

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



Silence, Speech and Gender in Webster's *The White Devil*: A Presentist Palestinian Perspective

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Palestinian women and girls who speak out [against verbal and physical violence] are often blamed for the violence inflicted upon them, and their families are shamed for not exerting greater control over their sexuality.¹

These lines reveal that in contemporary Palestine the female voice and sexual looseness are interrelated. Stephanie Chaban, Reema Daraghme and Garance Stettler argue that the construction of gender difference in contemporary Palestine can be attributed to the interrelated systems of traditions, occupation and discriminatory laws and legal systems which reinforce each other's dynamics and limit the advancement of women.² Some Palestinian women are confined to the private spheres of the house, barred from the public domain and discourse to preserve their reputations, which could be tarnished by their movement in public space and by speech to others.³ Women who challenge Palestinian traditions and sexual norms are subject to the cultural forces of gossip, scandal, shame and honour killing, forces which control and subordinate women to the dynamics of gender ideology. Honour killing is an omnipresent danger that suggests a reclaiming of patriarchal honour through the eradication of a rebellious woman. Diane Baxter argues that punishing transgressive women in contemporary Palestine 'demonstrates male control over female family members [...]; it serves as a stern warning to other females; reasserts cultural values; reduces [...] familial shame; and it limits the decline in the family's reputation'.⁴ The Palestinian NGO Al-Muntada

¹ Stephanie Chaban, Reema Daraghme and Garance Stettler, *Palestinian Women and Security: Why Palestinian Women and Girls Do Not Feel Secure* (Switzerland, Geneva Centre for the democratic Control of Armed Forces, 2010), p. 10.

² *Ibid.*, pp.18–22, 42, 51.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 23–28.

⁴ Baxter, Diane, 'Honor Thy Sister: Selfhood, Gender, and Agency in Palestinian Culture', *Anthropological Quarterly*, 80.3 (2007), 737–775 (p. 753).

exposed 32 cases of ‘honour killings’ between 2004 and 2006.⁵ Furthermore, innocent women are sometimes killed because of groundless suspicion based on gossip, as Itamar Marcus and Kawther Salam argue.⁶

Chaban *et al* thus underline the web of collective traditions that can oppress and silence women in Palestine.⁷ In interviewing women from different Palestinian locations, they note that ‘Women often mentioned situations where a female family member was known to have been sexually abused by a male relative but was pushed to remain silent, in order to preserve the family’s honour’.⁸ While these women are discouraged from public speech, their submission and silence are put at the service of male figures’ immoral desires. Women who suffer from verbal and physical violence at home refrain from going to court, so as not to bring public shame to themselves and to their families, and because ‘the vast majority of laws within the Palestinian Territories not only discriminate against women, but also tolerate violence against women and girls’.⁹

In this article, I use contemporary Palestinian constructions of gender difference via the binary opposites of speech and silence as a ground from which I analyse the representation of silence, speech and gender in Webster’s *The White Devil* (1612).¹⁰ While Webster’s protagonist Vittoria voices her sexual desires and fulfils them through adultery and murder, her challenge and exposure of male figures’ hypocritical voices may form a ground from which my students can criticise Palestinian traditions and legal systems that are dominated by men, and Palestinian male figures’ deafness to the female voice.

While Shakespeare’s tragedies are named after male protagonists, the titles of Webster’s *The White Devil* (1612) and *The Duchess of Malfi* (1613–14) suggest that women take centre stage (the former title is a reference to the play’s female protagonist). *The White*

⁵ Al-Muntada (Palestinian Non-Governmental Organization against Domestic Violence against Women), ‘Crimes of Women’s Killing in Palestine in the period 2004–2006’, trans. by Malek Qutteina, ed. by Nicola Nasser (2007) <http://www.sawa.ps/Upload/Reports/CrimesofWomensKillinginPalestine_arabic.pdf> [accessed 20 August 2013], 1–47 (p. 16).

⁶ Marcus, Itamar, ‘Special Report: Upsurge in “honor killings” triggers Palestinian calls for cultural changes, new laws’ (15 August 2012) <http://www.palwatch.org/main.aspx?fi=157&doc_id=7245> [accessed 20 April 2013], 1–8 (p. 7); Salam, Kawther, ‘Victims of Incest and Abuse in Palestine’, *Europa and Middle East News* (2009) <<http://www.kawther.info/wpr/2009/06/11/victims-of-incest-and-abuse-in-palestine>> [accessed 15 May 2013].

⁷ Chaban, Daraghmeah and Stettler, *Palestinian Women and Security*, pp. 29–39.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

¹⁰ John Webster, *The White Devil in The White Devil, The Duchess of Malfi, The Devil’s Law-Case, A Cure for a Cuckold*, ed. by René Weis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 1–100. Subsequent references to the play are taken from this edition and cited in the text by act, scene and line number.

Devil is a Jacobean revenge tragedy, replete with adultery, murder, and misogyny. It enacts Brachiano's seduction of Vittoria who urges him to kill her husband Camillo and Brachiano's wife Isabella. Vittoria is tried for adultery and murder in a male-dominated arraignment scene in which she reveals male figures' misogyny and their political and religious hypocrisies. Isabella (Brachiano's wife and Francisco's sister), Cornelia (Vittoria's mother) and Webster's protagonist Vittoria all challenge male figures' hypocritical and misogynistic discourses, despite male figures' repeated attempts to silence and demonise female voices. Pioneering feminist critic Mary Beth Rose argues that 'Webster acknowledges the female hero's pivotal role in the process of historical exchange, exploring the workings of the components of female identity in Renaissance sexual ideology as Shakespeare never does'.¹¹

Following the critical lines of feminism developed across the 1990s, I argue that Webster's assertive tragic heroines speak for his rejection of the hierarchical ideology of his time. Webster critiques conventional gender roles and a dramatic tradition that has tended to emphasise male characters, male themes and male fantasies — especially in tragedy. Webster associates his female characters' speeches with truth and dramatic authority and male figures' voices with hypocrisy, evil, deceit and murderous desires. Webster and other Jacobean playwrights inverted the Renaissance convention that female speech is associated with evil, as noted by the authoritative early critic of the drama Gerald Eades Bentley: '[m]any of the Jacobean dramatists were preoccupied with this conception of an evil world — a world in which dishonesty, ingratitude, hypocrisy, corruption, lechery, and cruelty seemed to dominate the actions of men'.¹² I argue that Webster condones Vittoria's bold voicing of and acting upon her sexual desire in defiance of male hypocritical voices.

Secondly, I argue that the deconstruction of gender stereotypes, via the binary opposites of speech and silence, is linked to theatrical performance. I have not yet had the chance to teach Webster's *The White Devil* in a drama course in my current position as professor of English Drama in the Department of English at An-Najah National University in Nablus, but my recent innovative proposal to perform some scenes of Shakespeare's *Othello* (1604) was rejected by both my university's staff and the students (whom I had chosen based on their excellent academic record), as female performance is perceived as subversive to conventional norms of our society. I was advised that the traditions of our society restrict the choices available to female students,

¹¹ Mary Beth Rose, *The Expense of Spirit: Love and Sexuality in English Renaissance Drama* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 173.

¹² Gerald Eades Bentley, *The Development of the English Drama: An Anthology* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1950), p. 257.

and that their voices, facial expressions and costumes, placed on public display, would be interpreted by many as signs of lewdness. Female students expressed their objection to my idea of performing *Othello* by emphasising their feelings of shyness. My female students' sense of a taboo about female performance echoes that which obtained in early modern England and led to the exclusion of female voices and bodies from the early modern professional stage. I therefore suggest that a consideration of early modern performance conditions is essential to my presentist pedagogical agenda.

Drawing on Gina Bloom's, Christina Luckyj's and Catherine Belsey's research on boy actors, I argue that Webster's *The White Devil* generates a radical challenge to hypocritical male voices, showing that the female voices impersonated by boy actors are morally superior to male hypocrites' voices. Indeed, the boy actors playing female roles speak against and reveal male figures' religious and political hypocrisies. The boy actor's broken voice reverses the stereotypes of masculine rationality and feminine irrationality, putting into question the association between the female character's speech and passion, and the male character's speech and reason. I argue that the boy actor's broken voice signals his movement from playing a perfect female role and voice to his playing male roles characterised by hypocritical voices in the future. While women's subversion seems to be contained by their own silencing, the equivocal nature of the representations undercuts the accepted orthodoxies. *The White Devil* subverts the construction of speech as active and gendered masculine and silence as passive and gendered feminine, showing that a noble death is associated with silence.

Finally, I commit myself to the methodology of presentism, using Webster's play as a springboard for discussion of contemporary Palestinian concerns: as Hugh Grady and Terence Hawkes point out, by 'Deliberately employing crucial aspects of the present as a trigger for its investigations, [presentism's] centre of gravity will accordingly be "now", rather than "then"'.¹³ I thus use the trigger of the masculine construction of gender roles via the binary opposites of speech and silence in contemporary Palestine to illuminate this representation in Webster's *The White Devil*. As a Palestinian critic and a university professor of English Drama, I will be approaching Webster's *The White Devil* as pedagogical material for a student body in a large urban environment where the possibilities for change and critique are more immediate than in contemporary democratic western societies. By using this methodology, I immerse myself in the different cultural and historical contexts of both cultures. In conducting this analysis, one should not generalize women into a homogenous group by obscuring differences

¹³ Hugh Grady and Terence Hawkes, 'Introduction: Presenting Presentism', in *Presentist Shakespeare*, ed. by Hugh Grady and Terence Hawkes (Routledge: London and New York, 2007), pp. 1–5 (p. 4).

between them in terms of class, religion, educational attainment, and geographic locations. Gendered discourse varies according to the identity of the speaker and his or her interlocutor(s), and the topic of the conversation in which the discourse occurs. The effects of the feminist movement on politics, legal systems and culture, have, in theory, opened routes for women in contemporary Palestine to speak their minds and publish their views without compromising their sexual reputations. Not all Palestinian women are oppressed and silenced. In fact, Palestine has produced remarkable female authors, artists, business and stateswomen.¹⁴ I will, therefore, outline the Palestinian context with reference to critical readings and to my own lived understanding as a Palestinian reader, thus establishing ‘the Palestinian reader’ whose perspective I will invoke throughout the article. I define the Palestinian reader as one who shares my common understanding based on a shared knowledge of the Holy Qur’an, of traditions, and of the situation of occupation. Secondly, ‘Palestinian readers’ will refer to my colleagues and students from the university and individuals who want to challenge and change those traditional views of gender, speech and silence.

Palestine is not similar to Jacobean England merely in terms of gender constructions but also in terms of the use of certain types of conservative religious rhetoric to buttress those constructions. Like James’s England with its Catholics and Protestants, Palestine is Muslim and Christian, a land of related but conflicting religious traditions, and that conflict fuels a suspicion of difference and a conviction that adherence to dogma is a marker of character and belonging.¹⁵ Furthermore, Palestine is an occupied country, and occupation plays a part in the enhancement of male figures’ domination over women.¹⁶ As Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian argues, ‘[s]ocial oppression has proliferated and taken on various hues as a result of the economic stranglehold tightening its grip on the Palestinian community, attacks on the fabric and solidarity of Palestinian society, and the rise of masculine ideologies, which have grown, reproduced, and reconstructed themselves alongside and through the growth of Zionist policies’.¹⁷

Despite the many historical and ideological differences between early modern England and contemporary Palestine, I argue that male figures’ silencing of female figures in Webster’s *The White Devil* enacts a dialogue with contemporary Palestinian society,

¹⁴ My thanks to the anonymous peer reviewer who assisted me in nuancing this discussion of the status of Palestinian women.

¹⁵ Here, too, thanks are due to the anonymous peer reviewer.

¹⁶ Cheryl Rubenberg, *Palestinian Women: Patriarchy and Resistance in the West Bank* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001), p. 120.

¹⁷ Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, ‘The Physics of Power and the Challenges of the Palestinian Feminist Discourse: Between Thought and Practice’, *JADAL* 4 (2014) <http://mada-research.org/en/files/2009/10/jadal4/jadal4-eng/Jadal_Shalhoub-Kevorkian_FINAL.pdf> [accessed: 23 January 2015], 1–13 (p. 1).

where women's voices are circumscribed by patriarchal discriminatory laws and traditions. The depiction of the outspoken woman in Palestine as a whore or a phallic woman enables me to scrutinise the problematic position of Webster's Vittoria in the trial scene, in which the association of Vittoria's voice with truth and dramatic authority subverts the masculine ideology characteristic of both early modern England and contemporary Palestine, and presents a challenge to the Palestinian traditions that associate female speech with lasciviousness. Teaching this tragedy will not only undermine the Palestinian masculine construction of gender difference, but it will also challenge the curriculum at An-Najah University, which has been dominated by Shakespeare's plays and by traditional interpretations interested in consolidating established traditions of gender roles.¹⁸ I hope that Webster's *The White Devil*, which privileges female characters and associates their speeches with truth and dramatic authority and links male voices to political and religious hypocrisies, will lead my students to different perceptions of gender construction in both early modern England and contemporary Palestine.

Morality and Madness: Cornelia's and Isabella's 'Female' Voices

The White Devil reveals that female characters' voices and silences that the boy actors impersonate are morally superior to male figures' hypocritical religious and political voices. Webster shows that the demand for women to be chaste, silent and obedient is a self-protective strategy, a way for men to keep women submissive to their immoral desires. The valorisation of female chastity and modesty is, therefore, utilised in the service of a more general oppression of women. Such silencing has been a long-standing problem in contemporary Palestine, a problem exacerbated by the Israeli military occupation.¹⁹ As Shalhoub-Kevorkian notes, 'Refusing to acknowledge women's voices, their hidden transcripts of power and powerlessness, and their roles, deeply affects our understanding of women's ways of survival and of the way they deal with victimization, resistance, and activism'.²⁰

¹⁸ Nabil Alawi, Private Communication, 19 March 2015.

¹⁹ Palestinian nationalist discourse nationalises the body of women and ascribes their places within the domestic sphere of the house. Women's chastity is central to the conception and survival of a pure Palestine. Cheryl Rubenberg argues that 'during the intifada, parents were very concerned about their daughters' honor being sullied by contact with Israeli soldiers [...]. Many girls feared *iskat* (having one's honor tarnished, especially by an enemy) and preferred to be at home'. Cheryl Rubenberg, *Palestinian Women*, p. 124.

²⁰ Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, *Militarization and Violence Against Women in Conflict Zones in the Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 14.

Teaching Webster's *White Devil* with its victimised but outspoken heroine offers an opportunity for students to analyse the practices of silencing and the resistance offered by women's voices in their contemporary culture. In the wooing scene of *The White Devil*, for example, Brachiano, Isabella's husband, who is in love with Vittoria, shifts 'the cause of all ensuing harm' (1.2.99) onto Cornelia, Vittoria's mother. His words are repeated by Vittoria's brother Flamineo, who rejects his mother (1.2.327–32), suggesting that a whore would have been a better mother, since then he would have had '[p]lurality of fathers' (1.2.330). While Isabella's brother Francisco and Vittoria's brother Flamineo position women as the origins of their deceptive practices (4.1.26–28, 4.2.171–78), men's corruption is evident throughout the play. Lodovico, a murderous Italian Count in love with Brachiano's first wife, Isabella, blames his banishment on the 'whore' Fortune (1.1.4), but he and his followers in the first scene articulate a list of his crimes and his vicious desire for revenge (1.1.10–12, 30–31, 50–52). The association of men with revenge (4.1.35–36, 4.2.57–60, 4.3.152–53) and the fact that male characters speak of love, marriage and women in a degrading way (2.1.187–91, 5.1.157) reveals that male figures articulate misogynistic discourse so as to keep women submissive to their immoral voices.

Conversely, Webster represents female characters as the mouthpieces of morality and sexual control, as is illuminated in the figures of Cornelia, Isabella and Vittoria even when their physical actions, such as adultery, would be deemed immoral by early modern spectators. Bromley argues that 'Cornelia is certainly the voice of traditional morality'.²¹ However, when women trespass into the domain of masculine discourse, they are labelled 'whore', 'fury' and 'devil'. A similar situation dissuades women from entering the public domain in contemporary Palestine. Chaban, Daraghmeh and Stettler note that:

Very little attention has been paid to documenting and combating violence against Palestinian women and girls in the public sphere. Yet focus group discussions with Palestinian women and girls reveal that the public sphere, especially the street, is perceived as a 'male only' space and, thus, a source of insecurity and instability. Fear of entering the public sphere prevents women and girls from taking part in professional and educational activities.²²

²¹ Laura G. Bromley, 'The Rhetoric of Feminine Identity in *The White Devil*', in *In Another Country: Feminist Perspectives on Renaissance Drama*, ed. by Dorothea Kehler and Susan Baker (London: Scarecrow Press, 1991), pp. 50–70 (p. 51).

²² Chaban, Daraghmeh and Stettler, *Palestinian Women and Security*, p. 23.

Chaban, Daraghmeh and Stettler referred to the remarks of a university student from Ramallah on discrimination against female students in her university, stating that:

*At the university, the ones who are dominant are the male students. Girls feel inferior. As a girl, if you want to participate in certain activities they say to you: No, you are a girl. Even for specialisation in the university, some of the colleges are only for males; at most they accept eight males and only two female students. This leads to domination of male's rights over female's rights. Also, in the student council you will hardly ever find female members (original emphasis).*²³

Examples from the fictional world of Webster's early modern play offer a counter-text to such norms in contemporary Palestine. Cornelia's impersonation of masculine speech opens up a space for parody and caricature of the norms. As Luckyj states, 'the women of *The White Devil* who usurp masculine rhetoric are positioned not only to gain access to male privilege but also to offer a savage critique of that privilege'.²⁴ Although Flamineo receives the eavesdropping Cornelia's denunciation of Brachiano's relationship with Vittoria as the words of a 'fury' (1.2.260), and Brachiano murmurs '[f]ie, fie, the woman's mad' (1.2.289), associating Cornelia with evil portent (1.2.299), Cornelia castigates male sexual transgression as she speaks up for Christian monogamy. Her condemnation of 'my son the pander' (1.2.206) turns attention away from Vittoria's transgression and towards Flamineo's part in it. She calls Brachiano 'adulterous Duke' (1.2.276), censures '[t]he lives of princes' (1.2.279), and associates Flamineo with a ruthless patriarchal system (1.2.315–16).

Webster undercuts the power of Cornelia's and Isabella's moralistic voices to some extent by making them less dramatically dynamic and appealing than Vittoria, who speaks more lines and controls the speech of those around her. Cornelia, Julius Lever says, 'is soon silenced by Flamineo's withering scorn', and he notes that she and Isabella, though '[i]nnocent and virtuous [...] have no vitality on the stage', and that their virtuous speech 'has no field of action'.²⁵ Cornelia becomes totally ineffective and isolated from the political voices of her society by madness. Cornelia's madness and the elimination of her voice may seem a reaffirmation of gender difference and patriarchal discourse that consolidates itself by containing female vocal transgression. However,

²³ Ibid., p. 27.

²⁴ Christina Luckyj, 'Gender, Rhetoric, and Performance in John Webster's *The White Devil*', in *Enacting Gender on the English Renaissance Stage*, ed. by Viviana Comensoli and Anne Russell (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), pp. 218–32 (p. 223).

²⁵ Julius Walter Lever, *The Tragedy of State* (London: Methuen, 1971), pp. 194–95.

the fact that Cornelia's voice is impersonated by a boy actor blurs sexual difference. As Judith Butler points out, '*in imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself*' (original emphasis).²⁶ While Catherine Belsey argues that the role assigned to women denies them a unified subject position from which to speak,²⁷ Cornelia's marginalised and ineffective voice condemns male figures' hypocritical voices (1.2.206, 276, 290, 315–16). Her transgression of her feminine role and her vocal challenge would, arguably, move her toward the position of speaking subject.

The convention of the boy actor subverts the gender difference on which sexual stereotyping depends, as feminist materialist critics such as Gina Bloom have noted.²⁸ When the boy actor breaks out of his imitative role, his loss of control over his voice suggests 'poor masculine performance', as Callaghan notes.²⁹ In playing the woman's role, the boy actor puts into question the conventional association of masculinity with reason and linguistic control. This loss of control is exemplified by the boy actors' breaking voices. Alison Findlay points out that 'if both male and female identity is equally performative, the need to assert a fixed sense of self becomes irrelevant'.³⁰ It could be argued that the boy actor's lack of space to articulate Isabella's moral speech can be associated with tragedy for the boy actor who perfected this style of acting and will, arguably, move to perform male figures' deceptive voices in the future. Like Cornelia, whose powerlessness and demonization is expressed by her madness even though she is morally correct, in performance Isabella becomes a 'foolish, mad, / And jealous woman' (2.1.262–63). Belsey comments that 'predictably, these creatures who speak with voices which are not their own are unfixd, inconstant, unable to personate masculine virtue through to the end'.³¹ This construction of the unstable female voice again alludes to the boy actor whose physiological state hinders his impersonation of the female voice over the course of the performance, as Bloom argues.³²

But it could also be argued that the boy actors are stretching their lungs and speaking in a passionate or angry way that signifies their (and women's) frustration with the

²⁶ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 175.

²⁷ Catherine Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama* (London: Methuen, 1985), p. 149.

²⁸ Gina Bloom, *Voice in Motion: Staging Gender, Shaping Sound in Early Modern England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), pp. 17, 23, 25.

²⁹ Dymna Callaghan, *Shakespeare Without Women: Representing Gender and Race on the Renaissance Stage* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 71.

³⁰ Alison Findlay, 'Playing the "Scene Self": Jane Cavendish and Elizabeth Brackley's *The Concealed Fancies*', in *Enacting Gender on the English Renaissance Stage*, ed. by Viviana Comensoli and Anne Russell (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), pp. 154–76 (p. 164).

³¹ Belsey, *Subject*, p. 188.

³² Bloom, *Voice*, p. 21.

restrictions placed upon their speech and action. Isabella's anger reveals that her initial obedience and submission to her husband is a subjective space that conceals rebellious desires. Her anger reveals her wish for revenge by impersonating a masculine voice (2.1.242–44), which she equates with the power to act upon her desires and take revenge. Webster empowers her by giving her speech. Second-wave feminist critics, eager to recover lost female voices (as are contemporary Palestinian women), note the power of female enunciation in Webster's play. Hall argues that 'Isabella recreates herself, in language that carries energetic conviction, as the aggrieved party instead of the peacemaker'.³³ Isabella repeats Brachiano's words (2.1.251–57) in a way that undermines the opposition between her subject position and Brachiano's, caricaturing his ceremony (2.1.196–97, 255–57). Isabella simultaneously plays out the demonization of female speech and criticises the privilege of male discourse. The play exposes the double standard whereby Isabella is urged to be patient since a husband's faithlessness is only '[a] slight wrong' (2.1.240) and to suppress her 'killing griefs which dare not speak' (2.1.277). She is a pawn of male rivalry and class antagonism, in that Brachiano feels humiliated by his political marriage to her (2.1.187–89).

Like Cornelia, whose voice reveals the evil of male speech, Isabella's speech reveals male corruption — notably that of her brother, Francisco, whom she accuses of failing to fulfil his allotted role of protecting her (2.1.241–43). What is important is that in this performative role, Isabella directs her anger at another woman — her rival (2.1.245–50) — rather than at the husband who has wronged her. Isabella's verbal aggression towards Vittoria rather than towards her husband and the patriarchal system that oppresses her has striking affinity with contemporary Palestine. Anne Sofie Roald cites the example of Umm Khalid, whose husband left her in order to marry another woman. Instead of fighting her lustful husband, she verbally attacks his new wife, while she keeps treating her husband 'non-confrontationally and politely'.³⁴ In a tyrannical patriarchal society, women are set against each other.

Despite her critique, Isabella's speech reveals that she is ultimately subordinate to male figures' voices (2.1.277–78); she addresses Brachiano as 'my dear lord' (2.1.155). Isabella, who is called '[b]lessed lady' (3.2.320), sacrifices herself to settle the conflict between her brother and her husband by pretending that she is herself guilty (3.1.217–18).

³³ Joan Lord Hall, *The Dynamics of Role-playing in Jacobean Tragedy* (London: Macmillan, 1991), p. 140.

³⁴ Anne Sofie Roald, "'Benevolent Patriarchy': Palestinian Women Between 'Ideal' and 'Reality'", *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 24.3 (2013), 333–47 (p. 340).

Corruption and Revenge: Webster's Male Characters' Voices and Actions

Webster shows that male figures voice and act on their desires for revenge, which is against Christian teaching (the New Testament points out that 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, saith the Lord' [Romans 12.19]). Findlay argues that '[r]evenge tragedy is a feminine genre in spite of the fact that the revenge protagonists are usually male', for 'revenge [...] is diametrically opposed to the paternal Word, the Law of the Father'.³⁵ While Kyd's Hieronimo and Shakespeare's Titus and Hamlet are forced to voice and act on their revenge against corrupt courts, the avengers in *The White Devil* are the heads of corrupt political and religious institutions. The association of the political and religious figures' voices with revenge suggests that male figures of authority usurp and undermine the integrity of the divinely ordained hierarchal structures that authorise and empower them.

Belsey argues that 'the uncertainty about the gender of the speaker in a period when women's parts are played by male actors is part of the comedy'. She argues that in the comedies there is a disruption of the illusion of the boy actor: '[a] male actor *and* a female character is speaking'.³⁶ However, Webster's tragedy, which sustains the illusion of the boy actor who mimics the female voice, generates a radical challenge to the hypocritical male voices, which speak in opposition to the word of God against revenge. Francisco, 'the most hypocritical and the most devilish of all', agrees with Monticelso that the wicked will be destroyed by their deceit, but asks Monticelso for his black book 'of murderers, / Agents for any villainy' (4.1.86–7).³⁷ Webster highlights the corruption and abuse of divine power, representing the Pope as a servant of God who possesses a book listing the names of murderers and villains. The air of secrecy inherent in their revenge shows that it is men's silence rather than women's speech that upsets the order and the political authority of the state. Vittoria's speech and sexual transgression stem from class antagonism and rivalry between men. The male figures' misogynistic discourse through which they voice their revenge is, therefore, a challenge to God's authoritative voice.

A similar framework of masculine (self-)deception characterizes Flamineo, who speaks in asides and soliloquies, hiding behind the roles of malcontent, madman, pander and

³⁵ Alison Findlay, *A Feminist Perspective on Renaissance Drama* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), pp. 49, 52.

³⁶ Catherine Belsey, 'Disrupting Sexual Difference: Meaning and Gender in the Comedies', in *Alternative Shakespeares*, ed. by John Drakakis (London: Methuen, 1985), pp. 167–90 (p. 181).

³⁷ H. Bruce Franklin, 'The Trial Scene of Webster's *The White Devil* Examined in Terms of Renaissance Rhetoric', *Studies in English Literature* 1 (1961), 35–51 (p. 47).

machiavel.³⁸ He aligns himself with the corrupt forces of the Church and men of higher rank (1.2.325–27, 3.3.18–23) in order to improve his social status. When he confronts his superiors for calling his sister a whore (3.3.107, 116–17, 4.2.43) this is more self-oriented than affectionately protective, for to affront Vittoria as a ‘whore’ is simultaneously to affront Flamineo as a ‘pander’ (4.2.48). Yet Flamineo, whom Layman calls ‘the dedicated disintegrator of his own family’, is indeed a pander.³⁹

Flamineo’s procuring of Vittoria for Brachiano and his deployment of silence as a strategy to keep women submissive to male figures’ immorality resonates with the rape of Palestinian girls and women by members of their own families, a familiar phenomenon for contemporary Palestinian women in the occupied territories, and offers a counter-text to the Palestinian construction of silence as a female virtue. The Palestinian Ministry of Women’s Affairs notes that while a large number of Palestinian women are subject to physical and verbal violence, ‘it is believed that the bulk of sexual violence against women and girls is located within the family’.⁴⁰ In some Palestinian instances, women are ordered to keep silent to fulfil male figures’ sexual desires. As Chaban, Daraghmeh and Stettler note, ‘There are also indications that family members sometimes not only tolerate the sexual abuse of females, but also arrange for their female relatives to provide sexual favours to uncles, brothers-in-laws or other family members’. Chaban, Daraghmeh and Stettler observe that women who are sexually abused by their male relatives were ‘pressured to remain silent, in order to preserve the family’s honour’.⁴¹

Flamineo blames Vittoria for the chain of events that he himself sets in motion. When Flamineo claims that women conceal their lust as a ploy to arouse men’s desire (1.2.20–22), he deconstructs the stereotypical association of female silence with chastity (4.2.194–6): ‘[a] quiet woman’, he tells Brachiano, ‘[i]s still water under a great bridge. / A man may shoot her safely’ (4.2.176–77). These lines suggest that silence is associated with sexuality, as the word ‘shoot’ implies sexual penetration. Vittoria’s response, ‘[o] ye dissembling men’ (4.2.78), accentuates that Flamineo is defining women’s silence according to men’s immoral interest. In short, women can’t win. If they speak, it is to express desire. If they keep silent, it is to conceal it.

³⁸ Bromley, ‘Rhetoric’, p. 63; on the contrast between Flamineo and Vittoria, see J. B. Layman, ‘The Equilibrium of Opposites in *The White Devil*: A Reinterpretation’, *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 74 (1959), 336–47 (pp. 337, 342–43).

³⁹ Layman, ‘Opposites’, p. 338.

⁴⁰ Palestinian Ministry of Women’s Affairs, ‘National Strategy to Combat Violence against Women-2011–2019’, *Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment* (2011), 1–76 (p. 10).

⁴¹ Stephanie Chaban, Reema Daraghmeh and Garance Stettler, *Palestinian Women and Security*, p. 35.

Webster makes Brachiano the author of sexual indecency while Vittoria is the target for his sexual corruption (1.1.41–42). By giving the initiative to Brachiano, Webster questions the convention that women’s speech seduces men into sexuality. Vittoria does not conform to this stereotype as she has committed herself to Brachiano. However, Brachiano leaves her to her accusers, despite having earlier boasted ‘I’ll seat you above law and above scandal’ (1.2.252), and charges her with duplicity on the basis of Francisco’s wanton letter, which shows that men solicit women’s favour. Where Monticelso describes her as a dangerous temptress, Brachiano constructs Vittoria as his seducer (4.2.83–86). While Brachiano says that ‘all the world speaks ill of thee’ (4.2.98), Vittoria accuses him of duplicity and lechery (4.2.105–25). Brachiano’s revilement of Vittoria (4.2.97) is a projection of his own failures and inconstancy as he repents his words (4.2.126–27, 137–40). Vittoria’s constant love to Brachiano and Brachiano’s wavering emotions challenge the conventional association of masculinity with reason and femininity with emotion.

Vittoria’s speech is initially complicit with Brachiano’s. She is self-effacing, addressing Brachiano as ‘my loved lord’ (5.3.7) and comforting him (5.3.130–31). At first, Vittoria conforms to the conventional role women are relegated to: that of obedience to their husbands and fathers. The study of Vittoria’s submission and obedience to her husband by Palestinian readers, such as those at my university, illuminates current practices in contemporary Palestine where women reveal devotion and submission to their husbands even if they are mistreated. For example, in her discussion of polygyny in Islam, Roald cites the example of Umm Khalid, a woman in her mid-forties, who submits to her husband’s intention of remarriage, expressing a sense of self-effacement even though she recognises that her husband is not ruled by religion but by his lust, exploiting Islam for his sexual desires. She sees ‘polygyny as being exploited by men to satisfy their own lust (Ar: *shahwa*). “It is not Islam that makes them remarry”, she said. “They just use Islam when it is convenient for them”’.⁴² Likewise, Vittoria reveals obedience and devotion to her husband despite his accusations of inconstancy and deception. When he is poisoned, his speech breaks (5.3.12–14); he ‘come[s] to himself again’ (5.3.167) to call for Vittoria (5.3.17–19). Herward Price argues that this is an affirmation of his ‘deep and selfless’ love that outshines all of the hypocritical voices of the play.⁴³ However, I agree with McLeod, who explains that Brachiano’s words are a parody of the *Commendatio Animae*, the holy rite of commending a departing soul to God.⁴⁴

⁴² Roald, “Benevolent Patriarchy”, p. 339.

⁴³ Herward T. Price, ‘The Function of Imagery in Webster’, *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 70 (1955), 717–39 (p. 729).

⁴⁴ Susan H. McLeod, *Dramatic Imagery in the Plays of John Webster, Salzburg Studies in English Literature: Jacobean Drama Studies* (Salzburg: University of Salzburg, 1977), p. 65.

In the same way that Isabella prevents those about her from touching the poisoned picture, Brachiano says to Vittoria ‘Do not kiss me, for I shall poison thee’ (5.3.26).⁴⁵ Thus, while Webster represents Brachiano as damned by his passion for Vittoria, he distances her from this condemnation, associating Brachiano’s mouth rather than her body with poison. For scholars of English at An-Najah University, reading Webster’s text thus offers a critique of the masculine-motivated gossip that can poison a woman or girl’s reputation. As Chaban, Daraghmeh and Stettler observe, ‘Ultimately, gossip and rumours, whether factual or not, were just as immobilising as verbal or physical harassment’.⁴⁶ One Palestinian interviewee called gossip ‘the thing that oppresses you most’.⁴⁷ In a similar vein, *The White Devil* reveals that male figures slander female characters who transgress the feminine virtue of silence so as to assert the patriarchal circumscription of the female voice.

Convention and Challenge: Vittoria’s Voice and Palestinian Law

While Cornelia’s and Isabella’s speeches are instances of heroic defiance that reveal male figures’ unruly voices, Webster’s protagonist Vittoria reveals the corruption of the patriarchal voices and realises Isabella’s wish to impersonate a masculine voice without disintegrating into madness. Vittoria’s trial, which has been celebrated as ‘one of the great moments of the English stage’,⁴⁸ challenges the view that women are excluded from discourse through the speech of Vittoria, whose motives vary in a way that, as Belsey observes, leaves her with ‘no place, intelligible to the audience as single and continuous, from which to speak, to be recognized’.⁴⁹ However, Vittoria dominates the scenes and reveals male avengers’ religious and political hypocrisies. Sara Deutch Schotland argues that ‘*The White Devil* arises in the context of debate about the church courts, criticized for their procedural deficiencies in comparison with common law courts’.⁵⁰ She argues that the trial of Vittoria for murder and adultery via the Catholic Church’s inquisition is a comment on the brutality of the judicial system.⁵¹

⁴⁵ Price argues that ‘[t]he moral law [...] has vindicated itself with a resolute exactness. “An eye for an eye...”’ But further, Brachiano speaks the horrible truth about his love. It was poison for Vittoria’. Price, ‘Imagery’, p. 728.

⁴⁶ Stephanie Chaban, Reema Daraghmeh and Garance Stettler, *Palestinian Women and Security*, p. 25.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁴⁸ Jack Landau, ‘Elizabethan Art in a Mickey Spillane Setting’ (1955), in *Webster: The White Devil and The Duchess of Malfi: A Casebook*, ed. by R. V. Holdsworth (London: Macmillan, 1975), pp. 233–235 (p. 234).

⁴⁹ Belsey, *Subject*, p. 163.

⁵⁰ Sara Deutch Schotland, ‘Women on Trial: representations of women in the courtroom in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama’, *Women’s History Review*, 21.1 (2012), pp. 37–60 (p. 45).

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

The lawyer begins reading the accusations in Latin: ‘*Domine iudex, converte oculos in hanc pestem / mulierum corruptissimam*’ (3.2.10–11) — in translation, ‘[m]y lord judge, turn your eyes upon this plague, the most corrupt of women’.⁵² The lawyer speaks Latin to give authority to his words and, in so doing, he underestimates Vittoria’s capacity to understand the language. However, Webster shows Vittoria as a woman with control over language, as she has good listening skills (3.2.13–14). She insists that the trial be conducted in a language that everyone can understand, so that ‘[a]ll this assembly / Shall hear what you can charge me with’ (3.2.19–20).⁵³ While Latin is a language associated with the exclusively masculine fields of the law and ecclesiastical authority — in which women had no legitimate voice — Vittoria mocks the language of the law and deems it irrelevant (3.2.35–39). As Monticelso describes evidence against Vittoria as ‘nought but circumstances’ (3.1.4), he redirects the ambassadors’ eyes and ears to Vittoria’s ‘black lust’ (3.1.7) in order to besmirch and silence her. Monticelso’s accusations against Vittoria elucidate what Belsey describes as ‘patriarchal and reductive’ definitions of women generated ‘in a society where the circulation of discourses is controlled by men’ and where women are associated with silence.⁵⁴

In terms of gender politics, from my own perspective as a Palestinian critic and teacher, this masculine silencing and domination of women enacts a dialogue with contemporary Palestinian society where women’s voices are circumscribed. However, as Magda M. Al Nawaihi points out, ‘Although the general silencing of women appears to be an almost universal phenomenon, cutting across different periods and places, it is nevertheless a phenomenon that needs to be dealt with contextually’.⁵⁵ In contemporary Palestine, while Islam is arguably sympathetic to women,⁵⁶ the construction of gender roles is enhanced by traditions and occupation, as Rubenberg notes.⁵⁷ The existence of occupation and the absence of an independent Palestinian state reinforce tribal systems, especially in rural areas that are not open to the western world, as Nahla Abdo notes.⁵⁸

⁵² Weis, *The White Devil*, p. 375.

⁵³ Schotland notes that ‘This emphasis on intelligibility recalls [Sir Walter] Raleigh’s protest about the use of Latin mumbo jumbo at his trial’. Schotland, ‘Women on Trial’, p. 44.

⁵⁴ Belsey, *Subject*, pp. 164, 178–83.

⁵⁵ Magda M. Al-Nowaihi, ‘Resisting Silence in Arab Women’s Autobiographies’, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 33 (2001), 477–502 (p. 479).

⁵⁶ The Qur’an is explicit in its emphasis on the equality of women and men before God, regardless of gender, ethnicity or race. The Family of ‘Imran 3. 195; The Joint Forces 33. 35. *The Qur’an*, trans. by M. A. S. Abdel Haleem, 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁵⁷ Cheryl Rubenberg, *Palestinian Women*, pp. 52, 121.

⁵⁸ Nahla Abdo, ‘Gender and Politics under the Palestinian Authority’, *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 28.2 (1999), 38–51 (p. 41).

Many Palestinian women's voices are circumscribed by the patriarchal structures of Palestinian society, the discriminatory laws and legal systems. Shalhoub-Kevorkian observes that women's resistant voices and actions in contemporary Palestine 'were and are affected by the juxtaposition of local factors (historical legacy, geopolitics, and a spatial policy of colonization; the existing context of a gender hierarchy; the politico-economic and social conditions) and global ones involving conflicts and political developments.'⁵⁹ As Hannah Bought-Brooks, Salwa Duaibis and Soraida Hussein argue, 'Existing laws in the occupied Palestinian territory are often discriminatory and do not offer sufficient protection for women'.⁶⁰ They argue that the Israeli occupation 'impedes progress in improving women's rights within the occupied Palestinian territory and limits the opportunities and capacity to transform the legal and social structures within the society'.⁶¹

The legal systems in contemporary Palestine 'focus on the promotion of male power in Palestinian communities'.⁶² A Palestinian reader may recognise that a man's word carries more weight than a woman's in any court hearing, as the widespread prejudice that women are untrustworthy, manipulative, and dishonest tips the scales against them.⁶³ Vittoria's challenge and defiance of male figures' hypocritical voices may enable my students to scrutinise abusive practices of silencing. As Shalhoub-Kevorkian notes:

By analysing the dynamics of the silencing and agency of women's victimization, while we begin the process of hearing their voices, we can perhaps create new sites for a different kind of knowledge that is not complicit with hegemonic circuits of power where what is available for consumption (within the seemingly unavoidable nexus of colonialist capitalist and consumerist global structure) only reinvigorates the power structures that allowed for its consumption in the first place.⁶⁴

While Webster dramatises Vittoria's disenfranchisement in the apparently male-dominated trial scene, Vittoria defeats her accusers, who condemn her on frail evidence.⁶⁵ In response to Monticelso's condemnation of her for the "crime" of adultery

⁵⁹ Shalhoub-Kevorkian, *Militarization and Violence Against Women*, p. 11.

⁶⁰ Hannah Bought-Brooks, Salwa Duaibis, Soraida Hussein, 'Palestinian Women: Caught in the Cross Fire Between Occupation and Patriarchy', *Feminist Formations*, 22.3 (2010), 124–145 (p. 124).

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

⁶² Palestinian Ministry of Women's Affairs, 'National Strategy', p. 10.

⁶³ See Bilal Hamamra, 'Silence, Speech and Gender in Shakespeare's *Othello*: A Presentist, Palestinian Perspective', *International Journal of Comparative Literature and Translation Studies* 3.4 (2015), 1–13 (p. 7).

⁶⁴ Shalhoub-Kevorkian, *Militarization and Violence Against Women*, p. 55.

⁶⁵ Franklin, 'Trial', p. 51.

(3.2.192–98), she says that she was tempted, but that ‘temptation to lust proves not the act; / *Castaest quam nemo rogavit*’ (3.2.199–200). Her defence — a Latin reference to Ovid, meaning ‘she is chaste who no one has solicited’⁶⁶ — is thrust at the lawyer who has attempted to silence her by speaking in Latin. The Cardinal delivers a conventional caricature of the murderous whore and makes her eloquence proof of her deceit, which is associated with Eve (3.2.68–69, 79–101, 108–09). However, by asking the listeners to ‘sum up [her] faults’ (3.2.208), Vittoria says that the Cardinal lacks rhetorical accuracy (3.2.101, 146, 190–91), turning his accusations against him.⁶⁷ Luckyj argues that ‘Vittoria’s accomplished performance of masculinity exposes those cultural paradigms that underlie the rhetorical posturing of the men in the play’.⁶⁸ Vittoria draws the listeners’ ears to the fact that the accusations reflect on the accuser, rather than the accused (3.2.148–51).

Vittoria’s appeal to justice is equated with freedom of speech. While Vittoria internalises her society’s injunctions to silence (3.2.130–34), she realises that to defend herself she ‘[m]ust personate masculine virtue’ of speech (3.2.136). While Vittoria takes ‘woman’s poor revenge / Which dwells but in the tongue’ (3.2.283–84), her public speech condemns her. As Callaghan observes, ‘Vittoria takes up contradictory subject positions here as on the one hand, the (phallic) speaker, and on the other, the ravished woman’.⁶⁹ This contradiction has present Palestinian resonance. It is a common folkloric tradition that Palestinians call a vocal woman *mostarajelli* (‘mannish woman’) or *emzanebri* (‘horny woman’). As female public speech and sexual looseness are equated, Vittoria’s voice falls on unreceptive ears.

Vittoria aligns male speech with ‘prating’ (5.6.67–69) to belittle men’s uncontrollable communication and their deafness to her truthful voice. Her response to the Cardinal’s caricature — ‘A rape! a rape! [...] [Y]ou have ravished justice, / Forced her to your pleasure’ (3.2.272–74) — shows that silence is a sign of sexual violation and highlights the association of men’s speech with immorality. Ania Loomba notes that:

Patriarchal legality conceives of female sexuality as criminal, so [Vittoria] seizes on its own analogy and inverts it by employing the language of sexuality to

⁶⁶ Weis, *The White Devil*, p. 376.

⁶⁷ The Raleigh trial could be considered as a direct source for some of Vittoria’s criticism of the Cardinal’s manipulation of the law through rhetorical irrelevance. See Schotland, ‘Women on Trial’, p. 40.

⁶⁸ Luckyj, ‘Performance’, p. 224.

⁶⁹ Dympna Callaghan, *Women and Gender in Renaissance Tragedy: A Study of ‘King Lear’, ‘Othello’, ‘The Duchess of Malfi’ and ‘The White Devil’* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1989), p. 76.

describe a legal procedure; thus she is the first to employ the connection between sexuality and power in favour of the woman'.⁷⁰

Though the Cardinal counteracts Vittoria's truthful words by calling her 'mad' and a 'fury' (3.2.275, 278), I think that readers and spectators accept her assertion that the Cardinal made a 'corrupted trial' (3.2.260) and 'ravish'd justice' (3.2.273). Vittoria's performance of the persecuted woman, therefore, carries the audience's sympathy along with her because Webster associates her speech with truth and in so doing makes spectators bypass the question of her guilt.

Webster further challenges the patriarchal construction of silence as passive and feminine gendered by associating noble manly death with silence. Vittoria combines traditionally masculine and feminine attributes, maintaining her courage, dignity, and integrity to the end. She rejects the traditional expressions of feminine weakness, tears (3.2.284–86). She insists that she 'welcome[s] death [...] As princes do some great ambassadors' (5.6.219–20). Her feminine bravery in the face of death (5.6.222–25) impresses Flamineo as imparting a model 'to teach [man] manhood' (5.6.242). Demonstrating, finally, a willingness to heed Vittoria's voice and example, Flamineo achieves self-affirmation through his own silent death (5.6.203–04). He refuses the flattery of the church (5.6.274) and demands thunder (5.6.275), the expression of nobility. Unlike Brachiano's death, which is marked by a breakdown of speech and hearing due to panic and fear (5.3.39–40, 109–10), both Vittoria and Flamineo assert their identities when they lose their voices '[m]ost irrevocably' (5.6.270).

Some critics argue that Vittoria confesses her sin and accepts the judgement of her society when she says, '[o] my greatest sin lay in my blood. / Now my blood pays for't' (5.6.238–39). Brown argues that there is a 'sense of sin behind her courage and passion'.⁷¹ However, although Vittoria responds to Cornelia's rebuke in Act 1 with '[o] me accursed!' (1.2.293), she also dissociates her speech from licentiousness, insisting that she has tried to thwart Brachiano's seduction of her with a 'chaste denial' (1.2.284). Hall notes that '[t]hose words of hers that sound most vulnerable are ambiguous; "O me accurst" could be spoken with angry sarcasm (the stress on me registering indignation that her mother is cursing her rather than Bracciano)'.⁷² Webster sanctions Vittoria's acceptance of Brachiano's marriage proposal to set herself free from the confines of enforced marriage as a financial contract to the impotent Camillo (1.2.53–54, 307–24,

⁷⁰ Ania Loomba, 'Women's Division of Experience', in *Revenge Tragedy: Contemporary Critical Essays*, ed. by Stevie Simkin (New York: Palgrave 2001), pp. 41–65 (p. 55).

⁷¹ John Webster, *The White Devil*, ed. by John Russell Brown (London: Methuen, 1960), p. lvi.

⁷² Hall, *Role-playing*, p. 143.

3.2.235–38). Webster represents Vittoria as trapped in a masculine fantasy that leaves little room between oppressing silence and debasing speech.

Conclusion: Inspiring Critical Reflection in Contemporary Palestine

For teachers and students of English at An-Najah University, Vittoria's voicing of and acting upon her sexual desires and her defiance of male figures' voices dictates a challenge to those Palestinian traditions that function to oppress and dehumanize women. Following the methodology of presentism, I have shown that Webster's tragedies can be placed in dialogue with contemporary Palestinian gender constructions. From this perspective, *The White Devil* can serve as a criticism of legal discrimination against Palestinian women, and the social construction of the outspoken woman as phallic and a whore. While Vittoria is condemned and labelled as a whore because she departs from the conventional feminine virtue of silence, Webster shows that her speech reveals the corruption within a patriarchal society.

Zehavit Gross notes that higher education 'empowers the individual to resist discrimination and to be committed to enhancing equality and combating social injustice'.⁷³ Teaching this tragedy, which associates female speech with truth and dramatic authority and male voices with religious and political hypocrisies, will offer my students a new perception of the construction of gender in both early modern England and contemporary Palestine. If students read and analyse this tragedy from a position of complicity and critique, they may begin to critically reflect on those elements of their own traditional culture that oppress women and leave Palestine lagging behind other nations.

⁷³ Zehavit Gross, 'Muslim Women in Higher Education: reflections on Literacy and Modernisation in Israel', in *Women in Islam: Reflections on Historical and Contemporary Research*, ed. by Terence Lovat (Dordrecht: Springer E-books, 2012), pp.149–64 (p. 153).