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HOPKINS, Lisa <<http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9512-0926>>

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Innovation and Experiment in Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*

In John Madden's 1998 film *Shakespeare in Love*, the adult Shakespeare meets a rather repellent small boy who observes that he likes the gory bits of plays best, while stroking a mouse. When Shakespeare asks his name, the boy says that it is John Webster. At cinema screenings of the film when it was first released, this drew a knowing laugh from those who identified the future author of *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*. Webster was thus labelled as a peddler of the grotesque and decadent, and that is indeed how he is seen by early twentieth-century critics, a view famously summed up in T. S. Eliot's 'Webster was much possessed by death, / And saw the skull beneath the skin'.ⁱ

But Webster is much more than that. In the first place, Webster invented women, at least as far as early modern tragedy was concerned. Shakespeare's four great tragedies are all called after their heroes: *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear*. Even Cleopatra and Juliet get no more than double billing with Antony and Romeo. It would be wrong to see this as evidence of misogyny or lack of interest on Shakespeare's part, because there are two important factors in play. For one thing, Shakespeare did write major parts for women, but he seems to have felt that the proper domain for them was comedy rather than tragedy. In addition, Shakespeare, like all other early modern dramatists, had no female performers at his disposal: all his girls and women had to be portrayed by boy actors, who were by definition likely to be less experienced and less confident than the adult men who played the male characters. This was not always so: it is clear that early in his career Shakespeare had a really exceptional boy actor available, who created Rosalind, Beatrice, and Viola, but it is also obvious that that actor's voice broke around the time of the initial performance of *Twelfth Night*, and that he was thus no longer available to play women. We can see this from the design of the play:

Viola says at the beginning that her plan on entering Orsino's household is to sing, but in the event she never does, and instead Feste is improbably presented as the resident singer in Orsino's household as well as Olivia's. For a few years after that the parts Shakespeare writes for women are much less ambitious and demanding: Cordelia in *King Lear* speaks fewer than a hundred lines, though that might be partly because it is easier to create an impression of virtue if you do not shine too bright a light on it, and Cordelia's silence has a power of its own. Not until the time of *Antony and Cleopatra* does Shakespeare have a new performer at his disposal whose Cleopatra can give Richard Burbage as Antony a run for his money, and who indeed dominates the stage in the fifth act after Antony has very unusually died in the fourth.

Webster, however, was luckier, because *The Duchess of Malfi* coincided with the emergence of a brilliant new performer of female roles, Richard Robinson, hailed by Ben Jonson as 'a very pretty fellow'.ⁱⁱ Although we cannot be completely certain, it seems that the role of the Duchess was created by Robinson in 1613, and then reprised by Richard Sharpe in 1623. Certainly Webster must have had total confidence in whichever boy actor first played the part, for while Julia and Cariola are both small, conventional female roles of the kind that numerous dramatists had previously created, the Duchess is anything but: she is a complex, ambiguous figure who is simultaneously admirable and potentially culpable, and she is a character whom many famous actresses have been delighted to play. If Robinson was indeed the first Duchess, Webster was also able to capitalise on the fact that he was apprenticed to Richard Burbage, who played Ferdinand, because a boy actor would often play the wife and his master the husband, which helps account for the erotic frisson in Ferdinand's relationship with his sister. Above all the Duchess, and to a lesser extent Vittoria Corombona in *The White Devil*, stand out as amongst the earliest examples of the female tragic hero, a figure whose possibilities Webster was one of the first to explore.ⁱⁱⁱ

But the Duchess is by no means the only mesmeric character in the play. While Antonio is conventionally virtuous and Bosola follows meekly enough in a long line of malcontents, both Ferdinand and the Cardinal are more original and more unsettling. As we have seen, Ferdinand was first created by Richard Burbage, who had played all of Shakespeare's heroes, and the part was worthy of his talents, for while Coriolanus might have been *like* a wolf, Ferdinand thinks he *is* a wolf.^{iv} The Cardinal too is something new: in the same year as Shakespeare and Fletcher represented Cardinal Wolsey in *Henry VIII*, another play staged at the Blackfriars, as venal because he wants power, Webster's Cardinal seems to be venal because he is venal. When he looks into the fishpond, he sees a darkly parodic yet fundamentally truthful version of himself, and the mirror effect is all the more disturbing because the Cardinal's fishpond is a sign of his supposedly Catholic identity: he needs to eat fish on Fridays.

With a leading female character came babies. Of course there had been children in early modern drama before - Anne Frankford's in *A Woman Killed with Kindness*, the infant Perdita in *The Winter's Tale* - but it was unusual to ask a boy actor to give such a physicalised representation of pregnancy as is required of the Duchess,^v which includes actually going into labour on stage, or to play such a *womanly* woman as she is, with her interest in fashion and hairstyles and her final thoughts of cough medicine for her children. Even more strikingly and unusually, she becomes a female ghost, or at least an echo. The famous ghosts of Shakespeare had been male - Hamlet's father, Banquo, Julius Caesar; once his women are dead, they are dead. The Duchess is dead too, but she comes back in two resonant and haunting ways. In the first place, she revives after seeming dead. This is not new - Shakespeare does it with Desdemona and possibly with Cordelia - but the Duchess has been dead for an unusually long time, and also says something unusually specific when she

comes back: 'Antonio'. I have already noted elsewhere that a student of mine understood this as a question indicating that the Duchess had died, gone to heaven and, failing to find Antonio there, come back to enquire about him. Whatever one may think about this, her 'Antonio' certainly prefigures her second apparent 'resurrection', when the Echo manifests itself specifically to Antonio in order to warn him. Separately and together these two moments suggest that the Duchess is a *good* ghost, in a way that Shakespeare's ghosts had not been. Julius Caesar and Banquo both haunt their killers in order to frighten them; Hamlet's father does not haunt Claudius, but his injunction to his son is suspect and dangerous, as is well understood by the prince's companions. All these spirits could be seen as supporting the official Protestant view that ghosts did not exist, and that anything which appeared to be a ghost was in fact a diabolical manifestation intended to tempt and mislead mortals. In this as in so much else, the Duchess is much more liminal and ambiguous.

Webster's innovations are not confined to the characterisation, and in one particular respect he was lucky as well as skilful. He wrote *The Duchess of Malfi* at a time when the King's Men were finally able to play in their indoor theatre, the Blackfriars, as well as at the Globe, and we know from the title page that the play was initially performed at both venues. However on 29 June 1613 the Globe burned down during a performance of Shakespeare's and Fletcher's *Henry VIII* when a celebratory shot from a cannon set the thatch alight. *Henry VIII* is in many ways a companion play to *The Duchess of Malfi*: I have already mentioned that both have Cardinals, and they also shared actors, with Richard Robinson, the first Duchess, probably also appearing as Anne Boleyn, and Henry Condell, the first Cardinal in Webster's play, recorded as running out of the burning Globe alongside the actor playing the fool. The difference was that after the fire *Henry VIII* had nowhere to go (certainly nobody wanted to shoot off any more cannons) and *The Duchess of Malfi* did: it became an exclusively Blackfriars play, and it fitted the new theatre beautifully, as can be seen from the

production of it which opened the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse in 2014 and is now available on DVD. David Carnegie notes that ‘John Russell Brown rightly suggests that the five-act structure apparent in the text is also important on stage, with significant plot time elapsing between each of the first four acts ... Peter Walls adds that the style of music written for the *Madmen* seems to be intended for the more intimate acoustic of a private theatre’.^{vi}

Moreover the severed hand and waxwork bodies might not have held up well in the bright sunlight of the Globe, but they were perfect for the darkness which could be produced by snuffing out the candles in the Blackfriars, and the building’s ecclesiastical past lent just the right air to the scene in the ruined abbey and perhaps also contributed to the sense of near-sacrilege which Cariola detects in the the feigned pilgrimage to Loreto. Webster blamed the failure of his first play, *The White Devil*, on the fact that ‘it was acted, in so dull a time of winter, presented in so open and black a theatre, that it wanted (that which is the only grace and setting out of a tragedy) a full and understanding auditory’;^{vii} in contrast, *The Duchess of Malfi* at the Blackfriars was the perfect match between play and playhouse.

To cap it all, one of the residents of the Blackfriars district had been Lady Arbella Stuart, whose own illicit marriage and subsequent imprisonment seem to be echoed in the story of the Duchess.^{viii} The apparent reference to Lady Arbella is a further departure from Shakespeare, who very rarely glanced at living people in his plays. The joky reference in *Cymbeline* to ‘Sir Richard Du Champ’, which translates as the name of his boyhood acquaintance and London associate Richard Field, is one exception to this; the final chorus of *Henry V*, which obliquely mentions the Earl of Essex, is another, and the trouble that might have caused when Essex fell was probably sufficient to dissuade Shakespeare from sailing so close to the wind in future. Webster by contrast suppresses the identity of the real Duchess, whose Christian name of Giovanna is never mentioned, almost as if he wants us to notice the parallel with Lady Arbella, and he also seems to glance at the waxwork model used for the

funeral of Prince Henry and perhaps too at the reburial of Mary, Queen of Scots. The impression thus created is that *The Duchess of Malfi* is a dangerous, edgy play, a dark mirror to contemporary political realities.

Webster's final innovations are the richness of his imagery and the tight web of verbal and other echoes. Of course Shakespeare had given the world some absolutely astounding language, while Marlowe before him had been famous for what Ben Jonson called his 'mighty line'. But Webster is different in that while Shakespeare's characters often have strong, distinctive speech patterns which may amount almost to idiolects, in Webster's case it is the play as a whole that speaks, and in a language typically shared by characters rather than unique to any of them. This is partly because of Webster's fondness for what are known as *sententiae*, proverbial sayings which anyone might utter, and partly because the play as a whole has such strongly developed image patterns that it sometimes seems as if characters are almost borrowing each other's words, as when the Duchess talks about galley slaves, something which she has never been but which Bosola has.^{ix} In this world of shared speech characters struggle to assert their individual identities, but the Duchess can do it: she is Duchess of Malfi still, and as the writer of one of the first commendatory verses observed, anyone who sees her in the theatre is likely to be moved to tears.

So what about that imputation in *Shakespeare in Love* that Webster will be distinguished particularly for gory bits? The Royal Shakespeare Company 2018 production of the play at the Swan Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon certainly presented the play as primarily a violent one: a press release before the production opened assured the audience that the theatre had ordered more stage blood than had ever been used in any previous production of any other play, and at the start of the second half audience members sitting in the front row were offered blankets to protect themselves from being spattered (which came in very useful). The

episode in the text which most obviously supports this interpretation is the severed hand which Ferdinand makes the Duchess kiss, but like the rest of the play's horrors, that does much more than merely provoke a shudder, because in what looks like a savage parody of palmistry the Duchess reads the hand as an index of Ferdinand's character: 'What witchcraft doth he practise that he hath left / A dead man's hand here?'.^x Although Marlowe's Doctor Faustus is technically a witch, withcraft is generally considered a female crime in early modern drama; the Duchess however attributes it to Ferdinand, and in so doing also implicitly answers a question about whether she herself is guilty or innocent, for while she may not be perfect, she is certainly a great deal less guilty than he is. Indeed this is perhaps Webster's crowning achievement (albeit one conditioned by the availability and aptitude of individual performers): while Shakespeare convinces us of Cordelia's virtue by giving her almost nothing to say, Webster lets the Duchess eat, laugh, and talk, and still makes her shine out like a light in the darkness of the Blackfriars theatre.

Lisa Hopkins

Sheffield Hallam University

Notes

ⁱ T. S. Eliot, 'Whispers of Immortality', in *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (London: Faber, 1974), pp. 55-6.

ⁱⁱ Roberta Barker, 'The Duchess High and Low: A Performance History of *The Duchess of Malfi*', in *The Duchess of Malfi: A Critical Guide*, edited by Christina Luckyj (London: Continuum, 2011), pp.42 - 65, p. 44.

ⁱⁱⁱ See my *The Female Hero in English Renaissance Tragedy* (London: Palgrave, 2002).

^{iv} For discussion of the play's treatment of lycanthropy see Brett Hirsch, 'An Italian Werewolf in London: Lycanthropy and *The Duchess of Malfi*', *Early Modern Literary Studies* 11.2 (September 2005). Online: <https://extra.shu.ac.uk/emls/11-2/hirswere.htm>

^v For comment on this see Susan Zimmerman, *The Early Modern Corpse and Shakespeare's Theatre* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), p. 146.

^{vi} David Carnegie, 'Theatrical Introduction', in *The Works of John Webster: An Old-Spelling Critical Edition*, edited by David Gunby, David Carnegie, Antony Hammond and Doreen DelVecchio (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 3 vols, I, pp. 411-449, p. 422. On the time between acts see also David Coleman, *John Webster: Renaissance Dramatist* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), p. 90.

^{vii} John Webster, *The White Devil*, edited by John Russell Brown (London: Methuen, 1960), 'To the Reader', p. 2.

^{viii} See Sara Jayne Steen, 'The Crime of Marriage: Arbella Stuart and *The Duchess of Malfi*', *Sixteenth Century Journal* 22.1 (1991): 61-76.

^{ix} See for instance Rowland Wymer, *Webster and Ford* (Basingstoke: St Martin's Press, 1995), p. 68.

^x John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, edited by John Russell Brown (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), IV.i.54-5.