“I am Duchess of Malfi still”: the Framing of Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi*.

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Signed:

Abstract

This thesis investigates the ways in which Webster's *Duchess of Malfi* has been framed and interpreted, selecting various case studies from the four hundred years of the play's history. It analyses the way in which a number of discourses have been brought to bear upon the play to delimit and shape its meanings, in the absence of a powerful determining author-figure such as Shakespeare.

The investigation is organised around three "strands", or elements which reappear in the commentary on the play. These are "pastness", the sense that the play is framed as belonging to an earlier era and resistant to being completely interpreted by the later theatrical context being used to reproduce it; "not-Shakespeare", the way in which *Malfi* has been set up in opposition to a "Shakespearean" model of dramatic value, or folded into that model; and "the dominance of the Duchess", the tendency for the central character to act as a focus for the play's perceived meanings. It identifies and analyses the co-opting of these elements in the service of wildly varying cultural politics throughout the play's history.

Sited within the assumptions and practices of Early Modern performance studies, this thesis constitutes an intervention in the field, demonstrating the possibility of a radically decentred approach. Such an approach is freed from either a reliance on Shakespeare as a prototypical model from which other works are imagined as diverging, or from the progressive narrative of theatre history in which twentieth century scholars "discovered" the true inherent meaning of early modern drama which had been "obscured" by the intervening centuries of theatre practice. It reveals blindspots and weaknesses in the existing Shakespeare-centred conception of the field, and opens up new possibilities for understanding Early Modern drama in historical and contemporary performance.

Contents:

Introduction

In a recent essay Genevieve Love suggests with conscious extravagance that "perhaps each early modern playwright would need, as Shakespeare has, a mode of performance criticism specially attuned to his particular history, style, dramaturgy" ('Without Performance', 133). In this thesis I am going to take Love's suggestion seriously, and take it one step further, arguing for a mode of criticism tailored not only to Webster's history and cultural situation, but specifically refined for *The Duchess of Malfi* itself. A survey of the current situation in Shakespearean, and non-Shakespearean, performance studies will demonstrate the need for such an approach and elucidate the theoretical sources upon which it will draw.

The Two Subcultures

Two broad tendencies co-exist in the scholarship of Shakespearean performance, which can be generally classed as "performance criticism" and "performance studies", two labels with which their practitioners frequently, though not always, identify their work. In 2006, Jeremy Lopez reviewed the collections *Acts of Criticism: Performance Matters in Shakespeare and His Contemporaries* and the *Companion to Shakespeare and Performance*, finding in them "the bizarrely parallel but unconnected trajectories of two different kinds of performance criticism" which demonstrated "positions...[which] seem entrenched rather than in flux" and amongst which "it is difficult to find much hope for dialogue" (366).

Part of the problem may well be that one form of criticism, "performance studies", regards the other, "performance criticism", as a superseded part of its own historical development, and thus hardly worth considering as a rival or alternative to its own approach. This is made clear by the introductory essay to the collection Lopez reviewed, Barbara Hodgdon and William B. Worthen's *Companion to Shakespeare and Performance* (2005), which describes the work of scholars such as John Russell Brown and J.L. Styan as part of a "first wave" of work on performance, defined by a term which makes the field's instability clear: "Even at the time, and certainly at a distance, 'performance criticism' sounds uncomfortably oxymoronic; a label in which 'criticism' gives legitimacy to the messy, contradictory, slightly suspect materiality of theatrical culture" (3). According to this view of the field, works such as Worthen's *Shakespeare and the Authority of Performance* (1997) developed the necessary theoretical tools for a next wave, and the *Companion* was intended to both reveal and create a decisive break with the outmoded approaches of the past: "The essays collected here mark a

move from the essentializing orthodoxy of performance criticism to the theoretical heterodoxy of Shakespearean performance studies, a more encompassing, expansive, expressive and relational arena for rethinking performance" (7). Five years after this essay, it is easy to find work in Shakespearean performance studies which adopts this narrative of disciplinary development and takes it for granted, such as Christopher Cobb's 'Acts of Seizure' (2010), which refers casually in its opening pages to "the decade since the theoretical ferment of the 1990s laid to rest the text versus performance debates that long preoccupied Shakespeare performance criticism", footnoting Worthen's *Authority of Performance* as the key text (51). The field thus defined as "Shakespearean performance studies" covers the work of scholars such as William B. Worthen, Barbara Hodgdon, James C. Bulman, Pascale Aebischer, Roberta Barker, Robert Shaughnessy, Carol Chillington Rutter and Kim Solga: such a diverse group possesses no common theoretical basis, but rather an attitude and set of assumptions about the identity of the field.

Despite the confidence with which critics like Cobb build performance (or "stage-centred") criticism into their genealogy as a period of confusion long superseded, the practice is still being carried out with undiminished confidence by some scholars. J. L. Styan provides a good example, both because of the clarity with which he lays out his ideas in *Perspectives on Shakespeare in Performance* (2000) and the iconic status which his *Shakespeare Revolution* (1977) has achieved as a touchstone which later scholars either ally themselves with or define themselves against. The rhetoric of Styan's 'The Basis for Performance Criticism' (in the former book) alerts the reader to the difference in his approach from Worthen, Cobb at al, with references to how "Shakespeare's props are few, but they speak for his play" and "the rhyming of the strongly metrical four-beat lines point to the first theatrical signals" (5, 2.) This is a critical mode which understands the stage as the most appropriate site for the release of meaning, but which insists on the playtext as the source of that meaning. "Signals" within the text, such as the presence of Macbeth's dagger or a suggestion that Cordelia should be kneeling, guide the stage practitioner towards a theatrical event which is framed by Styan as interpretation: the unlocking of meaning rather than its production. Moreover, this meaning's availability to us is the result of a linear descent of authority which can be more or less securely aligned: "Shakespeare", "his play", stage production. This phraseology, and the principles which underlie it, also run through his account of the history of Shakespeare studies in 'Understanding Shakespeare in Performance', with its comment that "Guthrie found a style which made [*Love's Labour's Lost*] work" (again the emphasis on discovering meaning, rather than creating it) and the "shift of understanding" which took place for *All's Well* which is "now

a regular success, but previously always considered a commercial disaster and rarely played" (14, 15).

Styan's position rests here on two assumptions which critics avowedly working in performance studies might find difficult to assent to. Firstly, that the play is, somehow, a stable entity across time and space: "Putting on a production or going to see a play is not, as we are sometimes told, to snatch a moment of evanescence, quickly lost and gone forever, but to feel a touch of the play's immortality directly and personally" (*Perspectives*, 19). Secondly, that Shakespearean performance history can be viewed as a progressive narrative of emergence, as different plays are discovered in their true colours and made available to the theatrical community, salvaged from the obfuscations of history. This historiographic model underpins his references to *Love's Labour's Lost* and *All's Well* which I cited above, and is more developed in a remark about the "problem plays" as a group:

> *All's Well* and *Troilus and Cressida*, together with *Measure for Measure*, have been known traditionally – that is, since the formulation of the Edwardian concept of the social problem play – as Shakespeare's problem plays. I prefer to think that the problem in question arises not so much because it seems to reflect an Elizabethan social issue, but rather because these plays embody strange conventions of performance that we are still trying to understand. (*Perspectives*, 17)

Despite his recognition in the aside that the categories he is dealing with may have historical and historically contingent origins, Styan reasserts a progressive view of development in this passage and sites himself and his readers near the end of that process, though not able to grasp its completion yet. The theatrical quietism this leads him to adopt – mildly contemplating the morally or socially disturbing elements in Shakespeare productions as the result of stage conventions which we do not yet understand but which will one day cease to trouble us – puts him at profound variance with the more politically committed criticism of scholars such as Pascale Aebischer (in *Shakespeare's Violated Bodies*, 2004) and Kim Solga (in *Invisible Acts*, 2009). Their approach would regard this complacency in the face of troubling elements as an abrogation of responsibility, a case of the critic sitting back whilst morally problematic visions of gender relations are reproduced thousands of times a year across the world as part of a cultural ritual with enormous authority. Thus an apparently technical disagreement (in this case, the nature of the play's existence across time) exposes a profound disagreement about the purposes and nature of criticism.

Maurice Charney's essay 'Shakespeare: Rough or Smooth' (2006) serves as an example of the lack of dialogue between the two strands of criticism, even when they begin from potentially similar positions. Charney's piece, published in *Acts of Criticism*, opens with his complaint about the disproportionate position which Shakespeare and his image are accorded in the academy.

> In teaching, I have always thought of myself as a professor of *comparative* Shakespeare studies. Imagine my dismay when I discovered that this field doesn't exist. At Rutgers, we have at least a thousand students every semester studying Shakespeare - it may be because New Jersey has such a large ethnic population waiting to stake their claim in Anglo-American culture – and probably less than twenty-five students (if that many) studying all of the other dramatists who were contemporaries of Shakespeare. It is obvious, at least to me, that, although Shakespeare tried many different kinds of plays, he wasn't necessarily the best at everything he did. Certainly, Ben Jonson and Thomas Middleton wrote better comedies of London life. (74)

These opening remarks seem to contain the basis of a performance studies approach. There is Charney's scepticism over the means by which "Shakespeare" is reproduced, the recognition of the subject's place in a cultural economy which defines and gives access to certain models of nationality, and the desire to historicise the plays, by reference to other works of the time, into a more balanced perspective. However, the essay which follows focuses upon places where Shakespeare has been "smoothed" by editors and translators, jettisoning the demotic language and abrupt shifts in register which Charney values, in favour of a more homogenous and elevated tone. The cultural politics of this process is barely hinted at, despite the essay's beginnings, let alone analysed. More generally, Charney's work here is clearly directed at achieving a better understanding of Shakespeare's plays, apparently imagined as generally stable and unproblematic cultural artefacts. Even as he decries the priorities of the current academic arrangement, he can only offer in their place the prospect of a field of "comparative Shakespeare studies", whose title announces its continuing concern with one central figure, and enfolds all early modern dramatists into a system where at best they may be peripheral and instrumental, casting occasional light upon the Shakespearean canon.

The starkest contrast, however, is visible when it comes to scholarship around the theatre known as "Shakespeare's Globe" or "Globe III". On this topic the two schools Lopez

identified tackle the same material but with widely divergent assumptions and results. Performance studies' concern for the cultural and ideological context of theatre events has produced a series of notable analyses, such as W.B. Worthen's notion of "Globe performativity" (2003) and Paul Prescott's discussion of how newspaper reviews construct an "ideal audience" for Globe productions via criticism of audience members in 'Inheriting the Globe' (2005). More recently, Paul Menzer's 'The Spirit of ´76' (2010) has probed the impulses behind the "original practices" movement, finding in them a distinctly American form of "revolutionary nostalgia" and Bridget Escolme has sought to understand the mode of "liveness" in which Globe productions take place via the prevalence of clowning and physical theatre techniques in modern actor training (2010). Though they approach the subject from different angles, and indeed produce conclusions which are not always immediately reconcilable, all these critics share a concern for the broad context and ideological implications of performance which is sceptical of transhistorical or essentialising claims, either for Shakespeare's plays or the conditions of production at Shakespeare's Globe. Rather than understanding such performances as a recreation or approximation of "original practices", they frame Globe productions as firmly implicated in the modern theatrical economy (both of meaning and of money), situated in an exchange relationship with traces from the past, and to be understood as part of that economy – as in Michael Dobson's bracketing together of an imagined version of "*Timon of Athens* staged in six different languages using a chainsaw, a video-loop of the 5th Airborne division and four stuffed pandas" with "something still weirder, namely the sort of Shakespearian performances that go on at Shakespeare's Globe" ('Writing About', 161, 2005).

In the other camp, Andrew Gurr is able to treat Globe III as a physical experiment (in 'Sam Wanamaker's Invention: Lessons from the New Globe', 2008), in which results can be observed, presented to the scholarly community and, presumably, more or less reproduced under more or less the same conditions. The vaguely positivist tone of his approach, which seeks to quantify the "lessons" which the Globe productions have provided, is typified by this passage in the introduction to this essay:

> As one reassurance, I should add that in order to get a secure record of our findings, we did make a set of fixed-video recordings. These were not just of every production, but of every performance, using three fixed-video cameras for accurate measurement...It is a unique record, since it shows not just what happened at each performance but what changed and improved (or otherwise) as the season's run

> continued. Some of what I have to say here derives from reviewing those recordings.... (111)

Though the archive of which Gurr speaks would be the envy of any theatre historian, his terminology – "secure record", "findings", "accurate measurement" – reveal a concern with the physical reproducible aspects of performance over the more elusive, ideological or culturally constructed aspects. Gurr's three fixed cameras frame an area within which results can be captured and discussed: in the case of the Globe, he apparently shares Styan's distrust of accounts of performance which stress the evanescent and the fleeting. Further contrasts show up when Gurr elaborates on the lessons the theatre has provided, some of which centres around the experience of being "a groundling". Though he acknowledges the differences in "Elizabethan" dress and notions of "celebrity" (122, 114) Gurr continues to use "groundling" as a relatively unproblematic term. This is despite the work done by scholars such as Shepherd and Womack (in their *English Drama: A Cultural History*) on the term's origins, its deployment as a tool of cultural distinction throughout the years, and the ideological work it carries out to support the modernist model of drama and theatre.

This gap between the two tendencies of "performance" work is not necessarily inevitable or unbridgeable: against Lopez's vision of two entrenched positions, both with their own elite scholars and collections of publications, one might pose Sarah Werner's remarks in the introduction to *New Directions in Renaissance Performance Studies* (2010):

> It would be wrong to assume a teleological progress from the first generation of performance scholarship to the second: the latter is not necessarily better, nor did it overwrite the practices of the first. Scholarship is still being produced that assumes as its foundation the possibility of better understanding Shakespeare through the performance of the plays; theatre practitioners are still held up as models of textual engagement. Influential series with their origins in the first wave...continue to produce new volumes today, evidence of their ongoing popularity. At the same time, examinations of the cultural and material contexts for the production of Shakespeare performances...continue to grow, and questions about the "force of performance"...create new impulses for studying the plays. (3)

She also points out that though the "second wave" claims to point out problems and inconsistencies in the theoretical grounding of the "first wave", it is itself vulnerable to questions in return:

> If the goal is no longer to gain a better understanding of Shakespeare's text, what is the purpose of studying performances of the plays? Without the common ground of Shakespeare's meaning, how can performance study speak to literary scholarship or theatre history? (3)

Whilst Werner makes an excellent case for the need for fruitful exchange between those who would see themselves in the first and second waves (though those in the first wave might justifiably object to it being defined thus...), her argument does depend on recognising the significant differences between them. Her comments are less a description of a situation in which complementary modes productively coexist than a plea for greater appreciation and exchange.

Minding the Gaps

As is probably clear from the way in which I have outlined the divergence between these two "schools", I find the approaches gathered under the title of "performance studies" to be more useful when carrying out this investigation of *The Duchess of Malfi*. This is partly a practical question: the first quarto of the play, printed in 1623, declares on the titlepage that it contains "diverse things that the length of the play would not bear in the presentment" (Marcus, 116). We thus do not have a stable notion of what appeared during on stage during the play's early performance history. A performance criticism approach would presumably envision modern performances as the culmination of a progressive narrative of *Malfi* in the manner of Styan and Gurr, in which the play's essential meanings are long obscured by adaptation to passing taste, but at long last understood via reference to the stage practice of the time. However, it would be difficult to have much faith in such an endeavour when the very first printing we possess (upon which all subsequent versions appear to be based) openly advertises that it is not identical to whatever appeared on the Early Modern stage. In other words, we do not have a play text which can be "unlocked" by being placed back into seventeenth-century performance conditions, because there was never an exact match between the text as performed as the text that was printed in the first place.

More importantly, a survey of the play's history provides plenty of questions to which a performance studies approach is more likely to provide fruitful answers than a performance criticism approach. Faced with *The Fatal Secret,* a 1730s adaptation by R. H. Horne, one could attempt to trace the ways in which the text has been rearranged, tentatively relating these to prevailing theatrical convention and taste, and to an extent I have done so. However, for me the real questions come after this work has been carried out (giving some credence to Sarah Werner's insistence that the second wave cannot simply be seen as overwriting or replacing the first wave, nor consigning stage-centred criticism to the status of mere prolegomena.) The questions I seek to answer are: whose interests did such an adaptation serve? In what ways did the adjustment of the internal politics of the work mesh with discourses at work in the larger culture? How might the notion of "taste" with which the adaptation aligned itself be sustaining a model of power relations centred on ideas of gender, nationhood, or commerce? These questions can only be adequately tackled, let alone answered, by employing some of the methods and principles of performance studies. The case for these methods is strengthened by the appearance of such questions across the centuries, as well as within individual case studies. Why, in this play about an Italian court, do Spaniards keep appearing with such frequency? Why do prologues and productions keep harping on the play's origins in the past, even whilst they adapt it to contemporary taste? Why does the play seem to "stick" to individual actresses throughout their career, so that they repeat the role at different points of their career and with different production companies? The wider notion of "performance" and the analytical tools provided by performance studies are essential if I am going to do justice to any of these questions. This will involve taking the broad definition of a theatrical "event" as defined by the writings of theatre history scholars like Thomas Postlewait and Jacky Bratton (whose *New Readings* I cite below) and moving from the event to a larger consideration of the ideological elements which framed those events beyond the theatrical context, and how they interacted within the play's history.

This research cannot take place wholly within the existing framework available to scholars of Shakespearean performance studies, however. Though it draws on the theoretical basis of the field, and the work of several critics within it, my study of *Malfi* is located in a number of gaps in performance studies which have been noted by other scholars. It thus has the potential to intervene productively in the field, using the framework provided by previous work as a starting point from which to extend and develop our notion of what Early Modern performance studies could – or should – look like.

To identify the first of these gaps, we might return to the passage of Maurice Charney which I quoted earlier, about his surprise at realising that the field he preferred to work in, "comparative Shakespeare studies", did not in fact exist. This is underlined by Sarah Werner's review of the Hodgdon and Worthen *Companion*, which notes "some odd disconnections and lacunae that suggest the field itself still has room to grow" (111), before suggesting that:

> Finally, the biggest absence from this collection is both so obvious as hardly to be noticeable and acknowledged by the collection's very title: it is about *Shakespeare* and performance. Given this parameter, it is not surprising that non-Shakespearean performance is nowhere addressed. But that silence is true of the field as a whole. Our knowledge and theories of performance are shaped nearly entirely by Shakespeare's drama and not by those of his contemporaries. Surely we don't imagine that Shakespeare's stagecraft is the same as that of other playwrights, nor do I think we believe that our responses to Shakespeare's authority mirror responses to lesser-known playwrights. But how Shakespeare has shaped our very understanding of what performance is and how it works is a topic that is as yet unexplored. (114-5)

Extending the scope of performance studies to include non-Shakespearean work from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries can only contribute to the complexity and productivity of the field, whether one regards the ultimate end (as Charney does) as the better understanding of Shakespeare via "control" experiments with other playwrights, or (as Werner sees it) as a chance to achieve a broader understanding of performance itself. However, the ways in which the field has been tentatively extended so far do not all provide a useful model which can be applied to *Malfi*, as we shall see later when it comes to building a theoretical basis for the investigation.

The other gap can be found between the seventeenth and twentieth (or twenty-first) century, since most Shakespearean/Early Modern performance studies tends to regard these as natural poles to oscillate between. In the late nineteen-nineties, Peter Womack offered this as a reasonable position in his 'Notes on the "Elizabethan" Avant-Garde' (in Bate, Leverson and Mehl's *Shakespeare and the Twentieth Century*, 1998) based on his reading of historical fact:

> Theatrically, 'Renaissance drama' belongs to the twentieth century. The nineteenth-century repertoire contained no non-Shakespearean early modern plays, and the plays by Shakespeare that were done – by no means the whole canon – were heavily

> adapted for the needs of the late Victorian stage. A group of literary admirers reprinted some texts, but for theatrical purposes Renaissance drama did not exist. (75)

Later scholars, who do not necessarily agree with Womack's apparent privileging of the twentieth century's modernist approach over the "needs of the late Victorian stage", have nonetheless displayed a similar polarity constructed around the present and the period of the plays' first production.

Patricia Badir and Paul Yachnin, for example, introduce *Shakespeare and the Cultures of Performance* (2008) by claiming that "The essays that follow cover both Shakespeare's time and the nineteenth and twentieth centuries" (6). The "both", particularly in the context of modern performance studies, implies that these are the two default positions – or indeed that they are the only positions we should be interested in. Similarly, Sarah Werner suggested in her review of the Hodgdon and Worthen *Companion* that the collection shows up the field's blind spots, since

> The overwhelming majority of the essays focuses on twentieth-century performances (and mostly on the second half of the century at that). There are a couple of articles on nineteenth-century theatre...And although there are four pieces that touch on the early modern period, only one of these is explicitly about early modern theatrical practice...Why is it that the study of Shakespeare in performance focuses nearly exclusively on performances that are contemporary to our experiences? (114)

When Werner came to introduce *New Directions*, she posed a series of questions which were driving the volume's pushing at the frontiers of the field: "What does it mean to study Shakespeare and performance? What sort of performance – theatrical? film? early modern? twenty-first century?" (1). The questions with which she defines possible subjects seem to suggest these are the reasonable parameters of the subject, and though she has fulfilled her own insistence on a more historical attitude, it falls into the familiar polarity of "contemporaries": productions contemporary to the scholar or those contemporary to the playwright.

A study of *Malfi* has the potential to expand the field at this point because the polarity of the two "contemporary" kinds of production is not simply an accident, or the result of this criticism being the easiest to undertake - given the very different techniques required for

dealing with the evidence available about these two kinds of production, any field which instinctively juxtaposes them can hardly be accused to taking the line of least resistance. Rather, I believe that this polarity demonstrates the continuing influence of the older form of stage-centred criticism, and its underlying principles, which Jacky Bratton has described as part of the "modernist project" in British theatre during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The privileging of the seventeenth and twentieth/twenty-first centuries mimics the narrative of "discovery" which we found in Styan and Gurr, a progressive narrative in which the "truth" about Shakespearean performance is discovered from William Poel onwards, and the modern period joins hands with the Early Modern in order to repudiate the obfuscations of the years in between. It is also difficult not to identify the remnants of a concern with a stable, ahistorical notion of "the play" in the juxtaposition of the modern and the "original". It cannot simply be that, in the case of every Early Modern play, the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries happen to be the most interesting period of its history until the late twentieth century – they are certainly not usually the most well-documented or the most easily available to the scholar. The continual tendency of modern performance studies to organise their enquiries around these two "contemporary" performances suggests that, whilst many scholars have embraced a decentred, anti-essentialist notion of "the play" and become sceptical of theatrical modernism's relentlessly progressive narrative, their practice tends to reproduce some of the assumptions from which they would wish to disassociate themselves. I therefore propose to undertake, in this thesis, an investigation of *Malfi* that analyses case studies from across four centuries. This approach has the potential to expand the field in a particularly productive way, by disrupting this polarity and embodying a more completely decentred performance studies, which moves a step or two further away from notions of the "original" play and its "discovery" through time.

One strand of performance studies' attempt to get to grips with non-Shakespearean work, which I must address before proceeding to construct my own model for this study, can be seen developing in the work of Emma Smith and Genevieve Love. Smith sketched out a position in her contribution to *How To Do Things With Shakespeare* (2007). In a piece entitled 'Freezing the Snowman: (How) Can We Do Performance Criticism?', she used the image of the snowman which Michaelangelo once sculpted in Florence to suggest that performance criticism has become unhelpfully obsessed with the few traces which it can grasp and interrogate, to its own detriment. Recognising the emphemerality of the field's subject was, Smith suggested, the first step towards understanding its future possibilities, but she went even further:

> In the end I suggest that performance criticism should embrace, rather than efface, its own radical contingency, by replacing theatre archaeology with fantasy. Instead of trying to unearth the details of past performances we persist in thinking of as actual, perhaps performance criticism can project forwards, out of the never-was into the never-will-be. Since the lost productions of the past already occupy a space of fantasy which we fill with our own interpretative priorities, we might as well decouple this imaginative process from the semblance of historical fact. (281)

Genevieve Love's 'Performance Criticism Without Performance', in the *New Directions* volume which Werner edited, picks up on Smith's work and uses it to engage with non-Shakespearean Early Modern drama. She makes it clear, however, that she does so largely as a theoretical strategy, as she explains:

> ...approaching the field of early modern performance studies from the perspective of non-Shakespearean drama allows us first to appreciate the depth and breadth of the field's debt to the Shakespearean performance tradition; second, to attend to the possibilities of performance criticism that locates settings of theatrical desire independent of future or past productions. (133)

Love demonstrates an intention to free the field from its over-reliance on a Shakespearean model, but plots a trajectory which uses the notion of "non-Shakespearean drama" to loosen Shakespeare's conceptual dominance, before moving straight to a criticism which disregards actual performance history in favour of the freer play of "settings of theatrical desire".

Smith herself also developed her thinking in the direction of non-Shakespearean drama, in a piece in which she advanced an analogical method ('Performing Relevance/Relevant Performances', 2010), in which the absence of performance history could be supplied by drawing parallels between relatively unproduced Early Modern writers and our more produced contemporaries. Her essay applies this technique to Ben Jonson and Alfred Hitchcock, claiming that a fruitful parallel can be drawn, not in terms of theme or subject, but by attending to the mode in which these two authors worked. This critical strategy is necessary for Smith, because she sees the performance history of non-Shakespearean Early Modern drama as inevitably compromised. Smith argues that non-Shakespearean work, with its smaller and more fragmentary performance history, stands at variance to the dominant

model of (Shakespearean) criticism, that "Because the range of actual performances of non-Shakespearean plays often does not exist, is not adequately documented, or is more disconnected in nature, the study of performance of these plays cannot so readily serve the liberal agenda of multiple literary interpretations" (149.) This leads to a self-fulfilling cycle in which Shakespearean drama, and the model of criticism which assumes a Shakespeare-centred system of value, sustains itself. Shakespearean drama is framed as offering timeless experiences – or at least ones which can speak to any situation – whereas non-Shakespearean work is over-historicised and framed as giving access to a specific historical moment:

> The point here is that the turn towards performance in the study of Shakespeare has served in part to accentuate the perceived critical and pedagogical distance between the plays of Shakespeare and those of his contemporaries. The very fact that there are so many theatrical interpretations of Shakespeare's plays validates and perpetuates assumptions about their contemporary relevance or their timelessness; the difficulty of accessing the scarcer, and less documented, stage history of non-Shakespearean drama apparently attests to its relative obscurity as historical documentation rather than dramatic script. (151)

Faced with this state of affairs, Smith demands a radical solution, such as her fantasy model or her analogical strategy, since she believes that applying the current techniques in performance criticism to a wider range of works will only make the situation worse:

> The answer to the discrepancies between academic and theatrical deployments of non-Shakespearean plays, and between the study of Shakespeare and that of the drama of his contemporaries, cannot be to try to write performance histories for canonical plays in the same ways we have for Shakespeare. This would simply further marginalise the majority of the drama whilst producing partial and sketchy histories of a few plays by Webster, Jonson and Middleton. (152)

Consulting the recent Arden Early Modern editions, spun off from the Arden Shakespeare series, gives point to this critique. Understandably, given the series' origin, these editions tend to present the works' production history within a Shakespearean frame, which perhaps inevitably results in them seeming less significant. Misquoting Alan Sinfield's notion of "Shakespeare plus", these accounts give a distinct sense of "Shakespeare minus", failing to fill out the frame which has been placed around them. For example, the "production history" of

The Renegado (2010) provides an account of the original company, a handful of references to subsequent productions just before and after the Civil War, and then describes the characteristics of an undated Restoration adaptation in manuscript form. The account concludes that it was apparently "swept aside by the tide of theatrical fashion" soon after 1662, until "a staged reading in 2003...marked a hesitant revival of interest" (64).

Even when the play in question possesses a production history, such as *Philaster* (2009), the series tends to confine it in a pattern familiar to Shakespearean production narratives: original company; Restoration/ Eighteenth-century adaptations; nineteenth-century bowdlerisations; twentieth-century rediscovery. The "play" is treated as a roughly stable entity, identical with its text, which undergoes various vicissitudes in its journey towards the late twentieth century, enlivened by outbreaks of "politics" and "gender". Turning to other recent editions of Early Modern plays, the production history attached to the 2006 New Mermaids edition of *The Changeling* states that audiences in 1961 "were surprised to discover a tragedy that resembled *Macbeth* in its unblinking analysis" in a rhetorical move which aligns the play with a Shakespearean analogue and describes production as releasing, rather than creating, meaning. The long gaps in the plays' production histories are not read as contributing anything to their significance when revived, but simply as lacunae during which the works' meanings lie fallow and awaiting discovery. The fact that available evidence tends to cluster around the seventeenth and twentieth centuries means that the shape of these narratives push them towards a Styanesque metanarrative, or at least an elision of the intervening years as unimportant and unfortunate. The account given of *The Alchemist*'s history in the New Methuen edition (2010) for example, jumps from an extended consideration of what " we can learn...about how those first performances might have been" from "reading the play" to the second half of the twentieth century, in which directors are grappling with the same problems and possibilities (xviii). The same objections could be made to the accounts of *Malfi*'s production history in the editions by J.R. Brown (1997, New Revels Student) and Leah Marcus (2009, Arden Early Modern Drama), with the main change being the use of the two World Wars as focal points for the play coming into its own (Marcus 102-4). Kathleen McLuskie and Jenny Uglow's study *The Duchess of Malfi*, in the Plays in Performance series (1989), takes a more performance-centred approach, but it tends to reproduce the familiar processes of "stage-centred criticism" and reading performance as interpretation, though McLuskie's work elsewhere, in *Renaissance Dramatists* (1989) applies a generally performance studies approach to other contemporaries of Shakespeare.

Given these treatments of "Shakespeare's contemporaries" (a phrase Smith has stated she dislikes for its implicit assumption that their juxtaposition with the more famous writer is their defining feature) Love and Smith's critique is compelling. However, whilst I agree that we cannot simply apply the current structures of performance criticism, developed to deal with and explain Shakespearean production history, to the work of other seventeenth-century playwrights, I cannot quite follow Smith or Love in their move towards a fantasy criticism. Love's call for "settings of theatrical desire independent of future or past productions" forecloses investigation into the actual conditions and effects of the production of non-Shakespearean drama, which would miss some of the advantages which *Malfi*'s rich, if patchily documented, production history can offer performance studies.

Put simply, my objection is that fantasies and "settings of desire" which proceed from the current state of criticism are likely to be as Shakespeare-centred, as influenced and structured by the field's bias towards one cultural figure, as scholarly work in more mainstream performance studies. Apart from a sneaking suspicion that the world is weirder than many of our imaginings, the main objection to Love's approach is its disregard of the historical traces of non-Shakespearean work which could enrich and bolster those settings of desire. This is certainly true in the case of *Malfi*: I can easily imagine "fantasy casting" a version of Webster's play in the late Victorian period, perhaps involving members of the "Ibsenite" avant-garde mixed with the consciously archaic "bare boards" tendency, and I might just about have conjured up the sister of a fashionable novelist who stole the press attention by playing a bit part. But I would have been completely unable to fantasize Henry Irving lending costumes and scenery to the theatre company which many saw as his nemesis, to imagine the "purist" William Poel hiring a man to work the gaslights, or to contemplate a group of dancing skeletons "mopping and mowing" their way across his stage. Performance history regularly proves itself to be more unexpected – and more internally contradictory – for me to easily assent to Love's foreclosure of historical investigation.

Though Smith's analogical method is not necessary (yet), since *Malfi*'s production history is capable of supplying material for investigation for a little time to come, she poses a serious objection to investigations such as mine when developing her argument. The contention that the answer "cannot be to try to write performance histories for canonical plays in the same ways we have for Shakespeare", since "this would simply further marginalise the majority of the drama whilst producing partial and sketchy histories of a few plays by Webster, Jonson and Middleton" cannot be answered by an appeal to *Malfi*'s history, since it

presupposes some variety and depth to that history. However, I do not think it need be a decisive objection to the kind of work I am carrying out, since I believe that Smith rather underestimates the ability of critical work to alter and question the dominant Shakespearean model. For example, it could be objected that Gary Taylor's *Reinventing Shakespeare* (1989) and Michael Dobson's *The Making of the National Poet* (1992) could only further extend the hegemony of Shakespeare, since they both focus exclusively on him. However, their historical scholarship, which exposed the contingencies and political interests which jointly constructed our current notion of "Shakespeare", in fact bolstered a sceptical and critical approach. Historical work on plays such as *Malfi* can also reveal the points in the past – such as the Poel/Grein production – when they were understood in opposition to the dominant Shakespearean model of value. Certainly the ire and scorn poured upon this production in some newspapers suggests that it was neither assimilable within a "Shakespearean" sense of theatre, not docilely unthreatening. If the theatrical past can be more contradictory than Love seems to assume, it can also be more subversive and unsettling than Smith posits. I agree that it would entrench the current situation if we were to simply roll out the models developed for Shakespeare onto his contemporaries, since it would both "prove" some were inferior since they did not fit the template, and erase the rest which did not possess sufficient performance history. However, investigating *Malfi* with a broader set of models and methodologies has the potential to expose the weaknesses and blind spots in the "Shakespearean" model, both as it now stands and as it has existed through history. In doing so I will need to draw on sources inside and outside performance studies in order to do justice both to the play's history, and to its potential to alter the received vision of the field.

Filling the gap: models and approaches

This study will focus upon three key strands, or elements, in *Malfi*'s history. The first is "pastness", the way in which a sense of archaism attaches to the play in production, never allowing it to be entirely subsumed and translated by the theatrical and context. This frequently figures in the play's history as an excess which refuses to map coherently onto the medium which is being used to reproduce it, and resists complete interpretation. The second strand is the close association which repeatedly occurs between the role of the Duchess, and the actor performing it. A good example of this can be seen in Isabella Glyn performing the role in the Sadler's Wells revival in 1852, then quarrelling with the management, but being able to "take the play with her" to other theatres. The public clearly saw the production as belonging to Glyn, not to the theatre or actor-managers. This exerts a noticeable influence on the play's trajectory in history, particularly as the lead role is an almost unprecedentedly large

and complex one, when compared with other female roles in Early Modern drama. The third strand is focused around Susan Bennett's notion of the "not-Shakespeare". This is the extent to which *Malfi* is framed in relation to a "Shakespearean" model of theatre, and an explicitly Shakespeare-centred model of value – whether as a lesser version of the dominant playwright, a corrupt example of the "decadence" which followed Shakespeare's achievement, or as an alternative which questions and opposes the dominant model. This will provide a sense of how investigations such as mine can indeed (despite Emma Smith's doubts) productively expand our understanding of Early Modern drama and its performance without either collapsing into Shakespeare studies or moving into a fantasy mode.

In carrying out this study, I will not attempt to reconstruct the performances I investigate, but rather consider their framing and reception: the "uses" to which *Malfi* was put, the cultural skirmishes which took place across it, and the discourses which were brought to bear in reproducing and interpreting it. I am less interested, in this thesis, in the creation of meaning on stage in the moment of production, and more concerned with the ways in which those meanings were debated and framed, and the discourses which were brought to bear on them. For example, determining whether a particular prop in the 1892 production was authentically "Elizabethan", or even looked "Elizabethan" to the audience, is of less significance in this investigation than what "Elizabethan" meant in this context, and the cultural politics which it participated in. In implementing this approach, I shall be drawing on the work in which Jacky Bratton sought to expand the study of performance and its effects into what she described as "the intertheatrical", seeking to

> enlarge the significant area for consideration beyond the limits Schechner sets to performance, which he defines within a relatively narrow timespan, that is, from the moment people arrive at the venue until they leave. I want to look beyond the specific occasion to include an awareness of the elements and interactions that make up the whole web of mutual understanding between potential audiences and their players, a sense of the knowledge, or better the knowingness, about playing that spans a lifetime or more, and that is activated for all the participants during the performance event. This is my field of study, the intertheatrical, so-called by analogy to the intertextual, in which no writing or reading is isolated from the other writing and reading within its culture. (*New Readings*, 38)

Whereas Bratton uses playbills as a case study for her notion of intertheatricality, seeing them as constitutive of portions of the performance's meaning instead of simply a transparent vehicles for factual details, I shall be applying a similar approach to the reviews and commentary which surrounded productions of *Malfi*. This approach will be bolstered by the example of Paul Prescott's 'Inheriting the Globe: The Reception of Shakespearean Space and Audience in Contemporary Reviewing'. Prescott uses reviews to analyse "the characteristics of an interpretative community and the cultural status of Shakespeare", on the basis that

> Since the age of Garrick, newspaper critics have played a key role in mediating and circulating performance in the public sphere. For most readers, the review-text stands in and substitutes for the experience of performances, thus blurring the boundaries between performance and criticism, production and reception. (340)

Prescott cites Hodgdon's essay on the reception of Robert Lepage's famous/notorious *Midsummer Night's Dream* to show how reviews can be more than merely "a struggle over the meaning of theatrical signs but as symptomatic of current cultural anxieties about gender, race and nationality' (in Prescott, 340). Taking Prescott's "blurring of the lines" and Bratton's "intertheatricality" to their logical conclusion, along with an anti-essentialist model of the play, we might reasonably argue that when such discourses are brought to bear so strongly on a performance, they cease to be simply symptomatic of commentators' anxieties, and in fact begin to determine the meaning of that performance. Richard Schoch outlines a similar position when explaining how he uses reviews in his study *Shakespeare's Victorian Stage*:

> Because performance reconstruction is *not* a goal of this work, I make heavier use of journalistic notices than some theatre historians would deem prudent. Indeed, my sustained use of periodical sources will seem lacking in rigor to theatre historians who undertake intensive prompt-book analysis on the assumption that promptbooks are more or less authentic documentary sources. Unlike such objectivist historians, I regard periodical and newspaper accounts of theatrical performances as discursive formation in their own right and not as confirmations of primary sources. Because theatrical reviews are readings – and not iterations – of a performance, they do not express anterior assumptions about theatrical and popular culture so much as they constitute those very assumptions. The theatrical review is, consequently, no less real and no less significant than the event which it might be presumed only to recount. (6-7)

This does not, however, involve fragmenting *Malfi*'s history into a disconnected heap of comments by reviewers. As Shaughnessy and Worthen have both demonstrated at length, the apparent contingency of theatrical events is nonetheless entangled with appeals to authority, whether authorial, textual or that of an earlier theatrical period. Shaughnessy's *The Shakespeare Effect* analyses "the deep, and possibly irreconcilable, tensions between the competing authorities of performance, the text, and the institutional apparatus of 'Shakespeare' (none of which are stable or homogenous categories", and seeks to ask "awkward questions" about "the claims made for [Shakespearean performance], by it, and on its behalf, about what it is, what it does, and what it is for" (5, 6). Worthen's work interrogates the authorities which are brought to bear on the "unruly" sphere of performance, and to which those operating in that sphere appeal. These two critics in particular demonstrate that even when it is apparently most contingent, free and mercurial, Shakespearean performance is constructed by and implicated in a system of conflicting claims for authority. The three strands which constitute my thesis are an attempt to identify and investigate the authorities and discourses brought to bear on *Malfi* as it is produced in the absence of the signifying figure of Shakespeare, but still within the gravitational field of conflicting claims to authority.

The thesis will be structured around a set of case studies, focussing on the major shifts in *Malfi*'s cultural profile at key points during the four centuries between its first production at the beginning of the seventeenth century, and its appearance in the repertoire of the Royal Shakespeare Company in the middle of the twentieth century. I have chosen to write case studies rather than a continuous "history" of the play's productions for several reasons. Firstly, this will allow me to investigate the context and reception of each production more thoroughly than if I tried to account for every appearance of the play over this period. Instead of the thesis degenerating into a list of dates, locations and cast lists, with commentary used to provide facts, a selective approach will permit me to spend time analysing the discourses being brought to bear on the productions in the commentary.

Secondly, structuring my work around case studies will help to avoid a "Whiggish" (in Herbert Butterfield's phrase) model of history, in which gradual and beneficial development is seen working itself out over the long term, and the "positive" forces are those working in favour of such development in any given case. In theatre history and performance studies, this "Whiggish" approach is to be identified with the "modernist project" Jacky Bratton identified, its influence on a particular arc of scholarship which leads from William Poel to J.L.

Styan. I want to avoid presenting a history of *Malfi* in which the original "purity" of the work was compromised during the Restoration and eighteenth century by adaptation and spectacle, traduced by an ill-advised moral emphasis during the nineteenth century, and finally rediscovered via the "Elizabethanist" movement of the 1890s and early twentieth century, before the play was returned to its rightful place in the repertory via production by the Royal Shakespeare Company. Given the events which make up *Malfi*'s history, such a familiar tale would be easy to produce and would merely confirm many of the received narratives of theatrical history which the modernist project sought to establish. Instead, treating these events as case studies will emphasize that they have significance individually, and that the recurring elements they share are not evidence of a "development principle" working itself out across history.

Finally, it would be illogical to treat *Malfi*'s history as one continuous narrative, since even a brief examination will demonstrate that it did not take place in that way. The history is full of disconnections and gaps, alongside with repeated "revivals" and "rediscoveries". This is not simply a technical point about the arrangement of data, since in many cases the meanings imputed to productions, and the discourses against which they are interpreted, are closely involved with this disjunction and revival. Though most obvious in the investigation of "pastness", this pattern also exerts a powerful influence over the way in which actors are identified with the role (since it is not a standard role in the repertory) and *Malfi*'s identity as "not-Shakespeare". Organising the material into a conventional narrative arc would obscure the contribution which *Malfi*'s own particular and interrupted arc has repeatedly made to its cultural significance.

The kind of study I am undertaking has two major precursors in the field of Shakespeare studies. It will be necessary to look for models in Shakespeare studies since no equivalent works have been produced covering Webster. There has been productive work on Webster's dramaturgy by Christina Luckyj in *A Winter's Snake: Dramatic Form in the Tragedies of John Webster* (1989), but this has focused on the way in which production has made clear the underlying construction in the text, rather than on how those productions created meaning, or how meanings were created around them. M.C. Bradbrook's *John Webster: Citizen and Dramatist* (1980) described the social and historical context of his work, and Keith Sturgess set it in a more precise and nuanced theatrical context in *Jacobean Private Theatre* (1987), but there is still a historical gap unexplored between the original conditions of writing/production and modern stage interpretation.

Michael Dobson's *The Making of the National Poet: Shakespeare, Adaptation and Authorship, 1660-1769* (1992) sets out to unpick via historical investigation the processes by which Shakespeare, the playwright, came to be "SHAKESPEARE", the cultural signifier, and to expose the way in which the contradictions in our current attitude to Shakespeare's performance history reinforce that signifier. The coincidence of Shakespeare's "emergence" during the Enlightenment, and that period's apparently cavalier treatment of his texts, should be read as the outward evidence of a coherent process, according to Dobson:

> The coexistence of full-scale canonization with wholesale adaptation, of the urge to enshrine Shakespeare's texts as national treasures with the desire to alter their content, has long been regarded as a quaint paradox, the rewritten versions of the plays generally being dismissed as at best a bizarre cul-de-sac of literary history, inessential to the 'real' story of Shakespeare's reception. This view, I would argue, has seriously distorted our understanding of Shakespeare's changing roles in Augustan culture, and by implication – since the social and cultural forces which converged over that period to establish his supremacy have preserved it ever since – of his continuing presence in our own. I hope to show over the course of this study that adaptation and canonization, so far from being contradictory processes, were often mutually reinforcing ones: that the claiming of Shakespeare as an Enlightenment culture hero both profited from, and occasionally demanded, the substantial rewriting of his plays. (4-5)

This insight provides a basis for approaching production history and the cultural framing of individual instantiations, and makes clear the forces being brought to bear upon Shakespeare even as "SHAKESPEARE" is being brought to bear upon *Malfi*.

Gary Taylor's project in *Reinventing Shakespeare: A Cultural History from the Restoration to the Present* (1989) is more polemical, less a historical explanation of a contingent series of events than an attempted dethroning of an idol by revealing the feet of clay upon which it stands – Donna B. Hamilton has called the book the work of "a specialist in riling people up" (review, 107). As he explains in his introduction, starting with a desire to account for the changing image of Shakespeare which has been produced since the 1970s, he found himself needing to elaborate on the history of this cultural icon over the longer term, in order that the account would not "read like an adolescent's account of rebellion against parental authority" (4). The series of images of Shakespeare from the middle of the

seventeenth century to the twentieth century which Taylor investigates raise further questions about the production and maintenance of these images:

> The important questions, the questions that matter beyond the intellectual enclosure of Shakespeare specialists, do not concern the meaning of particular words or the motives of particular characters; they concern the blunt fact of his cultural dominance. When did people decide that Shakespeare was the greatest English dramatist? The greatest English poet? The greatest writer who ever lived? Who did the deciding? What prejudices and convictions might have influenced their decision? On what evidence, by what reasoning, did they justify their verdicts? How did they persuade others? How did they discredit rival claimants? And once Shakespeare's hegemony was achieved, how was it maintained? (5)

These inquiries themselves ramify in Taylor's hands, producing a new subject, which he entitles "Shakesperotics", since it "must incorporate the annals of criticism, the theatre and many other disciplines" and "embraces everything that a society does in the name...of Shakespeare" (6). Indeed, Taylor's Shakespeare becomes the focus and cornerstone of an investigation of almost everything which could be gathered under the label of "humanities", since

> in order to interpret what a society does in the name of Shakespeare, you have to know what else that society does. You can hardly recount the history for the theatre, of publishing, censorship, journalism, education, morality, sex, without becoming entangled in the complex entirety of their host society, its economics, politics, ideology, its total social and material structure. And so a history of Shakesperotics becomes, inevitably, a history of four centuries of our culture. (6)

This is cultural history with a vengeance, and Taylor produces a series of tightly-argued case studies, covering critical moments, such as the Restoration and the years 1709 and 1790. His work has been subjected to penetrating critique, notably that there are logical problems in using post-modern historiography to prove the "truth" that Shakespeare's essential nature is "not all he is cracked up to be" and that he presents a curiously old-fashioned vision of cultural history as a parade of individual great men's minds (Hamilton 107; de Grazia 527). Bearing these problems in mind, I shall still be able to use Taylor's work as a resource on which to draw.

Obviously my remit is narrower than Taylor's – since a "Websterotics" would not be so indissolubly tied up with much of British cultural history – and wider than Dobson's – as I draw my case studies from outside the years he covers. However, they are useful for my study in two ways. Firstly as a model: the sceptical mode of investigation, concerned with ideological mutations and political interests, which they employ across a broad historical territory, will contribute much to my approach. Secondly, they provide the background against which my own investigation will take place: much of what they detail about the cultural politics of the theatre and play publishing will help contextualise *Malfi*'s movements through the periods they cover and help create an understanding of the ways in which its meaning was produced in relation to either Shakespeare or a Shakespeare-dominated cultural landscape.

Though less systematic in their coverage than either Taylor or Dobson, Shepherd and Womack's 1996 volume *English Drama: A Cultural History* can also serve as a productive model. Their double approach, combining cultural analysis with theatre-historical investigation, leads them to produce a book in which the chapters on each period come in pairs: one to describe the characteristics and conditions of a chosen mode or genre, and the other to give an account of how the period was constructed by subsequent eras. Their insistence that "plays only make sense in relation to the historically actual practice of theatre" also extends to reception (vii). Thus they present an account of "the historical conditions of English play-writing" in parallel with "an analysis of the cultural reproduction of drama" which is concerned with "the 'second life' of the drama" (ix, ix, viii). This work not only provides a useful model of the dual work which I will need to undertake in investigating both *Malfi*'s history and that history's reception across time, but also goes some way towards investigating the ideological construction of "non-Shakespearean" drama, in its chapter on the notion of the "Elizabethan". They locate this concept in the dialectical process necessary to produce the "SHAKESPEARE" signifier: "the things about Shakespeare which seem unworthy of SHAKESPEARE need not be emended or cut; instead they can be understood as historical and therefore external to Shakespeare's true, supra-historical being" (91-2). A similar example of the principle can be found in their statement that for Dowden "when Shakespeare saves us through our identity with him, he is called Shakespeare, but when he saves us through his difference from us, his name is 'Elizabethan drama'" (107).

It is at this point that I will need to extend Shepherd and Womack's approach in order to do justice to *Malfi*'s history. Their analysis depends on a set of "stable binary opposition[s]" (in this case, "SHAKESPEARE" and "Elizabethan"), which produce sets of categories which

oppose each other neatly, and leave little room in the system (92). Whilst their notion of the "Elizabethan" is a good place to start, *Malfi* occupies a liminal position at various points in the history and construction of "non-Shakespearean" drama, allowing it to exert pressure on the stability of the system Shepherd and Womack have identified. Part of the expansion of the field I hope this study will make possible involves a more nuanced understanding of this system, developing it past sets of binaries into a more dynamic model. This will involve building on the work Shepherd and Womack have carried out.

As well as drawing on these models for the overall shape and approach of the study, I will also need to augment the theoretical basis of my investigation from specific models in each strand. This will involve drawing on an eclectic range of critics and thinkers not usually set in dialogue with each other within performance studies, in order to give an effective account of these different aspects of the play's production history. This reflects the need to bring other critical resources to bear on non-Shakespearean works in order to investigate their individual histories without folding them into a Shakespearean model which would both fail to provide sufficient insight and slight them by comparison. Each of the key elements of the play's history (pastness, not-Shakespeare and the dominance of the Duchess role) will need its own particular theoretical basis, whilst all three sit within the general framework of a performance studies approach.

Prologue to What's Past: Investigating Pastness

A central aspect of *Malfi*'s cultural profile at many points is its "pastness", the sense that it remains connected to a previous era, which colours its reception and interpretation. There is a persistent feeling in the commentary that the play will not map completely or coherently onto the theatrical context which is being used to reproduce it, which reflects both upon the play and upon that context. In constructing a theoretical framework to deal with pastness, I will have to draw on works which deal with the reception of "the past" and its artefacts in various different periods, and bring them together in a coherent approach.

In *The Social Circulation of the Past,* Daniel Woolf sets out to investigate the changing "historical culture" of the Early Modern period. Avoiding a teleological approach which would concentrate on finding the origins of modern historical consciousness or the growth of academic historiography, he instead focuses on how the changes in attitudes to the past "were sustained or effected by a process of social circulation, both horizontally among persons of roughly similar social and economic status, and vertically between persons of very different status" (12). This involves him in discussing topics far beyond traditional historiography, such

as heraldry, numismatics, philology and iconoclasm. In his own phrase, "th[e] national past was commemorated in, collected from, and rearticulated in various forms (narrative history, antiquarianism, chorography, philology on the 'factual' side; historical drama and verse on the 'fictional' side) through a variety of media, written, oral, and printed" (13). His concern is much more with the social pressures on "cultural history" in its broader sense than with "narrowly conceived intellectual innovations such as the rediscovery of the ancients, or the brilliant insights and heroic labours of individual historical authors" (13). Woolf's insistence on a model of "history" which occurs as a practice in the social world, rather than as a collection of facts or scholarly techniques, has much to offer this investigation, particularly in enabling me to deal coherently with a use of the past – theatrical production – which often frames itself both as entertainment and as part of a distinctively national culture and narrative.

Woolf helps give weight to what might otherwise be regarded as frivolous uses of the past, and this approach is developed further in the next work on which I will be drawing. David Lowenthal's *Possessed by the Past: The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* also covers a wide variety of historical practices, this time in the contemporary world, from myths of national origin to museums to historical re-enactment societies. Lowenthal considers all these forms of engagement with the past not because he considers them all to be equally valid and laudable, but because he wishes to distinguish dangerous and exclusive visions of the past from history as understood in the academy. Whilst discussing the "purpose and practice of history" he makes this distinction clear:

> The idea of history as universal, and universally accessible, is widely endorsed. To be sure, such a history is still alien to many. But within the global community of scholars it is normative. It is such history that I contrast here with heritage. Other kinds of history – tribal, exclusive, patriotic, redemptive, or self-aggrandizing – are, by and large, heritage masquerading as history. (120)

He explains why heritage may look like history, since "it uses historical traces and tells historical tales, but these tales and traces are stitched into fables that are open neither to critical analysis nor to comparative scrutiny" (121). Central to his critique is the notion that these different approaches to the past are motivated by different intentions and purposes:

> History and heritage transmit different things to different audiences. History tells all who will listen what has happened and how things came to be as they are. Heritage

> passes on exclusive myths of origin and continuance, endowing a select group with prestige and common purpose. History is enlarged by being disseminated; heritage is diminished and despoiled by export. (128)

Lowenthal's distinction between "history" and "heritage" will prove a useful one for this investigation, since it allows the study to move from determining the play's framing in connection with the past, to asking whose interests that framing served, what kinds of narratives it was being co-opted into, and what facts about the past were being ignored or suppressed in order for these narratives to be maintained. Drawing on Lowenthal's work will allow me to align this strand of the thesis more securely with the concerns and approaches of performance studies, through investigating periods which have been relatively neglected by the field so far. In doing so, it will be necessary to bear in mind that *Possessed by the Past* does not set out to provide a model for all uses of historical traces and material throughout the past: Lowenthal's concern is with the historical culture of the late twentieth century, and the particular way in which it deals with the past. However, there are striking similarities between the way he describes the "heritage industry" and certain phases of *Malfi*'s history and it should be possible to employ his insights in other eras, if they are suitably nuanced by an awareness of the particular historical situation.

Woolf can help supply the necessary historical nuance at one end of the study and Richard Schoch's *Shakespeare's Victorian Stage* will provide a great deal of nuance in the nineteenth century. Schoch suggests that

> The century spanned by the writings of Ranke, Macaulay, Marx and Nietzsche was the golden age of history. It was a time when the desire to know and possess the past rivalled science as the dominant system of cognition and history as a practice seemed to overtake the whole scope of representational activities: literature, architecture, handicrafts, painting, photography, sculpture, spectacle, and theatre. (1)

His equation between "history" and "the desire to know and possess the past" suggests that Schoch is employing the first term in a far wider sense than would be recognised in the modern academy, and one which is covering the same territory as both Lowenthal's "history" and "heritage". This is confirmed by his characterisation of "historical consciousness in the nineteenth-century theatre" as "not so much the first glimmering of modern realism as it was the romantic and antiquarian feeling for history in its full and final resplendence" (50). Schoch

stresses the extent to which both Shakespeare and "the past" on the Victorian stage were regarded as instrumental means towards each other at times: "If Charles Kean's goal was to use Shakespeare to represent history, then Macready's was to use history to represent Shakespeare" (3). Thus his investigation of the engagements with the past which took place on the Victorian stage is compatible with the theoretical distinctions which Lowenthal provides and can help me to extend the "heritage" and "history" model into other periods. Indeed, Schoch comes close to a very similar distinction at times, with "antiquarianism" and "Romanticism" driving a "heritage" attitude to the past:

> Charles Kean's explicit desire to 'perform' the Middle Ages rather than study its records or to inventory its relics was, I contend, historiographically legitimate because it arose directly from the antiquary's fascination with the 'vestiges' of nationalistic behavior. Kean's theatrical historicism is thus not a perverted, but a privileged form of antiquarianism because it magnified and strengthened the tacit performative and, therefore, physical bias of nineteenth-century historical consciousness. (80)

Obviously the insights of Schoch's work will need to be nuanced when applied to non-Shakespearean drama – the nineteenth century saw perhaps the height of the dominance of a Shakespearean model of value and an extraordinary pervasion of culture by the one author. However, *Shakespeare's Victorian Stage* offers a valuable map of the theatrical territory in which Victorian engagements with the past took place.

The model which I will bring to bear on the case studies involves considering pastness as an excess, the extent to which the play maintains a connection to elements in the past and resists complete interpretation or reproduction via the specific theatrical and cultural context in which it is placed. This connection to another historical moment is significant in cultural politics because it has the potential to produce a reflection on the present, in a way which can be employed within a right-wing context (those Victorian commentators who believed the play could help bolster English culture against foreign influences) or a left-wing one (the 1980s socialist *Malfi* recorded by Susan Bennett.) "Pastness" is the extent to which an incarnation of *Malfi* carries the traces of its (apparent) origins, and how it brings those traces to bear on the context in which it is reproduced. The heritage/history distinction established by the critics I have just cited will enable me to approach these apparent connections to the past without either seeing them as either harmless footnotes within theatrical production (and missing their cultural-political charge), or failed attempts at accurate history (and dismissing them as

inaccurate and irrelevant). The work of Woolf, Lowenthal and Schoch will keep me asking why pastness is being stressed in each case, and whose cultural interests it serves.

Investigating Not-Shakespeare

Malfi's status as not-Shakespeare is an important aspect of the play's framing at many point in its history. These range from its appearance at Sadler's Wells in the 1850s under a "legitimising" management which undertook a programme of Shakespeare productions to raise the theatre's tone, to reviews of the 1960 RSC productions which criticised the company's choice and suggested that the production demonstrated why it was not worth performing works by Shakespeare's contemporaries. Indeed, the tendency to oppose *Malfi* to Shakespeare continues past the end-point of my study to the present day: the film *Shakespeare in Love* (dir. John Madden 1998) introduces Webster as a minor character, who functions as a bloodthirsty, materialistic foil to set off its idealisation of William Shakespeare. My investigation of *Malfi*'s status as not-Shakespeare will therefore involve teasing out shifting aspects of the play's identity, which is in turn defined against a shifting cultural signifier.

The principal source I will draw on to construct this strand of the investigation is Susan Bennett's *Performing Nostalgia: Shifting Shakespeare and the Contemporary Past*, from which I borrowed the term "not-Shakespeare". In a chapter entitled 'Not-Shakespeare, Our Contemporary: Trangression, Dissidence and Desire' (and writing in 1996), Bennett describes how

> In an economy where innovation anchored to the traditions of the pasts sells, and sells well, one of the trends of the last decade or so has been a return to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries for whatever other (not-Shakespeare) commodities might be re-circulated. This has seen any number of productions of contemporaries of Shakespeare for the first time since the centuries of their premiere performance, and critical and other communities tend to make sense of these exhumed texts in two particular ways: they mark the likeness of the play to one or other of Shakespeare's own and/or they mark the likeness to some apparently equivalent situation in the contemporary moment.... (79)

This movement, paralleled in Bennett's account by "obsession with the 'radical' in critical enquiry", tends towards producing revivals "which flaunt 'thematic distinctions' concerned

with transgression, dissidence and desire (80). Particularly noticeable are city comedies and revenge tragedies, and the "effect of the inclusion of these other texts" is one of

> diversity in the proliferation of past texts, a sense that not only Shakespeare can be brought into the service of nostalgia. Moreover, these not-Shakespeares may have different representations of different pasts to bring into collision with the present that apparently resembles them. (80)

Bennett finds herself particularly interested in revivals of plays which "attract the appellation 'Jacobean'", a label which is not entirely identified with the reign of James I, but rather as a marker for a certain aesthetic of "(moral) decay, excess and violence" (81, 82). She scrutinises these revivals to discover "how these do shift Shakespeare and elaborate possibilities for the (dis)articulation of a monolithic past" (81). Her work thus offers a model of criticism from which I can develop an approach to fill the "gaps" I mentioned earlier in this introduction, an approach which seeks to understand the relation between later productions of seventeenth-century drama and the cultural figure of "Shakespeare", in order to expand the field of performance studies. She shares the anti-essentialism of critics like Werner and Rutter, and demonstrates how the broad assumptions of the performance studies can be brought to bear on this particular topic. Focusing on the way in which *Malfi* has been interpreted in terms of (and in opposition to) a dominant Shakespearean model of value, without either evaluating it by that model or moving into a purely analogical or fantasy mode, can help in expanding the field's capabilities.

I should note that not all the revivals Bennett investigated demonstrated this potential for subversion and opposition. Her discussion of *Malfi* in particular, which she described as "*the* Jacobean play of choice" in the 1980s, describes the way in which the company Red Shift designed their early 1980s production in order to draw distinct parallels with the corruption of the "Calvi affair" in Rome, and provoke a "socialist analysis" (86, 85). In the end, though, Bennett found that it simply set up what she called a "trading agreement" between the terms "radical" and "classic", or "the reciprocity between the status of the text in the early 1980s and the marketing strategy of the company" (86). This situation tended to contain the subversive potential of the cultural work the production performed, and was further underlined when the company needed to recoup funds after a failed production of another overtly political work, *1984*:

> [Red Shift's artistic director] took particular action: "I resolved to repair the damage by mounting a concerted effort to achieve public funding and to revive the company's Edinburgh sell-out popularity through use of the deconstruction and overt political statement which had been so successful with *Malfi*" (no date: 43). Choice of Band-Aid? A Shakespeare play, and one of the best-known and most oft-produced at that: *Romeo and Juliet*. And this turned out to be a successful choice for the company, one which was instrumental in their obtaining some Arts Council Funding. (87)

Bennett's term "Band-Aid" makes it clear how she regards this reapplication of Red Shift's *Malfi* approach to *Romeo and Juliet*: a hasty patching of a problem, not a viable artistic strategy or an extension of the company's critique of established power. In her account, the "roll-out" of this radical-looking style to cover a play like *Romeo and Juliet*, and the production's instrumental value in attracting Arts Council funding, seems to co-opt the potentially subversive approach for the benefit of a Shakespearean model of value. The "socialist analysis" desired by Red Shift has been subsumed, according to Bennett, into the terms of the "trading agreement" intended to capitalise on (even to cash in) the company's accumulated "radical chic".

Bennett's work provides the central model for my investigation of *Malfi*'s status as "not-Shakespeare", and I shall be drawing on her concept of the "Jacobean", which she defines as revivals which "flaunt 'thematic distinctions'" from Shakespeare's normative cultural status "concerned with transgression, dissidence and desire" (80). The "Jacobean" quality she finds in particular late twentieth-century play revivals offers a useful comparison for situations where *Malfi* is being framed in ways which stress its "distinctions" from the cultural authority represented by Shakespeare. Just as important will be the flexibility with which she deploys her readings, and I shall emulate her awareness that the oppositional tendencies of not-Shakespeare identities are at frequent risk of being folded back into the Shakespearean model of value – indeed, their position on the periphery of that model of value means that this risk may be seen as the flip-side of their potential to challenge it. It will be important to keep in mind that "opposition" or "subversion" are not inherent qualities, but transient conditions which arise from surrounding discourses, and which can change with context.

Since this investigation will include case studies at points within four hundred years, for which very different kinds of evidence are available, I shall need to extend Bennett's terms in order to deploy them to best advantage. Though *Performing Nostalgia* specifically deals with the cultural landscape of the late twentieth century, I contend this extension will be not

only possible but productive. In order to understand what being not-Shakespeare might mean in earlier periods, it will be necessary to account for the developing meaning of Shakespeare, or the "SHAKESPEARE" of Shepherd and Womack, Dobson and Taylor. This will involve understanding both the way in which Shakespeare was being constructed at various points, and the extent to which he would have been a determining cultural icon against which *Malfi* would have been defined. These aspects of Shakespeare's history will be supplied by drawing on three works I have already mentioned above: Gary Taylor's *Reinventing Shakespeare*, Michael Dobson's *The Making of the National Poet* and Shepherd and Womack's *English Drama: A Cultural History*. These studies will provide a detailed sense of Shakespeare's cultural status around the time of each case study, and to what extent that status constituted a dominant model of cultural value. This strand of the study will inevitably vary in importance over the case studies, but will nonetheless provide an insight into one of the most powerful discourses affecting *Malfi*'s meanings, and one against which it exerted considerable pressure at various times.

Bearing in mind the aspects of these critics' work I have found helpful, I shall need to employ a very flexible notion of "not-Shakespeare" during my investigation into *Malfi*'s production history. It will start from the model presented by Bennett, incorporating her insights as to the way in which cultural productions might be framed and understood as in opposition to Shakespeare, and thus as part of a critique of the values which "Shakespeare" has come to represent in the contemporary cultural moment. It will also bear in mind the caveats which Bennett's application of this concept threw up: that such opposition is unstable, and may easily collapse into a mere "aesthetic" of the radical. This notion of "not-Shakespeare" will need to be extended, both in time and in its ramifications. Drawing, as I have mentioned, on Shepherd and Womack will mean acknowledging and bearing in mind the ways in which the "not-Shakespeares" may themselves have been constructed in the process of reconciling the contradictions inherent in the formation of "Shakespeare". However, the analysis provided by Dobson and Taylor will help complicate this aspect by revealing "Shakespeare" to be less monolithic and hegemonic than Shepherd and Womack's work might imply.

My category of "not-Shakespeare" must acknowledge that being "not Shakespeare" is not always a position of opposition, but might place a work in an indifferent relation to the figure of Shakespeare (as, arguably, *Malfi* was during the 1660s) a relation of dependence as a "lesser version" (the 1850s at Sadler's Wells) or an instrumental relational (such as Peter Hall's

"use" of *Malfi* and Peggy Ashcroft to tap into the Shakespearean "lineage" of verse-speaking in the 1960s.) These positions will vary through time, but they will also be affected by the status and kind of authority which "Shakespeare" possesses during that cultural moment, which the critics I have already cited can elucidate. My concept of "not-Shakespeare" must therefore expand from Bennett's postmodern cultural moment to account for a number of different kinds of relation to a number of historical "Shakespeares".

The dominance of the Duchess: Role and Instantiations.

The role of Webster's Duchess is an extraordinarily large and emotionally complex part, compared to the female roles in the work of his contemporaries. Amongst the works from Webster's period which have had a substantial performance history it has very few peers. Though Ferdinand and Bosola have been read as the male "lead" at different points in the play's history the Duchess has always been seen as the centre of the work. Indeed, many modern critics have sought the play's "meaning" in the figure of the Duchess, though coming to very different conclusions. Lisa Hopkins, for example, has stressed the importance of the character's gender, arguing in *The Female Hero in Renaissance Drama* that she is one of a small number of female characters in the period's drama who can be seen as rejecting the "passivity and victimhood" of most women in tragedy (6). Hopkins sees the Duchess, alongside Beatrice-Joanna in *The Changeling* and Bianca in *Women Beware Women* as "initiators" defined by their dignity and produced by the intersection of contested Early Modern ideas of women's place and nature (6). On the other hand, Joyce Peterson believes that *Malfi* has been the subject of sustained misreading, and that the Duchess should be seen as the central character in a "commonweal tragedy". In Peterson's reading, elaborated in *Curs'd Example*, the play judges the Duchess as a prince who is subject to the strains of private and public life, and fails: "Judged against her own claim that she can live and die like a prince, she is found wanting" (113). Though these two critics are almost diametrically opposed, their interpretations both require us to accept the overriding importance of the Duchess to the play's impact and significance. Indeed, Peterson suggests that the very power of the role has overbalanced critical response over the years:

> There are those women in literature, as there are in history, who so dominate the sphere in which they move, so engage our sympathies, and so charm our imaginations that they reduce all questions of ethical or moral standards to niggling. To judge them seems, at best, insensitivity, at worst, a priggish moralism. Webster's Duchess is such

> a woman. Critical history of the play attests to her power to forestall judgement or, more precisely, to forestall out recognition of the play's judgement upon her. (2)

The value of Peterson's insight for my thesis is not that the Duchess is a "prince" who is "judged" by the play, but her recognition of the way in which the Duchess role has often resisted being read as one element in the play's world, and evaluated on that basis. In general framing, as well as critical commentary, the Duchess seems to overflow the structures which surround "her". For example, the prologue to the 1708 printing of *Malfi* conflates character and book by troping them both as harassed and in need of protection, and when Peggy Ashcroft performed the role at the new Royal Shakespeare Company, many saw the cultural profile of a previous Marlowe Society production as "transferred" to the new production, despite the fact that Ashcroft was the only cast member in common. The Duchess frequently becomes a focus for the perceived "meaning" of the play in individual cases, and becomes attached to or identified with the performer or printing.

Though Peterson identifies it as a critical failing, and one which should be corrected by bringing a generic reading to bear on what the play "actually" meant in its original context, I want to recast this problem as an element in *Malfi*'s history which rewards investigation. Certainly the performance studies framework within which I have been developing this study's approach would demand that any interpretative "mistake" which appears so repeatedly must be taken seriously as a constituent of the play's existence, rather than ignored each time as "incorrect" by the standards of the original literary or performance conditions.

To help consider the unusually large and complex role at the centre of the *Malfi*, and the way it "shapes" the play's meanings, I would like to bring in work by Juliet Dusinberre and Karen Edwards. Dusinberre, in her contribution to *Shakespeare, Theory and Performance* (ed. James Bulman, 1997), steps away from some of her arguments in *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women* (1975) and produces a "competitive" reading of that play's structure. Noting the imagery of gambling and competition in the play, she links this to a sense of "competition" between the two lead characters for mastery of their relationship ("Whoever is perceived as winning dominion in the romance is also perceived as theatrically dominant", 'Squeaking Cleopatras: Gender and Performance in *Antony and Cleopatra*', 49), which is in turn linked to the "competition" between actors in the original company. Her argument rests on the fact that Cleopatra was "originally" played, not by a female star actor, but by a boy who would have been an apprentice in the company: "The boy, just an apprentice in Shakespeare's

company, is given a role in the play which constantly upstages those more powerful than he in theatrical terms" (57). When the role of Cleopatra came to be played by female performers after the Restoration, Dusinberre suggests that the "competition" inherent in the play's structure became a means for expressing anxiety about the proper relations between men and women in terms of power and authority. She cites a review by Kenneth Tynan of the 1951 production starring Lawrence Olivier and Vivian Leigh to make this point, remarking that that "he doesn't want Cleopatra to win the competition with Antony any more than he wants Leigh to win the competition with Olivier, or for Olivier, worse still, to let her do so" (60).

With Dusinberre's article we are still firmly in the realm of Shakespeare studies, indeed she makes it clear that this model is not to be applied to other playwrights:

> Moreover, no tragedian amongst Shakespeare's contemporaries experiments with the theatrical possibilities of putting the boy player in dialogue with the woman he plays. *The Duchess of Malfi* constructs the role of the woman ruler unmediated by any textual recognition that she is acted by a boy. (46)

Whilst I can agree that there is no obvious "textual recognition" of the situation in Webster's play, this disavowal may reflect Dusinberre's awareness that *Malfi*, with its strong and complex central female role surrounded by male characters who fail to achieve the status of co-lead, is the nearest contemporary comparison to *Antony and Cleopatra*. There are also several points of similarity between the account she gives of its history and that of *Malfi*: the dominance of adaptation, a revival by Phelps at Sadler's Wells starring Isabella Glyn, a notable performance by Peggy Ashcroft. These do not suggest a close similarity between the two works themselves, but that they may have acted in a similar way as a lens for cultural anxieties. They certainly provide a prima facie case for expanding Dusinberre's approach to cover *Malfi*'s production history, in spite of her own stipulation.

Indeed, one critic has already suggested a similarly "competitive" model for reading the relationship between the roles of Webster's play. In an unpublished talk, and subsequent correspondence, Karen Edwards has speculated that a "mischievous" Webster may have deliberately disrupted the mechanics of the company. She builds on the work done by Scott McMillin on the personal and "industrial" relations within Early Modern theatrical companies in "The Sharer and His Boy: Rehearsing Shakespeare's Women", and suggests that the role could have"exacerbate[ed] tensions already present in the company. (Surely it engendered jealousy among the other actors - especially those who had recently outgrown their ability to

take on women' roles - to give such a magnificently juicy part to a young actor?) (email, 20th April 2010)

Though I do not intend to follow their models, as they both seem to rest upon assumptions about the "original" workings of the play and its reception, Dusinberre and Edwards provide insights from which I can construct an approach with which to investigate the ways in which the role of the Duchess has acted as a focus for the play's perceived meanings. Though they both imply a level of intention or design in the way in which the central role acts within the plays (Edwards goes further, though she is at pains to stress that this is complete speculation), it is not necessary to assume any intention at all to focus a strand of my thesis on this element of the play's history. Indeed, disassociating the dominance of the Duchess' role both from any authorial intention and from the conditions of the original production, and thus moving the strand towards the anti-essentialist performance studies position I advanced earlier in the introduction, will allow me to give a more flexible account of the way this aspect of *Malfi* has helped shape its perceived meanings. The role of the Duchess has certainly helped frame the reception of the play, acting as a point for various discourses to crystallise around, but it has by no means always empowered the individual performer at the expense of the rest of the production context. I shall also expand this focus on the Duchess' role beyond stage performances to investigate at certain points the way in which it affects the profile of printings. Thus I will be concerned with how the dominance of the Duchess affects the play's instantiations in a broad sense.

As with pastness, it will be important not to assume that the relationship between role and instantiation operates in the same way throughout the case studies. The identification in the public discourse between Peggy Ashcroft and the Duchess allowed her to act as focus for the work's cultural profile when she recreated the role with another company, adding to her agency as a performer, whilst the similar association made in the 1730 printing seems to decrease the performer's agency by arranging her as a spectacle within the genre of "pathetic tragedy". In some cases this function of the Duchess role can be reduced or almost completely erased by the strength of other elements in the production's cultural profile, as when William Poel and the Independent Theatre Society were the determining foci of interpretation for the 1892 production, erasing Mary Rorke's significance in the press commentary. Whatever cultural politics the association with the role of the Duchess and the individual instantiation are used to channel, investigating this aspect of *Malfi*'s cultural profile throughout the case studies will help to further elucidate the discourses brought to bear on the play, and what purposes they served.

'I am Duchess of Malfi still": the framing of *The Duchess of Malfi*

These three strands, which will inevitably overlap at times, and diverge at others, provide the best chance to give an account of *Malfi*'s framing in the case studies which concentrates on what has repeatedly been significant in the play's history. The eclectic group of critics which I have set in dialogue in this introduction in order to map a coherent approach, and the extent to which I have had to develop beyond their work, highlights the eccentric and particular nature of *Malfi*'s afterlife in production and reception, as well as the need for an individual "performance studies" approach for coming to understand it. Sharing the basic philosophical assumptions of the work by scholars within Shakespearean performance studies, whom I discussed in the first section, my thesis will bring those principles to bear upon the more irregular and uneven history of Webster's play. At the beginning of this introduction I cited Genevieve Love to the effect that "perhaps each early modern playwright would need, as Shakespeare has, a mode of performance criticism specially attuned to his particular history, style, dramaturgy". In constructing a framework attuned to *Malfi* specifically, and applying it to vital points in the play's afterlife, I hope to show how the possibilities of Early Modern performance studies can be expanded. The critical landscape at the moment suggests that this is necessary not only to improve our understanding of not only "each early modern playwright", but of Shakespeare himself, whose works might well make more sense once we cease folding into them every other theatre poet of the time.

In the first chapter I will investigate the 1623 quarto of *Malfi*, which is often treated by scholars and theatre practitioners as if it is identical to the play itself. Interrogating the traces in this printing which "unfix" the book from its "original" appearance on the stage ten years previously, and relating its appearance in 1623 to the burning political issue of the proposed "Spanish Match", I will read this quarto as already part of the play's afterlife. Moving to the early eighteenth century, I shall examine the 1708 printing which appeared under the title *The Unfortunate Duchess of Malfi; or, The Unnatural Brother*, and Lewis Theobald's 1730 adaptation *The Fatal Secret*. These instantiations demonstrate the paradoxical way in which the play's meanings were radically reshaped in order to present supposedly "timeless" truths about female "nature" and English culture. My third chapter will examine productions of *Malfi* by the "legitimizing" management of the unfashionable Sadler's Wells Theatre in the 1850s, and by the experimental Independent Theatre Society of the 1890s. These productions co-opted the play's cultural gravitas for very different purposes: Sadler's Wells attempting to move themselves into the respectable mainstream with productions of "classic" English repertory, whilst William Poel and the Independent Theatre Society wanted to critique the

complacency and philistinism of that mainstream. Finally, in the last chapter I will concentrate on the flurry of performances by little theatre groups in the first half of the twentieth century, and the 1960 production by the fledgling Royal Shakespeare Company. In its position on the edge of the canon, *Malfi* provided a lightning rod for concerns about a fragmenting post-war culture, in which even major landmarks such as Shakespeare were coming to look unfamiliar and ambiguous.

These are the contexts in which my case studies appear, and within them we shall find a range of conflicting voices, all laying claim to *Malfi* and disagreeing over what the play means, and whose cultural politics it supports. I have chosen to end with the RSC production since it marks the beginning of a new era in the work's history: after centuries of existing at the fringes of the dramatic canon, this instantiation sees *Malfi* becoming firmly ensconced in the national cultural heritage and the state-subsidised theatre system. This is the position from which productions of the play are mounted today, and through the case studies in this thesis I shall be examining how previous instantiations of *Malfi* were framed and understood in ways which seem at times both startlingly different and oddly familiar.

Chapter One: 1623

In this chapter, I shall be interrogating the first printing of *The Duchess of Malfi* from a different angle than has been taken by previous investigations. The fact that this printing is used as the basis for later versions, and for modern scholarly editions, has meant that many commentators tend to assume a relatively unproblematic identification between the 1623 quarto and the work.[1] Though John Russell Brown's 1997 edition discusses various aspects of the quarto, such as corrections and the source of the manuscript, when it comes to considering "Origins, Context and Composition" or "Meanings", it treats the two as identical (2, 16). Leah Marcus (in her 2009 edition) treats the quarto as distinct from the (presumed) earliest productions of the play, since she discusses both the possible addition of lines in 1617/18 and the political context of 1623 (95, 14-15). She tends, however, to see this context as continuous with the decade which preceded it, writing of the printing: "A decade after its initial composition, the 1623 First Quarto edition of *Malfi* reiterates a critique of traditional aristocratic hierarchy over several layers of its printed text" (14). In contrast, this chapter will concentrate on the printing as the first substantial part of *Malfi*'s afterlife, focussing on the aspects of the quarto which mark it as belated. I want to read the 1623 printing as a book which functions by detaching itself from both the writer's "hand" and the play as it first appeared on the stage, and ask how this should change our understanding of the play and its history.

When attention is focused on this belatedness it becomes visible as one of the most striking aspects of the quarto, manifesting itself variously in the three strands around which my thesis is organised. In the first strand, the detachment works to bolster the authorial figure by constructing him as a Classical – and even, implicitly, a dead – author, risen above the petty materialities of the time to attain a timeless literary quality. The second strand sees this belatedness and detachment working to mark the pastness and excess of the printing, its refusal to identify comfortably with any single source of authority. This frames the printing rather like a "revival", a performance of an old play in its own right, and enables powerful parallels with contemporary religious politics. The third strand investigates the way that this belated text offers up a trace of the play's performance history, in the form of the first cast list in English printed drama. The name set alongside the role of the Duchess cannot, however, apparently be the actor who created the role, or the one still playing it at the time of the

[1] For example, the introduction to *The Duchess of Malfi (Plays in Performance*), Kathleen McLuskie and Jennifer Uglow, eds. (1989), and Chapter Four of David Coleman's more recent *John Webster: Renaissance Dramatist* (2010).

printing, so the list may offer a glimpse of the play's reception, and the effect of the dominant single role of the Duchess upon the way it was understood. The investigations in these three strands are underpinned by an assumption that the 1623 quarto is a document which provides some evidence for the play's history and (even more importantly) is itself a major part of that history in the early seventeenth century. Separating and interrogating these aspects of the printing will begin the process of decentring I referred to in the introduction, revealing the extent to which the play does not in fact reside in the 1623 quarto.

1.1 The Quick and the Dead: Not-Shakespeare in the 1623 Quarto[2]

The year 1623 is one of utmost importance for scholars of Early Modern drama, as it saw the publishing of the First Folio of Shakespeare's works, as well as the quarto publication of *Malfi*. The coincidence of the two books being printed in this year allows me to draw comparisons between the way these printings construct their author figures. There is no evidence that the *Malfi* quarto is defined by its relationship, whether of comparison or contrast, with the First Folio at this point: the successful and deceased playwright whose collected works had just been published had yet to be transmuted from Shakespeare to "SHAKESPEARE"[3]. That process, as recounted in Gary Taylor's *Reinventing Shakespeare* and Michael Dobson's *The Making of the National Poet: Shakespeare, Adaptation and Authorship 1660-1769*, begins in earnest after the Interregnum, leaving Shakespeare at this point in something of a limbo between death and the beginnings of deification. Being not-Shakespeare at this point could not be a cultural marker in the same way as it would be later, during and after the various stages by which Shakespeare was "Shakespeared". Depending on the context, in the theatre or on the page, being not-Shakespeare might be less significant in 1623 than being "not-Jonson" or "not-Fletcher". The coincidence of date marks the beginning of the play's afterlife, which will see it framed increasingly in terms of Shakespeare as its history continues, but it would be naive to think that, because Shakespeare was not a dominant influence on the cultural profile of *Malfi* in 1623, the year's two printings represent a "Year Zero" from which two afterlives begin. The two books appear already enmeshed in systems and conventions

[2] Since the thesis is organised around case studies and thematic strands at various points, I have numbered sections within the chapters with up to three numbers, to help with navigation within them. Unnumbered subheadings are simply developing the argument within that section, and chapter introductions and conclusions have also been left unnumbered.

[3] Though Christina Luckyj has suggested that "comparisons with Shakespeare" are "invidious" but "inevitable", and that Webster "invited" them by his preface to *The White Devil*, the 1623 *Malfi* quarto does not frame itself specifically with reference to Shakespeare (*Critical*, 3).

which framed and produced their meanings. This section will investigate the ways in which these two books offered their contents within the terms established by previous printings, and demonstrate a curious similarity between a Folio which memorialised a dead playwright, and a quarto which seems to be trying to embalm a living one.

When comparing and contrasting these volumes, the most obvious difference is their size and format. The magisterial Folio provides a corpus of work supposedly representing its author's life in the theatre, whilst the quarto presents one play in a cheaper, more disposable format. This arguably makes the *Malfi* printing more available for being read in terms of contemporary politics, as I will suggest when discussing pastness later in this chapter. The fact that there was never a similar collection of Webster's works, indeed that he was never identified with a substantial canon, would later be one of the necessary (though not sufficient) conditions for the different ways their authorial personae were regarded. In 1623, however, there were some notable similarities in the two printings as regards the construction of an author-figure. Though the printing as a whole fails to identify securely with any source of authority (such as the author's intentions, or an "original" performance), there are nonetheless elements within it which offer Webster as a "literary" authorial presence. Both Douglas Brooks and Zachary Lesser (in *From Playhouse to Printing House* and *Renaissance Drama and the Politics of Publication* respectively) have identified a particular strain of play publishing in the early seventeenth century as attempting to construct a genre of literary or "select" playbooks. Marked by elements such as Latin mottos on the titlepage, epistles to the reader and the practice of "continuous printing" (which marks a playtext aspiring to the condition of a poem), these texts tend to define themselves in opposition to the stage of the time. Prefaces in quartos such as *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, *Troilus and Cressida* and Webster's own *The White Devil*, scorn theatre audiences as common and undiscriminating, and in two cases actually dwell on the play's failure in the theatre, contrasting this with the success they will achieve in the hands of educated and sensitive readers.

A number of features of the 1623 *Malfi* are consistent with the model Brooks and Lesser have suggested. It has a Latin motto (which, when translated and hunted to its source in Horace, specifically asserts the work's literary qualities), continuous printing, an epistle dedicating it to Sir George Harding and the emphatic inscription "written by John Webster". However, in place of an epistle "to the reader" which interpellates the audience by addressing them as a single persona, the *Malfi* quarto contains a number of commendatory poems addressed to the author, specifically by Rowley, Ford and Middleton. The terms in which they commend the play are worth comparing with the commendatory poems which appeared in the First Folio by Ben Jonson and what Schoenbaum has called "three other admirers...[who]

can only be described as comparative nonentities: one I.M. (James Mabbes?), Hugh Holland, and Leonard Digges" (59). The two sets of poems frame their authors in ways which differ somewhat from Brooks' and Lesser's literary playbooks.

The pieces to Shakespeare and Webster both set the writers in a Classical context. Middleton's poem is entirely in Latin, and makes a reference to "the Thunderer", an epithet for Jupiter, whilst Ford's English poem styles Webster "a poet whom nor Rome nor Greece/ Transcend in all theirs for a masterpiece" (124, 126). Jonson catalogues Shakespeare alongside the dead playwright's "peers", including Aeschylus and Terence, and makes reference to Shakespeare wearing the "buskin" and "socks" of the Ancient Greek theatre (xlv). Digges' reference is briefer, via a mention of Ovid in the couplet "Nor fire nor cank'ring age, as Naso said/ Of his, thy wit-fraught book shall once invade (xlv, xlvi). (Holland's use of the phrase "Thespian spring" and "Phoebus clouds his rays" are much more muted, sounding to me more like poetic circumlocution than any attempt to frame Shakespeare as a Classical figure.)

The poems also contrast the works of their subjects with more traditional forms of funerary monument (see also Coleman, 79). Ford's poem states that Webster "hath to memory lent/ A lasting fame to raise his monument", whilst Middleton expands upon the theme:

> In this thou imitatest 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 other's honouring is worth's crime;
> Thy monument is raised in thy lifetime.
> 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. (123, ll.3-13)

The same note of posthumous survival is struck in Webster's dedication of the book to George Harding, when he declares

> 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. (122, ll.20-29)

Turning to the First Folio, Digges calls the contents of the collection

thy works which outlive
Thy tomb thy name must; when that stone is rent,
And time dissolves thy Stratford monument,
Here we alive shall view thee still. This book
When brass and marble fade, shall make thee look
Fresh to all ages.... (xlvi, ll. 3-7)

whilst Jonson famously bids

My Shakespeare, rise. I will not lodge thee by
Chaucer or Spenser, or bid Beaumont lie
A little further to make thee a room.
Thou art a monument without a tomb,
And art alive while thy book doth live
And we have wits to read and praise to give. (xlv, ll.19-24)

This strain of rhetoric stands out, since the commendatory poem as a form is much rarer than the features of Brooks' and Lesser's literary playbooks. James Biester's 'Gender and Style in Seventeenth-Century Commendatory Verse' can provide both clarification of the workings of this form, and historical context. As Biester points out, commendatory poems can provide an insight into what contemporary writers thought were important aspects of poetic practice, the elements which had been established as significant and praise-worthy, and thus reacted as much to previous work in the genre as to the poem under discussion (507). These poems thus attempt to site Webster and his play within a larger artistic horizon. More generally, Biester's analysis, and the examples he cites (such as Thomas Carew's elegy for John Donne) concerns works which are later than *Malfi*, and non-dramatic. The commendatory poem as a form thus seems part of an attempt to shift the frame of the quarto towards a "poetic" model. Though a

number of dramatic works published in the few years surrounding these publications include an "Epistle to the Reader", Latin motto, etc, I can only find one which offers a commendatory poem to the author: Massinger's *The Duke of Milan* (1623). Even this example differs from *Malfi* and the Folio, since it contains only the one poem, with a rather different emphasis: though there is a brief mention of posthumous fame in the last stanza, it is in fact a satire, lampooning an imagined "Poet-Critick" who cannot appreciate the play. I would argue that the commendatory poem, as a form, serves to fashion the figure of the author even more directly than a dedication or "Epistle to the Reader" from the playwright. They offer the author up as object, instead of subject, and allow another voice into the text to anatomise his qualities.

The classical imagery and the Latin poetry is an obvious attempt to model an interpretation of the books which follow these poems, shifting the frame of reference from the contemporary, commercial theatre to a timeless and transcendent zone of "literature". One of the criteria of "literary" status which Lesser uses to survey play printings in this period is the presence of Latin (in the form of mottoes and epigraphs) on the titlepage, which can operate as a signal of the play's supposed "select" status even if the buyer is unable to translate, or recognise the origin of, the quotation (68-9). Printing a commendatory poem in Latin takes the process a stage further, since it suggests that the play will be of interest to the kind of reader who can not only appreciate an apt "tag" from Classical literature, but read an entire newly-composed poem in Latin. Situating this strategy back within the history of printed drama, I would stress the influence of Ben Jonson's self-presentation, particularly in his own folio, the *Works* of 1616. Lesser cites Joseph Lowenstein and Sara Van Den Burg on the "crucial" importance of "Jonson's ability to fashion a persona for the dramatist based on classical authors" (78), and there is general agreement that his folio in some sense prepared the way for Shakespeare's own: as David M. Bergeron puts it, "Jonson's 1616 Folio clearly had an impact" (141). It is Jonson's, rather than Shakespeare's, folio which contains lengthy commendatory poems in Latin from John Selden and others. These textual tributes in the lingua franca of the learned world, ostentatiously letting the reader overhear the author in correspondence with his cultural peers, aid in the construction of that very author. The short equivalent in the *Malfi* quarto, in which the title and Middleton's name and titles take up more lines than the poem, serves the same purpose in a more abbreviated and less demanding form. Slightly more substantial than the Horatian epigraph on the titlepage, Middleton's piece adds a touch of gravitas to the pretexts without loading the front of the quarto with pages of erudite verse. Overall, these pretexts participate in an attempt to frame the emerging dramatic author-figure amongst the precedents of Classical culture such as Euripides and

Terence, rather than the other members of entertainment industry of London, such as prostitutes and angry bears.

The other strain of this rhetoric – the harping on memorials and tombs – is even more striking. The idea of immortality via poetry was not a new one in 1623: it was a trope with a long tradition, notably in Shakespeare's own sonnets and the works of Ovid and Horace. When applied to Shakespeare's Folio it makes sense: these are works being collected under the name of a dead writer, whose other writings stress the potential of art to triumph over mortality. Punning on Roland Barthes, Brooks states that "in its most literal sense...the death of the author did play a fundamental role in the coming into being of the notion of Shakespeare as an author" (11) and Bergeron sees a similar connection: "One could say that Shakespeare has been canonized. His "remaines" may refer either to his corpse or to his corpus of work. Either way, he and his plays gain transcendental stature. The transubstantiation of Shakespeare leads to these texts (152). Despite the difference in emphasis, this aspect of the rhetoric serves a similar function to the Classical references: it assists the construction of a transcendent figure, redeemed from time and mortality.

In the case of *Malfi*, however, this same style of address is being applied to a living writer. Instead of the scholar Selden commending Jonson, or the elderly poet Jonson memorialising Shakespeare, these poems come from Webster's colleagues and fellow-playwrights, and are addressed to a writer in the middle of his career. They anticipate the time when the works will be called upon to testify to the man who wrote them, oddly looking forward to his disappearance and almost inviting the reader to read *Malfi* as if its author were already dead.

Thus these two printings participate in the continuing development of the authorial figure in English printed drama. Joseph Lowenstein has investigated this process in detail, describing it as the arrival of as "the bibliographic ego" and tracing it to the precedent of Jonson's 1616 *Works* (*Possessive*, 1). However, the appearance of similar rhetorical material in such very different volumes means that the impact of that material has a different significance. The Classical and memorial imagery, when applied to the weighty Shakespeare Folio, takes the works of a dead playwright and uses his absence as a rhetorical basis for according him a place amongst the "greats" of a literary tradition. The same rhetorical technique, applied to the cheap quarto of a play of (as I will argue below) topical interest by a mid-career writer, and written by his colleagues in the trade, attempts to claim the same weight for a very different production. The *Malfi* prefatory materials are a step or two further down the path of the "bibliographic ego" than those of the First Folio, because they are more metaphorical, streamlined for a cheaper commercial format and have more cultural "work" to do in elevating

their author-figure whilst he is, inconveniently, still around. Thus *Malfi*'s very first printing is already troped as "belated", the product of an author who is in the past. This trope will be a noticeable part of the play's profile in the coming centuries, from the preface in the 1730s in which Lewis Theobald decried Webster's crude, old-fashioned and unrestrained talent, to the Victorian newspapers which advertised a production of a play by "old John Webster".

1.2 Struggling free: Pastness in the 1623 quarto

The "belatedness" I have just identified in prefatory material finds a parallel in the printing's pastness, the sense that *Malfi* is somehow connected to another moment in time, and the way in which that affects its cultural profile. The theatrical and literary conditions of 1623 were very much the same as those ten years earlier when the play first appeared on stage, so this pastness does not stem from the play's resistance to interpretation by the cultural form within which it is being reproduced (as it does later in the play's history.) Rather, the quarto seems to detach itself from the authority either of the authorial "hand", or the original stage production, creating a gap which constitutes "pastness". After elaborating on this process, I shall turn to the charge which I believe this quarto's pastness allowed it to carry during the fervid political atmosphere of 1623.

As presented in the 1623 quarto, *The Duchess of Malfi* possesses a simple sense of pastness, since it is a "historical" play dealing with events which took place in a previous era. The plot draws on historical events involving Giovanna d'Aragona, around the end of the fifteenth century and the beginning of the sixteenth. The main line of the play's sources appears to have started in Bandello's *Novelle*, published in 1514, then passed through Belleforest's *Histoires Tragiques* (1565) and Painter's *Palace of Pleasure* (1567). Leah S. Marcus notes that Painter appears to have been Webster's main source, though she suggests he could have also used Belleforest, Bandello or other versions of the story (22). It also appears that Simon Goulart's *Histoires admirables et memorables de nostre temps* of 1603 had an influence on the work. Whatever the precise chain of transmission, the play as it appears in the quarto is clearly based on events which had occurred in some form in Italy about a hundred years prior to the book's publication.

This general sense of pastness in the play is developed into a more specific form by the trappings of the quarto. The prefatory materials disrupt any simple identification between this printing and the play itself, and in the process locate the play's "authentic" and "original" existence in the past. I have mentioned that Webster apparently drew much of his material for the play from Painter, but one of the commendatory poems suggests that contemporary

readers might be expected to be aware of previous version of the story. The poem in question, by William Rowley, runs thus:

> *To his friend Mr John Webster upon his* Duchess of Malfi
> I never saw thy Duchess till the day
> That she was lively bodied in thy place.
> Howe'er she answered her low-rated love,
> Her brothers' anger did do fatal prove!
> Yet my opinion is, she might speak more
> But never in her life so well before. (125, 11.1-7.)

Leah Marcus glosses this quite straightforwardly in the notes to her edition, explaining that lines 2-3 refer to "imagining the Duchess as a living person", glossing line 4 as "no matter how eloquently she accounted for (or argued for)" and paraphrasing lines 6-7 as "She could have spoken even more, yet never so well as in the play" (125).

However, Rowley's compressed syntax leaves some phrases within the piece open to various interpretations. John Russell Brown differs from Marcus significantly in his reading of the middle lines, stating that "Her" is equivalent to "which her" and "prove" should be understood as "prove it to be" (40). He would thus presumably paraphrase line 5 as "Her brothers' anger proved that love to be so fatal!"

These differences between the two most recent editors do not exhaust the possibilities for alternative readings. For example, the opening couplet could either be a statement that Rowley's first acquaintance with the story had been via *The Duchess of Malfi*, or the exact opposite, that he had known previous versions which had failed to "lively bod[y]" the character as Webster's play did. The "Howe'er" in the third line could imply "however well" or "in whichever or various ways" she defended her marriage to Antonio. The final two lines might indeed mean, as Marcus suggests, that the dialogue Webster gave to the Duchess exceeded anything the historical woman might have said, but I think the line invites a metaphorical reading of "life", and Rowley is best understood as referring to other versions of the story of Giovanna d'Aragona.

The three alternative readings I have identified here all tend towards the idea that Rowley is comparing Webster to previous writers. Taken individually, they are simply ambiguities in the phrasing of a laconic poem, but in combination they provide a coherent case for this interpretation. This is strengthened by the fact that both of the options for reading the first line imply that there are other works concerning the Duchess in existence. Whether we

take Rowley's "I never saw" to be an exaggeration which discounts previous versions he has experienced in favour of Webster's play, or a literal statement of fact, both readings involve acknowledging other tales about d'Aragona. Without this implication, the line becomes incoherent: if Rowley is only aware of Webster's version, the first two lines are equivalent to saying "I never saw the main character of your play until I saw your play." With this in mind, the ambiguity identified in "Howe'er" seems more plausible, as does the metaphorical reading of "life" in the final line. This is supported by the fact that Webster's version reduces the Duchess' speeches considerably when drawing on Painter. The *Palace of Pleasure* tells the story largely through the voice of the Duchess and the narrator, involving her in lengthy internal debates as a way of explaining her situation, elaborating the courses open to her, and bewailing her fate. When compared to Webster, Painter's Duchess does speak a good deal more. Given the wide popularity of Painter in the early seventeenth century, it would be perfectly logical for Rowley to compare the two works as a means of praising Webster, in the expectation that enough of the quarto's readership would understand him.[4] The lines are a more comprehensible artistic compliment if Webster's play is being compared, not with the things the historical character might be imagined to have said, but with the euphuistic elaborations and psychomachia of Painter's novella.

Thus begins the process of "unfixing" the 1623 quarto from any specific source of authority, whether of authorial intention, fidelity to historical or literary sources or original performance. Rowley's commendatory poem works to loosen the identification between the tale and Webster's work, so that the reader is offered *a* Duchess rather than *the* Duchess. Other paratexts perform similar work, notably the titlepage's declaration that the printing "contains diverse things that the length of the play would not bear in the presentment", which refuses to identify the work entirely with the productions it also mentions at the Globe or Blackfriars. Indeed, the mention of two playhouses with such different cultural profiles itself calls into question the notion of a single "theatrical" *Malfi* being imagined in this printing (see Sturgess, esp. Chaps. 1 and 2.) (The distinction between the two playhouses is less in the technical staging possibilities, as in the reputation, mix of clientele and the "coterie" atmosphere which Sturgess identifies.) The marginal note to the Loretto scene function in the opposite direction, suggesting that the printing contains material not sanctioned by the author, but present in the stage productions.

[4] L.G. Kelly's entry for Painter in the *ODNB* describes the *Palace of Pleasure* as "widely read, imitated and plagiarized" and claims that he "seems to have left traces in every notable Tudor playwright", and R.W. Maslen's *Elizabethan Fictions* refers to the widespread use by other writers of Painter's work, which "seems to have at once captivated the fantasies of the Elizabethan public" (4).

This note appears next to the song which is sung whilst the Cardinal is performing his grand ceremony of "instalment" and "form of banishment", and reads simply "The author disclaims this ditty to be his." Marcus has compared two states of this scene, one in which the song is titled "Hymne" and one in which the title has disappeared and the marginal not appeared, and propounds a "conjectural scenario" of Webster coming into the printshop and insisting on the alteration, whether on aesthetic or religious grounds. She backs this scenario by noting other "highly informed changes" which are noticeable in the scene, and concludes by commenting that "If, as Roland Barthes wittily suggests, the author is to be allowed as a guest into his text, then this is one place in which we can allow ourselves to recognise his shaping presence during the process of revision" (66, 67). John Russell Brown proposes a similar interpretation, finding in these alterations proof that" Webster actually visited the press and took an interest in the text's authenticity", which he notes "could not be taken for granted at the time" (30).

Both editors make a convincing case for the Loretto alterations as authorial, but if we are to allow the Websterian "author-figure" back into this scene as a guest, it will be at the expense of his general authority. Webster's presence in the quarto is clear at this point, but it works to highlight the fact that elements of the Loretto scene were apparently not "authorial" – whatever scenario we construct to account for their appearance, the marginalia distance this passage from Webster's authorial intentions. Just as the titlepage advertises the printing's excess in one direction, including material which Webster wrote but which was not performed, the marginalia advertises excess in the other direction, marking material which was apparently performed but which Webster certainly did not write.

This effect of "unfixing" is intensified by the presence of the double cast list, which situates the quarto not only as a theatrical document, but one which is suspended between performances, failing to identify with one or another as its genuine incarnation. Brown notes that *Malfi* is "the earliest English play to be published with a list of actors assigned to individual roles" and that "Bosola has been given unprecedented rank and prominence at the head of the cast list" above characters who outrank him in the play's world. Brown suggests that "Webster may have been responsible for this...thus expressing his view of the play's structure and the significance of its characters" (42). Keith Sturgess makes a similar point in *Jacobean Private Theatre*, asserting that "Bosola...heads the cast list, breaking the convention of ranking characters first and marking Webster's own awareness of that character's special place in the play's design." He takes this list as demonstrating "Webster's own radical cast", since "a servant-turned-spy and a woman stand at the front of this play" (99).

Marcus points out, however, that it is Lowin the player, not Bosola the spy, who really heads the cast list: "the ordering principle of the list, as in the list of roles published in the Shakespeare First Folio the same year, appears to be the status of actors in the company" (129). The cast-list is thus not a window into the author's radical view of society, but moves the printing away from his authority by using stage production as its organising principle. Moreover, the list provides more than one actor for some of the roles: for example Ferdinand is assigned "1. *R. Burbidge.* 2. *J. Taylor*" and Antonio "1. *W. Ostler*. 2. *R. Benfield*." These obviously represent alterations in the assigning of roles caused by changes in the company between the play's premiere and its first printing (notably the death of Richard Burbage), but Sturgess has identified a problem, or at least a complication, with the list. According to *Jacobean Private Theatre*, Richard Sharpe was "probably too young" in 1613 to have created the role of the Duchess (which he is listed next to), but by the time of the printing he was "probably too old" to still be playing her, so Sturgess suggests that "Perhaps Webster remembered him as the best, or longest serving, Duchess" (99). This continues the close association for Sturgess between the quarto and the author's hand, which is imagined "scribbling in names against a *dramatis personae*", and used to solve the problem (99).

However, one does not to have to accept Sturgess's assumption that the list was provided by the author (which is undercut seriously by the discussion above of non-authorial elements in the printing) to be struck by his suggestion that the cast list represents a mix of the play's performance history. Just as the titlepage lists two very different theatres, the Globe and Blackfriars, this cast list appears to suspend the printing between a series of past productions, failing to identify itself with any "original" performance which can provide authorisation. Thus the quarto is unfixed from any stable authority, unable to map coherently across either "authorial intention" or the sanction of an originary performance to stabilise the excess it advertises. This pastness – always citing a previous version or source of authority, but never identifying securely with any – makes the play available for application to the contemporary political situation. As I will argue, the quarto's pastness both frees up the quarto to be applied to the political controversies of 1623, and increases its rhetorical force as a commentary. The printing's connection to the past allows it to be read as demonstrating perilous patterns in history, which are at risk of repeating themselves.

The "Spanish Match"

The burning political issue of the year was the so-called "Spanish Match", the proposed marriage which would ally the royal houses of England and Spain by marrying Prince Charles to the Infanta Maria, and before elaborating my analysis of how this would have framed the 1623 quarto, it is worth sketching the political situation at the time.[5] The possibility of a marriage between the royal families had first been mooted in 1617, but became more serious in the early 1620s, as part of James I's ambitions to forge a more harmonious and less confessionally aggressive Europe. War had broken out in the Holy Roman Empire during 1619, over the kingship of Bohemia, and one of the claimants was Frederick, the Elector Palatine, husband of Elizabeth Stuart and James I's son-in-law. The pair gained the soubriquet "the Winter King and Queen" after they only managed one season in their new capital before their lands were overrun and they were forced into exile. The conflict was threatening to escalate rapidly, with Spanish forces in the Rhineland, as the Spanish Hapsburgs sided with their cousins the Austrian Hapsburgs against Frederick and Elizabeth. Meanwhile, the English Parliament vocally championed the pair as innocent Protestant royalty being persecuted by the malign forces of Continental Catholicism. Their fortune and lands were confiscated, the pair were separated during their travels, and Elizabeth gave birth during this exile. Under such circumstances James' pacific foreign policy became more difficult, but also more urgent. He attempted to remain neutral on his son-in-law's claim to the Bohemian throne, and pursued his intended alliance via marriage with the Spanish Hapsburgs, though it remains a matter of debate amongst scholars whether the restoration of the Palatinate lands to Frederick was one of his aims in making the alliance, or merely a bargaining issue.

In 1623 the long-standing negotiations over this possible marriage came to a head, when Prince Charles and the Duke of Buckingham smuggled themselves over the Channel and travelled to Madrid in disguise, ending up as little better than hostage at the court. The

[5] This general sketch of the historical circumstances of the Spanish Match draws on accounts in Glyn Redworth's *The Prince and the Infanta: The Cultural Politics of the Spanish Match*, Brennan C. Pursell's 'The End of the Spanish Match' in *Historical Journal* and Jerzy Limon's *Dangerous Matter*. I should note that Jerzy Limon has argued that there was an orchestrated campaign of anti-Spanish propaganda in the 1623/4 theatrical season, arranged and paid for by the "war party" at court (10-12). According to Limon's analysis, which stresses the level of censorship and government control at the time, these works send out specific "signals" to alert readers to the second level of political meaning underneath the main narrative. However, his model requires that such a system of "signals" exist without any of the censors being aware of it, or, in one case, censor the play without removing the offending material (60). Whilst I agree that the Spanish Match was a vital part of the cultural landscape at the time, Limon's combination of a centralised conspiracy coupled with a system of "signals" leaves too many questions unanswered, especially after the work of Douglas Brook and Zachary Lesser has demonstrated that the commercial market in printed drama was more than capable of producing and distributing political and polemical work on all sides of a controversy without the need for any courtly skulduggery behind the scenes

lengthy negotiations over the treaty which would accompany the marriage was complicated by the difference in religion between the bride and groom's countries, and the sense of obligation felt by the Spanish king to preserve the purity of Catholic practice at all costs. It was an obligation he specifically swore an oath to fulfil during the negotiations with the English, and the nuptial proposals were scrutinised by a special junta, or council of theologians. Many of the terms of the treaty were set by letters which arrived from Rome via papal envoy, and in one case the dates on a letter were deliberately forged in order to give the Spanish side a tactical advantage.[6] Eventually escaping by another subterfuge, the prince was greeted as a hero on his arrival home in late 1623 by an ecstatic, and in some regions militantly, Protestant nation.

In proposing that this situation, and the discourses of anti-Catholicism which were prevalent in England at the time, would have exerted a powerful, and even determining, force on the 1623 quarto, I am not attempting to build these elements into an essentialist model of the play. When I advance internal evidence, such as plot or verbal details, it is in order to demonstrate that the text is capable of supporting such an interpretation, given the contemporary political situation, not as a way of arguing that *The Duchess of Malfi is somehow* "about" the Spanish Match. As Leah Marcus declares, *Malfi* "cannot be reduced to the status of an anti-Catholic or anti-Jacobean tract", and my interest in this study is more directed towards the way in which the play has been "framed" in its various incarnations (15). Bearing this in mind, I will discuss the elements of the play as printed in 1623 which would have made it susceptible to political interpretation in the light of the contemporary situation, advancing both internal and external evidence to support this conclusion.

First, the play's plot begins with a disputed marriage at a Catholic court. Comparisons have often been drawn between the Duchess' situation and that of Lady Arbella Stuart, notably in Sarah Jayne Steen's 'The Crime of Marriage: Arbella Stuart and *The Duchess of Malfi*', which attempts to use the known responses to Stuart's case as a guide to how audiences might have been disposed to view the Duchess. Given the play's possible relevance for theatregoers to the Stuart case in 1614, it seems just as reasonable that its printing in 1623

[6] Though it is difficult to establish how much, if any, news of this specific incident reached England, there is an intriguing analogue to this event in Middleton's *A Game At Chess*, when the Black Bishop's Pawn eludes justice for his attempted rape by fleeing the city, and leaves antedated letters behinds to suggest he was somewhere else when the crime was committed. If there is no specific application to be made of this episode to the Spanish Match, it certainly shows that such subterfuges were part of the popular expectation of "Catholic intrigues".

caused the play to be interpreted in relation to a much more celebrated and controversial marriage plan, that of Prince Charles and the Infanta Maria.

This application is made more convincing by the involvement of the marriage plot with anti-Catholic sentiment. The Duchess marries Antonio without a church ceremony, insisting that their union is valid when made only between themselves and in front of Cariola, with the demand "how can the church bind faster?" (I.ii.397). There is a specifically anti-Catholic echo in the phrase she uses to express her defiance: "bind" is a particularly loaded word to use when opposing the Catholic Church. The authority to "bind and loose", or authority over the forgiveness of sins, was one of the main issues of contention between the Protestant and Catholic Churches, with the Protestants denying the claim that Peter had been invested with this power, which would thus be transmitted to the popes via the apostolic succession. The controversy particularly centred on the interpretation of Matthew 16:16-19, in which Christ tells Peter "And I say also unto thee; that thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."[7]

This echo places the scene at the heart of the confessional controversies of the 1620s. Euan Cameron notes the importance to the Reformation of the denial of apostolic succession (150), whilst Owen Chadwick comments on the authority of St. Peter (17). More contemporary evidence can be found in the marginal notes on this passage of Matthew to be found in two competing English versions of the Bible available at the time. The Calvinist Geneva Bible declares that "here is set forth the power of the ministers of the word...and that power is common to all ministers" (Sig.Bbb1 v.), whilst the opposing positions can be seen by referring to the notes in the version of the New Testament published by the Catholic college at Rheims. This version devotes an entire page to elaborating the significance of *keys*, *bind* and *loose*, which include the declarations that the passage gives the Church "the authoritie or Chaire of doctrine", "the height of government" and right to loose, which "excepteth nothing that is punishable or pardonable by Christ in earth, for he hath committed his power to Peter" (47). The Duchess' words here are alive with the polemical rhetoric of the clash between the political and religious groups of Early Modern Europe.

[7] The quotation I have given here is from the 1611 King James' Bible, but "binde", "blindest" or "byndest" is also used in the other English-language versions available at the time, including the Tyndal, Coverdale, Geneva, Douai-Rheims and Bishops' Bibles.

The same emphasis is suggested by the Duchess' lines to Antonio as they take their leave of each other in the third act: "In the eternal church, sir,/ I do hope we shall not part thus" (III.v.69-70). Marcus glosses this phrase as "the community of blessed spirits in heaven, where they can be married for ever" and points to Dent's comparison with the *Arcadia* in which "Erona, thinking Antipholus dead, attempts suicide so she will be 'maried in the eternall church with him'" (252). Though this is true, in early seventeen century the line would have had a more precise implication, tapping into Luther's notion of the true church, invisible and eternal, unlike the visible and temporal establishment of the Catholic Church. Cameron refers to the fact that that "All the leading protestant theologians taught that the true, universal 'Church' was essentially the aggregate of all those Christians who *truly* believed: all those, separated in time and space", and the issue appears as a point of contention in Hooker's *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* in 1594, as well as in the Westminster Confession of 1643 (145; cited in McGrath, 272). The Duchess speaks these lines in the scene which follows the Loretto sequence, with its grand "ceremony of instalment" and "form of banishment", in which we see the Catholic Church's power being wielded most openly and unjustly against her. The passage not only suggests that the Duchess hopes for a purer and more holy church somewhere else, but that this church should be identified with contemporary Protestantism. The availability of these passages for interpretation in this way is bolstered by the quarto's refusal to identify itself securely with a previous source of authority. Rather like a modern stage "revival" which emphasizes the distance between the "original" and modern production, causing the audience to seek parallels in the modern world for the work's concerns, the 1623 quarto calls attention to its difference from its "originals" (in writing and performance), making it easier for the pressing religious politics of the time to fill the gap in authority and determine the play's "meaning" at that time.

The use of religiously charged language is continued in a more outright criticism of the Catholic establishment, when Antonio remarks to Delio that the Cardinal's attempts to acquire the papal throne have been marked by the giving of "bribes, so largely and so impudently, as if he would have carried it away without heaven's knowledge"(I.ii.82-4). Tellingly, he contrasts this with "the primitive decency of the church", of which we see little or none in *Malfi* (I.ii.82-3). Antonio's use of the words "primitive" and "decency" would have been as significant to Protestants as "bind", referring to the desire of reformers to return to the supposedly pure state of the Apostolic church, untainted by the accretions of tradition and the Petrine succession. The extent to which they would have been "live" terms for an audience and readership in 1623 is demonstrated by a remarkable coincidence. A group of chaplains were sent to Madrid during that year to join Prince Charles to minister to the spiritual needs of the

English party. The orders sent to them in this diplomatically tricky situation included instructions to take sufficient church ornaments "so that their behaviour and service may prove decent and agreeable to the purity of the primitive church and yet as near the Roman form as may lawfully be done" (quoted in Redworth, 93). Though these orders were not public knowledge, nor could they have been in the minds of the readers of the 1623 quarto, they are an oddly precise demonstration of the way these words were likely to have been instinctively understood at the time.

We have an unusual piece of evidence which demonstrates how at least one contemporary spectator saw this aspect of the play's meaning at around this time. In 1618, Orazio Busino, the chaplain to the Venetian ambassador to England, wrote comments on the way English players presented Catholicism. One passage is worth quoting at length (his comments are given in fuller form in Appendix B):

> they [the English actors] showed a Cardinal in all his grandeur, in the formal robes appropriate to this 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. Then 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. (qtd in Hunter, 31-2)

This is obviously a production of *Malfi*, and most of Busino's complaints appear to be an account of the Loretto sequence. Keith Sturgess has stressed the elderly and short-sighted nature of this observer, and certainly there is an error in identifying Julia with the Duchess at one point, but he nonetheless regards Busino's "response to the spirit of the play" as valuable (110). It suggests to Sturgess a tone which was "satirical or criticial but non-comic", in which the rituals were performed for the purpose of theatrical "demystification", revealing what English critics of Catholicism regarded as its faults: "idolatry, feigned holiness and crass materialism" (111).

What particularly strikes me about this passage is the apparent accuracy of the production: Busino describes the "formal robes appropriate to his station", his "Cardinal's habit", his "grandeur". This is very far from the caricature Catholicism of Middleton's *A Game at Chess*, which enjoyed a brief but spectacular success in 1623 before it was banned and the

players investigated. Busino does not complain of the distortion or lampooning of Catholic practice, but the fidelity of its reproduction, and his use of the word "public" is interesting. It is unclear whether the "public" situation is that of the playhouse or within the fictional world of the play, but nonetheless it stresses the importance of public vices in Busino's reading of the production. The Cardinal's wrong-doing is "public", particularly in the Loretto scene, because the elaborate ritual is being used to exert political power from a religious source. The dialogue of the two pilgrims introduced to comment on the sequence is larded with political terminology: "Here's a strange turn of state!", "What power hath this state/...to determine of a free prince?", "they are a free state, sir" (III.iv.6.23, 27-8, 29).

The Winter Queen

So far I have been considering how the 1623 quarto of *Malfi* might have prompted parallels to one part of the contemporary political situation, namely the question of the Spanish Match. However, discussing the Loretto scene brings me to a discussion of the elements within the printing which could have been interpreted with reference to another part of that situation: the flight and exile of Elizabeth Stuart. As I mentioned above, the conflict over the kingship of Bohemia had seen Frederick, Elector Palatine, stake a claim. The royal pair were then driven from their lands during the fighting, whilst English Parliamentarians loudly espoused their cause. To demonstrate how *Malfi* might be seen as relevant to this situation, I will introduce another play which was published in 1623, Thomas Drue's *The Duchess of Suffolk*, which shows striking similarities to both *Malfi* and Elizabeth's situation at the time.

The Duchess of Suffolk is based on the life of Katherine Willoughby Brandon, whose life spanned the reigns of Henry VIII, Mary Tudor and Elizabeth I. Based on the account of Brandon given by Foxe in his *Acts and Monuments* (indeed, Foxe actually appears as a character in the play, on the Duchess' side), and a 1602 ballad by Thomas Deloney called *The Duchess of Suffolk's Calamity*, it recounts some elements of her life-story which seem curiously familiar to anyone who knows *The Duchess of Malfi*. According to Drue's play, Brandon was left a widow when relatively young, and married her gentleman-usher, the young and handsome Bartie. Their marriage was happy, and she became pregnant by him, but the change of England's religion at the accession of Mary Tudor forced them to flee to the Continent, and their estates were confiscated. Pursued by emissaries of the Catholic Church, the couple were separated in flight, and Katherine believed her child to have been killed, though they were all restored to each other eventually when the arrival of Elizabeth's reign brought a new era.

Jerzy Limon discusses the play at length, and points out that the office book of the Henry Herbert, the Master of the Revels, contains a note that the play was licensed, but that Herbert "reformed" it, as it was "full of dangerous matter" (59). Arguing that the play had a specific and immediate political thrust, as a critique of James' foreign policy, he draws a series of convincing parallels between the situation of the Duchess of Suffolk in Mary's reign, and that of Elizabeth Stuart in 1623. These are her persecution by the Catholic establishment, the flight, the confiscation of lands and fortune, and the refuge in a friendly country. He contends that *The Duchess of Suffolk*, which was staged by the Palsgrave's Men, under the patronage of Elizabeth's husband, was a piece of propaganda, urging the restoration of the Palatine lands and "the salvation of endangered Protestantism and its new martyrs" (41). I have already explained my reservations about Limon's method of analysis and of the way in which he used this particular piece of evidence from the office book of the Master of the Revels. However, the general thrust of his argument is convincing in this case: *The Duchess of Suffolk* demands to be read in relation to the situation of Elizabeth Stuart in 1623.

Moreover, the parallels he identifies also apply to *The Duchess of Malfi*. Despite being based on different historical figures, Drue's Katharine Brandon and Webster's Giovanna d'Aragona are both shown remarried to a younger man of inferior status and pregnant, persecuted by Church authorities, fleeing and separated from their husbands. Apart from the rank of their husbands, they share these characteristics with Elizabeth Stuart, the Winter Queen. These similarities blur their identities further by the cavalier way in which the characters' names are treated in these works. Webster famously never actually uses Giovanna's name (indeed, later incarnations of *Malfi* assign her a totally different name), and Drue comes close to matching Webster, only once using Brandon's name and otherwise simply terming her "the Duchess". This effect is reinforced by the form of their respective printings in 1623: the heroine's historical names are not mentioned in the front matter and throughout stage directions and speech prefixes they are uniformly "the Duchess".[8] This practice looses the roles from the historical characters they are based on, and facilitates their interpretation as analogies or parallels to contemporary politics. Since we only know the licensing date of Drue's play, not the composition or production dates, and there is no entry in the Stationer's Register for *The Duchess of Malfi*, we cannot draw any conclusions about influence (though Drue could, of course, have been influenced by seeing *Malfi* in production.) However, the

[8] The same, of course, is true of the Cardinal in *The Duchess of Malfi*, who is also given a completely new name by later adaptations. Though not as diagrammatic as *A Game at Chess*, the most famous political play of this year, *Malfi* does arguably have at its heart an opposition between characters with notably abstract names: "Duchess" versus "Cardinal".

parallels between the two works, coupled with the obvious topicality of Drue's play, argues strongly for *Malfi* being read in a similarly political way.

One major divergence between the Duchesses of Suffolk and Malfi is their fate. Whilst the Duchess of Suffolk is restored to her family, and called back to England as Queen Elizabeth restores the Protestant faith, the Duchess of Malfi is tortured and strangled on her brother's orders. Limon notes that, despite Drue using Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* as source material, neither the play nor its sources contain any actual martyrdom, and the action "never goes beyond the boundaries of farce or melodrama" (44), whilst *Malfi*, though it contains potentially comic elements, is clearly a tragedy in both intent and execution. This need not weaken the contention that both would be read as dealing with the same situation in 1623: in fact the three women (Elizabeth, Katharine and Giovanna) form an imagined triptych within the ideological framework against which these works are likely to have been interpreted. During 1623 Elizabeth Stuart was still in anxious exile on the continent, awaiting the results of James' deliberations on the rights and wrongs of the crown of Bohemia, and his negotiations with the Spanish. Drue's Katharine Brandon, whose peripeteia comes about through the protection of the King of Poland and the new Queen of England, shows how events could turn out if James stood by the Protestant cause, and listened to the belligerent Parliament. Webster's Giovanna d'Aaragona, dispossessed, persecuted and killed in a ceremonious sequence redolent of martyrdom, illustrates the terrible consequences of James continuing in his policies.

There is an obvious objection to be raised: that the interpretation I am suggesting cannot have it both ways, and either the quarto is about the Spanish Match or it is about the Winter Queen. However, as I declared at the beginning of this argument, I am not proposing that the play is "about" either situation, but rather that it is susceptible to having been interpreted in relation to them. Moreover, the way in which I have been analysing this quarto – stressing both its pastness and refusal to identify completely with previous sources of authority – means that it can quite coherently be interpreted with reference to more than one part of the contemporary political landscape. Since the quarto's political force in this year does not rely on identifying what the author or the original production "originally meant" (indeed, the printing notably fails to nail its colours to either of these masts), there is no reason why this interpretation could not be made.

That being said, I would nonetheless argue that the two situations were regarded by many contemporaries as inextricably linked. This is demonstrated by the title of a contemporary polemical pamphlet, Thomas Scott's *Second Part of Spanish Practices*, which refers to "the two treaties both of the match and the Palatinate" in one breath. A large part

of James' diplomatic problems lay in the fact that whilst he was negotiating with the Spanish Hapsburgs, his Protestant son-in-law was a war with the Austrian Hapsburgs and many Parliamentary families had sent sons to fight on the Palatine side. Historians such as Glyn Redworth and Brennan Pursell have provided convincing evidence that the final, and decisive, derailment of the negotiations occurred when Rome agreed to a dispensation which would permit the marriage, but James instructed his ambassador that it be conditional on the restoration of the Palatinate lands to Frederick and Elizabeth. Diplomatically, dynastically, and culturally, the Palatinate and the Spanish Match were intertwined.

Nor does this view of the 1623 quarto collapse into incoherence when the parallels with Elizabeth Stuart are accommodated, since it does not depend on a simple one-to-one relationship between characters in the play and figures in contemporary European politics. Unlike *The Duchess of Suffolk*, or indeed *A Game at Chess*, it is unproductive to read *Malfi* as a pièce-a-clef to be "decoded" by reference to the outside world. Whether or not one locates the political meaning of drama in the intentions of the producer or (more convincingly) in the process of circulation, the first quarto of *Malfi* is unlike these other works because it was demonstrably not created for the purpose of commenting on the politics of the 1620s. This means that the political relevance is just as strong – if not stronger - in 1623, but more diffuse, and there is no reason why separate elements of the play should not have been understood as reflecting different aspects of the foreign policy situation. The early part of the play as printed in the quarto can reflect on the duplicity and corruption of a Catholic court, and the perils/heroics of clandestine marriage, whilst the latter part echoes the flight and persecution of a Protestant aristocrat. The common thread is the Catholic Church's involvement in affairs of state and its unjustifiable wielding of temporal power. Indeed, to a certain world-view (the one which gave rise to Thomas Scott's *Spanish Practices* and the conflation of diplomacy with metaphysics in *A Game at Chess*), the two elements would appear to be aspects of the very same problem. A play which drew them together within one narrative, like *Malfi*, might well seem more satisfying, since it combined geographically disparate elements of "Catholic malignancy" within a single aesthetic work, suggesting their essential connection.

After all, a historical or allegorical play does not simply act as a diagram to be decoded: even the simplest and thinnest "cover" engages in some kind of dialectical engagement with the situation it is intended (or used) to comment upon. For example, when the relationship between *A Game at Chess* and England's foreign relations is understood, the characters do not simply disappear in the minds of the audience, to be replaced by contemporary political figures. The "setting" exerts some pressure upon the spectator/reader's attitude towards the political situation, asserting in this case that the situation should be regarded as an essentially

Manichean struggle between two naturally opposed sides, between which there are literally no shades of grey. In the case of *The Duchess of Suffolk*, the story used as a parallel identifies Elizabeth Stuart's exile as a result of her adherence to Protestantism, and asserts that her woes could and should be brought to an end by the intervention of an English monarch (with an added implication that any monarch who refuses to do so is unworthy of inheriting the throne of the glorious Elizabeth I.) Where such plays draw on history, or at least discourses about the past such as hagiography, or the "heritage" narratives Lowenthal identifies, the rhetorical force is to some extent increased. In the case of *A Game at Chess* and *The Duchess of Suffolk*, the former can only offer the chessboard as a model for understanding the confessional struggles of Europe, whereas the latter can point to what it claims actually happened during the last reign in which Catholicism was ascendant in England.

From this point of view, the political significance on such plays relies not only on observable similarities between their characters, plots and incidents, and features of the political arena, but on a certain degree of difference as well. For history-based plays the difference serves two purposes: outlining the "model" through which the contemporary situation can be understood, but also drawing attention to an underlying principle which makes sense of both the play's narrative and contemporary politics. To distinguish again between *A Game at Chess* and *The Duchess of Suffolk*, the former is not actually suggesting that confessional politics in Europe are conducted according to the rules of chess (especially considering the play's actions seems to break those rules), whereas the latter does imply that the Catholic misuse of power is a constant danger in England's past, which can be recognised in different eras. Obviously the similarities between Katharine Brandon and Elizabeth Stuart are vital for the parallel to be recognised, but the differences in time and situation increase the rhetorical force of the comparison, and make the political point more strongly.[9]

It is for this reason that I have stressed the element of pastness in the 1623 quarto of *Malfi*, and linked that element to the play's relevance to the politics of the Spanish Match and the Palatinate. History-based plays such as *The Duchess of Suffolk* rely on one kind of pastness for their full political function: the gap in time between the play's events and the time in which the work is being produced. This is certainly the case for *Malfi*, with its dramatisation of the unhappy life of an early sixteenth-century noblewoman, and thus the simpler kinds of pastness (which I identified at the beginning of this discussion) contribute to the political significance of

[9] Of course, some of any given audience or readership might have been unaware of Katharine Brandon's actual existence, but the play's persuasive force is increased for those who recognise Foxe's presence in the play as a reference to previous versions of the story, and interpret the play accordingly.

the play in 1623. But the political charge of the quarto printing, as distinct from the work or the narrative, is bound up with the more complex sense of pastness I outlined above. The various marks on the printing (the marginalia, the titlepage, the Rowley poem, the double cast list) tend to unfix the printing from a complete identification with the play's narrative, the ten years of production and the author's "original" intentions, and in doing so produce an effect of excess and pastness. This pastness provides a greater degree of the "distance" I mentioned in relation to history-based plays, and thus increases the rhetorical force of the political parallels. The unfixing of the play from any specific set of intentions, combined with the attention thrown on the play's previous stage existence, presents a contemporary reader not only with a story from long-ago Italy which can illuminate the political situation, but a play which has been circulating for the last ten years and yet can now be applied to the year's sensational events on the Continent. For those willing to see Continental Catholicism as the underlying principle behind England's troubles, the pastness and excess of the 1623 quarto only make it a more convincing document for revealing that "truth".

1.3 Webster's Duchess, Sharpe's Duchess: Role and Instantiation in the 1623 Quarto

In this strand I will explore the relationship between the extraordinary role of the Duchess and the instantiations that embodied it, as the 1623 quarto presents them. This will involve taking the deliberately broad definition of "performance" I outlined in the introduction, to include the stage performances of the boy actors who played the part between the work's premiere and the 1623 quarto, but also the "textual performance" of the quarto itself. In the previous sections I have discussed this printing in terms of the cultural work it carries out and the dialogues it stages: the multiple voices in the prefatory material which construct and stage an authorial figure, as well as its status as a textual "performance" analogous to a stage revival, which sets it in dialogue with contemporary political events. I will now turn to consider the ways in which the role of the Duchess is identified both with acting performers and the printing itself as performer – both instantiations in which the dominating character threatens to overwhelm the play around her. These two aspects of the 1623 quarto adumbrate similar engagements between the role and the agents of performance in *Malfi*'s subsequent history, whether it be an eighteenth-century dedication which offers up the printing to a patron as "the poor distressed Duchess" seeking protection, or a twentieth-century director asking the star of a previous production to play the role for him in order to co-opt her artistic credibility. Here, in the 1623 quarto, we can see the beginnings of how the dominance of the Duchess framed the work's reception in these two related ways.

1.3 "upon his *Duchess of Malfi*": The Quarto and the Role.

The commendatory poems by Middleton and Rowley present the Duchess as the defining figure in the play, identifying her with Webster's artistic achievement. Middleton presents his piece "*In the just worth of that well deserver, Mr John Webster, and upon this masterpiece of tragedy*" and declares:

> In this thou imitatest 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
> ...
> Thy epitaph only the title be:
> Write 'Duchess'; that will fetch a tear for thee.
> For who'ever saw this Duchess live and die
> That could get off under a bleeding eye? (123, ll.1-4, 15-18)

Rowley's contribution is similarly titled, directing itself "*To my friend Mr. John Webster upon his* Duchess of Malfi", and proclaiming:

> I never saw thy Duchess till the day
> That she was lively bodied in thy play.
> Howe'er she answered 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. (125, ll.1-7)

In both cases, the poems identify the play's artistic achievement with its depiction of the lead female role, with Middleton stressing the emotional impact of the work, and Rowley the dramatic plot and adaptation of the previous narratives. On closer reading, though, both go further, and conflate that role with the play itself. Middleton's title identifies its subject as "that masterpiece of tragedy", which the poem calls "this work of fame", and later calls upon its author to stake his claim to artistic immortality upon the play: "Thy epitaph only the title be". However, the poem immediately pivots around that title, as "Duchess" is used to mean both the name of the work and the name of the character, "thy Duchess", who lives and dies in

the play. Both are ascribed the same power to move the discerning emotionally: the title will "fetch a tear for thee", and no-one ever experienced the life and death of the character and "got off under a bleeding eye". Rowley performs the same manoeuvre between the title and first lines, writing to commend "Webster upon his *Duchess of Malfi*" and then referring to "thy Duchess" who was lively bodied, loved and died. At this stage in the play's history, the role is securely "Webster's Duchess". The emotional effect of the role, and the rhetorical skill which the figure onstage displayed within the performance ("speak...so well"), are stressed in order to attribute them to the figure of Webster as author. The "dominance of the Duchess" which will be such a strong feature of the play's history in the coming centuries, is here annexed to the author-figure which this printing attempts to establish.

This identification is not simply a matter of the play's title being the name of a character, as we can see by once again comparing the quarto's prefatory material with that of Jonson's 1616 *Works*. Amongst the poems praising Jonson and his writing in general, there are two which pick out specific plays to comment upon. George Chapman apostrophizes Jonson in "Upon Sejanus", beginning his poem with a comparison between the playwright and another kind of craftsman: "So brings the wealth-contracting Ieweller/ Pearles and deare Stones, from richest shores & streames" (309, ll.1-2). He extends this simile for over twenty lines, insisting "Nor is this *Allegorie* unjustly rackt" (309, l.21), before there is any mention of the title character, in these lines:

> For, though thy hand was scarce addrest to draw
> The Semicircle of *Seianus* life,
> Thy *Muse* yet makes it the whole Sphaere, and Lawe
> To all State lives: and bounds Ambitions strife.
> And as a little Brooke creepes from his Spring,
> With shallow tremblings, through the lowest Vales,
> As if he feard his streame abroad to bring,
> Least prophane Feete should wrong it, and rude Gales (309-10, ll.29-36.)

Thus no sooner does Chapman mention Sejanus' name than he switches topic and builds another extended simile. The emphasis in this poem is securely on Jonson's artistry, the poetic inspiration which has enabled his works to be written, and the elaborate means by which Chapman can illustrate these. Though Sejanus' story has relevance beyond the facts of history - Jonson's telling of it is "the whole Sphaere, and Lawe/ To all State lives" – there is no sense that the Praetorian appears as a character within the poem's world, or is much associated with

the idea of Jonson's play beyond supplying the source material. Indeed, at the very end, Sejanus is apostrophised and advised to bow down before the book, clearly distinguishing him from both the play's instantiation and the version of his story which is told within in. There is no slippage between work, title and character of the kind which we can see developing in the 1623 *Malfi* quarto. Francis Beaumont also contributed a play-specific poem to the Jonson folio, "Upon the Silent Woman". We might legitimately expect such a poem to be less centred on the title character than *Malfi* or *Sejanus*, given the small size of the role and the plot hinging on a revelation about the character at the end, but Beaumont never even mentions Epicoene. The poem could be about any of Jonson's satirical comedies, indeed any similar work from the period, since it simply rehearses deftly the familiar arguments about the duty of satire to scourge vices, rather than people. In this particular case, Beaumont suggests that any writer who attempts to satirise individuals will produce such a poor play "That he himself shall thinke he hath no touch", whilst a satirist who strives "To scourge but vices in a labour'd scene", will make his audience see their own faults in the characters (324, ll.8, 10). This contrast – and the fact that I have to go back to Jonson's folio to find a suitable example for comparison – demonstrates the significance of the way in which these poems cast the relationship between the 1623 quarto and the figure of the Duchess. The dominance of the Duchess, which has resonated throughout the play's history, finds an early expression in the slippage in these prefaratory poems between the Duchess, the emotional agency of the work, and the quarto itself.

1.3 Records of reception: the evidence of the 1623 cast list

The prefatory material of the quarto can also provide us with hints about another unusual identification between the role of the Duchess and the overall performance, this time in the play's stage history between its premiere and the quarto's publication. In order to draw out this issue, I will return to Karen Edwards's and Juliet Dusinberre's comments about the play. Their reading of the structure of *Malfi* as a play provides a platform to consider what the cast list might be able to tell us about the relationship between the role of the Duchess and the boy actors who played the role in the first decade of the play's history. What looks like a record of performance, in the shape of the names of past actors, may in fact be a "record of reception".

Karen Edwards and Juliet Dusinberre have both offered models with which to approach the dominance of the Duchess on the stage. Edwards makes a speculative reading of the work as dramatising the tensions within the theatrical company, in a passage which is worth quoting at length. She begins with an unusual aspect of *Malfi*, that Webster "puts a

woman character at the center of the drama", which "even Shakespeare never does to the same extent", and proffers the idea that "this play isn't about a woman after all" (email, 20th April 2010). Drawing attention to the repertory-based nature of London theatre at the time, Edwards posits that such a group would have the usual human "tensions and jealousies" and that the playwrights "sometimes wrote a play that embodied, dramatized, the dynamics of the group" – suggesting *King Lear* as a work which could be read as enacting the transferral of status and power from one senior actor to the younger generation, or "dramatiz[ing] the jealousy of two former boy stars [Goneril and Regan] displaced by a newcomer". She goes on:

> Let's think about what kind of play Webster has created for Richard Robinson. It has everything in it for a young actor to get his teeth into - and, quite possibly, everything that would encourage a complacent, self-indulgent young star to show off. Let's assume that Webster knew that Shakespeare had written some of his plays as an exploration of the social/sexual dynamics of his company, and is trying to imitate him, or perhaps is using it in an opportunistic way to stir up rivalries. Think about it: a young actor, presumably in his twenties or not quite, who had such confidence in his ability to evoke compassion as a nobly suffering woman, was likely to stimulate his contemporary and slightly older rivals in all sorts of ways, most reliably perhaps to convincing displays of malice. Webster gives Robinson everything to do: there's sexual desire here, and love and flirtatious playfulness; there's torture, and death, and a temporary resurrection, then another death… Webster's position is that of a knowing outsider (an outsider to Shakespeare's company, that is, though with some knowledge and, I think, some spite). So, whereas Shakespeare gives his young actors parts they can handle, Webster gives the young actor this part, knowing that the youngster won't really, finally, be able to appropriate it, for the part tests even the finest actresses of our own day. (email, 20th April 2010)

Dusinberre suggests a similarly "competitive" reading of the dynamic between the actors in another play, *Antony and Cleopatra*, which can nonetheless shed light on *Malfi*:

> The assessment of a balance of power between hero and heroines in *Anthony and Cleopatra* spills over into a notion of theatrical power which is also implicit in the play itself (Singh 116). Whoever is perceived as winning dominion in the romance is also perceived as theatrically dominant. The sense of taking sides, on which the dramatic

> action of the play is structured, has continued to dominate not only the experience of directors and actors, but also of critics and audiences. (49)

She uses this to account for the reported experience of Judi Dench who, when playing Cleopatra, found that her own sense of the role's impetus differed from the overall arc which the director saw for the play:

> Like Ashcroft, Judi Dench saw Cleopatra in terms of cunning and a will to survive. 'Although Peter says that after Antony dies, the audience are longing for Cleopatra to join him, I keep finding moments when she seems to want to live (Lowen 93). Beneath that perception lies not Peter Hall's romantic Cleopatra, but the theatrical reality of a boy apprentice revelling in the theatrical power bestowed on him in the final act of the play. Why should he die? This is the moment which, as an actor, he has been eagerly awaiting. (55)

Both suggest a structure within the text which somehow expresses or stirs up power relations within any theatrical company performing the play, and does so by the dominance of the Duchess' role. Having already considered the way in which the 1623 printing engages in its own "performance", I would like to now consider it as evidence for the stage performances of boy actors which lie behind it, and how it represents them via the cast-list. For the name which Karen Edwards invokes as the likely original actor, Richard Robinson, does not appear anywhere in this printing.

Keith Sturgess also believes that the cast-list in the 1623 quarto does not include the boy actor who created the role of the Duchess, or even the one who was playing it when the printing was published. As I mentioned above, he calculates in *Jacobean Private Theatre* that Richard Sharpe, the name listed for the role, was "probably too young" in 1613 for Webster to have written the role with him in mind, and by 1623 would have been "probably too old" to be still serving in the part (99). Left with this anomaly, Sturgess speculates that "Perhaps Webster remembers him as the best, or longest serving Duchess" (99). Edwards also reads the cast list as indicating something special about Richard Sharpe, allied to the importance of the role:

> The fact that the cast-list-compiler remembered or thought of Richard Sharpe, even though (it seems) the timeframe isn't right may well indicate that it was the Duchess who was seen as central. That is, what stayed with the writer of the cast list was the memory of a performance so powerful that it disrupts his organizational structure.

> Second, and this is even more speculative - the 'historically' disruptive presence of Sharpe may reiterate the disruptive role of the Duchess. (email, 20th April, 2010)

Thus the "competitive" model of the play provided by a combination of Dusinberre's and Edwards' thinking can be used to read the 1623 cast list as a reflection of the role's "disruptive" (in Edwards' phrase) tendency. In this reading, the cast list presents a relatively ordered picture of the play's history up to this point, with the death of Burbage prompting a change in casting as the company reorganised itself after the death of the lead actor. However, the tendency of the Duchess to provoke a high degree of identification between the performer and the role meant that, for whatever reason, Richard Sharpe stuck in the mind of whoever drew up the list as "the Duchess" rather than simply "a Duchess". The part resisted being simply classed as another role with a chronological history, and instead came to define the experience of the play, when inhabited by Richard Sharpe. Thus this cast list – at least for this single role - can be read as a record of reception rather than a record of performance, a glimpse into the way the play worked, and how the dominance of the Duchess asserted itself during the decade of performance between the play's first performance and its first printing.

This reading, as Edwards points out, is speculative. It rests on the assumption that Sturgess is right, and Sharpe could neither have created the role nor have been still playing it at the time of the printing, which Sturgess himself only asserts as "probably" the case. Even if Sharpe's age does indicate this, it could be objected that the cast list may represent a simple mistake on the part of the compiler – though it could be retorted that the mistake being made in this form on this role can itself be read as evidence of the disruptive power of the Duchess. More seriously, the reading could be criticised as pressing a flimsy and circumstantial piece of evidence into the service of a larger thesis about the structure of the play. However, even if the evidence is no more than a puzzling error in the cast list, this reading both accounts for that error and chimes with the subsequent history of the play across hundreds of years. The disruption and identification which we can descry in the cast list of 1623 develops even more noticeably in *Malfi*'s later afterlife.

So from its first appearance in print, *Malfi* was framed by the extraordinary central role within the play. This unusual dramatic part seems to have dominated the reception of the work, both on stage and in print, leading to a tendency to identify the role and an actor, or the role and a printing, with each other. The impact of the play is interpreted as the impact of "the Duchess": at this stage she is "Webster's Duchess", but she will be co-opted by other interests and discourses in the centuries to come.

Conclusion:

In this chapter I have investigated the 1623 quarto printing of *Malfi* as both evidence for the work's afterlife, and itself a piece of that afterlife. The comparison with the 1623 Shakespeare First Folio demonstrates how, from the very first printing, *Malfi* was troped as "belated", the product of a bygone author. This aspect appears in a slightly different form in the investigation of pastness, in which the quarto's "unfixing" from either "original" stage context or authorial intention made it particularly liable to being understood via the political furore which took place over the Spanish Match ten years after the play's first appearance on the London stage. The identification between the instantiations and the role of the Duchess demonstrates another lens through which the quarto frames the play, another source of authority which is brought to bear upon it.

Considering the quarto's "belatedness" has allowed me to analyse the ways in which this printing, despite often being discussed as if it was identical with the play, in fact dramatises its distance from the "original" appearance of *Malfi* on the stage. It has thrown up themes and tendencies which we will see developing even more distinctly in the next chapter, which traces *Malfi*'s history from the 1640s to the 1730s. The abolition of the theatres during the Interregnum, and their re-establishment after the Restoration, bolsters its sense of pastness as the Jacobean theatre is seen from the other side of a fracture in English theatrical history. This sense of the play originating in an earlier period manifests itself in the excess of the early eighteenth-century printing, which incorporates the "polite" version being spoken on contemporary stages, but marks the older riskier material with marginal apostrophes. As the sense of Shakespeare's distinct identity develops through the late seventeenth century and on to its critical point in the 1740s, *Malfi*'s cultural profile begins to diverge more noticeably from that of his works: in the 1730s the coincidence of the two printings in 1623 is matched by the coincidence of the Shakespearean editor Theobald adapting *Malfi*, and "patching" the work with snippets of Shakespeare in a way which demonstrates the very different attitudes towards the two writers. The dominance of the Duchess also forms a striking part of the play's history in the next case studies, as the central role is read as equivalent to the "pathetic heroines" of late seventeenth-century and early eighteenth-century tragedy. Once the Duchess is reinterpreted in this way, the whole work follows her, to be co-opted as a "she-tragedy". This shift is also reflected in a printing which identifies itself in the dedication as the "poor, distressed Duchess" seeking protection from a patron.

Though my next case studies appear eighty years after the 1623 quarto, similar themes and elements resurface in *Malfi*'s framing and interpretation. It would be wrong to see these as inherent in the play's text, awaiting a chance to manifest themselves as transcendent forces

in history, but they do demonstrate the ways in which *Malfi* is repeatedly co-opted in similar ways by the discourses which frame its meanings throughout this period.

Chapter Two: 1708 and 1735

After the publication of the 1623 quarto, *Malfi* seems to have maintained a presence in the repertoire of London theatre companies throughout the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Though evidence for this period is patchy, we do know that it was named in the warrant which assigned a handful of the old Blackfriars' plays to Davenant's newly-formed Duke's Men (see McLuskie and Uglow, 12). *Malfi* was evidently produced in the immediate post-Restoration period, as Pepys mentioned seeing or reading the play on 30th September 1662, 2nd November 1666, 6th November 1666 and 25th November 1668, whilst the prompter John Downes commented that it was "one of the best stock tragedies" which "filled the house for eight days" (cited in Moore, 37-8; Downes 58, see also Barker, 46). Milhous and Hume also record productions in 1705 and 1708, but since they estimate that "we know no more than about 7 per cent of the performances that were given" between the Restoration and the end of the seventeenth century, in contrast to the almost complete records after the establishment of the *Daily Courant* in 1706, we should probably consider the occasional mentions before this date as more significant when attempting to gauge the play's fluctuating popularity (*Stage*, 4, see also McLuskie and Uglow, 17). There are records of quartos published in 1640 and 1678, and advertisements in a 1665 printing of Hippocrates' *Aphorisms* and a 1671 printing of *Nicomede* offer *Malfi* for sale at different bookshops. Its continuing presence in the theatrical culture is also suggested by its apparent impact on a number of later playwrights, with Shirley's *The Cardinal* (composed in the 1640s), Falkland's *The Marriage Night* (performed in the 1660s) and Banks' *Vertue Betray'd* (1682) showing signs of influence by Webster's play. Despite the difficulty of extrapolating from such variable evidence, *Malfi* clearly enjoyed a measure of success in the period, especially when compared to the oblivion which enveloped the vast majority of its contemporaries from the pre-Civil War repertoire. However, its popularity waned in the first decades of the eighteenth century and after the 1730s it disappeared from the stage for more than a century.

In this chapter I shall focus on the two most important instantiations during this period. The first of these was a quarto entitled *The Unfortunate Duchess of Malfy, or The Unnatural Brothers*, published in 1708, to which I will refer as the "1708 quarto" for clarity. As Marcus notes, this quarto cut some lines from the 1623 version, but is most notable for printing large passages in inverted commas, stating that "Those lines which were omitted in the Acting, by reason of the Length of the Play, are marked with (")." (88). Despite the disclaimer that these apparent cuts to the performed version were made simply to shorten the

running time, the lines marked in this way are clustered around the play's more controversial themes, specifically sex, court politics and gender politics, offering the reader an intriguing "double printing" which calls attention to the material deemed too risky for stage production. The second case study I shall be investigating is Lewis Theobald's *The Fatal Secret*, a wholesale adaptation of *Malfi*. Performed in 1733, and published in 1735, Theobald's version makes a number of drastic alterations to the play to fit neo-classical tastes: the action is confined to days rather than years, Antonio and Bosola rise in social rank, and virtue triumphs in a happy ending. Despite these adjustments, the play was apparently a theatrical failure, and the play was not produced again until the 1850s.

Like the 1623 quarto, *The Unfortunate Duchess* and *The Fatal Secret* both provide information on *Malfi*'s afterlife, and constitute it in themselves. The two printings show *Malfi* being framed within a very different theatrical context from that of the 1620s. My investigation of pastness will show how the quartos capitalise on this distance, one offering a vision of a licentious and risky theatrical past, whilst the other co-opts a supposedly "golden age" of English history in order to criticise the government. On the other hand, I will argue that the figure of the Duchess (as she appears onstage) shows the play's cultural profile being adapted to conform to those changes within theatrical and dramatic practice, as she is trimmed and fitted into the mould of a heroine of "affective tragedy", paradoxically altered to demonstrate an eternal "female nature". Meanwhile Shakespeare is undergoing the most significant alteration in his status during this period, from dead playwright to cultural icon. I will suggest that *Malfi*'s framing in relation to Shakespeare shows the growing importance of the more famous writer as a touchstone of value against which Webster's play is beginning to be judged.

2.1.1 Q4: The 1708 Printing of *The Unfortunate Duchess of Malfy*

The printing of 1708, designated "Q4" by Marcus, retitled the play *The Unfortunate Duchess of Malfy, or, The Unnatural Brothers* and made some alterations to the text whilst cutting other sequences (which I will examine in detail below). Brown sees the changes as an "attempt to regularize the metre and modernize the vocabulary" as well as to "make the play more respectable" with "lecher" being replaced by "lover" in one example (26). Marcus suggests that the cuts, and added stage directions, can be used to interpret the 1623 quarto, citing the "proverbial conservatism of the London stage" which would mean that "Q4...offers hints as to how the play had appeared on the stage almost a century earlier (96, see also McLuskie and Uglow, 18). However, given the massive changes in the London stage in that century, I would

suggest it is more productive to read the 1708 quarto in its own context, and regard it as an instantiation of the play in its own right. Rather than attempting to use it to descry a continuous production tradition lasting through the Interregnum and on into the next century, I shall consider *The Unfortunate Duchess of Malfy* as evidence for the play's cultural profile at the time. It is, I argue, a major piece of its afterlife.

2.1.2 "wretched, eminent things": Pastness in the Unruly Double Printing of 1708

Between the quartos of 1623 and 1708, the English theatre underwent a transformation. The dislocation of the Interregnum and the altered conditions after the Restoration (such as actresses, theatrical monopolies, changes in playhouse design) created a gulf in contemporary perceptions of the institution's history. John Evelyn's famous comment, "I saw Hamlet Pr: of Denmark played: but now the old play begins to disgust this refined age: since his Majestie being so long abroad", sounds either amusing or misguided to modern readers familiar with the play's subsequent canonization, but it gives a useful insight into attitudes to pre-Civil War theatre as early as the 1660s (cited in Boklund, 30-1). This feeling that pre-Restoration theatre belonged to another era provided the kind of conditions which Daniel Woolf has described: "A society that has little exposure to things that are very new need not devise any special mental shelf or 'closet', nor any corresponding discursive space, in which to store the very old; it can keep or throw out past traditions as present needs demand" (141). However, when a society "undergoes a period of rapid cultural, technological, or economic change", it lays the groundwork for the old to be "renewed", to be exotic and worthy of attention, and "an 'antiquity' in the sense of an object surviving from the remote past, becomes itself a 'novelty', a 'rarity' or 'curiosity'" (141). The fracture in the middle of the seventeenth century, both in the theatre and in the political, social and cultural spheres more widely, meant that pre-Civil War plays could be regarded as not merely outdated or old-fashioned, but as artefacts from another historical "age".

Nancy Klein Maguire has written of the ways in which this rupture made itself felt in dramatic writing. Discussing the arrival of tragicomedy and heroic drama, she declares that "old tragedy was dead" and that in the 1660s it was impossible to write tragedies of the pre-Civil War type after the social, cultural and even psychological shifts which had occurred during the Interregnum. Some old plays, including *Malfi*, maintained a place in the repertoire, but no new works were written on the pre-Civil War model, suggesting that the generic features of such plays would have made them recognisable as not belonging to "this refined Age". The combination of seismic shifts in society at large, and the drastic alterations theatrical fare, made *Malfi* liable to be framed via its pastness in this period (see also Barker, 45).

The probability that the play's origins in the pre-Civil War theatre made up a significant element of its profile during the later seventeenth century is bolstered by references to it in the writings of James Wright in the 1690s. James Wright's *Historia Histrionica* of 1699 presents a dialogue between two characters, Lovewit and Trueman, in which the "Old plays" or "plays of the last Age (so I call the times before the Rebellion)" are praised, and compared favourably to post-Restoration drama. *Malfi* is definitively put into the former category, during a discussion of cast lists, when Trueman says "some few Old Plays there are that have the Names set against the Parts, as, The Dutchess of Malfy..." (3-4). Further evidence is provided by another of Wright's works, *Country Conversations*, in which a group of friends visit the country estate of (another) Trueman to discuss art and taste in various forms. During their visit they encounter his neighbour Julio, who directs their attention to some ruins on the estate, and quotes Antonio's speech beginning "I do love these ancient ruins", which appears in *Malfi* at 5.3.9-19. He is described as a man who "omitted no occasion to Magnifie the Wit of the Dramatick Poets of the Last Age", and the speech is specifically ascribed to "The Dutchess of Malfy, a Tragedy writ by Webster" (54). As Moore points out, this is "the only quotation in the book apart from translated passages" (6). Though both references come from the work of a single man, this is convincing evidence of how *Malfi* was being seen at the time, clearly connected to the "last Age".

Another shift occurred in theatre and public culture on the accession of Anne to the throne in 1702. Jean Marsden has described the movement, headed by groups such as the Society for the Reformation of Manners, which sought to establish a more pious and decorous culture, defining itself against what it saw as "moral bankruptcy of the Restoration court" (*Fatal,* 133). In theatrical terms this meant a cleaning up of what were regarded as licentious elements in drama, and a stricter definition of chastity for stage heroines. Thus by the time the 1708 quarto appeared, *Malfi* had survived through a regicide, a counter-revolution, a complete overhaul of both theatrical practice and dramatic writing, and a recent tightening of the bounds of public decorum. The printing not only recognizes the play's pastness in the way it frames *Malfi*, but capitalizes on it, offering the work as an exotic and risqué survival from a previous age.

The Unfortunate Duchess of Malfy makes a number of alterations to the text, including lengthy passages which are printed with marginal apostrophes, on the pretext that the play was too long to be entirely spoken in performance. Whilst this is plausible – indeed, the 1623 quarto makes a similar point, though without marginal markings – the passages which are reproduced in quotation marks tend to fall into two noticeable categories: they are material which is either politically or sexually significant. I am going to argue that the technique

produced a "double vision" for the reader in 1708 which relied upon them recognising the excess of the play in a modern context, the difference between the older form of the work and the version which could appear on stage during this period. Jean Marsden has remarked upon the increasing strictness of moral codes on the stage after the accession of Anne in 1702, "so that ultimately women cannot violate the codes of chaste behaviour and still be considered heroines" (*Fatal,* 143). The "double vision" gave the reader a parallel text full of material which increasingly could not be staged according to the changing theatrical mores of the time. The dedication helps "activate" this vision, by remarking on the play's pastness, that it is "not adorned with the Advantage of a Modern Dress". (Sig. A3 r.-v.) *The Unfortunate Duchess of Malfy* offers a licentious and subversive old play whose markings call attention to the passages which spill over the bounds of what is acceptable to contemporary sensibilities.[10]

Firstly, there are passages of possible political significance. For example, Antonio's comment on Bosola:

> Tis great pity
> He should be thus neglected. I have heard.
> He's very valiant. This foul melancholy
> Will poison all his goodness (1.1.74-77)[11]

This was apparently spoken on stage, but the following lines were printed in quotation marks:

> for I'll tell you,
> If too immoderate sleep be truly said
> To be an inward rust unto the soul,
> It then doth follow want of action
> Breeds all black malcontents; and their close rearing,

[10] I am aware that Jay Halio has pointed out that these markings are not to be taken absolutely literally in all cases, citing a production of *Hamlet* by Garrick based on a similarly-marked 1703 quarto of *Hamlet* which nonetheless restored some of the marked lines in performance, therefore the correlation between these notes in editions and actual stage practice is not absolutely certain (40). However, since the pattern of cuts contributes to an overall reading of the play which is corroborated by the preface, advertising and details of repertoire, I believe it is reasonable to consider them as evidence. Indeed, whatever their relation to the stage practice of the company at the Haymarket, the marginal notations significantly affect the experience of reading this printing of the play.

[11] For the sake of clarity in this discussion of where lines were altered or cut, references are to lines in the 1623 text of *Malfi*, as edited by Marcus, unless otherwise stated.

Like moths in cloth, do hurt for want of wearing. (1.1.77-82)

The lines printed but not spoken shift Antonio's comment from a remark on the individual to a more general point about social problems producing "malcontents". Likewise the discussion between Ferdinand and Castruccio as to what duties best fit a prince has been retained, but placed in quotation marks, as has the sequence in which Ferdinand demands his courtiers should only laugh when he does so (1.2.42-4). These particular cuts could be explained by simply excising the character of Castruccio to shorten the play and reduce the cast, but they are part of a larger pattern of alterations on the same theme. Bosola's ironic outburst to the Duchess on her management of her domains is also placed within the marks (3.2.289-301), and the same happens to the Duchess' political parable of the dogfish and the salmon, with sixteen lines being corralled into the marginal apostrophes, during which the arrogance of "Our Dogship" is mocked and the hierarchy of the sea questioned (3.5.123-138). However, the anodyne moral at the end is kept, stripped of its political charge:

Men oft are valued high, when they're most wretched.
But come, whither you please; I am armed 'gainst misery (3.5.139-40)

Put within quotation marks are the remarks of the "officers" who abuse Antonio after his public disgrace, and the speech by Bosola which ensues in which he pours scorn on political parasites and the princes who employ flatterers (3.2.211-241). At this point, however the quotation marks end, and a few lines of unexceptionable plot-related dialogue occurs:

Alas, poor gentleman!
DUCHESS: Poor? He hath amply filled his coffers!
BOSOLA: Sure he was too honest! (3.2.242-4)

Then the marks appear again, as soon as Bosola turns to pontificate on the action, using the particular events as the grounds for a general satirical point about the distribution of wealth (3.2.244-8).

All these cuts cluster around politically sensitive topics: the awarding of preferment, the ideal way to run a society, the behaviour of courtiers and state officials. These cuts are even more striking when they occur in shorter passages, such as Delio's comment on the dead Arragonian brothers, which puts in apostrophes the comments on "wretched eminent things" which disappear like prints in snow (5.5.111-5), but the moral remains marked:

I have ever thought

Nature doth nothing so great, for great Men,

As when she's pleas'd to make them lords of Truth. (5.5.115-7)

Antonio loses his sententious couplet to the apostrophes: "The great are like the Base; nay, they are the same,/ When they seek shameful ways to avoid shame" and one of his lines disappears from the middle of a speech when only the readers can see him state that when the Cardinal envies anyone he "strews in his way flatterers, panders, intelligencers, atheists and a thousand such political monsters" (2.3.51-2, 1.2.78-80). Coupled with the loss of the longer passages, these relatively small cuts in the performance version prove a political significance to the differences between the printed and performed text, since they are taken from within longer speeches. Whilst keeping the beginning and end lines of a sequence intact would accord with the findings of Tiffany Stern and Simon Palfrey in *Shakespeare in Parts*, since it maintains the "cues" which provide the play's functional structure, the lines selected for cutting, and the relatively few words they save within the speeches in question, support my reading. This "surgical" cutting belies the paratext's insistence that the alterations were only made because of the limited performance time available.

A similar group of alterations are noticeable around lines relating to sexuality. A significant number of these simply disappear, instead of being shifted into quotation marks, as I will discuss in the third part of this chapter. However, there are also noticeable groups of lines which were apparently not spoken onstage, but remained in the printing. The bawdy joshing with Castruccio appears with the marginal markings, but at first glance this could be put down to simply cutting the character in performance for convenience. There are substantial speeches which are also moved into the quotation marks, made by characters who remain firmly within the play. For example, the Duchess' approach to Antonio, which forms such a central part of modern understanding of the play and its themes:

You do tremble.

Make not your heart so dead a piece of flesh

To fear more than to love me. Sir, be confident;

What is't distracts you? This is flesh and blood, sir:

'Tis not the figure cut in alabaster

Kneels at my husband's tomb. Awake, awake, man!

I do here put off all vain ceremony,

And only do appear to you a young widow
That claims you for her husband; and, like a Widow
I use but half a blush in't.
ANTONIO: Truth speak for me. (1.2.360-269)

or the sequence of playfully risqué joking between the two of them and Cariola in the scenes after the marriage (3.2.7-21).

Alongside these romantic intimate lines, the 1708 version also prints some of the bawdier, satirical sequences within the marginal marks, such as the twenty-four lines of Bosola's railing at the Old Lady (2.2.4-28), during which he refers to "what strange instrument...should swell up a glass to the fashion of a woman's belly", that "some of you give entertainment for pure love; but more for precious reward" and declares that "the devil takes delight to hang at a woman's girdle like a false rusty watch". The same happens to the banter about the supposed assassination attempt on the Duchess, with its references to codpieces and concealed weapons (2.2.36-46).

The end of the Arragonian brothers' warning to their sister about the perils of second marriages is both altered and placed within quotation marks: the lines beginning "Women like that part" in the 1623 quarto here read:

And beware that part, which, like the Lamprey,
Hath nev'r a bone in't. *Dutch* Fy Sir. *Ferd*. Nay,
I mean the Tongue: Variety of Courtship.
What cannot a neat Knave with a smooth Tale,
Make woman believe? farewell lusty Widow. (9)

This last, shorter exchange tends to confirm the relevance of this cluster, rather as Delio's speech did for the political cluster, since it does not affect the play's running time significantly. In fact, though it is interesting that these lines suggest a deliberate pattern of alteration, the intention they imply behind the structure of this edition is not the main point for this study – of greater significance is the pattern they present to the reader by visibly marking out the passages which are too risky to speak on stage.

I should point out that that this printing also cuts entirely, without reproducing within marginal apostrophes, passages which fall into the two categories I have outlined. Amongst these are the references to the "inconstant and rotten ground of service" (3.2.197-8) and the

image of the politicians' bladders (3.2.270-1), the first of the "old Lady" episodes (2.1.25-68) and the reference to false modesty in women (5.2.156-7). It seems logical to speculate that these lines were not performed on stage either, since they are in some cases even more satirical than those which are printed in apostrophes. However, whether this speculation is accepted or not does not materially affect the reading which I am advancing for this edition.

Thus the 1708 printing sets up a creative tension between the two texts which it offers its audience: a titillating, irreverent and unruly "original" text and the more polite and uncontroversial edited text to be used in performance. The apparent inability of the eighteenth-century theatre (and its audience) to countenance parts of the 1623 quarto on stage is made into an attraction for readers of this printing, in which the marginal apostrophes insistently call attention to the ways in which Webster's play strays outside the canons of contemporary good taste. The pastness of the play is presented by this quarto as exciting and subversive: the visible gap between 1708 and the play's original context generates the tension I have described. That pastness here is attached to ideas of transgression and archaism, and appears as another form of the "excess" I have previously noticed in *Malfi*'s framing during its afterlife. The excess in question – the inability of the contemporary theatre to contain or completely transmit the work – provides the energy which infuses this edition.

2.1.3 The "unorphaned" edition: the 1708 Quarto as not-Shakespeare

The case studies in this chapter fall within a crucial period in the development of Shakespeare from a dead playwright to a transcendent guarantor of national, cultural and spiritual values. The nineteenth century may have seen the most extreme and overblown expressions of regard for Shakespeare (and the coining of the term "Bardolatry" to describe them), but the years from the middle of the seventeenth century to the middle of the eighteenth century created most of Shakespeare the icon whom the Victorians would revere. Michael Dobson's *The Making of the National Poet: Adaptation and Authorship, 1660-1769*, sets out to provide an "account of how Shakespeare came to occupy the centre of English literary culture between the restoration of the monarchy and the Stratford Jubilee" (3). Gary Taylor stresses the low ebb from which Shakespeare's reputation rose in the same period, metaphorically suggesting that he had fallen under the Act of Indemnity and Oblivion after the Civil War, making his rise to dominate the cultural landscape even more striking.

The 1708 quarto appeared at a vital moment in the development of Shakespeare's cultural profile: Taylor identifies 1709, which saw Betterton's last performance as Hamlet, the first issue of *The Tatler* and the rewriting of copyright law, as a year which "would transform

the public perception of Shakespeare in the eighteenth century" (51). In order to explore the way in which *Malfi*'s cultural profile can be understood in relation to the rising figure of Shakespeare, I shall compare it with Rowe's *Works of Mr. William Shakespear* in 1709 and Theobald's version of *Richard II* in 1720. Taylor has described Rowe's 1709 edition as "a spectacular new rendition, seasoned to contemporary taste" and described its inclusion of "Some Account of the Life, &c., of Mr. *William Shakespear*" as dictated by "[publisher] Tonson's sense of the market" (74, 75). He also identified the biographical sketch's cultural politics, both as a means to critique the present by drawing a "contrast between theatrical conditions in Shakespeare's time and in Rowe's" and to "help arbitrate between rival claimants from the past" by demonstrating Shakespeare's supremacy over Jonson (78, 79). Taylor thus identifies the biographical paratext to this edition as a significant part of the book's cultural politics: it satisfied a demand from the reading public and enabled Rowe to build an image of Shakespeare which developed the emerging author-figure. This developing sense of Shakespeare as author built on the shift which Dobson identifies in the paratexts of Shakespeare adaptations during the Exclusion Crisis: he notes that

> While of all of the 1660s' adaptations only *The Enchanted Island* boasts a prologue discussing the author of its source play, of the nine alterations produced during the Exclusion Crisis only three do not explicitly and extensively advertise themselves as derived from Shakespearean originals. The accession of Shakespeare to full authorial status gathers fresh momentum here. (62)

This development, leading to the Rowe "Account of the Life, &c.", makes a notable contrast to the 1708 *Unfortunate Duchess of Malfy* which offers no authorial figure whatsoever. Instead, it personifies the play by eliding the printing, work and heroine (a tactic I will discuss in greater detail later), stating that "the poor Distressed and Unfortunate Duchess of Malfy presumes to approach you, and throw her self at your feet, not doubting in the least of Protection, how numerous and potent soever her Enemies may be" (A3 r.). The dedicator, Hugh Newman, later disclaims the idea that "because she that at present attempts to kiss your Grace's Hand, is not adorned with the Advantage of a Modern Dress, that therefore her true internal Beauty will not be discerned, and acceptable to you" (A3 r.-v.).

The play is here figured as isolated and harried by enemies, not part of a secure and confident body of work underwritten by an authoritative figure who contrasts favourably with both past and present competitors. This may be arguing from absence, and we shall see that there are generic reasons why the printing might be troped as suffering and isolated, but the

difference is striking. It becomes strengthened when we compare this preface with the appearance of an apparently similar trope in Theobald's *King Richard II*:

> MY LORD
> IT is owing to your lordship's great Condescension, that I now presume to recommend to your Care an Orphan Child of *Shakespear*; who throws her Self at your Lordship's Feet, in the State of a Vertuous Woman in a Vicious Age, whose Innocence may be generally commended, tho' it be but sparingly incourag'd. Whatever Disguise I may have put upon Her, I hope, She retains those strong lines of her Family, which may entitle Her, as a Descendant from that Great Parent, to your generous Protection. (A2 r.-v.)

Whilst Theobald also describes his work with an image of a vulnerable woman requiring protection, he crucially calls her an "Orphan Child", an idea which is entirely absent from Newman's dedication. Whilst imagining the play as a helpless figure, Theobald nonetheless defines that figure in terms of a relationship to an (in this case absent) parent. *Malfi* is not an orphan because the issue of "her parent" is not what defines the work: the edition is "unorphaned" because it never had a "father" in the first place. In his edition of *Richard II,*Theobald goes on to stress the relevance of the absent parent himself, in his comments on "those strong lines of her Family, which may entitle Her, as a Descendant from that Great Parent, to Your generous Protection".

If I seem to be placing too much significance on the difference in what could have been a throwaway metaphor, I would argue that that is an unusually important trope for this stage in Shakespeare's development. Dobson has described "Dryden's construction of Shakespeare as a father-figure" and described how "the playwrights of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century share a growing perception of Shakespeare both as a national father and a domestic one" (97). The presence of a paternity metaphor reflects the ideological development of Shakespeare's authorial image at this point, and its presence in Theobald's dedication is part of a wider vision of the playwright. Whilst its absence in the dedication to *The Unfortunate Dutchess of Malfy* cannot be described as part of the work's cultural profile – one can hardly image readers consciously comparing paratexts as I have just done, and gravely noting the variant metaphors (see Hume, 'Before') – it is an instructive demonstration of how *Malfi* (and Webster) were failing to develop the kind of authorial presence which would come to saturate Shakespeare's works.

A similar, though less dramatic parallel, can be noted in the marginal annotations to the 1708 printing: Dobson draws attention to Colly Cibber's *The Tragical History of King Richard III*, which was printed in 1700, and includes a statement that:

> Tho' there was no great danger of the Readers mistaking any of my lines for *Shakespear's*; yet, to satisfie the curious, and unwilling to assume more praise than is really my due, I have caused those that are intirely *Shakespear*'s to be printed in this *Italick Character*; and those lines with this mark (') before 'em, are generally this thoughts, in the best dress I could afford 'em. (A3 r.)

We see the growing sense of the importance of Shakespeare's authorial identity, as Cibber uses the marginal apostrophe to make clear what is actually from "*Shakespear*" himself, whilst *Malfi*'s markings distinguish the present stage from the unruly past, without apparently involving any questions of authorship or ownership. This continuing absence of a strong authorial figure will have a powerful effect on *Malfi*'s afterlife, as the play is defined and framed by other discursive forces. T.S. Eliot may have famously claimed that "Webster was much possessed by Death", but *Malfi* was rather less possessed by Webster ('Whispers of Immortality', l.1).

2.1.4 Cutting a Figure: The Duchess in the 1708 Quarto.

The 1708 quarto frames the figure of the Duchess within one of the dominant modes of drama at the time, that of "she-tragedy". The dominance of the Duchess as a focus for the play's meanings meant that *Malfi* was particularly well suited to being understood within the conventions of this genre, though it required the reshaping of some lines which stressed her physical presence and her sexuality (see McLuskie and Uglow, 19). The printing thus co-opted the play's central figure to the dominant ideology of "she-tragedy", which troped women as passive, suffering victims. The Duchess in the 1708 quarto, then, was strikingly at odds with the vision Lisa Hopkins has presented of the Duchess in the 1623 quarto as a dignified, active "female hero."

In order to understand the way the 1708 quarto presents the figure of the Duchess, it is necessary to set it in the altered theatrical context of the early eighteenth century. After the arrival of actresses in the 1660s, English theatre and drama both increasingly presented the figure of the female character/ performer as the emotional locus of tragedy. Elizabeth Howe traces the rise of "she-tragedy" in English drama, with its focus on the distress of a

central female character, declaring that by the execution scene at the end of John Banks' *Vertue Betray'd: or, Anna Bullen* in 1682, "Female suffering has become the whole subject of tragedy" (122). In Jean Marsden's phrase, in *Fatal Desire: Women, Sexuality and the English Stage, 166-1720,* "women are presented to the audience's gaze, established as desirable, and then driven into prolonged and often fatal suffering", and she also emphasizes the concern with a sexual "taint" in the central character, whether acquired voluntarily or not (60, 65). Both the shift in dramaturgy to emphasizing a single female character as the focus of a play's meaning and the concern with that character's suffering meant that *Malfi* was particularly liable to being interpreted via the theatrical logic of she-tragedy.

This logic included an aspect of interpellation, according to Marsden, who states that whilst "men are naturally expected to feel 'passion' on watching a she-tragedy, women are asked to identify with the female victim, expressing their fellow suffering with ideologically correct tears" (64). She admits the apparent effectiveness of the genre's gestures towards the female audience, since a number of revivals are billed as "at the request of certain ladies of quality", and understands how the genre might validate them by focusing on female experience, but sees an element of masochism in their identification. *Malfi*'s co-option by she-tragedy in this period sees the play being used as a focus for female attention and example, with the Duchess herself as the central point for identification and reflection of "female" virtues. The dominance of the role within the play provides a tragic figure with the potential to fulfil all the requirement of female-centred tragedy, turning the "female hero" Lisa Hopkins found in the "original" play into a passive and admonitory heroine.

Among her peers: *Malfi* deployed in production

Malfi's framing by the generic assumptions of she-tragedy and affective tragedy is demonstrated by an analysis of how the play was deployed by the Queen's Company in 1705. As Milhous and Hume point out, the season of 1705-6 was a period of intense and bitter rivalry between Drury Lane and the Queen's Theatre. Failed union negotiations, attempted (and successful) poaching of personnel and monopoly ambitions on both sides meant that "relations between the two companies were tense and hostile throughout this season" (243). Examining the season as a whole, there does seem to be a pattern of extremely competitive programming by both houses, in which a successful play would be countered by older plays from the opposing company's repertoire which might hope to siphon off audiences. The older plays performed in this way were sometimes advertised under a variant title, which provides us with valuable evidence both as to how the companies might expect these plays to be understood, and how they were consciously being framed. For example, in March 1706,

Queen's enjoyed some success with the musical *The British Enchanters, or No Magick Like Love*, and Drury Lane countered with two musicals of their own: *King Arthur, or The British Worthy* and *The Tempest, or The Inchanted Island* (Milhous and Hume, 285-7) Irrespective of how similar these pieces might have been in production, there is obviously an attempt here to present them as equivalents to the show at the Haymarket, extending to the use of similar words in the titles under which they were offered.

In the middle of January that same year Drury Lane had enjoyed a run with a new piece by Motteux: *The Island Princess, or The Generous Portuguese*. During the same period the Queen's Company produced *Don Sebastian, King of Portugal; Sophonisba, or Hannibal's Overthrow* and *Queen Elizabeth, or the Earl of Essex*. (Milhous and Hume 270-3). The relevance of Don Sebastian's country of origin is obvious, and the other two plays appear to be attempts to pit female-led pieces against the Princess who was earning Drury Lane good money. *Queen Elizabeth*, Banks' tragedy about the Earl of Essex, is particularly worth noting, since it is usually entitled *The Unhappy Favourite*. (e.g. 29th May 1706, Milhous and Hume 299). Indeed, it was produced twice during the same season under that title: apparently only when *The Island Princess* was drawing audiences for the rival company did the management of the Haymarket decide that Queen Elizabeth was the most significant feature of the play.

Just as striking is the counter-programming in February by Drury Lane when the Queen's premièred *The Revolution in Sweden*, another female-led piece, advertised at one point as *The Revolution in Sweden, or The Maiden Queen* (Milhous and Hume, 279, 281). Drury Lane replied on the same day with *The Squire of Alsatia*, and on the next day with *Bonduca, The British Heroine* (Milhous and Hume, 279-80). Later in the week Queen's performed *The Revolution* again, and Drury Lane produced *Arsinoe, Queen of Cyprus*, and the rivalry reached its height on the following Saturday, when Drury Lane advertised their offering as *The Revolution in Sweden, or The Maiden Queen*, whilst their rivals performed Dryden's *Secret Love, or The Maiden Queen* (Milhous and Hume, 280-1).

These examples establish the relevance of the idea of "counter-programming" during this particular period, which can shed light on the importance of *Malfi's* being performed under a different title at the Queen's Theatre on 3rd October 1705 (Milhous and Hume, 247). *An Unhappy Choice, or The Dutchess of Malfey* aligns this production with the same view of the play suggested by the title of the 1708 printing: *The Unfortunate Duchess of Malfy, or the Unnatural Brothers*. It also, however, echoes the title of the play being performed on the same day at Drury Lane: *The Unhappy Favourite, or the Earl of Essex*. Despite the title character being a man (in this case – we have already seen it staged as *Queen Elizabeth*) Banks' treatment of the Earl's story, and the play's emotional tone, locate it firmly in the character of

affective tragedy, and a logical development from Banks' earlier she-tragedies. Having seen how both theatre companies attempted to lure each other's audiences away during this season by presenting apparently similar and similarly-titled works, the advertising of the 1705 production makes it clear that *Malfi* was being framed as a near equivalent to Banks' brand of emotional, female-led tragedy.

The identification of *Malfi* with she-tragedy is further demonstrated by the preface of the 1708 printing of the play, which shows how easily the tendency of tragedy in this period could accommodate the dominance of the Duchess. As we have seen, the preface conflates the play, printing and main character, declaring to its intended patron that "the poor Distressed and Unfortunate Duchess of Malfy presumes to approach you, and throw her self at your Feet, not doubting in the least of Protection, how numerous and potent soever her Enemies may be" (A3 r.). This provides clear generic signals to the readers: before they even encounter the play's text, they are left in little doubt as to how they are expected to interpret its events, and the Duchess' role within them. The preface evokes a typical scene from an affective tragedy, metaphorically identifying the work's vulnerability in the marketplace with that of its heroine, and literally identifying its aesthetic and commercial value with its ability to elaborate upon that vulnerability. It also casts the Duchess as the determining focus of meaning within the play: the meaning of the Duchess as character and *The Duchess* as work are not so much intertwined as rendered identical in this preface. Where the commendatory poems to the 1623 quarto blurred the lines between role, work and printing, this paratext appears to simply trace those lines over each other.

Love in a time of suffering: the Duchess as an affective heroine

The Duchess who carries this focus of meaning is rather altered from previous instantiations, however (McLuskie and Uglow, 21). The role is reshaped, losing a large number of lines in this printing. Even more are placed within the marginal quotation marks. After the secret marriage to Antonio, the edition completely cuts her wish that Antonio should "lead your Fortune by the hand/ Unto your marriage bed", the image of the sword lying between them in that bed, and her desire to "shroud your blushes in my bosom". These are not simply excised from production and highlighted in the excitingly licentious 1708 "double printing", they disappear from the work altogether. In the performance of this scene, the Duchess loses one of her defining speeches, from "You do tremble" to "I use but half a blush in't" (1.2.360-9), and also loses the passage in which she refers to the principle of marriage *per verba de praesenti*. In the scene that is left, there is very little sense of the Duchess as a vivacious, sexually aware woman who initiates her marriage and reassures her prospective husband.

Instead, after the declaration of marriage, the dialogue cuts to Cariola, who finishes the scene with "I owe her much of pity". In the 1623 text, Cariola's line is balanced and undercut by the rush of ambiguous and forceful speech from the Duchess, but in the 1708 version it looks like a more straightforward gloss on the action which has just taken place. The line's prominence at the end of the first scene fits well with the interpretative model set up by the preface, standing as a signpost to the action about to develop, and declaring that this is a play whose heroine will need pitying.

There are also changes in the way in which other characters refer to the Duchess. The lines in which Bosola refers to the "bawd farthingales" and the "young springal cutting a caper in her belly" lines are excised from the 1708 printing, taking with them a highly specific, earthy image of the pregnant Duchess (2.1.153-6). Obviously the character is still pregnant, but Bosola does not body forth his suspicions in the same language. Nor does he remark of the apricots "how greedily she eats them", or mention the Duchess seething and puking, again refusing to direct attention towards her physicality and her appetites. Cariola no longer compares her mistress to a picture, or a ruined monument, metaphors which are less "improper" than Bosola's comments, but which have a robuster register and present the Duchess' body as "classical", rather than "grotesque" in the Bahktinian sense.

During her imprisonment in Act Four, the Duchess loses any reference to a desire to speak with the dead, as well as her declarations that

> Th'heaven above 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 tanned galley slave is with his oar. (4.2.24-7)

In rapid succession, these cuts remove allusions to her physical presence, a desire for knowledge forbidden by the Bible (or at least a heterodox speculation) and an image of heroic suffering which seems to dimly echo the threats of Leviticus 26:19: "And I will break the pride of your power; and I will make your heaven as iron and your earth as brass." (*KJB*, Lev. 26.19). The removal of these lines is not a matter of propriety, as the other cuts appear to be. They deprive the Duchess of a powerful set of images, a rhetorical outburst which allows her, if only for a while, to escape from or at least to verbally reorder her circumstances. Denying her the ability to shift herself into these images has two effects. Firstly, in practical terms, it deprives her of lines, and with them some degree of verbal agency. Secondly, the kind of metaphorical comparison which occurs in the 1623 quarto imputes some kind of universality to the subject.

Setting the Duchess between heaven and earth, comparing her to a galley slave or to a monument, suggests that she possesses a range of possibilities. The heaven and earth image sets her in a grand cosmological context, far from the reactive heroines of affective tragedy.

Similarly, in the same scene as printed in the first quarto, she speaks to Bosola of how

> I know death hath ten thousand several doors
> For men to take their exits; and 'tis found
> They go on such strange geometrical hinges,
> You may open them both ways. (4.2.211-4)

The 1708 quarto cuts this, as well as her quip to the torturer "Any way, for heaven's sake/ Would I were out of your whispering" (4.2.214-5). Again in these excised lines we see the Duchess universalizing herself, equating herself with "man", and making heterodox speculations about the nature of life and death, ending with a pun on her own impending death, which comes close to an oath, "for heaven's sake".

The cumulative effect of these cuts and alterations is to remodel the role of the Duchess, taking away much of her initiative, physicality and sexuality, in short removing many of the aspects which Hopkins suggested make up a "female hero" in Renaissance drama. These changes are certainly interesting in themselves, and show the play being reinterpreted through textual alteration, but their main interest for this study is as evidence for how the play was being seen. After all, readers and audiences would not have had a mental copy of the 1623 quarto with which to compare alterations and develop an understanding of the play's new slant via the differences which had been introduced. The cuts do not create meaning *ex nihilo*, rather they channel and direct the discursive forces which are naturally brought to bear on the play, and can be read as clues to the way in which those forces would tend to shape *Malfi*'s meanings at this point.

I should point out that my listing of the significant changes in the 1708 printing focuses attention at first on the alterations, rather than the continuities, but the vast bulk of the text was left untouched. On reflection, it is remarkable how few lines had to be excised in order to drastically shift the tenor of the remaining text. The drift of the cuts, along with the extra-textual evidence I highlighted in the production calendar for 1705, suggests that *Malfi* was being framed and understood as an affective or she-tragedy. A scholar familiar with the details of the 1623 quarto, or a theatre-goer used to the generally prevailing tone in *Malfi* productions over the last twenty years, might see the passages which have been cut as central to the Duchess' character, and thus to an authentic understanding of the play and its

meanings. We must equally bear in mind that an eighteenth-century reader or theatre-manager might well see them as a handful of unfortunate and deeply archaic lines which were preventing *Malfi* from being recognised for what it was: a powerful tragedy about a helplessly suffering heroine. I have therefore detailed these cuts, and discussed their impact, not primarily as an examination of the playtext's altering meaning within this printing, but as evidence of how the play was understood more generally. The alterations we have been in the role of the Duchess, reshaping the part to assert the ideology implicit in "she-tragedy", are continued even more markedly in the next incarnation of the play, Lewis Theobald's adaptation *The Fatal Secret*.

2.2.1 *The Fatal Secret*

In 1733 an adaptation of *Malfi* appeared on stage, entitled *The Fatal Secret*, and was published in 1735. It was written by Lewis Theobald, a London man of letters in the first decade of the eighteenth century, who had published translations of Classical plays and original works for the stage, but was most famous for his work on Shakespeare. *Shakespeare Restored* (1726), his critique of Pope's edition of Shakespeare's works, is a significant moment in the development of Shakespeare criticism, and provoked Pope's response in *The Dunciad Variorum* (1729). Theobald's own edition of Shakespeare, produced in the sequence of editions from Rowe to Pope to Theobald which Taylor sees as "acrid with the smoke of burning reputations" with each editions "defining itself in contemptuous opposition to its immediate predecessor", appeared in 1734 (71, 72). Thus by the time *The Fatal Secret* was published in 1735, its author was one of the most famous and contentious names in contemporary letters, who contributed to the development of Shakespeare as a figure detached from his contemporaries.

The adaptation itself overhauls the play according to neo-Aristotelian principles, compressing the events within a matter of days and bringing all the major roles up to the same social rank (Barker, 47; McLuskie and Uglow, 21). Most astonishingly, Antonio and the Duchess are both preserved from death, to be reunited in a happy ending which purports to demonstrate, according to the final sententious couplet, that "Virtue still is Heav'ns peculiar care" (57).

2.2.2 Pastness and Whig Elizabethan tragedy in the 1730s

The relationship between Theobald's source text and his adaptation has attracted some comment from scholars, notably Hunter and Hunter, who describe *The Fatal Secret* as a "theft" and Moore who calls it "larceny" (26; 9.) Theobald himself comments rather defensively on

the matter in the preface, declaring that , "I had no Intentions of disguising from the Publick that...John Webster has preceded me, above a hundred Years ago, in the same Story" (A4 v.) To me, however, Theobald's plagiary or otherwise is less interesting than the cultural politics of his appropriation. I am going to argue that *The Fatal Secret* had a direct and clear political relevance in the early 1730s, which operated through the work's association with Webster and the "Elizabethan" period. Theobald played down the importance of Webster's artistic achievement by stressing the other writers from a roughly similar period who had handled the subject, thus freeing himself from the imputation of passing off someone else's work as his own, whilst securely associating the narrative with the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. According to my reading of Theobald's work, this particular kind of pastness – a connection to the noble age of Elizabeth – worked as a rebuke to the policies of the contemporary administration and their passivity in the face of Spanish power.

I site this reading of *The Fatal Secret* within a more general tendency amongst a handful of plays produced in the 1730s, which I shall call "Whig Elizabethan tragedy". These include original dramatic works set in the Elizabethan period – George Lillo's *The London Merchant* and *Fatal Curiosity* – and adaptations of works which first appeared in that era, if not precisely in Elizabeth's reign) – *The Fatal Extravagance* (an adaptation of *A Yorkshire Tragedy*) and *The Fatal Secret* itself. My interpretation of this flurry of works depends on linking their connection to the past with their perceived contemporary political relevance, so it is worth dealing with each play in turn to elaborate the ways in which they co-opt the force of the past for a political charge.

The politics of this period are notable for the dominance of the Whig party in government under the leadership of Robert Walpole, so much so that the years between 1714 and 1745 are often referred to as the "Whig supremacy". However, the "Country" or out-of-office Whigs continued to criticise the "Court" Whigs (those in Walpole's administration) and the remaining Tories (see Hill, 10). Thus when plays criticised "the Court", they could be understood to mean the general machinery of government under the titular authority of the King, not simply the collection of courtiers who surrounded him. During the 1730s the main points of contention between the opposition Whigs and the government was Walpole's perceived weakness in the face of Spanish military power, particularly their naval spheres of influence, and the alleged corruption of the administration and its office-holders. (The former complaint was specific to the Country Whigs, as Tories tended to approve of an uninvolved or "blue water" foreign policy.)

Though opposed to the government on the foreign policy question, the oppositional Whigs still espoused the general principles of their party: an emphasis on Protestantism, the

defence of the freedoms from over-powerful monarchs established under the constitutional settlement of 1688, and scorn for the Jacobites who wished to establish one of the Stuart bloodline on the throne (O'Gorman, 142). They also shared with the governing Whigs a strong link with the interests of commerce and trade, which were expanding massively in this period and becoming a central part of England's prosperity (O'Gorman, 173-4). The Whigs "approved" of the growth of commerce and the increasing presence of "the middling orders" in the affairs of the period (173). Loftis also notes the way in which out-of-office Whigs adapted "the conception of the 'patriot'...for opposition use", drawing on "the ideal of the disinterested Roman lover of liberty" (122). This term quickly became a party label with which to express discontent with Walpole's government.

Against the background of this political situation, and as Michael Dobson has stated, the 1730s are notable for "a mounting propaganda campaign against Sir Robert Walpole's government" which "explicitly politicized questions of culture to an unusual degree" (*Making*, 135). Whilst he is specifically concerned to demonstrate the co-opting of Shakespeare as an Opposition playwright by the "Patriots", he mentions this as taking place within a general climate of criticism. As John Loftis comments "If the accession of George I in 1727 did not inaugurate a new era in the theatres, the production of Gay's *Beggar's Opera* in 1728 certainly did. The temper of the theatres in the following decade grew far more belligerent than it had been since the Restoration" (94). This was not simply a fad within the theatre, either: as O'Gorman points out, writers and dramatists were a significant part of the political scene. He notes the involvement of playwrights such as Gay, Swift and Pope, before concluding "There can be no question that this was one of the most brilliant, most famous, and most talented, but at the same time, most unsuccessful oppositions in modern British history" (80). Significantly he goes on to locate the cause of its impotence in the wide variety of political shades involved in the movement, "an odd assortment of Whigs, Tories, and ex-Jacobites", seeming to imply that an opposition which mobilised partly through cultural activity could well have been more effective if it had been more politically coherent (80).

Lillo and the "Patriots"

The first scene of George Lillo's seminal domestic tragedy *The London Merchant* provides a perfect example of the intertwining of historical setting and political commentary which I am seeking to elucidate in this group of plays. The prologue stresses the work's connection to the past, via references to the ballad which provided its source, claiming that the "fam'd old song" has "for a century of years/...fill'd a thousand thousand eyes with tears (xi). This connection to the past (specifically the early seventeenth century), was an important part of the play's

cultural profile, as Theophilus Cibber makes clear in this anecdote about "gaily-disposed spirits" who brought copies of the ballad to the performance "intending to make their pleasant remarks...and ludicrous comparisons between the ancient ditty and the modern play" but were "drawn to drop their ballads, and pull out their handkerchiefs" (5:399). This indicates that the work's involvement with the past was a significant and generally known aspect of its cultural profile from its very first performance.

The opening exchange of dialogue locates the play in the Elizabethan period and relates the success of English operations against the Spanish: "Heaven be prais'd! The Storm that threaten'd our Royal Mistress, pure Religion, Liberty, and Laws, is for a time diverted" (1). Here the whole oppositional Whig ideology is bound up together: a robust Protestant sectarianism, an emphasis on the rule of law as a safeguard against the over-use of royal prerogatives and the idolisation of "Liberty" (see O'Gorman, 142). The more immediate political relevance is provided by the fact that it is the Spaniards against whom these virtues have just been defended, and the continuing passage makes it clear that the mercantile trading classes are to be identified as the natural bulwark against Catholic supremacy and aggression: "The haughty and revengeful *Spaniard*, disappointed of the loan on which he depended from *Genoa*, must now attend the slow Return of Wealth, to supply his empty Coffers, e'er he can execute his purpos'd Invasion of our happy Island" (1).

The scene securely links praise of the "Peerless ELIZABETH (more than in Name the Mother of her People)" with that of the dignity and power of merchants (2). This opening establishes the "setting" of the play and the general ideological framework within which the tragedy of *The London Merchant* should be understood. The theme appears explicitly again when the play's scheming villainess declares, "I would have my conquests complete, like those of the Spaniards in the New World, who first plundered the natives of all the wealth they had and then condemned the wretches to the mines for life to work for more" (6). With this metaphor the work unambiguously links her evil with the activities of the Spanish, and specifically their combination of military and economic power. The first scene has established that the virtuous characters are on the side of Elizabeth against the Spanish; this passage ensures the symmetry of that model by the villainess' admiration for the Spanish system.

Lillo's next play, *Fatal Curiosity*, has a similar opening on the same theme, in which two characters discuss the unhappy return of Raleigh from the New World[12]. Though the

[12] The fact that Raleigh is specifically mentioned here as "Being arrived at Plymouth from Guiana" may well have an extra shade of contemporary relevance, as may the reference to the barbarity of the Spanish mines in *The London Merchant*. O'Gorman records that at this time "the Spanish authorities had for many years hindered and obstructed the rights which Britain had won in the Treaty of Utrech,

instrument of Raleigh's downfall is identified as his betrayal by "base Sir Lewis Stukeley, his own kinsman", thus adumbrating the play's concern with treachery within families, the motive force behind this execution is the need to "satisfy the Spaniards", as noted by William H. Burney (xii). Old Wilmot expands upon this element of *realpolitik* in Raleigh's death:

> *Old Wilmot*
> His martial genius does not the suit the times
> There's now no insolence that Spain can offer
> But, to the shame of this pacific reign,
> Poor England must submit to. (4)

After this dig at supine administrations, the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries are brought into even sharper juxtapositions by Old Wilmot's next lines on this "Gallant man!" in which he hopes "Posterity perhaps may do thee justice/ And praise thy courage, learning and integrity,/ When thou'rt past hearing" (4). The political message of this tragedy is thus bound tightly to its involvement with the Elizabethan past, and the ability of that past to reflect on the inadequacies of the present. These passages frame the narratives of Lillo's plays, making it clear how the general forms of wrong-doing which appear in the tragedies are to be understood in relation to larger kinds of aggression and evil. They steer the domestic, mercantilist ideology of the plays towards a bearing on the immediate political questions of the Whig Ascendancy.

The Fatal Extravagance, an early eighteenth-century adaptation of the Elizabethan *Yorkshire Tragedy*, demonstrates a similar political tendency. Attributed variously in its printings to Aaron Hill or Joseph Mitchell, it was certainly printed and performed at the beginning of the 1730s, and enjoyed a modest degree of success, with four performances recorded during 1721 and 1722 (*London Stage*; Scouten 38, 39, 309, 310; Avery 625, 648, 658, 677). The performances then peter out, and we can be sure that this is not simply a gap in records, but represents the play's absence from the stage, since this is a period for which relatively complete documentation exists, and since upon its next appearance it is advertised as "Not Acted these Eight Years" (*London Stage* Scouten, 38). Lincoln's Inn Fields made this boast in their bills when reviving the play on 21st February 1730 (38). This begins another

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namely the *Asiento* and the right to send one ship a year to the trade fairs of the Spanish Main. In the Caribbean the Spanish coastguard vessels, the *guardcostas*, customarily seized British ships and cargoes, subjecting British sailors to beatings and imprisonments. A series of bloodthirsty incidents aroused English public opinion to boiling point" (83-4).

cluster of performances with eight from 1730, four in 1733 and occasional appearances until 1736. This means that *The Fatal Extravagance* was revived, and achieved the success it had not garnered on its premiere, at the same time as the other "Elizabethan" tragedies I have been discussing.

A comparison between the texts of *A Yorkshire Tragedy* and *The Fatal Extravagance* shows alterations which shift the play's ideology firmly towards the mercantile, oppositional Whig position. The misfortunes which have befallen the husband and wife around whom the play centres have, in the adaptation, been focused in a bond, and the ending has been changed to involve the arrival of a merchant brother in his ship. There is a continuing refrain in the original play about the husband's lost lands, and family honour, for example "Thy lands and credit/ Lie now both sick of a consumption" (65, 2.130-1) and "That name, which hundreds of years has made this shire famous" (76, 4.75-6).[13] In the adaptation, these are refashioned into a much more contemporary pride:

> What have I liv'd for, if I die a Beggar?
> Why were my Ancestors renowned in *War*?
> Why, with grave Judges, have they grac'd the Bench,
> Or with wise Votes, the Senate? (20)

This harping on pride in the nobility of family ancestry and pedigree – which would have looked a suspiciously Tory, even Jacobite, statement in the political climate of the 1730s- has been transmitted to a record of the civic services provided to a nation in this Whiggish alteration. Blood and lands have becomes the executive, judicial and military functions carried out in a well-managed state.

Crucially, attitudes to the court have also altered drastically in *The Fatal Extravagance*: the original play uses the chance of "some office/ And place at court" as a "good and sure relief" to the couple's problems (69, 3.19-20). The later play scorns the "wild Lottery of a publick Hope./ Where Reason had no Chance, and Villains govern'd" (20), and scorns the ability of a "Courtier's Passions" to change at will, remarking "What cannot Interest teach us?" (53). The alteration is remarkable, and the court has changed from being a potential source of salvation to the epitome of corruption and dissimulation, bringing the play into line with the

[13] Other examples abound: "What is there in three dice to make a man draw thrice three thousand acres into the compass of a round small table" (75-6, 4.64-66), "My lands showed like a full moon about me" (76, 4.70), "Down goes the house of us, down it sinks" (76, 4.73-4), "ill beseeming/ The ancient honour of his house and name" (57, 2.8-9), "y'are a gentleman by many bloods" (60, 2.61).

other "Elizabethan" oppositional Whig plays I have been examining. *The Fatal Extravagance* does not link itself so explicitly to the Elizabethan past as *The London Merchant* or *Fatal Curiosity* via paratexts, but I suggest it makes sense to read them alongside each other as a collection of works whose involvement with the "golden age" of Elizabeth drove their political valence. The fact that *Fatal Extravagance* was revived successfully at this particular time adds to the balance of probability.

"bespeak him/ A Patriot:" *The Fatal Secret* in its political context

Before the reader gets to the playtext, there are several signals in the paratexts of *The Fatal Secret* that a political reading is appropriate. Theobald states at the beginning of the Preface that the work was unsuccessful on stage because it appeared "at a Season when the Weather was warm, and the Town in a political Ferment" (A5 v.). Don D. Moore mentions this rather dismissively as Theobald "blam[ing] politics and the weather for the brief run of the play", though Moore evidently does not take the play as a whole very seriously, as he goes on to state that the playwright "admit[ed] his larceny in the Preface (one hopes he'd been caught)" – the critic's whole attitude is one of scorn for a writer who poached his material and then made flimsy excuses for its lack of success (8). However, if one disregards the question of Theobald's intentions and alleged plagiarism, this makes a connection for the reader between *The Fatal Secret*'s production and the political turbulence of the time.

The same can be said of Theobald's unexpected dedication of *The Fatal Secret* to the prime minster himself, Robert Walpole. I am arguing that Theobald's work can be read alongside contemporary productions which criticise Walpole's administration, particularly with regard to its handling of naval policy in the face of Spanish military power, so it comes as a surprise to read the following praise in the dedication:

> THE little Piece, which I now throw at your feet, can boast no other Merit to warrant its Approach, than that it comes to express the Duty of its Presenter. The Address, indeed, is in the Nature of an unauthoriz'd Visitant; and I ought to beg Pardon, if it is unseasonable. But I could not resist the occasion, which the Crisis of Affairs furnishes, of humbly congratulating with you on the present Honours of our Country. It has been the peculiar Glory of BRITAIN, by her Arms or Meditations, to preserve the Balance of Power in EUROPE; and to rescue distress'd States from the ambitious Views of an over-weening Neighbour. This, even foreign Annals must report, We have done; and PORTUGAL now stands a shining Instance, that we have

neither lost the Virtue, nor the Courage, to exert that saving Power. I speak it with the more Pleasure, because the Justice of Posterity must remember, This was achiev'd when Sir ROBERT WALPOLE was at the Head of the British MINISTRY.

THIS is a real Praise which History must transmit; and which will transcend the Flatteries of a thousand Dedicators. Malcontents may blush to think with what freedom they have sneered at a pacific Fleet, but PORTUGAL will witness, that our Fleet rides the Ocean in Triumph, even without the Necessity of striking a Blow for it. (A3 r. - A4 r.)

However, my reading of *The Fatal Secret* does not depend on "decoding" Theobald's personal views from the play, and lining them up with contemporary political positions. This dedication could be ironic, or could be a directed towards Walpole in a deliberately hostile way, like that attached by Walter Aston to his banned anti-ministry play, *The Restauration of King Charles II*.

However, the significance of this passage does not rest upon any attempt to reconstruct Theobald's intentions, but the way in which this dedication frames the following playtext for a reader in 1735. Whatever Theobald's intentions, the preface and dedication call the reader's attention specifically to the political situation of the mid-1730s, direct them towards Walpole's naval policy and its effectiveness or failure, and emphasize the play's participation in the party politics of the time. They activate the play's political tendencies, and prepare the reader to see its relevance to the contemporary situation by harnessing its association with the "Elizabethan" era.

Turning to the main text, if we read Theobald's adaptation alongside these politically inflected "Elizabethan" tragedies of the 1730s, the political thrust becomes clear at several points. For example, the alteration of Antonio's speech on the French court, which in the quarto of 1623 reads thus:

ANTONIO: I admire it
In seeking to reduce both state and people
To a fixed order, their judicious king
Begins at home: quits first his royal palace
Of flattering sycophants, of dissolute
And infamous persons - which he sweetly terms
His master's masterpiece, the work of heaven -
Considering duly that a prince's court
Is like a common fountain, whence should flow

Pure silver drops in general. But if't chance
Some cursed example poison't near the head
'Death and diseases through the whole land spread.'
And what is't makes this blessed government
But a most provident council, who dare freely
Inform him the corruption of the times? (1.1.4-18)

The Fatal Secret gives these lines to Delio, and prints them thus:

In seeking to reduce both State and People
To a fixt order, thus judicious King
Begins at home, quits first his Royal Palace
Of flatt'ring Sycophants; or such, whose Morals,
Corrupt and loose, might hurt the Sounder Minds:
Consid'ring duely, that a Prince's Court
Is like a Common Fountain, whence should flow,
Pure silver Streams diffusive; but, if, haply,
Some curst Example poisons near the Head,
The foul Contagion spreads throughout the Land. (2)

Theobald alters the passage in two ways: he rewrites a couple of lines, to make their meaning more explicit, but he excludes the lines which suggest a council will restrain the excesses and corruptions of the court. Read as part of an oppositional Whig "Elizabethan" tendency, this makes perfect sense: there was little point in advancing parliament as the antidote to the power and influence of a court, since most power was held by the Walpole administration itself. Indeed, when George II did exert significant influence, when the government were under pressure during the "Excise Crisis" of 1733, it was to prop up the administration by stacking the House of Lords with friendly peers (O'Gorman, 81).

Further political elaboration occurs in an exchange during the first dialogue between Ferdinand and Bosola, which appears in the 1623 quarto as

BOSOLA: It seems you would create me
One of your familiars.
FERDINAND: Familiar? What's that?
BOSOLA: Why, a very quaint invisible devil in flesh -

An intelligencer. (1.2.175-8)

The Fatal Secret prints this exchange thus:

Bosola: So this subtle tempting Bait
Must turn me to a subtle quaint Familiar.
Ferdinand: What's that?
Bosola: A sort of Witch's Spirit for Mischief:
That cherish'd Tool of Courts, call'd an Informer:
Whose Thriving hangs on his ingenious Care
To find out Accusations, or invent 'em. (8)

A relatively small alteration in the lines alters their thrust considerably. Bosola's "familiar" is demoted from being an invisible devil to the spirit attendant upon a witch, removing the metaphysical significance of the image, and identifying it with what would have appeared a quaint, archaic superstition to an audience of 1733 (or a readership of 1735). At the same time the line is thoroughly secularized by expanding on its political meaning, insisting that it is a metaphor, and elaborating what real kind of political criminal it refers to. Webster's flash of theodicy (see Albert Tricomi for more on this line) has been transformed into a jab at the ways in which political regimes nourish their parasites.

At the other end of Bosola's service to Ferdinand, the 1623 printing has the mercenary berating his master after the death of the Duchess:

...though I loathed the evil, yet I loved
You that did counsel it, and rather sought
To appear a true servant than an honest man. (4.2.320-2)

Theobald's play again draws an explicit political moral:

And tho I loath'd the Evil, yet I lov'd
You that did counsel it – I'm fairly quitted.
Who taints his Honesty t'oblige a Prince,
Deserves such payment. (43)

Another criticism of general political power appears in one of the lines which occurs for the first time in this adaptation, when Ferdinand remarks that "Statesman seldom/ At their own Cost can brook another's Rise" (16). Amongst these political barbs we find one which is startlingly explicit in its partisanship: when Pescara describes Antonio in glowing terms, Ferdinand declares "You bespeak him/ A Patriot, whom few Courts can match in Praise" (16). It is only one line and could possibly be missed in performance, but the term "Patriot", the name adopted by the main opposition to Walpole's administration, jumps off the page when included in a line which suggests that few such men are to be found at court.

With this specific topical relevance in mind, returning to the paratexts provides more evidence for this play as anti-Walpole and anti-Spanish. The cast list for the 1733 production, printed in the 1735 edition, reproduces the characters familiar from the 1623, 1708 and other printings, but with some striking glosses (A6 r.). Some of these simply raise characters to a more suitable rank for the eighteenth-century tragic theatre: Antonio is now "Great Master of the Household to the Dutchess", Bosola a "Dependant on Duke Ferdinand and the Cardinal" and Cariola "Chief Lady of the Bedchamber". However, Ferdinand is styled "Ferdinand, Duke of Calabria" and his brother has become "Cardinal of Arragon"; the latter is a perfectly plausible ascription, but is nowhere mentioned in Webster's play. Just as eye-catching are three names further down, listed as "servants to the Cardinal": Carlos, Julio and Rodriguez. These are exceptionally minor roles who enter with the Cardinal and are sent off to spy on his behalf within a dozen or so lines of dialogue, only staying long enough to be addressed by these remarkably Spanish names, which do not appear in any version of *Malfi* before the 1730s. The sudden influx of Spanish names on the side of evil, especially given that neither the new titles nor the new servants serve any more than a nominal purpose, strongly suggests an alignment is taking place in *The Fatal Secret* similar to that which we have already seen in the "Elizabethan" tragedies. *Malfi* was already full of material which could be construed as reflecting upon Continental immorality and intrigue, and *The Fatal Secret*'s cast-list frames the adaptation to ensure that this tendency is focused more firmly upon the Spanish.

The growing sense of pastness which frames *Malfi* during this period reaches another turning point with *The Fatal Secret*, which embodies one form of pastness which is disappearing from the play's history, and another form which will dominate it in the years to come. Theobald's adaptation is the last instantiation I can find that is framed with a specifically party-political pastness: the anti-Spanish foreign policy strand, which is noticeable in the 1623 quarto, into the 1730s, ceases at this point. This is not to say that there are not political *Malfi*s to come, nor versions which embody a specific party stance, but they do not seek to link their position with the politics of the 1620s with which *Malfi* became associated,

and they tend not to advocate specific foreign policy. *The Fatal Secret* marks the shift (though it is not a precise distinction) between party politics and cultural politics, as *Malfi* becomes more and more associated with the notion of the "Elizabethan", and its various meanings. This will not by any means stop it being used for political and nationalistic purposes, but they are less rooted in what this individual play "meant" at the time of production/publication, and more about the cultural potency ascribed to the "age of Elizabeth" (or, much later, the "Jacobean" period.) Leah Marcus has described the 1623 quarto in terms of a political "nostalgia" for Elizabeth and the "values she had posthumously come to represent", but *The Fatal Secret* marks the change to *Malfi* being framed by a general cultural nostalgia (11).

2.2.3 Patchwork dialectic: Theobald's composition technique

The Fatal Secret is a turning point in *Malfi*'s relationship to Shakespeare. The fact that the quartos of 1623 and 1708 appeared within a year's proximity to significant Shakespeare publications is a useful coincidence, which enables comparisons between them and the developing Shakespearean author-figure, but the fact that a major mid eighteenth-century editor of Shakespeare also adapted *Malfi* is by no means a coincidence. Lewis Theobald's adaptation of *Malfi*, written whilst he was working on his edition of Shakespeare, shows that, for him at least, they held a similar interest. This does not mean, however, that he regarded *Malfi* as equal to Shakespeare's works, and the way in which he adapted the play, "patching" it with phrases from the more famous playwright, puts them in a dialectical relationship in which *Malfi* is distinctly inferior. This tension between *Malfi*'s similarities to Shakespeare, and its failure to achieve a similarly "great" cultural status, is the keynote of Theobald's apparent attitude as demonstrated in *The Fatal Secret*. It is the tipping-point between the earlier quartos, which provide an occasion to compare *Malfi*'s reputation with that of Shakespeare, and the commentary on subsequent productions which explicitly use Shakespeare as a yardstick.

I have already referred to the unusual way in which Theobald produced *The Fatal Secret* from *Malfi*, transposing speeches from one character to another, and shifting lines between scenes. Equally striking is his interpolation of fragments of Shakespeare when he is composing his own speeches, or simply eking out Webster's sequences. Hunter and Hunter have drawn attention to Bosola's speech at the beginning of Act Two as an example of this, in which Bosola refers to himself as "here in double Trust" and being bribed by "The hot Duke" (28). "Double trust" appears in *Macbeth* at 1.7.12, and "hot Duke" comes from *King Lear* 2.4.99. They do not point out, perhaps considering the echo to be less striking, that between

these two terms Bosola refers to the path of "simple Virtue", a phrase Shakespeare uses in *Much Ado About Nothing*, 4.1.36.

Indeed, considered individually, these snippets would well be written off as either coincidence or generally archaic "poetic" diction suitable for a tragedy. Pescara's reference to the Duchess as "fair Saint" uses the same term as *Romeo and Juliet*, 2.2.61 (and indeed, *Richard III,* V.iii.360), but the two words are hardly astonishing enough in combination to be considered a definite quotation in and of themselves. However, the text of *The Fatal Secret* seethes with such examples. The first two words of Antonio's title, "Great Master of the Household", which appears both in the dramatis personae and in one of Ferdinand's lines, occurs in *Henry V*, IV.viii.94, as well as in *King Lear,* 4.2.75 and *The Tempest*, 1.2.189. When the Duchess awards Bosola the mastership of the horse, he says nothing in *Malfi*, but *The Fatal Secret* has him reply "My Thanks and Duty", which can be found in *All's Well That Ends Well* at 1.2.23. When the Duchess' brothers attempt to make her swear not to marry again, the following dialogue occurs:

> *Ferd.* Swear by our Father's Soul, you will not marry;
> That, if you do, in justice to our House
> He may solicit Heav'n, for righteous Vengeance,
> *Dutch*. Why must I swear? [*Weeping*.
> *Ferd*. Ha! Is it then too late?
> Those guilty tears proclaim, that your hot Blood
> And curst licentious Youth have stoop'd to Frailty. (11)

Swearing by a father's soul seems a fairly reasonable melodramatic oath, but *Henry V* does contain the line "I swear, and my father's soul, the work ish ill done" (3.2.87) and "solicit Heav'n" finds a parallel in *Titus Andronicus*: "We will solicit heaven and move the gods/ To send down justice for to wreak our wrongs" (4.3.51-2), as well as a thematically stronger echo in Othello's words to Desdemona:

> If you bethink yourself of any crime
> Unreconciled as yet to heaven and grace
> Solicit for it straight (5.2.28-30)

Othello also provides another telling parallel from the same scene, for Ferdinand's "Is it then too late?", with the line "It is too late" when Desdemona asks for time to say a prayer

immediately before she is killed (5.2.92). There are a number of instances of "hot Blood" in Shakespeare, including Hamlet's famous declaration that he could drink it, but in a specifically sexual sense, it jumps out of *Troilus and Cressida* at 2.1.125:

> *Paris*: He eats nothing but doves, love, and that breeds hot blood, and hot blood begets hot thoughts, and hot thoughts beget hot deeds, and hot deeds is love.
> *Pandarus*: Is this the generation of love? Hot blood, hot thoughts, and hot deeds?

"Frailty", for sexual weakness, also occurs at several points in the Shakespeare canon, though it would be difficult to argue that the use of such a word, which is hardly exotic, specifically came from his works.

Indeed, if one returns to the speech by Bosola which Hunter and Hunter mention, bearing in mind the catalogue of parallels to Shakespeare, there are some lines which produce new echoes, though less precisely. The spy refers to the "Breath of Calumny" as "A pestilent Vapour Princes Palaces/ Are seldom purg'd of". None of these phrases have exact parallels, but different combinations of the words occur in Hamlet's "foul and pestilent congregation of vapours", (2.1.302-3) and Orsino's "Methought she purg'd the air of pestilence" (*Twelfth Night*, 1.1.21). The possibility, a few lines later, that Bosola's "sly seducing fiend" has its origins in Romeo's "saint-seducing gold" (1.1.214) is too speculative to be of value, that fiend is "tamp'ring here/ To push fair Nature from her honest Byas". The combination of "Nature" and "bias" occurs both in *King Lear*, in the line "falls/From bias of nature" (1.2.2) and *Twelfth Night*, with "But nature to her bias drew in that" (5.1.257).

This set of examples demonstrates the difficulty of proving a definitive link in individual cases, but even within this limited selection the appearance of so many traceable phrases is persuasive. That very difficulty alerts us to something more important about the way in which Theobald is using Shakespeare: he is not "quoting" the earlier playwright in a conventional sense. Even allowing for the differences between the group of plays which attracts most critical and popular attention in the early twenty-first century, and the equivalent group in the mid-eighteenth century, these phrases are hardly Shakespeare's most influential coinages. The care which must be taken in drawing parallels with the relevant passages suggests that Theobald was not intending to advertise every borrowing he makes. He does not, for example (and again allowing for differences in focus between centuries), pick "winter of discontent" or "undiscovered country" as handy phrases with which to patch his borrowings from Webster, not does he generally import lengthy sequences or those which might be recognisably characteristic of one particular role. The phrases are obtained from very

divergent parts of the Shakespeare canon, with no particular correlation between the works borrowed from and the popularity (or otherwise) of the plays on the eighteenth-century stage. Nor is there any apparent pattern to be discerned in his choice of plays: he does not concentrate either on tragedies, comedies or histories. Significantly, the phrases are sometimes used in a way which varies rather from their meaning in the context of the original play. All of these facts make it more likely, in my view, that these snippets would not function as "quotations" for a reader.

If that is the case, we are faced with the question of why these phrases are present. This can be answered, at least conjecturally, with reference to Theobald's own possible intentions. If he did indeed wish these phrases to form part of *The Fatal Secret* without necessarily advertising their origins to all readers or spectators, this suggests he viewed Webster and Shakespeare as in some way compatible. I am not of course suggesting that he would have regarded Webster as equivalent to the authorial figure which Theobald's own 1733 collected works of Shakespeare helped to develop. Rather, he considered their language to be roughly compatible in some places, that the snippets of Shakespeare which he was combining with *Malfi* would not signal their presence by some inherent quality, shining out from their context. On the other hand, he obviously valued these phrases in themselves: otherwise why would he go to the trouble of cutting and pasting them into *The Fatal Secret* when he could simply make up new lines?

It might be possible to argue, especially given the fact that these phrases often rearrange the order of the words in Shakespeare, or simply use them in proximity, that this is simply a case of overwhelming poetic influence. After all, *The Fatal Secret* was first performed in 1732, just a year before Theobald's Shakespeare was published. However, I would argue that it is far more likely that he borrowed these terms because he wished the resulting play to be somehow "authentic", its language of a piece, even if that meant finding phrases from Shakespeare's much larger corpus to serve when he wanted the play to include a line Webster had neglected to write. This bolsters the idea of *The Fatal Secret* as distinguished by its pastness: even the new lines were, in many cases, actually older lines. It is also possible that Theobald wished to improve Webster's play by replacing sections he found improper, ineffective, or simply irrelevant with material which would lift the whole play to the level of its "better" passages. To assert this as a certainty would require more evidence as to his intentions, but it seems reasonable to assume that Theobald held Shakespeare in considerably higher esteem than Webster, and that the process of adaptation for him involved improving or "rectifying" faulty sections, as the preface declares. The "faults" of which the preface speaks, the "wild and undigested" talent, the eccentric "Conceptions" and the straying into "the

realms of Bombast", are presumably to be identified with the sections which Theobald either leaves out or rewrites, and the importing of phrases from Shakespeare can be seen as part of these improvements.

The question of why these phrases appear in *The Fatal Secret* can be answered in a more general sense with reference to attitudes towards Shakespeare's texts in the eighteenth century. Jean Marsden has described, in *The Re-Imagined Text: Shakespeare, Adaptation and Eighteenth-Century Literary Theory*, the dramatic shift which occurred during this period in the approach to Shakespeare's works. She sums this up by saying that, in the two hundred and fifty years since the Restoration rewritings of Shakespeare's plays "Shakespeare as author becomes Shakespeare as document" (2). The focus of attention and reverence alters, from the ideas and emotions which are embodied in the plays, to the words which actually constitute the works. She writes:

> assumptions concerning the sanctity of a literary text underwent a radical change during the course of the eighteenth century. By mid-century, adaptation, in the guise of rewriting, had become an object of contempt and a symbol of an earlier age's literary failings. This contempt, focused on the previous age's insertion of non-Shakespearean language or "dross" into Shakespeare's golden words, depends upon a changed vision of literature in which the text is fixed and cannot, or should not, be changed. (*Re-Imagined*, 4)

Marsden's model illuminates both Theobald's use of the phrases from Shakespeare, and his general composition technique in *The Fatal Secret*. The splicing and rearranging of *Malfi*'s own text in order to produce a work which varies so far from Webster's play as to be called an "unintentional farce" by Moore, is characteristic or exactly the attitude Marsden describes as developing during the eighteenth century (8). Indeed, in so far as Marsden identifies the textual focus as modern, displayed in the readiness by mainstream theatrical productions to alter the context or "setting" of Shakespeares plays, but not to speak words he did not write, Theobald's version is extremely modern indeed. He preserves sixteenth- and seventeenth-century language to an extent which seems almost perverse to a modern reader, when that preservation is juxtaposed with the complete overhaul which *Malfi*'s plot and action receives.[14]

[14] This impression is backed up by a comparison between the text of the plays Theobald used phrases from, and the adaptations which held the stage at certain points after the Restoration. For example, "hot duke" does indeed appear in Nahum Tate's *The History of King Lear*, but I cannot find "hot blood" in Dryden's *Troilus and Cressida, or The Truth Found Too Late*, "solicit heaven" in Edward Ravenscroft's

From this evidence we can derive quite a clear idea of *Malfi*'s status relative to Shakespeare, at least in this text. Marsden's model suggests that Theobald's apparent attitude, as expressed in his composition technique, is characteristic of a larger cultural movement during the eighteenth century, but we should bear in mind that this shift related specifically to Shakespeare, and that Theobald was involved in the process of "textualising" to a much greater extent than most theatre-goers of the 1730s. However, *The Fatal Secret* does provide good evidence for *Malfi*'s status as not-Shakespeare in the mid-eighteenth century, and apparently constituted the play's only stage instantiation between the early eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries. The inclusion of the Shakespearean snippets, and the way in which they are integrated into the text, suggests that Webster is being seen as part of "the age of Shakespeare". This does not imply the dialectical model which Shepherd and Womack elaborated, in which the "age" is used as a tool to account for aspects of Shakespeare which were troublesome by later standards, but rather a vision of Webster and Shakespeare as part of the same historical, creative and linguistic moment. Though it might be too much to speak of *Malfi* existing with Shakespeare's works at end of some kind of continuum of graduated scale of "genius", *The Fatal Secret*'s composition seems to stress the historical authenticity in language, and make a connection between the two writers (or the two unequal collections of works) on that basis. In this sense they are aligned, or categorised together to a limited extent.

Considering the way in which the Shakespearean phrases are used in the process of improving or rectifying *Malfi*, however, allows a more sophisticated reading of the way the works are being held in dialogue. If we assume that the introduction of Shakespeare's words is part of the remedying of Webster's "wild and undigested" talent (as Theobald calls it in the preface), then the patchwork of quotations and passages which make up *The Fatal Secret* can be read as asserting two interconnected principles. Firstly, that Webster's original play requires rectifying, that there are serious problems with it on both a plot and a linguistic level, such as the "bombast" which the preface points to. Secondly, that it is capable of being improved, specifically by the introduction of Shakespeare's words (though not his most famous or characteristic words.) Whilst this might seem to be stating the obvious, in fact it places *Malfi* in quite a precise relationship to Shakespeare within this adaptation: the play does not

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Titus Andronicus, and *Romeo and Juliet's* "far saint" is missing from the equivalent (and closely parallel) passage in Thomas Otway's *The History and Fall of Caius Marius*. Theobald is, unsurprisingly, working from the Shakespearean versions, and the fact that these phrases do not appear in the popular adaptations may tell in the favour of the suggestion that he did not intend all the phrases to be recognised and identified with their original plays.

have anything like the stature of a Shakespeare play, but it will not be pulled apart by the addition of some of the other playwright's less remarkable words. The presence of these minor phrases in the adapted text thus defines *Malfi* in terms of its relationship to Shakespeare – the first time this has occurred so explicitly in the play's history. Of course, according to this reading *Malfi*'s relationship to Shakespeare is not a major part of its profile for an audience member or reader. Instead, it sees the relationship *The Fatal Secret* appears to set up as symptomatic of the way *Malfi* was regarded more widely in the mid-eighteenth century.

2.2.4 The hollow coronet: the Duchess in *The Fatal Secret*

Theobald's rewriting of *Malfi* "sanitises" the character of the Duchess even further than the 1708 printing, demonstrating even more strongly its reshaping to channel the ideological assumptions of contemporary female-centred tragedy (McLuskie, 21). Jean Marsden has outlined an institutional and cultural shift in the use of actresses during the period from erotic spectacle to emotional impact, paralleled by the reform movement I mentioned earlier in the chapter. The character of the Duchess in *The Fatal Secret* sits comfortably at the far end of that arc. The element of interpellation in female-centred tragedy is even more pronounced in this version than in the 1708 edition, as the "pure" and "innocent" character of the Duchess is used as a foil by a bawdy epilogue which plays off the virtue of the protagonist and presents the spectators with two contrasting visions of "female nature" which the prologue submits to the judgement of the female spectators. The central figure of the Duchess is used as a prism through which to focus and reflect these essentialist notions back onto the female readers and audience members.

Marsden's work sites the conservative cultural politics of this adaptation within its theatrical context, and Dror Wahrman's *The Making of the Modern Self* marks out a larger cultural drift which intersects with that context . He proposes an alteration in the late eighteenth century in the whole notion of gender, from a more performance-centred and thus flexible "ancien regime" to a distinction between biological sex and gendered activity (see Wahrman, chapter two). This resulted, in his account, in a concern that behaviour should be recognisably tied to sex, a conservative assertion of the congruity of the two. He constructs this as a move from "gender play" to "gender panic", and treats the eighteenth-century theatre as a "limit case", since its stress on assuming and altering identities made it an appropriate arena for a society to "contemplate the limits of gender categories" (48). Wahrman's timescale is somewhat later than the movements which are discernible in

Marsden's account of theatrical change, and in Malfi's history itself, which offers his "innate, essential" gender where one might expect "gender play", but the overall shift is similar, and my study suggests that the shift may already have been underway in this earlier decade. The sexual and gender conservatism visible in the changes to the framing of the Duchess during these years exhibits the same movement towards essentialism and assertion of female "nature", albeit in an earlier decade.

This "sanitising" of the central figure is carried out by Theobald with remarkable thoroughness. Amidst wide-spread alteration (including a happy ending and a more neo-classical time structure), the plot is changed to give the brothers a pecuniary motive for not wishing the Duchess to marry again, as if she does the Pope may seize her estates. Her relationship with Ferdinand is thus clarified and purged of the hint of sexual desire on his part. She gives her brothers a vow "by Virtue and my Father's soul" not to marry again until they choose a husband for her, though in fact she has already married Antonio in secret. Her lines describing herself as "flesh and blood, sir/...not the figure carved in alabaster. Kneels at my husband's tomb" are reassigned to Bosola, and all lamprey-based innuendo is deleted. Since she had already married Antonio before the action begins in Theobald's version, there is no courtship scene and no display on sexual desire on her part. When her husband declares he is eager to enjoy "the Bridegroom's glorious right", the Duchess asks him to "Forbear that Thought" until they are out of danger (15).

Moving even further from Hopkins' "female hero", this Duchess' first comment when left by her brothers is "I am sick o'th' sudden: would it were to death!" (12). Rather than initiating action, this Duchess' response to her problems is to wish she were dead and out of the world. When she invokes a parallel to her situation, it is not the tanned galley slave, nor all of mortal humanity, but Portia, a classical model of specifically wifely virtue and a precedent for suicide under enforced sexual disgrace. The character has been refined to the extent of wishing herself out of existence before the second act of the play, and she has already left the title-page, which is dominated by *The Fatal Secret*. Crucially, this secret is not her love, an emotion belonging to the character, but her marriage, a plot device. From possessing the title in 1708 as *The Unfortunate Duchess of Malfi* (though sharing with her *Unnatural Brothers*), she relinquishes it in 1732 to her defining relationship with a man.

The modern reader is faced with a curious adaptation which maintains the importance of the Duchess role (apart from her significance within the play, the care with which the role is reshaped is proof enough of that) but appears to "hollow it out", denying the character the physical presence and impetus which she possessed in previous versions. In *The Fatal Secret*,

the dominance of the Duchess role (despite a very un-dominant character) is relocated within a theatrical structure which seeks to interpellate female performers and audience members.

This aspect of the adaptation is first noticeable in the preface, where Theobald presents the "motives" which led him to consider "modernizing" Webster's play. He was struck, he writes, by "something singularly engaging in the Passions, a mixture of the Masculine and tender", and by the fact that "the Distress of the Tale is not fictitious, but founded upon an authentick Record" (Sig A4 v). I have already discussed Theobald's references to previous versions of the story, but it is telling that he identifies the "Distress" of the narrative as its most pertinent quality. The term conflates the events of the story, their effect upon the characters, and their projected emotional impact in performance, in front of an eighteenth-century audience. As he makes clear later in the preface, this emotional impact is closely tied up with his sense of the play's value and impact:

> If my piece has any praise, it is, in my opinion, that it had Power to draw Teares 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 Virtue are touch'd with his Portrait. (A5 v.)

The emphasis on the "natural" physiological response of the female audience members (which chimes with Marsden's mention of "ideologically correct tears") is also elaborated by Philip Frowde's Prologue, which was printed with the play (Marsden, *Fatal* 68). He refers to this "Tale of soft, pathetic, Woe" as the kind which in the past could "force the Fair to weep" and "crown" the poet with "their Tears". The last lines of the poem directly address the female audience:

> If yet some Taste for Tragedy remains,
> To you, ye Fair, are meant the coming Scenes.
> Should your full Eyes in soft Compassion flow,
> Your Breasts with gen'rous Indignation glow,
> The Fair Example shall instruct the Age,
> And banish Farce, and Folly, from the Stage. (A6 r.)

Thus the stress on an affective model of drama is specifically identified with the women in the audience, and more particularly their physical responses to the action of the play.

This focus on female "virtue" is counterpointed by elements in *The Fatal Secret* which frame the Duchess in a specifically sexual way for the audience. The epilogue contrasts neatly with this prologue, listed as to be spoken by "the Duchess", and it presents a very different character from the unearthly ethereal woman we have seen in the main playtext. It begins with a leer over the heroine's pious fortitude: "Well, Sirs, you've seen me strangely hampered here/ And press'd beyond what Woman well might bear", going on to express amazement at the fuss which the Arragonian brothers made over their sister's second marriage, since "I've heard it said, and not transgress a Text,/ Six husbands buried, we might take the next" (58). The epilogue suggests that modern men are just not adequate to fulfil women's desires, declaring that:

> In former Times, when Matrons were caress'd
> By *Giant-Lovers*, *Heroes* at the least,
> And went to Church, if in the pious Vein,
> With fifty Sons and Daughters in their Train;
> When *Gods* came down in pure relief of Beauty;
> Nay, took the Pains to teach good Men their Duty:
> We might, without Regret, have condescended
> *Once* to be Wives – so wedded, and befriended (58.)

In the eighteenth century, however, the "Hero-breed is drained" and man is "Made up of dress, the Shadow of himself", leading the "Duchess" to urge "Ladies, believe, 'tis foolish Self-Denial/ To sit down easy with a single Tryal" (58). The final lines replace the play's final sententia, "Virtue still is Heav'ns peculiar care" with a direction that women should "Each fair Offer seize/ Whilst you have Beauties, and the Pow'r to please" (58).

Other elements can be found within the play itself which cohere with this other strand in the presentation of the Duchess. Though, as I mentioned, the marriage is not consummated during *The Fatal Secret*, the stage directions set up what is recognisably a "couch scene", an element of drama which Howe has identified as characteristic of the way in which post-Restoration actresses were framed on stage, with a female character discovered "attractively defenceless" and "enticingly dishabille", whilst being observed by both the audience and a male hero or villain. The text of *The Fatal Secret* sets up exactly this situation with an odd specificity when Ferdinand visits the Duchess in her room: "Bed-chamber; a Bed seen, and a Table with Tapers. The Duchess sitting undrest", whilst Ferdinand is given similarly specific instructions: "Enter Duke Ferdinand behind with a Dagger, who first looks into the Bed, and

then comes forward" (25). The symbolism of the dagger, a clear phallic symbol even in the original work, is strengthened in *The Fatal Secret* by the fact that Mrs. Hallam, who played the Duchess, also played Belvidera in Otway's *Venice Preserv'd*, which enjoyed considerable success on the eighteenth-century stage. The repeated use of Jaffeir's knife in Otway's play as a symbol of the sadomasochistic emotional relationship between the lead characters might well have added an extra resonance to this moment in the 1733 production, or at least meant that audiences would have been instinctively ready to attach a sexual threat to the prop. The "ghostly tapestry" which Marvin Carlson describes theatrical productions as weaving from an audience's memories of previous appearances by actors, texts, props would be particularly visible to a contemporary audience at this point, with the dagger taking on a powerful charge from its previous association with the performer (164).

The importance of this stage setting to the effect of the play in performance, and the "meaning" of the Duchess, is suggested by the detailed stage directions, but they also seem to have been significant for Theobald's own vision of the play. In a private letter from the writer to William Warburton on 18th December 1732, Theobald refers to having "applied my uneasy summer months upon the attempt of a tragedy" and sends his correspondent "a pair of soliloquies to you as a taste of my poor workmanship" (cited in Hunter and Hunter, 38). After briefly outlining the plot, Theobald includes the Duchess' speech at her dressing table and Ferdinand's lament after his sister's murder. Strikingly, he describes Ferdinand in terms of the abstract principles which are working themselves out in his soliloquy: "I produce him in the conflict betwixt Conscience and Remorse", whilst the Duchess' speech is explained in rather different terms. Theobald states that the lines occur when "in the third Act I show her expecting her bridegroom's private approach to her" and sets the scene as "the Duchess' bed-chamber. A bed seen and a table with papers. The Duchess is sitting undressed" (38). Not only does Theobald imaginatively frame the Duchess physically – whilst her brother is framed in philosophical and psychological terms – but he seems to have instinctively arranged the setting with a sexual significance. Theobald's letter "stages" the Duchess' sexualised presence at a point before the play even existed as a whole.

Despite this split in the role, the rhetoric of the prologue is not simply contradicted by this strand within *The Fatal Secret*, however. Diana Solomon has outlined a theory, in "Tragic Play, *Bawdy* Epilogue?", that this kind of epilogue "suggests that the speaker could simultaneously perform and reflect on her character", which accords with the presentation of the Duchess here. However, I am not sure that it is useful to stress, as she does, the extent to which such a paratext "retroactively undoes the audience's investment in the coherence of character and plot", nor that it "degrades the original character", implicitly classing the two as

opposing forces in a struggle which must end in one cancelling the other (155, 156). Certainly in the case of *The Fatal Secret*, it is more productive to read the prologue and epilogue as operating on the same assumptions, but from different angles. The indignation at injured virtue mentioned in the prologue, and the sexual appetite of the epilogue, are both grounded in a rhetoric of an unchanging and essentialist female nature. Indeed, they both present a vision of the world in which that unchanging nature is surrounded by decline: the former sees a stage beset by "farce and folly", whilst the latter laments the lost "former times" of heroic manhood. The moral thrust may be different, but the whole pieces cohere within a single (highly conservative) vision of history and human nature. This supposedly essential female nature allows the play to use the figure of the Duchess to attempt to interpellate the women in the audience.

In the model Theobald's paratexts put forward, female virtue and sympathy are expressed by entirely involuntary means: weeping and glowing in indignation. Thus the suggestion made by the prologue – that the play's artistic quality can be judged by its physiological effect upon (implicitly) virtuous women in the audience – operates both ways. If the play affects "womanly" emotions in a particular way, the signs or absence of those responses can be used to detect whether those emotions are present in the female audience. Just as the bawdy jokes in Restoration comedy "staged" the female audience members by calling attention to whether or not they understood or found them amusing, this prologue seems to set up a model of affective tragedy in which the play in performance can demonstrate how properly "womanly" its spectators are. A similar effect is produced by the epilogue, when it undercuts the elevated sentiments of the drama and attempts once more to interpellate the women in the audience by presenting a very different vision of womanhood, shifting the focus onto female audience members once again. In this model, the central female character onstage and the audience are used to reflect upon each other, to give the play and the dramatic event significance by calling upon the supposedly eternal nature of women.

The reading I have elaborated focuses on the structures of interpellation which appear to be set up by the alterations in the text, the work's framing by the prologue and epilogue, and the tendencies of the genre within which is was being cast. The rhetorical structures which are evident in the framing of this work do not mean that audiences as a whole necessarily responded in these ways, nor that the agency of individual performers did not enable them to produce moments of subjectivity which broke through the constraints of convention. Nor, indeed, do they mean that individual female spectators were not capable of resistant readings of this version of *Malfi* in performance, denying the identification and

refusing to be sited within the model of female nature which they construct. At this stage in *Malfi*'s history there is not sufficient evidence available to assess how the rhetorical structures of interpellation functioned during actual performances, but, with this caveat, we can recognise how the Duchess is being framed in this period, and which cultural politics it is oriented towards.

Shifting within the changing cultural context of the period, the figure of the Duchess has remained a focus for the play's meanings, and maintained a strong identification with the play itself. "The Duchess" has altered, but in doing so become even more clearly the single role within the work which acts as an enduring locus of meaning. This association has been channelled by the surrounding cultural changes, noted by Marsden and Wahrman, into a tendency for the role to act as part of an interpellating structure, asserting a particular set of visions of female nature.

Conclusion: towards the eclipse

The period covered by this chapter sees *Malfi* move into its "afterlife" more strongly than has been previously evident. The progressive weakening of links with the original conditions of stage production and printing in the 1620s has made the play's framing liable to being influenced by a variety of cultural discourses. Many of these discourses, I should stress, involve laying claim to some form of continuity with those original conditions, as we have seen in the increasing alterations to the Duchess' character which nonetheless claim to represent an unchanging female nature, or the recurrence of the "Spanish threat" motif under different political circumstances. After *The Fatal Secret*, *Malfi* disappeared from the stage until the mid nineteenth century. Though I am concerned with individual case studies, not large-scale historical explanation, there are aspects in all three strands of this chapter which could have contributed to *Malfi*'s long absence.

The weakening of the connection with the political conditions of *Malfi*'s period of origin might have weakened the political valence of the work. The development of political institutions less centred on the Court (visible even during the Walpole administration) could have meant that *Malfi*'s oppositional possibilities shrank, since it presents a very specific and increasingly archaic form of political organisation. The more general "cultural" and "Elizabethan" pastness I have identified in *The Fatal Secret* may have been vulnerable to being crowded out by the figure of Shakespeare, as he moves into the final phase of the *Making of the National Poet* identified by Dobson as occurring between 1660 and 1769. The growth of Shakespeare may have left little room for the other figures from what increasingly became

seen as the Age of Shakespeare. It is also possible that *The Fatal Secret*, with its etiolated central role, marks the furthest possible point of the "hollowing out" I have noted in the development of the Duchess in this period: the changes we have seen demonstrate how far she could be altered before the character simply ceased to speak to contemporary issues over gender. Certainly when the Duchess arrives back on the stage a hundred years later, she is less drastically framed as a representative of "female nature". Whatever the cause of its absence from the stage, *Malfi* would reappear in the mid nineteenth century being framed once again by the elements of pastness, not-Shakespeare and the dominance of the Duchess role. Nineteenth-century newspaper commentary will provide a wealth of material in which these aspects of the play's cultural profile can be seen being deployed and debated, in the service of wildly differing cultural politics.

Chapter Three: 1850 and 1892

My investigation in this chapter will take the form of another two case studies, to enable me to examine more carefully *Malfi*'s appearance at two fascinating moments in British theatrical history: the "legitimising" management of Samuel Phelps at Sadler's Wells in the mid-century and the zealous ferment of the "new theatre" movement of the 1890s. In both cases *Malfi* was deployed as part of a conscious project within Victorian theatre, which was recognised as such by the commentators of the time and provoked controversy. I deal with them as separate case studies, rather than as a part of a continuous development or history of the play in the nineteenth century, because I think they offer insights into such different and important moments in the theatre of the era, and it will avoid the implications of a teleological narrative. The two critical moments within which *Malfi* appears during this century have also passed into the larger narratives of British theatrical history as heroic "turning points", advertised as such at the time and canonized by subsequent writers. The "reclaiming" of popular audiences in the mid-century, and the radical "new theatre" of the 1890s, have becomes familiar tropes in the subject, which still affect the attitudes of scholars and directors today, as I will discuss. *Malfi* thus also offers a lens with which these narratives can be scrutinised, and even a prism via which they can be split and analysed more precisely. Particularly at the end of the century, *Malfi*'s refusal to be interpreted via the available categories of theatrical art poses a challenge to the arc of modernist theatre history. Thus these case studies can not only bring the theatrical context to bear on *Malfi*, to help us understand how and why it was framed in the ways it was, but also bring *Malfi* to bear on the context, to scrutinise them more closely.

The long way round to Sadler's Wells: *Malfi*'s return in the early nineteenth century

After the failure of Theobald's *The Fatal Secret* in the 1730s, *Malfi* was absent from the stage for more than a hundred years. Its return was the culmination of a growing interest in late-sixteenth- and early-seventeenth-century dramatists in the early years of the century, which Don D. Moore has called "something of a minor Elizabethan revival" (12). In retrospect this movement both propelled *Malfi* towards the theatre and established much of the cultural framework within which it would be interpreted once there: *Malfi*'s profile in this period was defined not by stage production, but by the writings of commentators like Charles Lamb, William Hazlitt and Alexander Dyce. The first notable publication of this revival, which inspired much of what followed, was Lamb's *Specimens of the English Dramatic Writers who lived*

about the time of Shakespeare, published in 1808 (Aebischer, 8-9, McLuskie and Uglow, 24). He set the terms of reference for his comments very strongly by asserting at the beginning of the book: "The whole period, from the middle of Elizabeth's reign to the close of the reign of Charles I., comprizes a space of little more than half a century, within which time nearly all that we have of excellence in serious dramatic composition was produced" (vii).

The *Specimens* influenced the climate of criticism in which instantiations of *Malfi* would be judged, and provided quotations which reviewers could use to bolster their opinions and direct an audience's responses. Lamb's comments on *Malfi* itself assert the work's dignity by comparing it favourably to classical tales, and by mingling a quotation from Webster's own *White Devil* with the commentary alongside a quotation from *Othello*. It contains several lines which were to be used to praise and condemn the play in the century to come:

> 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. (217)

In contrast to Theobald's preface back in the 1730s, which refers to "extravagant" "incidents of horror" and "strong and impetuous" but "undigested" talent, Lamb enthuses about Webster's control, his artistry and the skill which allowed him to deal with horrific incidents without unacceptable extravagance (A5 v.) When a respected and influential critic had praised *Malfi*'s "decorum", of all qualities he could have chosen, the play was a step further towards rehabilitation and appearing on the contemporary stage.

In 1819 William Hazlitt delivered a series of lectures at the Surrey Institute, entitled *Lectures on the Literature of the Age of Elizabeth*, *Chiefly Dramatic* after having consulted with Lamb on the topic. They were published the next year, and were effective in establishing the image of Webster as an "Elizabethan" dramatist. Hazlitt reasserts the importance of the period to the value of British drama, declaring that there was more "dramatic excellence in that age than in the whole of the period that has elapsed since" (10). Whilst finding *Malfi*'s accumulations of horror a feature which "however great, we wish to be rare", he goes on to praise the death scene with Bosola's and Ferdinand's responses as "the writhing and conflict, and the supreme colloquy of man's nature with itself!", moving Webster another step forward

in the "Elizabethan revival" (102, 103; Aebischer 10). The difference between Lamb's and Hazlitt's titles is telling: in the latter's writings Webster develops a more distinctive individual identity. He is praised for originality and power, and (vitally for their restoration to the stage) Hazlitt seems to regard the plays as complete works, as distinct from Lamb's "specimens". His criticism was extremely influential in framing the play when it did reach the stage, as can be seen from the fact that *Lloyd's London Newspaper* directly quoted a passage on *Malfi* from the *Lectures*, and suggests that the adaptation in which the play appeared gives "every consideration to the foregoing just remarks" (24th Nov. 1850).

There was considerable overlap between the enthusiasm within the Romantic movement for "the old dramatists" and the major poets who have come to represent that movement. Byron praised *Malfi* in a backhanded style by claiming to have arrived at similar ideas without having read it, whilst Shelley's biographer Medwin drew attention to the poet's wide reading in Early Modern drama and the resulting influence on *The Cenci*. (Moore, 64; Medwin, 256). These examples of appreciation of Webster by the most famous members of the Romantic movement would not be significant enough to colour *Malfi*'s reception – they certainly do not compare with the influential lectures and writings of Coleridge on the Early Modern dramatists, which do not include material on Webster (see Brinkley) - but they do give a sense of the way Webster's reputation was swept along with the general Romantic enthusiasm.

The reference in Medwin's comments to Shelley's poetic drama *The Cenci* points towards another facet of the "Elizabethan" influence in this period, before *Malfi* made its return to the stage. Mock-Elizabethan dramas made frequent appearances in the theatres in the early nineteenth century, the most famous being Sheridan Knowles' *Virginius* of 1820. Daniel Barratt states that Knowles "led a revival of poetic drama that, over the next thirty years, brought him and like-minded reformers both theatrical and literary recognition", and that his work "hearkened back to the Elizabethan era of blank-verse tragedy, which found a receptive audience" (179). Michael Booth notes the same phenomenon in less enthusiastic terms, suggesting that a number of playwrights "persisted in ignoring their own age and composing verse tragedies and comedies in imitation of the Elizabethans", and finding in their productions "a sort of dramatic bloodlessness, leisurely philosophical introspection, static and descriptive passages of verse" and improbably perfect protagonists (*Victorian Age,* 148). For him, Knowles' *The Rose of Aragon* (1842) exemplifies "many of the faults of the pseudo-Elizabethan: excessively long speeches, tortured syntax and vocabulary and a turgid plot" (149). Whatever the merits of these plays, pieces such as Coleridge's *Remorse* (1813), Byron's *Marino Faliero* (1821) and Beddoes' *The Bride's Tragedy* (1822) all further demonstrate the

strong influence of the idea of "the old dramatists" at the intersections between the literary and theatrical cultures of the early nineteenth century.

The next major step in *Malfi*'s progress in its return to the stage is marked by Dyce's edition of Webster's works in 1830. Webster is given the distinction of a collected works, with "Some Account of the Author", and established his identity as at least partly independent from the "age" in which he worked. Dyce shied away from the wilder Romantic revelling in Webster's tombs and horrors, and continued Lamb and Hazlitt's defence of his decorum and control, remarking that:

> The passion of the Dutchess for Antonio, a subject most difficult to treat, is managed with intimate delicacy; and, in a situation of great peril for the author, she condescends without being degraded, and declares the affection with which her dependent had inspired her without losing anything of dignity and respect. (ix-x)

His praise for Webster's care and "delicacy" blends with a description of the relationship which sounds more as if Dyce is defending an acquaintance's *mésalliance* than discussing the plot of a revenge tragedy:

> 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 from the 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 an attachment. It is the wedded friendship of middle life transplanted to cheer the cold and glittering solitude of a court.... (x)

Dyce develops Lamb's emphasis on "decorum" and artistry to emphasize the moral acceptability of the resulting play: verbal delicacy is blurred into moral delicacy. He avoids discussing the "sufferings and death of the imprisoned Duchess" since "no part of our author's writings is so well known to the generality of readers" as these "extraordinary scenes" (xi). Dyce's introduction thus seeks to correct the over-emphasis he believes has been given to the sensational aspects of *Malfi*, providing a bridge between the Romantic enthusiasms of the "Elizabethan revival" and the sensibilities of the mid-nineteenth century. Terms like "rational...attachment", "wedded friendship" and "domestic affection" stress the moral worth

of the Duchess' secret marriage in terms of contemporary English mores rather emphasizing its illicit passion and the exoticism of Renaissance Italy.

The importance of this for issue for contemporary reception of the play is demonstrated by the reviews which follow Dyce in focusing on this aspect of the play. For example, *The Examiner*, which found Isabella Glyn's performance "a little too gay and conscious in the early scenes" and *The Birmingham Daily Post* which commended "the wooing scene...where womanly diffidence and womanly impulses contend respecting those advances which the superiority of her station impose upon her" (7th Dec. 1850; 25th Nov. 1859). Dyce's introduction both advances Webster's claim for acceptance by a nineteenth-century readership and tackles an issue which had a direct bearing on the play's stage potential. Female performers in the Victorian theatre were still vulnerable to being identified with the perceived moral failings of the characters they portrayed, as Mary Jean Corbett has explained:

> The actress' performances on either side of the curtain may...be understood as mutually determining: if being "well-bred" impedes the representation of passionate abandon, then representing passionate abandon may also imperil one's reputation for (and experience of oneself as) being "well-bred". (113)

Dyce's argument for the respectability of the Duchess' feelings makes the role more possible for a contemporary performer to undertake without moral opprobrium, supplying another necessary (though not sufficient) element in the play's rehabilitation before it could appear on the mid nineteenth-century stage.

3.1 *Malfi* in the 1850s

The first appearance of *Malfi* on stage after Theobald's 1730s adaptation is the revival of the play at Sadler's Wells Theatre in 1850 (McLuskie and Uglow, 24). The theatre was in the unfashionable region of London, and had previously had a reputation for producing melodrama and "low" entertainment, but under the actor-manager Samuel Phelps it became famous for "improving" culture and reintroducing Shakespeare to a popular audience (Allen, Chapter V). While this account has been questioned by recent scholars, as I shall discuss below, it would have provided a context for the play's reception at the time. The production starred Phelps himself as Ferdinand and a young actress called Isabella Glyn as the Duchess, in her first season as a leading lady on the London stage. The version of the text used was an adaptation by R.H. Horne, the Victorian critic, poet and social novelist, who had already attracted attention in the literary world with a three-book epic poem entitled *Orion*, and a

critical work on significant figures of the day, *A New Spirit of the Age*. His version named the Duchess "Marina", introduced long stretches of Horne's own mock-Elizabethan verse and reshaped the play to fit the Victorian model of a five-act tragedy. Though there was some bowdlerisation, the text was more forthright than *The Fatal Secret*, in that the Duchess and Antonio still consummated their marriage, and the heroic characters still died at the end. A striking departure in Horne's version – and one which makes clear why Phelps appeared as Ferdinand - was the development of the Duke as an anti-hero who at some point seemed to provide opportunities for the audience's sympathy, reflecting the Romantic context which we have seen *Malfi* discussed in before this adaptation appeared (McLuskie and Uglow, 25, Barker 48).

3.1.1 A legitimate inheritance: pastness in the 1850s

Richard Schoch has stated that "the century spanned by the writings of Ranke, Macaulay, Marx and Nietzsche was the golden age of history" and that, during this period, "the desire to know and possess the past rivalled science as the dominant system of cognition and history as a practice seemed to overtake the whole scope of representational activities" including both literature and theatre (1). Robin Gilmour describes the Victorians as "a parvenu civilization" who were "fascinated by time because they were conscious of being its victims" (1, 25). Under these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that *Malfi*'s reappearance on the stage in 1850 is framed by commentary which demonstrates the powerful valence the idea of pastness had. Both in the newspaper commentary, and in the theatrical context in which *Malfi* appeared, we will see its connection to the past, and thus its difference from the conditions of the present, asserted as a virtue. Largely, though not entirely uncontroversially, *Malfi*'s pastness is understood as a stark contrast to the conditions of the present, representing a strain of authentic national culture which could both expose and elevate the debased and degraded entertainment by which it was surrounded. The increasing focus on one specific period of English dramatic writing as a "golden age" of the art, and *Malfi*'s appearance in a self-consciously "legitimising" theatre at Sadler's Wells, produces an understanding of the play which elevates its pastness to the status of a moral value and a rebuke to the present.

Malfi amidst the 'Elizabethans'

Throughout the nineteenth century, *Malfi* is often bracketed with other sixteenth- and seventeenth-century plays under the label "Elizabethan", despite its composition and production under James I. This category is an invention of the nineteenth century and it seems

from the OED that it was used to describe literature and drama (as well as historical events) from the term's earliest appearances.

The term, as applied to Webster, was established firmly by the publication of Hazlitt's *Lectures on the Literature of the Age of Elizabeth, Chiefly Dramatic* (1820), whose "advertisement" explains how Hazlitt employed the term:

> By the "AGE OF ELIZABETH' (as it relates to the history of our Literature) I would be understood to mean the time from the Reformation to the end of Charles I., including the writers of a certain School or Style of Poetry or Prose, who flourished together or immediately succeeded one another within this period. (n.pag.)

Later writers, such as the newspaper critics who reviewed productions of *Malfi*,or the publishers who advertised editions, tended to be less precise about the scope of the term (e.g. review in *Lloyd's Weekly London Newspaper*, 24th Nov. 1850; letter to the editor in *Pall Mall Gazette*, 17th Mar. 1891, both discussed below). Partly due to Hazlitt himself, 'Elizabethan' became less a historical term than a slogan of cultural politics, asserting the force and virtue of the past. Hazlitt begins his lectures with the statement that "the Age of Elizabeth was distinguished beyond, perhaps, any other in our history, by a number of great men" and that "perhaps the genius of Great Britain (if I may so speak without offence or flattery) never shone out fuller or brighter, or looked more like itself, than at this point" (1). This association of "Elizabethan" with national identity, the sense that (in Hazlitt's words) the period's "writers and great men had something in them that savoured of the soil from which they grew...they sought for truth and nature, and found it in themselves" is a persistent one throughout the century, and explains much of the moral force which the word seems to channel in contemporary writing about drama.

Admittedly, "Elizabethan" was not an undisputed term of approval when it came to drama. An 1850 essay by George Henry Lewes in *The Leader* declared, with much trumpeting of the self-proclaimed "heresy" that "*the greatest injury yet sustained by the English drama was the revival of admiration for the Old English Dramatists*" and that "we would earnestly counsel all aspiring dramatists to forget, if possible, that Shakespeare had contemporaries" (Archer, 101,104). Mentioning Webster alongside Dekker, Marlowe and others, the piece goes on to condemn the admiration for Elizabethan drama as "Young Englandism of art", scornfully classing it with the group of Tory aristocrats under Disraeli who had been inspired by their idea of the Middle Ages to hope for a neo-feudal model of English society. However, the pugnacious tone of this essay demonstrates the considerable regard for the "Old English

drama" in the writing of the time, against which it rails. Indeed, though slavish admiration for "Elizabethan" drama is dismissed as foolish, the term itself is not subjected to critique, but presented as a coherent (if balefully influential) whole.

Hazlitt wrote of the "*terrible graces* of the obscure, forgotten Webster" in 1820. This stress on the idea of "obscurity" was picked up when the play was revived in 1850. An advert in *The Era* of 17th November proclaims that "On Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday will be produced a Tragedy, by John Webster (1612), entitled THE DUCHESS OF MALFI, reconstructed for the stage by R.H. Horne" (17th Nov. 1852). The importance of pastness in framing this production is demonstrated in the mention of the date 1612, which presumably refers to the conjectured date of the play's original composition, insisting on linking the work to a previous era even as it is offered as an upcoming attraction at a contemporary theatre. An approving review of the production in *Lloyd's Weekly London Newspaper*, 24th November 1850, strikes the same note, reporting that "Success of a most genuine kind attended the bold experiment of Messrs. Phelps and Greenwood in restoring to the stage old John Webster's fine tragedy of 'The Duchess of Malfi'"". The adjective "old" recurs in later account of *Malfi*: for example, the *Northern Star and National Trades' Journal* referred in 1851 to "John Webster's sanguinary old play", a prose version of the story was published in *Tait's Magazine* in the same year in the series "Tales From the Old Dramatists" and *Reynold's Newspaper* in 1852 mentions "Webster's old play" (*Northern Star*, 15th Mar. 1851; see *Morning Chronicle*, 31st Dec. 1851; *Reynold's*, 16th May 1852).

There is a crucial tension between the use of the words "restored" in the review and "reconstructed" in the advertisement, which demonstrates the way pastness is framing *Malfi's* profile at this point in a more complex way than it simply being an "old" play. "Restored" suggests the work is being put back in its rightful place (with faint echoes of the obsession with inheritance and rights which Gilmour finds haunting the culture of this "parvenu civilisation"), implying that Greenwood and Phelps are putting the work back into its natural context. "Reconstructed", however, highlights the necessity for the play to be rearranged and adapted in order to suit the Victorian stage, displaying the "excess" which has been a feature of *Malfi*'s pastness so frequently during its afterlife. Between them these terms elaborate the tension and the complexity of the play's pastness, the sense that it has a right to a place in the Victorian theatrical context, but that the same context is incapable of reproducing its meanings entirely and unproblematically.

The Legitimacy Question

To understand the cultural politics of *Malfi*'s pastness at this point – the uses for which this troublesome and exciting connection to the past was being deployed – we must set it in the wide context of the Victorian theatre. Michael Booth's account of the early part of the century outlines how the Theatres Regulation Act of 1843 brought to an end the monopoly of "legitimate drama" instituted by the Patent Act of 1737, and extended the right to play comedy, tragedy and farce to the "minor" theatres. Up to this point, the minor theatres had technically been limited to "illegitimate" genres such as burletta and melodrama (6). However, as Jane Moody's *Illegitimate Theatre in London 1770-1840* has made clear, "illegitimate" was not simply a technical term distinguishing between clear and discreet categories of theatre:

> Illegitimate culture is... an unstable category which crosses the boundaries between institutions and indeed between genres. It connotes not only those plays being performed at the minor theatres, but also the controversial production of melodrama and spectacle at the Theatres Royal. (78)

The terms "legitimate" and "illegitimate" therefore had a life in theatre discourse which continued long after they had ceased to be legal categories with the abolition of the 1737 Patent Act. For example, the 1850 review in *Lloyd's* I quoted above ends by declaring that "it is a matter of regret that other managers, having pretensions to the *'legitimate'*, do not follow their examples, instead of surfeiting us with melodramatic five-act dramas, void of poetry and every other requisite that characterise works of art". As Moody has elaborated, "at the heart of the campaign launched against patent monopoly lay the symbolic right to stage the works of the national playwright", and there is a sense in the commentary on *Malfi* in the 1850s that the play, though not by the national playwright, forms part of the 'national drama'[15]. The harping on "old" with reference both to Webster and his play was firmly tied to the notion of the 'Elizabethan' dramatists by reviews such as pieces in *Lloyd's* of 24th November 1850 and 16th May 1852, which both reproduced passages from Hazlitt and use the phrase "the age of Elizabeth".

[15] It is striking that the categories with which Gilmour's "parvenu civilisation" classified drama could also be applied to questions of lineage and inheritance. Discussion of the "legitimate" or "illegitimate" drama frames plays in relation to their participation in a genealogy of playwrighting, how the works resembled (or did not) the great works of the past, and whether they had a right to be considered part of the national cultural "inheritance".

The fact that the adaptation was by R.H. Horne, the nineteenth-century "man of letters", contributes to the framing of *Malfi* via the virtue of the past. Horne, according to Robert Dingley, was a "belated Romantic who had seen Hazlitt on his deathbed and worshipped Shelley", and this connection was continued by the title of his 1844 collection of essays *A New Spirit of the Age*, consciously echoing Hazlitt's own *Spirit of the Age* (*ODNB* entry). At this point in his career Horne's works had included a clutch of published but unperformed "ambitious blank verse historical dramas with morally ambivalent protagonists" with the titles *Cosimo De' Medici*, *The Death of Marlowe* and *Gregory VII*; a successful epic poem in three volumes entitled *Orion* and a number of articles in Dickens' *Household Words* magazine. (Dingley, *ODNB*). Tragedies about a murdered Elizabethan dramatist and two Italian Renaissance powerbrokers show obvious thematic similarities to *Malfi*, and he had also adapted Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Honest Man's Fortune* for the contemporary stage. Horne's previous works thus fitted him securely into the "Hazlitt school", and his reputation outside the theatre as a "man of letters" added to the legitimising "literary" tone of the work's framing – the review of the Sadler's Wells production in *The Lady's Newspaper* refers to him as "a gentleman of high poetical feeling" (23rd Nov. 1850).

The play's revival at Sadler's Wells in the 1850s provides a strong interpretative frame for the cultural politics of *Malfi*'s pastness. Phelps took over the theatre, in a suburban and unfashionable area of London, in 1844, the year after the Theatres Regulation Act. Freed by the Act to produce Shakespeare and the "legitimate" drama on a commercial footing, he produced a large number of Shakespeare's plays between taking over the theatre and leaving it in 1862: Jim Davis and Victor Emeljanow record that he produced "almost the entire Shakespeare canon, revivals of Jacobean and eighteenth-century plays, and acknowledged literary successes by contemporary nineteenth-century authors" (108, see also McLuskie and Uglow, 27). Phelps' project of "legitimising" his theatre, and his apparent success, was hailed by contemporaries. Theodor Fontane's contemporary survey *Shakespeare in the London Theatre 1855-58* describes it as "the true Shakespearean stage – the place where we find him at his most authentic" despite Sadler's Wells theatre itself being "at best second rate", and explains that the "questionable company" of the "by no means elegant public of Islington" has not discouraged patrons from more fashionable areas of London from attending (59). This note is also struck by Mander and Mitchenson, who records the theatre's previous reputation (before the Phelps management) "for having the roughest audiences in London and for being the home of the lower forms of dramatic entertainment" (247). This tension between context and the dramatic fare on offer demonstrates the "legitimising" process which Phelps sought to achieve. Davis and Emeljanow also refer to contemporary pieces by Dickens and R.H. Horne in

Household Words about the "reclamation" of Sadler's Wells for the legitimate and the "reformation" of the audience, in words loaded with moral freight (cited 108). Michael Williams' *Some London Theatres Past and Present* includes an 1879 piece which gives another contemporary's opinion of the cultural work effected at Sadler's Wells, in a movement movement from "melodrama of the coarsest type" being offered to "utterly vicious" audiences to "the Drama" being performed to the adulation of "the most intellectual pit of any theatre in London" including figures from the fashionable and literary worlds (17).

This narrative of "reformation" and "legitimisation", though broadly supported by Shirley Allen in 1971 and Michael Booth in 1991, has come under increasing criticism by more recent critics. Davis and Emeljanow have critiqued the "mythopoeia" of "miraculous transformation" (100,101) in a way which sits comfortably alongside Jacky Bratton's unravelling of the myth of the mid-century doldrums of nineteenth-century theatre in *New Readings in Theatre History*. Nonetheless, however unsatisfactory they have proved the orthodox narrative of progression to be, there can be no doubt it was a powerful context for contemporary reception.

Malfi's involvement with the legitimising force of pastness can be traced even when the production left Sadler's Wells. When the play next appeared on the London stage, still with Isabella Glyn in the starring role, it was at the Surrey Theatre in 1852. Davis and Emeljanow make clear the way in which The Surrey wished to present itself in this period by citing the autobiography of the manager, published in 1885:

> We commenced our membership of the Surrey by taking as an example Mr. Phelps' conduct of Sadler's Wells Theatre, and endeavoured to do at the Surrey side what he had effected at the north end of the metropolis, by creating a taste for a better kind of amusement than that to which the people had been accustomed. We determined to exert ourselves to raise the character of the house by providing intellectual fare for its patrons – to choose good pieces, and with the means at our command, to present them to the public in the best possible style. (72)

Malfi left Sadler's Wells only to arrive in a theatre which was explicitly modelling itself on the "legitimising" management pioneered by Samuel Phelps, and the appearance of Webster and Shakespeare at The Surrey represented a change from the kind of programme at that theatre described in a memorandum to the Lord Chamberlain shortly before the 1843 Act. It recorded "The Surrey – Nautical Melodramas, Pantomimes and occasionally the regular Drama – the latter not more than a month throughout the year" (cited in Davis and Emeljanow, 21).

The reviews of the production at The Surrey continue with association with pastness, referring to "old John Webster" and "this old play" (*Lloyd's*, May 16th 1852; *Reynold's*, 16th May 1852). When Glyn took her performance to the Theatre Royal, Manchester later in the year, *The Era* acclaimed her success in this "old-new play", once more hinting at the tension which lay at the heart of *Malfi*'s pastness (24th Oct. 1852). By this point, two years after the arrival of R.H. Horne's adaptation on the stage, his name has dropped out of the advertisements and reviews, just as it disappeared from the title-pages of the printings. The legitimising "tone" offered by the production at Sadler's Wells and The Surrey, which results from that tension of a visibly old play in a contemporary theatrical context, is apparently entirely due to Webster, not his adaptor.

Thus even after *Malfi* had left the "legitimising" theatrical management under which it first appeared on the nineteenth-century stage, it was still being framed in terms of its connection to the past, and its difference (in some senses) from the general theatrical culture in which it was being presented. Its excess, its ability to stand out from that general culture, whether as admonishment or benevolent influence, was a central part of its cultural profile during the period covered by this case study.

3.1.2 A 'noble brood': not-Shakespeare in the 1850s

In the nineteenth century, Shakespeare's reputation and cultural status moved into its highest phase. According to Taylor, "In this cultural environment, Shakespeare's artistic supremacy ceased to be debated: it was simply assumed" (168). This had the effect of making Shakespeare pervasive in more areas of culture beyond the literary and theatrical:

> the main movement of Shakesperotics now became lateral: his influence broadened geographically and socially. What had been the river of his reputation was now "the ocean of Shakespeare", an ocean that surrounded Great Britain. He became relevant to more areas of the cultural domain and the object of more kinds of cultural activity. (168)

Taylor records the way in which the nineteenth century involved Shakespeare in professional academic editing, serial publication and public examinations, as well as exhibiting a new interest in the possible relationships between his life and work. He can be found everywhere in this period, from the bland paraphrases of the *Tales from Shakespear* (1807) to the exemplary *Self Help* (1859), and it is against this background that I shall investigate *Malfi*'s status as not-Shakespeare in the mid-nineteenth century. At this point, *Malfi*'s value tends to

be judged by the way in which he resembles Shakespeare, or at least can be co-opted to a "Shakespearean" model of high culture. *Malfi* is produced in theatres which have established their credentials with Shakespearean "revivals", and is discussed as if it possessed a similar kind of cultural force, with the Duchess becoming a classical role, mentioned in the same breath as Hermione or Queen Katherine.

Hazlitt's and Lamb's comments on *Malfi* in relation to Shakespeare exerted similar influences on the criticism of productions in this part of the century as their development of the idea of the "Elizabethan dramatists". Lamb's title immediately sets the writers he discussed in a Shakespearean context, calling them *English Dramatic Writers who Lived about the time of Shakespeare*. His introduction also constructs a quick model of literary value in the work of the time, saying that he has set out to show "how much of Shakespeare shines in the great men his contemporaries, and how far in his divine mind and manners he surpassed them and all mankind" (vi). This, when coupled with his comments about the era producing "nearly all that we have of excellence in serious dramatic composition" (vii) seems to imply a three-level scale of value, in which Shakespeare is far above, the "great men his contemporaries" are below him, and the "rest of mankind" lag far behind. Lamb emphasizes the clear separation between each level of his scale, and crucially makes Shakespeare the only criterion of excellence. The "contemporaries" are worth attending to because something of him "shines" in them: resemblance to Shakespeare is the defining attribute of artistic value.

In his *Lectures*, Hazlitt was clear about his project to understand writers like Dekker and Webster in a rather more proportional relation to Shakespeare, declaring that the latter

> indeed overlooks and commands the admiration of posterity, but he does it from the *table-land* of the age in which he lived. He towered above his fellows 'in shape and gesture proudly eminent', but he was one of a race of giants – the tallest, the strongest, the most graceful and beautiful of them. But it was a common and a noble brood. (9)

He also declares that Shakespeare is "distinguished from his contemporaries, not in kind, but in degree and greater variety of excellence" (9, see also Aebischer, 10-11). Coming to discuss Webster himself, Hazlitt sets up a tension between the two writers:

> His *White Devil* and *Duchess of Malfi*, upon the whole, perhaps, come the nearest to Shakespeare 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 colour'

> is, that they are too like Shakespeare, 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.... (95-6)

Hazlitt thus suggests that the perceived closeness of Webster's style to that of Shakespeare renders him admirable, but also vaguely superfluous, if not simply derivative: "Webster's mind appears to have been cast more in the mould of Shakespeare's as well naturally as from studious emulation" (96). He contrasts this with the value to be found in Dekker, who is less similar to Shakespeare, and more original, if less great.

His discussion of *Malfi* contains some lines which (as I mentioned above) find their way into newspaper reports during the succeeding century, and which also specifically relate the play to Shakespeare's perceived qualities:

> The *Duchess of Malfi* is not, in my judgement, quite so spirited or effectual a performance as the *White Devil*. But it is distinguished 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 insupportable 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 the husband, exceed, to my thinking, the just bounds of poetry and of tragedy. At least, the merit is of such 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 stupefy and harden, rather than exalt the fancy or meliorate the heart. (102)

This passage demonstrates not only the way in which proximity to Shakespeare was an assumed standard of value, but also the degree to which "Shakespearian" as a term has become detached from Shakespeare's work themselves. Though it perhaps still seems natural for us to discuss plays in this way, the extent to which value judgements are still bound up with the notion of Shakespearean authority is suggested by the fact that we are not surprised by Hazlitt stating that one play not by Shakespeare is more like Shakespeare's plays than another play also not by Shakespeare. Even whilst attempting to advance the claims of the

"Elizabethan" dramatists on their own merits, Hazlitt finds it necessary to persuade his audience by situating them within a "Shakespearean" system of value.

Just as Hazlitt's carefully explained category of "Elizabethan" dramatists became less nuanced when simply reproduced in the newspapers without his caveats, the lines I latterly quoted tend to be reprinted without Hazlitt's judicious outline of the tension between Webster's value in being like Shakespeare, and being different from Shakespeare. *Lloyd's London Newspaper'*s review of the first Sadler's Wells production in 1850 reproduced those lines as a means of praising the way in which the adaptation was handled: "Mr. Horne...has given every consideration to the foregoing just remarks, and there we have not the accumulation of horrors found in the original" (24th Nov. 1850).

When Glyn chose to perform *Malfi* in her benefit performance that same year, the *Northern Star and National Trades Journal* described the programme in a way which points up assumptions about the relative values of *Malfi* and Shakespeare:

> With a great deal of native force and feeling, and with a countenance eminently tragic, she has been trained in what may be called the ideal school of acting, and is the sole representative of the style which is generally associated with the Kemble family. Her Cleopatra, her Queen Katherine, and her Duchess of Malfi, are amongst the most remarkable personations of the modern stage. The last of these characters was selected for her benefit, and with reason, for it is by her judicious handling that John Webster's sanguinary old play is rendered tolerable. That her versatility might be displayed, the abridged comedy of *Katherine and Petruchio* followed the dismal tale of *Malfi*, and she played the shrew with terrible vivacity. (15th Mar. 1851)

The Shakespearean characters either side of the Duchess – Cleopatra and the two Katherines – seem to assure the quality of the actress taking her benefit, despite the fact that she is in fact performing *Malfi* as the main piece. The writer comes close to paradox in trying to maintain her stature and explain her choice of role, by implying that Glyn may have preferred to perform Marina because the dubious quality of the play made it a virtuoso achievement to succeed in *Malfi*, unlike the Shakespearean works which bracket it in this article. When Glyn left Sadler's Wells and took *Malfi* to the Surrey, *Lloyd's* also reproduced the Hazlitt passage from "The *Duchess of Malfi*" to "meliorate the heart", keeping the old critic's judgement in front of the public, whilst flattening the nuance present in the original.

The trajectory I have traced for *Malfi* through Sadler's Wells and The Surrey can tell us a great deal about its relationship to Shakespeare as well as its pastness and "legitimacy". The

image of the legitimising managements of both theatres, as we have seen in the previous section, was closely tied up with their productions of Shakespeare. Jane Moody has detailed, in her *Illegitimate Theatre in London*, the ways in which the production of Shakespeare by minor houses had a particular political force before the 1843 Act, whether they simply flouted the rules, or called attention to them in burlesque titles such as *Romeo and Juliet, as the Law Directs*, or *Othello According to Act of Parliament* (140). She also explains the irony which the Act's effects involved:

> The history I have traced...also demonstrates Shakespeare's pivotal, symbolic role in the emergence and definition of illegitimate culture. As the prominence of *Othello* in their narrative has confirmed, such productions traded in their contemporary as well as the historical meanings of injustice, prejudice and oppression. The Theatre[s] Regulation Act of 1843 may have permitted all licensed playhouses to perform Shakespeare; ironically, however, the Act destroyed by rendering null and void the peculiar political valency of illegitimate Shakespeare. (146-7)

This is the historical basis of the use of "legitimate" which circles around both *Malfi* and Shakespeare productions, but since Webster's play was not revived until 1850, it had no relation to this kind of "illegitimate" Shakespeare at the minor houses. The Shakespeare to which *Malfi* was compared at Sadler's Wells and The Surrey, the Shakespeare with which its productions were in dialogue, was the "improving", "legitimising" work of Phelps and Creswick. This put *Malfi* in the position of inheriting the terminology of a struggle which had ceased some ten years previously, but which was still part of the vocabulary and value-system of London theatre in the 1850s – the controversies Moody describes had allied the "legitimate" firmly with the notion of a "national drama" and the central figure of Shakespeare.

The use of *Malfi* by the managements of Sadler's Wells and The Surrey was arguably an extension of their use of Shakespeare: the way Webster's play was deployed by Phelps and Creswick implied a position similar to that of Hazlitt, that *Malfi* was different in degree, not in kind, from Shakespeare. The revivals occurred in a theatrical context where the audience had been accustomed to watch Shakespeare: though of course it only appeared where Shakespeare productions had "broken the ground". *Malfi* on its own, without Shakespeare, was not a sufficiently "legitimising" force, but it could take part in the process. Of course, the critics and reviewers may not have agreed, but the productions of *Malfi* at these theatres, and

the discussion of it in terms of its pastness, strongly suggests that we can understand its position at these theatres as analogous to that of Shakespeare.

3.1.3 The face of *Malfi*: the Duchess and Isabella Glyn

The 1850 revival of *Malfi* starring Isabella Glyn began another extraordinarily close association between the play's lead role and the instantiation in which it appeared, this time focusing around the figure of Glyn herself. She achieved a virtual monopoly of the part, being identified with it in reviews and advertising in a way which went far beyond the normal conventions of female performers using specific roles to develop their public image. Press commentary – and the 1851 Tallis printing which used her portrait and biography to offer her as an "authorising figure" in place of the playwright – framed Glyn's performance as Marina as an example of the "Kemble school" of acting, and the artistic descendant of Sarah Siddons. This situated Glyn, rather strikingly, as a link between Siddons and a role she had never played, but reflected great gravitas onto both performer and role as the last example of a rather archaic but still authoritative mode of performance. The unusually close identification between Glyn and the role was made even clearer when she left Sadler's Wells after a disagreement with the management and the role went with her: once again the "dominance of the Duchess" had made the role the focus of a large portion of the play's perceived meanings. Isabella Glyn *was* the Duchess for the theatre of the 1850s in a way which allowed the part to become somehow infused with the authority of the Siddons style, and allowed her to become the play's public face in the Tallis printing.

Born in 1823, Glyn studied acting in Paris and was adopted as a protégée by Charles Kemble, first appearing in Manchester. She also performed in York and at the Olympic Theatre in London, before arriving at Sadler's Wells to take lead roles opposite Samuel Phelps in the season of 1848. By the time she created the role of "Marina", Glyn was an established part of the Sadler's Wells company, though it was still early in her career and she had not been a leading lady at any other theatre in London. McLuskie and Uglow describe her as "an actress of great physical presence" and "a skilful comedienne...able to bring variety into the standard tragic roles", though they cite some contemporary opinion which found her performances stylised, mannered and even affected (29). This notion of stylisation seems to reflect a general perception, which will recur in the press coverage below, that her acting style was old-fashioned and "picturesque" rather than belonging to the "intuitive" school represented by Kean.

When Glyn played "Marina" at Sadler's Wells, the press commentary was generally favourable. *Lloyd's Weekly London Newspapers* was fulsome in its praise of Glyn's ambition

and execution alike, in a comment which demonstrates the continuing dominance of the Duchess in the reception of the play:

> The great and all absorbing character in the play is the Duchess, and this part, one of immense difficulty, was represented by Miss Glyn with a genius surpassed by none and equalled by few. There was a feeling through-out no less feminine in its traits than vivid in its dramatic force. It was a great histrionic effort, and one which will elevate Miss Glyn to the position of an artist of first-rate capabilities. (24th Nov. 1850)

The piece goes on to praise her delivery of specific lines, finding in them "specimens of good taste and finished acting".[16] Glyn became closely identified with this "great and all absorbing character". As we have seen, she chose to play the part in her benefit in March 1851, five months after "creating" the role. *Lloyd's* declared on the occasion that "This young lady's talents, and the high estimation in which she is held by the public, cannot fail to secure a crowded audience" (9th Mar. 1851). The *Northern Star and National Trades' Journal* offered a more back-handed compliment, opining that her choice was a sound one because "it is by her judicious handling that John Webster's sanguinary old play is rendered tolerable" (15th Mar. 1851).

Glyn's success in the role of the Duchess, and her strong identification with it, may have partly led to her departure from Sadler's Wells after quarrelling with the management. In a letter to the editor of the *Daily News* on August 23rd 1851, Glyn asked "SIR – As the press is the great court of appeal, sitting constantly for the public in all matters of wrong, may I claim the privilege of your columns to lay before your readers an account of the circumstances under which I quit the boards of Sadler's Wells Theatre?". She went on to complain of the "meanness" and "petty jealousies" at the theatre, and the management's reneging on what she regarded as an unwritten agreement in her contract. They had engaged her, she claimed "to perform all parts and give all such assistance as may be required in all such pieces as may be selected for performances by the aforesaid managers", but that "it is always perfectly understood that such agreements are interpreted with reference to the quality and the station of the actor being engaged" (she particularly objected to being called on to perform the Queen in *Hamlet*). Glyn then complains of more unfair dealing in relation to parts:

[16] See also the review in *The Examiner* 24th Nov. 1850.

> Having secured my signature to the agreement alluded to, Messrs. Greenwood and Phelps henceforth engage Mrs. Warner, underhand, to open the season in July and thus anticipate my principal parts, exhausting their interest with the audience before I could appear, refusing at the same time to pay my salary for the two weeks, during which that lady was "starring", though I was quite ready to fulfil my engagement, and was entitled to the privilege of opening the season myself.

Given Glyn's use of *Malfi* for her benefit, it is extremely likely that the "principal parts" which she worried Warner would exhaust included that of the Duchess. The suggestion becomes even more probably when she continues:

> In conclusion, I cannot help mentioning that, while Mr. Phelps was, contrary to all rule, engaging Mrs. Warner over my head, and subsequently requiring me to support him in *Hamlet*, he had been careful to avoid reciprocating the service by withdrawing himself from the part of *Ferdinand*, in "The Duchess of Malfi", in which I was expected that I should re-appear, without his usual assistance.

Another account, less sympathetic to Glyn, appears in John Coleman's memoir *Fifty Years of an Actor's life*, published in 1904. In a chapter entitled "La Grande Isabelle", Coleman gives a version which attempts to remove most of Glyn's agency in her early career, but nonetheless insists on the connection with *Malfi*:

> Kemble persuaded Phelps to accept Isabella at 'The Wells', where he (Phelps) taught her the Queen (*Hamlet*), Cleopatra (*Antony and Cleopatra*), and The Duchess (*The Duchess of Malfy*). This gruesome play (revived for the first time for three hundred years) attracted considerable attention, with the result that the Duchess gave herself airs, and had a violent attack of 'swelled head.' A little of this went a long way with Phelps, and resulted in the abrupt dismissal of the lady. (568-9)

Both sides of the dispute thus associate the argument with Glyn's increasing ownership of the role of the Duchess, with Coleman making the rhetorical conflation we have seen in discourse around previous versions of the play: at the beginning of the story Isabella is "taught" to play the role, but a few lines later she has become "the Duchess". It seems probable that her close association with the role was due, in part at least, to the fact that she has appeared

successfully in the first revival of the play for a hundred years: unlike Cleopatra or Hermione, she was not vying with other actresses past and present to be identified with the role.

The printing which Tallis and Co brought out in 1851 marks another stage in Glyn's association with *Malfi*. I have already noted that it was published with no acknowledgement of Horne's involvement, but this printing offers Isabella Glyn as an authorising figure in place of either Horne or Webster. The advertising material on the back of the book praises the "terrible energy" and "profoundness...of pathos" of the play, but also dwells on the "tragic power" and "well-earned fame" of Glyn herself (66). Inside the cover, the reader is presented (after some advertising) with a portrait of Glyn, in the position where one might expect to find the face of the dramatist, offering her an authorising figure for this printing. The placement of the portrait recalls the famous head of Shakespeare which appears at the beginning of the 1623 Folio. Glyn's portrait thus appears in the gap where we might expect to find an authorial presence, and this tendency is continued over the next six pages, which are taken up with a "Memoir of Miss Glyn", beginning with her birth in 1823, progressing through her first contact with the theatre against her family's wishes, her early career and her most significant roles (1-6). This "memoir" further strengthens the sense that the figure determining and delimiting meaning in this publication is Isabella Glyn. There is an obvious comparison to be made with Dyce's edition of Webster (1830), which similarly begins with a biographical note, but of the dramatist, making the parallel exact.[17] Glyn, and her portrait, implicitly underwrite the existence and meaning of the printing which follows. Another development has taken place in the dominance of the Duchess, as Glyn's success in the role makes her the focus of meaning for this printing.

However, this potted biography does not simply present Glyn as authorising force, but seeks to co-opt another theatrical authority to her: that of the Kemble family. The narrative mentions Michelet of Paris and Ben Webster of the Haymarket, but it is Charles Kemble who appears as her protector, tutor and promoter: "Mr. Kemble acknowledged himself highly gratified with her recitation", "the inestimable benefit of Mr. Kemble's instructions, who now acknowledged her as his pupil", "Such was the interest that Mr. Kemble took in his protégée", "at the instance of Mr. Kemble, a hearing was procured for the pupil", "Miss Glyn was honoured on each occasion with the presence of Mr. Kemble" (1-2). This may well have been the case, but it is a notable choice of name to harp upon (especially to the extent that these quotations demonstrate), since by 1851, when this printing was being distributed, Charles

[17] In addition, Schoenbaum has noted how biographical writings were a distinctly nineteenth-century means of thinking about Shakespeare (383).

Kemble had ceased to be a significant force in the London theatre. His last managerial role had been the failed 1842/3 season at Covent Garden and his last performances were not even full productions, but "readings" from Shakespeare, which had ceased in 1848. He would die in 1854, between the publication of this performance edition, and the next production at The Surrey, which also starred Glyn. The shape of the narrative – the story of a young performer plucked from obscurity and taken under the protection of a heroic actor – is less striking than the dates involved, demonstrating a determination to associate Glyn with the dynasty which in turn suggests the importance of the connection for Glyn's image in this printing.

Nor is the link with Charles Kemble simply a way of subordinating Glyn's authorising force to a male impresario. The Kemble connection seems to be invoked partly in order to link her with a previous great female performer, Sarah Siddons. This is suggested by the memoir's insistence that Glyn could create "a revival of the Kemble school" of acting (given that Siddons was the only female member of that "school") and more distinctly stated in the comment that a particular moment in her performance of as Belvidera "reminded the old play-goer of Mrs. Siddons" (4,2). Any such playgoer would need to be quite old, since by the time this printing appeared, Sarah Siddons had been dead for twenty years, had not appeared in public for thirty and had not been acting regularly for forty. Again, the slight problem with the dates underlines the ideological importance of this connection.

However tenuous these associations might appear when examined historically, they clearly had considerable interpretative force in framing Glyn's performances. For example, a review in the *Northern Star* in 1851 describes her as "trained in what may be called the ideal school of acting" and "the sole representative of that style which is generally associated with the Kemble family" (15th Mar. 1851, 8). In her self-justification in the correspondence column of the *Daily News*, Glyn illustrates what she felt as the management's unreasonable demands by analogy with the Kembles, with her claim that the customary agreements did not "entitl[e] any manager to call on Mrs. Siddons to play *Columbine* or John Kemble *Harlequin*" (23rd Aug. 1851). The references continue later into the decade, as an advert for the production at the Great National Standard announces "Miss Glyn, the acknowledged Siddons of the day" and a reviewer for the *Glasgow Herald* advises readers that "The style of Miss Glyn has been moulded in the Kemble school" (*The Era*, 20th Apr. 1856; *Glasgow Herald*, 9th Oct. 1860, see also McLuskie and Uglow, 29).

Jim Davis gives a sense of what the performances of this "school" might have looked like, and how they would have been read by audiences, in his 'Presence, Personality and Physicality: Actors and their Repertoires 1776-1895'. He describes Siddons as the last of the practitioners of "a long era of neoclassical acting, a carry-over from the previous century",

which emphasized clarity, the recognisable expression of an established set of emotions and well-known "passages of high emotion" within plays (229-30). The audience would recognise the minor ways in which a performer indulged in "careful departure from the practice of previous interpreters" (230). Davis contrasts this with the arrival of Edmund Kean, whom Michael Booth has described as "an actor for romantic poets, romantic critics and a romantic age", with his "physical intensity, his abrupt transitions of mood" and his "violent (though carefully controlled) expressions of emotion" ('Nineteenth-Century Theatre', 303). Both reviewers and advertisers clearly saw Glyn as part of an older tradition, a neoclassical school of idealistic (as opposed to romantic) acting. It seems likely that this carefully nurtured perception of her style intersected with the sense of *Malfi*'s pastness which we have seen in this chapter, the old-fashioned approach to performance matching the sense of the play's archaism.

Siddons was also a very powerful cultural figure more generally. Russ McDonald has described her as "arguably the first female English theatrical superstar", the only female performer at the time to have achieved a place in the heroic tradition of English acting which ran from Burbage, through Betterton and Garrick ('Sarah Siddons', 111). Whilst discussing Hazlitt's writing about her, McDonald suggests that the "cast of the prose conveys distinctly the force of Siddons's effect on her audiences, and by implication the culture at large" (114). The links made with Siddons in the printing, press coverage and Glyn's letter connect her with a figure who had significance far beyond the specific acting style she represented. Establishing a "lineage" from Siddons to Glyn sited the latter both within theatrical history and the cultural iconography of the period as the inheritor of a heavyweight tragic mantle. This association gave gravitas to Glyn, who was still in the relatively early years of her career, and it is likely to have shaped the understanding of *Malfi*, too. We have seen the close association made in the Tallis printing between Glyn and the Kembles, and how strongly she was identified with the "great and all absorbing" role of Duchess (*Lloyd's*, 24th November 1850). The way Glyn's portrait and biography "authorised" the printing of *Malfi* set her up as a determiner of meaning within the work, and that meaning was clearly identified with the cultural force and tragic grandeur of the Siddons association. The "dominance of the Duchess", that disproportionately powerful role which often been identified with the play's instantiations, acted as a focus to connect *Malfi* with Glyn, with the Kembles (none of whom ever appeared in it), and with the weight of an old-fashioned but powerful neo-classical sense of tragedy.

Glyn herself seems to have emphasized this dramatic "lineage" when working with other actors: John Coleman, in his memoirs, mentions rehearsing with her in Newcastle:

> When we did come to rehearsals, unfortunately Isabella and I agreed to differ on nearly every subject. She laid down the law in the most dogmatic fashion, alleging that 'Mr. Kemble *said this*', 'Mrs. Siddons *did that*', and that whatever he said or she *did* must be right. (570)

Despite the complaint that Glyn harped on the connection, Coleman himself interpreted her performances through this frame, stating that "Accurately parroted in the archaistic method of Mrs. Siddons, many of Isabella's performances were intelligent, picturesque and striking. I have not seen a better Lady Macbeth, not so good a Cleopatra or Hermione" (570). The comparison is highlighted by his (perhaps deliberate) choice of roles which were all strongly associated with Siddons. When describing a production of *The Fatal Marriage*, Coleman refers to some of Glyn's actions as "a thrilling piece of Siddonian 'business'" (573). Whether he approved of the Kemble style, or Glyn's insistence on her place within it, he continued to read her performances as part of a theatrical lineage originating with Sarah Siddons.

Looking briefly beyond this particular case study, Glyn's "authorising" function, or at least her strong identification with the work, can be seen reflected in the play's next appearance on the stage. Despite the fact that Phelps had revived *Malfi* under his management at Sadler's Wells, and played Ferdinand, he did not immediately restage the play after Glyn's departure. Instead, Glyn recreated the role at the Surrey, whose advertisements boasted

> Entire Change. Surpassing Attractions. The first appearance here of the celebrated Miss Glyn for twelve nights only. Production of THE DUCHESS OF MALFI, with new scenery, dresses and decorations, in which Miss Glyn and Mr. Creswick will appear. (*Reynold's Newspaper*, 9th May 1852)

Lloyd's simply noted on the same day that "Miss Glyn appears at the Surrey, on Monday next, in 'The Duchess of Malfi', which has been got up in a style of costly munificence" (*Lloyd's*, 9th May 1852). Both quotations, the one exuberant, the other laconic, demonstrate the continuing association between Glyn and the role. We can extrapolate that not only did Glyn and Creswick think the audience (or *an* audience) would come to see her at a different theatre in the same role, but we can even speculate that Phelps did not trust that his audience would come in the same numbers to see another actress, such as Mrs. Warner, as Marina at Sadler's Wells.

Looking even further beyond the Sadler's Wells production, records suggest that Glyn continued to "own" the part for some years (Barker, 48; McLuskie and Uglow, 29) . In 1855, she took her role to the Standard, where she continued to perform it at intervals for the rest of the decade (adverts in, amongst others, *Daily News*, 27th Mar. 1855; *The Era*, 20th Apr. 1856; *Morning Chronicle* 10th Aug. 1857; *Lloyd's* 5th Nov 1859). There are also references to her taking the part on tour, to the Theatre Royal Manchester in 1852 (*Manchester Times* 9th Oct. 1852), the Theatres Royal Portsmouth and Dublin in 1858 (*Hampshire Telegraph and Sussex Chronicle* 30th Jan. 1858; *Freeman's Journal and Daily Commercial Advertiser*, 23rd Nov. 1858) and Glasgow in 1860 (*Glasgow Herald,* 9th Oct. 1860). Other performers did play the role during the 1850s, such as Miss Goddard who played it in the American West Coast and Australia 1855-8 (*Hull Packet* 8th Jan. 1858) and Emma Marriott who played it in a revival at Sadler's Wells in 1864 (*Reynold's*, 13th Mar. 1864; McLuskie and Uglow, 30) whilst Glyn was apparently on tour. Given these productions only occur in cities where Glyn was not performing, it appears that her Marina was the only Duchess of Malfi in town, so long as she was in town.

The association between a lead performer and particular roles was a recognised part of the Victorian theatre "system". A relatively terse advertisement in *The Era* makes the assumption that the public will understand this aspect of the marketing, declaring amongst the dates and titles of plays "Engagement of the celebrated Miss Glyn for a limited number of nights, who will appear in some of her favourite characters every evening" (9th Aug. 1857). The *Morning Chronicle* refers he "her Duchess of Malfi, Isabella and Hermione...which she has performed so often that they are quite familiar to all who have seen her play" (17th Aug. 1857). Gail Marshall has emphasized the way in which "Shakespearean" actresses constructed their public image via association with particular roles, noting that Helen Faucit created a number of heroine roles, but "it is through her role as a Shakespeare actress" she created her image (*Victorian Women*, 73). She also stresses the way in which such associations "coloured appreciation of their other performances, and conferred upon those appearances something of the legitimacy that their Shakespearean reputation entailed" (153). We can see the creation of a public profile for Glyn through role choices in the advertisement's reference to "her favourite", rather than most famous or successful characters: the theatre bill is presented as the result of artistic choice on the part of the discerning performer. So the identification of a female performer with a set of roles was a recognised part of both the way a theatre might present its productions, and the way individual performers would seek to frame their work overall.

The extent to which Glyn became identified with "the Duchess" does seem unusual, however. Whilst other performers were associated with particular roles, they did not have the same kind of effective "monopoly" of them: Marshall comments with interest on the way in which Helen Faucit and Fanny Kemble could "extract entirely different methodologies and careers" from "the same plays and parts" despite occupying the same theatrical time and context, since they were "near contemporaries" (*Victorian Women* 72, 76). Glyn's "ownership" of the role of Marina extended the usual association between performer and role. The part of Hermione in *The Winter's Tale* provides an instructive contrast: whilst this is identified as one of Glyn's "favourite roles" which she has performed many times, newspaper advertisements show that Miss Atkinson was playing the part at Sadler's Wells during the same period that Glyn performed it at the Standard *The Era*, 4th Feb. 1855; *Reynold's Newspaper*, 29th Apr. 1855). We have already seen that Sadler's Wells did not attempt to stage *Malfi* whilst Glyn was playing Marina at the Standard, but no similar effective monopoly applied to the role of Hermione. This seems likely to have resulted from a combination of factors, notably the "dominance of the Duchess" which pushes it towards a strong identification with the performer and the perceived meaning of the play, and the fact that *Malfi* had been absent from the stage for such a long time and thus there were no performers within memory who had been associated with the role.

Though this glimpse into the subsequent pattern of production takes us outside the scope of the case study of the Sadler's Wells revival, it does give us a sense of how strongly Glyn had become associated with the role of Marina by that production. The long lull before Sadler's Wells staged the play again also strikingly suggest that Glyn's association with the part translated into an association with the entire play, which in turn distorted the arrangements within the theatre. Despite *Malfi* being an easily recognisable part of the Sadler's Wells programme of "legitimisation", and a work which Phelps had staged for the first time in more than a hundred years, it was more closely identified with Glyn than with the management of the theatre. The dominance of the central role once again acted as a determining focus for the framing of the play: for a large proportion of the mid-Victorian theatre-going public, Glyn was Marina, and Marina was *Malfi*.

3.2 *Malfi* in the 1890s

My second case study in this chapter takes place during a period which is closely identified with the rise of the "modern" theatre, as I shall be discussing below. Given how closely implicated the 1890s are in the metanarrative of the tendencies of modern "performance criticism" which I identified in the introduction, this case study offers particular

opportunities for using *Malfi*'s afterlife to refocus some received narratives of Shakespearean performance history. In particular, *Malfi*'s framing in this production poses a powerful challenge to the notion that the "modernist" era saw the rediscovery of the "correct" mode of performing Early Modern works via the application of "authentic" staging techniques. I will argue that the way in which the 1892 *Malfi* was produced, interpreted and discussed poses a serious challenge to the notion of a coherent "authentic" set of practices shared by the seventeenth and twentieth centuries which "release" the meaning of Early Modern playtexts, which was central to the received notion of the "modern" theatre.

In 1892, the Independent Theatre Society staged a version of *Malfi* directed by the theatre critic J.T. Grein, with a text arranged by William Poel. Poel did not form the Elizabethan Stage Society, with whom his "authentic" bare-boards production techniques became most famous, until 1895, but he had been presenting spare productions with a group called "The Elizabethans" since 1879, and had overseen a bare-stage *Hamlet* at St. George's Hall in 1881. He had also been developing his theories about the delivery of Shakespearean verse during the 1880s, and putting them into practice during the latter years of the decade with the Shakespeare Reading Society: Poel was already a well-known member of the experimental theatre movement with strong ideas on the proper staging of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century drama (McLuskie and Uglow, 32).

The Independent Theatre Society was an equally important force at the turn of the century, but with a less precise sense of purpose or distinct battery of techniques. John Stokes, in *Resistible Theatres*, remarks that it was "organised by a group of people who had only *similar* concerns and alignments", but were not "united by background or nationality or even by interests outside the theatre" (114-5). They did all, however, share a concern with improving the theatre of the day, with making it more "literary" and responsive to social questions, "To wage war against Farce and Melodrama was very much to attack the spirit of the age", thus the society were "united if only in their self-conscious alienation from the popular mainstream" (Stokes, *Resistible*, 155; see also Kelly, 'Pandemic'). The society was founded largely by the efforts of the critic and writer J.T. Grein, who had been particularly inspired, along with other members of the broadly "progressive" theatre movement, such as George Moore, William Archer and George Bernard Shaw, by the example of André Antoine's Théâtre Libré. Antoine had demonstrated the impact which a small group of dedicated amateurs and semi-professionals could make, and had advanced theatrical techniques such as ensemble acting and naturalism. A number, such as George Bernard Shaw, were Fabians or leftists more generally, and there is a definite feeling of a "vanguard party" in their writings.

Though, as Stokes records, the Independent Theatre Society soon moved from a position of outright opposition to the commercial theatres to a hope to discover new writing and acting talent which could improve the commercial system, they demonstrated throughout a concern for the "improvement" of British theatre and for the encouragement of "unconventional" and "literary" standards work (*Resistible*, 139). Their first production was of Ibsen's *Ghosts*, which raised a predictable (and surely gratifying) storm of controversy in the mainstream press, and their second Zola's lurid and naturalistic *Thérèse Raquin*. It was in this context that the ITS announced their intention to stage *Malfi*.

Given the controversy surrounding the society, it is unsurprising that their choice of play was not universally approved, even by their supporters. A number of journalists suggested that a society committed to improving modern drama had no business reviving *Malfi*, and the playwright and journalist G.R. Sims declared that the ITS' decision to stage the play proved it had "failed in its declared intent of presenting new English plays" and that he offered a hundred pounds to a playwright who would write a more suitable "unconventional" English play (Stokes, *Resistible,* 141).

The production was a small-scale semi-professional performance, given for two nights only at the Opéra Comique in London, with some costumes and scenery lent to the society by the Lyceum Theatre under the direction of Henry Irving. Though the text was closer to the 1623 quarto than Horne's version, it did include some adaptation, most notably a "Dance of Death" during which several young noblewomen entered and performed a dance which involved turning round at one point to show they were costumed as skeletons on the other side. Accounts of the music suggest it was quite dramatic – some found it melodramatic – and involved drumming on tom-toms. *Victorian Plays* records credits for the stage machinery and limelight, so the production style of Poel's *Malfi* clearly differed somewhat from the "bare boards" style he found fame with as part of the Elizabethan Stage Society (90).

3.2.1 The double rebuke: pastness in 1892

In the late nineteenth-century, *Malfi*'s pastness was once again a powerful element in the play's framing in production. The work's perceived difference from the mainstream theatrical culture of the time meant that it could again be understood as a rebuke or influence on that culture. Its adoption by the ITS, a group explicitly committed to advancing the cause of a higher and more "literary" kind of theatre, provides a productive parallel to the "legitimising" management of Sadler's Wells. In both cases the play was being used as a focal point to gather the force of the past and bring it to bear on the surrounding culture, to critique and ultimately improve that culture.

However, there is a significant difference from the case study of 1850, in that there is significant controversy over which "culture" is to be rebuked. Some commentators see it as a counterblast to the insidious influence of the "Ibsenism" and French drama with which the ITS had previously been closely associated, and a healthy injection of vigorous English culture into the theatrical scene (e.g. *Pall Mall Gazette*, 17th Mar. 1891; *Birmingham Daily Post*, 11th Nov. 1892). Others, particularly those who sympathise with the "decadent" tendency in fin-de-siècle culture, frame it as a confrontation between the smug, complacent national culture and a startling piece of grotesque from its own past (see Aebischer, 11). There are even those who support the ITS' project for a more progressive theatre, but discount *Malfi*'s potential to advance that cause. This turbulence in the play's cultural profile demonstrates the inadequacy of the dominant metanarratives of theatre history covering this period, and the way in which *Malfi* can help refocus these narratives to provide a clearer and more nuanced understanding.

The pastness surrounding the 1892 production is thus much more controversial than we have seen in previous versions, with directly opposing sides claiming it as a splendid contrast to elements within contemporary culture of which they disapprove. What is not disputed, however, is the force of that pastness, the large extent to which the play's excess determines its meanings and frames the way it is deployed and understood. Whatever people believe the 1892 *Malfi* proves, they are sure it does so by its abiding strangeness.

Malfi's continuing potential to be co-opted for the purposes of cultural politics, via its pastness, is demonstrated strongly by a letter printed in the *Pall Mall Gazette* in 1890. It was written in response to the first production in London of Ibsen's *Ghosts*, which was staged by the same Independent Theatre Society who would put on *Malfi* eighteen months later. Along with many other commentators of the time whose responses have passed into the legend of how modernism arrived in the British theatre, this letter decries Ibsen's work, declaring that the playwright's male characters "are impossible, and his women (mostly) unwholesome creations, whom one, fortunately, seldom meets in real life" (*Pall Mall Gazette,* 17th Mar. 1891). He also compares Ibsen to the down-market melodrama houses south of the Thames: "there is a flavour as of our own transpontine plays in most of his work. It is the low side of life...it is vulgar vice and commonplace criminality that he presents to us".

In this case, however, the writer also demanded: "Can an independent theatre do nothing better for us than produce plays by foreign authors?" and declared: "it is ill to neglect the wonderful works of our own Elizabethan and other writers, and that is what the playgoing world has been doing for many years past". He appeals "Will Mr. Grein or some other

manager consider the claims of our own great plays?" and goes on to advance the claims of Webster, Dekker and Jonson, before ending with this passage:

> The free vigorous life, the healthy animalism that runs through the Elizabethan writers, will clear away the mawkish sentimentality and dreary moralism of Ibsen as a fresh wind clears away the odour of scent and pastiles when it blows through the opened windows of a room whose atmosphere has been made heavy by their presence.

Here again we see close ties being set up between a healthy, natural English taste, and the debased productions of "transpontine" melodrama houses. In this case particular stress is laid on the English nature of the "old" dramatists, since they are to be deployed against a foreign Norwegian influence, recalling Hazlitt's notion that they embodied a point when the "genius of Great Britain" appeared "most like itself" (1). Modern theatregoers familiar with the details of *Malfi*'s plot and the effect of its staging would surely be surprised at the suggestion that it contains "free vigorous life" and "healthy animalism", but it is a measure of the powerful effect of framing *Malfi* as "Elizabethan" that this writer apparently saw it that way.

When the Independent Theatre Society decided to produce *Malfi*, *The Era* went even further than merely referring to the piece as "Elizabethan": they printed a long article describing the story as it appeared in Bandello's work, and relating this to the play (1st Oct. 1891). The newspaper obviously felt that a knowledge of Webster's main source, with its roots in the distant Italian past, would be of interest to its readership, and it is striking that the article quotes from Painter's translation in the original spelling, to give a suitably archaic flavour to the piece. *The Glasgow Herald* linked the production to Lamb whilst regarding the prospect of a performance enthusiastically: "It is a pity that Charles Lamb is not alive now to hear the good news that the Independent Theatre Society are going to put Webster's "Duchess of Malfi" on the stage. That is something like an experiment in Elizabethanism" (4th Oct. 1892). The article continued to stress the pastness of the play and its problematic aspects, suggesting that "to essay the ghastly funereal Webster" requires "a very strong enthusiasm for the old dramatic masters", and that Poel's adaptation of the play "seems to prove that Bowdlerism is inevitable even by Elizabethan devotees".

The emphasis on the nationalistic element of pastness reappeared in the *Birmingham Daily Post*'s review, though this time it was French influence, rather than Norwegian, which the Elizabethans could help defend against. This piece began:

> Nothing can be finer than the upward motion which has taken place in the drama, and the visible determination to resist the encroachments of the vulgarity which has become so loud and overbearing of late upon the boards and at the same time nothing more consoling to those whose taste and principle have been so grievously outraged by the imitation of French pruriency than by the success of the efforts made by the few real lovers of the drama who are endeavouring to purify the stage from its unwholesome foreign surroundings. (11th Nov. 1892)

It is easy to see the same assumptions playing out in this letter which we have already investigated: the association of one period of dramatic writing with an authentically "English" strain of drama, which could in its turn serve as the repository of national identity and the engine of cultural renewal.

3.2.2 The ITS and the "revival" question

The significance of pastness to the profile and perceived "meaning " of the Grein/ Poel production is demonstrated by a debate which took place in the newspapers at the time over the issue of what extent it could be considered a "revival" of a play which had been absent from the stage for many years. The *Glasgow Herald's* description of it as an "experiment in Elizabethanism", which they contrasted with the "mild and unheroic attempts" in the same vein by Henry Irving, certainly frames the production in this way. A similar note is struck by the *Liverpool Mercury*, which celebrated the return of "one of the great tragic masterpieces of the Elizabethan drama", with its connection with Burbage, Betterton, Phelps and Glyn, to the stage after "over 40 years" (25th Oct. 1892).

However, *The Graphic* took a different view. In criticising the production, it quoted from the company's prospectus that its purpose was to produce original and uncommercial work "to facilitate their incorporation in the repertory of our regular theatres" (29th Oct. 1892). *The Graphic* insisted

> that extraneous help was needed to test the acting quality of this play and facilitate its incorporation into the repertory of our regular theatres is certainly not a fact. It was "tested", as all playgoers know, by the late Mr. Phelps, and for many years afterwards was given occasionally, both in London and in the country, by Miss Glyn...Another well-known actress, Miss Marriott, also won renown in the character of the Duchess; and the play has long been, and is still, a stock-piece, though chiefly in suburban and

provincial houses. So much for the implied discovery of a play of artistic rather than commercial value....

This controversy became most heated when John Douglass wrote to the editor of *The Era*, and the paper published his letter on 29th October. I will deal with his criticisms as length when discussing not-Shakespeare, but the opening of his letter is worth considering here:

> Sir – On the authority of the Independent Theatre, the year 1850 is given as the date of the last public performance of John Webster's *Duchess of Malfi*, and the theatre, Sadler's Wells, under the late Mr. Phelps. Will you allow me space to correct this statement. Miss Marriott played the piece during her management of the same theatre many years later than 1850.
>
> Miss Glyn appeared as Marina, Duchess of Malfi, at the old Standard Theatre in April 1868, when the tragedy was splendidly introduced, with every scene and costume new, from designs supplied by the star actress. The play on that occasion ran for one month out of Miss Glyn's six weeks' engagement. (29th Oct. 1892)[18]

Whether the error in dating by the ITS was genuine or disingenuous, these commentators clearly read the framing of their production as making a claim that it was a daring "revival", the introduction to the contemporary stage of an old and unknown work. Their criticisms attempt to vitiate this implied claim by arguing that *Malfi* has been present on the British stage more recently than the Independent Theatre Society imply, suggesting that the play is not as exotic and archaic as the production's framing would suggest. They thus demonstrate an instinctive understanding of the tension involved in the "pastness" which surrounds *Malfi*: if the play is a "stock piece" and is produced "now and then" it is not at odds with the contemporary theatrical context and cannot generate the excitement which the excess of pastness would supply.

Malfi and the fin-de-siècle

At the same time, a very different attitude to *Malfi* was emerging from the literary culture of the late nineteenth century, which saw the play's pastness in an alternative light but agreed on the cultural power of its archaism and excess. The artistic movement known variously as "symbolism" the "fin-de-siècle" or "decadence" included writers whose interest in

[18] A shorter item to the same effect also appeared in the *Theatrical Gossip* column of *The Era* that day.

the literature of the past centred (at least partly) around its potential opposition to the dominant culture of the present. This led key figures in the movement, such as Oscar Wilde, John Addington Symonds and A.C. Swinburne, into encounters with Webster and his plays (Aebischer, 11). In order to understand the evidence which suggests that the attitudes and principles of the "decadence" provided a frame through which some of those present at the 1891 *Malfi* would have understood, we must set those principles in a broader cultural context.

Attitudes towards the past inevitably differed amongst members of the movement, but there is useful overlap which can be regarded as a general approach. Alexandra Warwick has described how Wilde regarded the past as a necessary counterpoint to the conditions of the present, an antithesis via which the Hegelian dialectic could occur. For Wilde, the past needed to be brought into productive contact with the present in order for there to be a future. By this logic, it was particularly necessary that the past of the present brought into this dialectic should be what appeared odd, eccentric, dark – the aspects of the past which were not easily explicable and assimilable by the culture of the present.

Murray Pittock has given a more general account of what he calls the "rage for the past" amongst the symbolists (84). Though there is not the same attachment to a Hegelian analysis in all the writers he surveys, he does demonstrate their use of the past as a tool of cultural opposition. This could take the form of a "re-reading" of periods which the "mainstream" culture prided itself on embodying:

> members of the British establishment...drew parallels between Britain and Athens, Germany and Sparta: but the reading of Greece provided by those who sympathized with Pater and Symonds seemed perpetually primed to subvert the official vision of Britain as a towering intellectual power defended by citizen-warriors in favour of a languid, passive image of sexual exhaustion. (84)

Or it could involve stressing eras and cultures which were seen as left out of the dominant narrative: Byzantine culture against the Western Church of the Latin Rite (MacCulloch, 289), High Catholicism against Protestant Evangelicalism, "Celtic" mysticism against "Saxon" civilization. This "oppositional" use of the past even extended to the adoption of manifestly long-dead political causes: the neo-Jacobite and pro-Stuart writings as a critique of the canonization of Cromwell by mid-Victorians such as Carlyle. Murray Pittock elaborates:

> The turmoil, mysticism, and millenarianism of the 1620-90 period was paralleled with the contemporary fin-de-siècle anxieties. The rise of anarchism, the growth of

> socialism, the power of a new Puritanism, and the mysticism and occultism of the Nineties, were all seen as *correspondances* to the world of the battle between the Stuart heroes and their bourgeois opponents. Degeneration-linked ideas of Decadence were also applied to the decay of seventeenth-century literature, particularly the drama, as well as to the art of the current age. (90)

The "decadent" attitude to *Malfi* combines these "oppositional" approaches to the past, by re-interpreting the idea of the "Elizabethans" and stressing the dark, violent and obscure elements in the play. Thus Swinburne included a poem entitled "John Webster" in his *Sonnets on the Elizabethan Poets* (1882) which declares that "Rage, anguish, harrowing fear, heart-crazing crime,/ Make monstrous all the murderous face of Time", offering a very different Webster from the one who sat amongst Dekker, Heywood and Jonson, with their "free, vigorous life" in *The Era*. Swinburne went on to publish an essay in *Nineteenth Century* in 1886 called "Chance and Terror in Webster" in which he celebrated the playwright in these terms: "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" (Hyder, 295). I shall discuss his handling of the comparison with Shakespeare later in this case study, but here it is noting worth what he is praising in Webster:

> Again and again his passionate and daring genius attains the utmost limit and rounds the final goal of tragedy, never once does it break the bounds of pure poetic instinct. If ever for a moment it may seem to graze that goal too closely, or 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 and seduced the foremost of its forerunners in that field. And yet this is the field in which its paces are most superbly shown. (in Hyder, 295)

Whilst insisting on the delicacy of Webster's instinct and taste, Swinburne identifies this fineness as the quality which allows the playwright's work to approach areas in which he risks a lapse in taste. There is even a suggestion in this passage that the finest parts of Webster occur when he is risking this lapse. Swinburne castigates critics who have written Webster off as "morbidly fascinated by a fantastic attraction to the 'violent delights' of horror and the nervous or sensational excitement of criminal detail", but represents him as safely navigating in areas of art which in other hands would lead to these kinds of culpable excesses (302).

When John Addington Symonds edited an edition of Webster and Tourneur in 1888, he extended the "decadent" reading of Webster past the bounds set by Swinburne. Writing of both *The White Devil* and *Malfi*, he comments:

> 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 towards 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 sarcasm of reckless atheism, in slow tortures, grief beyond endurance, the tempest 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. (xxi)

Where Swinburne sought to defend Webster from the imputation of morbidity, Symonds uses it as a point with which to praise him, quoting passages to demonstrate his "tendency to brood on what is ghastly" and the fact that Webster "cannot say the simplest thing without giving it a sinister turn" (xxi). Whilst they both agree that Webster is morally noble, Symonds contrasts the playwright's achievements with the failings of other writers in the aesthetic, not the moral sphere, referring to "the unrealities into which less potent artists – Tourneur, for example – blundered" (xxi).[19]

In this context, we can make sense of a letter Swinburne wrote on 27th October 1892 to William Poel, thanking him for "the honour done to me as a Websterian by your gift of a box on the 25th" and for the experience of "seeing that transcendent masterpiece of a tragedy restored to the stage under such favourable auspices" (cited in Hunter and Hunter, 73). The letter also contains a polite but intriguing boast that

> I think I must have been the only person present on Tuesday who had brought with him a copy of the Author's edition '1623'. I wish I had had the privilege of showing you

[19] At this point, it was generally assumed that Torneur was the author of *The Revenger's Tragedy*, and he was therefore often bracketed with Webster in contemporary commentary.

> the beautiful quarto which I had slipped into an inside breast pocket. (in Hunter and Hunter, 73)

Swinburne goes on to hope that Poel will revive more drama from the period, but there is a distinctly relic-like aspect to this carrying of the quarto , in an inside pocket, with no apparent desire to "read along" or check the text from it. It suggests a valuing of the item for its exotic pastness and its status as an artefact from another culture which could be brought into productive contact with the mainstream culture from which it differed so much.

Further evidence of the "decadent" image of *Malfi* colouring the reception of this 1892 production can be seen in the review by the *Glasgow Herald*, which refers to Webster's "strange churchyard genius" as the most extreme version of a tendency in the period: "there was in the Elizabethan playwrights a strange and morbid liking for themes of abnormal ghastliness" (4th Oct. 1892). The piece calls it "an expression of...that spirit of wild immorality and blood-thirstiness which...stands chronicled in the pages of Mr Symonds" and calls the work of the "Elizabethan horror-mongers":

> a marvellous instance of what may be called abnormalism in literature, a product something like Baudelaire's "Fleurs du Mal," or like the decadent verse of Verlaine. It is not likely ever to be forgotten in its best examples or ever to lack for admiration, but just as little, for histrionic purposes, is it very likely to be "revived".

The reviewer here is deploying the same kind of critical approach that we found in Symonds (indeed, seems to be directly drawing on his work on Cellini): providing a frame for the play which harps on and celebrates its morbid tendencies. This piece is almost an exact inversion of the two letters I cited which suggest that the "Elizabethan" writers could provide a bastion against the corrupt influence of Ibsen and French drama: the writer here does not question the value of the "Elizabethans" or undermine it as a category, but instead explicitly groups *Malfi* and the "Elizabethan horror-mongers" with the decadent French poets under the heading of "abnormalism".

It is striking that the notion of "abnormalism" in literature is envisioned as oppositional, deviant from the regular concerns and methods of mainstream art, but perpetually so: "It is not likely ever to be forgotten in its best examples, or ever to lack admiration, but just as little, for histrionic purposes, it is very likely to be 'revived'". The review does not envision (as Swinburne's letter does, for example) a time when *Malfi* will be reclaimed and absorbed into the mainstream theatrical canon, but sees it as a perpetually

marginal, always to remain in a challenging dialectical relationship with the dominant streams of art. (I will discuss this idea again when dealing with *Malfi*'s identity as not-Shakespeare in the period.) This reviewer, drawing on "decadent" attitudes to the drama of the period, sees *Malfi* as framed by such a powerful sense of pastness that it is completely at odds with the contemporary theatrical context, but can nonetheless have a productive effect on that context.

Indeed, despite the obvious differences between the two ways I have investigated in which the pastness of the 1892 *Malfi* was discussed, they share a number of assumptions: one finding in "Elizabethanism" a tonic for a backsliding British national culture, bolstering it against foreign corruption, the other classing the play with the French decadent poets as a useful challenge to the mainstream of British culture. Both stress the excess of the play, the extent to which the Victorian theatre as it currently stands is unsuitable to completely encompass *Malfi* and transmit its meanings unproblematically.

3.2.2 A rift in the historically authentic lute: not-Shakespeare in 1892.

The cultural politics of the 1892 production offer a distinct contrast in *Malfi*'s profile from what we have seen in the case study during the mid-century: where the Sadler's Wells production and its reception framed the work as lesser than but similar to Shakespeare, the ITS production was often understood as different in kind. Though this change does not take place in all commentary – there are reviews in the mid-century which see *Malfi* as utterly archaic and barbarous, and commentators in the 1890s who see him as nearly-Shakespeare – there is a definite trend of opinion. In examining the way the play was presented to the public and the range of commentary upon it, I will suggest that we can see the origins of a specifically not-Shakespeare identity for *Malfi* in this period. Though it is not the full sense of that term employed by Susan Bennett in *Performing Nostalgia*, there are elements of the production's reception which are developing in that direction.

In elaborating this reading, I shall draw heavily on the critique of the received narrative of nineteenth-century drama which Jacky Bratton developed in *New Readings in Theatre History*, and which shares some of its approach with the work by Davis and Emeljanow I used earlier. Bratton has described the way our sense of the century's theatre has been shaped by a "Modernist" project, a long attempt to take control of the medium's discourse by a dominant class faction which, in her words, "came to fruition" in the 1890s (12). The received narrative of nineteenth-century theatre is that written by George Bernard Shaw, William Archer and the various directors, among them Peter Hall and Harley Granville Barker,

who trace their descent back to William Poel. In the twentieth century it has been elaborated by J. L. Styan in *The Shakespeare Revolution*, who described Poel's "discovery of a true Shakespeare" via a return to an "Elizabethan" conception of the stage (48). If there is any doubt as to whether this is still a great organising trope of the subject, it is worth noting that the 1995 *Oxford Illustrated History of the Theatre* divides this period up into one chapter called "Nineteenth-Century Theatre" and one called "The Modern Theatre", which begins in 1890. Or we might look to the interview Peter Hall gave in 2009, in which he hailed Poel as "the great Shakespearean revolutionary...anti-Irving, anti the gaslight or electric-lit theatre-with-scenery: he wanted to put Shakespeare on a bare stage" (in Edgar, 37).

This version of theatre history is a modernist account of how both English drama and Shakespeare were rescued from the darkness, ignorance and melodrama of the mid-century, to thrive in the enlightened age of the moderns. It is a story of how bombast and schlock gave way to insight and realism. One strand tells how sentimental melodramas like *Adam Winter; or, Dark Deeds of Old London* and *Faithful under Peril, or, A Father's Dishonour and a Daughter's Shame* were defeated by Ibsen's *Ghosts* and Shaw's *Major Barbara* (Nicoll, *Late Ninteenth-Century* 1). Simon Trussler describes the framing of this period as a fight between the "ancients" and "moderns" in the *Cambridge Illustrated History of British Theatre* (259). Styan sums up the teleological "modern" position in his remarks on the changes the century saw in *The English Stage*, in which the "clown show" developed into "wit and satire" and "crude melodrama" became the "problem play", ending "If the English stage had yet to recognise the nature and extent of the revolution taking place on the Continent...it at least anticipated the new century not without a degree of readiness" (337).

The allied strand of this story explains how the lush, indulgent Shakespeare spectacles of Henry Irving and Beerbohm Tree, whose "archaeological" style filled the stage with heraldic clutter and live rabbits, gave way to the bare boards and "authentic" practices of William Poel and the Elizabethan Stage Society. In the late 1940s, Allardyce Nicoll described Poel's work as the culmination of the century's discoveries of the "original manner" of Shakespeare production, which had been only "groped blindly towards" in the earlier part of the century (48).

This is a story which has come under increasing criticism in the past decade or so, as this history written by the winners begins to unravel under the analysis of works like Bratton's *New Readings in Theatre History* and Jane Moody's *Illegitimate Theatre in London*. In investigating the 1892 production, I will suggest that we can see the development of a not-Shakespeare identity in the conflicting positions taken by reviewers as to where this *Malfi* belongs in the modernist account. The possibility of an oppositional *Malfi*, which would be at

least attempted in the twentieth century, lies in the way it disrupts the categories of "Elizabethan" and "melodramatic".

This tendency can also be seen in the appearance of *Malfi* in the writings of some of the so-called "decadent" or "symbolist" writers of the fin-de-siècle, associating the play with figures whose cultural profile is very far from the "healthy animalism" of the letter to the *Pall Mall Gazette* I quoted earlier. This means that in the following argument, I will not always be producing evidence which specifically declares *Malfi*'s similarity or difference from Shakespeare. Instead I will be building up a picture of the way in which *Malfi* refused to be contained within the orthodox value-system which, as we have seen, had Shakespeare as its ultimate touchstone. In the turbulence and controversy which surrounded its cultural profile, the way it disrupted the available models of culture, lie both the production's not-Shakespeare identity and the potential to use to it refocus aspects of theatre history, away from the dominant metanarrative determined by the Modernist project and towards a more thoughtful, flexible understanding of this pivotal moment in theatre history.

Poel, skeletons, and not-Shakespeare

The contrasting press coverage of the ITS production is not only controversial in its attitude towards pastness, but is also divided on the question of its relation to Shakespeare. The writer who contrasted the "free vigorous life" of the Elizabethans with the "dreary moralism" and "mawkish sentimentality" of Ibsen also positioned the Norwegian at the opposite end of the London theatre scene from Shakespeare: "there is a flavour as of our own transpontine plays in most of [Ibsen's] work. It is the low side of life, it is vulgar vice and commonplace criminality that he presents to us" (*Pall Mall Gazette,* 17th Mar. 1891). This letter implicitly takes us the position articulated by Hazlitt: that Shakespeare's age was a golden one for dramatic writing. The same impression is given by the reviewer for the *Liverpool Mercury*, who praises the production more in terms of its ambition than its success, but ends by saying "the performance was extremely curious and formed a most interesting evening at the play...No-one interested in the literature and drama of Shakespeare's time should fail to see it" (25th Oct. 1892). By contrast, the *Glasgow Herald*, though apparently approving of the production as an "experiment" and piece of "harmless and even commendable literary dilettantism", declares that Shakespeare is "the exception that proves the rule" and that playwrights like Webster will never escape their time in a similar way (4th Oct. 1892). We are presented here with two apparently opposing visions of the relation between Webster and Shakespeare: one that sees Shakespeare's age as a great one, the other which considers Shakespeare great by contrast with his age.

This production's relationship to the institutions which produced Shakespeare in the theatre of the time was also read in differing ways. The *Glasgow Herald*'s article hailed the performance as "an experiment in Elizabethanism" which made "Mr. Irving's revivals – "King Lear", "Henry the Eighth" and the rest of them" look like "mild and unheroic attempts", apparently understanding the production as an implicit challenge to Irving's Lyceum, by offering a more genuine and thoroughgoing form of "Elizabethanism" (4th Oct. 1892). The received narrative of the period has indeed read Poel's activities as opposed to those of Irving, as demonstrated in Peter Hall's remarks about him as "anti-Irving". However, *The Graphic*'s hostile review pointed out the problem with reading the production this way:

> The play, ...is carefully put on the stage, thanks mainly to the generosity of Mr. Irving in lending scenery and costumes, whereby that distinguished actor and manager – who once asked to be told in what the INDEPENDENT theatre was "independent" – may be said to have atoned for his offence, while he has given fresh point to his question. (29th Oct. 1892)

It is difficult to read the ITS *Malfi* as a purist bare-boards revival, a critique of the Shakespeare-spectacle exemplified by Irving and Tree, when Irving lent scenery and costumes. This becomes even more difficult when we consider that the records of the production include credits for the stage "machines" and the limelight: Michael Booth points out that Irving was something of a limelight "specialist who was almost entirely responsible for the much-praised quality and subtlety of the Lyceum lighting" (*Victorian Plays,* 90; *Victorian Age,* 86-7).

Nor can the commentary provide a consensus on what kind of art this production represented: high national drama or low melodrama. This controversy raged most notably around the "Dance of Death" in which the masquers were shown as beautiful young women one side, and skeletons the other. The *Pall Mall Gazette* envisioned this in terms of English art history: "It is proposed on the present occasion, to introduce the Dance of Death (after Holbein's drawings, we imagine) in the fourth act" (18th Oct. 1892).[20] The *Liverpool Mercury* offered its readers a similarly "high" interpretation on 25th October: "these are followed by a Dance of Death, such as Holbein has depicted". The *Birmingham Daily Post* did not frame the episode historically, but did discuss it in terms of pure aesthetic effect: "The very skeletons depicted in the Dance of Death are anatomically correct, every bone in its right place, but seen

[20] See also their review of 22nd Oct 1892, and the "Theatrical Gossip" column of *The Era* 29th Oct. 1892.

through the transparent drapery of silken gauze of the finest texture, admirably represent the indistinct images seen in the troubled dream" (11th Nov. 1892).

A far less charitable attitude was taken by some papers, who offered "low" genres as a more appropriate frame to understand the dancing figures. The *Liverpool Mercury* describes the Duchess as "surrounded by dancing skeletons (brought from the music halls...all the time the slow tom-tom of the melodramatic music...pulsates and throbs" (24th Oct. 1892). The letter from John Douglass I cited earlier, which corrected the dating error in the programme goes on to criticise the "silly pantomime business, "Dance of Death", with painted skeletons" for which "there is not the least justification" in the text (29th Oct. 1892).

The dispute between the two sets of opinions is between which framework to use in interpreting the episode. Richard Schoch describes a similar problem in the responses to Ellen Kean as the figure of Clio in the beginning of Kean's *Henry V*. Instead of "reading" her as a classical figure mediating the play's vision of history, the *Literary Gazette* compared her to a pantomime fairy (141-2). As Schoch says, the comment simply read the stage event in terms of other theatres of the time using similar techniques:

> At least some parts of the audience, then, were interpreting Mrs. Kean's appearance not in the light of the instructions they received in the playbill (or even from the Chorus herself) but in the light of similar stage images from otherwise quite different productions: the fairy cult of panto and the spectres of Gothic melodrama...While Kean thought allegorically, his audience thought transtextually. (141)

Schoch's work on the discourses brought to bear on Shakespeare productions also provokes a speculation which would implicate Poel's dancing skeletons even further in the cultural politics of not-Shakespeare. He has drawn attention to the curious and Gothic metaphors favoured by critics when discussing the idea of Victorian theatre "reanimating" the past, such as the theatre-manager as "Dr. Frankenstein", channelling Shakespeare's power to bring a creature to life, and gives as another example the fact that "The *Art Journal*...praised Kean's *Richard II* for making 'the dry bones of history...verily and undeniably live'" (111). Schoch relates the metaphor to a reference in the work of the twelfth century monk Peter the Venerable, but the phrase surely comes from Ezekiel 37, in which the prophet is commanded to address a valley of bones as "O ye dry bones" and to prophesy that "ye shall live" (*KJV*, Ezek. 37, esp. 37.4-5). Given that Schoch describes this as amongst the "metaphors favoured by Victorian critics to explain theatrical representations of the past", I believe we can read these dancing skeletons as in possible dialogue with Shakespeare's power to animate "dry bones": Shakespeare could

bring the dry bones of history to life, whilst Webster could only whip them up into a *danse macabre*.

Returning to the press commentary surrounding the play, and in particular the skeletons, Poel actually offered a defence of his stage practice in a letter to the editor of *The Era*, dated 2nd November 1892 and printed three days later. He immediately launched into a defence of the maligned dancers, arguing that "that in mediaeval Italy it was common at masks to use the double figure, and it was not unusual for a young and beautiful woman to wear as a reverse side the figure of a 'Death'" (5th Nov. 1892). For a modern reader, used to thinking of Poel as the revolutionary who swept away the clutter of the "archaeological" Shakespeare, this line of defence is striking. Poel does not defend his dancers on the grounds that such performances were common in seventeenth-century English theatre, but rather in fourteenth-century Italian ballrooms, the essence of the "archaeological" position with regard to Shakespeare. It is this position which Poel is supposed to have swept away, putting in place the "stage-centred" criticism elaborated by Styan. He goes on to buttress his argument by suggesting that Phelps' production "has an English melodramatic setting" unsuitable for Webster's "essentially Italian" play which "requires to be dressed in its natural local colours" and asserting that "Elizabethan dramatists and their audiences were familiar with the life and manners of Italy in the sixteenth century, and would have expected actors to give portraits of Italian men and women".

Thus when discussing the play's setting, Poel shifts his ground, from "mediaeval Italy" to the "life and manners of Italy in the sixteenth century", but effectively collapses the "Elizabethan theatre" into the time and place it is representing. As with his defence of the dancers, his argument displays the same attitude as the "archaeological" Shakespeare productions he is generally supposed to have attacked – and indeed, often did – in his work on Shakespeare. I am not attempting to somehow convict Poel of inconsistency, or deny his achievement, but rather to show that in his own commentary on the production he applied different principles from those evident in the Shakespeare productions for which he has become famous. The evidence here suggests that Poel saw *Malfi* as not simply a pale version of the kind of talent which found its zenith in Shakespeare, but as different in kind, occupying a different artistic and intellectual category.

These wildly contrasting positions might appear hopelessly contradictory at first (see McLuskie and Uglow, 33). We have one paper hailing the production as "an experiment in Elizabethanism", whilst Poel defends it on "archaeological" principles. One commentator sees it as allied with the modern drama movement, whilst another hopes it will crush that movement by showing the paucity of modern work in comparison to the Elizabethan drama.

Reviews cannot seem to decide whether to read it as high modern art, or low south-of-the-Thames melodrama. All of this suggests the production's resistance to the modernist reading of theatre history Jacky Bratton has critiqued. The 1892 *Malfi* can neither be co-opted to the rise of authentic stage practices and psychological realism, nor dismissed as part of the crass Victorian mainstream against which modernism defined itself. The contrasting positions taken on this production demonstrate not the ignorance of the nineteenth-century theatre scene and its critics, but the inadequacy of the narrative which has been imposed on it, both then and since.

In this interpretative problem we can see the beginnings of what Susan Bennett has called "not-Shakespeare", the way in which certain Elizabethan and Jacobean plays come to be defined in a dialectical and even antithetical relationship to Shakespeare. In *Performing Nostalgia*, Bennett describes a number of revivals of such works in the late twentieth century which "flaunt 'thematic distinctions' [from Shakespeare] concerned with transgression, dissidence and desire" (80).[21] The beginning of this dialectical, challenging position can be seen most clearly if we return to the work of the "decadent" writers I discussed earlier, and the way some of them opposed the "Elizabethans" to Shakespeare. In these writers we can find a not-Shakespeare identity for *Malfi* which would site it in the graveyards and the music-halls, as a challenge to the cultural values of a society dominated by Shakespeare.

Oscar Wilde's mention of Webster in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* offers a way into understanding the cultural politics of *Malfi* and "low" culture in the 1890s (Aebischer, 11-12). When Sybil Vane has committed suicide, Sir Henry attempts to comfort the mourning Dorian:

> "And, after all, you said something to me the day before yesterday that seemed to me at the time to be merely fanciful, but that I see now was absolutely true, and it holds the key to everything."
> "What was that, Harry?"
> "You said to me that Sybil Vane represented to you all the heroines of romance – that she was Desdemona one night, and Ophelia the next; that if she died as Juliet, she came to life as Imogen."
> "She will never come to life again now," muttered the lad, burying his face in his hands.

[21] She particularly focuses on *The Duchess of Malfi*, reading productions in the 1980s as an (unsuccessful) attempt at a radical nostalgia which co-opted the national past for left-wing purposes, trying to reclaim that past from a Conservative government who rallied under the banner of English "heritage" and fetishised Shakespeare's place in the educational system.

> "No, she will never come to life. She has played her last part. But you must think of that lonely death in the tawdry dressing-room simply as a strange lurid fragment from some Jacobean tragedy, as a wonderful scene from Webster, or Ford, or Cyril Tourneur. (124-5)

It is only after Sybil is dead that Webster, Ford and Tourneur are mentioned; before this point Dorian and Sybil are only described in terms of Shakespeare or Greek drama. Here we see Wilde deliberately opposing the world of Shakespeare and his 'romances' to the "strange" and "lurid" but nonetheless "wonderful" writers whom he terms "Jacobean" rather than "Elizabethan", distancing them from the cultural politics of nationalism and "legitimising".

The "Jacobean" frame of Webster and his contemporaries can thus be used in Wilde to make sense of actions which took place in a "tawdry dressing room", signalling the same kind of associations with false theatricality and low culture which some critics made between the music halls and Poel's dancing skeletons. For the decadents, however, such comparisons were not the complete condemnation which the mainstream theatrical culture might have considered them, since the decadent movement embraced the music halls. As Murray Pittock explains, "music halls were widely suspected of harbouring immoral practices" by "sectors of the public which saw itself luridly justified in the fall of Oscar Wilde...Wilde had turned from Aesthete to Decadent...so it was feared that the halls might follow the same route" (59).

There is a suggestion of the moral aspect of this suspicion of the "low" culture dance as a "Decadent moment" in the comments of the *Pall Mall Gazette*, who declared that "unfortunately an impertinent dance, Spanish in character, and some melodrama music of poor quality, have been added", with "impertinent" implying both irrelevancy and dubious morality (22nd Oct. 1892). Max Beerbohm (an associate of Wilde and one of the *Yellow Book* writers) wrote about the music halls with the air of a connoisseur, praising their "appeal...to the stupid and sensuous side of us" and framing his feelings as the "history of a keen soul in relation to a live art" (cited in Rowley, *Criticism*, 336-7). This combination of delight in the "low" appeal of the theatrical context combined with a consciously paradoxical "high" tone of criticism and appreciation shows clearly the kind of attitude which would interpret *Malfi*'s association with music hall skeletons and melodramatic music as an added aspect of its profile, rather than a simple dismissal.

By 1892, the decadent position had been sufficiently articulated that allying *Malfi* with the music hall would not have simply been understood as a condemnation of it as trivial or depraved (though there certainly were those aspects to the association), but could also place it within a coherent artistic frame, one which opposed it in some senses to Shakespeare and the

mainstream. The *Pall Mall Gazette* showed a suggestion of this in its comment that the Dance of Death was "very weirdly effective", an approval which is not couched in traditionally tragic or "high" language (22nd Oct. 1892).The clearest demonstration of this interpretative framework is provided by the review I quoted earlier from the *Glasgow Herald*, which declared that Webster's "strange churchyard genius" could be considered alongside Baudelaire and Verlaine as "a marvellous instance of what may be called abnormalism in literature" (4th Oct. 1892). Crucially, "it is not likely ever to be forgotten in its best examples or ever to lack admiration, but just as little, for histrionic purposes, is it very likely to be 'revived'".

This is the fullest elaboration of an oppositional, not-Shakespeare identity in the commentary we have seen so far, and it strongly anticipates the model which Bennett identifies in the late twentieth century. The notion that such works will always be on the periphery, always present but never assimilated, takes the model past the Hegelianism of Wilde, or the vague oppositional "pastness" of the decadents in general, setting up a dialectic which the writer cannot predict will ever be resolved in the absorption or "revival" of *Malfi*. For this reviewer and those he represents, the bones will never live, but they will be forever in a liminal space, dancing between the music hall and the theatre.

3.2.3 The lady vanishes: the effacement of the Duchess in 1892

The 1892 *Malfi* provides a remarkable case study for investigating the relationship between the role of the Duchess and the play's instantiations. Of all the versions I discuss in this thesis, the Independent Theatre Society's production demonstrates the least strong identification between the two: the "dominance of the Duchess" I have been tracing through the play's history is suddenly eclipsed in the commentary surrounding the production. This is even more striking given the debates occurring in the late nineteenth century around women's position and agency in politics, society at large, and in the organisations of the theatre itself. The Independent Theatre Society's *Malfi* presents us with the spectacle of a progressive theatre company, sited a within cultural movement with strong feminist tendencies, whose institutional structures and artistic practices marginalised the actual women on stage. The oppositional, liberating aspirations of the ITS, with its stress on ensemble work and literary value, "liberated" the Duchess from the concept of a star role and in the process effaced much of the agency of Mary Rorke's, the performer who took the role of the Duchess within the production. The contrast with Isabella Glyn, acquiring prestige and control over *Malfi*'s production within a star system operated by male managers and impresarios, is striking.

Sos Eltis has described the "widespread debate over marriage and women's legal rights following such significant legislation as the Divorce Act of 1857, the Contagious Diseases

Acts of the 1860s and the Married Women's Property Acts of 1870, 1882, 1886 and 1893" ("The fallen woman", 227). According to Eltis, "Women's incursion into previous male preserves such as higher education, journalism, and medicine, and the growing agitation for female suffrage, raised debate on women's role in society" and "Henrik Ibsen's plays further fueled debated" since "English critics tended to concentrate on the challenges to conventional ideas of femininity offered by Ibsen's heroines" (227). Her analysis demonstrates the way in which the figures of the "fallen woman" and "new woman" in drama of the 1890s posed questions to the entrenched gender inequality in society at large in works by George Bernard Shaw, Harley Granville Barker and Elizabeth Robins, or enforced them in the hands of more conservative playwrights like Arthur Wing Pinero and Henry Arthur Jones.

Women's agency was not only being debated via theatrical works, but also within the very institutions of theatre. Kerry Powell calls the early 1890s "a decisive moment" when "it appeared that masculine control of the theatre as an institution might be overthrown by the efforts of women and a few male allies" (*Women*, 149). She describes the attempts by Elizabeth Robins to realize a different kind of theatrical organisation "in which biases of gender would be set aside", renewing both the theatre and society as a whole (149). In Powell's account, Robins and Marion Lea's joint theatrical ventures "seemed in a position to challenge seriously the theatrical establishment", but ultimately failed to change the status quo.

Robins had worked with Poel in the mid 1880s, as part of the "Little Comedies" theatre company which gave small scale recitals and productions of playlets which J.P. Wearing describes as not "at all highbrow" ("Poel, William", *ODNB*). The importance of Ibsen (whom Eltis identifies as so central to the theatrical controversies over women's status and rights) to both the ITS and Robins also makes clear their involvement in the same theatrical milieu. Robins and Lea's joint female-controlled theatrical venture "made *Hedda Gabler* the object of their efforts as soon as they heard of this new 'woman's play'" (Powell, 160). The importance of the play to them is demonstrated by the fact that they raised the costs of production themselves after all their backers baulked at the idea of their producing it. *Ghosts* held a similarly symbolic position in the profile of the ITS, with Grein himself declaring that putting the play on as their first production "is in itself a manifesto – a demonstration of my plan of campaign" (cited in Stokes, 138). *The Graphic* made clear that it also saw the production as essential to the society's profile, calling the plan to stage *Ghosts* "a thoroughly uncompromising commencement to an essentially bold experiment" (14th March 1891, 17).

Gail Marshall also writes of the association between the progressive theatre and increased agency for female performers onstage and within theatrical contexts. She links the fact that "actresses of the 'New theatre tackle[d] Shakespeare alongside Ibsen" to a

"generational shift" as "actresses emerge[d] out of the control of the actor-manager to put themselves centre-stage". (*Victorian Women*, 154) Marshall also associates this shift with "the decline in the supremacy of the Lyceum" and "the way Shakespeare's "plays were ...the subject of more innovative forms of theatre, as demonstrated by the experimental theatre work of William Poel" (154).

Despite the situation of the Independent Theatre Society within this progressive theatre movement, the coverage which Mary Rorke received in the press appeared as an afterthought, and was distinctly lukewarm. The *Pall Mall Gazette*'s lengthy piece on the production on 22nd October 1892 argued that the play should never have been put on, before turning eventually turning its attention to the actual production: "Of last night's performance we cannot speak with enthusiasm". It had this to say about the lead: "As the Duchess Mary Rorke played very pleasantly, and in the courtship scene very prettily; but to realize the beauties of the death-scene requires an actress of a different calibre. No fault, however, can be found in her performance".

The combination of damning with faint praise ("pleasantly...prettily") and the opinion that the performer simply was not up to the part recurred through the press coverage. The *Liverpool Mercury* commented that "Miss Mary Rorke, as the *Duchess*, had a part which would have taxed the resources of Mrs. Siddons herself, and it says much for her that she made no glaring mistake: that she was not conspicuously inadequate" (25th Oct. 1892).[22] Reviewers did not criticise Rorke's interpretation of the part, or anatomise her performance, they simply wrote it off. *The Era*'s review on 29th October also only expended a fraction of its column inches on the performers, beginning its remarks on them with "This performance was not as fertile as others have been in the exposition of new talent". It summed up Rorke's work thus: "Miss Mary Rorke depicted the Duchess with fine delicacy, exquisite grace and intense feeling. She was particularly good in the scene in which the Duchess, with feminine tact, intimates to Antonio that he has found favour in her eyes". Though this is a more serious attempt to actually describe the characteristics of Rorke's acting than the other papers made, it hardly takes her seriously as a source of meaning within the production.

The explanation for this total failure of the Duchess to draw the kind of attention we have seen in previous productions lies in the organisation and profile of the Independent Theatre. It was, as I have described, associated with the Ibsenite movement, which was in turn a strong factor in the theatrical debate over women's rights and status, but it also drew heavily on the notion of the "free theatres" of Europe. John Stokes traces the influence from André

[22] See also review in *The Graphic* 29th Oct 1892.

Antoine's Théâtre Libre, through the writings of George Moore, to the founding of the Independent Theatre (*Resistible*, 113-125). He stresses the importance of ensemble work to Antoine, explaining that this makes sense of his loathing for the Comédie Française, but his admiration for the Meiningen Company, with their great theatrical spectacles and large numbers of actors. He also cites Antoine's interview with Moore, in which the former emphasized his sense of the Théâtre Libre as a "writer's theatre": "The aim...is to encourage every writer to write for himself...If he writes a monologue of half-a-dozen pages, the actor must speak those half-dozen pages word for word" (cited in Stokes, *Resistible*, 121).

These tendencies strongly informed the style and reception of the Independent Theatre Society, both for those who approved of it and those who reviled it, with the *Pall Mall Gazette* headlining their review of the Society's *Ghosts* "An English Théâtre-Libre", heading a page of letters on the subject "Ibsen and the 'Free Theatre'", and the *Ipswich Journal* calling Grein the "originator of the English Theatre Libre [sic]" (14th Mar. 1891; 17th Mar. 1891; 21st Mar. 1891). The recognition of the "free theatre" pedigree of the Independent Theatre Society continued into the analysis their work was subjected to, with Stokes remarking that "the staging of...productions attracted almost no attention at all: the play and, to a much lesser extent, the acting was the thing" (115). This is certainly the case in the reviews I mentioned of *Ghosts* in the *Ipswich Journal* and the *Pall Mall Gazette*. Under these circumstances, we can understand why the role of the Duchess, and Mary Rorke's performance of it, did not function as a focus for the play's meanings. The emphasis on ensemble work in the productions of the Society detracted from the role's possibilities as a "star" part, and the stress on the Society as a progressive "free theatre" threw attention onto the choice of play instead of the way it was realized.

In fact, the Independent Theatre Society's deviations from its public profile in this production may also have contributed to the effacement of the Duchess. Stokes mentions that "staging...of productions attracted almost no attention at all", but we have seen earlier in this chapter that the "staging" of this *Malfi* - the inclusion of the dance and the tom-tom music - caught the attention of many commentators, reducing still further the concern with the performers. The controversy over the production style, the different interpretations of the dancing figures and the mention of materials borrowed from Irving all underlined the sense that meaning in this production originated with, and could be traced back to, Poel and Grein. The contrast with Isabella Glyn, who superseded both the theatrical management and even (in the Tallis printing) the playwright as an authorising figure in the mid century, is striking. Some reviewers also criticised the casting on the grounds that it deviated from the official policy of the Society. After disposing of the group's claim to "produce original, unconventional, and

literary plays which have an artistic rather than a commercial value", *The Graphic* continued to "the implied claim to have afforded aspiring actors and actresses parts in all respects suited to them" (29th Oct. 1892). It ruled that "To class among novices hungering for an opportunity of showing what they can do such well known performers as Miss Mary Rorke, Mr. Basset Roe and Mr. Carson would manifestly be absurd". This explains the implication behind *The Era*'s remark that "This performance was not as fertile as others have been in the exposition of new talent" (29th Oct. 1892). These comments do at least direct the reader's attention towards the performers, but do so as a means of closing off the consideration of their performances, by ruling them "invalid" according to the understood "rules" of the free theatre. Certainly theatrical advertisements of the time show Mary Rorke appearing at the Adelphi in George Sims' melodrama *Harbour Lights* and *The English Rose* a romance he co-wrote with Robert Buchanan, as well as at the Gaiety in the stage version of Rider Haggard's imperial adventure *She* (*The Era*, 11th Dec. 1886; *The Standard,* 1st Sept. 1890; *The Standard*, 7th Sept. 1888). Thus she can hardly be considered an unknown talent which the Independent Theatre Society had "discovered", though the *Graphic* does admit that their claim to have done so is only "implied".

The Standard dismissed the performance on the grounds that "a work of this character" required "actors who have had special training" and not "members of the professions who chance to be without engagements at regular theatres" (22nd Oct. 1892). Rorke herself was dealt with in a couple of sentences: "Miss Mary Rorke as the Duchess bore herself with dignity in the midst of the agonies that overwhelm her. There is, however, a fund of pathos in the character which Miss Rorke did not reach, carefully as she had evidently studied her *rôle*". Despite its different angle, *The Standard*'s coverage reproduces the effect of diverting attention from what actually took place on stage towards the decisions which preceded the performance. This aspect of the commentary forecloses any consideration of the effect of her performance and adds to the tendency to regard the society's leadership as the overriding source of the production's meanings.

Thus the ITS' organisational style and cultural profile, as well as the way they were perceived to have departed from that profile, worked to push attention away from Mary Rorke and towards Poel and Grein, obliterating the "dominance of the Duchess" which has been such a strong feature of the play's other instantiations throughout its history.

Conclusion: equal and opposite reactions.

In this chapter we have seen *Malfi* reappear after a century of absence from the English stage, rearranged and adapted for theatrical contexts which were wildly different from the milieu in

which it first appeared, yet which frequently claimed "legitimacy" by invoking that milieu. The cultural force of the early seventeenth century, whether as "Elizabethan" and/or the "age of Shakespeare", allowed *Malfi* to be co-opted as a means of critiquing the present, whether as part of Phelps' "legitimation" or the fin-de-siècle's "decadent" project. The "dominance of the Duchess" within the play even enabled Glyn to construct her image as the continuation of a previous theatrical era, that of the "Kemble school", despite the play's absence from the stage during that era (though it signally failed to make Mary Rorke a focus for journalistic attention.) However it was interpreted, the play refused to sit inertly within the Victorian theatrical system, but exerted pressure upon the institutions surrounding it. The contradictions and cross-currents in the way that pressure was framed and debated has provided an opportunity to question the received narrative of modernist theatre history, and reassess the simple contrast often drawn between the mid-century and fin-de-siècle theatre.

In the next chapter, we will see a continuation of several themes which have been elaborated here. *Malfi* will continue to be considered an "Elizabethan" play by many, though this is complicated by the shifting of that term's meaning during the "second Elizabethan age" and the arrival of the term "Jacobean". The close identification between an actress and the central role of the Duchess, which was eclipsed in the Poel/Grein revival, will reappear in the discourse around Peggy Ashcroft's performances, with similarly disruptive consequences for at least one male theatre artist who believed that the production belonged to him. The connection made by commentators between *Malfi* and low forms of culture will also continue strongly (with "music-hall" and "transpontine melodrama" being replaced by "X-film" and "horror comic"), further developing a cultural identity which looks forward to Susan Bennett's not-Shakespeare. The twentieth century will also see the developing process by which *Malfi* has become such a canonical work in the theatres and libraries of the early twentieth-first century.

Chapter Four: Early Twentieth Century and 1960

The last chapter ended with *Malfi* sitting slightly uncomfortably amidst the experimental theatre of the late nineteenth century, being pushed into an awkward alliance with the supporters of Ibsen and Fabianism (McLuskie and Uglow, 32). In the twentieth century, the play's profile grew rapidly, beginning from that same fringe of experimental theatres to establish itself through productions at the Haymarket and the Royal Shakespeare Company's homes in Stratford and London. Thus by the end of this chapter *Malfi* will have been produced by companies at the heart of the theatrical establishment, and it will be increasingly regarded as part of the classical repertory. As I will argue, this process is a better means by which to mark a new era in Malfi's history, rather than the cataclysms of the World Wars which are so often used to "periodise" it.

This rise through the theatrical firmament inevitably brings it into juxtaposition, and even conflict, with the dominant yardstick of dramatic value in the twentieth century: Shakespeare. Making any claim to theatrical worth still involves accommodating that claim to, or opposing it to, a Shakespearean system of value. *Malfi* is very different from any of Shakespeare's works, however, and its virtues cannot easily be subsumed into the Shakespearean model, so much of the commentary displays a tension between similarity and difference, as reviewers struggle with an Early Modern poetic drama which nonetheless seems to have affinities with "low" or even "decadent" culture. Productions are also driven by, or crippled by, a powerful sense of pastness. Sometimes exciting, and sometimes baffling, this feeling that the play originates in another world dogs *Malfi* wherever and whenever it is produced during this period. This leads to *Malfi* being dismissed as antiquated and creaky, but also to it being advanced as a voice from the past which can speak to present problems from the depths of British culture. These two rather idealising elements of not-Shakespeare and pastness – which at times threaten to refine the discourse surrounding *Malfi*'s performances into philosophical argument – are counterbalanced by the physical necessity of having an actor onstage in an unusually nuanced and intense female role. The actual presence of the actor exerts pressure on the apparent intentions of the directors and the theatrical context of the performance, most noticeably in the case of Peggy Ashcroft, who embodied the Duchess so powerfully that she could transfer the play – and its cultural profile – from one theatre to another.

In the first six decades of the twentieth century *Malfi* received a series of productions from companies and institutions which tended to be on the periphery of the mainstream

theatre (McLuskie and Uglow, 35). The play continued to be printed as a single volume and in collected editions. These printings included a reprint of a 1890s edition (1908, 1919), illustrated editions (1930, 1945) and collected editions (1933, 1946). Alongside these instantiations on stage and in print the play attracted growing scholarly attention, being analysed in works such as T.S. Eliot's *Elizabethan Essays* (1934), M.C. Bradbrook's *Themes and Conventions of Elizabethan Tragedy* (1935) and Una Ellis-Fermor's *The Jacobean Drama: An Interpretation* (1936) (Aebischer, 14-15).

The Phoenix Society, whose name suggested their predilection for reviving neglected works, produced *Malfi* in 1919 at the Players' Theatre. The *Daily Express* noted the company's experimental intentions and "[desire] to assist our stage" but suggested the play was rather tedious and unsuitable (*Daily Express*, 22 Nov.; 25th Nov.). In 1929 there was a production at the Players' Theatre, which the *Express* described as "London's tiniest theatre" (13th Dec. 1929). The *Daily Mirror* recorded a 1935 production at the Embassy Theatre (15th Jan. 1935). All three of these companies were part of what Norman Marshall described as "the other theatre" in his 1947 work of the same title. Marshall proposed the term as a more precise alternative to "what for want of a better description is usually called 'the non-commercial theatre'" which he saw as "struggling against the timidity of the theatrical manager and the tyranny of the Censor" in the inter-war years (5, 13). In Marshall's opinion, "nearly everything that was most worthwhile in the English theatre in the period between the two wars was due to the influence of these rebel organisations", which included small theatres such as the Everyman and the Gate, alongside private play-producing societies such as the Stage Society, the Phoenix and the Pioneer Players (13).

Marshall presents a theatrical landscape based on similar assumptions which governed groups like the Independent Theatre Society when it produced *Malfi* in 1891: an unwieldy, unadventurous commercial sector which could, and should, be influenced by a vanguard group of small experimental theatre groups (see also McLuskie and Uglow, 35). The desire to "assist our stage" which the *Express* identified in the Phoenix's work is the same impulse which the *Graphic* pointed out in the charter of the Society in 1892: "to produce original, unconventional, and literary plays which have an artistic rather than a commercial value" in order to "facilitate their incorporation in the repertory of our regular theatres," (*The Graphic*, 29th Oct. 1892). The principles of this "other theatre" stretch across the fifty years between the ITC and Norman Marshall's book, and on through the next fifty years to Dominic Dromgoole's definition of his work as the Bush Theatre in the 1990s via his argument that such theatres "are the laboratories, the research and development centres. Through their discoveries, through the new flavours they unearth, they keep the soul of the mainstream alive" (97-8). This model of

the London theatre has persisted in scholarship as well as practice. Despite the fact that Marshall coined the term in the late mid-forties, the "other theatre" is still a strong trope in theatre history. Trussler's 1998 illustrated theatre history discusses "The Challenge of 'The Other Theatre'", giving the Phoenix prominent mention, and the more in-depth *Cambridge History of British Theatre* has a similarly titled section which praises Marshall's "astute analytical move" in identifying these "projects that thrived beyond the economics of the London commercial theatre" (150).

"The other theatre" provides a useful model with which to understand the similarity between these small groups, but it is also worth pointing out that the term covers a spectrum of companies. Though all may have wished to influence and "improve" the commercial repertory through experimental work, some were more experimental and some more influential. There is an obvious difference between, for example, the Group, founded in 1932, which Marshall describes as staging a series of rather unsuccessful poetic dramas, and Ronald Adam's management at the Embassy, which started in the same year and in "seven year's tenancy...provided the West End managers with no less than twenty-eight plays" (212, 221-2). Though *Malfi* never became part of the mainstream repertory, it appears to have been produced by the groups at the less experimental (or at least more popular) end of the "other theatre". It appeared at the Players' at around the same time that Marshall records the group produced "Beatrice Mayor's *Little Earthquake* and *Heaven and Charing Cross* by Aubrey Danvers Walker, afterwards transferred to a West End theatre", suggesting that the management was not dissimilar from that at the Embassy, which had such success in "trying out plays likely to prove suitable to the West End" (216, 222). The Phoenix Society also sat slightly oddly alongside the more radical groups in the "other theatre", as it was set up as a sub-group of from the Stage Society after successful revivals of Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer* and other Restoration works had concerned supporters who felt that "the Society ought to devote its energies to new and 'advanced' work" (Marshall, 76).

This makes a striking parallel to the situation which led to Poel and Grein producing *Malfi* similarly "under the auspices" of the Independent Theatre Society, which attracted equivalent comments around whether it was the job of a progressive stage group to revive old works. Though the Phoenix Society's productions were not outstandingly successful, particularly at first, this institutional history reflects a feeling in the "other theatre" that the revival of plays like *Malfi* was not necessarily its first concern. Thus, though we can talk of productions taking place within the institutions of the "other theatre" during the first half of the twentieth century, it is worth bearing in mind their distance from the radical end of the movement, and its ideals.

With its 1945 production at the Haymarket Theatre under the direction of John Gielgud, *Malfi* moved from the more popular end of the "other theatre" to one of the bastions of the theatrical establishment. Gielgud was a figure of enormous gravitas in the post-war theatre, representing the traditions of English theatre which some were keen to re-establish, and others to overthrow. An issue of *Theatre World* published in August 1946 demonstrates his weight in London theatrical culture: "Bit by bit London's pre-war glory is being restored. The fountains are playing in Trafalgar Square, the statues are back on their plinths but, most significant of all to the playgoer, John Gielgud is back in St. Martin's Lane" (cited in Billington, *State*, 31). John Elsom associates Gielgud with the "traditionally English styles of acting", representative of "the old theatrical world" and one of "the last of a venerable breed" as the "actor-manager" of the Haymarket (23, 82,11). Philip Barnes has emphasized the way in which Gielgud's management of the theatre "and his appearance in the great classical roles", isolated him from the more modern developments in the post-war theatre, notably "plays...critical of contemporary Britain" and from the "Method" school (91).

Gielgud's producer was also a figure of some weight, associated with the pre-war establishment: George Rylands (McLuskie and Uglow, 40-1, Barker, 50). Rylands was a don at Cambridge University who had become well known for directing productions with The Marlowe Society, a longstanding student dramatic group which had been formed in the early years of the century and specialised in Early Modern playwrights, aiming (like the Phoenix Society) to bring them to greater attention. In 1939 he published a famous Shakespeare anthology, *Ages of Man*, and in the year he produced *Malfi* at the Haymarket he became a governor of the Old Vic Theatre. Peter Hall would later credit Rylands with maintaining and transmitting the authentically Shakespearean way of speaking verse, and he was a figure of great prestige in mid-century Shakespeare production: *The Tablet*'s theatre critic declared in 1960 that "Most good productions of Elizabethan (or Jacobean) drama owe something to Mr. Rylands" (23rd Dec. 1960). Gielgud and Rylands were both members of the institutional establishment of British theatre, as well as being recognised artistic figures. As Elsom has pointed out, both men sat on the board of H. M. Tennent, the theatrical management company which controlled much of commercial London theatre at the time (14, see also Gale, 149). The production at the Haymarket thus sees *Malfi* move into a stronghold of the theatrical establishment, under a management which was associated with the remembered glories of the pre-war London stage.

In the wake of the 1945 Haymarket *Malfi*, the play continued to be performed by companies which, though they post-date Marshall's book, clearly fall within the scope of "the other theatre". London Artists' Theatre Company produced a *Malfi* in 1953, "continuing its

policy of producing neglected or rarely acted plays" and a performance the same year at the "little Library Theatre" set in the Manchester public library (*The Times*, 24th Jan. 1953, 6; 1st Oct 1953). The left-wing Theatre Workshop mounted a production at Stratford East in 1957 under Joan Littlewood, and the Dublin-based Lyric Players Theatre Group performed the play in a small theatre built onto the house of their producer during 1965 (*The Times*, 18th Feb. 1957, 3; 10th Sept. 1965, 13). *Malfi* was still being performed by small theatre groups with an interest in "reviving" plays which were not generally performed in the mainstream theatre, as a means of influencing the general dramatic scene, in the pattern described by Marshall.

The academic associations suggested by Rylands' involvement in the Haymarket production also continued after 1945, as the Bristol University drama department included the play in a tour to the continent in 1954 (*The Times* 26th Aug. 1954, 4). In 1960 the students of the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art and the Central School of Speech and Drama gave a joint performance of a cut-down version of *Malfi* (alongside a similar abridgement of Sheridan's *The Critic*) in front of the Queen Mother at the Vanbrugh Theatre (*The Times* 4th Nov.). Three years later the play was used as a show-case when the Wimbledon School of Art opened a theatre to be used as a design workshop, and presented settings for *Malfi* in its inaugural exhibition (27th Nov. 1963). It was in this period that the term "classic" was regularly used to describe the play (e.g. *The Times* 19th Apr. 1945; *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 31st Oct. 1960), and the presence of *The Critic* on the joint bill at the Vanbrugh certainly indicates that *Malfi* was being framed as part of the classic repertory of British theatre. The use of the play as a show-piece by these student groups as a means to show off their skills demonstrates its increasing stature as part of the theatrical canon.

That stature was most strongly asserted in this period by the production I shall be focussing most attention upon: the 1960 production by the Royal Shakespeare Theatre Company (later the RSC), at Stratford and the Aldwych Theatre in London (McLuskie and Uglow, 49, Barker, 51). Peter Hall used *Malfi* to inaugurate the RSTC's new London base, and the production starred Peggy Ashcroft, whom Hall had seen performing the part with Gielgud at the Haymarket when he was a teenager. This production was also part of an attempt to create a permanent classical company, as the recently-arrived Hall offered his actors three-year contracts necessary to provide the stability necessary for a strong repertory operation. Securing Peggy Ashcroft was a vital part of this attempt: as I will argue, it was Ashcroft's connection to the traditions of classical theatre, as well as her own skills, which Hall wished to co-opt for his fledgling company, and having her recreate her role as the Duchess was a powerful move in his project. In the chapter which follows, I shall be focussing a lot of attention on the 1960 Hall/Ashcroft *Malfi*, a key moment in the play's rise to its current

position as a canonical text of British drama. I will also investigate the coverage of earlier performances in order to extract a fuller sense of what cultural frameworks were brought to bear upon it during this period.

4.1 Not-Shakespeare: intellectual and cultural context

After the "oppositional" attitudes to *Malfi* displayed by some commentators during the "decadence", the early twentieth century looks like something of a retreat. The play is reintegrated within a broadly Shakespearean system of value at the beginning of the period, though a struggle for a separate identity – based on associations with "low" non-Shakespearean notions of culture – grows towards the fifties. Just as *Malfi* appears to be developing a coherent not-Shakespeare identity once again, the play is produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company, which brings it back even more securely to a model of culture defined in every way in relation to Shakespeare. Though the leadership of the RSC apparently intended to use non-Shakespearean works to probe and develop notions of Shakespearean culture (as we will see from their writings), the public discourse steadfastly ignored any oppositional potential, and insisted on reading *Malfi* as a failed Shakespeare play. The "struggle" for a not-Shakespeare identity I trace below illuminates the cultural currents of the early- to mid-twentieth century, presenting a fascinating picture of a play fought over by modernists, theatrical radicals, conservative reviewers and the personnel of the new state-subsidised theatre. An essential element of this picture is provided by the intellectual context which reviews of the productions draw on.

The "broadening" of Shakespeare's cultural presence in the nineteenth century which Taylor and Schoenbaum described, in which Shakespeare appeared in a larger number of cultural spheres, is checked at the beginning of the twentieth by several tendencies in modernist scholarship and criticism (Taylor, 168; Schoenbaum 383). Many of these can be described as a "narrowing" of Shakespeare's cultural profile, if not a weakening of his cultural charge. Shakespeare becomes associated in modernist criticism with a self-selected elite. As Taylor puts it:

> And so good-bye to all those amateur enthusiasts who had enjoyed Tennyson and Dickens, good-bye to all that mass literacy which the Victorians had so industriously cultivated. Real Literature, important literature, belonged to, and could only be preserved by, a cultural elite...Such attitudes permeated the best modernist criticism as surely as they did the best modernist literature. (245)

This vision of "Real Literature" saw Shakespeare as its centre, with its borders surrounded by the threats of techno-cultural developments such as cinema and mass advertising. In John Carey's more polemical version of this development (though it does not directly address Shakespeare or attitudes to him), modernism was not so much scornful of the achievements of late Victorian literacy, as actually produced via a reaction against them. It is not necessary to buy into Carey's entire argument, which would involve identifying large cultural shifts with the activities of a small number of "high modernist" intellectuals, and then seeking evidence of their "project" within the realm of Shakespeare production, in order to draw usefully upon it. Carey declares that "the principle around which modernist literature and culture fashioned themselves was the exclusion of the masses, the defeat of their power, the removal of their literacy, the denial of their humanity" (21). For the purposes of this study, we need not adopt the intentional model implicit in the term "fashioned", or accept as compelling the logical steps between "exclusion ... defeat ... removal ...denial", in order to recognise how powerfully Carey is describing shifts in the literary culture of the period.

In either formulation, the intellectual direction of modernist thought and practice had a significant impact on the cultural profile of Shakespeare in the first half of the twentieth century. One notable example was in the treatment of character, or rather the decline of interest in treating it. Taylor notes the preference of critics such as Bernard Shaw, G. Wilson Knight and L.C. Knights for verbal "music" over character, a characteristically modernist concern for form as the defining quality and criterion of value for art. This had consequences for writing about "lives" outside as well as inside Shakespeare's plays: as Taylor comments, "when you say good-bye to character, you say goodbye to biography too" (240). Modernism, and the scholarship influenced by it, pulled back from the Victorian emphasis on Shakespeare the man: "Text was just text, a fleshless complex of intellectual messages" (Taylor, 240). For Taylor, the scholarly documentation of Chambers' *William Shakespeare: A Study of Facts and Problems* is a definitive example of this approach, marked most strongly by its unreadability: "You do not read Chambers' *William Shakespeare*; you use it" (244). His account maps the change from a nineteenth-century situation in which "Victorian Shakespeare had been commandeered by specialist professionals, but that elite still sought and got the attention of a mass audience" to one in which professionals increasingly sought each other's attention in increasingly specialist language (243).

Carey would be less likely to see this shift in attitudes towards Shakespeare as a neutral development in intellectual history, but his analysis maps comfortably onto the contours laid out by Taylor. Where Taylor finds the interest in character and biography

waning, Carey would see evidence of a "dehumanizing" tendency in modernism, as demonstrated by the theories of the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset, which state that modern art stresses aesthetic form over "preoccupation with human content" (17-18). Again, the question of how far this tendency is a sub-Nietzchean "project" need not be tackled here: Carey has vividly described symptoms, if not demonstrated the causal link with a disease throughout the literary culture.

Both these visions of modernism explain how the "narrowing" of Shakespeare we observe in the first half of twentieth century is part of a coherent movement in his cultural profile. This can also be observed in the institutional history of Shakespeare production in the same period, with two companies pre-eminent: "between them, the Old Vic/National Theatre in London and the Memorial/Royal Shakespeare Theatre in Stratford would dominate the history of British Shakespeare revivals from the 1920s on" (Taylor, 235). This fact, framed in terms of theatre history, was the product of a complex mesh of economic and cultural-political factors in the period which included the two World Wars and their aftermath; it cannot not be said to have been "caused" by modernism's narrowing of Shakespeare. Nonetheless the intellectual frameworks which modernism developed were well suited to interpreting this narrower focus, dominated by two "important" companies producing genuinely "classical" theatre.

Of course, not all the criticism and commentary which surrounds *Malfi* productions in the first half of the twentieth century is explicitly informed by the modernist project and its attitudes to Shakespeare. Some seem to explicitly reject its tendencies, as when Harold Hobson reviews the 1961 Aldwych production by the RSC and declares that both the performance's and the play's failure must be obvious to everyone but a few people more interested in literature than drama (*The Sunday Times*, 18th Dec. 1960). Hobson's scorn for "Eng Lit notions" is a swipe at the narrowing which I have been tracing: the perceived retreat into academic specialisation at the expense of a scholarship and practice which engaged more enthusiastically with a mass literate audience. However, the very fact that Hobson feels the need to rail against these ideas, which could have "dazzled" the audience into accepting the production as a success, demonstrates their prevalence and influence in the period. The classical theatre of this era took place, was reviewed and evaluated in an intellectual environment shaped by the cultural politics of modernism in the early twentieth century, and the accompanying narrowing of "high" culture.

4.1.1 The struggle for identity: 1900-1957

Though we saw a faintly oppositional not-Shakespeare identity developing in the fin-de-siècle, in the positive associations made between *Malfi*, music halls and "decadent" French verse, commentary in the early twentieth still betrays attitudes which originated over a hundred years previously in the popular application of the work of Lamb and Hazlitt. Put broadly, these attitudes subsume *Malfi* within a "Shakespearean" scale of values, judging its quality by how far it rises towards Shakespeare's achievements. The same framework was used to interpret *Malfi* via its inclusion in the 1915 anthology *Six Plays by Contemporaries of Shakespeare*. The title itself encourages readers to consider the works within as defined by their relationship to Shakespeare, and the introduction continues that line of thought, describing them as the stars to the sun which "has been too often allowed to eclipse the splendour of his contemporaries" (v). The introduction's comments on *Malfi* compare it to Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*, rather than Shakespeare's works, but do include a lengthy quotation from Lamb about Webster's ability to "move a horror skilfully" (ix). This, along with the title, places the publication firmly within a tradition which draws on Lamb and Hazlitt and seeks to raise the valuation of Webster and other dramatists of the time, but does so by associating them with Shakespeare, tending to present them as "almost as good".[23] This anthology's remarks on *Malfi* may place it on a par with Sophocles' paradigmatic classical tragedy, but the metaphors of "lesser lights" and "eclipse" in the introduction suggest (perhaps unintentionally) a group of writers who either reflect Shakespeare's glory, or pale into insignificance beside it.

The same tendency is evident when the Phoenix society staged *Malfi* in 1919, and the *Daily Express* remarked that the play "is regarded as Webster's masterpiece. It is considered the most tragic of all tragedies, save 'King Lear'" (22nd Nov. 4). This rather detached opinion is located firmly within its critical tradition by the next sentence: "For two centuries Webster's claims as a playwright were ignored, but he found recognition at the hands of Lamb."

When it came to the 1945 production at the Haymarket, *Malfi* seemed to be regaining the more distinctive not-Shakespeare identity which it had occasionally possessed in the last decade of the previous century. The *Daily Express* review of 19th April (printed on the same page as a photograph from Buchenwald, like the *Times* review discussed by Marcus, 104) was headlined "No Gangster Film Equals This Play" and is worth quoting in full:

[23] I would stress that this tradition *draws* on Lamb and Hazlitt, it does not begin with them. As I have noted in the previous chapter on the nineteenth-century, both critics were far more sophisticated in their comments on Webster and his contemporaries than the vast majority of the later commentary which co-opted and quoted them.

> Modern stage thrillers, Chicago gangster films, paled into insignificance beside the Elizabethan tragedy, "The Duchess of Malfi" produced at the Haymarket Theatre last night.
>
> Nothing seen on the stage during the war, save "Hamlet", has given the victims greater lines to speak before they perish of poison, strangling or the sword. John Gielgud, as the duke dying in a frenzy, Peggy Ashcroft's pathetic portrait of the sister, the grand and sinister quisling of Cecil Trouncer, make this play an extraordinary theatrical experience.

There is a tension evident in this review between different kinds of culture, and competing standards by which *Malfi* might be evaluated. On the one hand, the writer brings in *Hamlet* as an unattainable standard of excellence, maintaining the implication that non-Shakespearean drama should be evaluated by how far it resembles Shakespeare's works. On the other hand, the headline and first paragraph bring forward other possible touchstones: "modern stage thrillers" and "Chicago gangster films". These are avowedly "low" forms, equivalent to the music hall and melodrama with which *Malfi* was sometimes classed in the nineteenth century, either to condemn it or to construct its not-Shakespeare identity. The force of this discourse stems from the differences which are being identified in the themes and cultural "charge" of *Malfi*, despite its evident similarities to Shakespeare's plays. It arises from the spectacle of a blank verse drama from the early seventeenth century which dealt with recognisably "Shakespearean" tragic elements, but which diverged so strongly in its presentation and framing from that model.

There is some ambiguity, perhaps inevitably in such a compressed review, as to what relationship the writer is proposing between these popular modern forms and this production of Webster's play. In stating that they cannot equal it, that they "[pale] into insignificance" beside it, the review leaves it uncertain whether *Malfi* surpasses the individual works in these genres or the genres themselves. In other words, *Malfi* either evokes the same kinds of ideas and emotions as a modern gangster film, and does so more efficiently; or it provides a higher kind of engagement and excitement, which comes close to the poetic transcendence of *Hamlet*. Despite this ambiguity, however, the review at least offers these "low" forms as potentially positive models: it classes *Malfi* alongside them as a means of praising the production, not as a way to dismiss it out of hand.

The sense that *Malfi* is continuing to develop a value aside from its resemblance to Shakespeare is reinforced by the review in *The Times,* which discusses the play in quite a lengthy piece without resorting to comparisons with/to Shakespeare (19th Apr.). The same

applies to the paper's notices on the Oxford University Dramatic Society production in 1951, the London Artists production of 1953 and the Theatre Workshop production in 1957 (1st Mar.; 21st Nov.). This is admittedly negative evidence, but becomes more meaningful when compared with the extremely frequent presence of Shakespeare as yardstick in the coverage which both preceded and succeeded this decade. As I will discuss in the pastness section, there is plenty of mention of "Elizabethan" and "Renaissance" theatre, but Shakespeare is not produced as a determining measure of value.

The Times' review of the last production – Theatre Workshop at Stratford East – goes further in framing the production with a positive model of popular culture:

> Played with simple vigour, Webster's revenge tragedy might well attract audiences in the East End. Its "thrills" – that severed hand thrust into the hand of the unsuspecting Duchess, the masque of madmen, the throttling carried out on the open stage, the heaped corpses at the end – can compete in horror with any film. And there is the language to drive the horror home. But why choose such a play if it is to be treated in the tamest style of modern realism? (23rd Feb. 1957)

There is clearly a condescending attitude to popular culture in this piece – the reference to "simple vigour" and suggestion that "audiences in the East End" are necessarily low-brow – but it is based on the idea that theatre might aspire to the emotional effects which films have achieved. Here horror and thrills are not the result of failed attempts at Shakespearean transcendence, but worthy aims in themselves. This review provides some of the strongest evidence in the period this chapter covers of *Malfi* developing a powerful not-Shakespeare identity, based on an association between the techniques and effects of popular forms and "low" culture and a seventeenth-century poetic drama.

However, though the reviews I have cited seem to be moving *Malfi* away from continual comparison to a Shakespearean benchmark of quality, it is important to note that much of the language in which they are couched originated in Shakespeare criticism. The formalist interest in the poetic and musical qualities of Shakespeare's language is often reflected in the commentary I have just been quoting. For the *Express*'s reviewer watching the Phoenix Society's production in 1919, "the beauty of many of the lines relieved the tedium", and the same paper praised the play's "[great]" lines in 1945 (25th Nov. 1919, 19th Apr. 1945). In commenting on the London Artists Theatre production in 1953, *The Times* remarked that "Webster's power...is a power...exquisitely verbal yet only half a dramatist's", full of "splendid and fertile...language" and yet "even the power of Webster's verse has failed to obtain a hold

on audiences of to-day" (24th Jan. 1953, 21st Nov. 1952). The review I have just cited of the 1957 Stratford East performance emphasises he lurid thrills latent in the play, and declares that *Malfi* has "the language to drive the horror home" (*The Times* 23rd Feb. 1957 3). Thus we should bear in mind that, whilst *Malfi* seems to be developing a cultural profile which in some ways opposes it to the Shakespearean model of high culture prevalent in the early twentieth century, the terms in which *Malfi* is being praised were still largely formed by the discourses surrounding Shakespeare. Nor should this surprise, since the play's potential for opposition is located in the co-existence of similarities to, and differences from, the vision of Shakespeare's plays which was current in this period.

4.1.2 Back into the fold: The 1960 RSC Production

This growing not-Shakespeare identity I have been tracing suffers an abrupt setback with the 1960/1 production by the Royal Shakespeare Memorial Theatre Company. Taylor has emphasized the importance of this organisation (which became the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1961) in the development and cultural identity of Shakespeare in the twentieth century (235). The scale and importance of the company's work, and the extent to which its identity was bound up with performing Shakespeare, meant that their production of *Malfi* slotted the play right back into a cultural context almost completely defined by "Shakespearean" value. Anything which the RSC performed would inevitably be judged by the extent to which it resembled Shakespeare.

The RSC, which had just come under the directorship of Peter Hall, obtained the lease on the Aldwych Theatre in order to secure a London home for the Stratford-based company. There is some disagreement amongst historians of the RSC as to how the Aldwych was intended to relate to the company's work in Stratford, and this question has a bearing on *Malfi*'s not-Shakespeare identity. In her early 1980s study *A History of Ten Decades*, Sally Beauman suggests the London theatre was part of a failed attempt to bring Stratford-based productions to a wider audience and that the company was forced to look for new plays to fill the gaps caused by problems transferring Shakespeare productions from Stratford (245). On the other hand, more recent work by Stephen Adler suggests we should invert this view, and that the RSC of the time was a new writing and "classics" theatre which had to fall back on Shakespeare transfers to balance its budgets and satisfy audiences eager for the RSC brand (55).

My research tends to support Adler's model, or at least confirms his two basic contentions: that the RSC leadership presented the Aldwych as a theatre in which non-Shakespearean work should dominate, and that the public reception of their work there was

not particularly hospitable to this idea. *The Royal Shakespeare Theatre Company 1960-1963*, a celebratory volume published in 1963 to coincide with the four hundredth anniversary of Shakespeare's birth, states that "as well as the annual April-to-December Shakespeare season at Stratford, they give a continuous repertory of new and classic plays at the Aldwych" (8). It gives a broader artistic rationale for this policy, suggesting that "a London repertory of mainly non-Shakespearean plays" will help "the actors [to] respond to all the influences of modern and classic drama and use these influences in their Shakespeare repertory at Stratford-on-Avon" (8). On the back of the programme given out free at performances of the Aldwych *Malfi*, there was a note:

> This theatre is now the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre's London home. Its stage, with its new jutting apron, is the same as that at Stratford-upon-Avon. Both theatres are directed by Peter Hall. And as Stratford is for presenting the works of Shakespeare only, the Aldwych is mainly for plays by other dramatists, new and old. (Shakespeare Archive, File "RSC/ SM/ 2/ 1960/ 8")

Despite this, much of the press commentary framed the first season as the arrival of the nation's finest specialist Shakespeare company. The *South Wales Argus* described the opening of the Aldwych season as "Shakespeare goes to town", even when noting that it would begin with *Malfi* (9th Dec .1960). The *Birmingham Post* described it as the triumph of Shakespeare over the trivial comedies which had previously been performed in the theatre: "The Swan of Stratford-upon-Avon is now above the proscenium of the converted Aldwych Stage. The older farceurs, those gay ghosts of the Aldwych, have yielded" (16th Dec. 1960).

Unsurprisingly, given this frame, some of the press commentary was dismissive of *Malfi* as not worthy of a place in the company's repertory. The *Wolverhampton Express and Echo*, for example, remarked that "After a season of Shakespeare at the Memorial Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, John Webster's 'Duchess of Malfi' was bound to seem stony prose" and the *Nottingham Guardian Journal* opined that "the opening production of 'The Duchess of Malfi' is a reminder that Shakespeare was unique among the Elizabethans'" (1st Dec. 1960, 19th Dec. 1960). *The Scotsman* was similarly dismissive at greater length:

> Having claimed that the Aldwych was being rescued from red-flannel farce in order to stage a continuous repertory of distinguished dramatists other than Shakespeare, the Memorial Company might have been expected to kick off with a play neither on the brink of farce, nor on the verge of bad Shakespeare. (19th Dec.)

The *Birmingham Mail* even pretended to suspect the RSC of a conspiracy to use Webster's supposed awfulness to their advantage in their "real" work: "I suspect it was a deep-laid plot – Stratford's cunning device to demonstrate, by contrast, the superiority of its native son over the man whom Bernard Shaw called the 'Tussaud Laureate'" (16th Dec. 1960).

Even when it came to praising the production, a significant number of critics did so via explicit comparison to Shakespeare. The *Illustrated London News* quoted the critic James Agate's opinion that Bosola was "Don John plus Iago, but also with a touch of Thersites plus Jacques", whilst the *Scotsman* declared that Patrick Wymark's performance of the character "occasionally falls between Kent and Falstaff" (17th Dec. 1960, 19th Dec. 1960). Such statements not only explicitly place *Malfi* within a scale of value defined by Shakespeare, but implicitly relegate it to an inferior position. After all, they suggest that the best that could be said of a character in the play is that it resembles one in Shakespeare, which provides no space in the comparison of value for the Webster character to equal or surpass its Shakespearean equivalent. Bosola is imagined as, at best, a rough alloy of two Platonic characters – Kent and Falstaff - who have already been defined in their purest form by Shakespeare.

An even more complete example of *Malfi* being folded into a Shakespearean system occurs in the *Western Daily Mail*'s notice that the RSC would be performing "'The Duchess of Malfi' and 'Twelfth Night', which between them cover the Elizabethan and Jacobean 'revenge and laughter' as neatly as Hamlet and the Gravedigger" (1st Nov. 1960). Though the tone of the remark is positive, it nonetheless reduces the frame within which any artistic achievement could be expected from the play. Where the *Scotsman* found Bosola unable to measure up to Shakespeare's characters, the *Western Daily Mail* sets up *Malfi* and *Twelfth Night* as emblematic of two tendencies in early seventeenth-century art, then folds them both into one (albeit famous) scene of *Hamlet*. The two entire works are almost rendered obsolete by the comparison, as Shakespeare is shown to have elaborated their content in a single scene elsewhere. According to this double-edged praise, *Malfi* can aspire only to be nearly as good as half a scene of Shakespeare. It is an excellent example of the extent to which *Malfi*'s production by the RSC pushed it back into a Shakespearean model of theatrical art, where it could only be judged as seriously lacking.

This tendency reached its most concise expression in the comments of the *Oxford Mail* that Bosola is "the only character except the Duchess which foreshadows the coming of Shakespeare" (17th Dec. 1960). This could either be a mistaken dating of Webster's work as preceding Shakespeare's, or based on an assumption that a series of Shakespeare productions would follow the play at the RSC's new London base. Either way, it demonstrates an

assumption that *Malfi* is to be evaluated entirely in terms of the RSC's house playwright, and the phrasing suggests that the best role Webster could be assigned would be as Shakespeare's John the Baptist.

The atrophying of the independent not-Shakespeare identity *Malfi* had been developing can also be seen in the references made to low cultural forms which occur in the press commentary. The *Daily Mirror* headlined a review on the 15th December with the word "HORRIFIC", continuing: "It has so much murder, treachery lust and madness in it that I'm amazed that Hammer Films haven't turned it into an "X" horror film" and describing it as " a rather unnecessary production" of a "wordy melodrama". Though this review links *Malfi* to the burgeoning British horror studio Hammer, it does so as a means of discounting the production. There is no sense here, as in reviews I quoted from earlier in the century, that comparing *Malfi* with low cultural forms might be a way of drawing attention to its emotional power, immediacy or other positive qualities.

This tone is also evident in the generally negative notice from the *Wolverhampton Express and Echo*, which declares: "Clinically economical, the settings reflect rather than help the bare cadences of the words. The story of cold plotting and maniacal revenge, spurred on by Humphrey Searle's lurid-thriller music, keeps momentum through the acting" (1ST Dec. 1960). The description of the music as "lurid-thriller" is ambiguous in itself, but set within the context of this review it cannot be read as an endorsement. The *Echo* implies that the music and acting are extraneous forces applied to keep an inadequate piece of work moving forward, not organic parts of its cultural profile. In the light of all this evidence, Trussler's remark that the Aldwych *Malfi* "at once affirmed the value of testing Shakespeare against the more oblique cutting edge of his contemporaries" may represent the intentions of the management, or the judgement of later scholars, but certainly not the public discourse surrounding the production at the end (326).

In tracing the abrupt decline of *Malfi*'s not-Shakespeare identity in this period, and suggesting reasons why it occurred, I do not want to give the impression that it was inevitable. Quite the reverse: given a well-funded RSC under the direction of a new leadership who were apparently committed to producing Elizabethan/Jacobean drama (as well as modern work) alongside Shakespeare, the situation might seem ideal for *Malfi* to develop an active dialectical identity in relation to Shakespeare. The regular presence of non-Shakespearean work from the same era of English theatre in the RSC's repertory, performed by the same actors, could have exerted a continual pressure on Shakespearean production. At worst, this pressure might have kept the company and theatre critics honest in the kind of claims they made for Shakespeare's universality and all-encompassing power, and at best have drawn attention to the gaps and

flaws in the "Shakespearean" vision of English culture and history which had developed over the last couple of centuries with the icon of the Stratford playwright at its centre. *Malfi*'s production by the RSC at the Aldwych did not inevitably mean it had to be folded back into a Shakespearean matrix of values. However, the company's own cultural profile, along with the expectation of critics and audiences, meant that everything it produced was almost entirely interpreted through a Shakespearean frame of reference, and *Malfi*'s developing not-Shakespeare identity was halted. This situation is symbolised by an entry at the beginning of the props list for the production, which remains in the RSC's archives at Stratford: the set for the Duchess' court included "Black Hamlet chair – Gold Cushion" (Shakespeare Archive, File "RSC/ SM/ 2/ 1960/ 8"). The props department may have thought *Malfi* was just using the Hamlet chair, but the majority of those watching and critiquing the play thought it was using the Hamlet theatre and the Hamlet actors, too.

4.2. The rearguard of history: the received narrative of *Malfi* and pastness

Malfi's pastness in this period is probably the most striking aspect of its cultural profile, since it runs counter to so much of the received narrative on the subject. A broad scholarly consensus has it that after the nineteenth century's fey dabblings in the grotesque, *Malfi* claimed its rightful place at the beginning of the modern period, less through advances in theatre research than the horrors of the two World Wars. The coincidence that the first photographs of the Buchenwald camp appeared on the same page as a review of *Malfi* in *The Times* and the *Daily Express* has been so powerfully suggestive that it has led to a retrospective assumption that the horrors of the war dominated *Malfi*'s reception at the time and put the play in unproblematic dialogue with the present. As I will show, however, this was far from the case: the commentary surrounding the play is a site of struggle between a powerful feeling that its horrific content should be able to provide insight for the troubled times and the equally powerful sense of pastness which still dogs it.

Leah Marcus encapsulates the received narrative attitude in the introduction to her 2009 edition:

> ...but *Malfi* came into its own – both on stage and among critics – during the twentieth century. The emerging aesthetic of modernism and the massive, cumulative cultural rupture of two world wars and the Holocaust resonated with Webster's dramatic emphasis on horror, disjunction and extreme suffering. (101)

When making the same argument, Martin White cites F.L. Lucas' 1958 edition of *Malfi* to the effect that:

> The most exaggerated fuss of all has been made about the dead man's hand in *The Duchess of Malfi*. 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. (cited in White, 211)

In this received account of *Malfi*'s history the First World War provided an experience of chaos and hopeless violence which chimed with Webster's own vision, but it was the Second which "justified" his obsession with evil and the lengths to which it could go. This apparently decisive moment when the play "came into its own" is represented by the famous front page of *The Times* which appears in so many accounts of *Malfi* in the period. Marcus and White are both worth citing at length, respectively:

> The highly acclaimed production at the Theatre Royal, Haymarket, directed by George Rylands, opened on 18 April 1945 in London – three weeks before Hitler's formal surrender on 7-8 May. The same page of the London *Times* that praised Rylands's *Malfi* also showed, directly above the review, five photographs of twisted bodies and other newly revealed atrocities from the German concentration camps...This time, when audiences saw the "heap of corpses on which the final curtain falls" they did not laugh as pre-war audience frequently had: art had imitated life with horrifying visual clarity. (Marcus 104)

and

> By chance, the review of the 1945 production of *The Duchess of Malfi* in *The Times* was printed beneath photographs of the victims of Nazi concentration camps. A similar image was invoked in the *New Statesman* review of the same production:
>
> If *Measure for Measure* and *The Winter's Tale* were not known to be by Shakespeare, and were therefore as unfamiliar on the stage as *The Duchess of Malfi*, some critics would doubtless declare these plays to be of merely antiquarian interest. The plots

> and the characters, we should be told, are incredible to the modern public. So they are. And so is Buchenwald. (*New Statesman and Nation*, 28 April 1945, p.271)

The Times review of the 1960 RSC production reiterated the point:

> It may be because we have lived close to violent events that it is easier for us than audiences of the nineties to enter sympathetically into a powerful poetic mind obsessed with violent lives that come to their crises in violent deaths (16 December 1960). (White, 211)

On closer inspection, however, both critics are quite circumspect about actually citing the piece which they advance as a historical turning point. The "textual event" of the review appearing on the same page of those photographs, as the moment when the play re-established itself in our cultural consciousness, seems to be enough: White goes on to substitute the words of a piece in the *New Statesman*, before skipping fifteen years to find corroborating evidence, whilst Marcus produces one line about the "heaps of corpses" and provides her own explanatory gloss about art imitating life (see also Barker, 'High and Low' 50).

In fact the *Times* review beneath the photographs makes no reference to the horrors of the war, and goes to some lengths to explain that the play could not really speak to modern concerns, calling the production "an unavailing attempt to reanimate a classic which time has tamed", whose audience "though naturally it could not discard its thwarting modernity, followed all that happened on stage with a respectful curiosity" (*The Times*, 19th Apr. 1945). The line which Marcus excerpts about piles of corpses serves a very different purpose in context:

> Those who know the play and the almost insuperable problems which it sets the present-day producer will not regard such praise as faint. That we do not smile at the heap of corpses on which the final curtain falls implies that the actors have fixed attention on Ferdinand's soul-stricken ravings, with the Cardinal's unequal struggle against implacable fate, and with Bosola's strangely intense remorse....

The equivalent piece in the *Daily Express*, which appeared five days later on the 19th April, was also published under a photograph of what the paper called the "death cart of Buchenwald", but did not adhere to the received narrative either: instead the headline referred to gangster

films as a suitable comparison (the page is reproduced in Appendix E). The turning point which so many accounts of the play's history firmly identify as its defining moment in the twentieth century is just not visible in the evidence available.

In retrospect the events of the Second World War, and their impact on British cultural consciousness, must have had some impact on the play's fortunes, and these critics are hardly at fault if they choose to emphasize those who were quicker to realise this than their contemporaries. However, using the end of the war as a defining point, and making the *Times* front page into an icon of this moment, obscures what actually went on. Critics did not rush to relate the play to the events being discovered in Germany: in fact, the vast majority avoided making any such link. There is certainly a strong feeling in commentary of this period that the play's concern with suffering and evil *ought* to allow it to speak to the problems of the moment, but an equally strong sense through most of them that its form prevents any such connection. It is a compelling idea that a classic text of Early Modern drama suddenly came to prominence as history caught up with it, but *Malfi*'s post-war appearances were preceded by productions by "the other theatre" which was used to feeding lesser known plays into the mainstream, and most contemporary commentators do not make the same link with the war as later theatre historians. In this section, I shall be investigating the powerful effect which discourses of pastness had on the play's profile, the tensions which it set up between a desire to hear the play speak to contemporary problems and an inability to hear it doing so, which were far more significant than a supposed sudden realization of the play's relevance caused by the war.

'Elizabethan': the (not yet) discarded image

In order to understand the ways in which the press commentary framed *Malfi* via its pastness in this period, it is necessary to understand two intellectual currents which are brought to bear on it: the continuing (but mutating) notion of the "Elizabethan", and the powerful sense of estrangement from the past which haunted the artistic discourse of the period. Throughout the period covered by this chapter *Malfi* continued to be classed as an "Elizabethan" play in press commentary and reviews. This continued up to and during the 1961 Aldwych production, when a minority of critics began to class it as "Jacobean". This reflects the shift in critical discourse towards an interest in distinctively "Jacobean" aspects of drama, which Aebischer has identified in Robert Ormstein's *The Moral Vision of Jacobean Tragedy* (1961) and Ralph J. Kaufmann's *A Study of Elizabethan and Jacobean Tragedy*, both of which stressed the social and moral "decadence" of the plays in question (21-22). "Elizabethan" maintained some of the connotations which it had carried during the latter part of the nineteenth-century,

whilst also acquiring some new emphases, and since I shall not be discussing what each individual commentator meant by it, it is important to get a sense of the term's significance at this time.

The use of "Elizabethan" as a catch-all term for late-sixteenth- and early-seventeenth-century works continued, with little concern shown by those using it for which monarch was actually reigning during the different decades of the "English Renaissance". There is no precise definition of the word's application given in T.S. Eliot's *Elizabethan Essays* of 1934, but the fact that he entitles an essay on Webster, Tourneur, Middleton and Chapman 'Four Elizabethan Dramatists' demonstrates how far the word can extend for him. We can build up a stronger sense of the scope of "Elizabethan" in Eliot's writing by collating excerpts from 'The Metaphysical Poets', such as "The poetry of Donne...is late Elizabethan in feeling, often very close to that of Chapman" (281). He continues, declaring that "This telescoping of images and multiplied associations is characteristic of the phrase of some of the dramatists of the period which Donne knew: not to mention Shakespeare, it is frequent in Middleton, Webster and Tourneur, and is one of the sources of the vitality of their language "and "the poets of the seventeenth century (up to the Revolution) were the direct and normal development of the precedent age" (283, 288). These passages are noteworthy because they not only demonstrate how far Eliot is willing to apply the term, but also the strain with which he is doing so. Though he is happy to class Donne, Middleton and Webster as "Elizabethan", he is also clearly aware of differences in style and content which demand the addition "late". Indeed, the insistence that the seventeenth century was part of an artistic continuum with Elizabeth's reign shows Eliot's need to make the point, and his awareness that the two periods possess significant differences which might mislead an unwary reader into separating them.

A similar sense of period, though directed to different critical ends, is evident in E.M. Tillyard's influential *The Elizabethan World Picture*, which specified the term's application: "I sometimes use the word Elizabethan with great laxity, meaning anything within the compass of the English Renaissance, anything between the ages of Henry VIII and Charles I akin to the main trends of Elizabethan thought". (9) Tillyard's argument might seem a little specious, claiming the right to extend the chronological boundaries of the "Elizabethan" based upon his own perception of what was truly representative of "Elizabethan thought". His use of the word takes it a step further than Hazlitt who, as we saw, admitted to a capacious use of the adjective but actually arranged his essays in chronological bands. However Tillyard is not simply dissolving "Elizabethan" into a set of supposed aesthetic or philosophical principles. He insists on a historical centre of gravity for the Elizabethan spirit, complaining that the growing

acclaim for the "Metaphysical poets" is like "exalting the age of Euripides over that of Aeschylus" and shifts "the centre of creation from the earlier to the later work of art (115).

Tillyard recognises that there are distinct qualities in the literature of the latter part of the "long Elizabethan" era, which foreshadows the development of "Jacobean" as a term of aesthetics and cultural politics rather than simple chronology. However, at this stage this distinct identity has yet to be articulated, and Tillyard regards what we would call "Jacobean" as late, and therefore lesser, Elizabethan writing. Though Eliot feels at home with the later writers, and Tillyard wishes to consign them to a lesser role in literary history, both critics demonstrate a desire to keep the "Elizabethan" age together, along with an awareness of how it is pulling apart.

We can also see, in Tillyard's usage, a diminishing of the term. Tillyard evidently believes that the "Elizabethan" period produced great literature, and is important enough to defend against dilution by undue emphasis being placed on later work, but he does not make the same claims as Hazlitt. Tillyard finds "earnestness passion and assurance" in the greatest of the period's writers, and values their basic "simplicity and strength" (115, 116). Hazlitt suggested that "the genius of Great Britain...never shone out fuller or brighter, or looked more like itself, than at this point", when a "race of giants" inhabited the land (1,7). Compared with this, Tillyard seems very moderate indeed when we states that "If we are sincere with ourselves we must know that we have [the Elizabethan mental] habit in our own bosoms somewhere, queer as it may seem" (117). The latter writer claims less for the adjective "Elizabethan", and also ties it less securely to the notion of a national genius or spirit.

Tillyard still asserts a continuity between the Elizabethan "habit of mind" and that of modern British people, but is less assured about declaring that this originates in a timeless national essence. Indeed, he moves further away from Hazlitt's national genius in the final sentence of the book, suggesting that the "habit of mind...resembles certain trains of thought in Central Europe" which have been ignored by "our scientifically minded intellectuals", partially resulting in the "present conflicts and distresses" (117). These are surely the political upheavals of Europe in the late 1930s and the Second World War. Elizabethan "habits of mind" are apparently capable of being channelled into destruction as well as creativity: in this passage Tillyard associates it less with a timeless national spirit than deep atavistic impulses which must be understood in order to tame them, rather than to revive them. This is a very different kind of pastness than Hazlitt and Lamb's veneration for the "old English literature". It also points forward to the concern, which is evident in the reviews of productions in this chapter, with the way in which the past may have something urgent to say to the present through *Malfi*, whatever trouble it may have in articulating it.

The other intellectual current which had a profound effect on *Malfi*'s pastness in this period was a strong sense of estrangement from the past. Susan Stranford Friedman has described how "In the humanities...modernity and modernism are most often associated with the radical *rupture* from rather than the supreme embodiment of post-Renaissance Enlightenment humanism" (500-1). She develops the implications of this idea, pointing out the way in which this estrangement involves a concern with the past from which it is detached, the way in which it "constructs retrospectively a sense of tradition from which it declares independence. Paradoxically, such a tradition--or, the awareness of it as "tradition"--might come into existence only at the moment of rebellion against it." (503). Jessica R. Feldman elaborates a similar point when she declares that "Artists and critics alike view high modernism within scenes of rupture and yearning", in which anxiety and nostalgia shade desire" for "the new" (453). She sketches the tension between the felt "need for a modernist rescue operation in a present defined by loss" and the appeal of "thrilling and despairing isolation" in the cultural landscape of the early twentieth century (453). Two of the most famous quotations from modernist writers capture this tension, with Virginia Woolf's famous statement that ""On or about December 1910, human character changed" displaying the consciously paradoxical bravado of declaring complete rupture from the past, and T.S. Eliot's "These fragments I have shored against my ruins" illustrating the construction of a tradition against which to define the "thrilling and despairing isolation" ('Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown', 320; *The Waste Land*, l.431).

I have described pastness as an "excess", the extent to which a work refuses to map exactly over the conditions in which it is being reproduced, and thus advertises its remoteness. It is easy to see how the conditions of the early twentieth century supply Daniel Woolf's requirements for drastic change in cultural, technological and economic spheres which makes "old things" into "less familiar fellow-travellers than exciting, interesting visitors", transforming "an 'antiquity'" into "a 'novelty'...or 'curiosity'"(141). Indeed, the commentary on *Malfi* in this period is suffused with such a strong historical sense that in some cases it derails attempts to appreciate and understand a production. The excess overwhelms the conditions of reproduction and *Malfi* is simply written off as hopelessly trapped in the past. On other occasions, the commentary is suffused with a feeling that the play *should* be relevant to the present, but its archaic form prevents it from being brought to bear on the contemporary world. Though newspaper reviewers neither cite obviously modernist writers when discussing these works, nor necessarily refer to the changed conditions of twentieth-century life, their comments are strongly informed by this sense of historical rupture, and the tensions inherent within it.

4.2.1 A desire to assist the stage: Pastness from 1900-1957

The productions which occurred in the first six decades of this century were all, to a greater or lesser extent, framed as "revivals". The 1919 production was given by the Phoenix Society, described by the *Daily Express* as "another institution that desires to assist the stage" because of its policy of performing less famous dramatic works (22nd Nov. 1919). A review of the 1945 Haymarket production referred to "several revivals in recent years of Webster's 'tragedy of blood'" and described this in terms of an "attempt to reanimate" the play (*The Times*, 19th Apr. 1945).[24]

This language of revival, neglect and renewed life tropes *Malfi* as continually in need of "bringing to light" for an audience which is assumed not to have seen it before. Indeed it is striking that the same metaphors can be reused so frequently through the period: *Malfi* seems always to be on the edge of the mainstream theatre, always being revived, but never quite taking root. As such, a large part of its cultural profile in the period is focussed around the fact that it is not part of the general theatrical repertory. Its connection with the theatrical past remains part of its cultural frame, despite the fact that it receives a surprising number of productions over the years under investigation. It never seems to be subsumed by the theatre of the time, in the mind of the reviewers, in the same way that it was after the 1850 revival at Sadler's Wells. *Malfi* seems to remain interesting because of its slightly exotic pastness, its difference from the conditions and conventions of the early-twentieth-century- stage. These are characteristics which must have made it attractive to the "other theatre", but may also have prevented it from crossing over into the commercial repertory. This strain in the criticism surrounding the play suggests the concern I have identified in the notion of "Elizabethan" drama at the time: the sense that this is part of a cultural heritage which seems both part of contemporary culture and atavistically far away from it.

This is the dominant note in the press commentary's framing of the play's pastness: a tension between the play's content, its validity after the horrors of the early twentieth century, a sense that it should speak to contemporary problems and the aspects, whether of form or style or age, which prevent it from doing so. The "excess" of pastness, the extent to which the play resists being interpreted and reproduced within the conventions of the contemporary theatre, once again provides a dominant element of its cultural profile. Not all

[24] For other examples, see *The Times*, 1st Mar.1951; 21st Nov. 1952; 18th Feb 1957.

reviews display this ambivalence clearly – some come down strongly on one side or the other – but the coverage overall demonstrates how *Malfi*'s pastness sets up this tension.

Some reviewers found the play's perceived archaism and distance from contemporary theatrical values an insuperable problem. *The Daily Express*, for example, suggested that the actors at the 1919 production had a specific problem to grapple with, during their attempts to "assist the stage": that "the dreadful old play would...be openly sniggered at by a general audience" and "could hardly be performed without deletions" (25th Nov. 1919). The excess of the play here overwhelms the other elements in its reception. The age of this "dreadful old play" is clearly linked with its lack of value for this reviewer: it is both too unsophisticated and too indecent for audiences of the time.

At the other end of the spectrum, the Haymarket production provoked an enthusiastic response from the *Daily Mirror*, whose phrasing suggested there was no pastness hindering the audience's appreciation. In the review I have already cited, the *Mirror* called it an "Elizabethan tragedy", but compared it favourably to "modern stage thrillers" and "Chicago gangster movies", suggesting that *Malfi* was more than capable of holding its own in the entertainment market of the 1940s. Most striking of all, it referred to Bosola as the "grand and sinister quisling" (19th Apr. 1945). This word had only been in use (to mean someone collaborating with an enemy) since a *Times* editorial coined it in April 1940, after Vidkun Quisling co-operated with the Nazi invasion and occupation of Norway and the writer seems to be using it in the more general sense of traitor. Its appearance here is remarkable because it suggests that, for at least one reviewer, *Malfi* could be translated into the language and categories of contemporary life. The use of such a recently-coined term of abuse, which originated in a war which had only just ended in Europe, seems to comprehensively deny the excess and incongruity which other commentators felt would prevent the play from affecting contemporary audiences. The review is not couched in terms of problems overcome, but seems to unaware of the existence of any such problems of pastness.

These two approaches represent the ends of the continuum of pastness and between them fall the more nuanced and anxious commentators, for whom the play's form and content are at variance. This is made clear in the review of the 1953 Oxford University Dramatic Society's 1951 production:

> Undergraduate actors are expected occasionally to attempt the impossible; and the Oxford University Dramatic Society this term attempts *The Duchess of Malfi*. The extreme difficulty of bringing this "tragedy of blood" to life on the modern stage lies less in the nature of the play's horror than in the theatrical means to evoke it.

> The modern totalitarian ethic has made all too comprehensible Webster's infatuation with terror, with the springs of evil in men's minds, with the smell of the churchyard, the torture chamber and the charnel house. His gloom is scarcely more intense than the gloom of some modern plays, *The Consul*, for instance, which affect us so powerfully yet so far from making our flesh creep, which is presumably the effect Webster had on his Jacobean public, he is more likely to set us smiling. We have developed the awkward habit of asking for what particular reason a man has decided to have his twin-sister mentally tortured and then strangled. Webster evidently would have regarded the question as tiresomely pedantic, and if pressed to explain why a Cardinal with good case to fear assassination should capriciously dispense with his bodyguard he would very likely point with pride to the ingenuity of the incident.
>
> Against the slow wearing down effect of this antiquated theatricalism the company struggle with unfailing spirit. (*The Times* 1st Mar. 1951)

This offers a thorough-going elaboration of the tense pastness which many commentators of this period found in *Malfi*. The fact that judgement is being conducted from a "modern" standpoint is stressed continually, contrasting the "modern stage" to the "Jacobean public" and grouping all possible contemporary audiences under the repeated pronouns "we" and "us". Paradoxically there is a statement that Webster's work is rather more comprehensible to a critic of the fifties than it had been to the Victorians: "The modern totalitarian ethic has made all too comprehensible Webster's infatuation with terror". Webster's fixations become explicable just when the play they are expressed in becomes incapable of communicating them effectively to the "modern" public. Gian Carlo Menotti's *The Consul* (an opera premiered in 1950 about a dissident in a totalitarian regime") is brought into the review as a paradigmatic "modern" work, under the assumption that this makes it entirely different in kind from Webster's play. The similarities in their "gloom" makes it all the more frustrating that these two works are on opposite sides of the modernist gulf in history. Indeed, the reviewer apparently feels that *Malfi* is so incapable of communicating to a contemporary audience that the review enacts the obscurity which it describes. The column inches it expends on explaining the archaism of the work's form, its "antiquated theatricalism", prevents it from discussing in any detail what occurs on stage, performing the miscommunication it gestures towards.

The striking feature of this perceived mismatch between the play's form and content is that it appears in reviews which otherwise display entirely opposed attitudes. The review I just cited found the play's "ethic" impeded by its "antiquated theatricalism", whereas another

piece in the same paper two years later had the following to say about the London Artists production which was in rehearsal:

> Although from time to time Webster's "tragedy of blood" has received several revivals, among others by the O.U.D.S. and the Marlowe Society, its exploitation of horror and depravity is no doubt one of the reasons why even the power of Webster's verse has failed to obtain a hold on audiences of to-day. (*The Times* 21st Nov. 1953)

This framed the production securely for the paper's readers before the production was even ready, and the review the following January, though it gave space to an evaluation of the production, began thus:

> Though one may weary of the motiveless cruelty and fall to reflecting on the fondness of Jacobean audiences for horror for its own sake, Webster's power is not to be resisted. It is a power, as some may think, exquisitely verbal yet only half a dramatist's. (24th Jan. 1953)

These reviews seem to admire the formal structure of *Malfi*, "the power of Webster's verse" and his "exquisitely verbal" skill (with the reservation that it may be more poetic than dramatic), but find that the content's harping on horrors prevents the play from being produced successfully. Tellingly, though the "ethic" is here condemned and the artifice praised, the distinction is maintained and it is still identified as arising from the difference between "Jacobean audiences" and "audiences of today".

A review of Gielgud's Haymarket production similarly described the "thwarting modernity" which the audience "could not discard", despite the fact that "not much more in the way of staging and acting could well be done to put us in the frame of mind of the original public for whom Burbage played Ferdinand" (*The Times*, 19th Apr. 1945). The production's perceived lack of success was again framed in terms of its resistance to the contemporary theatrical context: "the almost insuperable problems which it sets the present-day producer", notably the requirement in the torture scenes for "an apparatus of grisliness which no modern producer can effectively employ, resolute though he may be". Despite this negative verdict, the play itself was not criticised, being described as "a classic which time has tamed".

Thus a felt tension between the play's potential – either as an intricate work of art, or a timely examination of human power and corruption – and the conditions of the twentieth-

century theatre was one of the dominant notes in press commentary during this period. The continual sense that *Malfi* was important to the modern era, yet incapable of communicating with it, haunts the play's framing.

4.2.2 'One of the strongest and most strange dramas': pastness in the RSC *Malfi*.

Having moved through the more buoyant fringes of the "other theatre" and the old-fashioned establishment of the Haymarket, *Malfi* appeared at the RSC, one of the jewels in the crown of state-supported theatre. The critical coverage partially continued the tension we have seen between the play's potential and the difficulties of producing it in the contemporary theatre, but a minority of critics offered an alternative view: that the conditions of the modern theatre were more suitable to *Malfi* than had been the case in the Victorian and Edwardian eras. They saw the conditions of "modern" consciousness as eminently suited to appreciating the atavistic and strange elements of the past which *Malfi* offered.

There were still some blanket dismissals of the play as incapable of speaking to contemporary audiences: the *Evening News* complained that "horror piled upon horror but lacking plausible motivation leaves one not only unmoved but bored", in a line which stages the cultural skirmish which surrounded Webster's reception at the time (19th Dec. 1961). The "horror piled upon horror" is an echo of the phrase from *Othello* which has been passed around Webster criticism ever since Lamb used it in *Specimens of the English Dramatic Poets*: "on horror's head horrors accumulate" (3.3.370). Lamb cited the line as part of his enthusiasm for the playwright's particular skills: "...this only a Webster can do. Writers of an inferior genius may 'upon horror's head horrors accumulate', but they cannot do this" (217). The second part of the review's line indicts the lack of "plausible motivation", which is not an unusual complaint; ten years previously the *Times* criticised the play's "motiveless cruelty" (24th Jan. 1953). Whereas the earlier mention of "motiveless" recalled Coleridge, the term "motivation" points in the direction of the Method, and Lee Strasberg's development of Stanislavsky's emphasis on interior motivation: the "motive" of a criminal act has become the "motivation" of an actor representing it. Thus this relatively brief remark in the *Evening News* invokes the weight of Webster's history in the theatre only to dismiss is as meaningless in the altered conditions of the contemporary theatre.

An equally dismissive attitude can be found in the comments of the *Daily Mail*, which finds Peggy Ashcroft's performance to be "the only justification for disinterring this very wordy melodrama" (15th Dec. 1960). Where the groups of the "other theatre" hoped to "revive" *Malfi*, this review substitutes the notion of "disinterring" a corpse, leaving no hope that the work could be made to live again for contemporary audiences. Though it is obviously an

extremely negative judgement, the disinterment metaphor is nonetheless underpinned by the same assumptions which made "revival" an effective trope for those who took a more hopeful view of the play's possibilities.

Harold Hobson, the joint-holder with Kenneth Tynan of the critics' all-London super-heavyweight belt at the time, provided a critique which was only slightly more balanced in a review entitled "The Duchess is Dead":

> long before the evening was over it must have been apparent to everyone not blinded by mistaken notions of goodwill, or dazzled by Eng Lit notions of culture, that if the Stratford company is to offer London anything of value it will have to do a great deal better than this (*The Sunday Times*, 18th Dec.)

For Hobson the play is so moribund it has already passed from theatre into literary history, as his jibes at "Eng Lit notions of culture" make clear. He goes on in the same review to pan a contemporary play entitled *Strip the Willow* before concluding thus:

> But even as it stands 'Strip the Willow' has scraps and glimpses of contemporary meaning. 'The Duchess of Malfi' has not – at any rate as it is presented at the Aldwych. Perhaps Mr. Hall's latest choices will have more bearing on what we need and suffer today.

This is a fairly comprehensive dismissal of the production, yet it carries a hint of the attitude in the previous fifty years which found *Malfi*'s relevance stifled by its form. Hobson's denunciation of the play's failure to have any "bearing on what we need and suffer today" implies that the production is making claims to do so, and measures it against an imagined standard of relevance. This is further supported by the throwaway comment that the play has no "contemporary meaning", "at any rate as it is presented at the Aldwych". Hobson seems to be seeking for a contemporary resonance which the production has failed to provide, but which the play might reveal in different circumstances.

For another group of commentators, the play's pastness was both problematic and exciting, a challenge which offered potential rewards but could easily defeat the company. The *Daily Sketch* praised Peggy Ashcroft's performance whilst somehow implying that the difficulty of reviving the play made her achievement more impressive: "We cheered her. But it was a salute to her prowess in a lost cause" (*Daily Sketch*, 15th Dec. 1960). The *Sphere* and the *Western Independent* were more positive about the production's potential, but clearly still saw

it as a risk, with the former declaring that the it made "no compromise in favour of London West End theatre audiences" (*The Sketch*, 17th Dec. 1960) and the latter commenting that the RSC had "courageously" staged

> one of the strongest and most strange dramas in the history of the English theatre...There is nothing timid about this choice: it is the sort of play that will dumbfound people who think that 'Watch It, Sailor!' is still on at this theatre. (It has gone to the Apollo). (*Western Independent*, 18th Dec. 1960).

The critic J.C. Trewin began a lengthy account in the *Illustrated London News* of the play's performance history with his opinion that:

> The Webster, as opening play, is a fine and challenging choice. It had appeared for a full West End season – that was also in repertory – once this century, and before then, of course, its revivals were as rare as its Cardinal's good deeds. (*Illustrated London News*, 17th Dec.)

The most striking aspect of this spectrum of opinion, from dismissal to enthusiasm, is its shared basic assumption that the modern age has put the previous history of Webster's play on the other side of a gulf. These critics can enjoy the play's pastness, but only after it has been wrestled with by the theatre company in a bout whose result is far from a foregone conclusion. The play holds enormous potential, which is at constant risk of being eclipsed by "thwarting modernity". At times it seems as if commentators are not so much watching a production of the play, as enjoying (and evaluating) the company's struggle with it, constantly impeded by the gulf between *Malfi*'s time and theirs.

By contrast, a smaller quantity of criticism made radically different assumptions about *Malfi*'s relationship to the past, theatre history and the modern period. These critics shared the implicit view that the modern period had seen a radical disjunction between the present and the past, but saw the split more as a break with Victorian and Edwardian attitudes. For these critics, who shared this position with the leadership of the RSC itself, modernism's wrench away from the nineteenth and early twentieth century had made the more distant past available and meaningful again. A review in the *Eastern Daily Press* begins with some familiar tropes, but suddenly breaks new ground:

> The Stratford-upon-Avon company has arrived at its London home, the Aldwych Theatre, with a glorious pudding made of shrieks, gall, wormwood and strangled corpses. The Duchess of Malfi, once played by Shakespeare's company, is the Jacobean equivalent of the X-film.
>
> Television exists to correct the view that Webster piles on too many horrors for a modern audience. There are more dead cowboys littering the drawing room when the announcer smiles us to bed than dead Italians scattered about the Aldwych when the curtain comes down. The difference is that Webster does his work with a romantic flourish, a rich tissue of poetic utterance, an extravagance swooping between madness and melancholy. (*Eastern Daily Press*, 19th Dec. 1960)

The reviewer's conceit that "television exists to correct" assumptions about *Malfi* harnesses the conditions of "modern" life to a rediscovery of Webster's true qualities. The rapid developments which cause a split from the recent past, in the popular historiography of the "modern age", also clear that past away and prevent it from obstructing a clear view of what came before it. A similar assumption can be found in a comment by the *Daily Herald*: "Time and the conventions of the well-made play were as often ignored by the Elizabethans as they are by the modern playwrights who are urged to get back to 'form'". (*Daily Herald*, 15th Dec. 1960). This commentator brackets Webster along with the playwrights of the "modern" age, setting them both against the "well-made play" tradition of Scribe, Henry Arthur Jones and Arthur Wing Pinero.

The idea that the condition of modernity allowed a clearer vision of the distant past via a repudiation of "Edwardian" and "Victorian" culture – was part of the RSC's own approach to Early Modern plays at the time. The celebratory volume *The Royal Shakespeare Theatre Company 1960-1963* contains an account by Peter Hall of "Shakespeare and the Modern Director", within which is an anecdote which sets up this modernist opposition to the previous era:

> An old lady recently spoke to me outside the Stratford theatre. 'I am terribly interested,' she said, 'in your attempts to make Shakespeare alive for our time, but don't you think you ought to do occasional productions for colleges and schools of what Shakespeare really meant?' I said 'What *did* Shakespeare really mean?' She replied 'we all know, don't we?' 'Well', I said, I'm trying to express Shakespeare as I honestly understand him. And without going to the conscious excesses of performing in modern dress, or turning verse into prose, or re-ordering the plays in terms of

> psycho-analysis, I must admit that I am a modern. So are the scholars whose re-interpretations I study, so are the audiences who watch my productions. We have *our* Shakespeare, but there is no final Shakespeare.'
>
> What the old lady meant, of course, was that if I departed from what *she* expected of a Shakespearean production, I was being 'un-Shakespearean'. I subsequently discovered that she yearned for more pictorial Shakespeare, a taste which is assuredly more Edwardian than Elizabethan. (41)

Later in the same piece, Hall declares that "Interpretation is not a sin but a necessity because the accretions of time have to be stripped away. Most of the stage traditions now surrounding the works are Victorian" (41). Hall might at first seem a little disingenuous here, arguing that a modern director must "interpret" and experiment to find a truth in the plays for the modern age, but with the apparent proviso that techniques and aesthetics associated with the Victorian and Edwardian periods are ruled out before the process begins as the only certainly "wrong" options. However, it is revealing that his old lady (whether she was apocryphal or not) voices the claims of the broad dominant Victorian Shakespeare culture we saw in the last chapter: "we all know, don't we?" what Shakespeare meant. In this book, published only a couple of years after the Aldwych *Malfi*, Hall presents the world of the "modern" directors, scholars and audiences as one in which it can no longer be assumed that "we all know".

According to the reading by Hall and the critics I cited, the conditions of modernity have shattered the consensus, or dominant Shakespeare culture, of the Victorians, and allowed access to the strange, atavistic elements of the past which had been dismissed or suppressed. It is not simply Shakespeare as Early Modern writer, or the patron saint of Stratford, but "SHAKESPEARE" the guarantor of value and cultural coherence which has been altered here. We can see the consensus of what "we all know" being disrupted, allowing stranger and more unexpected aspects of the past (including elements within Shakespeare's works) to make themselves known, and to claim just as much validity as the broad, unifying "SHAKESPEARE" of Victorian dominant culture. There is a parallel to be drawn with the way Tillyard saw the chaos and brutality of 1930s Europe as linked to the "Elizabethan" spirit within the English people. Television "correct[s] the view that Webster piles on too many horrors" because it demonstrates the public appetite for fictional slaughter, and demonstrates that this has always been an aspect of English dramatic culture. This aspect of the commentary on the Aldwych *Malfi* accepts the same principle we have seen articulated by those who dismiss the play as inert in the modern age – a gulf between the present and the past – but interpret its

implications differently. For this relatively small number of critics, along with the leadership of the RSC, *Malfi*'s pastness is what can bring it alive for modern audiences: it is not a failing, an obscurity or a "difficulty" which actors can attempt, but a tool for stripping back the deadening accretions of more recent cultural history.

Thus despite the received narrative that *Malfi* suddenly spoke urgently and clearly to audiences after the Second World War, pastness remained its defining characteristic for a long time afterwards. Its very failure to articulate clearly and coherently what was felt by many to be its potential to address contemporary problems set up powerful tensions which dominated the play's reception. Its pastness could form the basis for an approving review or a complete dismissal, but much of *Malfi*'s force continued to originate in a sense of rupture – whether the play was framed as cut off from the modern world, or from the stage traditions of the last era.

4.3.1 Nothing like a Dame: identification with the Duchess in the twentieth century.

During the first fifty years of the twentieth century, the critical commentary on the actors who played the Duchess tends to fold them into the play's pastness. They are framed as either a slight counterbalance to the excesses and archaisms of the play, or as failures who prove that the play cannot be "attempted" successfully. Thus when the Phoenix Society brought the play into the "other theatre" in 1919, the *Daily Express* described the prospect in this way:

> The play was "approvedly well acted at Blackfriars" about 1623 and as Miss Cathleen Nesbitt is to be our "Duchess" tomorrow, there is every reason to expect that it will be done so again. Miss Nesbitt is one of our young actresses who takes her work very seriously. She has only recently returned from New York, where she scored a hit in intellectual plays. (*Daily Express*, 22nd Nov. 1919)

When the paper came to review this production, it criticised the "dreadful old play" with its obvious artifice, violence and tendency towards the "ludicrous", before remarking "The beauty of many of the lines relieved the tedium, and they were admirably spoken...Miss Cathleen Nesbitt as the Duchess acted with fine restraint and frequent flashes of power" (25th Nov. 1919). This production provides us with an actor put into both relationships I have mentioned with the play's pastness: in the first the "serious" young actor of "intellectual plays" is set to bring a work to light which will improve the standard of the stage, in the second her "fine

restraint" demonstrates her taste when dealing with an extravagant and borderline offensive work like *Malfi*.

The Times' comments on the 1945 Haymarket production indulged in the same rhetorical manoeuvre: pitting a talented actor against a rotten play in a plucky but doomed attempt at revival. After its strictures on the play, and praise for the efforts (if not the achievement) of the producers, the piece reads:

> It is true, however, that while the Duchess lives in the person of Miss Peggy Ashcroft, the players' adventure seems less perilous than it afterwards becomes. Her wooing of the steward is delightful in its ease and certainty of touch, and her indiscreet gossipings with her husband, her maid, and the open-eared Bosola have the authentic sparkle that happiness assumed as a matter of right may confer. Nor does she fail when she is called upon to reveal the resistant spirit of the doomed woman. (*The Times*, 19th Apr. 1945)

This tendency for the play's pastness to subsume its female lead is not simply a coincidence due to the scarcity of column inches or the desire of newspaper critics to relate everything in a piece to a central idea. The relative obscurity (in the commentary) of the earlier twentieth-century actors who played the Duchess was a secure part of their cultural profile, and we can find a clue to the reason why in a generally favourable review of Ashcroft's performance in 1960 at the Aldwych:

> Peggy Ashcroft, who played the Duchess when the play was last produced in London 15 years ago, again leads the cast. She brings an added depth and maturity to a performance already noted for its sensitivity and moving simplicity. But nothing but the grand manner will do for this ill-starred Jacobean heroine. And that Dame Peggy, for all her great ability, hardly achieves. (*Gloucester Echo*, 1st Dec. 1960)

Here we have an explicit reference to the yardstick which so many reviewers seem to have been silently using to find productions wanting: the "grand manner". Given the play's unusual structure, with a female lead of extraordinary range, *Malfi* could have been a potential "star vehicle", but its place in the "other theatre" meant that only less famous actors would perform in it (until 1945.) To the critics, however, the play nevertheless cried out for a *grande dame* of the theatre, the only model available to them for an actor who could fill a role like the Duchess, and the interpretations of the experimental actors of the "other theatre" did not fit

this model. They are almost invisible in the reviews because they are not attempting a performance in the grand, starry style, but the critics who comment on them cannot see their interpretation of the role, only a gap where they think a star is missing. The Duchess undoubtedly exists as a cultural figure in the period, but the commentators have yet to update their notions about how such a role can be released on the stage. To underline this problem, we might turn our attention to a photograph in the *Daily Mirror* of 5th January 1926, which shows pictures of a society fancy dress ball held at Claridge's Hotel, including one of "Miss Baba Beaton [left] as the Duchess of Malfi, and Miss Nancy Beaton in an early Victorian dress" (*Daily Mirror*, 5th Jan 1926, reproduced in Appendix E). The two sisters neatly embody the association of this character with an outdated idea of cultural production, the *grande dame* of the theatre. This would change, however, with the 1961 Aldwych production, when a great deal of attention was paid to Peggy Ashcroft as the central figure of this *Malfi*.

4.3.2 'More ripely moving': Peggy Ashcroft and the Aldwych *Malfi*

Peggy Ashcroft's performance as the Duchess at the Aldwych in 1960 was a vital part of the cultural politics of the production, and indeed of the fledgling RSC as a whole. Her presence in the cast appears to have been part of an attempt by Peter Hall to stake a claim for the company as the inheritors of an English classical tradition of theatre, and a claim that the RSC had superseded its predecessors in that tradition at the same time. Bringing Peggy Ashcroft into the RSC – particularly in the role of the Duchess – allowed Hall to construct an imagined verse-speaking lineage for the company which stretched back through William Poel, all the way to Betterton, identifying it with an authentic continuing strand of Shakespearean performance. Within this project, Peggy Ashcroft and (to a lesser extent) Edith Evans, were cast as the means by which Hall could access the tradition, since they had worked with important male actors who had coached them in the verse-speaking Hall emphasized so strongly. This may seem to place her in a rather passive role, but the fact that Ashcroft could play the role Hall needed in his new classical company was due to a development in her repertory which she herself had pioneered: repeating classical roles at intervals in order to "improve" her version of them, as recorded by Sandra Richards (190). Both Ashcroft's private correspondence and press commentary will demonstrate a widespread understanding that Ashcroft had brought her role with her from the Haymarket, and "improved" it at the Aldwych (Billington, *Peggy* 191). This aspect of her working technique meant that artists and critics alike

identified Ashcroft's second Duchess as not a repetition or a copy of her previous version at the Haymarket, but as an advance on it, and the location of Ashcroft's "true" Duchess.

Neither would this transfer of cultural inheritance have been possible without the peculiar nature of the role Ashcroft was playing. We have seen previously how the unparalleled range and agency of the Duchess can "overbalance" the work in performance and thus disrupt the established economic and industrial relationships which go into producing the play: for example in Glyn's ability to leave Sadler's Wells, taking the play with her, or Karen Edward's theory about the strain put on the sharer/apprentice system by the play's first performances. The companies within which Ashcroft performed this role were headed by Gielgud (1945) and Hall (1961): an excellent example of what Trussler has called the shift "from actor-manager to director", a widely accepted trope in theatre history (284). Ashcroft's ability to shift the cultural "heft" from one company to another demonstrates how far her performance as the Duchess disrupted the control of the production which might have been expected to be vested in actor-manager or director: once again what I have called "dominance of the Duchess" overbalances the theatrical organisations within which the play is produced.

Peggy Ashcroft's public association with *Malfi* began when she played the lead role for John Gielgud's production at the Haymarket in 1945. According to Michael Billington's biography of her, the play had been ""a favourite of Peggy's and her brother's since adolescence" and the internal politics of the company made her link with the part stronger when some of the group mutinied and tried to stop the production from taking place, fearing it would be a failure (111). A private letter from Ashcroft offers a glimpse of how she felt about the role at this time: "I hope that during this week *something* of Webster's Duchess will come alive...I still feel oppressed with the responsibility of playing the Duchess. I love it so much I can *never* do it justice" and (quoted in Billington, 112). This association was be important to Hall, because for him Ashcroft represented a link to Rylands and the tradition of verse-speaking which he claimed formed the cornerstone of the RSC's approach to Shakespeare. In *Shakespeare's Advice to the Players*, he dismissed discussion of the company's early aesthetic in terms of neo-Brechtian staging or left-wing politics as missing the point. The RSC, he declares, 'was the product of a group of actors all speaking the text in the same way and a group of directors who agreed that they all knew what to look for in the verse" (203). In his writings, Hall repeatedly links this way of 'speaking the text', to his time in the Marlowe Society at Cambridge, under the direction of George Rylands. In *Exposed by the Mask*, he relates that "The Society was founded in 1907, inspired by the example of William Poel, the great Shakespearean revolutionary and scourge of Irving" and he uses this link to Poel as a

means of positioning himself within a much longer theatrical tradition, stretching back to Betterton (42).

The association with Poel is made again when Hall mentions Edith Evans, "one of the first great actors I worked with as a young director", who also passed along similar "rules of verse" which William Poel had taught her (43). This notion of the company's verse-speaking as the latest link in an unbroken tradition which stretched back from the 1960s to the 1660s was clearly a powerful enabling myth, and one which Ashcroft herself referred to in an interview in 1971: "You see, I think what we do now basically goes back to William Poel", "Edith Evans (who I worked with when I was young...) had been a student of William Poel" (Addenbrooke, 191; see also McLuskie and Uglow, 50-1)). Opening the RSC's London operation with a recreation of a production from fifteen years ago, in which Rylands had directed Ashcroft, can be read as part of Hall's attempt to position himself and his new company in the "Poel tradition", which they believed stretched back to the Restoration.

Ashcroft's ability to bring the cultural capital of this tradition with her and thus "anoint" the RSC as the heirs of Poel and Betterton, depended on her work with Rylands, but also on the advances she had made in classical repertory. Richards points out in *The Rise of the English Actress* that "The important precedent that [Ashcroft] was able to establish from the beginning of her career was for actresses to be given the chance to develop roles in which they had succeeded at earlier periods of their lives" (190). The most famous example of this is the series of Juliets she played in 1932, 1933 and 1935. Billington describes her interpretation of the character as improving with each recreation, and Ashcroft herself has written that she only achieved the performance she wanted in the last production (Billington, *Peggy* 77; Ashcroft, 'Playing' 13). There is evidence that this model of "development" was part of the way the Aldwych *Malfi* was understood by both those involved and the critics. Rylands saw the production, and a letter from Ashcroft to him suggests he had been critical: "*Hoped* you would have liked it more than that, for I *feel* the part has grown in size as it should having had its earlier production. I would *like* you to see it again when all has settled but I think you would not want to" (quoted in Billington, *Peggy* 191). Whatever Rylands had said about the Aldwych production, Ashcroft had clearly been expecting him to see it as she did: as an advance on the version they had worked on together in 1945. Her letter implicitly places the Haymarket *Malfi* as part of the process which produced the Aldwych version: an earlier incarnation which, though satisfying at the time, had been superseded by later improvements.

It is important to point out that the process I have been describing was not simply going on in the psyches and correspondence of a few theatre artistes. Newspaper commentary demonstrates an awareness of the "development" which was supposedly

occurring. When the Aldwych production was first announced, a very large number of the papers referred to the earlier incarnation at the Haymarket – to take a couple of representative examples, the *Guardian* remarked that "productions planned [include] a revival of Webster's "The Duchess of Malfi", not seen in the West End since Gielgud's Haymarket season of 1946 [sic] (with Peggy Ashcroft leading and George Rylands producing" and the *Birmingham Post* mentioned that "Peggy Ashcroft will appear in the title role, a part she acted at the Haymarket in 1945" (*Guardian*, 31st Oct. 1960; *Birmingham Post*, 31st Oct. 1960).

When it came to reviews, the commentary made it clear that Ashcroft's previous performance – and the notion of "development" – was a significant part of the production's framing. The *Gloucester Echo*, after noting that "Ashcroft...played the Duchess when the play was last produced in London 15 years ago", considered that "She brings an added depth and maturity to a performance already noted for its sensitivity and moving simplicity" (*Gloucester Echo*, 1st Dec. 1960). J.C. Trewin at the *Birmingham Post* declared "I had not thought it possible for Dame Peggy Ashcroft to give more pathos to the Duchess; but tonight she moved triumphantly forward" and the *Birmingham Mail* was more measured but still basing its opinion on the same assumptions: "Dame Peggy Ashcroft's Duchess, is, if anything, more commanding than ever" (*Birmingham Post*, 16th Dec. 1960; *Birmingham Mail*, 16th Dec. 1960).

The comparatives continued: the *Yorkshire Post* gave its opinion that "Peggy Ashcroft has played the Duchess before, but perhaps never quite with such regard for detail", whilst J.C. Trewin stated in the *Illustrated London News* that "I had known Dame Peggy's smaller version of the Duchess...Dame Peggy has trebled, quadrupled her 1945 performance" (*Yorkshire Post*, 17th Dec. 1960; *Illustrated London News*, 17th Dec. 1960). The *Guardian* found "more authority and quite as much pathos" in her new version of the role and the *Western Independent* decided that "Dame Peggy Ashcroft has widened and deepened her interpretation" (*The Guardian*, 17th Dec. 1960; *The Western Independent*, 18th Dec. 1960). Kenneth Tynan's opinion, that "Peggy Ashcroft's Duchess is more ripely moving than her Haymarket performance of fifteen years ago", not only made an explicit comparison, but co-opted the previous performance into an organic model of development (Tynan, *View*, 300). If the Aldwych *Malfi* was "more ripely moving", the Haymarket version is cast retrospectively as an earlier stage in an inevitable (and desirable) process of development.[25] By bringing the Duchess with her from the Haymarket, she had also brought *Malfi*.

[25] McLuskie and Uglow take a different position, stating that "Peggy Ashcroft's repetition of the part made comparisons with the 1945 production inevitable, and they were not to the modern production's advantage" (50). The reviews they cite in support of this interpretation, however, are not reflected in the balance of opinion in the commentary I have found.

In Ashcroft's ability to take the production with her – rather in the way Isabella Glyn did when leaving Sadler's Wells – we can see the unusual extent to which the Duchess is the centre of gravity for the play. This notion, of the Duchess' ability to disrupt the industrial and institutional relations of its theatrical context, can be reapplied to the events of the mid-twentieth century, in order to demonstrate how Ashcroft's actions cut across the general trends of development in institutional authority. The Haymarket and Royal Shakespeare companies provide an excellent example of a change in British theatre of the early twentieth century, which Trussler has summed up as "from Actor-manager to Director" (284). Trussler uses the phrase to describe a shift in the organisation of theatre companies, from the "actor-managers in the traditional mould", with their "extrovert proprietorial fashion" to "commercial impresarios" who were less involved with the "overall style of... productions" and left this to the new breed of non-acting directors (285, 286).

Though Trussler uses the phrase when describing changes during the 1920s and 30s, I think it is useful as a model for comparing the Haymarket and RSC. I quoted Michael Billington earlier in the chapter to the effect that the post-war Haymarket was a last gasp of a pre-war style and that patrons would see Gielgud's productions there as a form of "restoration". Certainly the press tended to identify the Haymarket *Malfi* as Gielgud's: Trewin mentioned Ashcroft performing in the "revival (for John Gielgud) in the Haymarket" and the Guardian referred to "Gielgud's Haymarket season of 1946" (*Illustrated London News*, 17th Dec., *The Guardian*, 31st Oct. 1960). The play's later appearance at the Aldwych is generally regarded as attached to Hall, the *London American* describing "Peter Hall's opening production" and the *Evening Standard* speculated on what "Peter Hall had deliberately set out" to achieve (*London American*, 3rd Nov. 1960; *Evening Standard*, 15th Dec. 1960). The shift between the two models is hinted at in the fact that both Hall (in his later writings) and Rylands (in his apparent criticism to Ashcroft) seem to have regarded the latter's involvement with the Haymarket version as just as significant as Gielgud's.

The extent to which the situations at the Haymarket and the Aldwych fit comfortably into this received trope of theatre history serves to highlight the play's identification with Ashcroft. Though we can hardly isolate variables or run control experiments in theatre history, Trussler's model provides additional support for the notion that Ashcroft cut across the general development of theatrical institutions, and that the role of the Duchess provided an unusually apt vehicle. From the 1890s to the mid-twentieth century we have seen the role subsumed within other aspects of the play's framing, but with Ashcroft the "dominance of the Duchess" reasserts itself as an essential element of the play's history.

Conclusion

In 1961, with its production at the Aldwych, a period in *Malfi*'s history came to an end. It had been performed by one of the nation's major theatre companies, in the heart of the Shakespearean establishment, with a theatrical Dame in the lead. The play had risen through the "other theatre" to a point where it would establish itself securely as part of the English classical repertory. The complex set of pressures exerted by the three discourses I have been analysing – pastness, the dominance of the Duchess and not-Shakespeare – had determined *Malfi*'s cultural profile in the first sixty years of the century, but with its appearance at the Aldwych, those pressures had shifted. This is not to say that pastness would not be an issue in the coming decades: reviewers would continue to point to giggling audience members and ask why the play had been revived, but the RSC's inclusion of the play in its season marked a turn in the tide. It had moved into a very different set of institutional circumstances, which would alter its framing and reception in the future. Thus it is here, rather than at the end of the war, that *Malfi*'s turning point was reached, and a new era in the play's history began which has continued to the present day.

Conclusion

The three strands of this thesis have provided a way to track and analyse key aspects of *Malfi*'s framing and interpretation in case studies selected from four hundred years of the play's afterlife. From the 1623 printing, its connection to the past and its resistance to being completely reproduced via the medium within which it appears has meant that *Malfi* has been used to access the authority of the past, and bring that authority to bear upon the present. This has included a theatrical pastness, based upon the changing conventions and institutions of British theatre, demonstrated in the 1708 double printing which flaunted the part of the playtext which were too sexually or politically controversial to stage, and in the mid-twentieth-century debates over whether *Malfi* was saddled with an "antiquated theatricalism" or could help theatre break free from the deadening hand of Victorian stage traditions. It has also included a more general cultural pastness, in which the play stands for a mythologically powerful era of national history: whether it was the Elizabethan nostalgia of the 1620s, 1730s or 1850s, instantiations of *Malfi* have almost always prompted a harking back to what was perceived as a founding moment in English history. The persistence of pastness as an essential element in the play's cultural profile is all the more striking given the extent to which it was reshaped during its history: despite cutting, adaptation and rewriting, *Malfi* refused to be subsumed within the theatrical conventions of any later period. Just as remarkable is the range of cultural politics which have co-opted the play's pastness, from arguing for war with Spain (1620s and 1730s), to rebuking the French and Norwegian influences on British culture (1890s), and even arguing that "decadent" continental culture has more in common with our national past than has been generally admitted (1890s).

The play's perceived relationship to the shifting figure of Shakespeare also repeatedly framed its instantiations during the case studies I have examined. The appearance of *Malfi* near turning points in Shakespeare's own afterlife - the 1623 First Folio, the 1709 Rowe edition, Theobald's work in the 1730s, Poel's experiments in the 1890s and the forming of the RSC in the 1960s – meant that investigating its framing in relation to the developing icon of Shakespeare produced valuable insights into both *Malfi* and Shakespeare. The "unorphaned" 1708 quarto, which never had an authorial father-figure to abandon it, and Poel's dancing skeletons, which could "mop and mow" at the audience in a grisly parody of life but could never hope to be revived, only make sense when understood against the background of "Shakespeare" discourse, but can in turn elucidate that by contrast and comparison.

Webster's play has sometimes been framed as a lesser version of Shakespeare's genius (1730s), and sometimes as an oppositional work able to critique Shakespeare-dominated cultural values (1890s), but their continuing juxtaposition sheds light on both of them.

Finally, the unusual structure of the play (as we have it in the 1623 printing), with a central female role of almost unparalleled breadth and emotional subtlety, has meant that the Duchess has acted as a focus for the plays perceived meanings. Both actors and printings have become to varying degrees "identified" with the Duchess, as commentators conflate the performer with the role. Both Middleton and Rowley, when praising Webster's play in the 1623 quarto, refer to "seeing" the "Duchess", whilst the 1708 quarto tropes the play as a distressed woman casting throwing herself on the mercy of the printing's intended patron. This "dominance of the Duchess" sets up a force which has been co-opted to reinforce the theatrical arrangements within which the play is being performed (the Duchess as "pathetic heroine") and also to cut across those arrangements (Glyn and Ashcroft both "taking" the play from one management to another). As with the other two strands, the dominance of the Duchess has been used to bolster varying cultural politics, but has regularly appeared as a defining element of the play's profile across its instantiations.

These strands make up a thesis which recognises the points around which commentary has tended to focus, whilst giving weight to the differences in context and without suggesting that they represent fixed aspects of an essential play whose meanings the instantiations reveal. I argued in the introduction that this investigation could also help to advance the field of Early Modern performance studies by expanding the scope of that field, and by showing up some of the weaknesses and blind spots of the Shakespeare-centred model which has until recently been so dominant. By presenting a more comprehensively de-centred model of performance studies, which moves further away from the lingering influences of the idea of the "original" play and its "discovery" via the modernist narrative of progressive theatre history, I hoped to show how the practice of Early Modern performance studies could be brought more into line with the theoretical underpinnings espoused by practitioners such as Sarah Werner, Pascale Aebischer, William B. Worthen and others.

Expanding the field

On a primary level, this study has extended the boundaries of Early Modern performance studies by bringing together and analysing material concerning *Malfi*'s afterlife within a "performance studies" framework and demonstrating that this is the most coherent way to treat the evidence available. Faced with the high level of adaptation throughout the

play's history, alongside the fact that the text generally agreed to be authoritative (the 1623 quarto) specifically advertises its difference from the version which appeared on stage at the time, following the assumptions of critics like J.L. Styan and Andrew Gurr would have meant either disregarding the majority of its afterlife, or labelling it as a deviation from the "true" play. Eschewing an essentialist model of the play's existence through time, and approaching it as a series of instantiations, has allowed me to make sense of the various printings and productions, and to draw attention to similarities in their framing without claiming that these represented "a touch of the play's immortality" (Styan, 18).

The fact that such a project has been possible validates the assumptions I identified in the introduction as typical of a "performance studies" approach, and the eclectic set of critical sources I found it necessary to draw on validates Sarah Werner's contention that "we don't imagine that Shakespeare's stagecraft is the same as that of other playwrights, nor do I think we believe that our responses to Shakespeare's authority mirror responses to lesser-known playwrights" ('Review', 114-5). The dominance of the Duchess is a distinctive aspect of the play's "stagecraft" which has loomed large in this thesis, and both the pastness and not-Shakespeare strands make clear how *Malfi*'s "authority" produced very different responses in audiences and commentators from those produced by Shakespeare. The mass of material from which I had to select my case studies also answers (at least partially) Emma Smith's concern that "Because the range of actual performances of non-Shakespearean plays often does not exist, is not adequately documented, or is more disconnected in nature" tracing those performances must necessarily simply reinforce a Shakespeare-centred model of value via a cycle in which the non-Shakespearean works prove their inferiority through their relative poverty of afterlife ('Relevance", 149).

Investigating *Malfi*'s afterlife within the framework of assumptions provided by performance studies expands the field's scope and in doing so brings into focus some concerns we might have about the play's production history. Whilst contemplating the cultural politics which have co-opted its pastness over the case studies, I found myself struck by the comments by Maurice Charney which I cited in the introduction. Whilst lamenting the non-existence of a field he wanted to call "comparative Shakespeare studies", Charney remarked that:

> At Rutgers, we have at least a thousand students every semester studying Shakespeare - it may be because New Jersey has such a large ethnic population waiting to stake their claim in Anglo-American culture – and probably less than twenty-five students (if

> that many) studying all of the other dramatists who were contemporaries of Shakespeare. ('Rough or Smooth', 74)

Though I want to move beyond the notion that "contemporaries" were only instrumental in the greater appreciation of Shakespeare, Charney's speculation that the high number of students taking his classes reflected a desire by ethnic minority populations to "stake their claim in Anglo-American culture" points to a troubling aspect of *Malfi*'s contemporary situation. A work which has so frequently been used to define "English" culture as actively hostile to Spanish Catholic culture has been canonised in academic and theatrical institutions which, as Charney points out, mediate privileged models of national identity. Given the way in which some high-profile commentators such as Samuel P. Huntingdon have framed the movement of modern American culture as a conflict between "Anglo-Protestant" culture and Catholic Hispanic culture in works such as *Who Are We?*, we should at least be aware of the susceptibility of Webster's play to being co-opted to a vision of modernity which sees seventeenth-century wars of religion being replayed in a "cultural" mode across the American continent. Susan Bennett does describe the distinctively left-wing version of the play used by Red Shift to comment on the "Calvi affair" engulfing the Vatican in the early 1980s, but it should be recognised that this production made its political point by playing up the aspects of *Malfi* which have been used across the centuries to stereotype Catholics in general as sexually deviant, superstitious and politically corrupt (84-87). This issue is much less visible if one simply placed *Malfi* within the existing Shakespeare-dominated narratives and structures of performance studies, since it arises from the specifics of the play's framing across time. Thus the manifest difference of *Malfi* through history from a "Shakespearean" model of stagecraft and authority means that investigating it can both productively expand the ground covered by performance studies, demonstrate the viability of investigating non-Shakespearean drama in this way, and alert us to problematic ways this particular play may be framed today.

Modifying the Shakespearean narrative

This study also has also shown up inadequacies in the received Shakespeare-centred narrative of performance history. Some of the points at which *Malfi*'s history intersects with crucial moments in Shakespeare's afterlife – such as the 1623 printings and the Rowe *Works* – can be regarded as useful coincidences, but others demand that the general narrative be modified. Theobald's use of short phrases from Shakespeare in his construction of *The Fatal Secret* comes during a defining shift in literary culture's attitudes to Shakespeare, as described by Jean Marsden as a process through which "Shakespeare as author becomes Shakespeare as

document" (*Re-Imagined*, 2). If Shakespeare's words were becoming so sacrosanct that the Restoration "insertion of non-Shakespearean language or "dross" into Shakespeare's golden words" was seen as a catastrophic failure of taste, then the spectacle of one of the editors who effected that shift taking cuttings from the canon to build another play should give us pause for thought. Does it represent a sense that some words are more "Shakespearean" than others? That Shakespeare as cultural icon and sacred text had not outstripped his contemporaries as far as we had thought by the 1730s? These questions are beyond the scope of this study, but they do suggest that the Shakespeare narrative of the mid-eighteenth century can be illuminated further by its intersection with *Malfi*.

Peter Hall's production of *Malfi* in 1960 provides a similar moment which calls for revision of the received narrative. The formation of the RSC under Hall's management, and the involvement of Peggy Ashcroft, with all the cultural freight she brought from her work with John Gielgud and others, has been identified as a crucial point in the "lineage" of Shakespearean production in Britain (Hall *Exposed,* 42; Taylor 235). However, this transfer of Shakespearean gravitas from the old actor-manager era to the modern director's theatre, and Ashcroft's specific transfer of the Rylands/ Poel verse-speaking style, took place via *Malfi*, a non-Shakespearean play which was received by the reviewers and public as such. Nor is this the only time at non-Shakespearean work has mediated the transition of major "Shakespearean" figures within the RSC: Sally Beauman records that Trevor Nunn had been a failure at the company and "lived in daily expectation of dismissal" before proving himself with a 1966 production of *The Revenger's Tragedy* which "marked his first step towards the directorship of the RSC" (289) and Colin Chambers notes that it was Adrian Noble's production of *Malfi* in Manchester which caught the RSC leadership's eye and led to his first assistant directorship in 1980 (96). This points to an unexamined role which non-Shakespearean work (notably *Malfi* itself) has played in the mediation and development of the Shakespearean "lineage", which has been obscured by the focus of investigation in the past.

More generally, this investigation has challenged the "modernist" progressive narrative, laid out in the writings of commentators from William Poel to J.L. Styan, in which the late nineteenth century sees the "discovery" of the "authentic" way to produce Shakespeare, stressing the way in which his texts provide "signals" which need to be placed back into the context of Early Modern stage practices in order to "release" their meaning. This narrative relies on defining itself against the way in which the period between the "Shakespearean" and "modern" eras has obscured and traduced the plays' true meanings, and constructs Shakespeare as the paradigmatic figure of Early Modern culture, making him the touchstone of "authentic" English cultural value. My thesis has challenged this model by pointing out the

ways in which productions by key figures of this narrative (Poel, Gielgud, Hall) differed from, and were received as different from, the aspects of their Shakespearean work which the modernist narrative stresses. Poel's dancing skeletons and the reviewers who compare Hall's production to a horror film work to situate their productions within a "low" model of culture which clashes with their connection with the ultimate "high" culture figure of Shakespeare. The case studies I have investigated involve a work from the same "authentic" Early Modern theatrical context being produced and consumed in ways which question the comfortable alignment between the "rediscovery" of Shakespeare's plays via "authentic" stagecraft, and the dominant Shakespeare-centred scale of cultural value. In doing so they challenge the centrality of a Shakespearean model of value both in their own cultural contexts, and in the practices of performance studies today.

Altering the vision of Early Modern performance studies

If this study has demonstrated the validity of investigating non-Shakespearean drama within a performance studies framework, and pointed out ways in which the Shakespeare-centred conception of the field needs to be modified, it also points the way towards a radically decentred model of Early Modern performance studies. I began this thesis by citing Genevieve Love to the effect that "perhaps each early modern playwright would need, as Shakespeare has, a mode of performance criticism specially attuned to his particular history, style, dramaturgy", and proposing to take her suggestion one step further, constructing a new approach to deal with one specific play ('Without Performance', 133). My thesis suggests that a strong authorial presence is not a defining, or indeed necessary, feature of Early Modern drama afterlives. Werner's contention that "our responses to Shakespeare's authority [do not] mirror responses to lesser-known playwrights" contains an important insight which this thesis has foregrounded: the extent to which Webster's authority is so much weaker than Shakespeare's, and the fact it is not Webster's authority which most frequently delineates and directs the *Malfi*'s meanings during its afterlife. Rather than attempting to construct authorial figures on the Shakespearean model for playwrights such as Dekker, Webster and Tourneur – an effort which would surely fail, justifying Smith's concern about a self-fuelling cycle of inferiority – it makes more sense to regard Shakespeare as a fascinating aberration and investigate the afterlife other early modern plays without such a narrow emphasis on the authorial figure.

After all, the work on the development of the Shakespearean figure by Michael Dobson and Gary Taylor, which I have been citing throughout this thesis, highlights how exceptional and historically contingent the process was which culminated in that figure. John

Jowett's essay in *Thomas Middleton and Early Modern Textual Culture* makes clear the futility of searching for another Shakespearean author-figure who will provide an exact counterbalance, even in a playwright with an extensive and widely-consumed body of work: "The Middleton canon had a weak authorial underpinning...In this version of transmission and reception, the author's readers are utterly without loyalty to him" (312). The very existence of the Early Modern "author" as addressed by modern university study, according to Jowett, depends upon "an editorial act of willed centripetalism against the dispersive energies of production, circulation and reading" (312). Approaching Early Modern performance histories more pragmatically, by attending to discursive forces like "pastness" which may frame the reception of individual works, and which may well not be present so strongly in the "original" instantiations of these works, offers a much more productive means of arranging investigation, and one which is less likely to find such histories "lacking" because they do not conform to the Shakespearean model.[26] This shift reflects the trends which are evident in a performance studies approach, such as decentring the text, a shift away from organizing narrative around the polarities of "original" and twentieth-century production, and an anti-essentialist notion of the play's existence through time. Moving towards a decentred Early Modern performance studies which sought out the alternative foci around which plays' afterlives were organized would bring its practice further into line with the aspirations expressed by Werner and others, and would more productively exploit the theoretical insights which underpin the work already being done. It would certainly offer a more logical approach than using the most exceptional case in English theatrical history as a template to be imposed upon the rest. Thus my investigation of *Malfi* has drawn on the principles which critics of the performance studies school have elaborated, and suggested how those principles could be put into practice in an even fuller and more productive sense.

[26] Wendy Griswold made some moves in this direction in her 1986 study *Renaissance Revivals: City Comedy and Revenge Tragedy in the London Theatre 1576 –1980*, which arranged its investigation around genre. However, her concern to investigate the way in which twentieth-century revivals occurred when aspects of contemporary society paralleled the context of "original" production meant that her work reproduced the progressive narrative of origin, obscurity and discovery, operating within what we might describe as a "contextual essentialism" which did not take it very far from textual essentialism.

Appendices

Appendix A: Timeline of most significant dates in *Malfi*'s production history.

1613/4: Premiere of *Malfi* on the London stage.

1618: Orazio Busino sees a production.

1623: First quarto printed; negotiations over the "Spanish Match"

1630: Played at Cockpit-in-Court for King Charles I.

1657: Printing: *The Dutchesse of Malfy a Tragedy*

1668: Pepys notes seeing a performance.

1678: Printing: *The Dutchesse of Malfey a Tragedy*

1686: Performed in the Great Hall at Whitehall

1705: Performed at Lincoln's Inn Fields

1708: Printing: *The Unfortunate Duchess of Malfi* (the "double quarto")

1732: *The Fatal Secret* appears on the London stage.

1735: *The Fatal Secret* printed.

1850: R.H. Horne's version of *Malfi* appears at Sadler's Wells, starring Isabella Glyn.

1851: John Tallis and Co. print Horne's adaptation, with a portrait and "memoir" of Glyn. She uses the role for a benefit performance.

1852: Glyn leaves Sadler's Wells and recreates the role at the Surrey Theatre

1857: Four-volume edition of Webster's works by Hazlitt.

1864: Produced at Sadler's Wells (without Glyn).

1865: Ernest Lafond's translation of *Malfi* published in Paris.

1883: Printed as No. 350 in series of "Dick's Standard Plays".

1888: J.A. Symonds edits a volume of the works of Webster and Torneur.

1890: *Malfi* appears in American edition of *Best Elizabethan Plays*, ed. William Roscoe Thayer

1892: The Independent Theatre Society perform *Malfi* in a small semi-professional production under the auspices of William Poel and J.T. Grein.

1896: The play is edited by C. Vaughan.

1908: Vaughan's edition is reprinted.

1919: Produced by the Phoenix Society, another reprint of Vaughan's edition.

1926: Production at the York Everyman Theatre.

1929: Produced by the Players' Theatre.

1933: An edition of Webster and Tourneur is published by J.M. Dent.

1935: Production at the Embassy Theatre, Swiss Cottage.

1937: Performed at the Tavistock Little Theatre.

1945: *Malfi* is performed at the Haymarket under John Gielgud, starring Peggy Ashcroft. Sylvan Press produced an edition including essays by George Rylands and Charles Williams.

1946: Rylands directs the play on Broadway, at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre.

1949: An edition illustrated by Adrian Daintrey.

1951: Performed by Oxford University Dramatic Society.

1953: Produced by London Artists Theatre Company and at the Little Library Theatre, Manchester. Bristol University drama department tour the play on the continent.

1957: Theatre Workshop perform the play at Stratford East. Excerpts are included in a recital at Stratford-upon-Avon which features Gielgud and Ashcroft. In New York, a production appears at the Phoenix Theatre, off Broadway.

1958: F.L. Lucas edits the play.

1960: The Royal Shakespeare Company produce *Malfi* at Stratford and London, starring Peggy Ashcroft.

Appendix B: Comments by Orazio Busino, chaplain to the Venetian Ambassador to London, including reference to an apparent performance of *Malfi* (cited in Hunter and Hunter, 31-2).

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 god 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.

Appendix C: a page of the 1708 quarto, showing the marginal quotation marks.

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Appendix D: Baba Beaton dressed as the Duchess of Malfi at the "Peter Pan Ball" at Claridge's Hotel, *Daily Mail* 5th Jan. 1926 (bottom right).

This image has been removed by the author of the thesis for copyright reasons.

Appendix E: *Daily Express* 19th Apr. 1945, with some of the first photographs from Buchenwald, and a review of the Haymarket production of *Malfi* (bottom right, under the title "No gangster film equals this play").

This image has been removed by the author of the thesis for copyright reasons.

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