boktryckeri A.B.
- FORKER, C.R. (1986), *Skull Beneath the Skin: The Achievement of John Webster* Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- GUNBY, D.C. (Ed) (1972), *John Webster: Three Plays*. London: Penguin Books.
- MOORE, D.D. (Ed) (1981), *Webster: The Critical Heritage*. London: Routledge.
- PIERSON, J. (1980), *Tragedy and Tragicomedies in the Plays of John Webster*. New Jersey: Barnes and Noble Books.