

old hag then finally marrying the knight reflects The Wife's agreement with Jankin.

Vittoria rejects the role that has been assigned to her by the masculine society of the play, to be a silent and obedient wife, instead she is 'the wind' returning the terms of 'whore' and 'devil' back to the male accusers. This contrasts to the constraints of Isabella as a wife to Bracciano, she isn't empowered enough to be angry at him when he admits to cheating. In fact she is so obedient that she takes the blame for their separation based on jealousy. Isabella is merely a tool to further condemn female sexuality and power, the illicit language she uses when she explains how she wishes 'to dig the strumpets eyes out' shows how Webster has used a female character to conduct a misogynistic outburst against female sexuality. Isabella is not empowered but portrayed as the loving, arguably sickly, quiet wife, which was what was expected from women in 17th century. Vittoria is still empowered even when she is condemned in the arraignment scene and is sentenced to the House of Convertites claiming it will be 'honester to [her]/ Than the Pope's palace.' She goes with dignity, not giving Monticelsco the loud and defiant reaction that he wants from her.

Female empowerment is an illusion because both works were written by men and performed by men. The Wife's empowerment of her sexuality and husbands is an illusion because no matter how much 'maistree' she thinks she has she is still primarily named by her relationship to a man. Margery Kempe argues that 'there is very little that The Wife Of Bath does that is truly revolutionary or empowering for women of her time.' Despite how much empowerment she shows, it can be argued that the whole piece was intended to be anti-feminist by Chaucer to reflect the consequence of letting a wife take control in marriage. It is only due to the increased female power in early 21st century that a modern audience may interpret her prologue and tale to be pro-feminist.

Female empowerment can be seen an illusion or a device by Webster to touch upon social issues such as the Catholic Church. Vittoria is seen as a strong, empowered woman when she points out that 'it doth not suit a reverend to play the lawyer' however this could be merely Webster's way of pointing out how corrupt Monticelsco is as a character and is a metaphor for Catholicism because of the low status of lawyers in the 17th century. Vittoria's empowerment within her sexuality is what pokes holes in the holy ideals of Catholicism; Monticelsco is supposed to be chased and yet he gets some sort of sexual gratification from trying to condemn a woman who is open in her sexuality. The fact that all female parts were played by males in context of production, can support the idea that the audience would have more so picked up on the fact that Webster is criticising Catholicism than Vittoria as an empowered woman as they would not have viewed her as a woman on stage.

Therefore there is an argument for female characters to only seem empowered to an early 21st century audience. In context of production, 'The White Devil' could have been viewed as anti-feminist because of the deceitful and duplicitous nature of women which is a key theme which the central plot of the play supports. All of the female characters seem victim-beneficiaries of a sexist society, showing 'masculine virtue' when challenged, but a tendency to exploit the role of 'wronged woman' when their going is easier. The Wife wouldn't have been seen as empowered to a 14th century audience but laughable and embarrassing. Her bawdiness and exegesis would have left her open to be mocked by the pilgrims but also the listeners to the tale. Since the texts have not changed, only the societies in which they are performed it can be argued that female empowerment is an illusion only respected within early 21st century society. A 2015 audience would claim that whereas The Wife is empowered by her role and title as wife, Vittoria is empowered by rejecting and disrespecting her female role in society.