THE CRITICAL HERITAGE

JOHN WEBSTER

Edited by

DON D. MOORE

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JOHN WEBSTER

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Edited by

DON D.MOORE

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General Editor's Preface

The reception given to a writer by his contemporaries and near-contemporaries is evidence of considerable value to the student of literature. On one side we learn a great deal about the state of criticism at large and in particular about the development of critical attitudes towards a single writer; at the same time, through private comments in letters, journals or marginalia, we gain an insight upon the tastes and literary thought of individual readers of the period. Evidence of this kind helps us to understand the writer's historical situation, the nature of his immediate reading-public, and his response to these pressures.

The separate volumes in the *Critical Heritage Series* present a record of this early criticism. Clearly, for many of the highly productive and lengthily reviewed nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers, there exists an enormous body of material; and in these cases the volume editors have made a selection of the most important views, significant for their intrinsic critical worth or for their representative quality—perhaps even registering incomprehension!

For earlier writers, notably pre-eighteenth century, the materials are much scarcer and the historical period has been extended, sometimes far beyond the writer's lifetime, in order to show the inception and growth of critical views which were initially slow to appear.

In each volume the documents are headed by an Introduction, discussing the material assembled and relating the early stages of the author's reception to what we have come to identify as the critical tradition. The volumes will make available much material which would otherwise be difficult of access and it is hoped that the modern reader will be thereby helped towards an informed understanding of the ways in which literature has been read and judged.

B.C.S.

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Introduction

In his address to the reader in the 1612 quarto of 'The White Devil', John Webster, responding to charges of his slowness as a writer, seems confident of his own critical heritage:

> To those who report I was a long time in finishing this tragedy, I confess I do not write with a goose-quill, winged with two feathers, and if they will needs make it my fault, I must answer them with that of Euripides to Alcestides, a tragic writer: Alcestides objecting that Euripides had only in three days composed three verses, whereas himself had written three hundred: 'Thou tells't truth,' (quoth he) 'but here's the difference, —thine shall only be read for three days, whereas mine shall continue three ages.'(1)

Indeed, as in his Preface to 'The Devil's Law Case', Webster never seemed to doubt that his works would be found worthy. And if 'The White Devil' failed at the Red Bull Theatre, it was due to the absence of 'a full and understanding auditory',(2) not to the absence of the writer's art.

More than three ages have now passed, and Webster's self-evaluation has proven, in many ways, accurate. His major tragedies, 'The White Devil' and 'The Duchess of Malfi', are the focus of attention in the study, the school, and, increasingly, on the stage. Dissertations are written; symposia are held; editions are plentiful. At the same time, however, Webster's prophetic comments are not wholly accurate. For almost two ages Webster was available, having not fully disappeared with his fellows; but few seemed to care, And with his revival in the early nineteenth century, heralded by Lamb's appreciation, Webster began to generate one of the mostpeculiar critical histories of any author of any time: by some he is praised unstintingly as being second only to Shakespeare in tragic art, and he is damned to the lowest circles by others. Since 1850 his tragedies have been staged more often than those of any of Shakespeare's contemporaries except Jonson; the results have brought delight and dole in equal scale. Webster endures, but not quite in the fashion he may have imagined: in 1949, for example, we learned that Webster rose above his fellows through his 'intellectual and spiritual insight',(3) but elsewhere that there is, finally, 'something a trifle ridiculous about Webster'.(4)

CONTEMPORARY REPUTATION

As has often been noted, what we know about Shakespeare seems voluminous when compared with what we know of Webster in his own time. Until recently, the primary biographical facts were these: in 1602, Henslowe made five payments to John Webster and several other playwrights; we have dates for Webster's collaborative efforts; we know that 'The White Devil' failed at the Red Bull Theatre in 1612 but that 'The Duchess of Malfi' was produced at the Globe in 1614, representing a gain in prestige for the dramatist; by 1615 Webster was a freeman of the Merchant Taylors' Company; we have later dates of plays written alone and with his fellows. However, Mary Edmond has recently discovered some valuable additions to these meagre facts, concerning Webster's family:(5) through a study of wills and other evidence she has made a probable case that the dramatist's parents were John and Elizabeth Webster of St Sepulchre's without Newgate, and that John senior and, later, the dramatist's younger brother Edward were important figures in the rapidly developing road transport business as makers of waggons, carts, and coaches.(6) Records indicate that the playwright's father had dealings with theatre people and their pageantry in the early 1590s; and given the last journeys taken by condemned men from Newgate prison to their execution in one of Webster's carts, we can agree with Edmond that 'it is not surprising that his elder son's thoughts turned toward the stage, and sombre themes'.(7) She further names, through wills of two neighbours near Webster, a Sara Peniall as the dramatist's wife and his children as John, Elizabeth, Sara, and others. Edmond conjecturally places Webster's birth in 1578 or not long after, and his death between 1632 and 1634.(8)

Yet we remain in a mist, to use a Websterian image, regarding his general reputation in his own time. Certain things are sure: from Webster himself we learn the fate of 'The White Devil' (No. 1), which was not surprising. The theatre audience at the Red Bull in Clerkenwell was 'a plain man's playhouse, where clownery, clamor, and spectacle vied with subject matter flattering to the vanity of tradesmen'.(9) Such a house might well have been confused by a drama of old conventions but troublingly new ideas, with characters who did not fit the older stereotypes. Webster did not lack confidence, however, and perhaps never did, as evidenced by his dedications to 'The Duchess of Malfi' (No. 2) and 'The Devil's Law Case' (No. 3). We have in the Preface to 'The White Devil' his well-known references to his colleagues; we note that he begins the list with the two serious and classical writers, Chapman and Jonson, and ends with the master writers of the popular theatre, Shakespeare, Dekker, and Heywood. There is little doubt that Webster would prefer to be read by the 'light' of the first two learned playwrights, and with Jonson's defensive Preface to 'Sejanus' before him, no doubt saw himself as above the popular theatre. Still, his 'good opinion of other men's labors' is not particularly effusive, and Webster here, as in the other dedicatory epistles, seems at this time an independent, confident man. That near the end of his career he would return in a collaborative role to the Red Bull was an unanticipated and probably an unpleasant irony: 'Keep the Widow Waking', written with Ford, Dekker, and Rowley, was performed there in 1624.

The commendatory verses for the 1623 edition of 'The Duchess of Malfi' (No. 4) are from three playwrights not praised in 'The White Devil' preface, and we may wonder at Webster's reputation in 1623 because of the absence of certain of those mentioned. Instead, we have

Middleton, Ford, and Rowley, all collaborators with Webster but of different levels of learning and interests. Yet though Rowley's verse befits his usual hack level, Middleton's and Ford's do indicate a genuine awareness of the merit of the play; and we may note also that Middleton and Rowley wrote no other prefatory verse. The famous description by Henry Fitzjeffrey (No. 5) remains our only personal glimpse of Webster, and the unflattering portrait therein is the first of many intermittent but vivid assaults on Webster and his art which continue well into the twentieth century. Objecting to 'The Duchess' for religious reasons is Orazio Busino, Venetian envoy in England in 1618 (No. 6). That the play was thus available in 1618 indicates, along with the cast-lists, itstheatrical success, as does the printing of 'The Duchess' in 1623 when presumably it was off the stage. Nevertheless, after rising briefly to great heights, Webster's power in the field of tragedy declined: 'The Devil's Law Case' is a less than challenging play of episodic structure belonging to 1616–20; there were dull collaborations; 'Appius and Virginia', in the 1620s (?), does manifest a unity of tone, but that tone is unexciting and simplistic. In his end was his beginning.

WEBSTER IN THE LATER SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

For a period of time afterwards we find Webster in the commonplace books (Edmund Pudsey had earlier garbled eight quotations from 'The White Devil', c. 1616) and as a ghostly influence on such writers as James Shirley, Nathaniel Richards, and Robert Baron. In 1648, an unlicensed royalist newsbook, 'Mercurius Pragmaticus', referred to 'famous Webster' in a roll-call of poets including Seneca, Sophocles, Shakespeare, and Jonson(10) (Webster being singled out for the lone adjective); but it is Samuel Sheppard who provides us with the one mid-century appreciation with his epigram on 'The White Devil' in 1651 and his inclusion of Webster in a literary hall of fame in his laboured epic 'The Fairy King' (No. 8). The latter effort includes Webster in a House of Eloquence, ranking behind More, Sidney, Spenser, Chapman, and Wotton. The work was never published, a blessing for the public. His epigram on 'The White Devil', however, marks the beginning of a rudimentary character criticism: Vittoria is a 'fam'd whore', Flamineo is 'The Devil's darling', and the like. Given the absence of any kind of real criticism, we have o settle for Sheppard. Webster shortly made his first of many appearances in poetic anthologies in John Cotgrave's 'The English Treasury of Wit and Language' (1655), and is represented by 104 quotations from his plays. We may credit Cotgrave as the first anthologist to present dramatic poetry by minor as well as major dramatists, and to place the passages under topics from A to W, that is, from 'Accident' to 'World'. Webster ranks sixth behind Shakespeare (154 quotations), Beaumont and Fletcher (112), Jonson (111), Chapman (111), and Greville (110).(11)

The early 1660s found Webster on the stage once more: 'The White Devil' was performed twice in October of 1661 and again the following December; there would be another recorded performance in late summer of 1671. The quarto of 1671 tells us that it had been 'divers times Acted by the Queenes Maiestes seruants in Drury Lane'; the thirdand fourth quartos (1665 and 1672) note performances at the Theatre Royal by the King's Company. More successful seems 'The Duchess of Malfi': it was performed on 30 September 1662, with London's finest talent. Betterton played Bosola, Mary Saunderson was the Duchess, with Henry Harris as Ferdinand. John Downes records that it was 'so exceedingly excellently acted in all parts, chiefly Duke

Ferdinand and Bosola, it filled the house eight days successively, proving one of the best stock tragedies'.(12) Samuel Pepys, however, had some opinions of Webster which sound similar to those of some modern reviewers (No. 9). Taking advantage of this brief revival of Webster was Francis Kirkman, who published 'A Cure for a Cuckold' in 1661 with a Preface which is of interest: 'As for this play, I need not speak anything in its commendation, and the author's names, Webster and Rowley, are (to knowing men) sufficient to declare its worth.'(13) Again, Rowley was in good company.

Thus Webster was kept tenuously alive through sporadic performances and new editions of his plays. 'Appius and Virginia' was reprinted in 1654 (reissued in 1659) and again in 1679, due to Betterton's adaptation called 'The Roman Virgin'. (The actor's revision never saw print, which may tell us something of its merit.) Webster's appearance in play lists such as Edward Archer's (1656) and Kirkman's (1661 and 1671) indicates that the reading of old plays did not stop for a Civil War and a Restoration.(14) Edward Phillips made Webster the subject of a brief but error-filled account in his effort at theatre history in 'Theatrum Poetarum' (1675); William Winstanley did little better in his 'Lives of the Most Famous English Poets' (1687), usually copying indiscriminately from Phillips. It remained for Gerard Langbaine to bring together the play lists and the attempt at biographies in his 'Account of the English Dramatic Poets' in 1691 (No. 10), a revision of his 'New Catalogue of English Plays' of 1688. His account is given here chiefly for the historical record; but for a century it was the standard source for Webster documentation. In 1698 Charles Gildon republished the material in his 'Lives of the Poets', adding almost as an afterthought that Webster was at one time clerk of St Andrew's parish, thus confusing the dramatist's biography for over a century. Dyce in his 1830 edition firmly challenged the accuracy of the remark, C.W.Dilke having been dubious in his 'Old English Plays' (1814–15) which included 'Appius and Virginia'.

James Wright in 'Country Conversations' (1694) helps bring the sparse Webster references to a placid and perhaps symbolic close at the end of the century. A countrygentleman, Trueman, chats with his visiting city friends on a variety of topics, from the merits of the older drama and the new to proper garden arrangement. We eventually hear one Julio, upon seeing some picturesque ruins preserved by a neighbouring squire, quoting Antonio's 'ruins' speech from 'The Duchess' (V, iii, 9–19). Indeed, we learn that Julio was one 'who omitted no occasion to magnify the wit of the dramatic poets of the last age'.(15) The passage, soon to be the Webster favourite in eighteenth-century anthologies, is ascribed to Webster, the play, and the speaker, and is the only quotation in the book apart from translated passages. Wright, son of Abraham Wright (No. 7), produced in 1699 the 'Historica Histronica', in which he briefly refers to 'The Duchess' as the first of a group of plays that had the names of the actors set against their parts.

Between the publications of Wright, there had been a touch of Webster in another play: Joseph Harris's 'The City Bride' (1696) was a reworking of 'A Cure for a Cuckold' with poetry turned to prose amid music, song, and the latest in Restoration repartee. The plot at least remained essentially Webster's. However, Webster was briefly taken to task in 1698 for one aspect of his plotting in 'The Duchess' (No. 11).

Thus if the years immediately following the Restoration were briefly propitious for Webster, the next twenty-five years were not. He had not completely disappeared, but we have fewer and fewer straws to grasp. Shakespeare, Jonson, Beaumont and Fletcher remain

visible, sometimes on stage and in books of poetic miscellany, dedications of Restoration plays, and in critical works of Dryden, Cowley, and others.(16) Nevertheless, Webster, if less acknowledged, still had an influence in the melodramas of Southerne, Otway, and others who dealt with the themes of lust and betrayal. As Allardyce Nicoll has noted,

> The horrible presentments that are put forward in so many of the Restoration tragedies, heroic and otherwise, make us realize that, if the poetic spirit of Webster and Ford was in many ways lost, certainly their love of blood and of riotous torment never was.(17)

THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

Generally speaking, there is no critical heritage of John Webster between 1700 and 1800. The dramatic bibliographers were acquainted with him; poetry anthologies sometimes included him; and scholars, turning increasing attentionto the age of Shakespeare, knew his plays.(18) But even for Malone, Steevens, and Capell, Webster was for an age, not for all time. Pope's one allusion in 1728 sums up most of the commentary: 'Webster, Marston, Goff, Kyd, and Massinger were the persons instanced as tolerable writers of tragedy in Ben Jonson's time.'(19) And Webster's stage history for over a century can be told as quickly: three performances of a revised 'Duchess of Malfi', and two adaptations, one not staged, the other lasting two performances.

On 22 July 1707, 'The Unfortunate Duchess, or, The Unnatural Brothers' was performed at the lavish Queen's Haymarket, the first playhouse to be constructed in the century. Two more performances followed on 29 July and 8 August. The reviser is unknown, but the cast was excellent, including John Verbruggen, Mary Porter, John Mills, Barton Booth, and others. The text, in the form of the fourth quarto, was published in 1708 and indicates cuts and stage directions. Missing was the pilgrim scene (III, iv) , the fables, and the lines in Act III, scene iii indicating a son of the first marriage. Some of the language is, of course, purged: 'lecher' becomes 'lover', for instance, amid other laundering. Compared to what awaited Webster, however, the 1708 text seems pure.

In 1707, Nahum Tate, plagiarist and poet laureate, favoured his public with a newly published play called 'Injur'd Love, or, The Cruel Husband' (No. 12). Nowhere does Tate admit his theft (who would know?); he does admit in an epilogue that he 'chose a Vessel that would bear the shock/Of Censure; Yes, old built but Heart of Oak'. The vessel, however, cannot bear the shock of Tate. Though 'The White Devil' fares better than did 'King Lear' in Tate's hands—some scenes follow in their regular Websterian order with little rewriting, and the villains meet their deaths as in the original—conformity and convention are observed. Vittoria, no longer the blazing Jacobean femme fatale, is truly innocent of adultery with Brachiano (making the trial scene ridiculous), and, indeed, in her own praise of Isabella's purity we realize we have reached the age of sentimental drama, an age wherein, on stage at least, the earth groans at the thought of a broken marriage. It is salutary to know that 'Injur'd Love' never injured an audience: no record of a performance exists.(20)

On 18 December 1731, Lewis Theobald writes to William Warburton:

> I have apply'd my uneasie Summer Months upon the Attempt of a Tragedy. *Sit verbo venia!* I have a Design upon the Ladies Eyes, as the Passage to their Pockets.... I'll indulge myself, in submitting a Pair of soliloquies to you, as a taste of my poor Workmanship. I lay my scene in Italy. My heroine is a young Widow Dutchess, who has two haughty Spanish Brothers, yet enjoin her not to marry again. She, however, marries the Master of her Household on the morning I open my scene...(21)

There follow two soliloquies from his 'tragedy' with lines from Webster sometimes recognizable, but not apparently to the scholar Warburton. Such was the state of Webster scholarship.

The play, now called 'The Fatal Secret' (No. 13), was staged twice at Covent Garden on 4 and 6 April 1733, with James Quin as Bosola, Lacy Ryan as Ferdinand, and Mrs Hallam as the Duchess; and it is worse than 'Injur'd Love'. Theobald in his Preface, which affords us our one piece of neo-classic comment on Webster, blames politics and the weather for the brief run of the play; we can blame Theobald. Admitting his larceny in the Preface (one hopes he'd been caught), he writes of Webster's violation of the unities and his 'wild and undigested Genius'. In the process of taming and digesting this genius, however, Theobald regularizes the play into an unintentional farce. If the plot consequently moves more quickly, it is at the expense of everything else. No children are born, obvious morals are drawn, horrors are softened, Webster's lines disappear, but in this brave new world the Duchess herself does not: at the end of the play, having been safely stowed away by Bosola, she emerges alive, well, and tedious. An anonymous letter writer to the 'Grubstreet Journal' on 25 April, protesting the refusal of his own work by the theatre manager who has instead staged lesser plays, reports triumphantly that 'The Fatal Secret' 'met with the Fate it deserved'.(22) On this note, Webster's plays left the English stages for over a century.

Indeed, it may be said that Webster left the English consciousness for almost the same period, until Lamb's 'Specimens of the English Dramatic Poets' in 1808. There are small sightings during the remainder of the century, yet Webster is relegated even there to one of a crowd, leading no individual life and noted only by anthologists and scholars.

In 1738 Thomas Hayward, drawing from the remarkable library of Edward Harley, second Earl of Oxford, and with the help of Harley's librarian, William Oldys, put together 'The British Muse' ('A Collection of Thoughts Moral, Natural, and Sublime of our English Poets; who flourished in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries'). Two hundred plays furnished proper comment on alphabetized subjects (Cotgrave's legacy), from Adversity into the Y's.If we pit Shakespeare against Webster in citations, the score is 427 to 93, in Stratford's favour. The anthology was published again in 1777 as 'Beauties of the English Drama', and perhaps caught Lamb's attention. 'The White Devil', not known even to Fielding when he parodied Tate's 'Injur'd Love' in 'The Tragedy of Tragedies, or the Life and Death of Tom Thumb' (1731), reappeared for the reading public when Robert Dodsley published his 'Old Plays' (1744).

Webster's play goes unannotated, but later editions in 1780 and 1825 include the erroneous 'parish clerk' biography (Gildon's causal contribution to the critical heritage in 1698) and list his plays and their dates. (The 1825 edition by Reed, Collier, and Gilchrist includes the Fitzjeffrey portrait and Theobald's Preface to 'The Fatal Secret', not much of an editorial favour.) Thus in

1744, one could read 'The White Devil', but with Tate's 'King Lear' playing at the Garden, one probably wouldn't bother. Webster is mentioned in David Erskine Baker's 'Biographica Dramatica' (1764) as a 'tolerable poet'; his plays are listed with their earliest productions and with fragmentary commentary: 'The Duchess of Malfi', for instance, 'is a story well known in history and was acted with success'. Such was the process in the various 'histories' of the times.

The scholars continued their work in Shakespeare, and while we may patronize Lewis Theobald as artist, we owe him a debt for his awareness that the method of editing classical texts would also be of value in the editing of the English classics.(23) Following Theobald's edition in 1733, the regular procedure in the editing of Shakespeare came to include not only collation of texts and explication of passages in an individual play with similar speeches elsewhere in the canon, but also the comparison of Shakespeare's work with that of his contemporaries. Thus in 1783 Edward Capell's 'The School of Shakespeare', the third volume in his 'Notes and Various Readings to Shakespeare', included the 'Notitia Dramatica', a large selection of extracts from old plays and from Shakespeare's sources. Capell includes from Webster the Preface to 'The White Devil' and several somewhat garbled lines from the play, the Induction to 'The Malcontent', three quotations from 'Appius and Virginia', and a long dialogue from 'A Cure for a Cuckold'. Oddly enough, 'The Duchess of Malfi' is overlooked, although 'The White Devil' is on a list of plays that for Capell rival Shakespeare's. Malone and Steevens also were busy reading old plays (Malone would include a 'Historical Account of the English Stage' in his 1790 edition of Shakespeare); yet in the work of all three, the earlier dramatists were there primarily to serve Shakespeare, to swell a progress and start a scene or two.

Nevertheless, a historical approach was making its inroads. Thomas Warton had observed in 1754, 'In reading the works of an author who lived in a remote age, it is necessary that we should look back upon the customs and manners which prevailed in his age, that we should place ourselves in the writer's situation and circumstances.' (24) Bishop Hurd insisted in his 'Defense of Romantic Literature' (1762) that as Gothic and Grecian architecture should be judged by the rules of form for each age, so should types of poetry: 'Judge of 'The Faerie Queene' by the classic models, and you are shocked with its disorder: consider it with an eye to its Gothic original, and you find it regular.'(25) Three years previously, Hurd had had praise for the language of the age of Elizabeth: 'It was pure, strong, and perspicacious, without affectation. At the same time, the high figurative manner which fits a language so peculiarly for the uses of the poet, had not yet been controlled by the prosaic genius of philosophy and logic.'(26)

Some of Hurd's observations were part of the growing debate over the neo-classic concept of the unities, a debate marked by increasing liberal criticism over the cramping effect of observing the unities of time and place. Daniel Webb in his 'Remarks on the Beauties of Poetry' (1762) affords a typical observation:

> It is observable that the same critics who condemn so much in Shakespeare a neglect of the unities are equally forward in acknowledging the singular energy and beauty of his sentiments. Now it seems to me that the fault which they censure is the principal source of the beauties they admire. For as the Poet was not confined to an unity and simplicity of action he created incidents in proportion to the promptness and vivacity of his

> genius. Hence his sentiments spring from motives exquisitely fitted to produce them: to this they owe that original spirit, that commanding energy which overcome the improbabilities of the scene and transport the heart in defiance of the understanding. (27)

The argument would, in the following century, gain Webster recognition by many for his own unity of design and tone; but not in the eighteenth century. For a more popular view, we have Oliver Goldsmith's comments in his 'Enquiry into the Present State of Polite Learning in Europe' (1759), Writing on revivals of Jonson, Massinger, and, above all, Shakespeare, he complains that

> Old pieces are revived, and scarcely any new ones are admitted. The actor is ever in our eye, and the poet seldom permitted to appear; and the public are again obliged to ruminate over these hashes of absurdity.... Let the spectator who assists at any one of these newly revived pieces specifically of Shakespeare only ask himself whether he would approve of such a performance by a modern poet? I fear he will find that much of his applause proceeds merely from the sound of a name and an empty veneration of antiquity.(28)

THE EARLIER NINETEENTH CENTURY

In a modestly brief autobiography written in 1827 at the request of William Upcott, Charles Lamb added at the end of an incomplete list of his works one comment: 'He was also the first to draw the Public attention to the old English Dramatists in a work called "Specimens of the English Dramatic Writers who lived about the time of Shakespeare", published about 15 years since.'(29) Lamb was wrong only in the time lapse: it had been nineteen years since his pioneering work in 1808 (No. 14). Otherwise, his remark is accurate.

Lamb brought for the first time a genuinely critical acumen to the works of the writers as opposed to the antiquarian appreciation of the anthologists and the historical dictionaries. It was an impressionistic approach to the plays as literature, not as antique curiosities, and owes its method partly to the Longinian influence on Romantic criticism, an emphasis on appreciative ecstasy in the reader, rather than on an Augustan inquiry through analytic, judicial investigation. Bishop Hurd had earlier written of the 'pure, strong, and perspicacious' language of the age of Elizabeth; and Wordsworth only recently had defined poetry as the 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings' in his Preface (1802) to the 'Lyrical Ballads'. As Wordsworth concentrated on 'fitting to metrical arrangement a selection of the real language used by men', so Lamb, in printing large extracts from the dramatists, chose scenes (rather than the anthologists' quotations) of the 'deepest quality':

> The kind of extracts which I have sought after have been, not so much passages of wit and humour, though the old plays are rich in such, as scenes of passion, sometimes of the deepest quality, interesting situations, serious descriptions, that which is more nearly allied to poetry than to wit, and to tragic rather than to comic poetry.

> The plays which I have made choice of have been, with few exceptions, those which treat of human life and manners, rather than masques, and Arcadian pastorals, with their train of abstractions, unimpassioned deities, passionate mortals, Claius, and Medorus, and Amintas, and Amarillis. My leading design has been, to illustrate what may be called the moral sense of our ancestors. To show in what manner they felt, when they placed themselves by the power of imagination in trying situations, in the conflicts of duty and passion, or the strife of contending duties; what sort of loves and enmities theirs were; how their griefs were tempered, and their full-swoln joys abated: how much of Shakspeare shines in the great men his contemporaries, and how far in his divine mind and manners he surpassed them and all mankind.(30)

In 'the moral sense of our ancestors', 'the power of imagination', and other phrases we are reminded of Wordsworth's precepts and intentions, for in their own ways both writers would restore a native poetic heritage. T.S. Eliot would later criticize Lamb's poetic emphasis, and hold him responsible for beginning a near-fatal dichotomy between drama and poetry.(31) Indeed, all too often during the remainder of the century Webster is called a poet, not a playwright. Nevertheless, Lamb's generous selections and his marginalia led to renewed awareness of Webster and his fellows, and to critical arguments over Lamb's observations well into our own time. And if Lamb on occasion was overly enthusiastic, we can only regret that the earlier scholars and anthologists did not share the same failing.

Something of a minor Elizabethan revival took place in the journals in the years following the 'Specimens'. 'Blackwood's' in 1818 began a series on the early English drama (No. 17) wherein Webster is found by John Wilson to be a master of scenes rather than structure, although Wilson accentuates the positive. Nevertheless, Wilson seems to have been the first critic to consider the problem of losing the main character in the fourth act of a five-act play. Other unsigned appreciations appeared in the 'European Magazine' in October and November of 1820 and in the 'Retrospective Review' for 1823, neither of which bears reprinting. The 'European Magazine' defends the early English dramatists against Voltaire and neo-classic strictures: 'The spirit of English tragedy is of too severe and mighty a character to bend down to any rules but its own' (p. 302), although the writer notes without real comment a great irregularity in Websterian structure. The enthusiasm of the author inthe 'Retrospective Review' leads to the statement that Webster is entitled 'to the gratitude of every lover of the histrionic art; we say of the histrionic art because they [his plays] are much better calculated for representation than most of our early dramas' (p. 88). We are not told why this is so. Both writers quote appreciatively.

More important in reinstating the dramatist in the public mind were the lectures by William Hazlitt in 1819 (No. 19). Combining Lamb's evocative impressionism with more specific historical and comparative criticism, Hazlitt is the first to tell us that 'The White Devil' and 'The Duchess of Malfi' 'come the nearest to Shakespear of any thing we have upon record', a comparison both accepted and challenged by critics of the future. Not surprisingly, Hazlitt avoids real comment on Webster's structure, as Hazlitt himself rarely attains a stylistic symmetry of plan. Of interest is his preference for 'The White Devil', since for Hazlitt the final horrors of 'The Duchess' 'exceed the just bounds' of tragedy. He notes that he writes

'under correction', a deferential bow, perhaps, to his friend Lamb whose evocative tributes to the fifth act were to become a standard point of argument.

In 1830 came the text of Webster which would serve readers for almost a century. Alexander Dyce, clergyman editor, included in 'The Works of John Webster' the two major tragedies, 'The Devil's Law Case', 'Appius and Virginia', 'Northward Ho', 'The Thracian Wonder', 'The Famous History of Thomas Wyatt', and 'The Malcontent'. His introduction (No. 23) remains of occasional merit. Dyce testifies to Webster's 'overcharged' action in 'The White Devil' which the imagination, nevertheless, 'receives as credible', and discusses Vittoria's role in the trial scene with clear perception. He is among the first to celebrate the wooing scene in 'The Duchess of Malfi', 'a subject most difficult to treat'; elsewhere his criticism is generally impressionistic appreciation. Dyce's work received favourable notice: the London 'Literary Gazette' commended 'Mr. Dyce's labours to the favour of all literary persons' (17 April 1830, p. 255); Sir Walter Scott, having included the two major tragedies in 'The Ancient British Drama' (edited anonymously in 1810), writes in 1831 to Dyce and notes Webster as 'one of the best of our ancient dramatists'.(32) In an unsigned article which commends Dyce in the 'Gentleman's Magazine' (No. 25) we find a proto-Victorian reaction: Vittoria is a threat to home and hearth, and the injured but faithful wife Isabella moves the writer to tears. It is hardly a full endorsement of Webster, who for the journalist had sublime tragic power amid disjointed structure and unfortunate excesses.

1850–1900

On 20 November 1850, audiences at the Sadler's Wells Theatre saw 'The Duchess of Malfi', the first staging in over a century. With the production begins a new phase of Webster's critical heritage, the responses to the plays as acted. And this response is a divided one, to say the least. Critics would disagree throughout the remainder of the century, one side celebrating the poetic power of Webster's tragic vision, while others, especially the stage critics, would vigorously attack what they characterized as episodic structure, absurd improbabilities, and gross excesses. And within the anti-Webster group would come another complaint, that of decadence and immorality. Nor surprisingly, the Victorian popular novelist and reformer Charles Kingsley first makes the charge not long after the 1850 production. And while we may dismiss the moral charges of the Victorians, the reviews of Webster on the stage in the nineteenth century sound, on occasion, sadly similar to those in our own time.(33) To be sure, what the Sadler's Wells audience saw was not wholly Webster's 'Duchess of Malfi' but, as the printed text informs us, one 'Re-Constructed for Stage Performance by R.H.Horne'.(34) Richard Hengist (Henry) Horne, author of the 'farthing epic' 'Orion' and well-known journalist, editor, and critic, took Webster's play and turned it into a stage piece that afforded certain actresses their most famous role for the next twenty-five years in England and the USA. However, in his adaptation, we lose a considerable portion of Webster. As Horne tells us in his introduction (No. 28),

> All the terrors (shorn and abated of the excesses in the original) are still left here in all their genuine tragic force. But it must also be borne in mind that nothing like a shocking *reality* must be presented; — the whole being softened by stage arrangements—in short, by *Art*—so as to be seen through a poetical and refining medium.

This artistic softening results in a play of tight construction, fluent and unmemorable Fletcherian verse, and a tone not of moral ambiguity but of melodrama, sentimental and black and white. Minor characters disappear, and major characters constantly inform us as to their intentions. Thus the Cardinal (now Cardinal Graziani) confides in the audience often, manipulates Ferdinand, and uses Julia, now sexually rehabilitated by Horne, as an unwitting instrument in his melodramatic villainy. Themadmen are heard offstage in the tidying up of the plot: those who hear them will assume the noise to be the ravings of the mad Duchess, whose estate will then come into the management of her brothers. (And, of course, 'shocking reality' must be avoided.) The Duchess (now called Marina and re-entering after her strangling to cry 'Mercy' and die on stage) is not the occasionally sensual young woman of Webster but one who shares this kind of business in the torture scene with Bosola:

Bos. Thou art an over-ripe fruit, that not being duly gathered, art fallen to rot on the soil. There's not a hand shall take thee up.

Duch. *(Looking upwards.)* A hand *will* take me up! — A fallen fruit? No; I am a seed, whose mortal shell must lie and rot i' the earth before the flower can rise again to the light. *(Looking round as on her prison.)* Didst thou ever see a lark in a cage? — such is the soul in the body. The world is like its little turf of grass; and the heaven o'er our heads, like its looking-glass, only gives us a miserable knowledge of the small compass of our prison.

We realize that something is dreadfully awry here: the author has horned in and given to the Duchess Bosola's original lines, thus completely reversing Webster's meaning. Yet George Henry Lewes (No. 28e), not an admirer of Webster, felt that 'unless you have the two books side by side, you cannot tell whether you are reading Webster or Horne'. However, the 'Athenaeum' critic (No. 28c), having read Webster better than Lewes but still objecting to having Webster exhumed, nevertheless realized that 'we have here not even Webster'.

But with sophisticated lighting (the stage slowly darkened for moments of tension), scenic splendour (Horne's text opens on 'A Bridge in Malfi with Gardens Beyond'), and various sound effects (bells counterpointed the madmen's cries), the Webster-Horne 'Duchess' played for twenty-five years, though often to mixed reviews. There was even a revision of the revision, published around 1860 in 'Cumberland's Acting Plays' by George Daniel (1789–1864), the miscellaneous writer, satiric poet and friend of Lamb. While not exactly on the level of Macready's stage restoration of the Fool to 'King Lear', Daniel at least restored the dead man's hand to 'The Duchess of Malfi'. And in the USA, there were some remarkable last scenes, courtesy of 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' (No. 30).

While Isabella Glyn (No. 29), Alice Marriot, and Emma Waller often received favourable personal notices (Glynbuilt a career as the Duchess), the play did not always receive the same. As noted earlier, a dichotomy came to exist among Webster's critics. There would be those from Swinburne through Eliot and into the later twentieth century who would attest to the power of Webster's tragic vision, his revelation of man's inhumanity to man, his stoicism in the face of horror and, throughout all, his poetry. But the theatrical critics, particularly in the new age of the 'well-made play', would decry the looseness of Webster when seen on the stage, and in 'The Duchess' the collection of corpses in the fifth act. Webster read and Webster seen often generate different responses, even with changes of taste and attitudes. In reviews from 1850 into the 1970s we realize that tears in the study sometimes change to titters

in the audience in many productions of 'The Duchess of Malfi', and the fault does not always seem to be eccentric direction or acting. (To be sure, a 1919 production in which Ferdinand died standing on his head did little to enhance Webster's poetic vision.)

Thus William Poel's production of 'The Duchess' in 1892 (No. 41) which brought forth much of Webster's original text (though amid cuts, rearrangement, and stylized horrors) also brought forth William Archer, translater of Ibsen, friend of Shaw, champion of a new, believable drama 'of rational construction' (No. 42), and Webster's most vociferous enemy. And though we may smile indulgently at Archer, uninformed as he was about the Elizabethans, certain of his objections seem to be borne out by audience reactions to productions in our own time.(35)

Attacking on the moral front were Canon Charles Kingsley (No. 31) and, later, the traditionalist William Watson (No. 44), both of whom indirectly relate to Archer and his call for real people acting rationally upon the stage, particularly if 'rationally' can be defined as 'morally'. Kingsley, writing 'Plays and Puritans' not long after Horne's adaptation, protested the lack of moral purpose in the Elizabethans, scoffing at the idea of improvement by negative illustration:

> As the staple interest of the comedies is dirt, so the staple interest in the tragedies is crime. Revenge, hatred, villainy, incest, and murder upon murder, are their constant themes and (with the exception of Shakespeare, Ben Jonson in his earlier plays, and perhaps Massinger) they handle these horrors with little or no moral purpose, save that of exciting or amusing the audience, and of displaying their own power of delineation in a way which makes one but too ready to believe the accusations of the Puritans.

Watson, over thirty years later, would complain in much the same fashion:

> Cynicism, disgust, and despair were brief and casual refuges of Shakespeare's spirit. These moods are the permanent and congenial dwelling places of minds like Webster's.... The ethical infertility of such a presentation of the world is manifest enough, but how short-sighted and shallow seems the criticism which professes to see any kinship between Shakespeare and a type of mind so defective in sanity of vision, so poor in humour, so remote from healthful nature, so out of touch with genial reality.

'Genial reality', however, is of course in the eye of the beholder. For Swinburne (No. 36) in his long appreciation, far more enthusiastic than Lamb-like, for Symonds (Nos 33, 39) and for other late Victorians, Webster's world may have represented an escape from the reality Kingsley and Watson represented. G.K.Hunter has suggested that

> The revival of interest in the early dramatists noticeable in the last quarter of the nineteenth century must be associated with the anti-Victorian or decadent strain in the library life of the time...the exploration of past decadence is a liberation from the present and a means of justifying their own tastes.(36)

William Poel (No. 43) would defend Webster against Archer's arrows by an appeal to the historical accuracy on Webster's part, and his picture of the 'manners and morals of the Italian Renaissance as they appeared to the imagination of Englishmen'; and James Russell Lowell (No. 37) would do something of the same. Although Poel meant Jacobean Englishmen, certain late Victorians found in Webster a corresponding attitude of mind, an attitude quite dissimilar to Tennyson's seeming assurance of meeting his Pilot after crossing the bar or Browning's cheery greeting to the unseen. Whether or not Webster was historically accurate is unimportant, finally. Flamineo's 'at myself I will begin and end' meant something more pessimistic yet more congenial to some readers than Henley's being master of his fate. This fin de siècle attitude would be true for the young Rupert Brooke in his vigorously written 'John Webster and the Elizabethan Drama', published posthumously in 1916. Brooke, more than any critic before him, could see in Webster a unity of tone:

> The end of the matter is that Webster was a great writer; and the way in which one uses great writers is two-fold. There is the exhilarating way of reading their writing; and there is the essence of the whole man, or of the man's whole work, which you carry away and permanently keep with you. This essence generally presents itself more or less in the form of a view of the universe, recognisable by its emotional rather than logical content.(37)

Yet some later Victorians could not go quite that far. Gosse (No. 45), Ward (No. 35), Saintsbury (No. 38), even Symonds, and others find Webster the master of mosaics, the creator of the powerful dramatic moment. From Symonds's introduction to Webster comes a remark which would, if sometimes obliquely, be considered in many twentieth-century studies:

> in 'Vittoria Corombona' and 'The Duchess of Malfi', each part is etched with equal effort after luminous effect upon a murky background; and the whole play is a mosaic of these parts. It lacks the breadth which comes from concentration on a master-motive.

And Swinburne's observation that 'no poet is morally nobler' indicates Webster's occupation in their minds: for the Victorian lover of poetry, Webster's characters exist not on a stage, but on a page.

In 1899 came Sidney Lee's end-of-the-century estimate of Webster for the 'Dictionary of National Biography' (No. 96) and it is unsatisfactory if unsurprising. Even though the playwright is 'rarely coarse' and worked with a 'true artistic sense', Webster 'with a persistence that seems unjustifiable in a great artist…concentrated his chief energies on repulsive themes and characters'. But before the entry is over, we hear of the miraculous touches that only Shakespeare could rival and the 'essential greatness of his conceptions'.

Chronicling varying responses in the critical heritage of John Webster is somewhat reminiscent of the Duchess's 'going into a wilderness'/Where I shall find no path or friendly clue/To be my guide'. We can nevertheless summarize generally that those who proclaim Webster's greatness emphasize throughout the century his power in creating a dark and terrible poetic vision, a vision which for many is a moral one. Less wholehearted critics fall

into three broad categories. First, there are those in the earlier part of the century who emphasize the passion and Gothic horror of Webster. For many, Webster surpasses most inthe ability to create the terrible and the terrifying; yet he flows with too great a facility and should be stopped sooner. Fanciers of Webster's Gothic power exist, of course, into the later nineteenth century. Second, there are the critics among the later Victorians who see Webster as the creator of the great poetic moment, yet without a totality of meaning. The third group is dominated by Archer, with support from the moralists, who care little for personification but greatly for probability. Yet even in this latter group of Webster's most implacable critics, there is reluctant testimony to Webster's troublesome power.

Looking ahead to the twentieth century, further generalizations seem possible. The years would bring global wars which would tragically attest to the credibility of Webster's horrific vision of man's inhumanity. Writing on the dead man's hand in 'The Duchess of Malfi', F.L.Lucas in his great 1927 edition of Webster could note, 'Too many of the present generation have stumbled about in the darkness among month-old corpses on the battlefields of France to be much impressed by the falsetto uproar which this piece of "business" occasioned in nineteenth century minds.'(38) And in 1945 a rare stage success of 'The Duchess of Malfi' occurred in London shortly after commanders at Buchenwald and Dachau had proven the truth of creations like Ferdinand and the Cardinal. In an accidental but telling stroke, the London 'Times' placed its review of the play underneath five newly released pictures of German concentration camps.(39)

Webster's world is, alas, closer. Twentieth-century critics have dealt with Webster with more sympathy and with more enlightenment than were found in the nineteenth, though in many ways they have built on what is recorded here. And as in the previous century, there remains disagreement still. Approaches have been made to a concept of moral vision, with Irving Ribner and Robert Ornstein, naming two of many, disagreeing over the degree attempted or achieved.(40) Eliot's comment in 'Four Elizabethan Dramatists' that Webster was a 'genius directed toward chaos' (his view itself owing something to the later Victorians) generated differing responses from several Cambridge critics, among them Muriel Bradbrook and L.G. Salingar. Though they conclude that Webster mixes convention with naturalism, Salingar is far more distressed than Bradbrook.(41) Later critics such as Travis Bogard, I.S.Ekeblad, and J.L.Calderwood turn to counterpoint and ritual to explain Webster, finding a shaping vision based on generic fusion of tragedy and satire (Bogard) or ritualistic images which bring a subtle order out of seeming chaos.(42) J.R.Brown's excellent Revels introductionsto the tragedies draw on occasion from these approaches. Most recently critics have moved away from questions of moral vision and attempts to account for a unity of tone and instead have considered the 'absurdist' element in the plays, in which a 'conventional form' does not lead to a 'conventional conclusion'.(43) Indeed, in a collection of essays on Webster in 1970(44) comparison is made more frequently with the works of Beckett, Pinter, and Ionesco than with any Jacobean dramatist, and for many Webster has increasingly become our contemporary rather than Shakespeare's.

But in the theatres Webster's fortunes continue to be limited in spite of several major productions. After efforts in the study in praise of Webster, critics in the theatre have all too often continued to hear titters replacing terror and to see comedy replacing catharsis. The fact remains that when we read metaphysical accounts of how Flamineo's feigned death reflects

subliminally the appearance-reality motif and its reverberations throughout 'The White Devil', we should also remember that the scene at the National Theatre in 1969 often provoked laughter. Una Ellis-Fermor wrote many years ago that although 'The Duchess of Malfi' was 'susceptible of a more or less naturalistic presentation', its musical and poetic values were 'utterly alien to any plausible stage representation'. (45) In 1971 we had 'The Duchess' staged in two ways: at the Royal Court in an avant-garde approach, and later at Stratford in 'realistic' fashion. Reviews for both were poor, with some critics rising to heights of humorous invective. In a recent BBC television production, presented naturalistically, Bosola seemed lost in a structural mist and took longer to die than Bottom's Pyramus.

Sometimes it is obviously the director's fault; yet sometimes it is Webster's. For all the appeal to myth, ritual, symbol, and absurdist canons, Webster's plays on stage admit to at least two confusing perspectives: the court of Malfi, for instance, is seen in naturalistic terms while Ferdinand and the Cardinal inhabit the nightmare world of the grotesque.(46) That a director can successfully fuse these perspectives in a truly satisfying stage performance has yet to be fully demonstrated. It is not surprising that we learn from the 1623 title-page that the play was cut even from the time of its first performance. In the study the job of synthesis seems easier, especially when we forget Ezra Pound's cogent remark that 'the medium of drama is not words, but people moving about on a stage using words'. Nor was William Empson invoking the shade of William Archer by claiming that it is 'clearly wrong to talk as if coherence of character is not needed inneeded in poetic drama, only coherence of metaphor and so on'.(47)

A parallel which I drew some years ago still seems valid: Webster remains the Tennessee Williams of the Jacobeans. With women at the centre of his plays, Webster is, like Williams, darkly theatrical and poetically effective at his best, yet extravagantly rhetorical and implausible in his excesses. Like Williams, his outlook is intense but narrow, and inconsistent in tone even within that narrowness. And he, like Williams, has consequently generated a most divided critical heritage.

NOTES

1 'The White Devil', ed. J.R.Brown (1958), pp. 3–4.
2 Ibid., p. 2. Cf. Dekker's similar phrasing in 'If it be not Good, the Devil is in It' (1612).
3 David Cecil, 'Poets and Storytellers' (1949), p. 29.
4 Ian Jack, The Case of John Webster, 'Scrutiny', XVI (March 1949), p. 43.
5 Mary Edmond, In Search of John Webster, 'TLS', 24 December 1976, pp. 1621–22; see also her subsequent letters in 'TLS', 11 March 1977, p. 272, and 24 October 1980, p. 1201. Arriving too late for full consideration is M.C.Bradbrook's 'John Webster: Citizen and Dramatist' (1980), which builds on Edmond's discoveries and provides an in-depth picture of Webster's London.
6 The reference explains Fitzjeffrey's 'cartwright' (No. 5), usually taken to mean Webster's laborious workmanship, and makes more significant William Heminges' allusion in his mock elegy in 1632 to 'Webster's brother' who 'would not lend a coach' in order to provide a cortège for a missing finger, lost by a friend in a duel. R.G.Howarth had first noted the relationship between the references in 'TLS', 2 November 1933, p. 751. The 'Elegy on Randolph's Finger' is in the Bodleian Library, MS Ashmole 38, 26.

7 Edmond, op.cit., p. 1621.
8 Thomas Heywood in the 'Hierarchy of the Blessed Angels', licensed 7 November 1634, speaks of Webster in the past tense, telling us that the nickname of Fletcher and Webster 'was but Jack'. Heminges in 1632 refers to 'Webster's brother', seemingly a present tense. Thomas Hall thought he was alive in 1655 when he confused the dramatist with a popular preacher of the same name. Webster the vicar is attacked and called a 'Quondam Player' in Hall's 'Vindiciae Literarum'. Hall was confused, and the churchman no doubt surprised.
9 L.B.Wright, 'Middle Class Culture in Elizabethan England' (1935), p. 609.
10 Quoted in G.E.Bentley, 'Shakespeare and Jonson' (1945), p. 288.
11 See G.E.Bentley's John Cotgrave's 'English Treasury of Wit and Language' and the Elizabethan Drama, 'Studies in Philology', XL (April 1943), p. 192.
12 John Downes, 'Roscius Anglicanus', ed. Montague Summers (1928), p. 29. It would be staged again on 25 November 1668, 31 January 1672, and at court on 13 January 1686. ('The London Stage', ed. William Van Lennep (1965), I, p. 40).
13 Noted by F.L.Lucas, 'The Complete Works of John Webster' (1927), III, p. 29.
14 Tso-Liang Wang's 'The Literary Reputation of John Webster to 1830' (1975) studies the playlists effectively, pp. 1–38. Wang's book in the Salzburg monograph series has been a welcome aid for this entire period; I have also drawn freely upon my own 'John Webster and His Critics, 1617–1964' (1966) and referred to G.K. and S.K.Hunter's 'John Webster: A Critical Anthology' (1969).
15 James Wright, 'Country Conversations', ed. Charles Whibley (1927), p. 57.
16 Cf. Herbert Weisinger, The Seventeenth Century Reputation of the Elizabethans, 'Modern Language Quarterly', VI (March 1945), pp. 13–21.
17 Allardyce Nicoll, 'History of Restoration Drama 1660– 1700' (1928), p. 120.
18 Cf. R.D.Williams, Antiquarian Interest in the Elizabethan Drama Before Lamb, 'PMLA', LIII (June 1938), pp. 434–44.
19 Quoted by Joseph Spence, 'Anecdotes, Observations, and Characters of Books and Men', ed. S.W.Singer, newly introduced by Barnaby Dobree (1964), p. 44.
20 Wang, op.cit., studies Tate's burglary as does Hazleton Spencer, Nahum Tate and 'The White Devil', 'Journal of English Literary History', I (1934), pp. 235–49.
21 Quoted in R.F.Jones, 'Lewis Theobald' (1919), p. 291.
22 Reprinted in the 'Gentleman's Magazine' (1733), p. 194. Wang, op.cit., also considers Theobald's version, as does R.K.Kaul in What Theobald Did to Webster, 'Indian Journal of English Studies', II (1961), pp. 138–44.
23 Cf. Earl Wasserman, The Scholarly Origin of the Elizabethan Revival, 'Journal of English Literary History', IV (September 1937), pp. 213–44.
24 Thomas Warton, Observations on The Fairy Queen, 'Eighteenth Century Essays', ed. Scott Elledge (1961), II, 772. Pope, of course, had in 1725 made his famous remark about the futility of judging Shakespeare by Aristotle's rules; Johnson in 1765 would say that the unities might be sacrificed successfully to variety.
25 Richard Hurd, 'Taste and Criticism in the Eighteenth Century', ed. H.A.Needham (1952), p. 146.
26 Richard Hurd, 'Letters on Chivalry and Romance', ed. Edith Morley (1911), pp. 71–2.
27 'Shakespeare: The Critical Heritage', ed. Brian Vickers, IV (1976), p. 519.
28 'Works of Oliver Goldsmith', ed. Peter Cunningham (1854), II, pp. 67–8. The strict Licensing Act of 1736 no doubt discouraged some potential playwrights.
29 Quoted by E.V.Lucas in 'The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb' (1904), IV, p. 597.

30 Ibid., p. 1. Lamb's selections were later often cited by others in the journals. Stendhal, in a chapter of 'Armance' (1827), quotes part of Cornelia's dirge as an epigraph.

31 Cf. T.S.Eliot, The Possibility of a Poetic Drama in 'The Sacred Wood' (1928) and Four Elizabethan Dramatists in 'Elizabethan Essays' (1934). Eliot himself would review 'The Duchess of Malfi' in 'Arts and Letters', III (Winter 1920), pp. 36–9. The production was a disaster, and Eliot's commentary is little better, with its several surprisingly untenable remarks on the staging of poetic drama. Eliot also did a radio critique of Webster, reprinted in the 'Listener', 18 December 1941, pp. 825–6. See my discussion of Eliot's influential role in Webster criticism in 'Webster and His Critics', pp. 97–108.

32 'Letters of Sir Walter Scott', ed. H.J.C.Grierson (1937), XII, 1. Making Webster further available for the Victorians would be W.C.Hazlitt's four-volume edition of Webster in 1857, reprinted in 1897. Generally an inferior copy of Dyce.

33 From reviews of 'The Duchess of Malfi' in November 1892 and July 1971: 'At moments when the audience should have wept, it tittered' ('Nation'); 'Bosola confesses to having some conscience and kills his fellow villains. And the audience titters and goes home' ('Spectator'). I do not mean to imply that all Webster productions meet with titters and failure, but the record is not a happy one.

34 Published by John Tallis in 1850. Two other texts exist, the Lord Chamberlain's licensing copy (BM Add. MS 43031, vol. CLXVII) and Samuel Phelps's prompt-book in the Folger Library (Cat. No. D. b. 5–9). A careful study of Horne's revision is in Frank Wadsworth's Shorn and Abated: British Performances of 'The Duchess of Malfi','Theatre Survey', X (1969), pp. 89–104.

35 Eliot in Four Elizabethan Dramatists, op. cit., commented on a paradoxical similarity between Archer and Swinburne in that both are discussing the distinction between poetry and drama: 'Swinburne as well as Mr. Archer allows us to entertain the belief that the difference between modern drama and Elizabethan drama is represented by a gain of dramatic technique and the loss of poetry.' In this essay, however, originally written in 1924, we end with an inverted similarity between Archer and Eliot: the weakness of the Elizabethans is not their lack of realism 'but it is the same weakness of modern drama, it is the lack of a convention'.

36 G.K.Hunter, op.cit., p. 53.

37 Rupert Brooke, 'John Webster and the Elizabethan Drama' (1916), p. 161.

38 F.L.Lucas, op. cit., I, pp. 33–4.

39 As I first noted in 'John Webster and His Critics', p. 155. See also Edmund Wilson's observations in Notes at the End of a War, published originally in the 'New Yorker', 2 June 1945, p. 47.

40 Cf. Irving Ribner's 'Jacobean Tragedy: The Quest for Moral Order' (1962) and Robert Ornstein's 'The Moral Vision of Jacobean Tragedy' (1960).

41 Cf. Muriel Bradbrook's 'Themes and Conventions of Elizabethan Tragedy' (1935) and L.G.Salingar's Tourneur and the Tragedy of Revenge in 'The Age of Shakespeare', ed. Boris Ford (1956). Salingar's is an updating of a 'Scrutiny' article in 1938. In her recent 'John Webster' (see. n. 5 above) Bradbrook relates Webster's effort to embody incompatibles to his 'difficult position between the gentry and the citizens. Webster constantly recalls, delicately and indirectly, the struggle of such a divided self.' She suggests that Webster was also influenced by the baroque art of Inigo Jones, 'the movement and perspective of his masques', thus disagreeing in effect with Ralph Berry (see n. 43 below).

42 Cf. Travis Bogard's 'The Tragic Satire of John Webster' (1955), I.S.Ekeblad's The 'Impure Art' of John Webster, 'Review of English Studies', IX (August 1958), pp. 253– 67, and

J.L.Calderwood's The Duchess of Malfi: Styles of Ceremony, 'Essays in Criticism', XII (1962), pp. 133– 47.

43 Norman Rabkin (ed.), 'Twentieth Century Interpretations of "The Duchess of Malfi"', p. 8. Ralph Berry, in 'The Art of John Webster' (1972), sees in the dramatist's technique the principles of early baroque artistry, and further claims for many of Webster's characters an existential outlook of which Camus would approve. And we may hope that Maurice Charney has helped terminate Webster-Shakespeare comparisons with his Webster vs. Middleton, or the Shakespearean Yardstick in Jacobean Tragedy in 'English Renaissance Drama', ed. Standish Henning, Robert Kimbrough, and Richard Knowles (1976). Charney sensibly suggests that we centre on what is distinctive and un-Shakespearean in the Jacobean dramatists.

44 'John Webster', ed. Brian Morris (1970), Mermaid Critical Commentaries.

45 Una Ellis-Fermor, 'The Jacobean Drama' (1936), pp. 43–4.

46 Cf. Lois Potter's Realism versus Nightmare: Problems of Staging 'The Duchess of Malfi', 'The Triple Bond', ed. Joseph Price (1975), pp. 170–89. It is reassuring to note some positive reviews for a staging of 'The Duchess' at the Round House, London, in April 1981. For the 'Guardian', Adrian Noble's production preserved 'the Websterian balance between decadence and tenderness' (12 April 1981, p. 25).

47 William Empson, 'The Structure of Complex Words' (1951), p. 231.

Comments

1.
WEBSTER ON 'THE WHITE DEVIL'
1612

In something of a Declaration of Independence from the popular theatre, Webster in his Preface to 'The White Devil' defends his play after its failure at the Red Bull Theatre (see Introduction). From J.R.Brown's Revels edition of 'The White Devil' (1958), pp. 2–4.

TO THE READER

In publishing this tragedy, I do but challenge to myself that liberty, which other men have ta'en before me; not that I affect praise by it, for, *nos haec novimus esse nihil,*(1) only since 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: and that since that time I have noted, most of the people that come to that playhouse, resemble those ignorant asses (who visiting stationers' shops their use is not to inquire for good books, but new books) I present it to the general view with this confidence:

Nec rhoncos metues, maligniorum, Nec scombris tunicas, dabis molestas.(2)

If it be objected this is no true dramatic poem,(3) I shall easily confess it, —*non potes in nugas dicereplura meas: ipse ego quam dixi,*(4) —willingly, and not ignorantly, in this kind have I faulted: for should a man present to such an auditory, the most sententious tragedy that ever was written, observing all the critical laws, as height of style, and gravity of person, enrich it with the sententious Chorus, and as it were lif'n death, in the passionate and weighty *Nuntius:* yet after all this divine rapture, *O dura messorum ilia*,(5) the breath that comes from the uncapable multitude is able to poison it, and ere it be acted, let the author resolve to fix to every scene, this of Horace,

—*Haec hodie porcis comedenda relinques.*(6)

To those who report I was a long time in finishing this tragedy, I confess I do not write with a goose-quill, winged with two feathers, and if they will needs make it my fault, I must answer them that of Euripides to Alcestides, a tragic writer: Alcestides objecting that Euripides had only in three days composed three verses, whereas himself had written three hundred: 'Thou

tell'st truth,' (quoth he) 'but here's the difference, —thine shall only be read for three days, whereas mine shall continue three ages.'

Detraction is the sworn friend to ignorance: for mine own part, I have ever truly cherish'd my good opinion of other men's worthy labours, especially of that full and height'ned style of Master Chapman, the labour'd and understanding works of Master Jonson: the no less worthy composures of the both worthily excellent Master Beaumont, and Master Fletcher: and lastly (without wrong last to be named) the right happy and copious industry of Master Shakespeare, Master Dekker, and Master Heywood, wishing what I write may be read by their light: protesting, that, in the strength of mine own judgement, I know them so worthy, that though I rest silent in my own work, yet to most of theirs I dare (without flattery) fix that of Martial:

—*non rorunt, haec monumenta mori.*(7)

Notes

1 'We know these things are nothing' (Martial, XIII, 2).
2 'You [the poet's book] will not fear the sneers of the malicious, nor be used for wrapping mackerel' (Martial, IV, 86).
3 Cf. Jonson's earlier and similar defence in his Preface to 'Sejanus' (1605).
4 'You cannot say more against my trifles than I have said myself' (Martial, XIII, 2).
5 'O strong stomachs of harvesters' (Horace, 'Epodes', III, 4; an allusion to their love of garlic).
6 'What you leave will be for the pigs to eat today' (Horace, 'Epistles', I, vii, 19).
7 'These monuments do not know how to die' (Martial, X, ii, 12); comparing literature with ruined tombs).

2. WEBSTER'S VIEW OF 'THE DUCHESS OF MALFI' 1623

From Webster's dedication of his play, first staged c. 1614 by the King's Men to a response happily unlike that to 'The White Devil'. The play is dedicated to George Harding, Baron Berkeley, who also received Burton's dedication of the 'Anatomy of Melancholy' (1621). In J.R.Brown's Revels edition (1964), p. 3.

I am confident this work is not unworthy your Honour's perusal for by such poems as this, poets have kissed the hands of great princes, and drawn their gentle eyes to look down upon their sheets of paper, when the poets themselves were bound up in their winding sheets. The like courtesy from your Lordship, shall make you live in your grave, and laurel spring out of it; when the ignorant scorners of the Muses (that like worms in libraries seem to live only to destroy learning) shall wither, neglected and forgotten. This work and myself I humbly present to your approved censure, it being the utmost of my wishes, to have your honourable self my weighty and perspicuous comment: which grace so done me, shall ever be acknowledged.
By your Lordship's in all duty and observance,

John Webster

3.
THE DEDICATION OF 'THE DEVIL'S LAW CASE'
1623

Webster again is certain that the greatest of Caesars have happily approved lesser works than 'The Devil's Law Case', which was probably staged c. 1617–20. The play is dedicated to Sir Thomas Finch, grandson of Thomas Heneage, vice-chamberlain in the Queen's household. In 'The Complete Works of John Webster', ed. F.L.Lucas (1927), II, p. 235.

Sir, let it not appear strange that I do aspire to your patronage. Things that taste of any goodness love to be sheltered near goodness. Nor do I flatter in this, which I hate; only touch at the original copy of your virtues. Some of my other works, as 'The White Devil', 'The Duchess of Malfi', 'Guise'(1) and others, you have formerly seen. I present this humbly to kiss your hands and to find your allowance. Nor do I much doubt it, knowing the greatest of the Caesars have cheerfully entertained less poems than this; And had I thought it unworthy I had not enquired after so worthy a patronage. Yourself I understand to be all courtesy. I doubt not therefore of your acceptance, but resolve that my election is happy. For which favour done me I shall ever rest

Your Worship's humbly devoted
John Webster

Note

1 Although Webster's 'The Guise' is mentioned in Archer's playlist in 1656, it has since disappeared. It possibly followed 'The Duchess of Malfi' in Webster's career, and is a major loss in the Webster canon.

4.
THREE POEMS FOR 'THE DUCHESS'
1623

Thomas Middleton, William Rowley, and John Ford wrote the commendatory verses for the 1623 quarto of 'The Duchess of Malfi'. Middleton had collaborated with Webster many years earlier; Rowley and Ford would do so shortly. Interestingly, none of the three is mentioned in Webster's salute to his colleagues in the Preface to 'The White Devil' (see Introduction). From Brown's edition of 'The Duchess of Malfi' (1958), pp. 4–5.

In the just worth of that well-deserver, Mr. John Webster, and upon this masterpiece of tragedy.

In this thou imitat'st one rich, and wise, That sees his good deeds done before he dies; As he by works, thou by this work of fame, Hast well provided for thy living name. To trust to others' honourings is worth's crime— Thy monument is rais'd in thy life-time; And 'tis most just; for every worthy man Is his own marble, and his merit can Cut him to any figure and express More art than Death's cathedral palaces, Where royal ashes keep their court. Thy note Be ever plainness, 'tis the richest coat: Thy epitaph only the title be— Write, 'Duchess', that will fetch a tear for thee, For who e'er saw this duchess live, and die, That could get off under a bleeding eye?

In Tragaediam.

Ut lux ex tenebris ictu percussa Tonantis, Illa, ruina malis, claris fit vita poetis.(1)

Thomas Middletonus,
Poeta & Chron. Londinensis.

To his friend, Mr. John Webster, upon his 'Duchess of Malfi'.

I never saw thy duchess till the day That she was lively body'd in thy play;Howe'er she answer'd her low-rated love, Her brothers' anger did so fatal prove, Yet my opinion is, she might speak more, But never, in her life, so well before.

Wil. Rowley.

To the reader of the author, and his 'Duchess of Malfi'.

> Crown him a poet, whom nor Rome, nor Greece, Transcend in all theirs, for a masterpiece: In which, whiles words and matter change, and men Act one another, he, from whose clear pen They all took life, to memory hath lent A lasting fame, to raise his monument.
>
> *John Ford.*

Note

1 'To Tragedy: As light from darkness springs at the thunderer's stroke, /So she brings ruin to the wicked and life to the poet.' Middleton had been appointed City Chronologer in 1620.

5.
FITZJEFFREY'S PORTRAIT OF WEBSTER
1617

The one contemporary picture of Webster is furnished by Henry Fitzjeffrey of Lincoln's Inn in a satirical poem called Notes from Blackfriars, printed in 'Certain Elegies by Sundry Excellent Wits', although the chief wit seems to have been Fitzjeffrey. The author describes, one by one, types in an audience at Blackfriars, and it is possible that Webster, after his successful if temporary emancipation from the Red Bull, may have become a noticeable figure in the world of the Blackfriars Theatre. Thus Fitzjeffrey, as Robert Greene in 1592, may be reacting to another 'upstart crow' with pretensions to serious drama and criticism. We may note the imputation of slowness in writing, the same charge which had provoked Webster's response in the Preface to 'The White Devil' five years previously. The 'cartwright' term, given recent discoveries, surelyalludes to the business of Webster's father and brother. The Fitzjeffrey account is quoted by Lucas, 'Works', I, p. 55.

But hist! with him, crabbed Websterio, The playwright-cartwright (whether either!). Ho! No further. Look as you'd be looked into; Sit as ye would be read. Lord! who would know him? Was ever man so mangled with a poem? See how he draws his mouth awry of late, How he scrubs, wrings his wrists, scratches his pate. A midwife, help! By his brain's coitus Some centaur strange, some huge Bucephalus, Or Pallas, sure, engendered in his brain, Strike Vulcan, with thy hammer once again. This is the critic that of all the rest I'd not have view me, yet I fear him least. Here's not a word cursively I have writ But he'll industriously examine it, And in some twelve months hence, or thereabout, Set in a shameful sheet my errors out. But what care I? It will be so obscure That none shall understand him I am sure.(1)

Note

1 For Webster's differences with the lawyers at Lincoln's Inn, see M.C.Bradbrook's 'John Webster' (1980), pp. 167–9.

6.
AN ITALIAN ENVOY COMMENTS ON 'THE DUCHESS'
1618

Orazio Busino, a Venetian envoy in England, describes 'on another occasion' what seems to be Act III, scene iv of 'The Duchess of Malfi' and, assuming Busino could not distinguish Julia from the Duchess, the death of Julia in V, ii. It is a confused account and may be based on hearsay. Nevertheless, the account suggests a revival in 1618. FromBusino's 'Anglopotrida', a manuscript in the Marciana library in Venice and noted by E.E.Stoll in his 'John Webster' (1905), p. 29.

The English scoff at our religion as disgusting and merely superstitious; they never put on any public show whatever, be it tragedy or satire or comedy, into which they do not insert some Catholic churchman's vices and wickednesses, making mock and scorn of him, according to their taste, but to the dismay of good men. In fact, a Franciscan friar was seen by some of our countrymen introduced into a comedy as a wily character chock-full of different impieties, as given over to avarice as to lust. And the whole thing turned out to be a tragedy, for he had his head cut off on open stage. On another occasion they showed a cardinal in all his grandeur, in the formal robes appropriate to his station, splendid and rich, with his train in attendance, having an altar erected on the stage, where he pretended to make a prayer, organizing a procession; and then they produced him in public with a harlot on his knee. They showed him giving poison to one of his sisters, in a question of honour. Moreover he goes to war, first laying down his cardinal's habit on the altar, with the help of his chaplains, with great ceremoniousness; finally he has his sword bound on and dons the soldier's sash with so much panache you could not imagine it better done. And all this was acted in condemnation of the grandeur of the Church, which they despise and which in this kingdom they hate to the death.

From London
7 February 1618

7.
ABRAHAM WRIGHT'S COMMONPLACE BOOK
c. 1650

From 'Excerpta Quaedam per A.W.Adolescentem' (BM Add. MS 22068). Wright (1611–90), royalist clergyman and collector of play manuscripts, used a commonplace book as one means of instruction for his son James (1643–1713), later a theatre historian. Wright records and comments on excerpts from several dramatists, and his observations on Websterillustrate his awareness of the varied approaches by which a play may be judged. J.G.McManaway studies the MS in 'Studies in Honor of De Witt T.Starnes' (1967).

'The Duchess of Malfi'

A good play, especially for the plot at the latter end, otherwise plain. In his language he uses a little too much of scripture as in the first Act, speaking of a captain full of wounds, he says he [was] like the children of Ishmael [all in tents]. And which is against the laws of the scene, the business was two years a-doing, as may be perceived by the beginning of the third Act where Antonio has three children by the Duchess, when in the first Act he had but one [sic].

'The White Devil'

But an indifferent play to read, but for the presentments I believe good. The lines are too much rhyming. [Wright praises the scene of the murder of the Duke.]

'The Devil's Law Case'

But an indifferent play. The plot is intricate enough, but if rightly scanned will be found faulty by reason many passages do either not hang together, or if they do it is so sillily that no man can perceive them likely to be ever done.

8. SINGULAR PRAISE FROM SAMUEL SHEPPARD 1651

The solitary mid-century appreciation comes from Samuel Sheppard (c. 1624–55), royalist poet, satirist, and journalist. His epigram of 'The White Devil' serves mainly to prove that Webster had not disappeared and marks an early effort at rudimentary character sketches. 'The Fairy King' (1648–54), an unpublished manuscript in the Bodleian,includes a House of Eloquence wherein Webster has, oddly for the time, a better place than Jonson. The third of the 'noble tragedies' may be the lost 'Guise'; or it may be the tragi-comedy 'The Devil's Law Case'. From (a) 'Epigrams Theological, Philosophical, and. Romantic' (1651), p. 133; and (b) 'The Fairy King', quoted in Hyder E.Rollins, Samuel Sheppard and his Praise of Poets, 'Studies in Philology', XXIV (April 1927), p. 554.

(a) On Mr. Webster's Most Excellent Tragedy Called 'The White Devil'

We will no more admire Euripides, Nor praise the tragic strains of Sophocles; For why? Thou in this tragedy has framed All real worth that can in them be named. How lively are thy persons fitted, and How pretty are thy lines! Thy verses stand Like unto precious jewels set in gold And grace thy fluent prose. I once was told By one well skilled in Arts he thought thy play Was only worthy fame to bear away From all before it. Brachiano's ill— Murdering his Duchess hath by thy rare skill Made him renowned, Flamineo such another— The Devil's darling, murderer of his brother. His part—most strange! —given him to act by thee Doth gain him credit and not calumny. Vittorio Corombona, that famed whore, Desperate Lodovico weltering in his gore, Subtle Francisco—all of them shall be Gazed at as comets by posterity. And thou meantime with never-withering bays Shall crowned be by all that read thy lays.

(b) 'The Fairy King'

Webster the next, though not so much of note Nor's name attended with such noise and crowd, Yet by the Nine and by Apollo's vote, Whose groves of bay are for his head allowed— Most sacred spirit (some may say I dote), Of thy three noble tragedies be as

proud As great voluminous Jonson; thou shalt be Read longer and with more applause than he.

9. SAMUEL PEPYS ON WEBSTER 1661, 1662, 1666, 1668, 1669

Extracts from the 'Diary', ed. H.B.Wheatley (1893–9). Pepys proves happily inconsistent in his reactions to Webster. The 1662 production with Betterton had some success (see Introduction); 'Ianthe' was Mary Saunderson, later Mrs Betterton. 'The Roman Virgin' was an adaptation of 'Appius and Virginia' by Betterton in 1669.

2 October 1661: …we went to the Theatre, but coming late and sitting in an ill place I never had so little pleasure in a play in my life; yet it was the first time that ever I saw it— 'Victoria Corombona'. Methinks a very poor play, (ii, 114)
4 October 1661: Then Captain Ferrers and I to the Theatre, and there came too late; so we stayed and saw a bit of 'Victoria' which pleased me worse than it did the other day. So we stayed not to see it out, and drank a bottle or two of China ale. (ii, 116)

30 September 1662: …after dinner we took coach and to the Duke's playhouse, where we saw 'The Duchess of Malfi' well performed, but Betterton and Ianthe to perfection, (ii, 348)

2 November 1666: …and so home, I reading all the way to make end of the 'Bondman' (which, the oftener I read, the more I like) and begun 'The Duchess of Malfi' which seems a good play, (vi, 481)

6 November 1666: …after dinner down alone by water to Deptford, reading 'Duchess of Malfi' the play, which is pretty good, (vi, 53)

25 November 1668: …my wife and I to the Duke of York's house to see 'The Duchess of Malfi', a sorry play, and sat with little pleasure for fear of my wife's seeing me look about, and so I was uneasy all the while, though I desire and resolve never to give her trouble of that kind more, (viii, 165)

12 May 1669: …my wife and I to the Duke of York's playhouse, and there, in the side balcony over against themusic, did hear but not see, a new play, the first day acted, 'The Roman Virgin' an old play and but ordinary I thought; but the trouble of my eyes with the light of the candles did almost kill me. (viii, 322)

10.
LANGBAINE'S WEBSTER
1691

From 'An Account of The English Dramatick Poets. Or, Some Observations and Remarks on the Lives and Writings of all those that have Published either Comedies, Tragedies…in the English Tongue'.

Gerard Langbaine (1656–92) was a son of the Provost of Queen's College, Oxford, and spirited amateur of the drama. In the 'Account', Langbaine recorded titles of over a thousand plays and short accounts of over two hundred authors, providing a bedrock upon which later historians would build. Often happily cavalier in his approach (Thomas Southerne is 'An Author of whom I can give no further Account, than that he has two plays in print'), nevertheless his entry on Webster held good for over a century, and even F.L.Lucas was able to add only a few details by 1927.

John Webster
An Author that liv'd in the Reign of King James the First; and was in those Days accounted an Excellent Poet. He joyn'd with Decker, Marston, and Rowley, in several Plays; and was likewise Author of others, which have even in our Age gain'd Applause: As for Instance, Appius and Virginia, Dutchess of Malfy, and Vittoria Corrombona; but I shall speak of these in their Order.

Appius and Virginia, a Tragedy, printed (according to my Copy) 40. Lond. 1659. I suppose there may be an older Edition than mine; but this is that which was acted at the Duke's Theatre, and was alter'd (as I have heard by Mr. Carthwright) by Mr. Betterton: For the Plot, consult Livy, Florus, &c.

Devil's Law-case, or When Women go to Law, the Devil is full of business; a Tragi-comedy, approvedly well actedby Her Majesty's Servants; printed 40. London. 1623. and dedicated to Sir Thomas Finch. An Accident like that of Romelio's stabbing Contarino out of Malice, which turned to his preservation, is (if I mistake not) in Skenkius his Observations: At least I am sure, the like happened to Phaereus Jason, as you may see in Q. Val. Maximus, lib. 1. cap. 8. The like Story is related in Goulart's Histoires Admirables, tome 1. page 178.

Dutchess of Malfy, a Tragedy presented privately at the Black-fryars, and publickly at the Globe, by the King's Majesty's Servants; and I have seen it since acted at the Duke of York's Theatre. 'Twas first printed 40. Lond. 1623, and dedicated to the Right Honourable George, Lord Berkeley, and since reprinted 40. Lond. 1678. For the Plot, consult Bandello's Novels in

French, by Belleforest, N. 19. Beard's Theatre of God's Judgments, Book 2. Ch. 24. The like Story is related by Goulart, in his Histoires admirables de notre temps, p. 226.

White Devil, or the Tragedy of Paulo Giordano Ursini, Duke of Brachiano; with the Life and Death of Vittoria Corombona, the Famous Venetian Curtezan: acted by the Queen's Majesty's Servants, at the Phoenix in Drury-lane; printed 40. Lond. 1612. and since acted at the Theatre-Royal, and reprinted 1665.

Besides these plays, our Author has been assisted by Mr. Rowley in two Others; which because he had the least part in their Composition, I place to our Author; viz.

Cure for a Cuckold, a Comedy several times acted with great applause; printed 40. Lond. 1661.

Thracian Wonder, a Comical History several times acted with great applause; printed quarto Lond. 1661.

Mr. Philips has committed a great Mistake, in ascribing several Plays to our Author, and his Associate Mr. Decker; One of which belong to another Writer, whose Name is annexed, and the rest are Anonymous: As for Instance, The Noble Stranger, was writ by Lewis Sharpe; and The New Trick to cheat the Devil, Weakest goes to the wall, and Woman will have her will, to unknown Authors.

11.
ON THE FAILURE OF BIRTH CONTROL IN 'THE DUCHESS OF MALFI' AND 'HENRY VIII'
1698

An anonymous author admits that drama can succeed despite violation of the unities, but Webster and Shakespeare wanted art in two of their plays. From 'A Defence of Dramatick Poetry: Being a Review of Mr. Collier's View, London 1698'. Mr Collier is, of course, Jeremy Collier, whose 'Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage' appeared earlier in the same year. From 'The Shakespearean Allusion Book', ed. John Munro (1932), pp. 412–13.

'Tis true, I allow thus far, That it ought to be the chief care of the Poet, to confine himself into as narrow a Compass as he can, without any particular stint, in the two First Unities of Time and Place; for which end he must observe two Things. First upon occasion (suppose in such a Subject as Mackbeth) he ought to falsifie even History it self. For the Foundation of that Play in the Chronicles, was the Action of 25 Years: But in the Play we may suppose it begun and finish'd in one third of so many Months. Young Malcom and Donalbain, the Suns of Duncomb, are but Children at the Murder of their Father, and such they return with the Forces from England to revenge his Death: whereas in the true Historick Length they must have set out Children and return'd Men. Secondly, the length of Time, and distance of Place required in the Action, ought to be never pointed at, nor hinted in the play. For example, neither Malcomb nor Donalbain must tell us, how long they have been in England to raise those Forces, nor how long those Forces have been Marching into Scotland; not Mackbeth how far Schone and Dunsinane lay asunder. By this means the Audience, who come both willing and prepar'd to be deceiv'd, (populus vult decipi), and indulge their own Delusion, can pass over a considerable distance both of Time and Place unheeded and unminded, if they are not purposely thrown too openly in their way, to stumble at. Thus Hamlet, Julius Caesar, and those Historick Plays shall pass glibly; when the Audience shall be almost quite shockt at such a Play as Henry the 8th. or the Dutchess of Malfey. And why, because here's a Marriage and the Birth of a Child, possibly in two Acts; which pointsso directly to Ten Months length of time, that the Play has very little Air of Reality, and appears too much unnatural. In this case therefore 'tis the Art of the Poet to shew all the Peacocks Trains, but as little as possible of her Foot.

12. NAHUM TATE REWRITES 'THE WHITE DEVIL' 1707

Extracts from Act I, scene i and Act II, scene i of 'Injur'd Love, or, The Cruel Husband' by Nahum Tate (1652– 1715). Tate, appointed poet laureate in 1692 and the successful adapter of 'King Lear' in 1681, in this instance failed to see his unacknowledged plagiarism rewarded: the title-page describes 'Injur'd Love' as 'designed to be acted at the Theatre Royal'; no record exists that it ever was. Although many scenes follow in Websterian order, yet often with laundered lines, Tate introduces a major change for his post-Restoration intended audience: Vittoria, though high-spirited and attracted to Brachiano, remains faithful to Camillo and, as seen below, tells Brachiano not of her 'foolish idle dream' but of Isabella's virtue. Thus her 'innocence-resembling boldness', as Lamb later put it, becomes at the trial the boldness indeed of innocence. And at Brachiano's effort to destroy his marriage, audiences in an age of decorum were to have heard the earth groan. Among the missing are the scenes of the dirge and at the house of convertities, a dumb show (Camillo's death), disgressions, asides, and, in all, the atmosphere of 'The White Devil'.

[From Act I, scene i]

Enter Brachiano

Bra. Believe me I could wish Time would stand still, And never end this Interview-Let me into your Bosom, dearest Charmer, Pour out instead of Eloquence, my Passion? Loose me not Madam, for if you forgoe Me, I'm lost indeed. Vitt. Sir in way of Charity I wish you Heart's ease. Bra. You are a sweet Physician. Vitt. Sure deadly Cruelties in Ladies, Are as to Doctors many Funerals; It takes away their Credit. Bra. Excellent Creature, We call the Cruel, Fair; what Name for you, That are so Merciful? Zan. See now they Close. Fla. I apprehend you; When Principals engage, 'tis scandalous For Seconds to be Idle. Vitt. You call'd me your Physician, and I make This Visit to prescribe your Grief a Cure; A certain speedy Cure. Bra. That's double Charity. Vitt. 'Tis Resolutely at once to quench and stifle This hopeless Passion. Bra. That's too rough a Method, And suits not with my Constitution. These Minutes are too Precious— Vitt. Sir, I know their Value, And shall improve 'em to our mutual Benefit; 'Twas I that purpos'd in this Interview, We now are wander'd to the brink of Ruin, And must turn short, or perish. Bra. Where's the Danger? Vitt. It was my Lot To be high born and bred, and then reduc'd To Fortune's Ebb, and (to compleat my Woes) Made Hymen's Martyr, Wedded to Aversion; Yet still the name of Husband's Venerable; My Vow was Sacred, and let Hope

forsake me When first— Bra. Hold; 'twas no Match, And I pronounce it void; unnatural Contracts Dissolve themselves. [Enter Cornelia observing them at a Distance. Vitt. Yours was at least Religious; You have a Princess, Sir, the Pride of Nature, And Paradise of Virtues, worth your Prizing If Monarch of the World; and Sir, this Charmer, Your Lover, and almost your Worshipper. Cor. My fears are fall'n upon me! Oh my Heart, My Son, their Pandar? Vitt. Beware my Lord! Orphans and Widows cries, Defrauded Labour's starving Sighs are loud; But none, to draw down Vengeance from Above, No! None like the Complaints of injur'd Love. Bra. You have both said and answer'd, call'd her Wife And mine. Vitt. So are your Dukedoms, Sir—I own these Beauties Mean as my Fortune, yet above the Purchase Of Crowns and Scepters; brighter too than they, While deck't with Innocence—that Jewel lost The Mountain Nymypth that dresses at a Fountain Her inn'cent Head with Daisies, would outshine me Blazing with diamonds. [Cornelia comes near to 'em. Bra. Content, and who shall dare to call it a Crime? Vitt. Were Censure aw'd, what Troops can you Command, What Guards to silence the Accuser here/ The rev'ling gaudy Scene in time will change. Furies succeed the flatt'ring Cupid's fled, And howling Honor haunt the guilty Bed. [From Act II, scene i] Isa. Had I, who am the Sufferer, Been the offender, this submissive Posture Might plead a Pardon and prevail— Behold, my Lord, upon her humble Knees Your injured Wife suing for Reconcilement! Return to me, and to your self return; Shake off this sullen Cloud and shine again The dazzling Wonder of the World; return, If not to me, to Fame, Content, and Quiet. Bra. Content and Quiet! 'Twas for that I leftMy haunted House and see! The Goblin follows me. I cry ye mercy; you are Flesh and Blood, Your Business, Assignation with some Gallant, That must supply our Discontinuance.... Bra. Your hand I'le kiss. This is the last Ceremony of my Love, Henceforth I'le never Bed with you; be this my Witness, This Wedding Ring; I'le ne'er more sleep with you— And this Divorce shall be as duly kept, As if the Judge had doom'd it; Fare you well, Our Sleeps are sever'd. Isa. Forbid it, the sweet Union Of all Things sacred; why the listning Stars [A Noise under Ground. Will start at this! The Stars! Earth groan'd to hear it. Is it firm Ground we tread— Or the Convulsion here— [laying her Hand at her Breast. Bra. Let not thy Love Make thee an Unbeliever, this my Vow Shall never on my Life be disannul'd By Recantation, let thy Brother Rage Beyond a Lapland Tempest, a Sea Fight, My Vow is fix'd. Isa. O my Winding Sheet! For I shall need thee shortly, dear my Lord, Let me hear once more, what I wou'd not hear; never? Bra. Never. [Lightning and Thunder.

13. LEWIS THEOBALD REWRITES 'THE DUCHESS OF MALFI' 1733

Extracts from (a) the Preface to 'The Fatal Secret' (London, 1735), by Lewis Theobald (1688–1744), staged at Covent Garden on 4 and 6 April 1733; and (b) 'The Fatal Secret',IV, i and V, iv (the torture of the Duchess and the last scene).

Theobald, Shakespearean editor, translator, playwright, and Pope's original King of Dullness, provides us in his Preface with our one piece of neo-classic criticism of Webster, and in the play itself with a triumphantly wrong-headed example of imposing the classic unities and decorous rhetoric upon a dark play never meant for such illumination. With the regularization of the plot (no children are born, among other changes), scenes are lost or rewritten, simplicity replaces complexity, and the Duchess is allowed to live. Webster's play, in the process, dies.

(a) The Importunity of some Friends whom I could no means disobey has drawn from me the Publication of the Piece at a Disadvantage…. Such was its fate…that, appearing at a Season when the Weather was warm and the Town in a political Ferment, it was praised and forsaken; and I had the choice Comfort left me of hearing everybody wonder that it was not supported…. Though I called it 'The Fatal Secret' I had no Intention of disguising from the Public that (as my friend has confessed for me in the Prologue) John Webster had preceded me, above a hundred years ago, in the same story. I have retained the names of the Characters in his 'Duchess of Malfi', adopted as much of his Tale as I conceived for my Purpose, and as much of his Writings as I could turn to account without giving into too obsolete a Diction. If I have borrowed Webster's Matter freely I have taken it up on fair and open Credit, and hope I have repaid the Principal with Interest. I have nowhere spared myself out, of Indolence; but have often engrafted his Thoughts and Language because I was conscious I could not so well supply them from my own Fund. When I first read his scenes I found something singularly engaging in the Passions, a mixture of the Masculine and the Tender which induced me to think of modernizing them. Another Motive was that the distress of the Tale was not fictitious but founded upon an authentic Record….

As to our countryman Webster, though I am to confess Obligations to him I am not obliged to be blind to all his Faults. He is not without his incidents of Horror, almost as extravagant as those of the Spaniard [Lope de Vega]. He had a strong and impetuous Genius, but withal a most wild and undigested one; he sometimes conceived nobly but did not always express with

Clearness; and if he now and then soars handsomely he as often rises into regionsof bombast; his Conceptions were so eccentric that we are not to wonder why we cannot trace him. As for Rules, he either knew them not or thought them too servile a Restraint. Hence it is he skips over Years and Kingdoms with an equal Liberty. It must be [admitted] the Unities were very sparingly observed at the Time in which he wrote; however, when any Poet travels too fast that the Imagination of his Spectators cannot keep pace with him, Probability is put quite out of Breath. Nor has he been less licentious in another Respect: He makes mention of Galileo and Tasso, neither of whom were born till near half a Century after the Duchess of Malfi was murdered.

Having been so free in characterizing the old Bard, I may reasonably expect an inquisition into my own Performance. But I am willing to be beforehand with Censurers and allow all the Faults they shall think fit to impute to it. What I have done is submitted to Examination and I'll spare myself the Odium of marking it out. If the piece has any Praise it is, in my opinion, that it had Pow'r to draw tears from fair Eyes. The Poet who writes for the Stage, should principally aim at pleasing his female Judges; for the best Proof whether he can draw a distress is how far their Nature and Virtues are touched with his Portrait.

(b) Ferd. Where are you?

Dutch. Here, sir.

Ferd. This Darkness uits, and pictures out your Fortune. From what a Blaze of Glory, where you sate Inshrin'd a Wonder, has your hapless Conduct Sunk you in Shade! It fares with erring Greatness, As with that Vapour call'd a shooting Star; Which, bright in Passage, yet, once fall'n, becomes Unlustrous as the Earth with which it mixes.

Dutch. Alas! I feel my Fault, and find this Gloom, Like to the sudden Darkness of a Storm, Shew me my Danger. —But, my gracious Brother, Make not my willful Trespass your Discomfort: But let the Affliction, as the Punishment, Fall singly on my self.

Ferd. —It cannot be: You were the Sun, the Splendour of our House, And I, like the foolish Indian, gaz'd Almost with Adoration of your Brightness,Am chill'd, and darken'd, by your fading Ray. My lustre is impaired; my Titles sullied; And the rude Finger of Contempt shall mark me As Brother to the wanton, widow'd Malfy, Who married with her Groom.

Dutch. Sure, that Reproach Is of the Bitt'rest.

Ferd. Come, no more of this, I mean to seal my Peace: Approach yet nearer: Where is your Hand?

Dutch. Here, Sir; but let me Kneel, And print a Kiss on yours of true Affection.

Ferd. Hold, you're too lib'ral in these Acts of Fondness. Know, that your son this Night arrives from Naples; And, with the Morrow's Dawn, I'm for Calabria. Here, wear this Ring; and keep it as the Warrant, To judge how Time, and your repentant Sorrows May help to work our farther Reconcilement.

Dutch. Now blessings on your heart!

Ferd. Lights for the Dutchess—

[Duke Ferdinand flings away; and enter Urbino and Servants with Lights.

Dutch. Dear Pledge of Peace! More welcome to me far Than Pardon to a Wretch condemn'd: —Start, eyes! Leap from thy Seat at once, unfeeling Sense; And instant Frenzy take up all my Brain! What horrid Magick's bound in this dread Circle, To shake me thus with Fears? —It is the Ring I gave Antonio, when he parted from me.

Urb. It is; and he returns it, firm to Promise, 'Tis the last Legacy his falt'ring Tongue Bequeathed you at his Death.

Dutch. Distraction! Horror! Thy words are Keen as Daggers to my Heart; His Death! —O dear Antonio, art thou dead? Has all my pious Care then been in vain, To snatch thee from these fell Barbarians' Fury? There is not betwixt Heav'n and Earth one I stay for now. — Say, wilt thou seek these Tygers And in a Sister's Name implore one Grant, Which I'll account as Mercy?

Urb. What's your Boon?

Dutch. That they would bind me to his lifeless Trunk, 'Til I'm a Corse like him.

[Ferdinand soliloquizes after the Duchess has been led offstage to her presumed death.]

Ferd. O sacred Innocence, that sweetly sleeps On Turtles' Feathers; whilst a guilty Conscience Makes all our Slumbers worse than fevrish Dreams, When only monstrous Forms disturb the Brain. 'Tis a black Register, wherein are writ All our good Deeds and bad: A Perspective, That shows us Hell more horrid than Divines, Or Poets, know to paint it. —Hark, what Noise? The Screams of Women, ever and anon, Ring thro my Ears; shrill as the Cries they send, When the stern Murth'er takes 'em unprepar'd. — A thousand fancied Horrors shake my Soul, E'er since I dictated this Deed of Slaughter. There is no written Evidence to proclaim My Order; and must coward Apprehension Give it a Tongue? —The Element of Water Drops from the Clouds, and sinks into the Earth; But Blood flies upward, and bedews the Heav'ns. — The Wolf shall find her Grave, and scrape it up, Not to devour the Corse, but to discover The horrid Murther. —Shall I let her live? What says Revenge to that? Or what says Nature? Resentment whispers Treason still to Virtue, And, to repent us of a blameful Purpose, Is manly pious Sorrow. —She shall live.

[As the Duke is going out, enter Bosola.

Where is my Sister?

Bos. She's what you would have her.

Ferd. I say, where is she? I would see my Sister.

Bos. Set wide these folding Doors. —There fix your Eye.

[The scene draws, and discovers the Dutchess in her Coffin. The Cord lying upon it.

Ferd. Ha! Thou too fatally obedient Traytor! Is she then dead? Is Mercy sprung too late? Cover her Face; my Eyes begin to dazzle.

[In the final scene, at the Royal Monument, Ferdinand and the Cardinal fatally wound one another, and the Cardinal, not Bosola, speaks of dying 'In a mist; I know not how'. Antonio, Bosola, Pescara, Delio, the young Duke of Malfi, and others arrive at the monument-tomb to hear the Cardinal's last words and to learn that the body of the Duchess is not in the tomb. Bosola has 'cheated/Her credulous Brother with a waxen Image:/That beauteous Waxen Image so admir'd/Framed by Vincentio di Laureola/When her Grace married first'. Bosola promises to produce the hidden corpse as an act of clemency and leaves the stage. Then shouts are heard.]

Pesc. What Shouts of Joy are these, that rend the Air? Again, a nearer sound. —Oh my Liege, By my best Hopes, my Royal Mistress lives: Oh, virtuous Bosola!

Ant. —Amazing transport!

[Enter Bosola, follow'd by the Dutchess, Cariola, and Attendants in Mourning. The Young Duke runs, and embraces her.

Duke. My Mother! O, what Words can speak my Joy? Let my Tears answer for my Heart's big Pleasure. What Miracle has giv'n you back to Life?

Dutch. This Man, appointed to my Death, preserv'd me.

[To Bosola, who kneels.

Duke. Oh think, what Honours can requite Thy Virtue.

Dutch. Preserv'd me from a Fate, had giv'n me Peace, But now I'm doom'd the Slave to lasting Sorrows: A mourning Widow, past the Help of Comfort, For poor Antonio's loss.

Bos. Even there I'm pleas'd To lend a Dawn of Hope. That fatal Ring, Which you suppos'd sent from your murther'd Lord, Came from his Hand t'assure you of his Safety. A Pilgrim brought it; gave it to your Servants; But, intercepted by your cruel Brother, 'Twas used in Aggravation of your Tortures.

Duke. Be still the Messenger of farther Comfort, And heighten, if thou canst, thy countless Merit Ten thousand Ducats crown the virtuous Man, Who brings Antonio to us.

Ant. O my Princess! Look up, and once more bless the lost Antonio.

[Throws down his Pilgrim's Staff, and opens his frock.

Dutch. 'Tis He! —O Ecstasy, too strong for Sense! Joy crowds about my Heart in such Excess, The Torrent quite o'er-bears me.

Ant. Excellent Creature! Cleave to my heart. O Bosola! My Brother! Still wear that Title: and divide in all My Wealth; all Joys, but One, the Sum of All.

Dutch. They now no more shall part us.

Ant. —Never, never: Our Foes are past a Fear. —My dearest Prince, Accept my duteous Knee.

Duke. O rise, Antonio: My Father and my Friend! —I am too young To hold the veins of Pow'r: Be thou my Guide; And teach the State to ven'rate more thy Virtues. What other Pilgrim's that?

Ant. 'Tis Delio, Sir, The willing Foll'wer of my wayward Fortunes.

Duke. That Service shall command him to Reward. Come, Madam, to the Palace, still your own: Where let the Triumphs of your Nuptials banish The Mem'ry of all Griefs.

Dutch. Some Tears are due T'appease th' offended Pow'rs. Had I not breath'd A guilty Vow, my Brothers had not bled. Till Penitence shall erase that Debt of Sorrow, I must not yield to Joy.

Pesc. My gracious Mistress, Permit your old, your faithful Slave to kneel, And gratulate your strange and unhop'd Rescue. That Vow but led, to what the Powr's thought fit, Where Guilt provok'd, the vengeful Shaft is lit. Thro' Means, beyond what Reason's Eye foresees, Wise Providence asserts its own Decrees: Making its Judgments, and Rewards, declare, That Virtue still is Heav'n's peculiar Care.

14.
CHARLES LAMB: WEBSTER RECLAIMED
1808

Charles Lamb (1775–1834) remains the critic who first looked closely at Webster, at the plays as literature, thus removing the dramatist from the possession of the booksellers and anthologists. His 'Specimens of English Dramatic Poets who lived about the time of Shakespeare' (1808) was understandably not a popular success; yet it had the effect of revitalizing the dramatists through Lamb's enthusiastic, impressionistic appreciation. We are taken on a tour of the writers, and are shown 'scenes of passion, often of deepest quality', and in Webster's case, this scenic route proved salutary. Critics have since noted Lamb's debt to the antiquarians and anthologists; T.S.Eliot would later fault Lamb for setting in motion the fatal idea that to the word-lover, drama and poetry are two separate things (Four Elizabethan Dramatists, 'Selected Essays', 1934). Indeed, Swinburne and Gosse refer to Webster's 'poems'. Nevertheless, we remain in Lamb's debt: Dyce's edition would follow afterwards, and Lamb's critical observations, often in a single sentence, would provide arguing points for critics into the twentieth century.

Lamb quotes first from 'The Devil's Law Case' (I, i; II, i; V, iv), and from 'Appius and Virginia' (IV, i). From 'The Duchess of Malfi' he includes the Duchess-Antonio wedding scene (I, ii); two fables (the Salmon, III, v, and Reputation, Love, and Death, III, ii); the Duchess's 'Fie upon this single life' (III, ii); and the torture and death scenes of the Duchess (IV, i, ii). He records, from 'The White Devil', Vittoria's trial scene (III, i); Marcello's death (V, ii); Cornelia's grief and dirge (V, ii); and various sententiae, noting on occasions Webster's debt to Shakespeare. The notes following are on (a) the arraignment of Vittoria, (b) Cornelia's dirge, and (c) the tortures of the Duchess. From the 'Specimens' in 'The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb', ed. E.V.Lucas (1904), IV, pp. 190, 179.

(a) This White Devil of Italy sets off a bad cause so speciously, and pleads with such an innocence-resembling boldness, that we seem to see that matchless beauty of her face which inspires such gay confidence into her; andare ready to expect, when she has done her pleadings, that her very judges, her accusers, the grave ambassadors who sit as spectators, and all the court, will rise and make proffer to defend her in spite of the utmost conviction of her guilt; as the shepherds

in 'Don Quixote' make proffer to follow the beautiful shepherdess Marcela 'without reaping any profit out of her manifest resolution made there in their hearing'.

> So sweet and lovely does she make the shame, Which, like a canker in the fragrant rose,
> Does spot the beauty of her budding name!

(b) I never saw anything like this Dirge, except the Ditty which reminds Ferdinand of his drowned father in 'The Tempest'. As that is of the water, watery; so this is of the earth, earthy. Both have that intenseness of feeling, which seems to resolve itself into the elements which it contemplates.

(c) All the several parts of the dreadful apparatus with which the Duchess's death is ushered in, are not more remote from the conceptions of ordinary vengeance, than the strange character of suffering which they seem to bring upon their victims is beyond the imagination of ordinary poets. As they are not like inflictions *of this life,* so her language seems not *of this world.* She has lived among horrors till she is become 'native and endowed unto that element'. She speaks the dialect of despair, her tongue has a snatch of Tartarus and the souls in bale. —What are 'Luke's iron crown', the brazen bull of Perillus, Procrustes' bed, to the waxen images which counterfeit death, to the wild masque of madmen, the tomb-maker, the bellman, the living person's dirge, the mortification by degrees! To move a horror skillfully, to touch a soul to the quick, to lay upon fear as much as it can bear, to wean and weary a life till it is ready to drop, and then step in with mortal instruments to take its last forfeit— this only a Webster can do. Writers of an inferior genius may 'upon horror's head horrors accumulate', but they cannot do this. They mistake quantity for quality, they 'terrify babes with painted devils', but they know not how a soul is capable of being moved; their terrors want dignity, their affrightments are without decorum.

15.
REACTIONS TO LAMB
1809

Extracts from (a) the 'Monthly Review', LVIII (1809), p. 356; (b) the 'Annual Review, and History of Literature', VII (1809), p. 568.

The latter is of especial interest as it may be the work of Coleridge: Lamb, in a letter to him on 7 June 1809, wrote, 'I am also obliged, I believe, for a review in the "Annual", am I not?' ('Letters', ed. E.V.Lucas (1935), III, p. 73). Coleridge, as best we know, is silent on the matter. Although the review is favourable, ending with high praise for Lamb and his 'kindred power' with the Elizabethans, the reviewer anticipates Archer in 1893 as to Webster's handling of horror.

(a) The notes before us, indeed, have nothing very remarkable, except the style, which is formally abrupt, and elaborately quaint. Some of the most studied attempts to display excessive feeling we had noted for animadversion but the task is unnecessary. We will not even say a word of comparison made between the *Dirge* in the White Devil, and the *Ditty* in Shakespeare's Tempest, 'the one of the earth, earthy, the other of the water, watery: both have that *intenseness of feeling* which seems *to resolve itself into the elements* which it contemplates';—nor will we discuss 'the dilaceration of the spirit and the extenteration of the inmost mind' sustained by the light-heeled Calantha, or the 'dignified terms and *decorous* affrightments' which have *bewilderd* Mr. Lamb into such unqualified and exaggerated admiration of the Duchess of Malfy. Such phrases may possibly have been adopted for their resemblance to the theatrical language of those times, and unquestionably the resemblance exists: —but the language imitated is that of Pistol and Holofernes, or the mock-heroics of the play-king in Hamlet….

(b) The Duchess of Malfy is one of those plays which Mr. Lamb admires most warmly, yet surely it contains nothing half so fine as the praise he has misbestowed upon it…. There is something as absurd as it is monstrous in what is thus commended. The brother of the duchess, to punish her for marrying an inferior, torments her with masks andmockeries of cruelty, waxen images representing the dead bodies of her husband and children are exhibited; madmen are turned loose to dance before her to mad music; a coffin, cords, and bell are produced; the grave-digger comes in: and lastly she is strangled. Is this moving a horror skilfully! The surgeon may as well be called a great master of the passions, for giving pain when he cuts to the quick, as a dramatist who can employ such means as these.

16.
NATHAN DRAKE RANKS THE ELIZABETHANS
1817

Nathan Drake (1766–1836), essayist and physician, places Webster after Ford in 'Shakespeare and His Times', pp. 564–5. Drake, as others, credits Webster with a Shakespearean reach which exceeded his grasp.

'If there be a class of writers of which, above all others,' observes Mr. Gilchrist, 'England may be proud, it is of those, for the stage, coeval with and immediately succeeding Shakespeare'; an observation which the names alone of Fletcher and Massinger would sufficiently justify; but when to these we are enabled to add such fellow artists as Ford, Webster, Middleton, etc. we are astonished that even the talents of Shakespeare should, for so long a period, have eclipsed their fame....

John Webster, whom we shall place immediately after Ford, as next, perhaps, in talent, resembled him in a predilection for the terrible and strange, but with a cast of character still more lawless and impetuous.... The tragedies, especially 'The White Devil,' or 'Vittoria Corombona,' first printed in 1612, and 'The Dutchesse of Malfy,' in 1623, are very striking, though, in many respects, very eccentric proofs of dramatic vigour.

It appears however, from the dedication to 'The White Devil,' that our author was well acquainted with the laws of the ancient drama, and that 'willingly, not ignorantly,' he adopted the Romantic or Shakespearean form.

[Quotes the last paragraph from Webster's dedication to 'The White Devil'.]

The silence which modesty dictated to Webster, ought long ago to have been broken by a declaration, that he was fully entitled to a niche in the same temple of Fame with those whom he has here commemorated. In his pictures of wretchedness and despair, he has introduced touches of expression which curdle the very blood with terror, and make the hair stand erect. Of this, the death of 'The Dutchesse of Malfy', with all its preparatory horrors, is a most distinguishing proof. The fifth act of his 'Vittoria Corombona' shows, also, with what occasional skill he could imbibe the imagination of Shakspeare, particularly where its features seem to breathe a more than earthly wildness. The danger, however, which almost certainly attends such an aspiration after, what may be called inimitable excellence, Webster has not escaped; for where his master moves free and etherial, an interpreter for other worlds, he but too often seems laboriously striving to break from terrestial fetters; and, when liberated, he is, not unfrequently, 'an extravagant and erring spirit.' Yet, with all their faults, his tragedies are, most assuredly, stamped with, and consecrated by, the seal of genius.

17.
'BLACKWOOD'S' REVIEWS WEBSTER
1818

John Wilson (1785–1854), frequent contributor to 'Blackwood's' as 'Christopher North' and Professor of Moral Philosophy at Edinburgh, looks backward in his Webster summation to neo-classic standards and, on the character of Vittoria, ahead to Kingsley's unfortunate strictures. Extracts from Analytical Essays on the Early English Dramatists, 'Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine', III (March and August 1818), pp. 656–62, 557–62. Wilson writes here as 'H.M.' and is reprinted chiefly for the historical record.

…none of the predecessors of Shakespeare must be thought along with him, when he appears before us like Prometheus moulding the figures of men, and breathing into them the animation, and all the passions of life.

The same may be said of almost all his illustrious contemporaries. Few of them ever have conceived a consistent character, and given a perfect drawing and coloring of it; they have rarely indeed inspired us with such belief in the existence of their personages, as we often feel towards those of Shakespeare, and which makes us actually unhappy unless we can fully understand every thing about them, so like are they to living men. And if we wonder at his mighty genius, when we compare his best plays with all that went before him, we shall perhaps wonder still more when we compare them with the finest works of those whose genius he himself inspired, and who flourished during the same splendid era of dramatic poetry.

This will hold time with the works of all the great dramatists of that time, to which the public mind has of late years been directed—the Fletchers, the Jonsons, the Massingers, and the Fords. Still more so, is it the case with those many other men of power which that age, fruitful in great souls, produced. The plans of their dramas are irregular and confused, —Their characters often wildly distorted, —and an air of imperfection and incompleteness hangs in general over the whole composition; —so that the attention is wearied out, —the interest flags, —and we rather hurry on, than are hurried, to the horrors of the final catastrophe.

To none of our early dramatists do these observations more forcibly apply than to Webster. Some single scenes are to be found in his works inferior in power of passion to nothing in the whole range of the drama. He was a man of a truly original genius, and seems to have felt strong pleasure in the strange and fantastic horrors that rose up from the dark abyss of his imagination. The vices and the crimes which he delights to paint, all partake of an extragavance which, nevertheless, makes them impressive and terrible, and in the retribution and the

punishment there is a character of corresponding wildness. But our sympathies, suddenly awakened, are allowed as suddenly to subside. There is nothing of what Wordsworth calls 'a mighty stream of tendency' in the events of his dramas, nor, in our opinion, is there a single character that clearly and boldly stands out before us like a picture. This being the case, we shall lay before our readers merely an outline of the story of this his best play (Duchess of Malfy) and a few of its finest passages....

Hitherto the chief merit of the drama has consisted in the delineation of the mutual affection and attachment of the Duchess and her husband. We have purposely taken no notice of much low and worthless matter in the subordinate conduct of the play. There is something very touching andtrue to nature in the warmth, yet purity of feeling, that characterizes the Duchess; and knowing from the first that fiendish machinations are directed against her peace, we all along consider her as an interesting object, upon whom there is destined to fall some fatal calamity. In the fourth act the tragedy assumes a very different complexion, and the peculiar genius of Webster bursts forth into strange, wild, fantastic, and terrible grandeur. The Duchess is sitting in solitary imprisonment, and by the command of her savage brother Ferdinand, in utter darkness....

[Quotes from IV, i and ii.]

The interest of the drama thus expires with the fourth act. In the fifth, there is some powerful painting of the distraction of Ferdinand, whom remorse has driven into madness, — and a murderous confusion of death among the guilty actors; but the extracts already given are sufficient to enable our readers to estimate the general character of the tragedy, and our limits prevent us from offering any further criticism.

This play ['The White Devil'] is so disjointed in its action, —the incidents are so capricious and so involved, — and there is, throughout, such a mixture of the horrible and the absurd— the comic and the tragic—the pathetic and the ludicrous, —that we find it impossible, within our narrow limits, to give any thing like a complete analysis of it. All we shall attempt, therefore, will be to present our readers with such specimens as may serve to characterize the peculiar genius of Webster.

[The plot of 'The White Devil' is summarized.]

Brachiano on his death-bed is struck with a raving madness, — and Lodovico and Gaspero having been admitted to him in the habit of Capuchins, with crucifix and hallowed candle, throw off their disguise, and insult his dying agonies with reproaches and curses.... The whole of this scene is distinguished by that sort of wild, grotesque, fantastical, and extravagant horror in which the strength of Webster lies— and which, in spite of ourselves, strikes us with the same feelings that are produced in real life by some strange and unnatural murder.

Previous to this catastrophe, Flamineo, the wicked son of Cornelia, had, in a fit of demonaical passion, slain his brother Marcello. Few scenes in dramatic poetry surpass the following in pathos:

[Quotes at length from V, iv, Cornelia's mad scene] ...

There is great power in this drama, and even much fine poetry, but, on the whole, it shocks rather than agitates, and the passion is rather painful than tragical. There are, in truth, some scenes that altogether revolt and disgust, —and mean, abandoned, and unprincipled characters occupy too much of our attention throughout the action of the play. There is but little imagination breathed over the passions of the prime agents, who exhibit themselves in the bare

deformity of evil, —and scene follows scene of shameless profligacy, unredeemed either by great intellectual energy, or occasional burstings of moral sensibilities. The character of Vittoria Corombona, on which the chief interest of the drama depends, is sketched with great spirit and freedom, —but though true enough to nature, and startling by her beauty and wickedness, we feel that she is not fit to be the chief personage of tragedy, which ought ever to deal only with great passions, and with great events. There is, however, a sort of fascination about this 'White Devil of Venice,' which accompanies her to the fatal end of her career, —and something like admiration towards her is awakened by the dauntless intrepidity of her death.

I will not in my death shed one base tear, Or if look pale, for want of blood, not fear.

18.
CAMPBELL REFUTES LAMB
1819

Thomas Campbell (1777–1844), poet, critic, and translator, had Scott's original encouragement in what became a seven-volume anthology covering several centuries of English poets. Although he borrows from Lamb's Webster selection, he somewhat satirically finds Lamb's judgment faulty. So, of course, is Campbell's accuracy: Webster's 'advertisement' ('To the Reader') belongs to 'The White Devil'. From 'Specimens of the English Poets', III, pp. 215–33.

Langbaine only informs us of this writer, that he was clerk of St. Andrew's parish, Holborn, and was esteemed by his contemporaries. He wrote his two comedies, the Thracian Wonder, and the Cure for a Cuckold, in conjunction with Rowley, Dekker, and Marston. Few other pieces, entirely his own, are Vittoria Corombona, the tragedy of Appius, the Devil's Law Case, and the Duchess of Malfy. From the advertisement prefixed to his Duchess of Malfy, the piece seems not to have been successful in the representation. The author says, 'that it wanted that which is the only grace and setting out of a tragedy, a full and understanding auditory.' The auditory, it may be suspected, were not quite so much struck with the beauty of Webster's horrors, as Mr. Lamb seems to have been in writing the notes to his Specimens of our old Dramatic Poetry. In the same preface Webster deprives himself of the only apology that could be offered for his absurdities as a dramatist, by acknowledging that he wrote slowly, a circumstance in which he modestly compares himself to Euripides. In his tragedy of the Duchess of Malfy, the duchess is married and delivered of several children in the course of five acts.

[Quotes Vittoria's dream, the murder of the Duchess, and the echo scene.]

19.
HAZLITT ON WEBSTER
1819, 1826

William Hazlitt (1778–1830), critic and essayist, lectured on the Elizabethan dramatists at the Surrey Institute in November and December of 1819, after consultation with Lamb earlier in the year. Prepared at Winterslow Hut in Wiltshire, the lectures sweep through the dramatists in a style which, as Hazlitt says, 'flows like a river, and overspreads its banks'. Of interest is Hazlitt's preference for 'The White Devil' rather than 'The Duchess of Malfi', unlike Lamb, and, indeed, the eighteenth century.

Extracts from (a) 'Lectures Chiefly on the Dramatic Literature of the Age of Elizabeth' ('Works of William Hazlitt', ed. P.P.Howe (1931), VI, pp. 240–6) and (b) Hazlitt's reactions in 1826 to the efforts of Byron asdramatist in 'The Plain Speaker', On Reason and Imaginations' ('Works', XII, pp. 53–4).

(a) Webster would, I think, be a greater dramatic genius than Deckar, if he had the same originality; and perhaps is so, even without it. His White Devil and Duchess of Malfy, upon the whole perhaps, come the nearest to Shakespear of any thing we have upon record; the only drawback to them, the only shade of imputation that can be thrown upon them, by which they lose some color, is, that they are too like Shakespear, and often direct imitations of him, both in general conception and individual expression. So far, there is nobody else whom it would be either so difficult or so desirable to imitate; but it would have been still better, if all his characters had been entirely his own, had stood out as much from others, resting only on their own naked merits…. Deckar, has, I think, more truth of character, more instinctive depth of sentiment, more of the unconscious simplicity of nature; but he does not, out of his own stores, clothe his subject with the same richness of imagination, or the same glowing colors of language. Deckar excels in giving expression to certain habitual, deeply-rooted feelings, which remain pretty much the same in all circumstances, the simple uncompounded elements of nature and passion: —Webster gives more scope to their various combinations and changeable aspects, brings them into dramatic play by contrast and comparison, flings them into a state of fusion by a kindled fancy, makes them describe a wider arc of oscillation from the impulse of unbridled passion, and carries both terror and pity to a more painful and sometimes unwarrantable excess. Deckar is contented with the historic picture of suffering; Webster goes on to suggest humble imaginings. In a word, Deckar is more like Chaucer or Boccaccio; as Webster's mind appears to have been cast more in the mould of Shakespear's, as well naturally

as from studious emulation. The Bellafront and Vittoria Corombona of these two excellent writers, shew their different powers and turn of mind. The one is all softness; the other 'all fire and air.'... This White Devil (as she is called) is made fair as the leprosy, dazzling as the lightning. She is dressed like a bride in her wrongs and her revenge. In the trial-scene in particular, her sudden indignant answers to the questions that are asked her, startle the hearers. No thing can be imagined finer than the whole conduct and conception of this scene, than her scorn of her accusers and of herself. The sincerity of her sense of guilttriumphs over the hypocrisy of their affected and official contempt for it....
In the closing scene with her cold blooded assassins, Lodovico and Gasparo, she speaks daggers, and might almost be supposed to exorcise the murdering field out of these true devils. Every word probes to the quick. The whole scene is the sublime of contempt and indifference.

[Quotes V, vi, 188–233.]

Such are some of the *terrible graces* of the obscure, forgotten Webster. There are other parts of this play of a less violent, more subdued, and, if it were possible, even deeper character; such is the declaration of divorce pronounced by Brachiano on his wife:

> Your hand I'll kiss: This is the latest ceremony of my love; I'll never more live with you; &c.

which is in the manner of, and equal to, Deckar's finest things: —and others, in a quite different style of fanciful poetry and bewildered passion; such as the lamentation of Cornelia, his mother, for the death of Marcello, and the parting scene of Brachiano, which would be as fine as Shakespear, if they were not in a great measure borrowed from his inexhaustible store.

[Quotes further Cornelia's reaction of Marcello's death, V, ii, 27–69; and Brachiano's awareness of his poisoning V, iii, 12–41.]

The Duchess of Malfy is not, in my judgment, quite so spirited or effectual a performance as the White Devil. But it is distinguishable by the same kind of beauties, clad in the same terrors. I do not know but the occasional strokes of passion are even profounder and more Shakespearian; but the story is more laboured, and the horror is accumulated to an overpowering and unsupportable height. However appalling to the imagination and finely done, the scenes of the madhouse to which the Duchess is condemned with a view to unsettle her reason, and the interview between her and her brother, where he gives her the supposed dead hand of her husband, exceed, to my thinking, the just bounds of poetry and of tragedy. At least, the merit is of a kind, which, however great, we wish to be rare. A series of such exhibitions obtruded upon the senses or the imagination must tend to stupify and harden, rather than to exalt the fancy or meliorate the heart. I speak thisunder correction; but I hope the objection is a venial common-place. In a different style altogether are the directions she gives about her children in her last struggles;

> I prythee, look thou giv'st my little boy Some syrop for his cold, and let the girl Say her pray'rs ere she sleep. Now what death you please—

and her last word, 'Mercy,' which she recovers just strength enough to pronounce; her proud answer to her tormentors, who taunt her with her degradation and misery— 'But I am Duchess of Malfy still,' —as if the heart rose up, like a serpent coiled, to resent the indignities put upon it, and being struck at, struck again; and the staggering reflection her brother makes on her death, 'Cover her face: my eyes dazzle: she died young!' Bosola replies:

> I think not so; her infelicity Seem'd to have years too many. *Ferdinand:* She and I were twins: And should I die this instant, I had liv'd Her time to a minute.

This is not the bandying of idle words and rhetorical common-places, but the writhing and conflict, and the supreme colloquy of man's nature with itself!

(b) Modern tragedy, in particular, is no longer like a vessel making the voyage of life, and tossed about by the winds and waves of passion, but is converted into a handsomely constructed steam-boat, that is moved by the sole expansive power of words. Lord Byron has launched several of these ventures lately (if ventures they may be called) and may continue in the same strain as long as he pleases. We have not now a number of *dramatis personae* affected by particular incidents and speaking according to their feelings, or as the occasion suggests, but each mounting the rostrum, and delivering his opinion on fate, fortune, and the entire consummation of things. The individual is not of sufficient importance to occupy his own thoughts or the thoughts of others. The poet fills his page with *grandes pensees.* He covers the face of nature with the beauty of his sentiments and the brilliancy of his paradoxes. We have the subtleties of the head, instead of the workings of the heart.... As an instance of the opposite style ofdramatic dialogue, in which the persons speak for themselves and to one another, I will give, by way of illustration, a passage from an old tragedy, in which a brother has just caused his sister to be put to a violent death.

Bosola. Fix your eye here.
Ferdinand. Constantly.
Bosola. Do you not weep? Other sins only speak; nurther shrieks out: The element of water moistens the earth; But blood flies upwards and bedews the heavens.
Ferdinand. Cover her face: mine eyes dazzle; she died young.
Bosola. I think not so: her infelicity seemed to have years to many.
Ferdinand. She and I were twins: And should I die this instance, I had lived Her time to a minute.

'Duchess of Malfy', Act IV, Scene 2.

How fine is the constancy with which he first fixes his eye on the dead body, with a forced courage, and then, as his resolution wavers, how natural is his turning his face away, and the reflection that strikes him on her youth and beauty and untimely death, and the thought that they were twins, and his measuring his life by hers up to the present period, as if all that was to come of it were nothing! I would fain ask whether there is not in this contemplation of the interval that separates the beginning from the end of life, of a life too so varied from good to ill, and of the pitiable termination of which the person speaking has been the wilful and guilty cause, enough to 'give the mind pause?' Are not the struggles of the will with untoward events and

the adverse passions of others as interesting and instructive in the representation as reflections on the mutability of fortune or inevitableness of destiny, as the passions of men in general? The tragic Muse does not merely utter muffled sounds: but we see the paleness on the cheek, and the life-blood gushing from the heart! The interest we take in our own lives, in our successes or disappointments, and the *home* feelings that arise out of these, when well described, are the clearest and truest mirror in which we can see the image of human nature.

20. LORD BYRON RESISTS BUT READS 1820, 1821

'I deny that the English have hitherto had a drama at all,' wrote Byron to Shelley on 4 April 1821 ('Works of Lord Byron: Letters and Journals', ed. R.E.Prothero (1898– 1901), V, p. 268). Yet Byron was obviously acquainted with one of 'those turbid mountebanks'.

Extracts (a) from letters to John Murray on 4 January 1821 and 6 July 1820 ('Letters', V, pp. 217, 47); (b) from a conversation with Thomas Medwin in 1821 ('Medwin's Conversations with Lord Byron', ed. E.J.Lovell, Jr (1966), p. 139).

(a) …do not judge me [his 'Marino Faliero'] by your mad old dramatists, which is like drinking Usquebaugh and then proving a fountain: yet after all, I suppose that you do not mean that spirit is a nobler element than a clear spring bubbling in the sun; and this I take to be the difference between the Greeks and those turbid mountebanks—always excepting B.Jonson, who was a Scholar and a Classic.

…I have been the cause of a great conjugal scrape here [the Guiccioli affair] which is now before the *Pope* (seriously I assure you) and what the decision of his Sanctity will be no one can predict. It would be odd that having left England for one Woman (Vittoria Carambana the 'White Devil' to wit) I should have to quit Italy for another.

(b) 'I have just been reading Lamb's Specimens,' said he, 'and am surprised to find in the extracts from the old dramatists so many ideas that I had thought exclusively my own. Here is a passage, for instance, from "The Duchess of Malfy," astonishingly like one in my "Don Juan"…. These Specimens of Lamb's I never saw till today. I am taxed with being a plagiarist when I am least conscious of being one; but I am very scrupulous. I own, when I have a good idea, how I came into possession of it.'

21.
SHELLEY'S TASTES
c. 1820

From 'The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley' by Thomas Medwin, ed. H.B.Forman (1913), p. 256. One tends to believe the gossipy Medwin, in this case. In 'The Cenci', written in 1819, the year of Hazlitt's lectures, Shelley, as does Webster in 'The White Devil', pictures a guilty woman at a trial who none the less holds our sympathy through her courage.

Among English plays he was a great admirer of 'The Duchess of Malfy', and thought the dungeon scene, where she takes her executioners for allegorical personages, of Torture and Murder, or some such grim personifications as equal to anything in Shakespeare, indeed he was continually reading the Old Dramatists—Middleton, and Webster, Ford and Massinger, and Beaumont and Fletcher, were the mines from which he drew the pure and vigorous style that so highly distinguished 'The Cenci'.

22.
'BARRY CORNWALL' ON WEBSTER
1823

Bryan Proctor (1787–1874) as 'Barry Cornwall' was a popular minor poet and pseudo-Elizabethan dramatist. His Gothic Webster appeared in a review of Knowles's 'Virginius' and Beddoes's 'The Bride's Tragedy' in the 'Edinburgh Review', XXXVII (February 1823), pp. 197–8.

Webster was altogether of a different stamp [from Chapman, 'a grave and solid writer' who 'did not possess much skill in tragedy']. He was an unequal writer, full of a gloomy power, but with touches of profound sentiment and the deepest pathos. His imagination rioted upon the grave, and frenzy and murder and 'tortured melancholy' were in his dreams. A common calamity was beneath him, and ordinary vengeance was too trivial for his muse. His pen distilledhouse, and picked his brain to outvie the horrors of both. His visions were not of Heaven, nor of the air; but they came, dusky and earthy, from the tomb, and the madhouse emptied its cells to do justice to the closing of his fearful stories. There are few passages, except in Shakespeare, which have so deep a sentiment as the following. Ferdinand, Duke of Calabria, has caused his sister (the Duchess of Malfy) to be murdered by Bosola, his creature. They are standing by the dead body.

[Quotes IV, 'Fix your eye here' to 'I had lived her time to a minute.']

We would not be supposed to assert that the writer was without his faults. On the contrary, he had several: he had too gloomy a brain, a distempered taste; he was sometimes harsh, and sometimes dull; but he had great sentiment and, not unfrequently, great vigor of expression. He was like Marlowe with this difference—that as Marlowe's imagination was soaring, so, on the other hand, was his penetrating and profound. The one rose to the stars, the other plunged to the centre; equally distant from the bare commonplaces of the earth, they sought for thoughts and images in clouds and depths, and arrived, by different means, to the same great end.

23.
DYCE'S INTRODUCTION TO WEBSTER
1830

Alexander Dyce (1798–1869), the first editor of John Webster, served briefly as a curate in Cornwall and Suffolk, having entered the church to avoid the East India Company career planned for him by his father. However, he abandoned the profession in 1825, settling in London to devote himself to literature. The best of the early Victorian editors of the Elizabethan dramatists, Dyce culminated his scrupulous work with his edition of Shakespeare in 1857, although it is his James Shirley edition of 1833 which remains of major importance. His Webster served as the standard text for almost a century. Excerpts from Dyce's introduction to 'The Works of John Webster, Now First Collected with Some Account of the Author', London (1830), pp. v-xlll.

Seldom has the biographer greater cause to lament the deficiency of materials for his task than where engaged on the life of any of our early dramatists. Among that illustrious band John Webster occupies a distinguished place; and yet so little do we know concerning him, that the present essay must consist almost entirely of an account of his different productions, and of an attempt to show that he was not the author of certain prose pieces which have been attributed to his pen….

In 1607 were given to the press 'The History of Sir Thomas Wyatt', 'Westward Ho', and 'Northward Ho', —all which were composed by Webster, in alliance with Dekker.

That the authors did not superintend the printing of 'Sir Thomas Wyatt' there can be no doubt, as the text is miserably corrupt; and I am inclined to believe that it is merely made up from fragments of the drama called 'Lady Jane', already mentioned in the quotation from Henslowe's papers.

'Westward Ho' and 'Northward Ho' (the former of which was on the stage in 1605, see vol iii, p. 3) are full of life and bristle, and exhibit as curious a picture of the manners and customs of the time as we shall anywhere find. Though by no means pure, they are comparatively little stained by that grossness from which none of our old comedies are entirely free. In them the worst things are always called by the worst names: the licentious and the debauched always speak most strictly in character; and the rake, the bawd, and the courtezan are as odious in representation as they would be if actually present. But the public taste has now reached the pitch of refinement, and such coarseness is tolerated in our theatres no more. Perhaps,

however, the language of the stage is purified in proportion as our morals have deteriorated, and we dread the mention of the vices which we are not ashamed to practise; which our forefathers, under the sway of a less fastidious but a more energetic principle of virtue, were careless of words and only considerate of actions.

In 1612, the 'White Devil' was printed, a play of extraordinary power. The plot, though somewhat confused, is eminently interesting, and the action though abounding, perhaps a little overcharged, with fearful circumstances, is such as the imagination willingly receives as credible. What genius was required to conceive, what skill to embody, so forcible, so various, and so consistent a character as Vittoria! We shall not easily find, in the whole range of our ancient drama, a more effective scene than in that in which she is arraigned for the murder of her husband. It is truth itself. Brachiano's throwing down his seat, and then, with impatient ostentation, leaving it behindhim on his departure; the pleader's Latin exordium; the jesting interruption of the culprit; the overbearing in-temperance of the Cardinal; the prompt and unconquerable spirit of Vittoria—altogether unite in impressing the mind with a picture as strong and diversified as any which could be received from an actual transaction of real life. Mr. Lamb, in his 'Specimens of English Dramatic Poets' (the most tasteful selection ever made from any set of writers), p. 229, speaks of the 'innocence-resembling boldness of Vittoria.' For my own part, I admire the dexterity with which Webster has discriminated between that simple confidence in their own integrity which characterises the innocent under the imputation of any great offence, and the forced and practised presence of mind which the hardened criminal may bring to the place of accusation. Vittoria stands before her judges, alive to all the terrors of her situation, relying on the quickness of her wit, conscious of the influence of her beauty, and not without a certain sense of protection, in case of extreme need, from the interposition of Brachiano. She surprises by the readiness of her replies, but never, in a single instance, has the author ascribed to her one word which was likely to have fallen from an innocent person under similar circumstances. Vittoria is undaunted, but it is by effort. Her intrepidity has none of the calmness which naturally attends the person who knows that his own plain tale can set down his adversary; but it is the high-wrought and exaggerated boldness of a resolute spirit, — a determination to outface facts, to brave the evidence she cannot refute, and to act the martyr though convicted as a culprit. Scattered throughout the play are passages of exquisite poetic beauty, which, once read by any person of taste and feeling, can never be forgotten.

...In 1623 were published 'The Dutchess of Malfi' (which must have been acted as early as 1619, see vol. i p. 170) and 'The Devil's Law-case'. Of the latter of these plays the plot is disagreeable, and not a little improbable, but portions of the serious scenes are not unworthy of Webster. Few dramas possess a deeper interest in their progress, and are more affecting in their conclusion, than in 'The Dutchess of Malfi'. The passion of the Dutchess for Antonio, a subject most difficult to treat, is managed with intimate delicacy; and, in a situation at great peril for the author, she condescends without being degraded, and declares the affection with which her dependant had inspired her without losing anything of dignity and respect. Her attachment is justified by the excellence of its object; and she seems only to exercise the privilege of exalted rank in raising merit from obscurity. We sympathise fromthe first moment in the loves of the Dutchess and Antonio, as we would in a long standing domestic affection, and we mourn the more over the misery that attends them because we feel that happiness was

the natural and legitimate fruit of so pure and rational attachment. It is the wedded friendship of middle life transplanted to cheer the cold and glittering solitude of a court: it flourishes but for a short space in that unaccustomed sphere, and then is violently rooted out. How pathetic is the scene where they part never to meet again! And how beautiful and touching is her exclamation!

> the birds that live i' th' field, On the wild benefit of nature, live Happier than we, for they may choose their mates, And carol their sweet pleasure to the spring!

The sufferings and death of the imprisoned Dutchess haunt the mind like painful realities; but it is the less necessary to dwell on them here, as no part of our author's writings is so well known to the generality of readers as the extraordinary scenes wherein they are depicted. In such scenes, Webster was on his own ground. His imagination had a fond familiarity with objects of awe and fear. The silence of the sepulchre, the sculptures of marble monuments, the knolling of church bells, the ceremenets of the corpse, and yew that roots itself in dead men's graves, are the illustrations that most readily present themselves to his imagination. If he speaks of love, and of the force of human passion, his language is, —

> This is flesh and blood, sir; 'Tis not the figure cut in alabaster, Kneels at my husband's tomb—

and when we are told that

> Glories, like glow-worms, afar off shine bright But look'd to near, have neither heat nor light,

we almost feel satisfied that the glow-worm which Webster saw, and which suggested the reflection, was sparkling on the green sod of some lowly grave....

'Appius and Virginia' was printed in 1654. When I consider its simplicity, its deep pathos, its unobtrusive beauties, its singleness of plot, and the easy unimpeded march of its story, I cannot but suspect that there are readers who will prefer this drama to any other of our author's production.

24. GEORGE DARLEY WRITES OF WEBSTER 1831

From a letter to Allan Cunningham from George Darley (1795–1846), poet, mathematician, and editor of Beaumont and Fletcher. Darley was an often caustic critic of the dramatists of his day.

From 'The Life and Letters of George Darley', ed. C.C.Abbott (1928, repr. 1967), pp. 97–8.

Indeed, I often say what a superfluous set of people we are…to write poetry when there is so much of it in print unread. Ay, and of better than the pick of us could execute, if our brains were beaten together. Have you ever read Webster? Why, my good sir! there are passages in 'Vittoria Corombona' almost worthy of the Angel Gabriel. Don't mind what Campbell says—his criticism upon this author is nearly as strong evidence against his own poetical genius as the 'Pleasures of Hope' is in favour of it. There are passages in that play every whit as good as—No! deuce take it, that would be too bad! —Well, Shakespeare and Milton excepted, there is poetry in Webster superior to that of any other English author. If you have not 'The White Devil' by heart, get it.

25.
THE ‘GENTLEMAN’S MAGAZINE’ CONSIDERS WEBSTER
1833

An anonymous critic reacted to Shakespeare and his contemporaries in a series in the ‘Gentleman’s Magazine’. The writer emphasizes the terrors of Webster, as did many in the earlier nineteenth century, but manages a mid-Victorian attitude in 1833. From The Early English Drama, No. III, (a) May 1833, pp. 414–17; and (b) June 1833, pp. 489–92.

(a) What has been observed of our greatest dramatic poet, holds true no less of many of his rivals or followers. We may sometimes lament the imperfection of their judgement, and we may wonder at the capriciousness or perverseness of their taste; but their learning was equal to their purpose. Their object was to produce a strong and effective emotion on minds not very sensitive or highly cultivated. They did not want the fine evolutions, and the skilful and learned movements of the fencer, but the strong cuts and thrusts of the swordsman….

The Author [Webster], whose works we now possess for the first time collected, and beautifully and accurately edited, although his name is not in honour with general readers, must rank very high among his brethren of the sock and buskin in the comparative scale of merit. Inferior to Jonson in richness of comic humour, to Fletcher in gracefulness of fancy and delicacy of sentiment; and far below Massinger in the conduct of his plot and the consistency of his characters; he far, very far, surpasses them all in the depth of his pathos, his tragic power, and his command over the sublime, the terrible and the affecting. His fancy seems to indulge itself in forming every fantastic variety of sorrow, and of following up the miseries of the broken heart even beyond the sanctuary of the grave. He loves to dwell (old Burton perhaps would have said, had he drawn Webster’s characters) among scutcheons, and hour-glasses, and coffins, and all the painful emblems of mortality; an epitaph to him is a joke, and a sexton is his bedfellow and friend. He has a dagger more often in his hand than a knife, and he carries a phial of poison in his pocket…. His genius, like the yew-tree which he describes, flourishes best where its roots are in the tomb; but he possesses considerable variety of reflection, and the elegance of imagery. His verse is often harmonious, and his language elevated and select. Of his comic power we do not think very highly; and the judicious formation of his plots and arrangement of incidents do not seem to have been much studied by him. To enable him to produce a great effect, all lesser advantages give way; and, like

Rembrandt, he throws every thing else into shadow, to bring out his principal incident with greater force and luster.

The first play we meet with is 'The White Devil, or Vittoria Corombona,' a drama exhibiting very unusual trains of thought, deep reflections, and poetical illustrations, but with a plot disjointed and not well conceived, and with characters rather seen in parts and fragments, than consistently and clearly developed. The story does not move by any series of well-directed incidents to its conclusion;to which must be added the disgusting representation of a brother being a pander to his sister's dishonour, as in the person of Flamineo, although we are not unaware how much this terrific instance of the most utter depravation is in keeping with the exhibition of the other ungoverned and tempestuous passions that sweep over the scenes of this dark and bloodstained tragedy. His absurd quarrel with his sister, and the murder of Bracciano by throwing poison in his hat, must be considered blemishes in the general merit of the play. There is no doubt of the great tragic power which Webster possessed; but he has much abused the fertility of his genius. Terror is too strongly exerted; there is a strange unnatural mixture of levity and wretchedness, scorn and sorrow, fiendish laughter, that seems to feed upon the despair and hopelessness of the defenceless and desolate heart. The defence of Victoria [sic] at her trial has been highly praised. The present Editor says— 'that in the whole range of our ancient drama, we shall not find a more effective scene.' To this opinion we cannot agree. We consider (to take the first example that strikes us) the defence of Othello before the Senate far more true to nature, more effective, and more masterly in its delineations and design. Too much of time and words, in Victoria's arraignment, is lost per accidenta. The trial is too long coming to the point. Matters irrelevant and useless are introduced; the unity of our interest is disturbed; nor can we agree in the Editor's ideas of the fine consistency of Victoria's behaviour. When she is commended for her 'innocence-resembling boldness,' we cannot but recollect her parting imprecation:

> 'Die with those pills in your most cursed maw should bring you health! a while you sit o' the bench Let your own spittle choke you.'

To our mind the most powerful and the most pathetic scene, is the interview between the guilty and hardened husband Bracciano and his injured and most gentle Isabella. We confess, as we read, the pages were wet with our tears….

[The writer quotes briefly from the passage, and reprints Cornelia's dirge, which has 'all the hopeless distress, the vague, bewildered terrified sorrow of Ophelia.']

(b) 'The Duchess of Malfi' is the play in which Webster's tragic powers expand to their full height. To produce the effect which he desired, the most violent contrasts are called out, and the most thrilling emotions excited. Themind is held in fearful suspense; and many varying passions and hopes and fears, are pouring into it from every quarter. Yet we must not suppose that mere tragic incident was called in to harass or agonize the mind, unsupported by other essential constituents of poetry. Webster has been called, how justly we know not, the Spagnolet of poetry. Of Spagnolet's painting we have seen not much; but we should conceive that he did not possess that just and natural feeling, which led Webster to soften the savage grandeur of his terrific scenes, and wring the mind, when overcharged, away from their deep impressions, to less affecting subjects, and give it an interval to recruit its exhausted powers.

Spagnolet brought to his spectors of death, and his forms of pain, and his instruments of torture, in all their single and terrible nakedness, before us: but Webster has great resources behind, when terror has exhausted his magazines of wrath, and emptied his vials of affliction. There are in this play reflections of the robust colours, beautiful and varied imagery, thoughts of fine selection, sweet touching pathos, elegant and playful sports of the imagination, and poetical images of high refinement. All the scenes, the opening one especially between the Duchess and Antonio, are charming in taste and feeling. How delicate and womanly is the Duchess' disclosure of her love!

> I thank you, gentle love; And 'cause you shall not come to me in debt, Bring now my steward, here upon your lips I sign your Quietus est. This you should have begged.
> Oh! let me shroud my blushes in your bosom, Since 'tis the treasury of all my secrets!

How sweetly expressed is her complaint, where in the commencement of her distress she says,

> The birds that live i' the field On the wild benefit of nature, live Happier than we; for they may chose their mates, And carol their sweet pleasure to the spring.

This is the very spirit of Fletcher. The main defects in the tragedy, are the want of a properly progressive interest, arising from a succession of well-arranged events; the artifice of imposing on the Duchess by figures of her husband and her children (as if dead) is childish and disgusting; and the outrageous and fiendish fury of her brothers all through the play is revolting toour conceptions of justice and natural propriety. But the head and front of the offending is in the fourth act. Who but Webster would have thought of opening to us the interior of Bedlam; and letting loose his lunatics on the stage? Was there ever such a stage direction as the following — 'Here the dance, consisting of eight madmen, with *music anserable* there unto.' Then follows the murder of the Duchess on the stage, the nurse, and all the children, till we sup full of horrors; but the real interest of the play has ended in the 4th act. All after is but coarse and common butchery; —and poetical justice is secured only by means violent and improbable.

'Devil's Law Case'—This play has little in it agreeable to the fancy, or moving to the passions. It abounds with wicked devices, great crimes, and worse confessions. The duel scene between Contarino and Ercole, Mr. Lamb calls 'the model of a well-managed and gentlemanlike difference.' Which is true, except that it is somewhat too romantic. The character of Romelio is one of that fiendish and desperate wickedness, as only can excite horror: a description of character peculiar to some few writers of the early stage; and passing far beyond the sober and legitimate purposes of tragic imitation. In the noble reflections of human feeling and character in Shakespeare, cruelty is softened, if not disguised, by its union with the greater and more elevated passions; it is the tool which ambition and pride use to attain their ends if necessary. Macbeth is cruel, as he is ambitious, but in the plays of Webster and others, cruelty forms the very staple of the degraded and loathsome beings in whom it harbors; it is the base ferocity of the assassin, the minister of hate and avarice and selfishness, without compunction, without shame, without remorse, without dignity….

26.
A HISTORIAN'S WEBSTER
1839

Extract from 'Introduction to the Literature of Europe in the Fifteenth, Sixteenth, and Seventeenth Centuries' by Henry Hallam (1777–1859), English historian and author of 'The Constitutional History of England' (1827). Websterreceives a brief separate treatment in Hallam's chief effort as literary critic. From the 1873 edition, pp. 122–4.

Webster belongs to the first part of the reign of James. He possessed very considerable powers and ought to be ranked, I think, the next below Ford. With less of poetic grace than Shirley, he had incomparably more vigour, with less of nature and simplicity than Heywood, he had a more elevated genius, and a bolder pencil. But the deep sorrows and terrors of tragedy were peculiarly his province. 'His imagination,' says his last editor, 'had a fond familiarity with objects of awe and fear. The silence of the sepulchre, the sculptures of marble monuments, the knolling of church bells, the cerements of the corpse, the yew that roots itself in dead men's graves are the illustrations that most readily present themselves to his imagination.' I think this well written sentence a little one sided, and hardly doing justice to the variety of Webster's power; but in fact he was as deeply tainted as any of his contemporaries with the savage taste of the Italian school, and in the 'Duchess of Malfy' scarcely leaves enough on the stage to bury the dead.

This is the most celebrated of Webster's dramas. The story is taken from Bandello, and has all that accumulation of wickedness and horror which the Italian novelists perversely described, and our tragedians as perversely imitated. But the scenes are wrought up with skill, and produce a strong impression. Webster has a superiority in delineating character above many of the old dramatists; he is seldom extravagant beyond the limits of conceivable nature, we find the guilt, or even the atrocity, of human passions, but not that incarnation of evil spirits which some more ordinary dramatists loved to exhibit. In the character of the Duchess of Malfy herself there wants neither originality or skill of management, and I do not know that any dramatist after Shakespeare would have succeeded better in the difficult scene where she discloses her love to an inferior. There is perhaps a little failure in dignity and delicacy, especially towards the close; but the Duchess of Malfy is not drawn as an Isabella or a Portia; she is a love-sick widow, virtuous and true-hearted, but more intended for our sympathy than our reverence.

'The White Devil' or 'Vittoria Corombona', is not much inferior in language and spirit to the 'Duchess of Malfy'; but the plot is more confused, less interesting, and worseconducted.

Mr. Dyce, the late editor of Webster, praises the dramatic vigour of the part of Vittoria, but justly differs from Lamb, who speaks of 'the innocence resembling boldness' she displays in the trial scene. It is rather a delineation of desperate guilt, losing in a counterfeited audacity all that could seduce or conciliate the tribunal. Webster's other plays are less striking; in 'Appius and Virginia' he has done perhaps better than any one who has attempted a subject not on the whole very promising for tragedy; several of the scenes are dramatic and effective; the language, as is usually the case with Webster, is written so as to display an actor's talents, and he has followed the received history sufficiently to abstain from any excess of slaughter at the close. Webster is not without comic wit, as well as a power of imagination; his plays have lately met with an editor of taste enough to admire his beauties, and not very over-partial in estimating them.

27.
THE STUDENTS' WEBSTER
1848

Extract from 'A Complete Manual of English Literature' by Thomas B.Shaw (1813–62), a Cambridge graduate who became Lector of English at the University of St Petersburg. His 'student manuals' were popular and went through several editions in spite of occasional errors, such as the availability of 'The Guise'. From the New York 1870 edition, pp. 163–4.

But perhaps the most powerful and original genius among the Shakesperian dramatists of the second order is John Webster. His terrible and funereal muse was Death; his wild imagination revelled in images and sentiments which breathe, as it were, the odor of the charnel: his plays are full of pictures recalling with fantastic variety all associations of the weakness and futility of human hope and interest, and dark questionings of our future destinies. His literary physiognomy has something of that dark, bitter, and woeful expression which makes us thrill in the portraits of Dante. The number of his known works is very small: the most celebrated among them is the tragedy ofthe 'Duchess of Malfy' (1623); but others are not inferior to that strange piece in intensity of feeling and savage grimness of plot and treatment. Besides the above we possess 'Guise or the Massacre of Trana', in which the St Barthelemy is, of course the main action, the 'Devil's Law Case', the 'White Devil', founded on the crimes and sufferings of 'Vittoria Corombona', 'Appius and Virginia'; and thus we see that in the majority of his subjects he worked by preference in themes which offered a congenial field for his portraiture of the darker passions and of the moral torture of their victims. In selecting such revolting themes as abounded in the black annals of medieval Italy, Webster followed the peculiar bent of his great and morbid genius; in the treatment of these subjects we found a strange mixture of the horrible with the pathetic. In his language there is an extraordinary union of complexity and simplicity: he loves to draw his illustrations not only from 'skulls, graves, and epitaphs,' but also from the most attractive and picturesque objects in nature, and his occasional intermingling of the deepest and most innocent emotion and of the most exquisite touches of natural beauty produces the effect of the daisy springing up amid the festering mould of a graveyard. Like many of his contemporaries, he knew the secret of expressing the highest passion through the most familiar images; and the dirges and funeral songs which he has frequently introduced into his pieces possess, as Charles Lamb eloquently expresses it that intensity of feeling which seems to resolve itself into the very elements they contemplate. His dramas are generally composed in mingled prose and verse; and it is possible

that he may have had a share in the production of many other pieces besides those I have enumerated above.

28. 'THE DUCHESS OF MALFI' ON STAGE 1850

On 20 November 1850, Samuel Phelps (1804–78), producer-director at the Sadler's Wells Theatre, presented 'The Duchess of Malfi' as adapted by Richard Hengist (Henry) Horne (1803–84), poet and dramatist, marking the first stage performance of 'The Duchess' in over a century. Although the production received several favourable reviews, we may also note the first appearance of condemnatory comment from dramatic critics, marking a divided response that has accompanied Webster productions well into the later twentieth century. Nevertheless, the 1850 revival provided the actress Isabella Glyn (1823–89) with one of her most famous roles and inspired subsequent productions for several years to come. Glyn herself portrayed the Duchess for eighteen years; both Alice Marriot and, in America, Emma Waller also had success in the role. Yet from the mid-nineteenth century, Webster on the stage has often created more difficulty than Webster in the study.

Horne's adaptation is considered in the Introduction to this volume. Excerpts from (a) Horne's Preface, Prologue, and Ferdinand's last moments from the published version of his play, 1850; (b) 'The Times', London, 21 November 1850, p. 8; (c) the 'Athenaeum', 23 November 1850, pp. 1225–6; (d) the 'Spectator', 23 November 1850, p. 1113; (e) George Henry Lewes's review in the 'Leader', 30 November 1850, reprinted in his 'Dramatic Essays', ed. William Archer and Robert Lowe (1896), pp. 118–22. Lewes (1817–78), journalist, philosophical essayist, and dramatic critic, antedates the approach of his own later editor, William Archer.

(a) When I first conceived the idea of bringing 'The Duchess of Malfi' upon the modern stage, I thought that a considerable reduction of its length, by the erasure of a number of unnecessary scenes, and a little revision of certain objectionable passages, would be nearly sufficient. But, before I had got half through the first act, the futility of such a course became sufficiently apparent. Still I hope to accomplish the task, with due reverence to a work which I considered the most powerful of any tragedy not in Shakespeare, and equal in that quality even to him. For, if the two chief elements of tragic power be terror and pity, assuredly both of these are carried to the highest degree in 'The Duchess of Malfi'.

The more, however, I examined the structure of the tragedy the more manifest did it become, that the only way to render it available to the stage must be that of reconstructing the whole, cutting away all that could not be used, and filling up the gaps and chasms.

Nor was this all that it required. The contradictions, incongruities, and oversights were of a kind that exceeded anything I had previously conjectured. In truth, until I came to scrutinize the scenes thus closely, I had overlooked these discrepancies as well as the author, andothers have done. Let me give an instance. Antonio sends off his friend Delio, post-haste to Rome on a service of most vital importance; and the next time they meet on Delio's return, Antonio has forgotten all about it. Again: after the Duchess (in Act IV, Scene i, of the original) has seen, as she believes, her children lying dead in their shrouds—she, in the very next scene, has entirely forgotten this, and gives precise and affecting maternal directions concerning them both, as if they were alive. Several other extraordinary instances might be mentioned, but it would only confuse the mind between the two versions, to specify them and answer no good purpose.

It hence became apparent that if this great tragedy was to be exhumed from its comparative obscurity, by representation on the stage, all the characters must be made consistent with themselves, and all the events proper to them—all the parts must be made coherent—and all this be built with direct relationship to the whole, and direct tendency to the final results. Yet, amidst all this the great scenes must be religiously preserved, or I should do worse than nothing, and produce a weak and sacrilegious deformity. What I have, therefore, sought to do, is as though a grand old abbey—haunted, and falling into decay—stood before me, and I had undertaken to reconstruct it anew with as much of its own materials as I could use—asking pardon for the rest—but preserving almost entire its majestic halls and archways, its loftiest turrets, its most secret and solemn chamber, where the soul, in its hours of agony, uplifted its voice to God.

Writing this Preface the night before performance, when no one can have certain knowledge of the effect of tragic scenes so awful, and others so new to the stage, I am anxious to record that I do not doubt but this tragedy of Webster's will be worthily acted at Sadler's Wells, not only by Mr. Phelps, Miss Glyn, and Mr. Bennett, but by all principals and seconds in the performance. Be the result what it may, my cordial acknowledgments are due to the careful assiduity, the unwearied energy, and watchfulness with which a tragedy, so long highly honoured in dramatic literature, has been placed by Mr. Phelps upon the stage— to the pains taken by each performer in the rehearsals— and though I name Mr. T.L.Greenwood last, he stands foremost in his appreciation of the present version of 'The Duchess of Malfi'.

In this edition, printed from the prompter's copy, most of the acting directions are allowed to remain, with a view to render the numerous stage difficulties less onerous to future managers.

The sun himself, his planets and his peers, Circling some vaster centre of all spheres: All *these* again in harmony combine— Moving for ever, somewhere—by design!
The tree that hath no hope can bear no fruit: Must stars come down to teach the oak its root? Show how eternal nature in the earth From light and air claims a perennial birth; That while the heart of man remains the same, The Drama bears within a constant flame, Ready to light our progress, onward ever, When *truth* and *power* combine in that

endeavour; Ready to re-illume its ancient stories, And weave its brow with *new* and lasting glories!
In our fresh period vigourous life requires More solid food for its exalting fires; Great passions—doings—sufferings, great hopes still, To urge us up the steep and thorny hill, Where genius, science, liberty, combined, Give lasting empire to the advancing mind. Wherefore, tonight, we bring the inspiring themes Of great, old Webster, —clad in whose strong beams We venture forth on the uplifted sea Of his invention's high-wrought poesy, Steering to reach the storm-rent beacon tower, Trusting his hand—and with full faith in, power.

[*The body of* Antonio is *carried in*]

Ferdinand *[bending forward]:* I must look closer at that sleeping man. *[They assist him forward]* His face is paler than the waxen mould My sister once did stare at through her tears; And I do seem to breed strange memories Of passion and of sorrow in my brain, Where thunder lately echoed. *[He kneels beside the body]*
Shifting mists Thicken between us. Poor Antonio— A damp and heavy earth lies on our hearts— The frost doth take our knees, so that I pray,

[*Taking* Antonio's *hand*]

But cannot rise—my thoughts lose government And have no meaning—but stray all forlorn, Seeking forgiveness—till some weeping ghost Melt us into itself. Marina calls! *[He dies]*

(b) It has ever been the delight of the present managers of Sadler's Wells to seek after dramatic curiosities. Here the less familiar of Shakespeare's plays have been revived; forgotten works of Beaumont and Fletcher have been taken from the shelf; and last night a still bolder attempt was made by the production of the 'Duchess of Malfi', one of the most celebrated plays of old, strong, and—we must add—barbarous John Webster....

Those of our literary critics who have been fascinated by the vigour of Webster's writing, and his peculiar mastery in awakening sensations of terror, regard the 'Duchess of Malfi' as his greatest creation. The plot of his work is simple to the last degree, but the author has filled it with horror, mental and physical, to its extreme complement.

[The writer recounts the plot and quotes Lamb on the Duchess's tortures.]

There is certainly a grandeur about Webster; lines might be taken from this piece of surpassing strength, and now and then the depths of human nature are sounded with a strange sort of instinct. The distich which points the moral of the whole tale —

Whether we fall by ambition, blood, or lust, Like diamonds we are cut by our own dust,

is of itself a brilliant scintillation of a kind of ghastly wit. But still we would warn enthusiasts against regarding such a work as the 'Duchess of Malfi' as anything beyond a curiosity. It is, we

are ready to admit, a fine specimen of pristine strength, but let us not be too ready to take a monument for a model.

Mr. Horne, a gentleman of high poetical feeling, and endowed with a peculiar elegance of mind, has accomplished very skillfully the task of rendering the sanguinary work of John Webster tolerable on a modern stage, cutting away, by the by, some of the very horrors which excited Lamb's admiration. Those who are familiar with the original, and are acquainted with the rude coarseness of the dialogue and the atrocities ordered by the stage directions, will see that he has had no easy problem to solve. But the revolting nature of the story, and the anti-climax of the fifth act, in which the several villains kill one another, are beyond the reach of the reformer's skill.

For the style in which the piece is produced the managers and actors of Sadler's Wells are entitled to all praise. Miss Glyn's performance of the Duchess is one of the most striking achievements of that rising actress. Thescenes, intrinsically coarse, in which she makes love to her steward, were admirably softened by the playful spirit of coquetry which she infused into them. The soft passages of sorrow stole with mournful effect upon the naturally mirthful temperament, and when her wrongs aroused her alike to a sense of pain and dignity, her denunciations were terrific. Ferdinand is a less refined character than the Duchess, but the transition from malice to remorse was finely represented by Mr. Phelps, and Mr. G.Bennett is a thorough intentional villain in the part of Bosola.

At the end the applause of the audience was loud, continuous, and unanimous, and Mr. Horne and all the chief actors were called for.

(c) Sadler's Wells— 'The Duchess of Malfi,' altered by Mr. R.H.Horne from old John Webster's celebrated tragedy, was produced on Wednesday. This play, though written evidently in a religious spirit, lacks that fine humanity which looks so beautiful in Shakespeare. Webster is a gloomy believer in man's depravity, and seeks the tragic in his crimes. We have here, indeed, the tragedy of the churchyard; the fetid atmosphere of the charnel is that breathed by the stern old poet. —The shade of the yew darkens his pictures, and the shriek of the mandrake maddens his scenes. Such are the usual images with which the dialogue of Webster is burthened, —and the persons of his dramas are fitted to these, both in their acts and in their motives. The only exception in the present tragedy is, the character of the Duchess of Malfy herself; — who, nevertheless, is affected by the evil of her position, and made to seem criminal when indulging a virtuous passion. The Duchess of Malfi is the victim of a secret marriage, and the mother of three children (in Mr. Horne's version reduced to two), —whose fault of choosing beneath her station is resented by a haughty brother, even to the extent of the death of all parties concerned—excepting one, a son of the unfortunate pair, who, in the original play, survives the general ruin. Duke Ferdinand, the revengeful brother, becomes a lycanthropist, as a fitting consummation of his guilt. This part of the play is decidedly the weakest: —though much benefited by Mr. Horne's judicious alterations in the fifth act.

The Duke's agent, Bosola, is the strongest and most efficient character. It was very properly confided to Mr. G.Bennett, who performed it with great force, and that old feeling for the histrionic art which few modern professors seem to understand. Mr. Phelps struggled hard to overcome the inherent difficulties of the part ofFerdinand, —and to some extent succeeded. But no genius could have achieved a triumph in such a part: —the utmost that talent, controlled by more than ordinary judgment and taste, could effect, was to render it endurable. Some startling

stage effects, were, however, made. The mad scenes were finely rendered. The nobleminded woman who vainly endeavoured to plant the domestic affections in a courtly soil, found a suitable representative in Miss Glyn. Her usual originality of conception marked her performance throughout. The character in her hands had two phases — comic, and tragic. In the early scenes she was the lively lady, loving and beloved; in the latter ones, she became majestic, —a being to move terror and pity. Her last scene, in which she suffers strangulation approaches to the horrible in its details; but the art of the actress was equal to the peril of the situation, and commanded sympathy.

Mr. Horne has accomplished his stage adaptation of this old drama with much tact and talent: —no pains, however, can wholly get rid of its original clumsy structure. Nothing is more conducive to a right estimate of Shakespeare's art than the contrast in regard to construction which dramas of this class present with the most careless of his. Compared with 'Othello' and 'The Tempest,' they offer masses of modern extravagance. —We cannot say that experiments like the present are to be commended. While Webster is wholly unfitted to the modern stage, —we have here not even Webster. But for the purpose of restoring one of our old dramatists, there is no argument for this reproduction, —and the alterations made to render the reproduction possible, prove that he cannot be restored.

The costumes and scenery were costly and picturesque, and the *mise en scene* displayed admirable tact and invention. This must be carried to the account of Mr. Phelps, as stage manager, —to whose intelligence it is understood that such arrangements at this theatre are always due. The house was crowded. Though evidently somewhat puzzled by the horror of the situation, the beauties of the dialogue seemed to be appreciated by the pit: —and at the conclusion the applause was loud. Miss Glyn, Mr. Phelps, Mr. Bennett, and Mr. Horne were called to receive the accustomed congratulations. A prologue written by Mr. Horne and spoken by Mr. Hoskins, preceded the performance.

(d) The Elizabethan dramatist John Webster, whose works, admirably edited by the Reverend Alexander Dyce, fill four such respectable volumes, is one of those gentlemen whohave reaped the full benefit of a reaction. When he had been all but forgotten for something like a century, those literary critics to whom we are so much indebted for their revival of a taste for the earlier English literature chose John Webster as an especial theme for eulogy. The more generally familiar Elizabethans, such as Jonson, Beaumont, Fletcher, and Massinger, were less respectfully treated; but the rude strength of Webster could hardly be praised enough. Like many other reactions, this, in our opinion, went too far, and an honour was paid to one of our least polished poets scarcely less than what is rightfully awarded to an Aeschylus.

The production of 'The Duchess of Malfi' at Sadler's Wells brings this idol for the first time before a modern public; and, like many other idols, he will gain little by ocular inspection. As a whole the play is but a sorry work, showing equally the strength and the untutored condition of the mind that produced it. The story, setting forth the slow process by which two fiendish brothers murdered their sister, a regnant duchess, as a punishment for a mésalliance, has in itself no further interest than may be found in any atrocity of journalistic renown. The accumulated horrors of the fourth act, which give the play its character, are followed by a fifth so feeble and ridiculously murderous, that nothing can exceed the anti-climax. The personages, far from being psychologically elaborated, are flung upon the stage as so many lumps

of moral deformity. In the language there is not the elevation of Marlowe's earliest plays, which even when they touch the ridiculous are still replete with poetical sublimity; but on the contrary, ideality is shunned for the sake of realism in its uncouthest form. What may be said of most poets of an untutored age applies to Webster in particular. In the 150 pages which his play occupies, passages of matchless force (we will not say *beauty*) may be found; and these are the more remarkable as they strike suddenly, and we feel ourselves unexpectedly moved after long tasting most unsavoury fare.

Mr. R.H.Horne, who has achieved the task of making 'The Duchess of Malfi' endurable enough not to send an audience rushing out of a house, by removing from Webster's play those means of excitement which appeal less to the imagination than to the stomach, exhibits all that care which attends a labour of love. He has rearranged and dovetailed passages at an expense of toil which can have been scarcely less than that of producing an original work. But after all, might not his fine poetical mind have been better employed than in making a rough-hewn work appear a degree less rough-hewn? Would he not contribute more to theelevation of the drama by looking over one of his own plays with a view to scenic production? As for 'The Duchess of Malfi' being taken as any model of theatrical composition, it is totally out of the question. Placing it by the side of another play which is based on the principle of terror, can any impartial, *practical* judge, say that it approaches an equality to that French banquet of atrocities the 'Lucréce Borgia' of Victor Hugo?

In the acting of the piece, the great feature is the very excellent performance of Miss Glyn; and we would especially commend her treatment of the earlier portion of the drama. The forcible passages that afterwards occur may be said, in a way, to act themselves; but the difficulties at starting required delicate discrimination. The Duchess is made to avow her passion to her steward, with a freedom that is almost repulsive, and might be rendered exceedingly so by a coarse treatment. Miss Glyn, by giving the love-scene the tone of haute comédie, veils the indelicacy of the position by an air of polished badinage. This treatment also secures the advantage of contrast for the misery that follows, and relieves the general ghastliness of the play.

(e) Among the pardonable errors of my youth, I count the belief that our old English dramatists were worthy of study as men of true dramatic genius. Pardonable, I say, because I was lured into it by a reverential regard felt for Lamb, Hazlitt, and others, as fine critics, and by the unmistakable beauties of the scenes and passages they quoted. My days and nights were given to Marlowe, Dekker, Webster, Marston, Kyd, Greene, Peele, and the illustrious obscure in Dodsley. Enthusiasm, however, was tamed by the irresistible mediocrity of these plays; no belief in their excellence could long stand up against the evidence of their dreariness and foolishness. I underlined fine passages; copied apophthegms and beauties into various notebooks; wrote foolish articles in magazines expressive of my admiration: but the thing could not last, and I silently gave up my former idols to the scorn of whoso pleased to vilify them. Looking backwards to the days of Lamb— especially bearing in mind his peculiar idiosyncrasies— the admiration he felt, and tried to inspire others with, is perfectly intelligible; but, as I said some months ago in these columns, the resuscitation of those dramatists has been a fatal obstruction to the progress of the drama, and has misled many a brave and generous talent. It has fostered the tendency and flattered the weakness of poets, by encouraging them to believe that mere writing sufficesfor a drama—that imagery will supply

the place of incidents, and that tragic *intentions* which boldly appeal to the imagination, are enough.

Nothing was needed to burst this bubble but the actual revival of a play or two upon the modern stage. Marston's 'Malcontent' was rudely tried at the Olympic; and now 'The Duchess of Malfi,' by John Webster, the most admired of the company excepting Marlowe, has been elaborately prepared by R.H.Horne, and produced at Sadler's Wells with all the care and picturesqueness for which that theatre is known. I have read that play four times, but although Horne has greatly lessened its absurdities, I never felt them so vividly until it was acted before my eyes. He has made it less tedious and less childish in its horrors, but the irredeemable mediocrity of its *dramatic* evolution of human passion is unmistakable. The noble lines of manly verse which charm the *reader* fail to arrest the *spectator*, who is alternating between impressions of the wearisome and the ludicrous.

Consider it under what aspect you will, short of a commonplace book of 'passages,' 'The Duchess of Malfi' is a feeble and a foolish work. I say this fully aware of the authorities against me—fully aware of the 'passages' which may be quoted as specimen-bricks. Other critics have declaimed against its accumulation of horrors; to my mind that is not the greatest defect. Instead of 'holding the mirror up to nature,' this drama holds the mirror up to Madame Tussaud's and emulates her 'chamber of horrors' but the 'worst remains behind,' and that is the motiveless and false exhibition of human nature. Take the story. The young Duchess of Malfi loves her steward, tells him so, and privately marries him. Her brothers Ferdinand and the Cardinal, caring only for the nobility of their lineage, with to marry her to Prince Malateste; and, on hearing how she has disgraced herself, resolve to kill her. But death, simply as death, is no fit punishment for such a crime. They prepare, therefore, a waxen image (anticipating Madame Tussaud) of Antonio, her husband, which is shown to her as his corpse; they fill her palace with mad people, whose howlings are to madden her; and, having wrought upon her till they think despair can hold out no longer, they bring in the executioners and strangle her. No sooner is she dead than Ferdinand, who planned it all, turns suddenly remorseful—as villains do in the last scenes of melodramas—and in the fifth act he goes raving mad. Now, firstly, the horrors are childish, because they grow out of no proper ground. They are not the culmination of tragic motives. The insulated pride of Ferdinand might demand as reparation the life of his sister, and there is a realtragic position in the third act, where he places the poinard in her hand and bids her die. But playing these fantastic tricks to bring her to despair is mere madness. How ludicrously absurd is this Ferdinand—who has never given a hint of any love for his sister, any sorrow for her shame, any reluctance in perpetrating these cruelties — to be suddenly lachrymose and repentant as soon as she is dead! This is not the work of a *dramatist;* it is clumsy ignorance. 'The Duchess of Malfi' is a nightmare, not a tragedy.

I might go through the work, and point out in almost every scene evidences of a similar incapacity for high dramatic art; but to what purpose? Every year plays are published by misguided young gentlemen exhibiting this kind of incapacity, and friendly critics have no greater compliment than to declare that the 'mantle of the Elizabethan dramatists has fallen upon Mr. Jones.' If Shakespeare is a great dramatist, Webster and company are not dramatists at all; and nothing exalts him more than to measure him by his contemporaries.

Despising probabilities, disregarding all conditions of art, and falsifying human nature, 'The Duchess of Malfi' is, nevertheless, an attractive play to that audience. As a terrific melodrame, it delights the pit. It was, therefore, not a bad speculation to produce this adaptation, which, let me say once for all, must have cost Horne more labour than he will gain credit for. As a poet, Horne is known to wield 'Marlowe's mighty line' like a kindred spirit. In these additions to Webster we defy the nicest critic to detect the old from the new; unless you have the two books side by side, you cannot tell whether you are reading Webster or Horne. But he would write a better play himself, and his labour would better be employed. Why waste his faculties in the hopeless task of making falsehood look like truth? 'Cosmo de Medici', impracticable though it be, is worth any amount of Webster.

The acting of this play reflects credit on the theatre. Miss Glyn was better than we have yet seen her; but this intelligent actress will never achieve the position she aspires to, unless she make a radical change in her style, and throw aside the affectations and conventions she has acquired. Her elocution is vicious. She chaunts instead of speaking, and her chaunt is unmusical. Instead of taking the rhythm from the verse, the accent from the sense, she puts one monotonous rhythm upon the verse, and lets the accent obey the impetus of the chaunt, as if the voice mastered her, instead of her mastering the voice. Once or twice when she spoke naturally it was quite charming; and her grand burst of despair, in the fourth act, thoughinjured by defect of chaunting, had so much force and fury in it that the house shook with plaudits. The comedy of the early scenes was hard, forced, and stagey. In making love to her steward she wanted tenderness, grace, and coyness. On the whole, however, one may say that, except Helen Faucit, no English actress could have played the part so well. Phelps was ill at ease in the first four acts, as if the nonsense of his part baffled him, and he could not grasp it; towards the close of the fourth act, however, he made a clutch at it, and his madness in the fifth act was terribly real. George Bennett, in Bosola, was suited to a nicety.

29.
ISABELLA GLYN TOURS AS THE DUCHESS
1852–68

During the eighteen years Isabella Glyn starred as the Duchess of Malfi, the reviewers, with a few exceptions, praised her performance while often expressing some distaste for the play itself. Of interest is the playfulness Miss Glyn, on occasion in her career an accomplished comedienne, brought to the earlier scenes of the play, thus contrasting with the tragic despair manifested in the fourth act. It is a coquetry not immediately seen in Horne's pedestrian text; for this audiences should have been thankful. We may note also the new 'effect' in 1855 in which the Duchess appeared as her ghost in a moonlit echo scene, and the elaborate set noted for the scene of the Duchess's capture: the open country at midnight, 'with the moonlight reflected in the rippling waters of the lake'.

Excerpts from (a) the 'Manchester Guardian', 23 October 1852, p. 8; (b) 'The Times', London, 2 April 1855, p. 5; (c) the Dublin 'Daily Express', 25 November 1858, p. 3; (d) 'The Times', London, 14 April 1868, p. 9.

(a) [The writer lengthily recounts the plot and quotes and praises 'Shakespearian' passages.]
So far we have described the printed, and not the acted, drama, which ends with the death of the duchess in the fourth act. It has, as it seems to say, great errors inconstruction. It is unlikely that in her own territory, a sovereign duchess should be seized, imprisoned in her own palace, none of her greatest subjects permitted to see her; the people, a mere shadowy myth, suffering her to be cruelly done to death.... There seems no reason why the duchess should for two years conceal her marriage, even after the birth of her second child.... In short, the dramatist, in effect, begs the auditor and reader to concede to him that his virtuous and high-minded couple are weak, timid, trembling creatures, who dare not avow their union before the world.... It has also much more clap-trap, stage trickery, as for instance, making Bosola disguise himself as an old man.... The joyous nature of Marina is finely displayed by [Miss Glyn] in the badinage with her husband in the chamber; her dignity and self-possession in the interview which immediately follows with Ferdinand, and which only makes it the more difficult to realize her subsequent shrinking and apprehension. Nervous in her terrors, the moment real danger arrives, she reasserts the constancy of her soul, and defies it. But she yields passively to this tyranny from which one vigorous assertion of her rights would have freed her; and it is this fatal inconsistency in the character, as drawn by the dramatist, which prevents Miss Glyn from achieving any great triumph in the part.... Mr. Swinbourn

(Ferdinand), in aiming to display the raving of disappointed rage, burst out into a rant which provoked laughter…. On the whole, we cannot think this old play a happy revival, though it is wholly free from grossness.

(b) …Altogether, we strongly suspect that the neighbors of the Eastern Countries Terminus prefer John Webster to William Shakespeare—that is to say, as typified in the two plays of 'The Duchess of Malfi' and 'Antony and Cleopatra'. The latter work presupposes something like a knowledge of history, which one may not always have conveniently at hand; but the former, the creation of old, terrible Webster, is made up of a mass of horrors, which, though they nominally occur in Amalfi (or, as honest John calls it, 'Malfi'), are intelligible to those who are blessed with no more learning as to the doings of mankind than can be obtained from the reports of the Central Criminal Court. Moreover, the horrors are good, substantial horrors….

Miss Glyn's interpretation of the Duchess, which consists in giving a comic tone to the earlier scenes and idealizing as much as possible the circumstances of the dreadful death, so as to at once avoid coarseness and toproduce a strong contrast, is already familiar; indeed it is she alone who has preserved the vitality of the play…. Nor should we forget the new 'effect' in the scene where the echo from the tomb summons the bereaved Antonio. Formerly the wailing voice belonged to the prompter, but now Miss Glyn answers *in propria persona,* and then glides away as the ghost of herself in a style worthy of a Corsican-brother.

(c) The 'Duchess of Malfi,' a tragedy adapted from the origins of John Webster, a noted playwright of the Beaumont and Fletcher era, was produced for the first time in Dublin at the Theatre Royal on Tuesday night. This drama had remained in complete oblivion—so far as its non-production on the stage could be so considered—from the time of its first representation at the Blackfriars Theatre in 1640, until 1850, when it was revived by Mr. Phelps at Sadler's Wells, the part of the Duchess being then sustained by Miss Glyn. Her impersonation of the character was so vivid and impressive as to achieve for the piece a success which might in some degree be considered a compensation for the neglect to which it had been so long consigned, and which, to any mere reader of the play (with all due respect to the memory of 'Old John Webster') must have seemed extraordinary, were not the wonders within the scope of histrionic genius reflected upon. In point of poetic thought and expression this tragedy appears very defective indeed, when contrasted with the master-pieces of some of the writer's contemporaries; but it nevertheless possesses that one merit which in all cases seems sufficient to insure for any stage composition a respectable vitality—namely a well-defined and startling plot, in which the tragic element is sustained and developed with increasing power to the climax, which culminates in four several murders. The story is briefly as follows: —The Duchess of Malfi, a young and beautiful widow, falls in love with and secretly marries her steward, Antonio Bologna. Her brothers, the Duke Ferdinand and the Prince Graziani, are desirous that she should form an alliance with the noble Prince Malateste, who is a suitor for her hand, and, with the view of being informed as to her private movements, they induce her to hire as her master of horse one Bossola, a man of desperate fortune, who is a spy in their service. After an interval, this man becomes aware of the nature of the relations existing between the Duchess and Antonio, and communicates the fact to the brothers, who are enraged at what they conceive to be the dishonour entailed upon their noble house, in the marriage of their sister with a man of such obscure position.The Duke flies to Malfi, and

imprisons the Duchess in her palace, Antonio having just before Ferdinand's arrival escaped with his children to Ancona, whither his wife had arranged to follow him. Bossola is then induced by the brothers, on condition that the title of Count shall be conferred upon him, to secretly strangle the Duchess, the perpetration of which crime is followed by the remorse of the Duke, who, in a frenzy, threatens to deliver up Bossola as a murderer. The latter then determines upon the death of the Duke, and on a certain dark night falls upon and kills a man whom he mistakes for his intended victim, but who turns out to be no other than Antonio returned from Ancona in search of his wife. At this juncture the Duke enters in a wild and excited mood, followed by his brother, whom he taunts with having been the instigator of the foul murder of their sister, and then rushes upon and slays. Bossola and he then meet, mutually attack, and kill each other, whereupon, after a dying speech or two, the curtain drops.

In the character of the Duchess, Miss Glyn had ample range for the display of her versatile genius, —the scene in which she acknowledges her love to Antonio, and expresses her wish to become his wife, being acted with a grace and vivacity quite charming; whilst in the subsequent tragic passages she evinced a pathos and energy which might bear comparison with the highest efforts of any tragedienne of our day. Mr. Montgomery—who is seen with increased advantage on each successive appearance—represented the part of the Duke with consummate ability, avoiding the slightest approach to exaggeration either of declamation or gesture, whilst preserving all the force and spirit essential to an adequate rendering of the part. Miss Glyn and Mr. Montgomery were both called before the curtain on the conclusion of the piece.

The play was repeated last night to a good house. The comic drama, 'The Two Queens,' concluded the entertainment.

(d) [The writer appreciates the managerial effort to bring a 'higher and more legitimate class of entertainment' to the new theatre in Shoreditch, but admits that 'the production of a play like "The Duchess of Malfi" is, to say the least, a hazardous experiment'. He recounts Webster's biography, his sources, the stage history of the play, concluding: 'It is impossible that Webster's "Duchess of Malfi", even with its more repellent prominences softened down in Mr. Horne's version, can ever retain a permanent hold on the stage. Like Joanna Baillie's "De Montfort", it is a fine poem but an accumulation of horrors—an unmitigated display of the terrible graces.' Though much has been done, notes the critic, to secure a favourable response to the play, the efforts, except for Miss Glyn's performance, are 'of no avail'.]

It would be impossible to speak too highly of Miss Glyn's impersonation of the Duchess. Her name is exclusively associated with the character, for, to use an Italian phrase, she has never been 'doubled' in it. Replete with all the varieties of depth and solemn brilliancy, her performance comprehends everything that could be wished for.... The most remarkable individual beauties in her performance were her delivery of those exquisitely poetical lines —

> The birds that live i' th' field On the wild benefit of nature, live Happier than we; for they may choose their mates, And carol their sweet pleasures to the spring,

in which her tone and manner lent double grace and beauty to the image; and in that passage when, in reply to Bosola's taunts as to her misery and degradation, she collected up all her dignity and pride to bid him remember that she was 'Duchess of Malfi still'...The piece was admirably put

upon the stage, and one of the scenes—a view of the open country at midnight, with the moonlight reflected in the rippling waters of a lake—was very beautiful.

30.
‘THE DUCHESS’ IN THE USA
1857–9

On 22 August 1857, ‘The Duchess of Malfi’ was introduced to the USA at the American Theatre in San Francisco. James Stark, the actor-manager who directed his wife Sarah in the title role with himself as Ferdinand, greatly revised Horne’s fifth act and included even more settings and effects. His most triumphant addition came at the close of the play: an ‘apotheosis’ tableau of the Duchess and Antonio sentimentally reunited in death, amid clouds and ‘blue fire when cloud ascends’. Yet it was the Wilmarth Wallers who soon achieved the greatest successes with the play in the USA. Waller, an American actor who playedAntonio in the original Sadler’s Wells revival, directed his wife Emma and, like Stark, portrayed Ferdinand. Although receiving mixed reviews on her first attempts at the Duchess, Mrs Waller went on to rival Isabella Glyn’s success, playing the role for the next twenty-five years. Perhaps even more than the Starks, the Wallers sensationalized Horne’s text, as the Philadelphia review indicates: at the close, the Duchess was seen ‘riding to heaven, in white muslin’. Frank W.Wadsworth, in his helpful study, American Performances of the ‘Duchess of Malfi’, in ‘Theatre Survey’, II (1970), pp. 151–66, examines the extant prompt-books and conjectures that these closing tableaux represented a strange marriage between Webster and Harriet Beecher Stowe: audiences had thrilled to George Aiken’s stage adaptation of ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin’ since 1852, with its climactic tableau wherein Little Eva was ‘discovered’ on the back of a milk-white dove, presumably en route to heaven. Sentimental moral victories were thus achieved in both plays, delighting the audiences but, as so often in the case of Webster, not always the reviewers.

Excerpts from (a) the New Orleans ‘Daily Picayune’, 11 December 1857, p. 5; (b) the ‘New York Times’, 7 April 1858, p. 4; (c) the ‘Spirit of the Times’, 10 April 1858, p. 108; (d) the ‘New York Daily Tribune’, 6 April 1858, p. 5; (e) the ‘New York Herald’, 6 April 1858, p. 7; (f) the ‘Philadelphia Press’, 26 April 1859, p. 2.

(a) There was a good house at the St. Charles theatre last evening, to witness the first performance, in this city, of the tragedy called ‘The Duchess of Malfi,’ which was written by John Webster, ‘the noble minded,’ as Hazlitt designates him, who lived and wrote in the first

half of the seventeenth century. He died about the year 1640, and the best critics have awarded him a high rank among the dramatists that have left their work upon English literature….
The plot of this deep tragedy turns on the mortal offence which Marina, the Duchess of Malfi (Mrs. Stark) gives to her two proud brothers, Duke Ferdinand (Mr. Stark) and the Cardinal Graziana (Mr. Swan), by indulging in a generous though infatuated passion for Antonio (Mr. Wright), a gentleman of her court, and whom she privately marries.

[The critic praises Mrs Stark's portrayal in the wooing scene, with its 'exquisite touches of feeling'. It is the scene 'which above most of them will be remembered with pleasure'. The plot is recounted, and the death of theDuchess is described, 'a hideous refinement of cruelty'. The writer quotes briefly from the Duchess's last speeches.]

She is led out by the masks [masked attendants], with the cord placed by her own hands about her neck; a stifled scream is heard, and the Duchess staggers in, and falls dead upon the stage. Ferdinand enters and is struck with remorse at the sight of his twin sister lying there a corpse, the victim of his own terrible revenge. The woe he sought but vainly to inflict on her becomes his own, and he goes distraught….

Full as this play is of highly dramatic situations, admirably drawn and naturally colored as are all the characters, and abounding as it certainly is with eloquent and powerful language, we confess that it is too highly wrought with what the biographer of Webster designates as 'supernumerary horrors,' to suit our taste as an acting play; and we should be quite resigned to its speedy return to the shelves of the library, from which we do not think it will prove a successful experiment to have taken it down. It is true that we are invited to 'sup full of horrors,' over such banquets as Shakespeare, and Otway, and Congreve, and Rowe, and others of the standard dramatists have provided in plentiful profusion for us. But let us rest content with the bowl of the Borgia, the cord of poor Cordelia, the envenomed steel of Hamlet, without seeking to add to the terrible list forgotten horrors; presented to us as though they may be in forms of classic grace and made seductive by words instinct with genius.

'The Duchess of Malfi' is to be repeated this evening, and only on this single occasion. It is very forcibly and impressively performed, every character in it well sustained; and to those who are fond of the manifestation and development of the tragic element in its fullest intensity, will prove a not unacceptable performance.

(b) Broadway Theatre—To the explorer of ancient dramatic literature, John Webster's play of the 'Duchess of Malfi' comes like a flash of light. Not that its merits in themselves are especially brilliant, but because they contrast favorably with the feeble glimmers emitted by some others of Shakespeare's contemporaries. The tragedy is of the thrilling kind, and abounds in horrible situations, whilst the plot is blood-thirsty to the last degree. The dialogue is pompous without always being elevated, but at times it touches the poetic standard and is grand. As an acting play, the version given by Mr. andMrs. Waller last evening at the Broadway, has everything to recommend it, and even those faults which are unpalatable to the student are not unwelcome to an audience.

Mrs. Waller is a lady of decided talent, although a little wild and restless, and also a little conventional. She aims largely for effects, and wins them generally in the old-fashioned way, but sometimes she permits her native talent to have full sway, and then something more brilliant than common tragic tinsel is the result. A few performances before a Metropolitan

audience will, we trust, place this lady in a favorable light with the public. We were unable to detect any particular merit in Mr. Waller beyond that which belongs to any stock actor.

The tragedy is well played, and has been put on the stage in a careful manner.

(c) …Mr. and Mrs. Waller are certainly clever artists, but both possess the same fault—a grievous one in a New York theatre—that of *ranting:* they are too stagey, and pay too little regard to nature. Mrs. Waller has a fine figure, a very pleasing countenance, and a sweet voice, all of which she manages well in the quiet scenes, looking every inch a Duchess and a pretty young widow. Mr. Waller's Ferdinand was altogether too boisterous as we have intimated above, but he has in him the stuff for a first-class actor, and we doubt not he will profit by the advice which he will receive…. The tragedy itself is of the most gloomy and unnatural description. Some horrid noises in the fourth act, which caused considerable merriment when the author intended everybody to cry, somewhat relieved the general monotony; but we would rather at that time have sympathized with the unfortunate Duchess and watched intently the emotions of Mrs. Waller, than to have been distracted by inquiries in audible whispers as to whether the elephant had been removed, with a general tittering throughout the house.

(d) John Webster's play, 'The Duchess of Malfi,' was performed last night, introducing to the audience Mr. and Mrs. Waller. The merits of this old drama may be summed up in saying that it has occasionally some very strong lines. The plot is not good, and the situations are spasmodically forced up to tragedy, without the self-working which distinguishes a first class work of art; besides, it is an essentially meager and disagreeable story as a whole. A proud and cruel ducal brother torturing and killing a widowed Duchess, because she was secretly married to agentleman of inferior rank, but of good repute, seems to us poor stuff for five acts of somberness, hardly relieved by a touch of every-day emotion and sentiment….

We feel bound to add that the audience applauded heartily, and called Mr. and Mrs. Waller before the curtain; and if they are satisfied, so it may be said should be the critics. The play was well put on the stage; and excepting the awful tragic noises behind the scenes in the fourth act, kept the audience as serious as could be wished. These, though set down in the book, made the listeners laugh during the death scenes of the Duchess. On the repetition of the drama, a little modification at this point would be well.

(e) Mr. and Mrs. Waller made their first appearance at the Broadway last night in the old Elizabethan five-act tragedy of John Webster, a contemporary of the immortal Will Shakespeare, the 'Duchess of Malfi'. The old play has been considerably modernized, and in some instances not with much advantage. For example, the attempt to dovetail the illegitimate into the legitimate drama by the introduction of tableaux and sensation scenes, though perhaps in accordance with the prevailing taste of the day, was not to our mind quite successful, nor in keeping with the spirit of the author. However, that may be, it is certain that the play had a brilliant success last night, and is destined to enjoy a long run…. The house was well-filled, and the greatest enthusiasm was evinced throughout the entire performance. In modernising the rendering of the 'Duchess of Malfi', however, we think that more ingenuity might have been displayed in the fifth act. In the present representation all the villains, but whom it seemed essential to kill off in order to perfect the tragic character of the play, are dispatched in a heap, and with a celerity which is somewhat disagreeable to witness. In truth, the play would end better with the fourth than the fifth act, with a little amendment in the plot: the impressions of both of the drama and the actors would be far more pleasurable….

(f) A large audience, at Walnut-street Theatre, gave a hearty salutation to Mr. and Mrs. Waller…. The play was Webster's 'Duchess of Malfi', adapted to the sense of propriety which audiences of the present day feel more delicately than our forefathers did, in the early days of the drama….

There is a scene of novel power, in which Antonio, ignorant of his wife's death, has responses of his own words made to him by an echo from his grave. Next time, Echo must raise her voice. Bosola, repentant, seeks to save Antonio's life, but accidentally slays him in the dark, and is threatening the Cardinal, when the Duke, mad with remorse and rage, kills both, receiving his own death-stab from Bosola. The curtain falls on the four dead men, and an allegorical tableau follows.

Mrs. Waller played the Duchess about as ably as it could be played. The most exquisite scene was that in which she woos Antonio, without overstepping the modesty of her sex. Mr. Waller scarcely pleased us until after the death of the Duchess, when his rage became subdued by remorse….

The play was well placed in the stage, and the dresses good—those of the Wallers splendid—except the Cardinal's miserable apology for sacerdotal vestments. The echoes in the fifth act were scarcely audible in front, and the scene showing the Duchess riding to Heaven, in white muslin, was a needless interpolation…. Neither, when the play was ended did we like the pause necessary to show a sort of apotheosis of the Duchess.

Mrs. Waller was called for at the end of acts III and IV, and, with Mr. Waller, again at the end of the play.

31.
THE CANON FIRES
1856

Extracts from 'Plays and Puritans' by Charles Kingsley (1819–75), novelist, social reformer, and canon of West-minster. As a Victorian moralist, Kingsley naturally wanted 'truth' and 'living persons' in plays which should uplift the masses. His powerful attack marks the opening of the debate over Webster's moral view, an argument which continued into the twentieth century. Extracts from the 1885 edition, pp. 18, 50–6. Originally published in the 'North British Review', 1856.

The whole story of 'Vittoria Corombona' is one of sin and horror. The subject-matter of the play is altogether made up of the fiercest and basest passions. But the play isnot a study of those passions from which we may gain a great insight into human nature. There is no trace— nor is there, again, in the 'Duchess of Malfi' —of that development of human souls for good or evil which is Shakespeare's especial power—the power which, far more than any accidental 'beauties,' makes his plays to this day, the delight alike of the simple and the wise, while his contemporaries are all but forgotten. The highest aim of dramatic art is to exhibit the development of the human soul, to construct dramas in which the conclusion shall depend, not on the events, but on the characters; and in which the characters shall not be mere embodiments of a certain passion, or a certain 'humour': but persons, each unlike all. Thus, each having a destiny of his own peculiarities, and of his own will.... This is indeed 'high art': but we find no more of it in Webster than in the rest. His characters, be they young or old, come on the stage ready-made, full grown, and stereotyped; and therefore, in general, they are not characters at all, but mere passions or humours in human form. Now and then he essays to draw a character: but it is analytically, by description, not synthetically and dramatically, but letting the man exhibit himself in action; and in the 'Duchess of Malfi', he falls into the great mistake of telling, by Antonio's mouth, more about the Duke and Cardinal than he afterwards makes them act....

But the truth is, the study of human nature is not Webster's aim. He has to arouse terror and pity, not thought, and he does it in his own way, by blood and fury, madmen and screech-owls, not without a rugged power. There are scenes of his, certainly, like that of Vittoria's trial, which have been praised for their delineation of character: but it is one thing to solve the problem, which Shakespeare has so handled in 'Lear', 'Othello', and 'Richard the Third' — 'Given a mixed character, to show how he may become criminal'; and to solve Webster's— 'Given a

ready-made criminal, to show how he commits his crimes.' To us the knowledge of character shown in Vittoria's trial scene is not an insight into Vittoria's essential heart and brain, but a general acquaintance with the conduct of all bold bad women when brought to bay…the strength of Webster's confest master scene lies simply in intimate acquaintance with vicious nature in general….

The 'Duchess of Malfi' is certainly in a purer and loftier strain, but in spite of the praise that has been lavished on her, we must take the liberty to doubt whether the poor Duchess is a 'person' at all. General goodness and beauty, intense though pure affection for a man below her in rank, and a will to carry out her purpose at allhazards, are not enough to distinguish her from thousands of other women: but Webster has no such purpose. What he was thinking of was not truth, but effect; not the Duchess, but her story; not Antonio, her major-domo and husband, but his good and bad fortunes; and thus he has made Antonio merely insipid, the brothers merely unnatural, and the Duchess (in the critical moment of the play) merely forward. That curious scene, in which she acquaints Antonio with her love for him and makes him marry her, is, on the whole, painful. Webster himself seems to have felt that it was so; and, dreading lest he had gone too far, to have tried to redeem the Duchess at the end by making her break down in two exquisite lines of loving shame: but he has utterly forgotten to explain or justify her love by giving to Antonio (as Shakespeare would probably have done) such strong specialties of character as would compel, and therefore excuse, his mistress' affection…. The prison scenes between the Duchess and her tormentors are painful enough, if to give pain be a dramatic virtue; and she appears in them really noble; and might have appeared far more so, had Webster taken half as much pains with her as he has with the madmen, ruffians, ghosts, and screech owls in which his heart really delights. The only character really worked out so as to live and grow under his hand is Bosola, who, of course, is the villain of the piece, and being a rough fabric, is easily manufactured with rough tools. Still Webster has his wonderful touches here and there—

Cariola. Hence, villains, tyrants, murderers! Alas! What will you do with my lady? Call for help!

Duchess. To whom? to our next neighbors? they are mad folk. Farewell, Cariola. I pray thee look thou giv'st my little boy Some syrup for his cold; and let the girl Say her prayers ere she sleep. —Now, what you please; What death?

And so the play ends, as does 'Vittoria Corrombona,' with half a dozen murders *coram populo,* howls, despair, bedlam, and the shambles….

32.
WEBSTER ON THE AMERICAN LECTURE CIRCUIT
1859

Edwin P. Whipple (1819–86), essayist and popular lecturer in Boston and New York literary circles, notes Webster's 'steadiness of nerve and clearness of vision' in a lecture given at the Lowell Institute, later published in 'The Literature of the Age of Elizabeth' (1869), pp. 139–47.

Webster was one of those writers whose genius consists in the expression of special moods, and who, outside of those moods, cannot force their creative faculties into vigorous action. His mind by instinctive sentiment was directed to the contemplation of the darker aspects of life. He brooded over crime and misery until his imagination was enveloped in their atmosphere, found a fearful joy in probing their sources and tracing their consequences, became strangely familiar with their physiognomy and psychology, and felt a shuddering sympathy with their 'deep groans and terrible ghastly looks.' There was hardly a remote corner of the soul, which hid a feeling capable of giving mental pain, into which this artist in agony had not curiously peered; and his meditations on the mysterious disorder produced in the human consciousness by the rebound of thoughtless or criminal deeds might have found fit expression in the lines of a great poet of our own times: —

> Action is momentary, — The motion of a muscle, this way or that. Suffering is long, obscure, and infinite.

With this proclivity of his imagination, Webster's power as a dramatist consists in confining the domain of his tragedy within definite limits, in excluding all variety of incident and character which could interfere with his main design of awakening terror and pity, and in the intensity with which he arrests, and the tenacity with which he holds the attention, as he drags the mind along the pathway which begins in misfortune or guilt, and ends in death. He is such a spendthrift of his stimulants, and accumulates horror on horror, and crime on crime, with such fatal facility, that he would render the mind callous to his terrors, were it not that what is acted is still less than what is suggested, and that the souls of his characters are greaterthan their suffering, or more terrible than their deeds. The crimes and the criminals belong to Italy as it was in the sixteenth century, when poisoning and assassination were almost in the fashion; the feelings with which they are regarded are English; and the result of the combination is to make the poisoners and assassins more fiendishly malignant in spirit than they actually were. Thus

Ferdinand, in the ‘Duchess of Malfy,’ is the conception formed by an honest, deep-thoughted Englishman of an Italian duke and politician, who had been educated in those maxims of policy which were generalized by Machiavelli. Webster makes him a devil, but a devil with a soul to be damned….

We have said that Webster’s peculiarity is the tenacity of his hold on the mental and moral constitution of his characters. We know of their appetites and passions and by the effects of these on their souls. He has properly no sensuousness. Thus in ‘The White Devil,’ his other great tragedy, the events proceed from the passion of Brachiano for Vittoria Corombona, —a passion so in-ense as to lead one to order the murder of her husband. If either Fletcher or Ford had attempted the subject, the sensual and emotional motives to the crime would have been represented with overpowering force, and expressed in the most alluring images, so that wickedness would have been almost resolved into weakness; but Webster lifts the wickedness at once from the region of the senses into the region of the soul, exhibits its results in sensual depravity, and shows the satanic energy of purpose which may spring from the ruins of the moral will. There is nothing lovable in Vittoria; she seems indeed, almost without sensations; and the affection between her and Brachiano is simply the magnetic attraction which one evil spirit has for another evil spirit. Francisco, the brother of Brachiano’s wife, says to him: —

> ‘Thou has a wife, our sister; would I had given Both her white hands to death, bound and locked fast In her last winding-sheet, when I gave thee But one.’

This is the language of the intensest passion, but as applied to the adulterous lover of Victoria it seems little more than the utterance of reasonable regret; for devil only can truly mate with devil, and Vittoria is Brachiano’s real ‘affinity.’

The moral confusion they produce by their deeds is treated with more than Webster’s usual steadiness of nerve and clearness of vision. The evil they inflict is a causeof evil in others; the passion which leads to murder rouses the fiercer passion which aches for vengeance; and at last, when the avengers of crime have become morally as bad as the criminals, they are all involved in a common destruction. Vittoria is probably Webster’s most powerful delineation. Bold, bad, proud, glittering in her baleful beauty, strong in that evil courage which shrinks from crime as little as from danger, she meets her murderers with the same self-reliant scorn with which she met her judges….

Of all the contemporaries of Shakespeare, Webster is the most Shakespearian. His genius was not only influenced by its contact with one side of Shakespeare’s many-sided mind, but the tragedies we have been considering abound in expressions and situations either suggested by or directly copied from the tragedies of him he took for his model….

33.
J.A.SYMONDS IN THE 'CORNHILL MAGAZINE'
1865

Known in his own day as the historian of the Italian Renaissance, John Addington Symonds (1940–93) would later write the introduction to the Mermaid edition of Webster and Tourneur (1888). As his seven volume 'Renaissance in Italy' (1875–86) is marked by the fluent as well as the florid, so is this earlier appreciation of Webster and his colleagues. From The English Drama during the Reigns of Elizabeth and James, 'Cornhill Magazine', XI (May 1965), pp. 604–18.

At all periods of history the stage has been the mirror of the spirit of the century in which it has arisen. Dramatic poets give form to the ideas of their age, exhibiting its common aims and hopes and wishes on a more magnificent scale than that of daily life. To interpret men to themselves, to express in words what the majority can only feel, and to leave in art a record of past ages to posterity, is the function of all genius, but more especially of the dramatic genius, which rules for its domain the passions and manners of men. But while the stage thus sums up thecharacter of epochs in history, it never ceases to be national.... Never since the birth of art in Greece has any nation displayed a dramatic genius so spontaneous and powerful [as England's], so thoroughly belonging to the century in which it sprang, and so national in form and spirit. Yet at the same time it is universal by right of its commanding interest, of its insight into nature, of its freedom from any prejudice, of its sympathy with every phase of human feeling, of its meditation upon all the problems that have vexed the world, of its accumulated learning, of its vast experiences, and of the liberality with which its wealth was cast unreckoned on the world....

Yet in whatever scene [the playwrights] fixed the action of their plays, we find the same exuberance of life and the same vehement passions. In their delineation of character there is no feebleness of execution. In their plots we trace no lack of incidents, no languor of development. Their art suffered rather from rapidity, excess of vigour, and extravagant invention. To represent exciting scenes by energetic action, to clothe audacious ideas in grandiloquent language, to imitate the broader aspects of passion, to quicken the dullest apprehensions by strong contrasts and 'sensational' effects, was the aim which authors and actors pursued in common.... The Flamineo and Bosola of Webster are the villains of a darker dye, men such as only Italy of the sixteenth century could breed, courtiers refined in arts of wickedness; subtle, polite, and finished scholars; brave in war and bold in love; and then, in ill repute and want of money, place themselves at the command of princes to subserve their

pleasures and accomplish their revenge. In such men there is no faith, no hope, and no remorse. Some devil seems to have sat for their portraits.

Insanity in [the dramatists'] hands became a powerful instrument of moving pity and inspiring dread. There is nothing more solemn than the consciousness of vacillating reason which the Duchess of Malfi displays after she has been confined in prison among lunatics and murderers. The persecutors seek to drive her into madness. She argues with herself whether she be mad or not.

[Quotes 'O that it were possible' and 'And custom makes it easy'.]

Extravagant passion, the love of love, or the hate of hate, makes men tremble on the verge of insanity. This state of exaltation, in which the whole nature quivers beneath the shock of one overpowering desire, was admirably revealed by the dramatists. Ferdinand, in Webster, killshis sister from excess of jealousy and avarice. But when he sees her corpse, his fancy, set on flame already by the fury of his hate, becomes a kind of hell, which plagues him always with the memory of her calm, pale face, fixed eyes, and tender age....

If the evil of the world was painted simply as it is in all its strength and ugliness by our old dramatists, the beauty and the peace, the loveliness of nature and the dignity of soul which makes our life worth living, were no less faithfully portrayed. The multiform existence we enjoy upon this earth received a true reflection in our theatre—nor was one aspect of its development neglected for another. Those artists verily believed that 'the world's a stage': they made their art a microcosm of the universe.

34.
WILLIAM MINTO ON WEBSTER AS DRAMATIST
1874

William Minto, Professor of English Literature at the University of Aberdeen, argues briefly for Webster as effective playwright, a somewhat singular approach among Victorian admirers of Webster. From his 'Characteristics of English Poets', the American edition of 1897, p. 355.

And these plays are not merely closet-plays, whose excellences can be picked out and admired only at leisure. The characters have not the simplicity and popular intelligibility of Shakespeare's Richard or Iago. The plots, too, except in 'Appius and Virginia,' where all the incidents lie in the direct line of the catastrophe, are involved with obscure windings and turnings. Yet all the scenes are carefully constructed for dramatic effect. Mark how studious Webster has been that his actors shall never go lamely off the stage: they make their exit at happily chosen moments, and with some remark calculated to leave a buzz of interest behind them. When we look closely into Webster's plays we become aware that no dramatist loses more in closet perusal: all his dialogues were written with a careful eye to the stage. Everywhere throughout his plays we meet with marks of deep meditation and just design. It is not with hisplays as with Fletcher's. The more we study Webster, the more we find to admire. His characters approach nearer to the many-sidedness of real men and women than those of any dramatist except Shakespeare; and his exhibition of the changes of feeling wrought in them by the changing progress of events, though characterised by less of revealing instinct and more of penetrating effort than appear in Shakespeare, is hardly less powerful and true.

35.
WARD'S 'HISTORY'
1875

A.W.Ward (1837–1924), historian, critic, and co-editor of the 'Cambridge History of English Literature', provided the first 'modern' history of the English drama with his 1875 'History of English Dramatic Literature'. Something of a Victorian moralist, Ward denies Webster a moral and tragic vision. From the second edition (1899), III, pp. 57–66.

Ward considers first 'The White Devil', disagreeing with Lamb and Dyce on the character of Vittoria: she is a 'defiant sinner'. There are wonderful touches, but on the whole 'we crave—and crave in vain—some relief to the almost sickening combination of awe and loathing created by such characters and motives as this drama presents'. 'The Duchess of Malfi' is, however, a 'masterly' work, with 'flashes of genius which seem to light up of a sudden a wide horizon of emotions'.

This extraordinary tragedy ['The White Devil'], whose finest scenes and passages have, in the judgment of Mr. Swinburne, been never surpassed or equalled except by Shakspere 'in the crowning qualities of tragic or dramatic poetry,' must be described as at once highly elaborated and essentially imperfect. In the address *To the Reader* already referred to, Webster confesses with conscious pride that this play was the fruit of protracted labour; but his efforts appear to have been directed rather to accumulating and elaborating effective touches of detail than to producing a well-proportioned whole. The catastrophe seems to lag too far after the climax; and in spite of the mightyimpression created by the genius of the author, it is difficult to resist a sense of weariness in the progress of the later part of the action. But a yet more serious defect appears to me to attach to 'Vittoria Corombona.' The personages of this tragedy—above all that of the heroine—are conceived with the most striking original power and carried out with unerring consistency; but we crave—and crave in vain—some relief to the almost sickening combination of awe and loathing created by such characters and motives as this drama presents.

The character of Vittoria herself—the White Devil — this is a conception which we instinctively feel to be true to nature—to nature, that is, in one of her abnormal moods. In the first scene in which Vittoria appears she reveals the deadliness of her passionate resolution, when relating to her paramour the dream which is to urge him on to the murder of his duchess

and her own husband. The ghastliness of the imagery of the vision is indescribably effective, together with the horrible scornfulness of the closing phrase:

> When to my rescue there arose, methought, A whirlwind, which let fall a massy arm From that strong plant; And both were struck dead by that sacred yew, *In that base shallow grave that was their due.*

The scene in which Vittoria is tried for the murder of her husband has attracted the comment of several critics — among others of Charles Lamb, who strangely enough speaks of her 'innocence-resembling boldness.' Dyce demurs to this view, which appears to me utterly erroneous, and destructive of the consistency which the character throughout maintains. Not 'sweetness' and 'loveliness' but a species of strange fascination, such as is only too often exercised by heartless pride, seems to pervade the figure and the speech of the defiant sinner who refuses to withdraw an inch from the position which she has assumed, and meets her judges with a front of withering scorn. Almost equally effective are the burst of passion with which she turns upon the jealous Brachiano, and the gradual subsiding of her wrath, as of a fire, under his caresses. The terrible energy of the last act is almost unparalleled; but the character of Vittoria remains true to itself, except perhaps in the last—rather trivial — reflexion with which she dies.

The remaining characters of the tragedy are drawn with varying degrees of force; but they all seem to stand forth as real human figures under the lurid glare of a storm-ladensky: nor is it easy to analyse the impression created by so dense a mixture of unwholesome humours, wild passions, and fearful sorrows. The total effect is unspeakably ghastly—though in one of the most elaborately terrible scenes the intention becomes too obvious, and 'several forms of distraction' exhibited by the mad Cornelia strike one as in some degree conventional, as they are to some extent plagiarised.

It must however be observed that in this play, as in 'The Duchess of Malfi,' Webster creates some of his most powerful effects by single touches—flashes of genius which seem to light up of a sudden a wide horizon of emotions. It is in these flashes, so vivid as to illumine the dullest perception, so subtle as to search the closest heart, that Webster alone among our dramatists can be said at times to equal Shakspere.

'The Duchess of Malfi' (first printed in 1623) bears to my mind the signs of a more matured workmanship than 'The White Devil.' The action is indeed full of horrors, but not, so to speak, clogged with them; the tragic effect is not less deep, but pity may claim an equal share in it with terror. The story (taken from a novel by Bandello which through Belleforest's French version found its way into Paynter's 'Palace of Pleasure') is in itself simple and symmetrical, and the fifth act (though perhaps rather excessive in length) seems a natural complement to the main action. The death of the unhappy Duchess, whose crime it was to marry her steward from sheer love, is here avenged upon her brothers and murderers by the instrument of their own cruelty. In the character of the Duchess there is little very specially to attract; but she is drawn with a simplicity not devoid of power, and her artlessness is apparently designed to contrast with the diabolical craft of her persecutors. It is not however till the fourth act that the author has an opportunity of putting forth his peculiar power. He has here accumulated every element of horror of which the situation seems to admit (indeed the dance of madmen is in every sense

superfluous); the preparations for the Duchess' death are made in her presence; her coffin is brought in, her dirge is sung, then she is strangled, to revive only for a moment in order to learn from her executioner, himself full of pity and remorse, that her husband still lives. This act abounds in those marvellous touches of which Webster is master; the most powerful of them all is the sudden thrill of pity in the breast of the brother who has commanded her death, on beholding his command fulfilled:

Bos. Do you not weep? Other sins only speak; murder shrieks out: The element of water moistens the earth, But blood flies upwards and bedews the heavens.

Ferd. Cover her face; mine eyes dazzle; she died young.

Although the character of Bosola in this tragedy displays a composite kind of humour in which the author appears to have taken a unique kind of pleasure, there is less variety in the *dramatis personae* as a whole than in those of 'The White Devil.' But the total impression left upon the mind by the tragic action of 'The Duchess of Malfi' is unsurpassed in depth by anything else known to have been achieved by Webster; nor is the hope unreasonable that so masterly a work may permanently recover possession of the English stage….

Little needs to be added to the above in the way of general comment on the characteristics of Webster's dramatic genius. The wonderful strength of these characteristics displays itself with the utmost distinctness in 'The White Devil' and 'The Duchess of Malfi.' Webster loves to accumulate the favourite furniture of theatrical terror—murders and executions, the dagger and the pistol, the cord and the coffin, together with skulls and ghosts, and whatever horrors attend or are suggested by the central horror of them all. Herein he is not exceptional among the Elisabethans, of whom, from Kyd to Tourneur, so many were alike addicted to the employment of the whole apparatus of death. What is distinctive in Webster, is in the first place the extraordinary intensity of his imagination in this sphere of ideas, and again the elaborateness of his workmanship, which enabled him to surpass—it may fairly be said—all our old dramatists in a field which a large proportion were at all times ready to cultivate. As for later endeavors in our literature to rival this familiarity with death and its ghastly associations, they have rarely escaped the danger of artificiality or succeeded in stimulating the imaginative powers of any generation but their own. Among all these poets of the grave and its terrors we meet with but few whose very soul seems, like Webster's, a denizen of the gloom by which their creations are overspread.

But Webster's most powerful plays and scenes are characterised by something besides their effective appeal to the emotion of terror. He has a true insight into human nature, and is capable of exhibiting the operation of powerful influences upon it with marvellous directness. He is aware that men and women will lay open the inmost recesses of their souls in moments of deep or suddenagitation; he has learnt that on such occasions unexpected contrasts—an impulse of genuine compassion in an assassin, a movement of true dignity in a harlot—are wont to offer themselves to the surprised observer; he is acquainted with the fury and the bitterness, the goad and the after-sting of passion, and with the broken vocabulary of grief. All these he knows and understands, and is able to reproduce, not continually or wearisomely, but with that unerring recognition of supremely fitting occasions which is one of the highest, as it is beyond all doubt one of the rarest, gifts of true dramatic genius.

It is impossible that a dramatist possessing this faculty should be without humour of a very remarkable order; and though we unfortunately possess but a single comedy which can be ascribed to Webster only, no doubt can exist as to his possession of the gift in question. Some of the comic characters in 'The White Devil' (Flamineo and Camillo) are effectively drawn; the dry humour of Bosola's commentaries on life and its vicissitudes in 'The Duchess of Malfi' has a quite original savour; and if Webster is to be held to have had any share in 'A Cure for a Cuckold,' I cannot see why it should be thought self-evident that he was guiltless of any of its unrefined, but far from spiritless, fun. His satirical powers are great, as may be seen from the versatility with which he varies his attacks upon the favourite subject of his social satire—the law, its practice and its practitioners.

It was equally out of the question that the characteristic powers of Webster's dramatic genius should have been unaccompanied by fine poetic feeling. Of this he occasionally gives evidence in passages of considerable beauty, though upon imagery he appears to have bestowed no very marked attention. I am not aware that either in the respect of particular passages, or of entire scenes, Webster's debt to Shakspere is so large as it has been represented to be; and I must confess my ignorance as to what support can (with the exception of Cornelia's madness) be found for Hazlitt's assertion that Webster's two most famous tragedies are 'too like Shakespear, and often direct imitations of him, both in general conception and individual expression.' On the other hand, the same critic seems by no means to go too far in saying that this author's plays 'upon the whole perhaps come the nearest to Shakespear of anything we have on record.' What more requires to be said in acknowledgment of the true dramatic genius of which Webster was possessed?

But at the same time the meaning of the assertion should not be pressed beyond certain definite limits. In his power of revealing dramatically by truthful touches the secrets of human nature, Webster was like Shakspere. Hewas unlike him in but rarely combining with this power the art of exhibiting dramatically the development of character under the influence of incident. The collapse of Bracciano's strength of will and of Appius' self-control under the influence of passion and of opportunity are forcibly brought home to us; but the White Devil herself, as her name is intended to imply, is an abnormal, though not impossible, being; while the Duchess of Malfi can hardly be said to have a character at all. What Webster in general reproduces with inimitable force, is a succession of situations of overpowering effect; in construction he is far from strong, and in characterisation he only exceptionally passes beyond the range of ordinary types. There seems little moral purpose at work in his most imposing efforts; and his imagination, instead of dwelling by preference on the associations of the law-court and the charnel-house, would have had to sustain itself on nutriment more diverse and more spiritual, in order to wing his mighty genius to freer and loftier flights.

36.
SWINBURNE ON WEBSTER
1882, 1886

Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837–1909) was Webster's most enthusiastic champion in the late nineteenth century, and his extravagant and impressionistic praise led to fierce rejoinders from theatrical critics such as Archer and Shaw. For although Swinburne writes that Webster's fame 'assuredly does not depend upon the merit of a casual passage here or there', an examination of dramatic structure has little place in Swinburne's view of Webster as moral poet. He stands as the chief spokesman for the line of Victorian critics who celebrate Webster's poetic imagination and who place him at Shakespeare's right hand in the creation of poetry, rather than drama. The legacy of Lamb continued.

Extracts from (a) John Webster, 'Sonnets on English Dramatic Poets' ('The Complete Works of A.C.Swinburne', ed. Edmund Gosse and T.J.Wise (1925), V, p. 177) and (b) John Webster, 'The Nineteenth Century', XIX, pp. 861–81. The essay was slightly revised for his last work, 'The Age of Shakespeare' (1908).

(a) Thunder: the flesh quails, and the soul bows down. Night: east, west, south, and northward, very night. Star upon struggling star strives into sight, Star after shuddering star the deep storms drown. The very throne of night, her very crown, A man lays hand on, and usurps her right. Song from the highest of heaven's imperious height Shoots, as a fire to smite some towering town. Rage, anguish, harrowing fear, heart-crazing crime, Make monstrous all the murderous face of Time Shown in the spheral orbit of a glass Revolving. Earth cries out from all her graves. Frail, on frail rafts, across wide-wallowing waves, Shapes here and there of child and mother pass.

(b) There were many poets in the age of Shakespeare who make us think, as we read them, that the characters in their plays could not have spoken more beautifully, more powerfully, more effectively, under the circumstances imagined for the occasion of their utterance: there are only two who make us feel that the words assigned to the creatures of their genius are the very words they must have said, the only words they could have said, the actual words they assuredly did say. Mere literary power, mere poetic beauty, mere charm of passionate or

pathetic fancy, we find in varying degrees dispersed among them all alike; but the crowning gift of imagination, the power to make us realize that thus and not otherwise it was, that thus and not otherwise it must have been, was given—except by exceptional fits and starts—to none of the poets of their time but only to Shakespeare and to Webster.

Webster, it may be said, was but as it were a limb of Shakespeare: but that limb, it might be replied, was the right arm. 'The kingly-crowned head, the vigilant eye,' whose empire of thought and whose reach of vision no other man's faculty has ever been found competent to match, are Shakespeare's alone for ever: but the force of hand, the fire of heart, the fervour of pity, the sympathy of passion, not poetic or theatric merely, but actual and immediate, are qualities in which the lesser poet is not less certainly or less unmistakably pre-eminent than the greater. And there is no third to be set beside them: not even if we turn from their contemporaries to Shelley himself. All that Beatrice says in 'The Cenci' is beautiful and conceivable and admirable: but unless we except her exquisite last words—and even they are more beautiful than inevitable—we shall hardly find what we find in 'King Lear' and 'The White Devil,' 'Othello' and 'TheDuchess of Malfy'; the tone of convincing reality; the note, as a critic of our own day might call it, of certitude.

There are poets—in our own age, as in all past ages— from whose best work it might be difficult to choose at a glance some verse sufficient to establish their claim— great as their claim may be—to be remembered for ever; and who yet may be worthy of remembrance among all but the highest. Webster is not one of these: though his fame assuredly does not depend upon the merit of a casual passage here or there, it would be easy to select from any one of his representative plays such examples of the highest, the purest, the most perfect power, as can be found only in the works of the greatest among poets. There is not, as far as my studies have ever extended, a third English poet to whom these words might rationally be attributed by the conjecture of a competent reader.

We cease to grieve, cease to be fortune's slaves, Nay, cease to die, by dying.

There is a depth of severe sense in them, a height of heroic scorn, or a dignity of quiet cynicism, which can scarcely be paralleled in the bitterest or the fiercest effusions of John Marston or Cyril Tourneur or Jonathan Swift. Nay, were they not put into the mouth of a criminal cynic, they would not seem unworthy of Epictetus….

The first quality which all readers must recognize, and which may strike a superficial reader as the exclusive or excessive note of his genius and his work, is of course his command of terror. Except in Aeschylus, in Dante, and in Shakespeare, I at least know not where to seek for passages which in sheer force of tragic and noble horror—to the vulgar shock of ignoble or brutal horror he never condescends to submit his reader or subdue his inspiration—may be set against the subtlest, the deepest, the sublimest passages of Webster. Other gifts he had as great in themselves, as precious and as necessary to the poet: but on this side he is incomparable and unique. Neither Marlowe nor Shakespeare had so fine, so accurate, so infallible a sense of the delicate line of demarcation which divides the impressive and the terrible from the horrible and the loathsome—Victor Hugo and Honoré de Balzac from Eugène Sue and Emile Zola. In his theatre we find no presentation of old men with their beards torn off and their eyes gouged out, of young men imprisoned in reeking cesspools and impaled with red-hot spits. Again and

again his passionate and daring genius attains the utmost limit and rounds the final goal of tragedy; never once does itbreak the bounds of pure poetic instinct. If ever for a moment it may seem to graze that goal too closely, to brush too sharply by those bounds, the very next moment finds it clear of any such risk and remote from any such temptation as sometimes entrapped or seduced the foremost of its forerunners in the field. And yet this is the field in which its paces are most superbly shown. No name among all the names of great poets will recur so soon as Webster's to the reader who knows what it signifies, as he reads or repeats the verses in which a greater than this great poet—a greater than all since Shakespeare— has expressed the latent mystery of terror which lurks in all the highest poetry or beauty, and distinguishes it inexplicably and inevitably from all that is but a little lower than the highest….

Few instances of Webster's genius are so well known as the brief but magnificent passage which follows; yet it may not be impertinent to cite it once again.

> *Brachiano.* O thou soft natural death, that art joint twin
> To sweetest slumber! no rough-bearded comet Stares on thy mild departure; the dull owl Beats not against thy casement; the hoarse wolf Scents not thy carrion; pity winds thy corpse, Whilst horror waits on princes.

Vittoria. I am lost forever.
B. How miserable a thing it is to die 'Mongst women howling! —What are those?
Flamineo. Franciscans: They have brought the extreme unction.
B. On pain of death, let no man name death to me; It is a word infinitely terrible.

The very tremor of moral and physical abjection from nervous defiance into prostrate fear which seems to pant and bluster and quail and subside in the natural cadence of these lines would suffice to prove the greatness of the artist who could express it with such terrible perfection: but when we compare it, by collation of the two scenes, with the deep simplicity of tenderness, the childlike accuracy of innocent emotion, in the passage previously cited, it seems to me that we must admit, as an unquestionable truth, that in the deepest and highest and purest qualities of tragic poetry Webster stands nearer to Shakespeare than any other English poets stands to Webster; and so much nearer as to be a good second; while it is at least questionable whether even Shelley can reasonably be accepted as a good third. Not one among the predecessors, contemporaries, or successors of Shakespeare and Webster has given proof of this double faculty—this coequal mastery of terror and pity, undiscoloured and undistorted, but vivified and glorified, by the splendour of immediate and infallible imagination. The most grovelling realism could scarcely be so impudent in stupidity as to pretend an aim at more perfect presentation of truth: the most fervent fancy, the most sensitive taste, could hardly dream of a desire for more exquisite expression of natural passion in a form of utterance more naturally exalted and refined.

In all the vast and voluminous records of critical error there can be discovered no falsehood more foolish or more flagrant than the vulgar tradition which represents this high-souled and gentle-hearted poet as one morbidly fascinated by a fantastic attraction towards the 'violent delights' of horror and the nervous or sensational excitements of criminal detail; nor can there be conceived a more perverse or futile misapprehension than that which represents John

Webster as one whose instinct led him by some obscure and oblique propensity to darken the darkness of southern crime or vice by an infusion of northern seriousness, of introspective cynicism and reflective intensity in wrongdoing, into the easy levity and infantile simplicity of spontaneous wickedness which distinguished the moral and social corruption of renascent Italy. Proof enough of this has already been adduced to make any protestation or appeal against such an estimate as preposterous in its superfluity as the misconception just mentioned is preposterous in its perversity. The great if not incomparable power displayed in Webster's delineation of such criminals as Flamineo and Bosola— Bonapartes in the bud, Napoleons in a nutshell, Caesars who have missed their Rubicon and collapse into the likeness of a Catiline— is a sign rather of his noble English loathing for the traditions associated with such names as Caesar and Medici and Borgia, Catiline and Iscariot and Napoleon, than of any sympathetic interest in such incarnations of historic crime….

The fifth act of 'The Duchess of Malfy' has been assailed on the very ground which it should have been evident to a thoughtful and capable reader that the writer must have intended to take up—on the ground that the whole upshot of the story is dominated by sheer chance, arranged by mere error, and guided by pure accident. No formal scheme or religious principle of retribution would have been so strangely or so thoroughly in deeping with the whole scheme and principle of the tragedy. After the overwhelming terrors and the overpowering beauties of that unique andmarvellous fourth act in which the genius of this poet spreads its fullest and its darkest wing for the longest and the strongest of its flights, it could not but be that the subsequent action and passion of the drama should appear by comparison unimpressive or ineffectual; but all the effect or impression possible of attainment under the inevitable burden of this difficulty is achieved by natural and simple and straightforward means. If Webster has not made the part of Antonio dramatically striking and attractive—as he probably found it impossible to do— he has at least bestowed on the fugitive and unconscious widower of his murdered heroine a pensive and manly grace of deliberate resignation which is not without pathetic as well as poetical effect. In the beautiful and well-known scene where the echo from his wife's unknown and new-made grave seems to respond to his meditative mockery and forewarn him of his impending death, Webster has given such reality and seriousness to an old commonplace of contemporary fancy or previous fashion in poetry that we are fain to forget the fantastic side of the conception and see only the tragic aspect of its meaning. A weightier objection than any which can be brought against the conduct of the play might be suggested to the minds of some readers—and these, perhaps, not too exacting or too captious readers—by the sudden vehemence of transformation which in the great preceding act seems to fall like fire from heaven upon the two chief criminals who figure on the stage of murder. It seems rather a miraculous retribution, a judicial violation of the laws of nature, than a reasonably credible consequence or evolution of those laws, which strikes Ferdinand with madness and Bosola with repentance. But the whole atmosphere of the action is so charged with thunder that this double and simultaneous shock of moral electricity rather thrills us with admiration and faith than chills us with repulsion or distrust. The passionate intensity and moral ardour of imagination which we feel to vibrate and penetrate through every turn and every phrase of the dialogue would suffice to enforce upon our belief a more nearly incredible revolution of nature or revulsion of the soul.

It is so difficult for even the very greatest poets to give any vivid force of living interest to a figure of passive endurance that perhaps the only instance of perfect triumph over this difficulty is to be found in the character of Desdemona. Shakespeare alone could have made her as interesting as Imogen or Cordelia; though these have so much to do and dare, and she after her first appearance has simply to suffer: even Webster could not give such individual vigour of characteristic life to thefigure of his criminal heroine. Her courage and sweetness, her delicacy and sincerity, her patience and her passion, are painted with equal power and tenderness of touch: yet she hardly stands before us as distinct from others of her half angelic sisterhood as does the White Devil from the fellowship of her comrades in perdition.

But it is only with Shakespeare that Webster can ever be compared in any way to his disadvantage as a tragic poet: above all others of his country he stands indisputably supreme. The place of Marlowe indeed is higher among our poets by right of his primacy as a founder and a pioneer: but of course his work has not—as of course it could not have—that plenitude and perfection of dramatic power in construction and dramatic subtlety in detail which the tragedies of Webster share in so large a measure with the tragedies of Shakespeare. Marston, the poet with whom he has most in common, might almost be said to stand in the same relation to Webster as Webster to Shakespeare. In single lines and phrases, in a few detached passages and a very few distinguishable scenes, he is worthy to be compared with the greater poet; he suddenly rises and dilates to the stature and strength of a model whom usually he can but follow afar off. Marston, as a tragic poet, is not quite what Webster would be if his fame depended simply on such scenes as those in which the noble mother of Vittoria breaks off her daughter's first interview with Brachiano—spares, and commends to God's forgiveness, the son who has murdered his brother before her eyes—and lastly appears 'in several forms of distraction,' 'grown a very old woman in two hours,' and singing that most pathetic and imaginative of all funereal invocations which the finest critic of all time so justly and so delicately compared to the watery dirge of Ariel. There is less refinement, less exaltation and perfection of feeling, less tenderness of emotion and less nobility of passion, but hardly less force and fervour, less weighty and sonorous ardour of expression, in the very best and loftiest passages of Marston: but his genius is more uncertain, more fitful and intermittent, less harmonious, coherent, and trustworthy than Webster's. And Webster, notwithstanding an occasional outbreak into Aristophanic licence of momentary sarcasm through the sardonic lips of such a cynical ruffian as Ferdinand or Flamineo, is without exception the cleanliest, as Marston is beyond comparison the coarsest writer of his time.

37.
JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL LECTURES
1887

American poet, critic, and diplomat, James Russell Lowell (1819–1891) lectured on The Old English Dramatists at the Lowell Institute in Boston, finding Webster, like Victor Hugo, impressive in spite of himself. Extracts from his hastily written lecture in volume XI of 'The Works of James Russell Lowell' (1892), pp. 239–61.

In my first lecture I spoke briefly of the deficiency in every respect of Form which characterizes nearly all the dramatic literature of which we are taking a summary survey, till the example of Shakespeare and the precepts of Ben Jonson wrought their natural effect. Teleology, or the argument from means to end, the argument of adaptation, is not so much in fashion in some spheres of thought and speculation as it once was, but here it applies admirably. We have a piece of work, and we know the maker of it. The next question that we ask ourselves is the very natural one—how far it shows marks of intelligent design. In a play we not only expect a succession of scenes, but that each scene should lead, by a logic more or less stringent, if not to the next, at any rate to something that is to follow, and that all should contribute their fraction of impulse towards the inevitable catastrophe. That is to say, the structure should be organic, with a necessary and harmonious connection and relation of parts, and not merely mechanical, with an arbitrary or haphazard joining of one part to another. It is in the former sense alone that any production can be called a work of art.

And when we apply the word Form in this sense to some creation of the mind, we imply that there is a life, or, what is still better, a soul in it. That there is an intimate relation, or, at any rate, a close analogy, between Form in this its highest attribute and Imagination, is evident if we remember that the Imagination is the shaping faculty. This is, indeed, its preeminent function, to which all others are subsidiary....

Let us, however, come down to what is within the reach and under the control of talent and of a natural or acquired dexterity. And such a thing is the plot or arrangement of a play. In this part our older playwrights are especially unskilled or negligent. They seem perfectlycontent if they have a story which they can divide at proper intervals by acts and scenes, and bring at last to a satisfactory end by marriage or murder, as the case may be. A certain variety of characters is necessary, but the motives that compel and control them are almost never sufficiently apparent. And this is especially true of the dramatic motives, as distinguished from the moral. The personages are brought in to do certain things and perform certain purposes of the author,

but too often there seems to be no special reason why one of them should do this or that more than another. The obliging simplicity with which they walk into traps which everybody can see but themselves, is sometimes almost delightful in its absurdity....

These thoughts were suggested to me by the gratuitous miscellaneousness of plot (if I may so call it) in some of the plays of John Webster, concerning whose works I am to say something this evening, a complication made still more puzzling by the motiveless conduct of many of the characters. When he invented a plot of his own, as in his comedy of 'The Devil's Law Case,' the improbabilities become insuperable, by which I mean that they are such as not merely the understanding but the imagination cannot get over.... In estimating material improbability as distinguished from moral, however, we should give our old dramatists the benefit of the fact that all the world was a great deal farther away in those days than in ours, when the electric telegraph puts our button into the grip of whatever commonplace our planet is capable of producing.

Moreover, in respect of Webster as of his fellows, we must, in order to understand them, first naturalize our minds to *their* world. Chapman makes Byron say to Queen Elizabeth: —

> 'These stars, Whose influence for this latitude, Distilled, and wrought in with this temperate air, And this division of the elements, Have with your reign brought forth more worthy spirits For counsel, valour, height of wit, and art, Than any other region of the earth, Or were brought forth to all your ancestors.'

And this is apt to be the only view we take of that Golden Age, as we call it fairly enough in one, and that, perhaps, the most superficial, sense. But it was in many ways rude and savage, an age of great crimes and the ever-brooding suspicion of great crimes. Queen Elizabeth herself was the daughter of a King as savagely cruel and irresponsible asthe Grand Turk. It was an age that in Italy could breed a Cenci, and in France could tolerate the massacre of St. Bartholomew as a legitimate crime of statecraft. But when we consider whether crime be a fit subject for tragedy, we must distinguish. Merely as crime, it is vulgar, as are the waxen images of murderers with the very rope round their necks with which they are hanged. Crime becomes then really tragic when it merely furnishes the theme for a profound psychological study of motive and character. The weakness of Webster's two greatest plays lies in this—that crime is presented as a spectacle, and not as a means of looking into our own hearts and fathoming our own consciousness.

[Lowell recounts in detail the plot of 'The Devil's Law Case', noting the improbabilities within the action.]

'The White Devil, or Vittoria Corombona,' produced in 1612, and 'The Duchess of Malfi,' in 1616, are the two works by which Webster is remembered. In these plays there is almost something like a fascination of crime and horror. Our eyes dazzle with them. The imagination that conceived them is a ghastly imagination. Hell is naked before it. It is the imagination of nightmare, but of no vulgar nightmare. I would rather call it fantasy than imagination, for there is something fantastic in its creations, and the fantastic is dangerously near to the grotesque, while the imagination, where it is most authentic, is most serene. Even to elicit strong emotion, it is the still small voice that is most effective; nor is Webster unaware of this, as I shall show presently. Both these plays are full of horrors, yet they do move pity and terror

strongly also. We feel that we are under the control of a usurped and illegitimate power, but it is power. I remember seeing a picture in some Belgian church where an angel makes a motion to arrest the hand of the almighty just as it is stretched forth in the act of creation. If the angel foresaw that the world to be created was to be such a one as Webster conceived, we can fully understand his impulse. Through both plays there is a vapor of fresh blood and a scent of churchyard mould in the air. They are what children call *creepy*. Ghosts are ready at any moment: they seem indeed to have formed a considerable part of the population in those days.

[Lowell gives the story of 'The White Devil', and quotes the scene of Marcello's burial.]

In the trial scene the defiant haughtiness of Vittoria, entrenched in her illustrious birth, against the taunts of the Cardinal, making one think of Browning's Ottima 'magnificent in sin,' excites a sympathy which must check itself if it would not become admiration. She dies with the same unconquerable spirit, not shaming in death at least the blood of the Vitelli that ran in her veins. As to Flamineo, I think it plain that but for Iago he would never have existed; and it has always interested me to find in Webster more obvious reminiscences of Shakespeare, without conscious imitation of him, than in any other dramatist of the time. Indeed, the style of Shakespeare cannot be imitated, because it is the expression of his individual genius. Coleridge tells us that he thought he was copying it when writing the tragedy of 'Remorse,' and found, when all was done, that he had reproduced Massinger instead. Iago seems to me one of Shakespeare's most extraordinary divinations. He has embodied in him the corrupt Italian intellect of the Renaissance. Flamineo is a more degraded example of the same type, but without Iago's motives of hate and revenge. He is a mere incarnation of selfish sensuality. These two tragedies of 'Vittoria Corombona' and the 'Duchess of Malfi' are, I should say, the most vivid pictures of that repulsively fascinating period, that we have in English. Alfred de Musset's 'Lorenzaccio' is, however, far more terrible, because there the horror is moral wholly, and never physical, as too often in Webster.

There is something in Webster that reminds me of Victor Hugo. There is the same confusion at times of what is big with what is great, the same fondness for the merely spectacular, the same insensibility to repulsive details, the same indifference to the probable or even the natural, the same leaning toward the grotesque, the same love of effect at whatever cost; and there is also the same impressiveness of result. Whatever other effect Webster may produce upon us, he never leaves us indifferent. We may blame, we may criticize, as much as we will; we may say that all this ghastliness is only a trick of theatrical blue-light; we shudder, and admire nevertheless. We may say he is melodramatic, that his figures are magic lantern pictures that waver and change shape with the curtain on which they are thrown: it matters not; he stirs us with an emotion deeper than any mere artifice could stir.

38.
SAINTSBURY'S SURVEY
1887

Perhaps the most influential literary historian and critic of his time, George Saintsbury (1845–1933), Regius Professor of Rhetoric and English Literature at Edinburgh, stressed positive personal response by the reader as a major test of literary greatness. Saintsbury implies that this reader would be grounded in realism and thus find Webster the creator of great dramatic flashes, and would have a preference for 'The White Devil'. Extracts from 'A History of Elizabethan Literature', pp. 274–6, 278–80.

Webster's plays are comparatively well known, and there is no space here to tell their rather intricate arguments. It need only be said that the contrast of the two ['The White Devil' and 'The Duchess of Malfi'] is striking and unmistakable; and that Webster evidently meant in the one to indicate the punishment of female vice, in the other to draw pity and terror by the exhibition of the unprevented but not unavenged sufferings of female virtue. Certainly both are excellent subjects, and if the latter seem the harder, we have Imogen and Bellafront to show, in the most diverse material, and with the most diverse setting possible, how genius can manage it. With regard to 'The White Devil,' it has been suggested with some plausibility that it wants expansion. Certainly the action is rather crowded, and the recourse to dumb show (which, however, Webster again permitted himself in 'The Duchess') looks like a kind of shorthand indication of scenes that might have been worked out. Even as it is, however, the sequence of events is intelligible, and the presentation of character is complete. Indeed, if there is any fault to find with it, it seems to me that Webster has sinned rather by too much detail than by too little. We could spare several of the minor characters, though none are perhaps quite so otiose as Delio, Julio, and others in 'The Duchess of Malfi.' We feel (or at least I feel) that Vittoria's villainous brother Flamineo is not as Iago and Aaron and De Flores are each in his way, a thoroughly live creature. We ask ourselves (or I ask myself) what is the good of the repulsive and not in the least effective presentment of the Moor Zanche. Cardinal Monticelso is incontinent of tongue and singularly feeble in deed, —for no rational man would,after describing Vittoria as a kind of pest to mankind, have condemned her to a punishment which was apparently little more than residence in a rather disreputable but by no means constrained boarding-house, and no omnipotent pope would have let Ludivico loose with a clear inkling of his murderous designs. But when these criticisms and others are made, 'The White Devil' remains one of the most glorious works of the period. Vittoria is perfect

throughout; and in the justly-lauded trial scene she has no superior on any stage. Brachiano is a thoroughly life-like portrait of the man who is completely besotted with an evil woman. Flamineo I have spoken of, and not favourably; yet in literature, if not in life, he is a triumph; and above all the absorbing tragic interest of the play, which it is impossible to take up without finishing, has to be counted in. But the real charm of 'The White Devil' is the wholly miraculous poetry in phrases and short passages which it contains. Vittoria's dream of the yew-tree, almost all the speeches of the unfortunate Isabella, and most of her rival's, have this merit. But the most wonderful flashes of poetry are put in the mouth of the scoundrel Flamineo, where they have a singular effect. The famous dirge which Cornelia sings can hardly be spoken of now, except in Lamb's artfully simple phrase 'I never saw anything like it,' and the final speeches of Flamineo and his sister deserve the same endorsement. Nor is even the proud farewell of the Moor Zanche unworthy….

'The Duchess of Malfi' is to my thinking very inferior—full of beauties as it is. In the first place, we cannot sympathise with the duchess, despite her misfortunes, as we do with the 'White Devil.' She is neither quite a virtuous woman (for in that case she would not have resorted to so much concealment) nor a frank professor of 'All for Love.' Antonio, her so-called husband, is an unromantic and even questionable figure. Many of the minor characters, as already hinted, would be much better away. Of the two brothers the Cardinal is a cold-blooded and uninteresting debauchee and murderer, who sacrifices sisters and mistresses without any reasonable excuse. Ferdinand, the other, is no doubt mad enough, but not interestingly mad, and no attempt is made to account in any way satisfactorily for the delay of his vengeance. By common consent, even of the greatest admirers of the play, the fifth act is a kind of gratuitous appendix of horrors stuck on without art or reason. But the extraordinary force and beauty of the scene where the duchess is murdered; the touches of poetry, pure and simple, which, as in 'The White Devil,' are scattered all over the play; the fantastic accumulation of terrors before the climax; andthe remarkable character of Bosola, —justify the high place generally assigned to the work. True, Bosola wants the last touches, the touches which Shakespeare would have given. He is not wholly conceivable as he is. But as a 'Plain Dealer' gone wrong, a 'Malcontent' (Webster's work on that play very likely suggested him), turned villain, a man whom ill-luck and fruitless following of courts have changed from a cynic to a scoundrel, he is a strangely original and successful study. The dramatic flashes in the play would of themselves save it. 'I am Duchess of Malfi still,' and the other famous one 'Cover her face; mine eyes dazzle; she died young,' often as they have been quoted, can only be quoted again. They are of the first order of their kind, and except the 'already my De Flores!' of 'The Changeling,' there is nothing in the Elizabethan drama out of Shakespeare to match them.

39.
J.A.SYMONDS ON WEBSTER
1888

In his Mermaid edition of the tragedies of Webster and Tourneur, J.A.Symonds (1840–93), while appreciative of the moral Webster's 'firm grasp upon the essential qualities of diseased and guilty human nature', furthers the idea of Webster's plays as mosaics: 'the outlines of the Fable, the structure of the drama as a complete work of art, seem to elude our grasp'. Symonds prefigures Eliot and others who would agree that Webster's 'general impression' is 'blurred'. Extracts from 'Webster and Tourneur', pp. xii-xxiii.

It is just this power of blending tenderness and pity with the exhibition of acute moral anguish by which Webster is so superior to Tourneur as a dramatist.

Both playwrights have this point in common, that their forte lies not in the construction of plots, or in the creation of characters, so much as in an acute sense for dramatic situations. Their plots are involved and stippled in with slender touches; they lack breadth, and do not rightly hang together. Their characters, though forcibly conceived, tend to monotony, and move mechanically. Butwhen it is needful to develop a poignant, a passionate, or a delicate situation, Tourneur and Webster show themselves to be masters of their art. They find inevitable words, the right utterance, not indeed always for their specific personages, but for generic humanity, under the *peine forte et dure* of intense emotional pressure. Webster, being the larger, nobler, deeper in his touch on nature, offers a greater variety of situations which reveal the struggles of the human soul with sin and fate. He is also better able to sustain these situations at a high dramatic pitch— as in the scene of Vittoria before her judges, and the scene of the Duchess of Malfi's assassination. Still Tourneur can display a few such moments by apocalyptic flashes— notably in the scenes where Vendice deals with his mother and sister.

Both playwrights indulge the late Elizabethan predilection for conceits. Webster, here as elsewhere, proves himself the finer artist. He inserts Vittoria's dream, Antonio's dialogue with Echo, Bosola's Masque of Madmen, accidentally and subserviently to action. Tourneur enlarges needlessly, but with lurid rhetorical effect, upon the grisly humours suggested by the skull of Vendice's dead mistress. Using similar materials, the one asserts his claim to be called the nobler poet by more steady observance of the Greek precept 'Nothing overmuch'. Words to the same effect might be written about their several employment of blank verse and prose. Both follow Shakespeare's distribution of these forms, while both run verse into prose as Shakespeare never did. Yet I think we may detect a subtler discriminative quality in Webster's

most chaotic periods than we can in Tourneur's; and what upon this point deserves notice is that Webster, of the two, alone shows lyrical faculty. His three dirges are of exquisite melodic rhythm, in a rich low minor key; much of his blank verse has the ring of music; and even his prose suggests the colour of song by its cadence. This cannot be said of the sinister and arid Muse of Tourneur.… [Webster] is not a poet to be dealt with by any summary method; for he touches the depths of human nature in ways that need the subtlest analysis for their proper explanation. I am, however, loth to close without a word or two concerning the peculiarities of Webster's dramatic style. Owing to condensation of thought and compression of language, his plays offer considerable difficulties to readers who approach them for the first time. So many fantastic incidents are crowded into a single action, and the dialogue is burdened with so much profoundly studied matter, that the general impression is apt to be blurred. We rise from the perusal of his Italian tragedies with a deep senseof the poet's power and personality, an ineffaceable recollection of one or two resplendent scenes, and a clear conception of the leading characters. Meanwhile the outlines of the fable, the structure of the drama as a complete work of art, seem to elude our grasp. The persons, who have played their part upon the stage of our imagination, stand apart from one another, like figures in a *tableau vivant*. 'Appius and Virginia', indeed, proves that Webster understood the value of a simple plot, and that he was able to work one out with conscientious firmness. But in 'Vittoria Corombona' and 'The Duchess of Malfi', each part is etched with equal effort after luminous effect upon a murky background; and the whole play is a mosaic of these parts. It lacks the breadth which comes from concentration on a master-motive. We feel that the author had a certain depth of tone and intricacy of design in view, combining sensational effect and sententious pregnancy of diction in works of laboured art. It is probable that able representation upon the public stage of an Elizabethan theatre gave them the coherence, the animation, and the movement which a chamber-student misses. When familiarity has brought us acquainted with Webster's way of working, we perceive that he treats terrible and striking subjects with a concentrated vigour special to his genius. Each word and trait of character has been studied for a particular effect. Brief lightning flashes of astute self-revelation illuminate the midnight darkness of the lost souls he has painted. Flowers of the purest and most human pathos, like Giovanni de Medici's dialogue with his uncle in 'Vittoria Corombona', bloom by the charnel-house on which the poet's fancy loved to dwell. The culmination of these tragedies, setting like stormy suns in blood-red clouds, is prepared by gradual approaches and degrees of horror. No dramatist showed more consummate ability in heightening terrific effects, in laying bare the inner mysteries of crime, remorse, and pain combined to make men miserable. He seems to have had a natural bias toward the dreadful stuff with which he deals so powerfully. He was drawn to comprehend and reproduce abnormal elements of spiritual anguish. The materials with which he builds are sought for in the ruined places of abandoned lives, in the agonies of madness and despair, in the sarcasms of reckless atheism, in slow tortures, griefs beyond endurance, the tempests of sin-haunted conscience, the spasms of fratricidal bloodshed, the deaths of frantic hope-deserted criminals. He is often melodramatic in the means employed to bring these psychological elements of tragedy home to our imagination. He makes free use of poisoned engines, daggers, pistols, disguised murderers,masques, and nightmares. Yet his firm grasp upon the essential qualities of diseased and guilty human nature, his profound pity for the innocent who suffer shipwreck in the storm of evil passions not their own, save him, even at his gloomiest and

wildest, from the unrealities and extravagances into which less potent artists—Tourneur, for example—blundered. That the tendency to brood on what is ghastly belonged to Webster's idiosyncrasy appears in his use of metaphor. He cannot say the simplest thing without giving it a sinister turn—as thus:

> you speak as if a man Should know what fowl is coffn'd in a bak'd meat, Afore you cut it up.
>
> ('The White Devil', IV ii 19–21)

> When knaves come to preferment, they rise as gallowses are raised i'th' Low Countries, one upon another's shoulders.
>
> ('The White Devil', II i 320–22)

> Pleasure of life! what is't? only the good hours Of an ague.
>
> ('The Duchess of Malfi', V iv 67–8)

> I would sooner eat a dead pigeon taken from the soles of the feet of one sick of the plague, than kiss one of you fasting.
>
> ('The Duchess of Malfi', II i 38–40)

In his dialogue, people bandy phrases like— 'O you screech-owl!' and 'Thou foul black cloud!' A sister warns her brother to think twice before committing suicide, with this weird admonition:

> I prithee yet remember, Millions are now in graves, which at last day Like mandrakes shall rise shrieking.
>
> ('The White Devil', V vi 65–7)

But enough now has been said about these peculiarities of Webster's dramatic style. It is needful to become acclimatised to his specific mannerism, both in the way of working and the tone of thinking before we can appreciate his real greatness as a dramatic poet and moralist.

40.
THE TYPICAL WEBSTER
1892

From 'The Nature and Elements of Poetry', p. 249, by E.C. Stedman (1833–1908), poet, critic, and editor. A highly esteemed member of the New York literary circle of his day, Stedman affords us a microcosm of Webster criticism. The book is comprised of lectures given by Stedman at Johns Hopkins University in 1891.

At the outset of English poetry, Chaucer's imagination is sane, clear-sighted, wholesome with open-air feeling and truth to life. Spenser's is the poet's poet chiefly as an artist. The allegory of 'The Faerie Queene' is not like that of Dante, forged at white heat, but the symbolism of a courtier and euphuist who felt its unreality. But all in all, the Elizabethan period displays the English imagination at full height. Marlowe and Webster, for example, give out fitful but imaginative light which at times is of kindred splendor with Shakespeare's steadfast beam. Webster's 'Duchess of Malfi' teaches both the triumphs and the dangers of the dramatic fury. The construction runs riot; certain characters are powerfully constructed, others are wild figments of the brain. It is full of most fantastic speech and action; yet the tragedy, the passion, the felicitous language and imagery of various scenes, are nothing less than Shakesperean. To comprehend rightly the good and bad qualities of this play is to have gained a liberal education in poetic criticism.

41.
'THE DUCHESS OF MALFI' IN LONDON
1892

On 21 October 1892, the Independent Theatre Society presented 'The Duchess of Malfi', adapted and staged by William Poel, at the Opera Comique. Poel's version consisted of some scene rearrangements but, unlike Horne's adaptation, had few additions to Webster's text. Momentsof sensationalism included luminous skeletons painted on the backs of the madmen. Mary Rorke portrayed the Duchess with Murray Carson as Bosola, and both perhaps regretted their involvement: the reviews as a whole were not good, and Webster on the stage again proved a problem. The Independent Theatre Society, formed in part to preserve through staging various old masterpieces, would later promote early performances of Ibsen and Shaw.

Extracts from (a) the 'Nation', 10 November 1892, pp. 348–9; (b) 'The Times', London, 22 October 1892, p. 6; (c) Clement Scott's review in the 'Illustrated London News', 29 October 1892, p. 539.

(a) ...Perhaps I might as well say at once how deeply I regret that the Society is so much more praiseworthy in intention than in achievement. In the present deplorable dramatic stagnation, one does not like to find fault where there is certainly a striving in the right direction. But unfortunately the effect of a play upon the stage depends wholly and entirely on the manner in which it is interpreted by actors and actresses, and this is doubly true when the play is a tragedy in verse, dating back to a day when dramatic ideals were not as ours, and when, in point of dramatic construction, Shakespere was a giant among pigmies. I venture to say that it would be absolutely out of the question to give an unrevised version of the 'Duchess of Malfi,' though this fact does not excuse the Independent Theatre Society's unexpected squeamishness in suppressing some of the more vigorous Elizabethan passages. The changes made, however, were chiefly in the arrangement of the scenes, and here Mr. William Poel, the Shakespere scholar, had a work made to his hand. But, despite his labors, scene followed scene and incident succeeded incident with an irrelevancy and a suddenness that left one fairly bewildered. The deadly hatred of Duke and Cardinal for their sister, even before she has married her steward without their leave, one had to accept simply, without asking for a reason, as one accepts the screen in the modern society play, or the convenient arrangement of doors in the modern farce. The motives of Bosola, the hired murderer, discoursing of pity, singing the dirge, as it were, of his own victim, was another problem for which one did not

seek the solution. The intrigue of the Cardinal with Julia apparently had no other use in the tragedy save to add one more corpse to the many strewing the stage in that indescribable fifth act, which even Webster's most ardent admirers think superfluous. In aword, to make the play, even after revision, not only convincing, but possible, to a modern audience, it must be consummately well rendered by trained and experienced actors who understand the value of the lines and their proper delivery. The programme, on the night of the performance, quoted the critical appreciations of Lamb, who thought that only a Webster could move a horror skilfully or touch a soul to the quick; of Mr. Swinburne, who declared no poet to be morally nobler than Webster; of Mr. Symonds, who finds his excellence in his power of blending tenderness and pity with the exhibition of acute moral anguish; of Mr. Gosse, who ranks the 'Duchess of Malfi' as second only to 'King Lear.' But to read a drama in the library is a very different thing from seeing it performed on the stage. If the beauty and power depend upon the lines rather than the construction, then, when those lines are cruelly murdered in the mouths of second-rate or inexperienced actors, beauty and power disappear and tragedy degenerates into burlesque.

Miss Mary Rorke, who played the Duchess, is an actress of some refinement and dignity in mediocre parts, but her entire misconception of what was expected of her was shown by her close study of Miss Ellen Terry's methods. It were a charity not to give the name of the man who parodied the Duke, and ranted and raved up and down the stage, so that from the very first, instead of waiting until the end of the fourth act, Bosola might have proclaimed him distraught. But to me it was Bosola (Mr. Murray Carson) who was the chief offender, because of his greater pretensions. He began at that high pitch where the wise tragedian leaves off; he spoke with his eyes, his nostrils, his forehead; he writhed and grimaced so unrestrainedly that by the end of the first act he had exhausted his resources, and could but begin and go through the same tricks all over again. As for the others, the kindest that can be said is that their incapacity was a trifle less aggressive—probably because their roles were more than a trifle less important. Lowell was also quoted on the playbill. 'Whatever effect,' he says, 'Webster may produce upon us, he never leaves us indifferent.' At moments when the audience should have wept they tittered, and this, too, in the fourth act, where horror crowds upon horror in the long ingenious torture to which the Duchess is submitted as a preparation for her own murder. However, it was in this same act that the one scene adequately impressive was presented; an impressiveness due not a little to the fact that not a word was spoken, while 'ladies' in Holbein dress danced the Dance of Death with grinning skeletons, to the far tap, tap of a muffled drum, and the Duchess, in her white robes, satwatching, reading herdoom in every step, her faithful Cariola crouched at her knees.

Mr. Green and his society proposed to give aspiring actors and actresses the chance, elsewhere denied, of a hearing in parts suited to them—an admirable proposition. But to aid and abet the incompetent in the full display of their incompetency is another matter. It is just here that the directors of the Independent Theatre so far have followed such a mistaken policy. They may yet discover rare talent in new playwrights, they may revive old masterpieces; but until for the interpretation of their dramatists they find actors and actresses of fair average ability and intelligence, their performances, artistically, must be failures. Who would want to listen to Wagner ground out of a hurdy-gurdy? Who would want to look at a Titian on the canvas of the cheap copyist? I, for my part, would rather never have seen Webster's 'Duchess

of Malfi' on the stage than to have allowed the sad parody presented on the boards of the Opera Comique on Friday last.

(b) In its quest of the extravagant and the horrifying, the Independent Theatre has chanced upon 'The Duchess of Malfi,' of which it gave a special performance last night at the Opera Comique. It is not clear with what object this revival is undertaken by Mr. Green's society. Webster's tragedy has fallen upon evil days. It is no stranger to the stage, since it is occasionally played in suburban and provincial theatres, like dramas of the 'Sweeney Todd' and 'The Castle Spectre' type, for the sake of its horrors. The acting versions of the piece are, of course, more or less mutilated; but the Independent Theatre, which plays a version arranged by Mr. W.Poel, does not show any particular reverence for the poet's text, and, indeed, from a prefatory note to the first edition, which professes to contain 'diverse things that the length of the play would not bear in the presentment,' it would appear that the tragedy never has been acted as printed. Most of the adapters have introduced into the old play matter of their own, this being the case even with the version played by Phelps at Sadler's Wells 40 years ago; and Mr. Poel, if he has not altered anything on his own account, has at least borrowed from other sources, the Duchess, for example, being strangled, not on the stage, but in the wings, whither she is borne for that purpose, as in Theobald's version. A greater liberty still now taken with the classic is the introduction of a so-called 'Dance of Death,' an effect well-known, we believe, in the music halls,whereby a group of dancers, thanks to a costume trick, suddenly assume the semblance of skeletons. On the other hand, the gruesome scenes, with the madmen are greatly shorn of their original proportions and the dance of madmen omitted. The play, as now performed, can only be considered attractive by reason of its nightmarelike scenes enacted in the prison, where the Duchess is put to death. Slowly and deliberately performed on what, for the most part, is a darkened stage, its long drawn-out intrigue would be found oppressive and tiresome by an ordinary audience. Miss Mary Rorke claims a certain amount of sympathy for the hapless Duchess, and Mr. Murray Carson as Bosola, the instrument of the murder, has some thrilling and impressive moments. Ferdinand and the Cardinal, who plan their sister's assassination because of her secret marriage with Antonio, are embodied by Mr. Barraclough and Mr. James Roe. If the play were put up for a run, further excisions of the text would be advisable, three hours and a half of its horrors, native and imported, being a too liberal allowance.

(c) The earnest and enthusiastic members of the Independent Theatre Society have given us a very interesting and complete performance of old Webster's fine tragedy, 'The Duchess of Malfi'. This glorious play, so far as literature is concerned, has been approached in a very reverential spirit, and it was put on the stage with extreme care; and, on the whole, this most difficult work was very creditably acted by the young people engaged. The Duchess of Miss Mary Rorke, though uninspired, was a pathetic and poetically graceful performance.... But head and shoulders above all the rest was the Bosola of Mr. Murray Carson. He was like a bit of old Sadler's Wells, and it is a pity that one who has such a fine stage face, such a rich and ringing voice, and such an admirable elocutionary method should have been born in an age that discards not only tragedy but the whole range of poetic drama.... And oh! what a treat to the tortured ear to hear good poetry declaimed like this, without a trace of bombast in it, but with just emphasis, nice balance, and true feeling! It was a musical as well as a dramatic treat.

42.
ARCHER ATTACKS
1893

William Archer (1856–1924), drama critic, playwright, and translator of Ibsen, was a central force in promoting the new drama of Ibsen and Shaw. For Archer, a vitriolic attack on earlier drama was one method of making way for public acceptance of the new. Totally grounded in the 'well-made play' of rational construction and realistic effect, Archer, though misguided and incorrigibly uninformed about Elizabethan dramatic conventions, cannot be wholly patronized: as Robert Ornstein has noted, 'his attacks on the formlessness of Webster's plays contained an irreducible kernel of aesthetic truth' ('The Moral Vision of Jacobean Tragedy' (1960), p. 128).

Archer's first barrage in January 1893 appeared as Webster, Lamb, and Swinburne, following the William Poel production of 'The Duchess' in 1892; from the 'New Review', VIII, pp. 96–106. He would later review a 1919 ill-fated production at Hammersmith of 'The Duchess' in 'Nineteenth Century', LXXXXVII (January 1920), pp. 126–32, and publish it in a revised and expanded version in his pThe Old Drama and the New' (1924). This was the production in which Ferdinand died standing on his head, and it was all Archer needed.

The recent performance of Webster's 'The Duchess of Malfi' at the Independent Theatre must have done one good service if no other. It must have brought home to many of the audience the need for a careful scrutiny of what may be called the Lamb tradition with respect, to the Elizabethan dramatists. To say so is to take your life in your hands, for never had critical tradition devouter or more puissant champions. I myself, in making the suggestion, am conscious of a feeling of impiety. To the most fanatical worshipper of Charles Lamb I would say, 'Nay, an thou'lt mouth I'll rant as well as thou', were it not that the motion with which one thinks of that exquisite spirit is so intimate and personal as to seem almost profane by utterance. In the love of Lamb, I take it, all literary sects and parties are at one. Not to love him is to place yourself without the pale of literature, almost of humanity. Nor do I for a moment deny that the discovery, the illumination, the revivifying of the Elizabethan drama is one ofhis chief claims upon our gratitude. In the dark treasure-cave where jewels and dross had long lain indistinguishable, he said, 'Let there be light', and there was light. The gems shone forth, a possession for ever: and if the discoverer's eyes were a little bit dazzled, if he now and then

mistook the superficial glitter of the dross for the inborn glow of the jewel, shall that be held to detract from the value and the renown of his discovery? It is, after all, his humanity that we love in Lamb: and humanity is not infallible.

I see, on second thoughts, that I have used a misleading image. My point is not that Lamb mistook dross for jewels, but that he now and then mistook the value of the dramatic setting in which he found his poetic jewels enchased. He regarded the Elizabethan drama too much in the light of absolute literature, making it a law unto itself. He took too little account of the historic influences, the material conditions, under which it was produced; and in this the inheritors and expounders of his doctrine have faithfully followed his lead. Poetry—pure beauty, force, dignity, perfection of utterance—is in reality one and eternal. What is well said is well said, whether it be addressed to Ionian villagers or to Roman courtiers, to the populace of sixteenth-century London, or to the exquisites of seventeenth-century Versailles. And that which seems well said because of its consonance with a temporary fashion, is in reality ill said. Fine style is fine style— and poetry is the fine flower of fine style—in virtue of its harmony with primal instincts, with universal laws of perception and association, with fundamental conditions of intellectual, emotional, and sensuous life. It appeals to no conventions, to no ephemeral modes of thought; wherefore it may be studied and appraised as a thing in itself, apart from all historical or sociological knowledge. Drama, on the other hand, is a thing of convention, of fashion. The drama of any given period (in so far as it is a natural, not a merely imitative, product) is strictly a part of its manners and customs, and must be studied as a social institution. Its merits and defects must be read in the light of the material and intellectual circumstances which gave it birth, and the conventions of one period must not be mistaken for everlasting canons of art. Lamb and his disciples, as it seems to me, are subject to this illusion. Their knowledge of the Elizabethan period is imperfect on the historical side, and on the literary side so intimate as to be uncritical. Is this a paradox? Surely not. Is it not rather a truism that if we stand too near a given object we cannot see it in its true relations and proportions? Lamb read himself into the literature of the perioduntil he himself became an Elizabethan in spirit. His moral and aesthetic perceptions, and especially his notions of dramatic effect, became wholly Elizabethanized. 'Elia hath not so fixed his nativity', he declared in one of his most whimsical papers, 'but that, if he seeth occasion, he will be born again in whatever place, and at whatever period, shall seem good unto him.' By way of preparation for his study of the Elizabethans he seems to throw back his nativity from 1775 to 1575. This makes his criticism delightful, but inconclusive. Prince Posterity must not abdicate the privileges, which are also the duties, of his heirship to the ages. In dealing with an art so absolutely conditioned by time and place as the drama, we must not sublimate into an ideal and practice, even the noblest practice, of one particular period, and that, so far as its theatrical audiences were concerned, a semi barbarous one. By all means let us be capable, on occasion, of taking the Elizabethan point of view; but let us not therefore abandon for ever the point of view of universal art, or, in other words, of right reason. Lamb's estimate of the pure poetry contained in the Elizabethan drama will always be valid, for excellence of style, as aforesaid, is one and eternal. Whoso has eyes to see it at all is always at the right point of view. But in drama, even under what may be called the poetical convention, pure beauty of expression is a subordinate and inessential quality; and Lamb, I submit, was not at the right point of view for estimating the Elizabethan drama as drama, in its relation to other dramatic literatures and to the ideal of

dramatic creation. His disciples, too, partly by reason of their discipleship, have failed to place themselves at the just point of view. They have, if anything, exaggerated his tendency to make the Elizabethan drama a law unto itself. Therefore, I repeat, it is high time that the whole Lamb tradition should be subjected to careful scrutiny.

I have neither the learning, the leisure, nor the skill for such a task. For the present, at any rate, I can only attempt, in a few desultory remarks on 'The Duchess of Malfi', to indicate to better qualified critics the line of thought which, as it seems to me, they ought to follow. Onlookers, we know, see most of the game, and an outsider may sometimes attain to a clearer and saner vision of things than is possible for an adept. Specialist criticism, if I may call it so, has in Mr. Swinburne an illustrious and redoubtable champion. In learning, insight, sympathy, eloquence, he stands alone. Were I to measure myself against him in all or any of these qualities, my presumption would be such as it would taxeven his rhetoric to characterize. My will, like Orlando's, hath in it a more modest working. Far from presuming to rival him as an expert, I claim no advantage save that of inexpertness, detachment of mind, comparative aloofness of standpoint. Erudition will not always guide a critic to the best point of view. Intensity of vision may even be deceptive if the object be not approached at the proper angle.

Let me in the first place clear the ground, and refresh the reader's memory, by means of a brief synopsis of 'The Duchess of Malfi'. Webster found in Bandello the bare incident of a marriage between a Duchess of Malfi and her major-domo, both of whom are killed at the instigation of her brother, the Cardinal of Arragon. Bandello casually mentions 'Bosolo' as the name of the man who shot Antonio; and there is also a vague reference to an unnamed brother of the Cardinal's. To all intents and purposes, however, the play, both as regards character and incident, is of Webster's own invention. He borrowed scarcely a single detail from the Italian novel.

In the first act, at Malfi, Ferdinand, Duke of Calabria, and his brother, the Cardinal of Arragon, in parting from their sister, the widowed Duchess of Malfi, warn her, in threatening terms, not to think of marrying again. They set one Bosola to spy upon her actions. No sooner are their backs turned than the Duchess summons her major-domo, Antonio Bologna, proposes marriage to him, and marries him (per verba [de] presenti, as she puts it) on the spot. In the second act, Bosola suspects that the Duchess is pregnant, and lays a trap to make her reveal her condition. This hastens her delivery, and Bosola's suspicion is converted into certainty when he picks up a paper in which Antonio has cast the nativity of the new-born child. It never occurs to him that Antonio may be the father; but he posts off to Rome to inform his employers of his discovery. Bosola's intelligence annoys the Cardinal, and throws Ferdinand into a foul-mouthed frenzy of rage, which brings the act to a close. Ferdinand's frenzy, however, is not a furor brevis. He is so patient in his wrath that before the third act opens, his sister, living in undisturbed conjugal felicity, has had two more children. Bosola is still spying upon her and eager to discover her paramour, but does not even now suspect Antonio. Ferdinand, by means of a secret door, enters his sister's chamber and upbraids her savagely, professing as his motive an extreme concern for her lost virtue. Seeing that they are on the brink of discovery, she accuses Antonio of embezzlement and pretends to dismiss him from her service, promising to follow him to Ancona, where he is to take refuge. Bosola, by affectingsympathy with the disgraced Antonio, worms her secret out of her, and of course makes known the truth to his employers. The action now wanders to Loretto, where Antonio

and the Duchess are separated. Antonio takes refuge in Milan, and the Duchess, captured by Bosola, is led back to Malfi.

We now come to what Mr. Swinburne calls 'the overwhelming terrors and the overpowering beauties of that unique and marvellous fourth act, in which the genius of this poet spreads its fullest and its darkest wing for the longest and the strongest of its flights'. The scene is the room in her palace in which the Duchess is imprisoned. Ferdinand, entering the dark, pretends to be reconciled with her, and gives her, instead of his own hand, that of a dead man, leading her to believe that it is Antonio's. Then a curtain is drawn back, and (in an alcove, I suppose) are revealed waxen images representing the dead bodies of Antonio and their children. The Duchess does not suspect the trick which is being played upon her, and (oddly enough) makes no attempt to approach or touch the supposed corpses. A grief-stricken woman might be expected to kiss her dead children, and so discover the fraud; but the Duchess is too much taken up (as Lamb puts it) with 'speaking the dialect of despair', and saying things that have 'a snatch of Tartarus and the sould in bale', to think of any such simple and natural proceeding. Then Ferdinand releases the mad-folk from 'the common hospital', and sets them 'to sing and dance and act their gambols to the full o' the moon' around her chamber. Presently they enter, singing:

> O, let us howl, some heavy note, Some deadly dogged howl, Sounding as from the threat'ning throat Of beasts, and fatal fowl!
>
> (IV ii 61–4)

They indulge in ribald ravings, dance a dance 'with music answerable thereto', and then go off again as Bosola enters, disguised as an old man. He announces himself as a tomb-maker, introduces 'executioners, with a coffin, cords, and a bell', and proceeds to speak 'the living person's dirge' in order 'to bring her by degrees to mortification'. Then the Duchess is strangled, her children are strangled, and her maid, Cariola, is strangled, all on the open stage. Ferdinand goes mad at sight of this slaughter-house, and Bosola, suddenly penitent, sets off for Milan to carry the news to Antonio. In the fifth act, at Milan, the Cardinal's mistress, Julia, is poisoned;Bosola kills Antonio, mistaking him for the Cardinal; then he kills the Cardinal's servant, the Cardinal himself, and Ferdinand, who, by the way, is still raving mad; and Ferdinand, before he dies, kills Bosola. Antonio's friend, Delio, and one of the children are left alive.

In this tragedy, then, five men, three women, and two children come to violent ends, the children and two of the women being strangled on the open stage; yet, says Mr. Swinburne,

> in all the vast and voluminous records of critical error there can be discovered no falsehood more foolish or more flagrant than the vulgar tradition which represents this high-souled and gentle-hearted poet as one morbidly fascinated by a fantastic attraction towards the 'violent delights' of horror, and the nervous or sensational excitements of criminal detail.
>
> 'What', [says Lamb] 'are "Luke's iron crown", the brazen bull of Perillus, Procrustes' bed, to the waxen images which counterfeit death, to the wild masque of madmen, the tomb-maker, the bell-man, the living person's dirge, the mortification by

> degrees! To move a horror skilfully, to touch a soul to the quick, to lay upon fear as much as it can bear, to wean and weary a life till it is ready to drop, and then step in with mortal instruments to take its last forfeit; this only a Webster can do. Writers of an inferior genius may "upon horror's head horrors accumulate", but they cannot do this. They mistake quantity for quality, they "terrify babes with painted devils", but they know not how a soul is capable of being moved; their terrors want dignity, their affrightments are without decorum.'

Well, well! We are to understand, then, that the hideous and dragged-in antics of insanity constitute a decorous affrightment, and that the public strangling of two little children is not a 'violent delight'!

When we thus find great critics putting forth judgements which read like extravagant and wanton paradoxes, must we not suspect an illusion somewhere? Their expressions are, on the face of it, in flagrant contradiction with the facts (which the reader may verify for himself) set forth in my account of the play. But from such an account, from a bald narrative of facts, what element is necessarily excluded? Clearly that of style, of verbal felicity, of what Mr. Swinburne calls 'literary power, poetic beauty, charm of passionate or pathetic fancy'. Now in these qualities—qualities of which Lamb and Mr. Swinburne are judges beyond all appeal—Webster undoubtedly standsvery high. In spite of a metrical laxity which Mr. Swinburne himself deplores, this play contains many passages of great inherent beauty, and a still greater number of speeches of a quaint and, so to speak, unexpected dramatic force and appropriateness. Take for instance Antonio's speech when the Duchess feigns to dismiss him from her household:

> O, the inconstant And rotten ground of service! —you may see 'Tis ev'n like him, that in a winter night Takes a long slumber o'er a dying fire, As loth to part from't; yet parts thence as cold As when he first sat down.
>
> (III ii 198–203)

Here, again, is an often-quoted speech of the Duchess to Cariola while the madmen are howling round her apartment:

> I'll tell thee a miracle— I am not mad yet, to my cause of sorrow. Th' heaven o'er my head seems made of molten brass, The earth of flaming sulphur, yet I am not mad: I am acquainted with sad misery, As the tann'd galley-slave is with his oar; Necessity makes me suffer constantly, And custom makes it easy…
>
> (IV ii 23–30)

I could fill page after page with passages of the like imaginative beauty and vitality, but must content myself with reminding the reader of the immortal dirge, and quoting these four lines from it:

> Of what is't fools make such vain keeping? Sin their conception, their birth weeping;
> Their life a general mist of error, Their death a hideous storm of terror.
>
> (IV ii 186–9)

The man who wrote this was in truth a poet, and Mr. Swinburne may, if he is so disposed, class him as 'a lesser poet only than the greatest'. It must be remembered, indeed, that he was one of 'the early risers of literature' who 'found language with the dew upon it'—in other words, he lived at a period when comparatively small men had the knack of writing astonishingly great verse. But that is a side consideration, and nothing to the present purpose. What is certain is that the writings of Websterare full of 'literary power, poetic beauty, and charm of passionate and pathetic fancy'. Is it not possible that these qualities, to which they are so keenly sensitive may have misled Lamb and Mr. Swinburne? Receiving great delight from a work in dramatic form, may they not have concluded too hastily that their pleasure was due to its dramatic merits, and transferred to the characters and the fable admiration which belongs by right to the language and the imagery? In a word, may they not have mistaken a low form of drama for a high, and even the highest, because they found it robed in regal purple of pure poetry?

Whatever may have been Webster's personal tastes, there cannot be the smallest doubt that the average Elizabethan audience was avid of 'the "violent delights" or horror, and the nervous or sensational excitements of criminal detail'. It is futile to pretend that either the gallants and masked fair ones in the 'rooms', or the citizens and 'prentices in the 'yard' did not love bloodshed and physical horror in action, reckless crudity, and even deliberate lewdness, in speech. No playwright of the period failed to minister to these tastes, for in Elizabeth's time, no less than in our own, the drama's laws the drama's patrons gave. The stage was not only the vehicle for the highest poetry and philosophy of the time; it was also its Punch and its Pick-Me-Up, its London Journal, its Police News and its Penny Dreadful. In respect of physical horror, at any rate, Shakespeare pandered less to the mob than almost any of his contemporaries, and in nothing did he show more clearly that he was not of an age but for all the time. Nor can we doubt that several even of the choicest spirits of the age, found the less difficulty in gratifying the popular taste for gruesomeness and gore, because their own imagination was haunted in a strange uncanny fashion by the legendary crimes of the Italian Renaissance. Was not this pre-eminently the case of Webster? When we find a playwright, in his two acknowledged masterpieces, drenching the stage with blood even beyond the wont of his contemporaries and searching out every possible circumstance of horror—ghosts, maniacs, severed limbs and all the paraphernalia of the charnel-house and the tomb—with no conceivable purpose except just to make our flesh creep, may we not reasonably, or rather must we not inevitably, conclude that he either revelled in 'violent delights' for their own sake, or wantonly pandered to the popular craving for them? If Mr. Swinburne accepts the latter alternative—if he would have us believe that the Webster of the tragedies is not the real Webster, but is playing an abhorrent part to ingratiate himself with the groundlings—then his position, if essentially unprovable,is also essentially incontrovertible. But I do not understand him to claim any private or peculiar knowledge of Webster's character. What he evidently means is that in these very tragedies we can discover the 'high soul' and 'gentle heart' of the poet, and can not discover any morbid

predilection for 'violent delights'. High-souled and gentle-hearted he may possibly have been, for these qualities are not incompatible with the vilest perversions of the aesthetic sense. But to argue that Webster's aesthetic sense was refined and unperverted is simply to maintain that black is white and blood is rose-water.

'Webster does not deal in horrors for their own sake', we shall be told, 'but uses them as means towards the illustration and development of character'. Could he not have made clear to us the resignation and fortitude of the Duchess of Malfi without the ghastly mummery of the dead hand and the waxen corpses? To argue so is simply to deny his competence as a dramatic poet. I have heard it maintained that the strangling of Cariola is designed to contrast with that of the Duchess—the frantic terror of the maid serving to throw into relief the noble courage of the mistress. Who can fail to perceive that if this were the intention, the death of the maid must of necessity precede that of the mistress, not follow it, as in Webster? When an effect of contrast is aimed at, and the things to be contrasted cannot be displayed simultaneously, it is clear that the minor, so to speak, must precede the major, the darkness must precede the light. In other words, the background must be established before the object to be set off against it is presented to our view. And then the children! What effect of contrast is served by the massacre of the innocents? Whose character does it serve to illustrate? Their mother is already dead, or at least unconscious. Had they been strangled before her eyes, the effect would have been one of unparalleled, intolerable brutality, but it would, in a certain sense, have been dramatic. As it is, their death is a mere mechanical piling of horror upon horror. It does not even throw any new light on the character of Bosola; when a man is wading in blood, an inch more or less is no great matter. What it does throw light upon is the character, or at least the aesthetic sense, of Webster and his public. It is perfectly evident that Elizabethan audiences found a pleasurable excitement in the crude fact of seeing little children strangled on the stage, and that Webster, to say the least of it, had no insuperable objection to gratifying that taste.

Far be it from me to argue that horror has not its legitimate place in literature and in drama. 'To move a horrorskilfully, to touch a soul to the quick' is neither an easy nor an unworthy task. My point is that in 'The Duchess of Malfi' (and, to a minor degree, in 'The White Devil') the horrors are unskilfully moved—that they are frigid, mechanical, brutal. Literature is literature in virtue of the brain-power implicit in it; and there goes no more brain power to the invention of these massacres and monstrosities than to carving a turnip lantern and sticking it on a pole.

Much might be said, if space permitted, of Webster's construction and characterization. Of dramatic concentration he did not dream. Though a younger man than Shakespeare (whose 'right happy and copius industry' he bracketed with that of Dekker and Heywood, and postponed to the loftier talents of Chapman and Jonson), he reverted to a stage of literary development which Shakespeare had outgrown. In 'The White Devil' and 'The Duchess of Malfi' the differentiation between romance and drama is still incomplete. They are not constructed plays, but loose-strung, go-as-you-please romances in dialogue. The motivation of 'The Duchess of Malfi' is haphazard even beyond the Elizabethan average. No motive is assigned in the earlier part of the play for the brother's virulent and almost monomaniac opposition to the very idea of their sister's marrying again. After her death, Ferdinand explains that he hoped to gain 'an infinite mass of treasure' if she died unmarried, and we may presume that the Cardinal would have been his co-heir. But this motive, even when we are tardily

informed of it, does not account for his epilepsies of rage and cruelty, which seem sometimes to spring from regard for the family honour, sometimes from a rabid enthusiasm for 'virtue' in the abstract. Perhaps we are to understand that all these motives combine to work up his fundamentally cruel nature to the pitch of madness. This might be a plausible theory enough, but we arrive at it only by conjecture. It is more than doubtful whether Webster himself was at all clear as to his characters' motives. In Ferdinand he provided Burbage with an effective part in which to 'tear a cat', and neither author, actor, nor audience inquired too curiously into the reasons for his frenzies and his cruelties. A similar difficulty confronts us in Bosola. This 'moody and mocking man of blood' is certainly not, like the ordinary melodramatic villain, hewn all of one piece. There is an appearance of subtlety in his character because it is full of contradictions. But there is no difficulty in making a character inconsistent; the task of the artist is to show an underlying harmony between the apparently conflicting attributes. Bosola seems sometimes to revel in his infamy, at others to bethe unwilling instrument of a power he cannot resist. 'And though I loathed the evil,' he says to Ferdinand after the massacre, 'yet I loved you that did counsel it.' But this is the first and last we hear of any sentimental devotion on the spy's part towards his employers; nor can we discover the smallest ground for such a feeling. Mr. Swinburne himself has a momentary misgiving as to 'the sudden vehemence of transformation, which seems to fall like fire from Heaven upon the two chief criminals who figure on the stage of murder'. But he quickly pulls himself together, explaining that 'the whole atmosphere of the action is so charged with thunder that this double and simultaneous shock of moral electricity rather thrills us with admiration and faith than chills us with repulsion and distrust'. On the whole, I am inclined to think that Webster came very near to creating in Bosola one of the most complex and most human villains in drama, a living illustration of that age-old but ever new paradox: 'Video meliora, proboque; deteriora sequor.' But the fatal lack of clearness ruins everything. We cannot help feeling from time to time that the poet is writing for mere momentary effect, and has suffered the general scheme of the character to slip out of sight. All we can say with confidence is that, artistically, Bosola is worth a score of Flamineos. The way in which the action is suffered to straggle over quite unnecessary stretches of time and space bespeaks the romance rather than the drama. Ferdinand's fury becomes doubly incredible and ineffective when two years or more are suffered to elapse between his reception of Bosola's intelligence and his descent upon the Duchess. The only advantage of this delay is that but for it we should have to go without the massacre of the innocents. The relevance of the passage in which Delio makes love to the Cardinal's mistress utterly escapes me; indeed Julia is altogether a mere excrescence on the play. In shifting the scene to Loretto, Webster seems at first sight to have slavishly and mechanically followed Bandello; but his motive was probably to work in the dumb-show pageant of the Cardinal's military investiture. This to-ing and fro-ing, in any case, seriously enfeebles the action. The right, if need be, to jump not only from Amalfi to Ancona, but from China to Peru, is certainly one of the vital privileges of the romantic drama; but it is no less certain that changes of scene must be justified by some clear artistic advantage, else they merely injure the general effect. Wantonly to ignore the unities is no less an error than to sacrifice everything to their observance.

This is scarcely the place in which to consider Mr. Swinburne's assertion that 'Webster is without exceptionthe cleanliest writer of his time'. I think it must be based on some private

interpretation of the term 'cleanly'; but I do not profess to have weighed grossness against grossness with any nicety. The point, at any rate, is quite inessential. The gist of my argument, so far as it can be summed up in a phrase, is this: that Webster was not, in the special sense of the word, a great dramatist, but was a great poet who wrote haphazard dramatic or melodramatic romances for an eagerly receptive but semi-barbarous public.

43. WILLIAM POEL DEFENDS WEBSTER 1893

William Poel (1852–1934), actor, theatre manager, and producer, founded the Elizabethan Stage Society (1894–1905) in an important effort to produce the earlier dramatists under Elizabethan staging conditions. He produced 'The Duchess' in October 1892, and generated Archer's first attack. From A New Criticism of Webster's 'The Duchess of Malfi', 'Library Review', II (1893), pp. 21–4.

In a recent number of the 'New Review' Mr. Archer expresses the opinion that Webster was 'a great poet who wrote haphazard dramatic romances for an eagerly receptive but semi-barbarous public'; and adds that Webster excels in verbal felicity, and in writing beautiful language which is full of imagery and literary power. Of Webster's dramatic felicity and dramatic power Mr. Archer is apparently incredulous. The play of 'The Duchess of Malfi' is 'robed in regal purple of pure poetry', but the dramatic setting in which the poetic jewels are enchased is valueless. In other words, Webster's verse to be admired must be dissociated from the play for which it is written. But Webster's poetry, of all others, cannot be separated from its dramatic interest. The immortal dirge may be, as Mr. Archer affirms, true poetry, but coming from the lips of Bosola at a moment when the suffering woman is facing her own grave, the words have an additional force and meaning. They become then convincing. Nor is it reasonable to ignore the dramatic instinct needed to conceive dialogue that gives point tothe situation. Later on in the same scene Bosola says to Ferdinand

> You have bloodily approv'd the ancient truth, That kindred commonly do worse agree
> Than remote strangers.
>
> (IV ii 270–2)

and these words, in themselves pregnant with knowledge of human nature, are made doubly suggestive by the dramatist's skill in having them spoken at the moment when the action gives reality to them. In fact, Webster's most celebrated passages are not great simply because they are pre-eminent in beauty of idea and felicity of expression, but because they carry with them dramatic force by being appropriate to character and situation. 'The real object of the drama,' says Macaulay, 'is the exhibition of human character, and those situations which most signally develop character form the best plot.' Judged by this standard, a well-constructed play may be

trifling, dull, and unnatural, while 'a haphazard dramatic romance' that has in it some scenes inferior in power and passion to nothing in the whole range of the drama, may entitle the author to the position of a great dramatist.

A difficulty in appreciating the actions and motives of Webster's characters may arise from that imperfect historical knowledge which we are told is the characteristic of Lamb's criticism. Webster wrote his play not for the purpose of dealing 'in horror for horror's sake', nor 'just to make the flesh creep', but with a desire to give vital embodiment to the manners and morals of the Italian Renaissance, as they appeared to the imagination of Englishmen. As Vernon Lee ably points out, it was the very strangeness and horror of Italian life, as compared with the dull decorum of English households, that constituted the attraction of Italian tragedy for Elizabethan playgoers. They were familiar with the saying that 'nothing in Italy was cheaper than human life'. Their own Ascham had written that he found in Italy, during a nine days' stay in one small city, more liberty to sin 'than ever he heard tell of in our noble citie of London in nine yeare'. No wonder, then, if the metaphysical judgement of the Puritan urged Elizabethan dramatists to show, by the action of their dramas, that there existed a higher power than the mere strength of those fiercer passions which occurred in Italy, the land of passion in the sixteenth century. Looked at from this point of view, much in the play that is unintelligible can be explained. Burckhardt, in his 'Renaissance of Italy', tells us that a warm imagination kept ever alivethe memory of injuries, real or supposed; more especially in a country that allowed each man to take the law into his own hands. Not only a husband, but even a brother, in order to satisfy the family honour, would take upon himself the act of vengeance; nor would a father scruple to kill his own daughter, if the dignity of his house had been compromised by an unworthy marriage. Besides, an Italian's revenge was never a half-and-half affair. The Duchess's children are 'massacred' because the whole name and race of Antonio must be rooted out. Cariola, too, must die, because she helped to bring about the hated marriage. It is this desire for truth to Italian life that causes Webster to introduce Julia, and the pre-eminently Italian dialogue between Julia and Delio. Without Julia we do not get our typical Cardinal of the Italian Renaissance, a man experienced in simony, poisoning, and lust. There is even a higher motive for her appearance in the play. She is designed as a set-off to the Duchess; as an instance of unholy love in contrast to the chaste love of the Duchess. Bosola is a masterly study of the Italian 'familiar', who is at the same time a humanist. He is refined, subtle, indifferent, cynical. A criminal in action but not in constitution. A man forced by his position to know all the inward resources of his own nature, passing or permanent, and conscious of the possibility of a very brief period of power and influence. It is necessary, moreover, in judging of this play to take into consideration the restrictions put upon the dramatist by the novelist. Webster's audience was too familiar with the various incidents of the story to allow of the dramatist ignoring them. In one instance only does Webster depart from a statement of Bandello, and that is in making the Cardinal the younger and not the elder brother—an unaccountable oversight on the part of Bandello—for Italian Cardinals were invariably the younger sons of noble houses.

Mr. Robert Louis Stevenson says that to read a play is a knack: the fruit of much knowledge, and some imagination, comparable to that of reading score, 'the reader is apt to miss the proper point of view'. To see dramatic propriety and dramatic power in 'The Duchess of Malfi', there may be needed both critical and historical imagination.

44.
A TRADITIONALIST PROTESTS
1893

William Watson (1858–1935), poet and critic, fought a rearguard action for the Victorians against such fin de siècle figures as Wilde and Beardsley. A champion of the traditionalist cause in poetry, and defender, as one reviewer wrote, of 'orthodoxy, patriotism, England, home and duty', Watson, unsurprisingly, was not at home in Webster's world. From 'Excursions in Criticism', pp. 1–22.

...with the present century came a race of critics who announced with much originality and power that the most potent spirits of the old drama were not Jonson with his laborious art, nor Massinger with his surefooted style, nor Beaumont and Fletcher with their decorative fancy and lyrical grace, but Marlowe of the 'mighty line,' and Webster of the sombre imagination, and Dekker and Middleton and Tourneur and Ford.

The most exquisitely gifted of these critics, Charles Lamb, was fired with all the zeal of a discoverer. In many instances he absurdly exaggerated the fertility and beauty of his new-found land, but much must be pardoned to the pioneer. With adventurers who first look down into an unmapped world from a 'peak in Darien,' the immediate impulse is to gaze and marvel rather than accurately observe. To Lamb and Hazlitt the work of the forgotten dramatists was a region of indescribable glamour and enchantment; and no wonder, for of them and their immediate associates we may say that

They were the first that ever burst Into that silent sea.

And some of their verdicts are not likely to be annulled or much modified. Marlowe is a case in point. As the real founder, though not precisely the initiator, both of English tragedy and English blank verse—as being thus in a certain sense the father of our poetry more truly than even Chaucer, for Chaucer's direct influence upon Shakespeare and Milton is not great, while Marlowe's unquestionably is—the immense importance of his position can scarcely be overstated....

Let us be grateful to that group of ardent explorers who brushed the thick dust of two centuries from the pages of our first great dramatic poet; but having tendered them our gratitude for real and brilliant service performed, we may still consider ourselves at liberty to inquire whether that absence of all just sense of proportion which distinguishes a contemporary school of criticism — a school whose loudest, most voluble apostles are capable of naming

Villon in the same breath with Dante—is not lineally traceable to the imperfect equipoise of zeal and discretion which could permit Lamb to speak of Ford, for instance, as belonging to 'the first order of Poets.'…

Reverting to Hazlitt, one is sorry to find that great critic's sobriety of judgment, as evinced by his coolly judicial estimate of Ford, deserting him somewhat in the presence of Webster, of whom he observes: 'His "White Devil" and "Duchess of Malfi" upon the whole perhaps come the nearest to Shakespeare of anything we have on record.' It may be worth while briefly to consider the propriety of the criticism which brackets the name of John Webster with the greatest name in literature.

Coming in the immediate wake of the great master, Webster had, of course—as was inevitable with a man of his epoch—studied under Shakespeare, so to speak, and though he cannot be said to have 'caught his great language,' yet something like an echo of the master's utterance may be heard at times in the pupil's speech. Even this however, is apt to be delusive, being really in part ascribable to that general community of tone and likeness of vocabulary amongst the Elizabethan dramatists, whereby, in a measure, all the contemporaries of Shakespeare seem to deliver themselves with somewhat of his accent and air. Then, too, Webster abounds with direct verbal reminiscences of Shakespeare. Plagiarisms I suppose they may be called, but, in truth, they are but petty larcenies of a kind having no deep dye of turpitude. Dryden says of Ben Jonson, referring to his spoliations of the classics, 'there is scarce a poet or historian among the Roman authors of those times whom he has not translated in "Sejannus" and "Catiline." But he has done his robberies so openly that we may see he fears not to be taxed by any law. He invades authors like a monarch, and what would be theft in other poets is only victory in him.' This imperial mode of appropriation is not, however, Webster's manner. In fact, his numerous little filchings from Shakespeare are of the sneaking sort; less like heroical spoils of conquest than furtive nibblings at the vast stores of an inexhaustible granary. But, in conjunction with broader evidences of style, they help to show the extent of Shakespeare's literary influenceupon Webster. It was a literary influence almost solely, a moral influence hardly at all. Shakespeare could teach something of dramatic art to his immediate successors, but his large and lucid vision of life was an incommunicable private prerogative. Their habitual attitude of mind in presence of the deeper issues of existence bears no essential resemblance to his. Shakespeare now and again, as in 'Measure for Measure,' resigned himself to a temporary sojourn in some desert tract of thought or feeling. But cynicism, disgust, and despair, were brief and casual refuges of his spirit. These moods are the permanent and congenial dwelling-places of minds like Webster's. In the presence of Shakespeare we feel ourselves in communication with an inexhaustible reservoir of vitality. Life passes into us from every pore of his mind. We turn to Webster and it is like exchanging the breath of morn for the exhalations of the charnel. An unwholesome chill goes out from him. An odour of decay oppresses the tenebrous air. This poet's morbid imagination affects us like that touch of the dead man's hand in one of the hideous scenes of his own most famous play.

That play is 'The Duchess of Malfi.' Its heroine, the Duchess, a young widow, has recently married her steward Antonio. Her powerful brothers, Duke Ferdinand and the Cardinal, through the agency of their spy and bravo, Bosola, become aware of her *mesalliance,* and, enraged at the discovery, proceed to put in motion an elaborately infernal machinery of punishment. She is incarcerated in her palace. Duke Ferdinand visits her in a darkened

chamber and extends to her at parting a dead man's hand in lieu of his own. Horrified, she calls for lights, which, being brought, disclose the effigies of her husband and children, appearing as if murdered, and devised so ingeniously,

By Vincentio Lauriola, The curious master in that quality,

as to deceive her with the semblance of nature. From this point onwards the horrors are dispensed with profuse liberality. Duke Ferdinand, apparently solicitous above all things that his sister should not suffer *ennui* in her durance, entertains her with a company of madmen purposely released from Bedlam. One of them sings a rousing catch, beginning cheerfully thus:—

'O let us howl some heavy note, Some deadly dogged howl.'

They dance, —the performance, according to the stage-direction, being accompanied 'with music answerable there-unto.' The Bedlamites having retired, Bosola enters. Bosola is a kind of human gangrene infecting the whole body of the play. His putrid fancy is ingeniously loathsome, and leaves a trace of slime upon all objects which it traverses: though it may here be remarked parenthetically that Webster exhibits in general a singular fondness for illustrations drawn from disease and corruption. In the circuit of his imagery the most frequent halting-places are the mad-house, the lazar-house, the charnel-house. But, as was observed, Bosola enters to the Duchess, announcing that he has come to make her tomb. Afterwards executioners appear, 'with a coffin, cords, and a bell.' Finally the Duchess, her woman Cariola, and her children are strangled on the stage. The play, however, still drags its festering length through another act, in the course of which several more or less unpleasant persons are suitably 'removed,' until the reader, satiated with such gruesome fare, is left to digest, if he can, his ghoulish banquet.

And these gross melodramatic horrors, irredeemable by any touch of saving imagination—these are the poetic elements which Lamb, admiring in them what he calls 'their remoteness from the conceptions of ordinary vengeance,' seriously, and with all the curious brilliance of his style, discusses as if such things really belonged to the domain of pure and noble art. Remote from ordinary conceptions these may be, but remote by any essential superiority of elevation they assuredly are not. Horrors that are stale and commonplace are, of course, recognized at once for the cheap and vulgar stuff that they are; but horrors that are strange and bizarre do not of necessity belong to any intrinsically higher level of art; both are properly of the same class, inasmuch as they propose to themselves the excitation of the same order of emotions. And the truth is, with regard to Webster and his group, that these men had no sober vision of things. Theirs is a world that reels in a 'disastrous twilight' of lust and blood. We rise from Shakespeare enlarged and illumined. Webster is felt as a contracting and blurring influence. Like his own Duchess of Malfi, when she exclaims:

'The heavens o'er my head seem made of molten brass,'

we are oppressed as by a sense of a world which is but a narrow and noisome prison-house, with the heavens for its ignoble cope. The pity and terror here are not such as purify. Life seems a chance medley, a rendezvous ofbewildered phantoms; virtue in this disordered world is merely wasted, honour bears not issue, nobleness dies unto itself. What one wishes to protest against is the false criticism which would elevate him and his group to the rank of the masters who feed man's spirit, just as we should protest against the putting forward of a similar claim in behalf of such a writer, for instance, as Edgar Poe. Poe was a literary artist of much power; the brilliancy of outline which are not the shadow and light of nature, yet have their peculiar fascination; but the authentic masters, are they not masters in virtue of their power of nobly elucidating the difficult world, not of exhibiting it in a fantastic lime-light? And after all, the highest beauty in art is, perhaps, a transcendent propriety. The touches which allure us by strangeness, or which 'surprise by a fine excess,' belong at best to the second order of greatness. The highest, rarest, and most marvellous of all are those which simply compel us to feel that they are supremely fit and right.

One has to admit that Webster's fatalism, debased though it be, —a fatalism expressing itself in such words as those of Bosola,

'We are merely the stars' tennis balls, struck and bandied Which way please them—'

is in its way impressive; but how unlike the fatalism of Greek tragedy, from which a certain tonic and astringent philosophy of life may be extracted! Webster's is merely a fatalism having its root in a conception of existence as essentially anarchic. In reading him we lose for the time all sensation of an ordered governance of things. Life seems a treacherous phantasm or lawless dream, in which human shapes chase one another like fortuitous shadows across an insubstantial arena. The ethical infertility of such a presentation of the world is manifest enough, but how shortsighted and shallow the criticism which professes to see any kinship between Shakespeare and a type of mind so defective in sanity of vision, so poor in humour, so remote from healthful nature, so out of touch with genial reality! 'A gulf or estuary of the sea which is Shakespeare!' The image is picturesque but unveracious, conveying as it does a suggestion of open sunlight and bracing briny air which is utterly foreign to Webster's talent. His art is no breezy inlet of any ocean, but rather a subterranean chamber where the breath and light of morning never penetrate. In the palace of life he seems to inhabit, by preference, some mouldy dungeon, peopled with spectral memories, and odorous of death.

And herein is shown the vast distance of such men from Shakespeare. The airy amplitudes, the azure spaces of his mind, are apparent to everyone. The others stifle you with murderous walls. And it is, perhaps, not altogether fanciful to surmise that this very characteristic of their art may have had something to do with the secret of its special fascination for Charles Lamb. External nature, it is notorious, had no hold upon him; that exquisite genius was anything but at home under the open sky. The world as seen by a picturesque torchlight rather than by candid sunlight attracted his gaze. And it was a torchlighted world, a world of alternate deep shadow and vivid glare, of Rembrandtesque chiaroscuro, that he found in the minor Elizabethan drama....

Enough, however, has been said. Let us take leave of Shakespeare's dramatic contemporaries and immediate successors with a hearty recognition of one great though extrinsic merit

common to them all. They are not gulfs or estuaries of his ocean, but they stand towards him in one very serviceable relation, they are his finest imaginable foils. If we live under the shadow of the Andes, a time comes when their immensity ceases to be a perpetual astonishment to us. But if Skiddaw and Helvellyn could suddenly be placed in the foreground, we should experience a renewed sensation of the vastness of Chimborazo and Aconcagua. If any reader is so unfortunate as to find that a prolonged familiarity with Shakespeare begets at last a some what blunted sensibility to the master's supreme power, a remedy is at hand by which his palate may recover its gust. Let him try a course of Webster and Dekker, Randolph and Tourneur, Middleton and Heywood and Ford.

45. GOSSE ON WEBSTER'S 'TRAGIC POEM' 1894

Extract from 'The Jacobean Poets' by Edmund Gosse (1849– 1928), poet and man of letters. As the first English translator of Ibsen ('Hedda Gabler', 1891), Gosse not surprisingly faults Webster as dramatist, but, unlike his colleague William Archer, he can praise Webster, as usual, for the poetry.

Webster's masterpiece is 'The Duchess of Malfy,' of which it may confidently be alleged that it is the finest tragedy in the English language outside the works of Shakespeare. The poet found his story in that storehouse of plots, the 'Novelle' of Bandello, but it had been told in English by others before him. It was one pre-eminently suited to inflame the sombre and enthusiastic imagination of Webster, and to inspire this great, irregular and sublime poem. Dramatic, in the accepted sense, it may scarcely be called. In the nice conduct of a reasonable and interesting plot to a satisfactory conclusion, Webster is not the equal of Fletcher or of Massinger; some still smaller writers may be considered to surpass him on this particular ground. But he aimed at something more, or at least, something other, than the mere entertainment of the groundlings. With unusual solemnity he dedicates his tragedy to his patron as a 'poem,' and his contemporaries perceived that this was a stronger and more elaborate piece of dramatic architecture than the eye was accustomed to see built for half a dozen nights, and then disappear. Ford, when he read 'The Duchess of Malfy,' exclaimed—

> Crown him a poet, whom nor Rome nor Greece Transcend in all theirs for a masterpiece,

and Middleton described it as Webster's own monument, fashioned by himself in marble. He had the reputation of being a slow and punctilious writer, among a set of poets, with whom a ready pen was more commonly in fashion. We look to Webster for work designed at leisure, and executed with critical and scrupulous attention. This carefulness, however, was unfavourable to a well-balanced composition, the movement of the whole being sacrificed to an extraordinary brilliancy in detailed passages, and though 'The Duchess of Malfy' has again and again been attempted on the modern stage, each experiment has but emphasized the fact that it is pre-eminently a tragic poem to be enjoyed in the study.

It is curious that in a writer so distinguished by care in the working out of detail, we should find so lax a metrical system as marks 'The Duchess of Malfy.' Here, again, Webster seems to be content to leave the general surface dull, while burnishing his own favourite passages to a high lustre. He has lavished the beauties both of his imagination and of his verse on what Mr. Swinburne eloquently calls 'the overwhelming terrors and the over-powering beauties of that unique and marvellous fourth act, in which the genius of the poet spreads its fullestand darkest wing for the longest and the strongest of its flights.'

This is what Bosola ejaculates when the Duchess dies —

> O, she's gone again! There the cords of life broke. O sacred innocence, that sweetly sleeps On turtle's feathers, whilst a guilty conscience Is a black register wherein is writ All our good deeds and bad, a perspective That shows us hell! that we can not be suffer'd To do good when we have a mind to it! This is manly sorrow; These tears, I am very certain, never grew In my mother's milk: my estate is sunk Below the degree of fear: where were These penitent fountains while she was living? O, they were frozen up! Here is a sight As direful to my soul as is the sword Unto a wretch hath slain his father. Come, I'll bear thee hence, And execute thy last will; that's deliver Thy body to the reverent dispose Of some good women; that the cruel tyrant Shall not deny me. Then I'll post to Milan, Where somewhat I will speedily enact Worth my dejection.

The characterization of the Duchess, with her independence, her integrity, and her noble and yet sprightly dignity, gradually gaining refinement as the joy of life is crushed out of her, is one calculated to inspire pity to a degree very rare indeed in any tragical poetry. The figure of Antonio, the subject whom she secretly raises to a morganatic alliance with her, is simply and wholesomely drawn. All is original, all touching and moving, while the spirit of beauty, that rare and intangible element, throws its charm like a tinge of rose-colour over all that might otherwise seem to a modern reader harsh or crude.

On one point, however, with great diffidence, the present writer must confess that he cannot agree with those great authorities, Lamb and Mr. Swinburne, who have asserted, in their admiration for Webster, that he was always skilful in the introduction of horror. In his own mind, as a poet, Webster doubtless was aware of the procession of a majestic and solemn spectacle, but when he endeavours to present that conception on the boards of the theatre, his 'terrors want dignity, his affrightments want decorum.' The horrible dumb shows of 'The Duchess of Malfy'—the strangled children, the chorus of maniacs, the murder ofCariola, as she bites and scratches, the scuffling and stabbing in the fifth act, are, it appears to me—with all deference to the eminent critics, who have applauded them—blots on what is notwithstanding a truly noble poem, and what, with more reserve in this respect, would have been one of the first tragedies of the world.

Similar characteristics present themselves to us in 'The White Devil,' but in a much rougher form. The sketchiness of this play, which is not divided into acts and scenes, and progresses with unaccountable gaps in the story, and perfunctory makeshifts of dumb show, has been the wonder of critics. But Webster was particularly interested in his own work as a romantic rather than a theatrical poet, and it must be remembered that after a long apprenticeship in collaboration, 'The White Devil' was his first independent play. It reads as though the writer had

put in only what interested him, and had left the rest for a coadjutor, who did not happen to present himself, to fill up. The central figure of Vittoria, the subtle, masterful, and exquisite she-devil, is filled up very minutely and vividly in the otherwise hastily painted canvas; and in the trial-scene, which is perhaps the most perfectly sustained which Webster has left us, we are so much captivated by the beauty and ingenuity of the murderess that, as Lamb says in a famous passage, we are ready to expect that 'all the court will rise and make proffer to defend her in spite of the utmost conviction of her guilt.' The fascination of Vittoria, like an exquisite poisonous perfume, pervades the play, and Brachiano strikes a note, which is the central one of the romance, when he says to her —

> Thou hast led me like a heathen sacrifice, With music and with fatal yokes of flowers,
> To my eternal ruin.

'The White Devil' is not less full than the 'Duchess of Malfy' of short lines and phrases full of a surprising melody. In the fabrication of these jewels, Webster is surpassed only by Shakespeare....

The abrupt withdrawal of Webster from writing for the stage—a step which he seems to have taken when he was little over thirty years of age—points to a sense of want of harmony between his genius and the theatre. In fact, none of the leading dramatists of our great period seems to have so little native instinct for stage-craft as Webster, and it is natural to suppose that in another age, and in other conditions, he would have directed his noble gifts of romantic poetry to other provinces of theart. If it were not absolutely certain that he flourished between 1602 and 1612, we should be inclined to place the period of his activity at least ten years earlier. Although in fact an exact contemporary of Beaumont and Fletcher, and evidently much Shakespeare's junior, a place between Marlowe and those dramatists seems appropriate to him, so primitive is his theatrical art, so ingenuous and inexperienced his notion of the stage. That he preferred the more stilted and buskined utterances of drama to grace and suppleness may be gathered from Webster's own critical distinctions; he has no words of admiration too high for Chapman and Jonson; Shakespeare he commends, with a touch of patronage, on a level with Dekker and Heywood, for his 'right happy and copious industry,' placing the romantic Beaumont and Fletcher above him. This points to a somewhat academic temper of mind, and to a tendency to look rather at the splendid raiment of drama than at the proficiency and variety of those who wear it. Webster is an impressive rather than a dexterous playwright; but as a romantic poet of passion he takes a position in the very first rank of his contemporaries.

46. WEBSTER IN THE ‘DNB’ 1899

Sidney Lee (1859–1926), editor of the ‘Dictionary of National Biography’ and biographer of Shakespeare, affords us the official view of Webster at the end of the century; the entry still stands in subsequent editions. Though free from the panegyrics of Swinburne and others, we are given a Webster whose blank verse is ‘more regular than Fletcher’s’. From volume XX, pp. 1031–6.

Although Nathan Drake and some other eighteenth-century critics had detected in Webster ‘a more than earthly wildness,’ it was Charles Lamb who first recognised his surpassing genius as a writer of tragedy. Subsequently Hazlitt, and at a later period Mr. Swinburne, bore powerful testimony to Lamb’s justness of view. Webster is obviously a disciple of Shakespeare, and of all his contemporaries Webster approaches Shakespeare nearest in tragic power.But his power is infinitely circumscribed when it is compared with Shakespeare’s. His knowledge of his master’s work, too, is sometimes visible in a form suggestive of plagiarism. His masterpieces are liable to the charge that they present the story indecisively and at times fail in dramatic point and perspicuity. Many scenes too strongly resemble dialogues from romances to render them effective on the stage. Webster lacked Shakespeare’s sureness of touch in developing character, and his studies of human nature often suffer from over-elaboration. With a persistence that seems unjustifiable in a great artist, Webster, moreover, concentrated his chief energies on repulsive themes and characters; he trafficked with an obstinate monotony in fantastic crimes. Nevertheless, he had a true artistic sense. He worked slowly, and viewed with abhorrence careless or undigested work. ‘No action,’ he wrote in the preface to ‘The Devil’s Law Case,’ ‘can ever be gracious where the decency of the language and ingenious structure of the scene arrive not to make up a perfect harmony.’ It is proof of his high poetic spirit that he was capable of illuminating scenes of the most repellent wrong-doing with miraculous touches of poetic beauty such as only Shakespeare could rival. Furthermore, Webster, despite all the vice round which his plots revolve, is rarely coarse. In depicting the perversities of passion he never deviated into pruriency, and handled situations of contentional delicacy with dignified reticence. Webster’s dialogue (he seldom essayed soliloquy) abounds in rapid imagery. His blank verse is vigorous and musical. In its general movement it resembles that of Shakespeare’s later plays. It is far less regular than Marlowe’s, but somewhat more regular than Fletcher’s. At its best his language has something of the ‘happy valiancy’ which Coleridge detected in Shakespeare’s ‘Antony and Cleopatra;’ it has consequently no small share of the obscurity

which characterizes Shakespeare's later work. This feature in Webster impressed his contemporaries, one of whom, Henry Fitzjeffrey, applied to him the epithet 'crabbed,' and declared that he wrote 'with his mouth awry.' But, as another contemporary, Middleton, suggested with surer insight, the force of Webster's tragic genius, despite the occasional indistinctness of his utterance and defects of execution, allows no doubt of the essential greatness of his dramatic conceptions.

The fame of Webster has spread to France and Germany. The 'Duchess of Malfy' and 'The White Devil' were published with an appreciative preface in French translation by Ernest Lafond in Paris in 1865, and Frederick Bodenstedt devoted the first volume of his 'William Shakespeare's Zeitgenossen und ihre Werke' (Berlin, 1858) to a German rendering of extracts from all Webster's plays.

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