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Elizabeth Purnell April 12, 2021

Juxtaposition, Perception, and Virginity:

How *Othello*, *The White Devil*, and *The Wonder of Women* Construct Fairness Through Womanhood

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Abstract

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Beginning in the mid-16th century in England, fairness began to be not only associated with the moral status of women and beauty, but also with skin color. This honors thesis examines how William Shakespeare's *Othello* (1603-04), John Webster's *The White Devil* (1612), and John Marston's *The Wonder of Women* (1606) construct the fairness – physical, moral, or both – of their female characters through juxtaposition, perception, and virginity, respectively. In *Othello*, Desdemona's fairness is constructed by the juxtaposition of her and Othello and her and Bianca, resulting in Desdemona being more physically fair than Othello but less morally fair than Bianca. Vittoria's moral fairness is constructed in *The White Devil* through how several male characters – Flaminio, Bracciano, and Francisco – perceive Vittoria's moral purity after she commits adultery and completes her punishment. Vittoria's fairness is circumstantial, differing between each of the male characters. Lastly, in *The Wonder of Women*, Sophonisba's fairness is constructed through her play-long status as a married virgin. Her moral purity flows over into her physical features, resulting in the whitewashing of the historical Sophonisba's North African features.

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Introduction

In her 1995 book *Things of Darkness: Economics of Race and Gender in Early Modern England,* Kim Hall claims that

> frequently, 'black' in Renaissance discourses is opposed not to 'white' but to 'beauty' or 'fairness,' and these terms most often refer to the appearance or moral states of women… This is not to say that men are not 'fair' or 'black' in this discourse, but that the terms acquire a special force when they are turned to women and that they are most frequently used in relation to women. (9)

The aim of my thesis is to understand how fairness is constructed through womanhood in three early modern English plays: William Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice* (1603-04), John Webster's *The White Devil or, The Tragedy of Paolo Giordano Orsini, Duke of Bracciano, With The Life and Death of Vittoria Corombona, the Famous Venetian Courtesan* (1612), and John Marston's *The Wonder of Women, or The Tragedy of Sophonisba* (1606).

Before further discussion of these three plays, it is useful to understand how the ideas of fairness and darkness and whiteness and blackness operated during the early modern period. These concepts exist together – not separately. Hall argues that "the polarity of dark and light is most often worked out in representation of black men and white women" (*Things of Darkness* 9). This holds true for *Othello,* where Othello is the black man and Desdemona is the white woman. It is partially true for *The Wonder of Women*. Sophonisba is the white woman, and Vangue, a servant, is the black man. However, there is also a black female servant named Zanthia present in this play. She spends more time on stage with the white woman and is more integral to the play's plot. The black man/white woman formula does not work for *The White Devil*. Here, both the

black person and the white person are women. Additionally, Hall notes that it is during the early modern period that these concepts "[become] increasingly infused with concerns over skin color, economics, and gender politics" (*Things of Darkness* 2). The first definition for 'white' that appears in the *Oxford English Dictionary* with a racial meaning – "belonging to or denoting a light-skinned group of people, esp. one of European origin or descent" – occurs in a travel narrative from 1555 ("white, adj. (and adv.) and n.").[1]

Furthermore, in understanding the history of whiteness and fairness as it relates to race, it is important to reiterate Hall's point that "*the language of fairness was associated specifically with women* and thus becomes a key factor in the issues of sexuality and gender difference that *also inform the development of racial distinctions*" in the early modern period (*Things of Darkness* 117, my emphasis). Hall also notes that "discourses of fairness work to control and shape women's sexuality and agency even as they speak to larger issues of group identity and cohesion" (*Things of Darkness* 117). Racial distinctions were happening on the early modern stage and female characters played an important role. On stage, a character's race was established through the use of cosmetics. White male actors would use blackface while playing characters with dark skin and whiteface when playing characters with light skin.[2] Gender was also crafted using cosmetics. Red and white were colors traditionally associated with femininity. Therefore, the white male actors playing white women on stage would wear "a wash for blanching the complexion and a rogue for cheeks and lips" (Callaghan 80). As Callaghan notes, "race – black *and* white – thus becomes not only cosmeticized but, in the case of whiteness, also

[1] Additionally, John Marston's 1598 work *The Metamorphosis of Pigmalions Image. And Certaine Sayyres* is listed as one of the earliest examples of 'white' being used with the meaning of definition 3: "of or with reference to the skin or complexion: light in colour, pale, fair" ("white, adj. (and adv.) and n.").
[2] In *Shakespeare Without Women,* Dympna Callaghan notes that blackness was also sometimes constructed on stage using a "black mask and gloves" (78).

feminized" (80, emphasis in original). In a way, my study of how Shakespeare, Webster, and Marston construct the fairness of their female characters is also a study about the beginnings of whiteness on the early modern stage.

As I mentioned in my opening paragraph, this thesis focuses on three early modern tragedies: Shakespeare's *Othello*, Webster's *The White Devil*, and Marston's *The Wonder of Women*. I have selected these plays for three reasons. First, each play's respective primary female character has her fairness – moral or physical or both – questioned. In *Othello*, Desdemona's moral fairness is questioned by her husband Othello and his ensign Iago. Additionally, Othello also questions her physical fairness. In *The White Devil*, Vittoria's moral fairness is questioned by numerous male characters. In *The Wonder of Women*, Syphax attacks Sophonisba's moral fairness numerous times. He even questions her physical fairness during the play's second bed scene. Second, each of these plays includes a character or characters whose skin is described as dark or black. In *Othello*, the titular character is a Moor with dark skin. In *The White Devil*, Vittoria's servant is a Moor named Zanche. Additionally, in act 4, Francisco, one of the play's main male characters, uses blackface to disguise himself as a Moor named Mulinassar. *The Wonder of Women* has two characters who are explicitly described as being black: Zanthia and Vangue. Zanthia is Sophonisba's maid, and Vangue is Syphax's servant. Third, each play primarily constructs fairness in womanhood in a way that is different from the other plays. All of the plays feature some construction of fairness through juxtaposition by virtue of having characters with both white and black skin. However, in *Othello*, the juxtaposition of characters with light and dark skin is most prominent. Shakespeare constructs Desdemona's fairness by juxtaposing her with her husband who has black skin and by juxtaposing her with a

courtesan named Bianca. Perception also plays a minor role in constructing Desdemona's fairness, as Iago convinces Othello that his wife is having an affair. In *The White Devil*, Webster chooses to construct Vittoria's moral fairness through how male characters perceive her shortly after she commits adultery and after she completes her punishment. Lastly, in *The Wonder of Women*, Marston constructs Sophonisba's moral fairness through her status as a married virgin, which she holds from the beginning to the end of the play. Her moral fairness flows over into her physical fairness as well.

Additionally, the three selected plays take place outside of England. Writing in *Barbarous Play: Race on the English Renaissance Stage*, Lara Bovilsky notes that "foreign settings… are fertile sites for the depiction of racial and national difference" (104). Consequently, it makes sense that all the settings are foreign in a thesis whose plays have been chosen because they deal with race on some level. Both *Othello* and *The White Devil* take place in Italy. *Othello* begins in Venice and ends in Cyprus; *The White Devil* begins in Venice and ends in Padua. Bovilsky claims that "the Italian settings of Jacobean tragedy and tragicomedy allow the English to depict disturbing tendencies towards immorality, religious errancy, and sexual license as the native province of national others" (118). Both *Othello* and *The White Devil* include these elements, with the exception of "religious errancy." *The Wonder of Women* is set in Carthage in North Africa.

The order of the following three chapters ignores chronology. Instead, I have grouped the chapters according to setting, with the two Italian plays coming first. The first chapter of this thesis focuses on how Shakespeare constructs *Othello*'s Desdemona's fairness through juxtaposition, resulting in her being more physically fair than Othello but less morally fair than Bianca. The second chapter focuses on how Webster constructs Vittoria's fairness through how

The White Devil's male characters – Flaminio, Bracciano, and Francisco – perceive her. Vittoria's fairness is circumstantial, depending on the needs of Flaminio, Bracciano, and Francisco. This results in her perceived fairness varying from character to character. The third and final chapter of this thesis focuses on how Marston constructs Sophonisba's fairness in *The Wonder of Women* through her enduring virginity. Sophonisba's moral purity flows over into her physical features, erasing her North African features and whitewashing her.

1. Desdemona: Fairness Through Juxtaposition

William Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice* (1603-04) is probably the play which comes to most people's minds when thinking of race and early modern theater. From the beginning of the play to its end, *Othello* focuses heavily on race. Othello, the titular character, is a Moor[3] while Desdemona, his wife, is white. Throughout the play, their racial difference is highlighted. *Othello* opens with Iago, the play's villain and Othello's ensign, telling Desdemona's father Brabantio about Othello and Desdemona's marriage: "an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe" (1.1.87-88). In a revenge scheme to punish Othello for promoting Michael Cassio to lieutenant over him, Iago plots to ruin Othello's relationship with his wife by painting her as adulterous: "I will turn her virtue into pitch" (2.3.355). As the play progresses, Iago works to convince Othello that Desdemona is having an affair with Cassio, and in turn, Iago's actions result in Cassio being stripped of his military promotion. In response to Othello's demand for visual proof of his wife's affair, Iago plants Desdemona's handkerchief in Cassio's room. Cassio then gives the handkerchief to Bianca, a courtesan and Cassio's lover. Othello, seeing Bianca and Cassio with the handkerchief, is convinced that Desdemona has been unfaithful. In 5.2, Othello confronts Desdemona in their bedroom, resulting her death among others.

Shakespeare's construction of Desdemona's whiteness is complex, operating on two levels that have some overlap. First, and arguably the most obvious way Shakespeare constructs Desdemona's whiteness, is through the juxtaposition of her and her black husband, Othello. This

[3] In "'Making the Beast with two Backs' – Interracial Relationships in Early Modern England," Miranda Kaufmann notes that "the term 'Moor' is ambiguous, as it was used in the 16th century to describe both lighter-skinned North Africans and darker-skinned sub-Saharan Africans" (23).

is primarily a physical juxtaposition. As Kim Hall points out in *Things of Darkness*, "descriptions of dark and light… became in the early modern period the conduit through which the English began to formulate the notions of 'self' and 'other'" (2). The second, less obvious, construction is through comparing Desdemona to the courtesan Bianca, the lover of Cassio. Unlike her juxtaposition with Othello, Desdemona and Bianca's juxtaposition is a juxtaposition of moral fairness. In the following paragraphs I will first address the juxtaposition between Othello and Desdemona. Here, I will focus on how Brabantio and the Duke of Venice describe Othello and on how Iago uses cosmetic language to darken Desdemona before turning to Othello's monologue in 5.2 where he struggles with Desdemona's physical fairness and moral purity. Then, I will turn to Desdemona and Bianca to show how a comparison of these two characters results in the tarnishing Desdemona's moral fairness. Shakespeare constructs Desdemona's fairness – or lack thereof – through juxtaposing her with Othello and with Bianca. The juxtapositions result in Desdemona being depicted as physically fairer than Othello but less morally fair than Bianca.

In the first scene of the first act of the play, Iago highlights Othello and Desdemona's racial difference when he wakes Brabantio in the middle of the night to inform him that he has been "robbed" (1.1.85) of his daughter and has "lost half [his] soul" (1.1.86) because "an old black ram / Is tupping [his] white ewe" (1.1.87-88). Othello is the "black ram"; Desdemona is the "white ewe." Iago's use of a possessive pronoun before "white ewe" suggests a sort of invasion by the ram. And as the reader or viewer can glean from 1.1, Brabantio did not give his consent for his daughter's marriage to Othello. Iago further taunts Brabantio that "the devil will make a grandsire of [him]" (1.1.90), and that "[his] daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs" (1.1.113-15). "Devil" is a reference to Othello. Devils, in addition to being

associated with sin, were commonly thought to have dark skin during the early modern period. Iago insinuates that the corruption and sin that comes from Othello and Desdemona having sex together will be passed down to their offspring – Brabantio's grandchildren. Thus, Desdemona and Othello's actions place a stain on the family. I would also like to comment on Iago not using the names Desdemona and Othello to refer to Desdemona and Othello when talking to Brabantio. The lack of names is dehumanizing. The pair is reduced to animals – "ram" and "ewe" – in lines 87 and 88, suggesting that their relationship is animalistic. Othello is later reduced to his ethnic background and an evil supernatural being. In doing this, Iago emphasizes that Othello is an outsider. Beyond being called an "ewe," Desdemona escapes additional unsavory names. Instead, Iago refers to Desdemona as "your daughter" when addressing Brabantio (1.1.110). By using a possessive pronoun, Iago joins Desdemona more closely to her father, insinuating that Brabantio is unable to control his daughter. Brabantio's reaction to the marriage between Desdemona and Othello is over the top, as he takes the matter directly to the Duke of Venice after learning the news and interrupts a meeting where the participants are planning a war. It is obvious that he sees marriage – and a sexual relationship – between Desdemona and Othello as less than ideal even though it makes his daughter happy and several of the play's other characters approve of the relationship. The Duke leaves Brabantio with the following parting words: "Good-night to everyone. And, noble signor, / If virtue no delighted beauty lack / Your son-in-law is far more fair than black" (1.3.289-91). The Duke believes that Othello's virtue should outweigh the fact that his skin color is darker than that of Desdemona. Here, physical darkness and moral fairness bleed together, creating friction between the two halves. Something similar happens to Desdemona in 2.3 when Iago begins his attempt to convince Othello of his wife's infidelity.

In the latter part of 2.3, the juxtaposition of light and dark appears again as Iago concocts a plan to further wreak havoc in the lives of Othello and Desdemona. Prior to Iago's soliloquy, Cassio's drunken incident results in Othello stripping him of his military rank. Iago then suggests to Cassio that he should enlist Desdemona's to help him regain his favor with Othello. After Cassio leaves the stage, Iago declares

> How am I then a villain
> To council Cassio to this parallel course
> Directly to his good? Divinity of hell!
> When devils will the blackest sins put on
> They do suggest at first with heavenly shows
> As I do now. For whiles this honest fool
> Plies Desdemona to repair his fortune,
> And she for him pleads strongly to the Moor,
> I'll pour this pestilence into his[4] ear:
> That she repeals him for her body's lust.
> And by how much she strives to do him good
> She shall undo her credit with the Moor—
> So I will turn her virtue into pitch
> And out of her own goodness make the net
> That shall enmesh them all. (2.3.343-57)

[4] This "his" and the following masculine pronouns in Iago's soliloquy refer to Othello.

Unfortunately, Iago's suggestions to Cassio end up not being for "his good," and he is stabbed later in act 5. Iago plans to pit Desdemona and Othello[5] against each other by suggesting that Desdemona has been unfaithful to him because she is following "her body's lust" for Cassio. Iago will go on to construct scenes within eyeshot of Othello where this appears true. Like in the previously discussed scenes, Iago uses lexical items that are suggestive of blackness and whiteness, corruption and purity to describe his own actions – and indirectly describe Desdemona. Iago contrasts "blackest sins" with "heavenly shows." While "sins" directly receives a color modifier, "heavenly shows" does not. However, since heaven has associations with purity, it has an implied whiteness or fairness. Iago explicitly states that these lines describe his actions in *Othello*. Yet, they also have some truth when applied to Desdemona. For Othello, Desdemona is aligned with the more pure, heavenly side at the beginning of the play. She is "the gentle Desdemona" (1.2.25) and later follows him to Cyprus as a show of love and devotion: "that I did love the Moor to live with him / … / … Let me go with him" (1.3.249-60). Then, in 3.3, Desdemona becomes blackened as Iago's plot unfolds: "Cassio, my lord? no, sure, I cannot think it / That he would steal away so guilty-like / Seeing you coming" (3.3.38-40).[6] Iago's phrase "when devils will the blackest sins put on / They do suggest at first with heavenly shows" also alludes to the concept of the white devil. According to Kim Hall, a white devil is "a particular kind of hypocrite… who deceives using the pretense of goodness"[7] (*Othello: Texts and*

[5] Once again, Iago does not refer to Othello by name and instead uses pronouns and the term "Moor." Like in 1.1, this serves to dehumanize Othello and emphasize the difference between him and other characters.
[6] These are Iago's lines.
[7] The term 'white devil' forms the main title of the play discussed in the following chapter. In John Webster's *The White Devil*, the term refers primarily to Vittoria, whose cosmetics usage and adultery lead to the play's male characters labeling her as deceptive and morally impure. A case could also be made that Sophonisba, the protagonist in chapter three's play *The Wonder of Women*, could be seen as a white devil from Syphax's perspective because she deceives him during a bed trick in 3.1.

Contexts 223). For Othello, who believes himself to have been duped by his wife, Desdemona is a white devil.[8]

Furthermore, the phrase "turn her virtue into pitch" (2.3.355) harkens back to one of the racially and sexually charged rhyming couplets that Iago tells Desdemona as they wait for Othello to arrive in Cyprus: "if she be black, and thereto have a wit, / She'll find a white that shall her blackness fit" (2.1.132-33). Writing about the couplets in *Barbarous Play: Race on the Renaissance Stage*, Lara Bovilsky notes that "female sexual behavior is often characterized… as darkness or more processually as darkening or dirtying" (58). Although Iago does not specify the subject of his couplets, it is not difficult to imagine Desdemona filling the role. Following the concept of the white devil, the "black" in the couplet is metaphorical blackness – not physical blackness – and likewise, the "white" is not physical whiteness. The Duke has already established that Othello is morally "more fair than black" (1.3.91). Iago insinuates that Desdemona's loose morals will corrupt her husband's virtuousness. In a way, Iago juxtaposes Othello and Desdemona in this couplet. By changing the female pronouns to male pronouns, the couplet describes Othello's relationship with Desdemona. However, in this case the color words refer to physical whiteness and blackness instead of their moral counterparts. Within Desdemona and Othello's relationship, race and morality – the tangible and the intangible – are closely intertwined. Returning to the phrase that began this paragraph, "turning [Desdemona's] virtue into pitch" also involves an intangible (virtue) and a tangible (pitch) (2.3.355). Additionally, pitch is a sticky, black substance. Iago intends that his change to Desdemona's moral fairness be

[8] While Desdemona is never explicitly called a 'white devil' in *Othello*, she is called a 'devil' approximately six times through the play – each time by Othello. In one of these six instances – in fact, the first instance – Othello calls Desdemona a "fair devil" (3.3.481).

difficult to get rid of. He wishes to turn Desdemona black like Othello. There is a cosmetics-like element in Iago's words that is later reinforced in 3.3.

In examining recipe books for cosmetics from the 16th and 17th centuries, a precedent appears for people being able to change their skin color from white to black, black to white, or from white to whiter. Girolamo Ruscelli's *The Secretes of the Reuerende Maister Alexis of Piemount* (1558) contains at least 13 recipes explicitly claiming in their titles to lighten the user's skin. Most are labeled as waters to make the skin or face white or fair. Of particular interest is the recipe "A water to make the skinne white, and to take away the sunne burning" (f.68v) because in the early modern period, the "climatic theory of racial difference… proposed that blackness was an extreme form of sunburn" (Callaghan 79). Therefore, this recipe entry hints at the lightening of darkened skin. Thomas Lupton's *A Thousand Notable Things, of Sundry Sortes* (1579) contains a couple recipes for lightening the skin and was printed throughout the 17th century. Hugh Plat's *Delightes for Ladies* (1602)[9] contains a recipe titled "skinne kept white and cleare" where the user is instructed to use "breast milke, or Cowe milke, or mixed with water, euerie night" to make a young child's skin "faire and cleare, and resist sunburning."[10] In addition to the numerous traditional recipes claiming to lighten the skin, *Cosmeticks or, The Beautifying Part of Physick* (1660) by Johann Wecker lists a recipe titled "Of Waters that black the Face":

> With Chymical Instruments extract a most clear water, from green Walnut-shells and Gaules; with which if you wet the face or hands, they grow black by degrees, like to an Aethiopian; which if afterwards you would restore to their former whiteness, you must

[9] I consulted the 1602 printing of *Delights for Ladies*. *Early English Books Online* (*EEBO*) lists numerous printings of Plat's work through at least 1656.
[10] This printing of *Delightes for Ladies* lacks page numbers. This recipe is listed as number 12 under the section "Sweete Powders, oyntments, beauties, &c.".

> distil Vineger, Juice of Lemmons and Colophonia, and washing with that will take off the blackness. (35)

Not only does this recipe instruct the user on how to darken their skin, but it also instructs them on how to "restore" their skin to its "former whiteness."

Returning again to *Othello,* the blackness that Iago wishes to manifest on Desdemona's metaphorical fairness receives a physical treatment in 3.3 as Othello, demanding "ocular proof" (3.3.363), struggles with his wife's supposed transgressions: "Her name, that was as fresh / As Dian's visage, is now begrimed and black / As my own face" (3.3.389-91). Othello links Desdemona to Diana, the Roman goddess of the moon who in mythology is a virgin. However, Desdemona is no longer chaste in Othello's mind. Othello imagines her impurity manifesting as a mark on her face that is as "black / As [his] own face." In these lines, the cosmetics imagery becomes more prominent as the boundary between the metaphorical and the physical becomes weaker. Keeping in mind that *Othello* is a play that was performed on stage by actors in makeup. It is not a stretch to interpret Othello's words as a verbal reinforcement of visible transfer of stage makeup between the actor in blackface playing Othello and the actor in whiteface playing Desdemona.

Before turning to the last scene where I will discuss how the Othello-Desdemona juxtaposition constructs Desdemona's whiteness, I would like to issue a reminder that the character of Othello is constructed on stage through blackface. Othello's blackness is always present on stage even if there is no mention of his blackness in the text of the play. Now, let us turn to the opening lines of 5.2 spoken by Othello:

> It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul!
>
> Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars,

It is the cause. Yet I'll not shed her blood

Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow

And smooth as monumental alabaster:

Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men.

Put out the light, and then put out the light!

…

…I will kill thee

And love thee after. (5.2.1-19)

I want you to image what the stage might look like as Othello speaks these words. Desdemona sleeps in her bed as Othello stands above her holding some sort of light – perhaps candles or a torch. In the low light of the bedchamber Desdemona's white skin stands out. Any small imperfections on her skin are smoothed out by the dull light. As for Othello, his black skin allows him to melt into the shadows, making Othello harder to see. Furthermore, any light emitted from the candles or torch does not illuminate much more than the top front of Othello's body, and the moving shadows caused by the dancing flames obscure the rest of him. Two figures are visible: a pale figure and a dark, shadowy figure.

The "cause" Othello refers to is never specified (5.2.1). However, possible interpretations for the "cause" include Desdemona's sexual exploits, the visual proof Iago provides to Othello of his wife's infidelity, and the feeling of betrayal by one thought of as loyal. Othello appears conflicted. He does not want to kill Desdemona by "[shedding] her blood" and risk injury to her body (5.2.3), but the risk of leaving her alive is that she might "betray more men" (5.2.6). He possibly worries about his ability to control his wife's apparent lust. Also, note that Othello identifies Desdemona as the one doing the betraying, insinuating that men do not have the ability

to refuse Desdemona's advances. Othello's description of his wife's nefarious actions is different from how he describes what she looks like lying in the bed. In bed, she is a vison of fairness with "whiter skin… than snow / And smooth as monumental alabaster." The juxtaposition of the visual image of Othello and Desdemona coupled with the conflicting description of Desdemona as this pure white, unblemished figure capable of being unchaste is complex. Previously, Othello declared that Desdemona was "begrimed and black" like him because of her extramarital affair with Cassio (3.3.390). Karim-Cooper notes that here Othello uses "Petrarchan language, eroticizing [Desdemona's] pale flesh, while… attempting to elevate her spiritually" (175). Thus, to this scene's juxtaposition of Othello and Desdemona is also added the juxtaposition of Desdemona to Desdemona. The juxtaposition of Othello to Desdemona is superficial and interpreted by assessing the physical, visual nature of the scene: Desdemona is fair, and Othello is not. Juxtaposing Desdemona to Desdemona is more complex and metaphorical. One Desdemona is tarnished by her relationship with Cassio; the second Desdemona is the restored, fair-appearing, un-begrimed figure laying in the bed. In declaring that he will "kill [her] / And love [her] after," Othello suggests that death will preserve her physical fairness while getting rid of her moral impurities (5.2.18-19).

I would now like to turn to the juxtaposition of Desdemona and Bianca. Unlike the juxtaposition of Othello and Desdemona which has implications for both physical and moral fairness, the juxtaposition of Desdemona and Bianca just operates within the realm of moral fairness. Firstly, who is Bianca? *Othello*'s list of characters describes her as a courtesan and Cassio's mistress. A courtesan is type Venetian sex worker who operates at a level above that of

traditional prostitutes; additionally, a courtesan would not be considered a whore.[11] Karim-Cooper provides the following insight on courtesans in Venice:

> It is unlike any other community of prostitutes. They were widely criticized for their openness and cosmetic shame, and this fueled anxieties about their sexual freedom, as well as the secret access they had in society. Yet, they were extolled for their seductive beauty, and the countless artistic depictions of them remind us of their erotic appeal. (173)

Most scholars subscribe to the stance that Bianca is a courtesan as described in *Othello*'s character list. However, in *Shakespeare's 'Whores': Erotics, Politics, and Poetics*, Kay Stanton proposes that Bianca should not be considered a courtesan because she "never manifests any behavior indicative of prostitution" such as accepting or asking for "payment of any kind for her sexual favors" (39). I disagree with Stanton's claim. Cassio insinuates that there could be some monetary transfer between himself and Bianca when he exclaims "I marry! What, a customer! prithee bear some charity to my wit, do not think it so unwholesome. Ha, ha, ha!" when asked by Iago if he will marry Bianca (4.1.120-02). "Customer" suggests the exchange of payment. Additionally, Iago claims that Bianca "by selling her desires / Buys herself bread and clothes" (4.1.95-96). I do, however, agree with Stanton's observation that "no sex partner other than Cassio is ever mentioned in connection with her," meaning that Bianca is in a monogamous relationship even though she and Cassio are not married (39).

The lives of Bianca and Desdemona have several intriguing similarities that make these two female characters comparable. First, both Bianca and Desdemona are in what appear to be monogamous relationships with Cassio and Othello, respectively, although Bianca and Cassio

[11] For more information on the levels of prostitution in 16th century Venice, see pages 2 and 3 of Veronica Franco's *Poems and Selected Letters* edited and translated by Ann Rosalind Jones and Margret F. Rosenthal.

are not married while Desdemona and Othello are married. Additionally, within their relationships, they encounter similar situations. Compare the two following exchanges. The first is between Desdemona and Othello where she tries to get Othello to come to dinner so that she can discuss Cassio's punishment with her husband:

DESDEMONA. Shall't be tonight, at supper?

OTHELLO. No, not tonight.

DESDEMONA. Tomorrow dinner then?

OTHELLO. I shall not dine at home

I meet the captains at the citadel.

DESDEMONA. Why then, tomorrow night, or Tuesday morn;

On Tuesday, noon or night; on Wednesday morn!

I prithee name the time, but let it not

Exceed three days (3.3.57-63)

The second exchange is between Bianca and Cassio where Bianca laments how long it has been since she has seen Cassio:

CASSIO. …What make you from home?

How is't with you, my most fair Bianca?

I'faith, sweet love, I was coming to your house.

BIANCA. And I was going to your lodging, Cassio.

What, keep a week away? seven days and nights?

Eight score eight hours? and lovers' absent hours

More tedious than the dial, eight score times!

O weary reckoning!

CASSIO. Pardon me, Bianca,

I have this while with leaden thoughts been pressed,

But I shall in a more continuate time

Strike off this score of absence. (3.4.169-79)

In both exchanges, the woman in the relationship expresses displeasure at her partner's unwillingness to be with her. Both Bianca and Desdemona occupy a similar role in their respective relationships.

Secondly, both Desdemona's and Bianca's sexual relationships are depicted as not staying within the traditional boundaries of husband and wife. Bianca, a courtesan, is in a publicly acknowledged relationship with Cassio, an unmarried man. Desdemona, on the other hand, is accused of having an affair with Cassio while being married to Othello. Each of these untraditional relationships involving Cassio suggest that the participants could be considered morally impure – Bianca because she is not married and Desdemona because she is married. Juxtaposing Bianca and Cassio's relationship and the supposed relationship between Desdemona and Cassio is beneficial to understanding the construction of Desdemona's fairness.

As I previously mentioned, Bianca and Cassio's relationship is not kept hidden from other characters, although Cassio prefers that Othello does not "see [him] womaned" (4.1.195). Despite this fact, there is a jovial and playful aspect to their relationship. When confronting Cassio about the length of time he has spent away from her, Bianca does not just say that he has been gone awhile or give a rough estimate of their time apart. She gives specifics, declaring that they have been apart "eight score eight hours" (3.4.175). Cassio even teases Bianca about her jealousy when he asks her to copy the embroidery pattern on the handkerchief that he does not know belongs to Desdemona because Bianca believes that the handkerchief is "some token from

a newer friend" (3.4.181). Bianca thinks that Cassio has grown tired of her and has found a new prostitute to occupy his time, which would explain why he has not visited her recently. Additionally, the playfulness of Bianca and Cassio's relationship is noted by Iago: "he, when he hears of her, cannot refrain / From the excess of laughter" (4.1.99-100). Later, after Cassio is wounded from behind by Iago in 5.1, Bianca expresses concern for him and calls him "my dear" (5.1.75) and "my sweet" (5.1.76). Bianca's actions show that her relationship with Cassio was not irreversibly harmed by him asking her to copy the embroidery pattern on the handkerchief she presumed to be from a new lover.

On the other hand, Desdemona and Cassio's relationship is hidden from public sight because it does not actually exist. Iago construct the illicit relationship for Othello by manipulating what Othello sees and how he interprets it and by taking advantage of Desdemona dropping her handkerchief. Iago's manipulation of events is best showcased in 4.1 when he decides to talk to Cassio about Bianca but frame it for Othello as if he is talking about Desdemona. Cassio's reactions – his "smiles, gestures and light behavior" – to Iago's questions enrage Othello (4.1.103). He interprets Cassio's description of Bianca's harmless actions – "so hangs and lolls and weeps upon me, so shakes and pulls me! Ha, ha, ha!" (4.1.138-39) – as Desdemona "[plucking] him to [Othello's] chamber" (4.1.140-41). Bianca's harmless actions become Desdemona's traitorous actions. Othello is too far away to hear Iago and Cassio's conversation, allowing for Iago to frame it in a manner that will confirm that Othello's distrust in his wife is not misplaced. Iago's manipulation comes to a head when Bianca appears between lines 144 and 145 holding Desdemona's handkerchief. Bianca inadvertently "becomes the visual testimonial that Desdemona has been transformed (or deformed) into a whore" (Little 319). The sight of not Desdemona holding Desdemona's handkerchief pushes Othello over the edge. He

declares that his once-fair wife will "rot and perish and be damned tonight… my heart is turned to stone" (4.1.178-80). If Othello had any previous hesitancy in believing Iago, it is now gone. Compared to the lightness in Cassio and Bianca's relationship that seems to be unaffected by their unmarried status, Othello and Desdemona's relationship is affected by her being equated with Bianca. Desdemona's moral fairness suffers.

It is also important to note how Bianca and Desdemona view themselves and how others view them within the context of their relationships with Cassio. Bianca is called a whore once during *Othello*. Iago calls Bianca a whore when he lays out for Othello how Desdemona's handkerchief came to be in Bianca's possession: "she gave it him, and he hath given it his whore" (4.1.173-74). The purpose of Iago's use of "whore" is to link Bianca and Desdemona together to get Othello to believe that Desdemona is as worse as a prostitute. Although this is the only use of "whore" in regard to Bianca, she is called "strumpet" – another word for a prostitute or a woman of loose morals – several times to her face by Iago and Emilia, Iago's wife (5.1.77, 120). Bianca rejects being labeled a strumpet: "I am no strumpet / But of life as honest as you" (5.1.121-22). Bianca rejects the assertation that her lifestyle places her at any moral disadvantage. Desdemona is also called both a whore and a strumpet. These words are often said to her face. In less than 20 lines,[12] Othello calls Desdemona a whore three times, including telling Desdemona that he "took [her] for that cunning whore of Venice / That married with Othello" (4.2.91-92). Othello insinuates that Desdemona was sexually promiscuous before they were married. She was not as pure as Othello or Brabantio, Desdemona's father, imagined. Being called a whore causes Desdemona to break down:

I cannot say whore:

[12] 4.2.73-91

It does abhor me now I speak the word;

To do the act that might the addition earn

Not the world's mass of vanity could make me. (4.2.163-66)

Desdemona is upset that Othello would think of her as a whore. This also highlights the differences between how Cassio addressed Bianca and how Othello addresses Desdemona when he believes her to be committing adultery. After Iago begins corrupting Desdemona's virtue, Othello frequently addresses Desdemona as 'whore'[13] and 'strumpet.'[14] Cassio addresses Bianca both by her name and in a more positive light: "fair Bianca" (3.4.170) and "sweet Bianca" (3.4.179, 4.1.155). These differences in address reflect the names of the two women. The sinfulness encoded in 'whore' and 'strumpet' links to the 'demon' embedded in Des**demon**a's name. The positive connotations of 'fair' and 'sweet' underscore the concept of purity encoded in the name Bianca, which is Italian for white. In juxtaposing Desdemona with Bianca, Desdemona appears less fair than the courtesan.

In summary, William Shakespeare shapes Desdemona's physical and moral fairness though juxtaposition. In every scene in which they appear together on stage, Desdemona and Othello juxtapose each other visually. Her light skin and his dark skin emphasize each other. Additionally, the juxtaposition between Desdemona and Othello results in Desdemona being degraded with animal imagery. She is likened to a "white ewe" (1.1.88) by Iago and forms part of "the beast with two backs" (1.1.114-15) with Othello. Furthermore, Othello imagines her face becoming "begrimed and black" like his skin after Iago paints her as unfaithful. In juxtaposition with Othello, her moral fairness suffers, too. The second juxtaposition is between Desdemona

[13] 3.3.362, 4.2.73, 4.2.88, 4.2.91
[14] 4.2.82, 4.2.83, 5.2.76, 5.2.78

and Bianca, a courtesan. The pair are similar in the respect that their relationships do not fit the traditional mold. Bianca is unmarried and in a relationship with the unmarried Cassio. Iago depicts Desdemona in an extramarital relationship with Cassio. This extramarital affair tarnishes Desdemona's moral purity, turning her less fair than the courtesan. Desdemona may be more physically fair than Othello, but she is depicted as less metaphorically fair than both Bianca and Othello.

2. Vittoria: Fairness Through Perception

The obsession with female sexual purity – here, with the spouse being the sole sexual partner of the woman – occupies the forefront of John Webster's *The White Devil or, The Tragedy of Paolo Giordano Orsini, Duke of Bracciano, With The Life and Death of Vittoria Corombona, the famous Venetian courtesan* (1612). The driving action of *The White Devil* is the adulterous affair between the married characters Bracciano and Vittoria, the two characters named in the play's lengthy subtitle. Following the affair, Vittoria is placed on trial in act 3. From the first scene of the play, Lodovico, a Count convicted of murder, notes the unfairness of the justice system:

> So. But I wonder, then, some great men scape
> This banishment. There's Paolo Giordano Orsini,
> The Duke of Bracciano, now lives in Rome
> And by close panderism seeks to prostitute
> The honor of Vittoria Corombona (1.1.38-42)

Lodovico, the recent recipient of a "banishment," meditates on how he is punished while others escape the same fate. Lodovico implies that Bracciano will receive a less harsh punishment for his actions than Lodovico has received for his. And Bracciano receives no formal punishment, unlike Vittoria, for his part in the affair. It is also worth noting that Bracciano does not act as a pander for Vittoria as Lodovico claims. This task falls to Flaminio, her brother and Bracciano's secretary. Flaminio also receives no official punishment through a court. The judicial process showcased in *The White Devil* is particularly harsh on women and lenient to men who hold some form of power in society.

Whereas past scholarship on Vittoria in *The White Devil* tends to focus on trying to judge Vittoria or justify her adulterous actions, this chapter instead examines the burden of the expectation placed on women – but not men – to maintain their sexual and moral purity. Quite often, these topics manifest themselves in *The White Devil* through depictions of whiteness – metaphorical lightening and darkening, fairness, the juxtaposition of characters with different skin colors – and through cosmetics. This chapter begins with the exploration of how Flaminio and Bracciano describe Vittoria before she engages in sexual relations with Bracciano and how Monticelso describes Vittoria as morally corrupted during her trial after the initial sexual relations. Here, I will also discuss how Monticelso weaponizes Vittoria's use of cosmetics – particularly the use and significance of blushing – during her trial. Blush is also featured in *The White Devil*'s subplot where Zanche, Vittoria's black servant, struggles with her skin's inability to show blush. In the second half of this chapter, I will address the permanence of female sexual purity through an analysis of how Bracciano's, Flaminio's and Francisco's perceptions of Vittoria shift after she completes her punishment for adultery and leaves the house of penitent whores. I will conclude this chapter by discussing how the importance of female sexual purity within *The White Devil* is not up to Vittoria but us subject to the needs of the play's male characters. Webster constructs Vittoria's fairness as variable in order to suit the needs of others.

The only direct – and I am hesitant to say direct – description of Vittoria's physical attributes occurs in Flaminio's aside to Camillo as Vittoria enters the stage in the play's second scene:

> See, she comes. What reason have you to be jealous of this creature? What an ignorant ass or flattering knave might he be counted that should write sonnets to her eyes, or call

> her brow the snow of Ida or ivory of Corinth, or compare her hair to the blackbird's bill when 'tis liker the blackbird's feather? (1.2.117-22)

Here, *The White Devil* is ambiguous. In having Flaminio describe his sister through hyperbole, Webster potentially shields Vittoria's true physicality from the readers. Instead, Webster leaves his readers question the extent to which Vittoria's features can be deciphered. Flaminio's description of Vittoria's physical beauty focuses on her dark hair and light skin. Benedict S. Robinson notes that Flaminio's description of the sonnet "[inverts] the traditional praise of pale skin and fair hair" (120). Writing in *Barbarous Play,* Lara Bovilsky sees the description as Flaminio "[critiquing] the application of Petrarchan forms to his sister, on the basis of her violation of Petrarchan aesthetic norms" (123). The inversion/violation of the norms suggests some sort of corruption. Taking Flaminio's current conversation with Camillo and past conversation with Bracciano as precedent, the corruption should be sexual in nature. While the "snow of Ida" (1.2.120) refers to sheep's wool, the "ivory of / Corinth" (1.2.120-21) does not have a similar connotation of purity and innocence. Robinson claims that Corinth "was known not for ivory but for marble and prostitutes" (120). This implies that Vittoria is basically a prostitute under her brother's care. Bovilsky notes that "in Jacobean Italinate drama, female sexual license is coded within the monochromatic antithesis of light and dark" (117-18). Here, white – a color often associated with things that are pure – hides something impure. Flaminio's imagined sonnet sets both pure and impure whiteness against the blackness of birds. Or, to get literal with human anatomy, the blackness of Vittoria's hair covers the whiteness of her skin.

Celia R. Daileader also takes the physical route when discussing Flaminio's description of his sister. She notes that "there is even a question as to how 'white' [Vittoria] might or might not be" and that "the rhetoric of fairness is remarkably absent from descriptions of Vittoria" (34).

Daileader claims that Flaminio portrays Vittoria as having "a less than lily white complexion" (34). I agree in part with Daileader. There is a scarcity of fairness in *The White Devil*. The scarcity of fairness in Webster's play stands in juxtaposition to the explicit physical fairness of Desdemona in Shakespeare's *Othello* and the explicit moral farness of Sophonisba in Marston's *The Wonder of Women*. Flaminio refers to his sister as "the fair Vittoria" (1.2.6) and as Camillo's "fair bedfellow" (1.2.38) – the only two times Vittoria is modified with the adjective in 1.2.[15] These two uses of 'fair' are more metaphorical than physical. Additionally, Vittoria being called her husband's "fair bedfellow" while Flaminio prostitutes her is subversive and oxymoronic. It hints that Vittoria is unsatisfied – or at least Flaminio perceives her to be unsatisfied – in her marriage to Camillo. This observation gains stronger traction when Camillo enters the stage and reveals to Flaminio that he "[does] not well remember… / When [he] last lay with [Vittoria]" (1.2.57-58) and that he believes "there grew a flaw between us" (1.2.60). Camillo and Vittoria – husband and wife – are not really bedfellows. Returning to Daileader's claim that Vittoria's skin is "less than lily white" (34), I would argue that Flaminio's comment to Vittoria later in the same scene that "darkness hides [her] blush" provides additional evidence towards Vittoria being of light complexion (1.2.206). Flaminio's earlier comment primes *The White Devil*'s reader to expect Vittoria's skin to be light. This priming becomes reinforced in Flaminio's poetic

[15] Vittoria is called 'fair' two additional times in *The White Devil* – but not by Flaminio or another major character. In 2.2, after observing the dumbshows depicting Isabella's and Camillo's deaths, the Conjurer tells Bracciano that "they are come with purpose to apprehend / Your mistress, *fair* Vittoria" (2.2.49-50, my emphasis). I find the Conjurer's use of both "mistress" and "fair" to modify Vittoria to be {uncomfortable?} because of their respective negative and positive connotations. Additionally, in 2.4, Francisco's servant uses 'fair' when asking the Matron of the house of penitent whores to "deliver for me / This letter to the *fair* Vittoria" (4.2.9-10, my emphasis). The servant's use of "fair" strikes me as ironic in several ways. First, Vittoria is in a house of penitent *whores* – a house of women whose purity has been called into question. Second, 'fair,' while it corroborates the contents of the letter, contradicts Francisco's true view of Vittoria. I will return to the ramifications of Francisco's letter later in this chapter.

description of Vittoria. Similarly, the uses of 'fair' in describing who Vittoria is act as primers for the expectation of whiteness.

Whereas the descriptions of Vittoria before the affair comment on her outward fairness but inward deviance by subverting Petrarchan conventions, the descriptions of Vittoria after the affair are more brutal and not sugared by poetic form. Her describers make less use of the suggestions and poetic language that Flaminio employs. They now know for certain that Vittoria is sexually impure. She is no longer fair. Francisco labels Vittoria as "[Bracciano's] strumpet" (2.1.58), and Isabella follows suit later in the same act, declaring "dig the strumpet's eyes out" (2.1.245). A strumpet is "a female prostitute; (also) a mistress, a concubine. More generally: a sexually promiscuous or lascivious woman" ("strumpet, n. and adj."). The entry for 'strumpet' in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) also includes the phrase 'to play the strumpet.' The definition for this phrase includes adultery – "to commit adultery or fornication; to prostitute oneself; to behave in a sexually promiscuous, lascivious, or provocative manner" – which is not present in the definitions for the word 'strumpet' ("strumpet, n. and adj."). In total, five[16] of the six uses of 'strumpet' are directed at Vittoria. The sixth use is directed at Zanche, Vittoria's servant, by Marcello (Vittoria and Flaminio's brother) at 5.1.195 after witnessing a romantic exchange between Zanche and Flaminio.

Vittoria is also labeled a 'whore' multiple times and by nine different characters, including herself, over the course of *The White Devil*. "Holy" (3.2.77), "damnable" (3.3.112), and "stately and advanced" (4.2.74) are all used to modify 'whore' in reference to Vittoria. There are two places where 'whore' occurs that are worth further investigation. One is when Bracciano tells Vittoria that she will "be a brave great lady / A stately and advanced whore" (4.2.73-74). I

[16] 2.1.58, 2.1.245, 2.1.395, 3.2.243, and 5.6.206.

will return to this instance later in this chapter as part of a discussion on the permanence of sexual purity. However, Monticelso's monologue on whores, which he gives during Vittoria's trial in response to her question "Ha! 'Whore'? What's that?", has present relevance (3.2.77). The monologue is worth quoting in full:

> 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 nostril,
> Poisoned perfumes. They are coz'ning 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,
> Extractions upon meat, drink, garments, sleep,
> Ay, even on man's perdition, his sin.
> They are those brittle evidence 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 filled,
> And emptied by cursed riot. They are worse,
> Worse than dead bodies which are begged 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're first stamps it, brings in trouble
> All that receive it— (3.2.78-101)

Vittoria cuts him off. Monticelso's anger is palpable. The repetition of the question "what are whores?" and its variants four times in the monologue manifests Monticelso's disbelief and anger of having to explain what a whore is to a woman accused of being a whore. Should she not be able to reflect upon her past to determine what a whore is? According to Monticelso's metaphors for whores, to be a whore is to be destructive. Whores are "poisoned perfumes," "shipwrecks in calmest weather," "winters… barren," "the true material fire of hell," "treasuries by extortion filled," and the "counterfeited coin." But the destruction is not done to the whore; it is done to the man who involves himself with the woman. These men "rot," are "emptied by cursed riot" of their money, and "receive" trouble. The burden is placed on women to maintain their sexual purity. Men are seen as the women's – the whore's – victims. Monticelso suggests that the men are tricked by the women – the "sweetmeats" and the "perfumes" – whose outward appearance hides sinister intentions. Thus, whores are like white devils: "the devil disguised as a virtuous being" ("white, adj. (and adv.) and n.").[17]

Monticelso never explicitly says that the whores he describes are women, yet it can be inferred he is discussing women because the context for this speech is a woman's trial. The *OED* allows for 'whore' to be used to refer to men, describing a "sexually promiscuous or lecherous

[17] In a study on the cosmetics aspects of *The White Devil*, Farrah Karim-Cooper notes the rich cosmetic imagery of Monticelso's whore monologue. She singles out the "poisoned perfumes" in line 81 and the shipwreck metaphor in line 82 as being references to cosmetics.

man" ("whore, n.").[18] Bracciano fits this portion of the definition of 'whore,' but unlike Vittoria, he does not stand trial. A double standard exists between the treatment of Vittoria and the treatment of Bracciano and Flaminio. While Vittoria receives the greatest rebuke, and the strongest language is used against her, Bracciano and Flaminio receive very little. But they are not innocent. Bracciano is confronted about his infidelity but not to the extent of Vittoria. He is never called a 'whore' explicitly; the language used by those who confront him is metaphorical and full of sexual euphemisms. His wife, Isabella, even forgives him to an extent, wishing that his "sins find mercy" (2.1.209). Very little is said about Flaminio's role in Bracciano and Vittoria's affair with the exception of Flaminio's mother. She exclaims in anguish, "my son the pander!" as she realizes the repercussions this could have on the reputation of her family (1.2.225).

Similar to Flaminio's sonnet-esque description in 1.2, descriptions of Vittoria's physical appearance during her trial are fleeting and facilitated by cosmetics imagery and language. Monticelso declares to Vittoria that he will "paint out / [Her] follies in more natural red and white / Than that upon [her] cheek" (3.2.51-53). The colors Monticelso picks out – red and white – held special significance in early modern England as "signs of chaste femininity" (Iyengar 132). Vittoria is not accepted as chaste during her trial. Therefore, Monticelso claims that her current use of cosmetics does not accurately represent who she is. Monticelso believes that he can wield cosmetics in a more convincing way. Writing about *The White Devil* in *Shades of Difference: Mythologies of Skin Color in Early Modern England*, Sujata Iyengar sees cosmetics as a form of control: "men [use] paint and metaphors of cosmetic deception to reassert their

[18] In definition 3: "A male prostitute; a (younger) man kept by another man as a (typically passive) sexual partner. More generally: a sexually promiscuous or lecherous man. Also as a general term of abuse. Frequently with descriptive modifier or as the second element in compounds" ("whore, n.")

authority over women and their complexions" (138). This is what Monticelso does to Vittoria in the trial scene. Beyond Monticelso's references to Vittoria's use of makeup, there are not any other references to her physical appearance.

Flaminio makes a point similar to Monticelso's when Zanche, a Moor who serves as Vittoria's maid, declares that her use of cosmetics makes Flaminio, her lover and Vittoria's brother, less in love with her:

> ZANCHE. …A little painting and gay clothes
>
> make you loathe me.
>
> FLAMINIO. How, love a lady for painting or gay apparel?
>
> I'll unkennel one example more for thee. Aesop had a
>
> foolish dog that let go of the leash to catch the shadow. (5.1.175-79)

Flaminio sees Zanche's makeup as misleading. He believes that makeup does not accurately represent the person who uses it. In a painful twist of irony, Zanche would have been portrayed by a white male in blackface on the early modern stage. In *Shades of Difference*, Iyengar discusses the use of cosmetics and the public's perception of cosmetics in early modern England. Regarding the use of cosmetics, Iyengar notes that both genders utilized cosmetics for reasons such as "to follow fashions at court" (136). If both men and women use cosmetics, it is hypocritical for men – such as Monticelso and Flaminio in *The White Devil* – to criticize women for their use of cosmetics. Additional reasons for men and women to wear cosmetics include the ability "to exert some control over their appearance" and "to appear sexually attractive and available" (136). The public perception of cosmetics was varied, as evidenced by writings denouncing cosmetics and by recipe books including instructions for making cosmetics. Those who were against makeup thought that its ability to "[conceal] women's blushes" would

"[threaten] to destroy the hermeneutics of early modern shame" (132). Others thought that female cosmetics users were "not merely tinkering with God's handiwork but also going against their essential, feminine, bodily nature" (133). In *Cosmetics in Shakespearean and Renaissance Drama*, Karim-Cooper adds that men's attraction to cosmetics was thought to have made them "vulnerable to seduction and entrapment" (93) and that using cosmetics leads women "to poison and murder" (95). I agree with Iyengar view that cosmetics in *The White Devil* are generally used in a negative fashion as a way for the male characters to control the female characters. Iyengar notes that his cosmetic control appears in Vittoria's trial scene, in the dumbshow of Isabella's death, and widely in *The White Devil* through blush.[19]

Blush plays a recurring role in *The White Devil*, appearing in many important scenes from Vittoria and Bracciano's on-stage meeting in the second scene to Vittoria's trial in 3.2 to Vittoria and Zanche's death scene at the end of the play. But to no character is blush so important and central than it is to Zanche, Vittoria's servant and a Moor. Zanche has a complicated relationship with her skin color and cosmetics. She, a black person, is in a relationship with Flaminio, a white person. The fact that their relationship is interracial makes other characters question their relationship. For example, Marcello asks Flaminio "why doth this devil haunt" him (5.1.86). Marcello insinuates that Flaminio is not in a relationship with Zanche by choice.[20] Flaminio's response – "I know not / …I do not conjure for her" – does nothing to dispel Marcello's accusations. Later in the same scene Flaminio admits that "[he does] love her just as a man holds a wolf by the ears: but for fear of turning upon me and pulling out my throat"

[19] Karim-Cooper presents a contrasting view of cosmetics in *The White Devil*. She believes that Webster seeks to "legitimize the use of cosmetics, at least within the masculine worlds of drama and poetry" by prominently featuring cosmetic imagery and language (92). And, in response to scholars who believe that Webster's plays "[reinforce] moralistic anti-cosmetic sentiments," she questions "why would any dramatist do so exclusively, when cosmetics are practically synonymous with theatre" (101).

[20] Daileader also picks up on this in *Racism, Misogyny, and the Othello Myth: Inter-racial Couples from Shakespeare to Spike Lee*, noting that "the sexual aggressor is female" (32).

(5.1.157-59). In likening Zanche to a wild animal, Flaminio portrays her as less than human. And Zanche appears unsuccessful in changing Flaminio's view of her, since her "little painting and gay clothes make [him] loathe [her]" (5.1.175-76). Zanche's use of cosmetics – perhaps with the effect of lightening her skin and adding blush – suggests that she is unhappy with her complexion. Attempting to please others, Zanche uses cosmetics and receives criticism for doing so. Thus, Zanche becomes the second woman in *The White Devil* after Vittoria to be criticized for her use of cosmetics. But in contrast to Vittoria, Zanche places cosmetics on top of her already dark skin – she places a mask on top of another mask. Other characters cannot read blushing on Zanche's dark skin, and they similarly cannot read the artificial blush created by cosmetics. Cosmetics and black skin have the same effect: unreadability.[21]

Zanche returns to contemplating her complexion two additional times in *The White Devil*. The first is when she professes her love to Francisco who uses blackface to disguise himself as Mulinassar, a Moor[22]: "I ne'er loved my complexion till now, / 'Cause I may boldly say without a blush / I love you" (5.1.219-21). The second time is a mere line before her death:

> I have blood
> As red as either of theirs; wilt drink some?
> 'Tis good for the falling sickness. I am proud
> Death cannot alter my complexion,
> For I shall ne'er look pale. (5.6.227-31)

[21] Iyengar makes this connection between cosmetics and dark skin in *Shades of Difference*. In using cosmetics, "fair, painted ladies have in effect rendered themselves 'black,' their faces unreadable through their fixed cosmetic pallor" (123).

[22] Francisco is hypocritical in using blackface cosmetics to disguise himself as Mulinassar. During the trial scene he listens to Monticelso attack Vittoria for her deceiving use of cosmetics. Here, Francisco uses cosmetics deceitfully but receives no reproach from any of the characters.

At first glance, it appears that Zanche finds empowerment in her skin color. Her skin cannot betray her emotions to someone she claims to love, and it allows her to keep her identity in death. However, one must consider the circumstances of Zanche's comments. She makes both of these statements about her skin color with male characters as her onstage audience. The benefits of being free from blush are limited for Zanche. She is still constrained by her black skin's unwillingness to yield any sign of her internal emotions despite her attempts in 5.6.227-28 to establish solidarity between herself and Vittoria through the claim that blood unites them. Additionally, she is constrained by the play's time period where she is inferior because she is a woman and a servant. Even without cosmetics, Zanche's face is still as unreadable as it would have been if she had covered it in cosmetics.

Recall the discussion of Vittoria's physical appearance from the beginning of this chapter. After Bracciano exits the stage, Flaminio tells his sister that "darkness hides [her] blush" (1.2.206). The obscuration of blushing is just one of the parallels between Vittoria and Zanche.[23] In *Barbarous Play*, Bovilsky claims that "sudden blushing indicates that seeming fair skin may always transform into (or already conceals) darkness, and sudden paleness implies that skin was never as light as it might have been" (126). Both blood rushing to the face and blood quickly leaving the face are problematic.

Let us return once again to Vittoria and how Francisco, Bracciano, and Flaminio perceive her metaphorical whiteness. After her trial for adultery and subsequent punishment of residing in a house of penitent whores, characters' views of Vittoria's moral standing begin to shift. Francisco, the brother of Bracciano's late wife Isabella, spurs the change as he seeks revenge for

[23] Vittoria and Zanche are also both promiscuous: Vittoria with Bracciano and Zanche with Flaminio and Francisco disguised as Mulinassar.

his sister's death. He plans to write a letter to Vittoria in which he declares his love for her. He declares, "I am in love, / In love with Corombona" as he writes (4.1.117-18). However, Francisco's love is a stunt to incite jealousy in Bracciano so that he will take Vittoria back. Additionally, in the process of letter writing, Francisco fails to address Vittoria by her first name. His use of her last name, Corombona, suggests that he wishes to keep her at a distance, as first names are more intimate. Nowhere in his letter does Francisco declare that Vittoria is fair or pure. His servant, however, calls her "the fair Vittoria" when telling the Matron of the house of penitent whores the recipient of the letter (4.2.10). The closest Francisco gets to this level of praise is calling her "the most unfortunate his best respected Vittoria," but the praise of "best respected" is lowered by the modifier "the most unfortunate" (4.2.16). Instead, he emphasizes her unfavorable condition as he describes how he would care for her, noting that he fears Vittoria "should fade and wither" without his care (4.2.27). Vittoria is Francisco's pawn. Her sexual purity – or the lack thereof – is beneficial to him because it provides him a way to exact his revenge by ruining Bracciano: "to marry a whore; what can be worse?" (4.3.57).

Bracciano's view of Vittoria in the latter half of the play derives some influence from Francisco's letter. In the immediate aftermath of reading the letter, Bracciano refers to Vittoria as a 'whore' twice. The first instance is a plain use of the word "whore" at 4.2.42. The second use occurs in a more elaborate construction and is used to address Vittoria directly: "God's precious, you shall be a brave great lady, / A stately and advanced whore" (4.2.73-74). Bracciano is jealous that Francisco will take his ex-lover. Juxtaposing "whore" with "brace great lady" and "stately and advanced," Bracciano mocks Vittoria. Despite the conditions Vittoria finds herself in, her past will always mar her. However, Bracciano abruptly changes his tune after Vittoria describes how he is responsible for her ruin. Vittoria now becomes his "dearest happiness"

(4.2.127) and his "love" (4.2.128). Bracciano tries to savage any relationship he might have with Vittoria. He probably fears the letter being true. From his point of view, to lose Vittoria to Francisco would be worse than marrying a whore. Bracciano changes his view of Vittoria to suit his own circumstances and reputation.

Flaminio is overcome with guilt after Vittoria is sent to the house of penitent whores. His sister is punished for adultery while he escapes punishment even though he is responsible for facilitating it. Flaminio's view of his sister's moral standing never really changes after her sentencing. But he does become defensive when Lodovico and Bracciano refer to Vittoria as "a damnable whore" (3.3.112) and "this whore" (4.2.43), respectively.[24] In response to Francisco's letter, Flaminio tries to mend the relationship between Vittoria and Bracciano. In doing so, he acknowledges that she no longer has sexual purity. Flaminio uses Vittoria's lack of sexual purity as a form of manipulation, telling Vittoria that she is "blemished in / [her] fame; my lord cures it" (4.2.234-35) and "Will any mercer take another's ware / When once 'tis toused and sullied?" (4.2.153-54). Flaminio realizes that his sister's options are limited; he is one of the causes of her situation. Unlike Bracciano, his opinion of the state of his sister's sexual purity never becomes favorable. He does not "[drink] Lethe" like Bracciano and forget the unfavorable opinion of Vittoria established during her trial or her time spent in a place with others who have committed similar sexual acts resulting in them being labeled whores (4.2.126). She always stays stained in his eyes.

The importance of female purity is circumstantial. In Webster's *The White Devil*, Vittoria's purity is only important when it suits the male characters' fancies and needs, and the weight it has shifts as the play progresses. At the beginning of the play, Vittoria's sexual purity is

[24] Flaminio replies "dost ever think to speak again?" (3.3.114) to Lodovico and "that – what do you call her?" (4.2.43) to Bracciano.

intact because her relationship is only with Camillo, her husband. Yet, her marital status does not have enough weight to dissuade Bracciano from committing adultery. Later, Francisco takes advantage of Vittoria's nonexistent purity when he exacts revenge on Bracciano for the death of Isabella – Francisco's sister and Bracciano's wife. Vittoria's adultery seemingly does not matter when he professes his want for a relationship with her through a letter. Vittoria's lack of sexual purity is important for Francisco because it allows him to influence Bracciano's actions. It would be a bad look for Bracciano if Francisco willingly entered a relationship with Bracciano's former mistress. Similarly, Bracciano must ignore Vittoria's impurities – "I have drunk Lethe" – after having maintained an unfavorable view of her during a portion of his visit to the house of convertites in order to prevent a negative impact on his image if Francisco married Vittoria (4.2.126).

John Webster based the general plot of *The White Devil* on historical events that took place in Italy during the latter half of the 16th century. The Fugger Newsletter[25] is one of multiple sources describing the death of Signora Accoramboni – the woman who would become Webster's Vittoria Corombona. Notably, the historical Vittoria did not commit adultery with the historical Duke of Bracciano because "she did not want to violate her marriage and told him that she was married and that no other man should touch her" (318). The pair eventually married after the murders of their respective spouses. Furthermore, while the idea of marital fidelity is prominent in the source material, whiteness and fairness is not. In crafting *The White Devil*, Webster paints a new story where a woman's worth is defined by her fairness. Multiple male characters question Vittoria's fairness throughout the play, from before her affair with Bracciano

[25] The portion of the Fugger Newsletter that addresses the death of Signora Accoramboni is dated December 1585 – January 1586.

in act 1 to her death in act 5. Webster emphasizes the tumultuous aspects of Vittoria's fairness and sexual purity through cosmetics – which create for their user an artificial fairness and blush – through how male characters – primarily Flaminio, Bracciano, and Francisco – interact with her sexual history, and by providing a secondary plot where Zanche struggles with her dark skin that is incapable of showing a blush. In turn, Vittoria's fairness becomes variable, subject to the needs of *The White Devil*'s male characters.

3. Sophonisba: Fairness Through Virginity

Like Shakespeare's *Othello* and Webster's *The White Devil*, John Marston's *The Wonder of Women, or The Tragedy of Sophonisba* (1606) is a tragedy where the action of the play can be explained as revolving around the main female character's sexual purity However, unlike *Othello*'s Desdemona and *The White Devil*'s Vittoria, the sexual purity of *The Wonder of Women*'s Sophonisba has not been tarnished, neither supposedly or actually. Sophonisba is a married virgin due to some rather unfortunate and extraordinary circumstances. In 1.2, Sophonisba is due to consummate her marriage to Masinissa in an elaborate bed scene, but their actions are interrupted by a wounded soldier who arrives to tell Masinissa that Carthage is under attack from Rome. Masinissa leaves to fight before his marriage is consummated. While Masinissa is gone, several Carthaginian senators agree to send Sophonisba to Syphax, a rival of Masinissa, in order to gain his favor. Sophonisba, believing Masinissa to be dead, agrees. In 3.1, Syphax attempts to bed Sophonisba, but Sophonisba is able to evade his advances. First, she delays by telling Syphax that in the event of Masinissa dying, she has "vowed to him / A most, most private sacrifice before / [She] touched a second spouse" (3.1.54-56). Then, Sophonisba tricks Vangue, Syphax's Ethiopian servant, into laying in Syphax's bed, allowing Sophonisba to escape. At the end of *The Wonder of Women* in 5.3, Sophonisba and Masinissa reunite only for Sophonisba to die by suicide as a virgin.

Like Desdemona, Sophonisba is faithful to her husband, and like Vittoria, Sophonisba's sexuality defines her. However, as she is a married virgin, Sophonisba occupies a slightly different sphere than the ladies discussed in the two previous chapters. Similarly, Marston constructs Sophonisba's whiteness in a way that is different from how Shakespeare did in 1604

and how Webster did in 1612. Whereas Shakespeare constructs Desdemona's whiteness by juxtaposing her with Othello and comparing her to Bianca,[26] and Webster constructs Vittoria's fairness through male characters' perceptions of her sexual purity, Marston constructs Sophonisba's whiteness by trying to erase the historical Sophonisba's North African features. Sophonisba's moral purity flows over into her physicality, straining against her North African-ness to suggest whiteness.[27] The manipulation of Sophonisba's North African features is not the only aspect of the tradition of Sophonisba Marston changes. As Susanne Gossett points out, Marston changes the historical story of Sophonisba: "the Sophonisba of the Roman historians is an 'evil genius' (Appian) whose 'blandishments' (Livy) misled her husband Syphax into violating his alliance with Scipio" (Gossett). Marston's Sophonisba is married to Masinissa – not Syphax – and escapes Syphax's attempts to rape her. Furthermore, Marston aligns his Sophonisba within the artistic tradition of Sophonisba wherein artists whitewash her. In this chapter I will explore, first, how Marston depicts Sophonisba's moral purity on stage and, second, how he describes her physical appearance in order to reveal how Sophonisba's moral purity flows over into her physicality to suggest whiteness.

The interrupted bed scene at the beginning of 1.2 is the first of several scenes where Marston puts Sophonisba's virginity on display. Unlike the other bed scenes[28] in *The Wonder of Women,* this bed scene revolves around a ceremony for the consummation of Sophonisba and Masinissa's marriage. Whereas a modern reader or viewer of the play might expect the

[26] A courtesan and Cassio's lover

[27] As in *Othello* and *The White Devil*, *The Wonder of Women* also contains the traditional juxtaposition of black and white characters. However, I believe that Sophonisba's moral standing plays a more significant role in Marston's construction of her fairness than the juxtaposition of Sophonisba and the two black servants, Zanthia and Vangue.

[28] Bed scenes occur in or around a bed and usually involve some combination of consummating a marriage, trickery, or death. Marston includes three bed scenes in *The Wonder of Women*. The first is the (failed) consummation of Masinissa and Sophonisba's marriage. The last two bed scenes center around Syphax and involve trickery *and* death and trickery, respectively.

consummation of marriage to be a private affair between the newly married couple, the ceremony in Marston's play involves at least eleven people[29] – including Hasdrubal, Sophonisba's father – in addition to Masinissa and Sophonisba. It is also highly elaborate. Sophonisba arrives in the bedchamber with Zanthia (Sophonisba's black maid) and two waiting women before her husband. Zanthia helps Sophonisba prepare for bed: "with this motto I undo your girdle: / 'You had been undone if you had not been undone'" (1.2.3-4). As the women hear music, Sophonisba gets into the bed and the bed's curtains are drawn. Masinissa's entrance into the bed chamber is slightly delayed at Sophonisba's command – "haste, good Zanthia! — Help, keep yet the doors" (1.2.34) – and is admitted at Zanthia's command – "fair fall you, lady. — So, admit, admit! (1.2.35). Four boys open the bed curtains to "[discover] Sophonisba" after Masinissa enters the chamber (SD 1.2.35). He then "draws a white ribbon forth of the bed, as from the waist of Sophonisba" (SD 1.2.40) before declaring "lo I unloose thy waist. / She that is just in love is godlike chaste.— / *Io* to Hymen![30]" (1.2.40). Sophonisba responds with sonnet describing how she believes women should act shortly before the ceremony is interrupted.

Sophonisba choosing to respond to Masinissa with a sonnet seems to be at odds with her opinion of the consummation ceremony in general. Sophonisba ponders "why the custom is / To use such ceremony, such strict shape" (1.2.6-7). The whole event is tedious to Sophonisba. She "[hates] these figures in locution" (1.2.11) and the "about phrases forced by ceremony" (1.2.12). The ceremony does have a rigid structure wherein Greek and Roman gods and goddesses are woven into the participants' speech. The exclamation "*Io* to Hymen!" is spoken five times from once Masinissa enters the room to when the ceremony is interrupted by the wounded soldier. Additionally, Sophonisba voices her displeasure in how women "must still seem to fly what

[29] The Chorus is also present and provides the music.
[30] Hymen is the Greek god of marriage.

[they] most seek, / And hide [themselves] from that [they] fain would find [them]" (1.2.13-14). The marriage bed ceremony forces women to maintain the illusion of sexual purity. While the woman may want her marriage to be consummated, ceremonial conventions force her to pretend that she is uninterested. Implied in this is that women's purpose is to protect her virginity. Women are not allowed to openly express pleasure or their want for sex. As Zanthia notes, women are "only made for show / And pleasure, created to bear children / And play at shuttlecock" (1.2.20-22). The purpose of women is to cater to the needs of men, to be subservient, and to participate in trivial things. This marriage bed ceremony plays into the needs of men to show off their spouse's purity. Ultimately, Sophonisba's sonnet is paradoxical. The sonnet's ababcdcdefefgg rhyme scheme conforms to the "strict shape" of the ceremony, but the sonnet's contents give Sophonisba the ability to gently push back against the ceremonial aspects of womanhood (1.2.7). Instead of keeping "modest silence" (1.2.44), Sophonisba declares that "what [she] dare [thinks] [she] boldly [speaks]" (1.2.48). She is not content to have her thoughts suppressed by her husband. She wants to be passionate in her relationship with Masinissa and asks the gods for "no mercy" if she breaks her wedding vows (1.2.54).

As we have seen, the relationship between Sophonisba and Zanthia, Sophonisba's black maid, is curious. Their relationship follows the juxtaposition of white masters or mistresses and black servants in the early modern portraits that Kim Hall identifies in her book *Things of Darkness*. But it also goes beyond the juxtaposition of skin color to an opposition of intent. Whereas Sophonisba strives to keep her fairness intact, Zanthia seeks to undermine it. Her actions during the ceremony revolve around the taking of Sophonisba's virginity. In helping Sophonisba with her clothes, Zanthia tells Sophonisba that she "had been undone if [she] had not been undone" (1.2.4). Zanthia puns on the meanings of "undone," using it to suggest both the

undoing of clothing and the taking of one's sexual purity. Literally, Sophonisba has had her clothing undone but not (yet) her virginity. Zanthia's line looks forward in the scene to around line 40 when Masinissa takes the white ribbon from Sophonisba. The white ribbon symbolizes Sophonisba's chastity, which is traditionally lost after one gets married. Linking these two lines is Zanthia. She is the gatekeeper to Sophonisba's virtue, controlling who can and cannot enter the bedchamber. Instead of following her mistress's command to not let her husband into the room, Zanthia declares "fair fall you, lady" and lets him in (1.2.35). Zanthia's lines have an unpleasantness to them. She is telling Sophonisba that she will lose her virginity tonight.[31] Zanthia's use of "lady" to address Sophonisba has an element of remoteness. It lacks the familiar feeling that comes with other forms of address such as the use of 'my lady' or Sophonisba referring to Zanthia by her first name. Zanthia seems to force Masinissa's presence upon Sophonisba, who has shown her hesitancy in the line prior. Although with this being a highly choreographed ceremony, it is difficult to tell what is real and what is ceremony.

The second bed scene in *The Wonder of Women*'s 3.1 is prefaced with a short exchange between Sophonisba and Syphax regarding Sophonisba's virginity and her loyalty to her presumably deceased husband, Masinissa. Between the previous bed scene and now, senators of Carthage have given Sophonisba to Syphax in a political maneuver. Syphax is eager to consummate their relationship, apparently by any means necessary: I'll tack thy head / To the low earth, whilst strength of two black knaves / Thy limbs all wide shall strain" (3.1.9-11). Syphax insinuates that he will rape Sophonisba.[32] The "two black knaves" are presumably

[31] Zanthia's line also foreshadows the end of *The Wonder of Women*. In addition to signaling the planned end of Sophonisba's sexual purity on her wedding night, the word "fall" can also be interpreted as meaning to die. And Sophonisba dies a virgin in act 5. She takes her fairness to the grave.

[32] Syphax's declaration has later echoes in 4.1. Sophonisba declares that "this good steel / shall set my soul on wing" if Syphax comes any closer to her (4.1.54-55). She would rather die by suicide than let him touch her. Syphax's response to Sophonisba's threat is morbid:

> Do, strike thy breast; know, being dead I'll use

Zanthia and Vangue, Syphax's servant. There are only four characters on stage for these lines, and Zanthia and Vangue are the two characters who are directly described as black. Zanthia's involvement in Syphax's plot puts her once again at odds with her mistress. Previously, I have described how Zanthia acts as a gatekeeper to Sophonisba's virtue. Here, she steps into that role again by being one of the people to hold Sophonisba down so that Syphax can have sex with her.[33] Sophonisba does not appear to pick up on this detail of Syphax's plan. Instead, her focus is on Syphax wanting to have sex with her. She responds to Syphax by first questioning "can Sophonisba be enforced?" (3.1.14) and then declaring "thou may'st enforce my body but not me" (3.1.15). There are definite sexual undertones to "enforced" in line 14. Sophonisba separates herself from her body. Syphax may do whatever he wants to Sophonisba's physical body, but his actions will not affect her moral purity. Because she does not consent to Syphax, Sophonisba believes that her moral standing remains intact. Her loyalty to Masinissa would remain unbroken. In an attempt to still bed Sophonisba, Syphax tells her that her husband is dead, resulting in Sophonisba relenting. However, Sophonisba does not give into Syphax without delay. She wants to first honor a vow she made to Masinissa:

> O my vow, 'tis thus:
>
> If ever my lord died, I vowed to him
>
> A most, most private sacrifice before

> With highest lust of sense thy senseless flesh,
> And even then thy vexed soul shall see,
> Without resistance, thy truck prostitute
> Unto our appetite. (4.1.57-61)

Syphax declares that he will commit necrophilia with Sophonisba's corpse, her "senseless flesh." He has no regard for her desires; he is only focused on his own.

[33] Zanthia's gatekeeper role also appears later in 3.1 when Syphax is surprised to find Vangue in his bed instead of Sophonisba. In asking for Syphax's "private ear," she reveals to Syphax that Sophonisba has escaped through a tunnel (3.1.189). This information allows Syphax to follow Sophonisba. Once again, Zanthia actively engages in an event that has the potential to bring about Sophonisba losing her virginity.

I touched a second spouse (3.1.53-56)

Sophonisba needs to resolve her and Masinissa's relationship. Although their relationship was not sexual, Sophonisba believes that she will be committing a disservice to Masinissa if there is not some sort of closure between them. Soon after Sophonisba reveals her vow, she learns via letter that Masinissa is still alive. However, the bed scene between Syphax and Sophonisba still takes place.

The second bed scene itself has much of the basic structure as the play's first bed scene involving Sophonisba and Masinissa. Servants attend to Sophonisba before Syphax enters the bedchamber, a person lies in the bed, and the curtains surrounding the bed are closed before Syphax returns. However, unlike the first bed scene, Sophonisba is not the one in the bed. In her place is Vangue, Syphax's male servant. After learning that Masinissa is still alive, Sophonisba concocts a plan to escape from Syphax. Vangue is an unwitting participant. Sophonisba tricks Vangue into consuming drugged wine, which spooks Zanthia into exclaiming "the negro's dead" (3.1.158). After Vangue is placed in the bed and the curtains are closed, Sophonisba declares "there lie, Syphax' bride; a naked man / Is soon undressed; there bide, dishonoured passion" (3.1.162-63). Keith Sturgess, the editor of the World Classics edition of *The Wonder of Women*, glosses "naked" in line 162 as "defenseless (because of the drug)" (380). Vangue is defenseless in a similar way that Sophonisba was defenseless in her highly choreographed bed scene with Masinissa. The "dishonoured passion" belongs to Syphax. He lets his lust consume him while pursuing the still married and uninterested Sophonisba.

Sophonisba's trickery harkens back to the historical Sophonisba from who Marston has tried to distance *The Wonder of Woman*'s Sophonisba. What impact does Sophonisba's bed

scene trickery have on her moral purity? On one hand, substituting Vangue for herself has allowed Sophonisba to escape from Syphax. Thus, she keeps her sexual purity untarnished On the other hand, Sophonisba's actions result in the death of Vangue after Syphax mistakes him for her. Like with fulfilling her vow to Masinissa, drugging and placing Vangue in Syphax's bed buys Sophonisba time. However, in this second situation, Sophonisba is being purposefully deceitful. All in all, her actions do not appear to have any negative affect on her moral purity because the play weights her virginity above all else. In fact, Sophonisba's actions provide some support for my claim that Sophonisba's moral purity flows over into her physicality, straining against her North African-ness to suggest whiteness. Pulling back the curtains and mistaking Vangue for Sophonisba leads Syphax to exclaim "can any woman turn to such a devil?" (3.1.184). Sturgess provides commentary on this line, noting that "the devil was popularly conceived as literally black in hue" in early modern England (380). In declaring that Sophonisba has "[turned] to such a devil," Syphax insinuates that Sophonisba's previous skin color was much lighter – and perhaps white or close to it.

In fact, most of what the reader can glean about Sophonisba's appearance can be inferred indirectly from how Zanthia and Vangue, two servants, are described. There is a lack of direct, unambiguous descriptions of Sophonisba's physical appearance in the text. According to *The Wonder of Woman*'s character list, Vangue, Syphax's servant, is from Ethiopia. Zanthia, Sophonisba's servant, is not given a nationality.[34] Both of these characters are described as black throughout the play. Syphax refers to Zanthia and Vangue collectively as "two black knaves" (3.1.10). In 1.1, Syphax refers to Vangue as an "Ethiopian negro" (1.1.88) and as a "gentle

[34] The World Classics edition of *The Wonder of Women* identifies Vangue as "an Ethiopian [negro,] slave to Syphax" and Zanthia as "her maid, [a negress]" (242). The portions of their descriptions enclosed in brackets are not present in the 1606 edition of the play and were probably added by Keith Sturgess, the editor of this edition of *The Wonder of Women*.

negro" (1.1.97). In 3.1, Sophonisba joins with Syphax in calling Vangue a "gentle negro" (3.1.147). Zanthia also refers to Vangue as a "negro"[35] after he passes out from the drugged wine given to him by Sophonisba (3.1.158). Interestingly, there is only one mention of Zanthia's physical blackness compared to at least six references to Vangue's skin color. The sixth reference to Vangue's skin color is the aforementioned time when Syphax exclaims "Can any woman turn to such a devil?" when he discovers Vangue in his bed in place of Sophonisba (3.1.184). Within the discussion of Sophonisba's physical appearance, I would be remiss to not acknowledge that *The Wonder of Women* was originally crafted for the stage and the implications thereof. Sophonisba's onstage visual, physical whiteness is constructed through the juxtaposition of the actor playing her and the actors in blackface playing Zanthia and Vangue. Therefore, the moments in the dialogue that refer directly to Zanthia and Vangue's skin color emphasize and reinforce the character's onstage visual blackness.

Returning to the discussion of Sophonisba's moral purity, the final scene in *The Wonder of Women* where Marston emphasizes Sophonisba's virginity and moral purity is when Sophonisba commits suicide in 5.3. After escaping from Syphax, Sophonisba returns to Masinissa. However, Roman forces have overrun Carthaginian forces, spelling trouble for the couple. The Roman general Laelius orders Masinissa to "deliver Sophonisba to [Rome's] hand" (5.3.3). The order violates several vows. Masinissa has promised Sophonisba that she will not have to "kneel to Rome[36]" (5.3.13) and "shalt live free" (5.3.29), yet to Rome, Masinissa has pledged a "vow of faith" (5.3.40). Sophonisba fears being placed under Roman control. Her fear is palpable. Upon hearing the news, she questions "bondage?" and laments "no, no" upon hearing Masinissa's confirmation (5.3.78). Bondage is a rather broad, unspecific term.

[35] "The negro's dead!" (3.1.158)
[36] Sophonisba's phrasing

Sophonisba does not know exactly what to expect when she is placed bondage to Rome. Rape is a possibility and probably her worst fear. Sophonisba's goal for the entire play has been to preserve her moral purity – her virginity. Now, she is in danger once again of losing her virginity and breaking her marital vows to Masinissa. Yet, the framing of the vows is different in 5.3 from elsewhere in the play. Here, less emphasis is placed on the potential for Sophonisba's vow to be broken and more emphasis is placed on the fact that Masinissa would be breaking one of his vows no matter what he chooses to do. In a way, Sophonisba's moral purity becomes less important.

Ultimately, Sophonisba decides that her "death / gives help to all" (5.3.85-86). She will commit suicide. In doing so, Masinissa will not have to break any of his vows. He can give Sophonisba to Rome, but she will still be free from oppression. Sophonisba's actions harken back to 3.1 when she declares that Syphax may "enforce my body but not me" (3.1.15). Once again, Sophonisba separates herself from her physical body. By committing suicide, not only does Masinissa keep his vows, but Sophonisba does as well. She dies

> with breast unstained,
>
> Faith pure, a virgin wife, tried to [her] glory,
>
> …
>
> Secure from bondage and all servile harms,
>
> But more, most happy in [her] husband's arms. (5.3.102-106)

Just as placing Vangue in Syphax's bed allows Sophonisba to escape from Syphax with her virginity intact, committing suicide allows for Sophonisba to escape from the Romans with her virginity intact. Sophonisba's suicide in 5.3 differs from her threat of suicide in 4.1. Had she gone through with committing suicide in 4.1, her body would have been left alone with Syphax,

who had expressed his intention to have sex with Sophonisba's corpse. However, in 5.3, Sophonisba's body is not left alone. Masinissa remains with her until the end of the play. Additionally, none of the Roman characters give any indication of wanting to take advantage of Sophonisba's corpse. Sophonisba remains morally pure to her death and after death.[37]

Before concluding, I would like to address how Marston describes Sophonisba's physical appearance. As I previously mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, when Marston penned *The Wonder of Women* in 1606, he inserted himself into the tradition of Sophonisba. The tradition of Sophonisba is twofold. It consists of a historical tradition and an artistic tradition comprised of both writers and traditional artists. Our focus now turns to the artistic tradition of Sophonisba. The historical Sophonisba was from Carthage in northern Africa and lived during the latter part of the 3rd century BC. Even if Sophonisba had lighter skin than others from Africa, she almost certainly would not have had white skin and blond hair. In her book *Women and Race in Early Modern Texts*, Joyce Green MacDonald argues that Renaissance writers lightened the skin color of women who are historically from Africa, such as Cleopatra, Dido, and Sophonisba. MacDonald describes how several writers depicted Sophonisba as having light skin, eyes, and hair. In Petrarch's epic poem *Africa*, written during the 14th century, Sophonisba is depicted as being "blonde" (MacDonald 76) and as having "milk-white" (qtd. in MacDonald 76) skin. The Sophonisba of Thomas Nabbes' 1635 play, *Hannibal and Scipio, An historicall tragedy*, is depicted as being "white-skinned, her brow adorned with 'golden curles'" (Nabbes qtd. in

[37] Originally performed for a Christian audience, Sophonisba's suicide is at odds with Christian morals. Writing in "The Wonder of Women: Virginity, Sexuality, and Religio-Politics in Marston's *The Tragedy of Sophonisba*," Thomas Rist places Sophonisba within the tradition of the cult of the Virgin Mary and notes that "Sophonisba's suicide presents the values of pagan rather than Christian Rome" and that "her un-Christian suicide contrasts starkly with Mary's Assumption" (122).

MacDonald 79).[38] In 1676, Nathaniel Lee describes Sophonisba as "a fair white Woman" in his play *Sophonisba, Or Hannibal's Overthrow* (Lee qtd. in MacDonald 82).

In "'As from the Waste of Sophonisba'; or; What's Sexy about Stage Directions," Genevieve Love points out that Marston was particularly interested in "the relationship between his play in the theater and in the hands of readers" (6). Although Love writes about stage directions, it is apparent that Marston was obsessed with reinforcing visuals. Despite this fact, Marston reveals very little to his readers about his Sophonisba's physical appearance. In *The Wonder of Women*, there are two concrete descriptions of Sophonisba's physical body. Before Sophonisba's husband Masinissa leaves for war, Sophonisba contrasts her "soft arms" (1.2.166) with his "well-strong limbs" (1.2.167). And as Syphax prepares to sleep with Sophonisba, he asks her to "touch [his] rougher skin / With [her] soft lip" (3.1.41-42). In both descriptions, the descriptive adjective is 'soft.' The *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) provides multiple definitions for 'soft.' The most relevant definition Sophonisba is 10a: "not hard or firm to the touch; having a surface that offers only limited resistance to pressure. Frequently of a person's body or a body part regarded as desirable or pleasing" ("soft, adj.").[39] 'Soft' is very sensual in its usage in these contexts. Sophonisba's "soft skin" and "soft lips" both occur very close to bed scenes. The sensualness of the physical descriptions of Sophonisba are humorously at odds with her enduring status as a married virgin.

Additionally, there are two description of Sophonisba's features that are less clear than the references to her arms and lips. First, As Sophonisba comes to terms with Masinissa's

[38] The description "golden curles" comes from Thomas Nabbes' *Hannibal and Scipio* and is quoted in MacDonald. The remainder of the quotation is MacDonald's own words.

[39] The definition given by 18a – "not strong or robust; incapable of much physical endurance or exertion; of a weak or delicate constitution; frail" – could be a second possible interpretation of the 'soft' describing Sophonisba's arms as the comparison to Masinissa's arms appears to be based on strength ("soft, adj."). However, Sophonisba displays physical endurance in escaping from Syphax in 4.1.

reported death, Syphax asks her to "wipe [her] fair eyes" (3.1.39). Secondly, after Syphax confronts Sophonisba after her escape, he calls her "virgin of fair brow" (4.1.49). In addition to her eyes and brow, 'fair' is used four more times by characters to refer to Sophonisba: "fair princess" (1.2.18), "fair sex"[40] (1.2.231), "fair bride" (2.1.93), and "fair queen" (5.3.5). What differentiates Syphax's use of "fair eyes" and "fair brow" from the other uses of 'fair' is that Syphax is not referring to the whole person.[41] Instead, he picks out a single feature. This usage of 'fair' to refer to a small part of a person is not found in either John Webster's *The White Devil* or William Shakespeare's *Othello*. It is unique to *The Wonder of Women*. The *OED* provides a plethora of definitions for 'fair.' In 1e, 'fair' is "used in forms of courteous, respectful, or affectionate address"; in 8, "expressing or expressive of gentleness or peaceable intention; kind; mild"; and in 12 "of a person's character, conduct, reputation, etc.; free from moral imperfections; exemplary, unblemished" ("fair, adj. and n.1"). Each of these definitions fits well with describing a whole person rather than a portion of a person. And these definitions, especially 12, fit well with Marston's characterizing Sophonisba as a woman who values her purity above all else.

The 'fair' in "fair eyes" (3.1.39), on the other hand, does not fit well with the above definitions. It could of course mean something similar to the broad definition of 'fair' defined in 1: "beautiful to the eye of attractive appearance; good looking" ("fair, adj. and n.1"). However, 'fair' in this context seems to fit more with the definition given to the 'fair' in 'fair-skinned' and 'fair-haired' in 17: "light as opposed to dark in color" ("fair, adj. and n.1"). I am drawn to this

[40] Masinissa uses "fair sex" when referring to Sophonisba being a woman (1.2.231).
[41] Think of Hamlet's words at the end of the To Be or Not To Be soliloquy: "Soft you now, / The fair Ophelia!" (3.1.87-88). If in *The Wonder of Women*, 'princess,' 'sex,' 'bride,' 'queen,' 'brow,' and 'eyes' were replaced with Sophonisba's name, all the utterances would make sense except for the ones which originally contained 'eyes' and 'brow': "wipe thy fair *Sophonisba*s" (3.1.39; my rewording).

interpretation of ‘fair’ since both ‘fair-skinned’ and ‘fair-haired’ pick out one aspect of a person and do not refer to the whole in the same way “fair eyes” picks out a specific aspect of Sophonisba’s features. Additionally, eye color is a variable trait. If this definition was applied to ‘arms’ – the only other mention of a physical feature of Sophonisba’s body – it would make less sense because it is the skin – not the arms themselves – that would be the thing to vary in color. Therefore, I see Syphax’s use of “fair eyes” as referring to Sophonisba’s eyes being a light color. Likewise, the ‘fair’ in “fair brow” refers to Sophonisba’s physical features (4.1.49). However, Syphax’s use of ‘fair’ in conjunction with ‘virgin’ in the phrase “virgin of fair brow” has more nuances it than other uses of the word ‘fair’ and bolsters my argument that Marston constructs Sophonisba’s whiteness by having her moral purity flow over into her physicality (4.1.49). The word ‘virgin’ carries the connotation of purity and the metaphorical sense of fairness. These connotations then manifest physically in Sophonisba’s “brow.” This means that her intangible moral purity has flowed over into her “fair brow” to become a physical characteristic.

To conclude, John Marston’s constructs Sophonisba’s fairness through her enduring virginity and devotion to her husband, Masinissa. Marston’s Sophonisba is not the decietful Sophonisba of Roman history. From the beginning of *The Wonder of Women*’s first bed scene in 1.2 to her death in 5.3, Sophonisba eludes having sex despite the attempts from Zanthia, her black servant, to hasten Sophonisba to that moment. Sophonisba values her sexual purity and moral fairness so much that she would rather die – and does die – than risk the possibility of someone beside Masinissa having sex with her. Sophonisba’s moral fairness is so pronounced through her actions that it overflows from the metaphorical into the physical. Marston’s whitewashing of the historically North African Sophonisba is subtle, and the action places

Marston's Sophonisba within the artistic tradition of Sophonisba. Sophonisba's physical whiteness appears in two ways. The first is during the bed scene where Syphax finds Vangue, his black servant, in his bed instead of Sophonisba. Here, Syphax's surprise at the figure's darkness underscores Sophonisba's physical fairness. The second way Sophonisba's physical whiteness appears is through the word 'fair' sprinkled throughout the play. Most of the time, 'fair' is used in a metaphorical sense and refers to Sophonisba as a whole. However, 'fair' twice refers to portions of Sophonisba face, revealing her physical whiteness. Marston constructs his Sophonisba's fairness by erasing the historical Sophonisba's actions and North African features.

Conclusion

Juxtaposition. Perception. Virginity. In the three early 17th century tragedies this thesis examines, these are ways that the playwrights constructed the fairness of their female characters. In the preceding chapters I assigned each play a construction of fairness that each play's playwright appeared to favor, resulting in three distinct ways that fairness is constructed on stage. However, *Othello*, *The White Devil*, and *The Wonder of Women* all draw on more than one method to construct fairness. I would like to spend the closing pages of this thesis exploring the overlap in construction methods.

Juxtaposition

Othello is the quintessential example of creating fairness through juxtaposition. William Shakespeare constructs Desdemona's fairness using two juxtapositions: the Desdemona-Othello and the Desdemona-Bianca juxtaposition. The Desdemona-Othello juxtaposition primarily juxtaposes Othello's black skin with Desdemona's white skin to emphasize their racial differences, showing Desdemona as fairer than Othello. The Desdemona-Bianca juxtaposition juxtaposes the moral states of the two female characters. Desdemona's supposed adultery makes her less morally pure (and therefore less fair) than the courtesan Bianca, whose relationship with Cassio as a sex worker was not as morally problematic as Desdemona's extramarital affair with Cassio.

The juxtaposition in *The White Devil* and *The Wonder of Women* differs slightly from the juxtaposition in *Othello*. Here, the juxtapositions of light skinned and dark skinned characters are between mistresses and servants – not between husband and wife. In *The White Devil*, Vittoria is

juxtaposed with Zanche, her black servant. And in *The Wonder of Women,* Sophonisba is juxtaposed with two black servants: Vangue and Zanthia. The juxtaposition of Sophonisba and Vangue is of particular interest. During Sophonisba's bed trick in 3.1, she places Vangue in Syphax's bed instead of herself. Thus, when Syphax draws back the curtains, his surprise at how black 'Sophonisba' is reinforces the actual Sophonisba's physical fairness.

Perception

In writing chapter 2, I highlighted how John Webster primarily uses perception to construct Vittoria's fairness in *The White Devil*. Vittoria's worth is defined by her sexual purity. To be considered fair, she must be perceived as morally pure by the men around her. As Vittoria progresses from committing adultery to being tried and found guilty of adultery to serving out her punishment at a house of penitent whores, how male characters interact with Vittoria depend on their perception of her moral purity. The male characters of *The White Devil* use Vittoria's moral fairness – or lack thereof – to their own advantage. Francisco uses Vittoria's tainted purity to take revenge on Bracciano. Francisco proposes marriage to the tarnished Vittoria. This in turn causes Bracciano to declare that he has "drunk Lethe" and to say that he will take her back (4.2.126). Bracciano perceives her as being morally fair.

Perception also plays a less than marginal role in *Othello*. Iago's revenge plan hinges on him being able to convince Othello that his wife has been unfaithful. Othello must perceive each of Iago's manipulated scenes and conversation as evidence for Desdemona's unfaithfulness. Of the three plays this thesis discusses, perception plays the smallest role in *The Wonder of Women*. Sophonisba perceives her virginity as having a physical and a metaphorical aspect. She claims that Syphax can "enforce [her] body but not [Sophonisba]" (3.1.15). She believes that her moral

purity will remain uncorrupted if her virginity is taken without her consent. Sophonisba uses this same logic at the end of *The Wonder of Women* to escape being placed in Roman custody.

Virginity

John Marston constructs Sophonisba's fairness in *The Wonder of Women* by placing emphasis on her virginity that endures throughout the play despite her marriage to Masinissa and several sexual advances by Syphax. Sophonisba's virginity is highlighted by Zanthia's attempts – letting Masinissa into the bedchamber and telling Syphax where Sophonisba went – to bring about the event of Sophonisba loosing her virginity and by Sophonisba's elaborate escapes from situations that have the potential to ruin her sexual purity. Ultimately, Sophonisba's sexual purity is so powerful that it causes her moral fairness to flow into her physical fairness. This is evident in Syphax's shock of seeing the dark-skinned Vangue in bed instead of Sophonisba as well as in the word 'fair' modifying particular body parts of Sophonisba.

The status of sexual relationships also incorporated in the plots of *Othello* and *The White Devil*. While virginity specifically is not at play here, the upsetting of traditional relationship between husband and wife is at play. Both of these plays accuse their primary female characters of committing adultery. In *The White Devil,* Vittoria is accused of having an extramarital relationship with Bracciano while being married to Camillo. In *Othello,* Desdemona is accused of having an affair with Cassio while being married to Othello. While these two relationships do not deal specifically with virginity, the moral stain that comes from adultery is the same result that Sophonisba would encounter if she lost her virginity to Syphax.

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