**SEXUALITY AND FEMALES IN THE WHITE DEVIL AND WIFE OF BATH**

GENERAL:

* Sexuality and sexual desire is always presented as something negative, especially when found in women
* Women use their sexual power to secure marriage and thus power
* Both show a strong, independent and intelligent woman whose voice is placed within a strong patriarchal society.
* They both considered relationships between men and women and consider jealousy
* In this society women can only define themselves through men; it is their only route to some limited power.
* Whether through marriage or more illicit means, women’s sexuality is their only means of social mobility
* Women were seen as manipulative and corruptive in both and learn to deceive at their mothers breast. Flamineo says that men learn to lie by sucking their mothers breast and in the wife of bath she states that mothers teach daughters to lie and deceive
* The hag says she can only be beautiful and potentially cheat or ugly and chaste Brachiano believes that beautiful women are more likely to be unfaithful as he says “your beauty” when he is angry and accusing of Vittoria having an affair with Francisco. Brachiano says “woman to man is either a god or a wolf”
* Men condemn overt sexuality 🡪 Jankin’s book
* In the 17th Century, literature (especially literature about the Fall of mankind) focussed on women being to blame
* Women behave deceitful only because of the demands of marriage placed on them by patriarchy

WHITE DEVIL:

* As Vittoria is given no soliloquy, it is unclear whether she really loves Brachiano or if, like the Wife, she is using him for her own advancement.
* Women are like “cursed dogs” – they are no better than bitches on heat, fulfilling their sexual desires without discernment. Links with the Wife as she claims than an undesirable woman will leap on a man like a spaniel – female desire is likened to an animal following instinct without restraint.
* Flamineo refers to Zanche saying “I do love her just as a man holds a wolf by the ears” – does he love her or fear her because of the hold she has over him? Links to the Wife and her being in control
* Vittoria is a headstrong individual and seeks to escape the repressive social forces that separate her from her lover, criticize her as a whore, and generally limit her agency as a woman.
* Monticelso paints a “whore” in a bad light – any woman who is overtly sexual is condemned. Similar to The Wife.
* Isabella can be seen as a “good” character. She comes to Rome with forgiveness in her heart and hopes to win her husband back from Vittorla, The Duchess explains her intentions to her brothers, stating that all the wrongs done to her “Are freely pardoned”. Her Christian forgiveness contrasts with Brachiano's devilish malice. Isabella's language employs Christian terms. She mentions "pardon" & "pity" – a reference to Christian principles. But Isabella is not capable of bringing Brachiano back to the folds she is too meek, too sheep-like. She is the first victim of the predators in the play
* Cornelius Jansenius coined the phrase Libido Sentlendi (the animal-like appetite for sensation) that define the driving forces of man's depravity. Libido sentiendi rules supremely in Zanche. To a high degree it exists in Brachiano as his sexual desire is clear, in Flamineo as indicated in his sexual speeches, and also in Vittoria as her vitality for the sensations of life (not mere sexuality) testify.
* Vittoria's qualities as a "devil" are numerous. She wilfully becomes Brachiano's whore; she is guilty of being involved in, if not responsible for, the murder of both Isabella and Camillo, she attempts to kill Flamineo, and she follows libido sentiendi in unrestrained pursuit of pleasure. Her “whiteness" is largely a matter degree. At the trial, although she makes her sins seem less serious than they actually are, she is not completely hypocritical as are her prosecutors. At Brachiano's death, Vitoria recognizes the living hell of the court, and she grieves sincerely for him. In the final scene, Vittoria faces death courageously, But she admits her guilt, and even as early as the trial scene, she does not moralize or attempt to justify her action; she lies, but she makes no excuses. "Devil" though she be, she is less one than many of the other characters.
* Women are dependent on men – when the protection of a man is lost a women cannot survive as Isabella dies when she’s divorced and Vittoria dies when Brachiano dies
* The White Devilreplicates in microcosm the women’s social limitations within a strongly patriarchal society: Vittoria is arraigned by powerful male interrogators and her right of response is negated by her gender. To Webster and his audience, the catalogue of Vittoria’s misfortunes is considered less than tragic due to cultural and dramatic conventions relating to class and gender. From a modern perspective however, her situation may elicit a more sympathetic response
* the “jewel conversation" which Brachiano instigates in the first act re-works the common metaphor of women as precious jewels, intended to flatter, but in fact revealing their commodification as objects of exchange and commercial value in the marriage market.
* Flamineo’s aspirations toward wealth and preferment depend entirely upon pandering to the Duke. In a society where women are currency, his sister is an obvious asset. Camillo “bought you of your father”
* *The White Devil* was written within the first decade of James I’s reign but, even half a century earlier, there was already concern regarding women’s increased agency and freedom, prompting legislation to regulate their speech outside the home. Nevertheless, the early Jacobean era saw a renewed interest in the subject
* The debate concerning woman’s “true nature” was largely based in Christian ideology, which identified woman as the source of man’s downfall.
* The “White Devil” of the play’s title is generally interpreted to mean Vittoria, signifying her supposed embodiment of evil. “Evil” amounts to transgression of the moral code of a particular society, its parameters are determined by the structures of power; therefore Vittoria is evil in these terms for her infringement against condoned cultural practice, whether or not she committed the crimes of which she is accused
* By the end of the first act, though she herself has appeared on stage only briefly and in ambiguous circumstances, Vittoria’s character has been constructed by the assumptions and interpretations of the characters who surround her
* The lack of consistency in Vittoria’s character can be read as an illustration of her shiftiness or protean nature as the “White Devil” of the play’s oxymoronic title
* Vittoria’s position throughout her arraignment is anomalous. She is in an untenable situation since, if she does not defend her case, she will be found guilty of the crimes as accused; but if she speaks her innocence she invites condemnation as a “public” woman, which in Webster’s culture attested her guilt. Vittoria’s character epitomises contrariety and paradox throughout the play.
* In Webster’s time, the female characters on the stage existed in a male-dominated stage-world: the plays were written by male playwrights and they were interpreted by male actors. The interpretation of Webster’s heroines is still often filtered through the lens of the overarching patriarchal ideology of the era, and Vittoria’s guilt, as charged of murder and prostitution, is accepted by most readers and audiences, although the dramatic action does not depict either offence; She does not witness either of the two dumb shows, neither is she complicit in the arrangements for either murder. She is arraigned for reasons of her unreliability, the fact that she is not to be trusted to act within the confines of her allotted role—in terms of rank, gender and matrimony—and not for the crimes of which she is accused.
* In the house of convertities Brachiano is quick to believe that Vittoria is unfaithful to him – women are instantly believed to be sexually corruptive
* Flamineo says women blush when sex is talked about yet are happy to engage in the act, suggesting that women have a different exterior to interior.
* Monticelso says Vittoria is like a “guilty counterfeited coin” – guilt can be a play on words for gilt (a gold covering) suggesting that Vittoria is only gold on the outside.
* “are women the subtler sex?” - The use of the word ‘yew’ is important here as she is fulfilling her role as the ‘subtle’ female by using word play to indicate to Brachiano that the dream is about him
* Webster deliberately represents Vittoria’s role in the murder as indirect, resting on Flamineo and Brachiano’s interpretation of her enigmatic yew tree dream
* The “goodly yew” of Vittoria’s dream links to the temptation represented by the “fair tree” in the Garden of Eden. Flamineo’s references to the devil recall the original temptation story and Flamineo’s metaphor of “the subtle foldings of a winter snake” can be linked to the “circular base of rising folds” that Satan as a snake is described as.
* Flamineo thinks Vittoria has come up with the dream in an attempt to manipulate Brachiano to kill their spouses; is she truly a deceptive character or is it just male interpretation of her deception? By being so ambiguous about the role of the dream, Webster isn’t allowing the audience to settle on an opinion of women but instead being forced to take men’s view on them
* women are branded as ‘furies’ once they step out of the confines of a passive female
* Whoredom is a key metaphor of the play. It is an extended metaphor, not limited to sexuality, but one that includes all of the obsessed characters who prostitute their human traits to animal instincts. Ultimate they prostitute reality
* Camillo is described as losing his hair and being impotent, these are symptoms of syphilis and could have been attributed by engaging in extra marital sex, probably with prostitutes. However if this is true why is Camillo not condemned for being a man whore?
* Flamineo refers to women as “cursed dogs”
* Women are seen as scheming as Flamineo thinks Vittoria has just come up with the dream in an attempt to manipulate and urge Brachiano to kill their spouses.
* Vittoria says Barchiano had been trying after her for a long time and so alleges that there would be blood if the relationship did not go on; is Webster creating sympathy for her by showing her as pressured? Is she not like Isabella in trying to keep peace?
* Flamineo says he would rather have had a prostitute for a mother since then he could have been provided with by lots of fathers
* When Isabella pretends she is the one initiating the divorce, the men are quick to blame her as they blame women for all men’s downfalls.
* Monticelso condemns Vittoria for the way she looks and calls her a whore due to her makeup – these problems are seen nowadays such as with “invoking” rape and so can also be linked to the old Hag in the Wife of Bath
* In the 1996 Royal Shakespeare Company production, Monticelso conducts the arraignment whilst leering down Vittoria’s cleavage
* Modern audience’s would be more forgiving of Vittoria because, even though adultery is seen as bad, it is not as bad as Webster’s time as we are generally less religious.
* Vittoria is also condemned in court due to the letter Brachiano sent her – but all she’s done is receive the letter. Later she also gets persecuted for the letter Francisco sends her
* However Women cannot be seen as truly pure as Vittoria argues that she only likes to have fun and is not guilty of adultery, but we know she has and so she is lying.
* Zanche is also condemned with Vittoria to the house of convertites and she too is condemned for something she hasn’t done
* All women are seen to turn corrupt – Cornelia ends up relaxing her moral values and lies to protect Flamineo
* Cornelia has no husband and so her morals have no influence
* Flamineo says women cry for anything and so their tears are meaningless, it is just the appearance of grief
* Flamineo claims that Vittoria’s arguments are mere rhetoric and ‘feminine arguments’
* Vittoria shows no sorrow at Camillo’s death
* Relationship between white Vittoria and black Zanche – are all women white devils?
* Marcello could have seen to have hit Zanche because if she was alleged to have an affair with Flamineo it would have caused dishonour of the Corombona family name – however why does he chastise Zanche and not Flamineo?

WIFE OF BATH:

* The Wife is the only woman, apart from the prioress, to be described in detail
* Being gap-toothed is seen as an indication of sexual energy
* She is wearing red stockings – red is synonymous with passion and lust.
* Born under mars and venus – femininity and masculinity – links with Vittoria having to act like a male in the trial scene
* The only way she can gain independence is through her sexuality and selling her body – she can only gain wealth through marriage
* She references a Folk tale of the “tell-tale bird” where the woman is portrayed as scheming, but the Wife argues that wives should learn from this story.
* She states women’s best qualities – deceit, weeping and spinning
* She says her mother taught her to flirt and to make her husband feel guilty, is Chaucer presenting all women as being manipulative and deceitful?
* She says we wish to be clean of sin – this emphasises the idea of appearing and being as women are not actually clean of sin, as seen by the Wife herself, but they like to present themselves as being pure – link with Vittoria and gilt
* The end shows how women are judged on their looks and are perceived as not being allowed to be both beautiful and chase – but maybe this is the man’s fault for not being able to not pursue a beautiful woman.
* The Wife’s account is followed by the Friar’s Tale – in his prologue he acknowledges that the Wife has spoken well of many things but warns her to leave the citing of authorities to scholars (the woman who speaks out is given a firm put down)

CONTXT:

* Webster was no stranger to the extra-marital sex that appears in his works. His first child was born only two months after his marriage to Sara Peniall in 1606.
* Webster’s other play ‘the Duchess of Malfi’ is a kind of twin of the white devil. Both plays contain pictures of the corrupt courts of princes. The hints of sexual attraction between Flamineo and his sister develop into Ferdinand’s incestuous desire for the Duchess. Flamineo’s obsession with economic deficiency closely parallels that of Bosola.
* Brachiano’s pursuit of Vittoria in this context would have been immediately shocking to a Jacobean audience as a challenge to the status quo rather than merely a sexual dalliance as we may see it today.

1969 National Theatre, directed by Frank Dunlop –a highly sexualised production. In the trial scene Vittoria has a change in costume from a white gown to a scarlet red one

Kate Augherson – “Webster’s central characters are women”

Dena Goldberg – “Vittoria is the victim of a marriage arranged by her family in a futile effort to reverse the trend of economic decline initiated by a spendthrift father”

Alexander Leggatt - Vittoria is a "combination of beauty and corruption”

James Winny – The Wife of Bath “is herself a conspicuous example of all the wifely vices imputed to her sex”

CHAUCER - the Bible “is a text wherein we find that woman is the ruin of mankind”

BRODIE – the Wife is an “independent woman [who is] sexually experienced [and] challenges patriarchal norms”

MARGARET RANALD – “Webster is no afraid to portray women of power… who broadened the female horizons of the Jacobean era”

Christine tucker – “the Wife is a strong women who takes full advantage of the power of her sexuality”

* You can compare Vittoria’s self-description as ‘this mine of diamonds’ with Milton’s depiction of Eve as ‘fairest unsupported flower’ to show that the sexuality of each has been corrupted in different ways