TEXT AND PERFORMANCE

General Editor: Michael Scott

The series is designed to introduce sixth-form and undergraduate students to the themes, continuing vitality and performance of major dramatic works. The attention given to production aspects is an element of special importance, responding to the invigoration given to literary study by the work of leading contemporary critics.

The prime aim is to present each play as a vital experience in the mind of the reader – achieved by analysis of the text in relation to its themes and theatricality. Emphasis is accordingly placed on the relevance of the work to the modern reader and the world of today. At the same time, traditional views are presented and appraised, forming the basis from which a creative response to the text can develop.

In each volume, Part One: *Text* discusses certain key themes or problems, the reader being encouraged to gain a stronger perception both of the inherent character of the work and also of variations in interpreting it. Part Two: *Performance* examines the ways in which these themes or problems have been handled in modern productions, and the approaches and techniques employed to enhance the play's accessibility to modern audiences.

A synopsis of the play is given and an outline of its major sources, and a concluding Reading List offers guidance to the student's independent study of the work.

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THE WHITE DEVIL AND THE DUCHESS OF MALFI

Text and Performance

RICHARD ALLEN CAVE

M
MACMILLAN
EDUCATION

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Quotations from the texts of the tragedies are taken from David Gunby's edition of *John Webster: Three Plays*, published in the Penguin English Library (Harmondsworth, 1972). All critical material relating to Webster cited in the following study is listed in the Bibliography.

All scholars working seriously on Webster's plays must admit a debt to John Russell Brown's superb editions of the tragedies for The Revels Plays series published by Methuen (*The White Devil*, 1960; *The Duchess of Malfi*, 1964).

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GENERAL EDITOR'S PREFACE

For many years a mutual suspicion existed between the theatre director and the literary critic of drama. Although in the first half of the century there were important exceptions, such was the rule. A radical change of attitude, however, has taken place over the last thirty years. Critics and directors now increasingly recognise the significance of each other's work and acknowledge their growing awareness of interdependence. Both interpret the same text, but do so according to their different situations and functions. Without the director, the designer and the actor, a play's existence is only partial. They revitalise the text with action, enabling the drama to live fully at each performance. The academic critic investigates the script to elucidate its textual problems, understand its conventions and discover how it operates. He may also propose his view of the work, expounding what he considers to be its significance.

Dramatic texts belong therefore to theatre and to literature. The aim of the 'Text and Performance' series is to achieve a fuller recognition of how both enhance our enjoyment of the play. Each volume follows the same basic pattern. Part One provides a critical introduction to the play under discussion, using the techniques and criteria of the literary critic in examining the manner in which the work operates through language, imagery and action. Part Two takes the enquiry further into the play's theatricality by focusing on selected productions of recent times so as to illustrate points of contrast and comparison in the interpretation of different directors and actors, and to demonstrate how the drama has worked on the modern stage. In this way the series seeks to provide a lively and informative introduction to major plays in their text and performance.

MICHAEL SCOTT

PLOT SYNOPSES AND SOURCES

THE WHITE DEVIL

The Duke of Brachiano becomes infatuated with Vittoria Corombona, the wife of Camillo, and seduces her with the aid of his secretary, Flamineo, Vittoria's brother. She instructs the Duke through a cleverly devised account of a dream to murder his wife and her husband. Brachiano privately divorces Isabella, his wife, and has her poisoned; Flamineo organises the death of Camillo. But Isabella was sister to Francisco de Medici, Duke of Florence, and Camillo nephew to Cardinal Monticelso and the murders bring the lovers powerful enemies in State and Church. Vittoria is arrested and tried for adultery and murder; the trial is a travesty of justice; her judges (Monticelso and Francisco) can make no real case against her but they have her imprisoned in a House of Convertites, thus publicly branding her a whore. Francisco decides to pursue his revenge in private and suborns Lodovico, a notorious murderer, to assist him; he then skilfully contrives to get Vittoria abducted from prison by Brachiano, who takes her to his palace at Padua and marries her. Francisco follows them disguised as a Moor, Mulinassar. During the tournament to celebrate the wedding, Francisco and his henchmen poison Brachiano's helmet and subsequently strangle him. Flamineo, enraged at failing to gain preferment by the marriage, first kills his brother Marcello, then persuades Vittoria to join him in a suicide pact. She shoots him and tramples on his body only to discover he has tricked her (the pistols were not loaded) to test her strength of purpose. The two are trapped by Lodovico; he puts them to a lingering death before he is himself slain by command of Brachiano's young heir.

SOURCES

These are chiefly historical, events recorded in the play taking place in Italy in the years 1576–85. While many printed accounts of the lives of Vittoria and Brachiano exist, none can be specifically designated Webster's actual source.

THE DUCHESS OF MALFI

The widowed Duchess of Malfi privately courts her young steward, Antonio, a man whose impeccable nature she has long admired. They wed secretly despite the fact that she has repeatedly been warned against a second marriage by her brothers, the Cardinal and Ferdinand, Duke of Calabria, who talk of not dishonouring their Aragonian blood but who desire to inherit her property. Ferdinand is incestuously attracted to his sister and plants a spy, Bosola, in her entourage to report on her behaviour. For some years the lovers contrive to keep their marriage a secret despite rumours which are current when the Duchess conceives and gives birth to a child. Bosola discovers that the Duchess is wed but cannot determine the identity of her husband. Ferdinand visits the Duchess by night, hoping to trap the unknown husband in her room but, failing to do so, he savagely condemns his sister for her 'looseness' and vows never to see her again. Panic-struck the Duchess and Antonio plan to flee to Ancona and in a thoughtless moment the Duchess confides to the kindly-seeming Bosola who her husband is. The couple are publicly shamed at Ancona by the Cardinal; they part for Antonio's better safety. The Duchess is captured by Bosola and Ferdinand; she is subjected to a series of hideous tortures in the hope of reducing her to abject despair and is finally strangled. Ferdinand grows insane with remorse; the repentant Bosola decides to join with Antonio but, mistaking him for the Cardinal, kills him. Overwhelmed with anguish, Bosola stabs both the Aragonian brothers but himself receives a fatal wound from Ferdinand.

SOURCES

Again historical, relating to events that took place between 1505 and 1513. But Webster clearly knew of them through one or more of the many fictional accounts popular in the early seventeenth century; Painter's *The Palace of Pleasure* (1566–67) is considered the most likely influence.