Postface

REMODELLING THE SKULL BENEATH THE SKIN: WEBSTERIAN ECHOES IN CONTEMPORARY FICTION

"Such a mistake as I have often seen in a play"
(5.5.94)

1. Webster of His Age, Webster of All Time

The complicated critical backstory of Webster's tragedies is a tale of censure and rehabilitation; unfair comparisons (to Shakespeare) and recognition of genius; complaints about incoherent plots and moral chaos and praise for poetry and spiritual redemption. In the last few decades, starting in the 1980s, there has been a tendency to stage Webster's tragedies more frequently than in previous times, and we generally view them as provocative and reflecting our present, disjointed times. The first play to be staged in the newly built (2014) Sam Wanamaker theatre next to the Globe in London was, unsurprisingly, *The Duchess of Malfi* (1614). The director of the 2017 production of *The White Devil* in the same theatre declared in an interview reported in the programme: "It's probably got too much plot —it's like a box set in two hours... It ain't Shakespeare— maybe it's more Tarantino".[1] This attitude is nothing new of course —nineteenth-century critics, such as Charles Lamb, were both entranced and repelled by Webster's "dark side" and his capacity to move horror.[2] Similarly, the corruption,

1. *The White Devil, by John Webster*, programme of the play staged at the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse, London, winter season 2017.
2. David Coleman, *John Webster, Renaissance Dramatist*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2010, p. 57-59.

deviant sexuality and exquisite sacrilegiousness of much Italianate tragedy have been associated with, and often appropriated by, Decadent writers.[1]

As the term "Gothic" in recent times has been de-historicized to describe a kind of aesthetics and mode of writing traceable in authors and genres which are not tied to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, many revenge plays, and especially Webster's, have been analysed as congenial to Gothic sensibility.[2] Luckyj has defined the space in which the Duchess is tormented and brought to death as "the proto-gothic space of the prison" which reflects Ferdinand's "disordered psyche and the play's metatheatrical registering of usurpation and tyranny".[3] "Jacobean", like Gothic, has also been used as a trans-historical category to identify an aesthetics of transgression and dissidence, "a denotation of (moral) decay, excess and violence —deficiencies we also find in our contemporary moment and for which this past can apparently give expression and meaning".[4] Mike Figgis's film *Hotel* (2001), which adapted *The Duchess of Malfi* in a way that rejected the realist style of heritage films in the Merchant-Ivory tradition, was described as a "contemporary Jacobean film".[5] Following a similar line, Alan Taylor[6] has devoted a whole monograph to the way Hitchcock can be refashioned as a Jacobean artist, and his films can be realigned with Webster's tragedies on common thematic and aesthetic grounds. Quite recently, Frazer and Hansen, in an introductory chapter to a volume of criticism on *The White Devil,* raise similar issues when they repeatedly call Webster's tragedy "modern" or "postmodern".[7] However disturbing and unsettling Webster's characters and plots may be, they

1. Alison Shell, *Catholicism, Controversy and the English Literary Imagination, 1558-1660*, Cambridge, CUP, 1999, p. 49-55.
2. See Catherine Belsey, "Beyond Reason: Hamlet and Early Modern Stage Ghosts", *in* Elizabeth Bronfen and Beate Neumeier (eds), *Gothic Renaissance. A Reassessment,* Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2014, p. 32-54.
3. Christina Luckyj (ed), *The Duchess of Malfi. A Critical Guide*, London, Continuum, 2011, p. 99.
4. Susan Bennett, *Performing Nostalgia. Shifting Shakespeare and the Contemporary Past*, London, Routledge, 1996, p. 82.
5. Pascale Aebischer, "Shakespearean Heritage and the Preposterous 'Contemporary Jacobean' Film: Mike Figgis's *Hotel*", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 2009, n°60, p. 279-303, p. 279, 283.
6. Alan Taylor, *Jacobean Visions. Webster, Hitchcock, and Google Culture*, Frankfurt, Peter Lang, 2007.
7. Paul Frazer and Adam Hansen (eds), *The White Devil. A Critical Reader*, London, Bloomsbury, 2016.

undoubtedly resonate as relevant to our contemporary cultural, political, and social contexts.

2. Echoes in/of Webster

For all Webster's apparent continuity with the present, his plays were (are) also the resonance chamber of many texts and discourses of the Renaissance —even obsessively so. Scholars and editors of the last two centuries have pointed out reminiscences, literary allusions and especially direct verbal borrowings from a variety of sources. Dent's "classic" work *John Webster's Borrowing* (1960) concludes that almost everything in Webster's plays must derive from a source.[1] More recently, Robert Henke has noted the dramatist's "habit of slow composition" and concluded, in the line of others,[2] that "no other dramatist of his time cites, plagiarizes, appropriates, and parodies so many authors, even in ways that now suggest the concept of intertextuality".[3] This was at a time in which the art of imitation and rhetorical tradition recommended incorporating borrowed material more than originality, and the use of "commonplace books" in which to jot down useful phrases and passages for future use was not unusual. And yet, Webster appears to have been able to "digest", echo and rework creatively sections of other authors' texts and ideological discourses to an uncommon degree, even for a Renaissance author. And of course Webster also borrows from himself, as imagery, themes, characters and structural components echo each other in *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*, "sister tragedies" in Brown's apt definition.[4] They may be considered "plays of remembrance", not just because they are "suffused with remembrances of the dead"[5] from a religious point of view, but in the way they revive myriad texts, especially those that are more obscure and less likely to be familiar to the modern reader.

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1. John Dent, *John Webster's Borrowing*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1960.
2. See for example Laura Tosi, *La Memoria del testo. Un'analisi macrotestuale delle tragedie di John Webster*, Pisa, Pacini, 2001.
3. Robert Henke, "John Webster: Collaboration and Solitude", *in* Ton Hoenselaars (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Contemporary Dramatists*, Cambridge, CUP, 2012, p. 181-196, p. 182.
4. John Russell Brown, "Introduction", John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi,* ed. John Russell Brown, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1974, p. xvii-lxxi, p. xxxi.
5. Thomas Rist, *Revenge Tragedy and the Drama of Commemoration in Reforming England*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2008, p. 97.

Hansen and Wetmore, in their introduction to *Shakespearean Echoes* (2015), use the "echo scene" from *The Duchess of Malfi* (5.3) to introduce their collection of essays. Webster's scene is read as the symbolical equivalent of the dramatist's own repetition of fragments and echoes of other authors, and of the relationship between sources and their reflections / repetitions / remediations in contemporary culture:

> Echoes validate and protect their originating sources but also negate and unsettle those sources. So acute is this unsettling and negation that they become a form of displacement. Does the echo succeed and overdub the source? Who is the source, then, and who the echo? This scene could be read, seen or heard as an anxious commentary on any act of intertextuality, inheritance, and influence.[1]

In the same way as the Duchess haunts the last act, with her disembodied ghost-like voice, the stories of the Duchess and Vittoria have haunted the imagination of many authors along the centuries, and even before the English dramatist produced his versions. Webster's sources for *The Duchess* (Bandello, Belleforest, Painter among others) and *The White Devil* blend historical fact with the very personal moral perspective and narrative / dramatic skill of the writer. Painter's Duchess (1567), for instance, is driven by lust to marriage "the same serving her but for a mask and coverture to hide her follies and shameless lusts, for which she did the penance that her folly deserved".[2] In the nineteenth century, more authors were fascinated by the central characters of Webster's plays as well as the historical facts behind the tragedy. Tieck and Stendhal,[3] among others, were inspired to give their own fictional rendition of the story of the real-life Vittoria Accoramboni, and similar attention has been given to Giovanna d'Aragona, the "real" Duchess, culminating in the publication of *The Mystery of the Duchess of Malfi* (2002) by Barbara Banks Amendola, who often notes that Webster's version "despite the anachronisms [...] bears some remarkable and

1. Adam Hansen and Kevin J. Wetmore, "Introduction", *in* Adam Hansen and Kevin J. Wetmore (eds), *Shakespearean Echoes*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, p. 1-20, p. 8.
2. William Painter, "The Infortunate Marriage of a Gentleman Called Antonio Bologna with the Duchess of Malfi, and the Pitiful Death of Them Both", *in* Michael Neill (ed), *The Duchess of Malfi*, New York, Norton, "Norton Critical Editions", 2015, p. 127-188, p. 136.
3. Ludwig Tieck, *Vittoria Accorombona* (1840) and Stendhal (Henry Beyle), *Vittoria Accoramboni, Duchesse de Bracciano* (1837).

unaccountable similarities to the real story",[1] the most extraordinary being that of portraying Vittoria and her younger brother as twins, a detail that cannot be found in any of the sources available to Webster. As for significant creative appropriations of Webster, Eliot's critical interest in the dramatist and his own use of Websterian echoes in his poetry seems to dominate the critical discussion. Quotations and isolated allusions to plot elements of Webster's tragedy, in works by Anthony Trollope, Thomas Hardy, Margaret Drabble, and Justin Evans[2] are more frequent than extensive adaptations. Most recently, the poet Derek Mahon has devoted "A Dirge" to the theatrical Duchess.[3]

3. Webster and Detective Fiction

Narrative remediations of Shakespeare's plays are ubiquitous in contemporary culture (see for example fiction for Young Adults) and recently they have attracted considerable critical attention: for example, Graham Holderness, in his *Tales from Shakespeare* (2014), uses the concept of particle collision as a useful analogy to describe an encounter between two texts that produces "a range of new meanings that did not previously exist",[4] and has subtly examined the convergence between the best critical practice and creative appropriation of Shakespeare. The collection of essays *Shakespeare and Millennial Fiction* (2017)[5] investigates the pervasive presence of Shakespeare in the contemporary novel and its subgenres, although fiction in English since its very beginning has often quoted and engaged consciously or unconsciously with Shakespeare. Since its launch in 2015, The Hogarth Shakespeare Project has paid homage to the tradition of narrative appropriation with a series of novels that update and refashion the language and socio-historical-geographical settings of the original plays. After all, one of the

1. Barbara Banks Amendola, *The Mystery of the Duchess of Malfi*, Stroud, Sutton, 2002, p. xxii
2. James Hirsch, "Vittoria's Secret: Teaching Webster's *The White Devil* as a Tragedy of Inscrutability", *in* Karen Bamford and Alexander Leggatt (eds.), *Approaches to Teaching English Renaissance Drama*, New York, Modern Language Association, 2002, p. 73-79, p. 101-103.
3. Hugh Haughton, *The Poetry of Derek Mahon*, Oxford, OUP, 2007, p. 318-319.
4. Graham Holderness, *Tales from Shakespeare. Creative Collisions*, Cambridge, CUP, 2014, p. 18.
5. Andrew James Hartley (ed), *Shakespeare and Millennial Fiction*, Cambridge, CUP, 2017.

most "classic" ways to revise a Shakespeare original, much employed by fan fiction and popular culture, is to turn drama into narrative. This means, for instance, exploring new connections among characters, introducing an omniscient narrator who often appropriates the characters' words as his own and intrudes with comments and interpretations, or by alternating perspectives on events.[1] It also means that out of the wealth of contradictory assertions and perspectives offered by the plays, a coherent, often entirely new, view of character and action, can be given. While the Shakespearean theatrical text can keep all interpretive options open, narrative versions can change a dialogical theatrical form into a linear monological narrative by adding motivations to the characters. Stephen Greenblatt has argued that, by deliberately withdrawing motivation, Shakespeare created a "strategic opacity" that

> released an enormous energy that had been at least partially blocked or contained by familiar, reassuring explanations. [...] Tearing away the structure of superficial meanings, he fashioned an inner structure through the resonant echoing of key terms, the subtle development of images, the brilliant orchestration of scenes, the complex unfolding of ideas, the intertwining of parallel plots, the uncovering of psychological associations.[2]

Greenblatt's quotation could easily apply to Webster's plays —*The Duchess of Malfi* has been defined as a play that deliberately withholds information and the problem of Victoria's guilt, or innocence, in *The White Devil* has plagued critics for centuries. The fact that criticism has looked and still looks for explanations of the plays through their central characters is revealing of the way these tragedies address central interpretive questions and as such exemplify "the potential inscrutability of certain features of human experience".[3]

Webster's presence in fiction is far less conspicuous than Shakespeare's and consequently adaptation studies on Webster are limited in number, but the potential of fiction to expand the plays' meanings remains the same. A couple of detective stories, P.D. James's *The Skull Beneath the Skin* (1982)[4] and Fabio Pittorru's *Il Caso Accoramboni* (2004),[5] rely heavily on the characters and the plots made famous by

1. Douglas Lanier, *Shakespeare and Popular Culture*, Oxford, OUP, 2002, p. 83.
2. Stephen Greenblatt, *Will in the World. How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare*, New York, Pimlico, 2005, p. 324.
3. James Hirsch, "Vittoria's Secret: Teaching Webster's *The White Devil* as a Tragedy of Inscrutability", in *op. cit.*. p. 73.
4. P.D. James, *The Skull Beneath the Skin*, London, Faber & Faber, 1982.
5. Fabio Pittorru, *Il Caso Vittoria Accoramboni*, Milano, Il Saggiatore, 2004.

Webster, and this is not surprising, as a connection between Jacobean revenge tragedy and detection is not difficult to identify.[1] Revengers such as Bosola, Hamlet, or Hieronimo, are ever looking for clues and reading signs in order to ascertain responsibilities (although unlike fictional detectives, they have revenge follow the detection stage): one only needs to think of the apricot incident and the discovery of the horoscope in *The Duchess of Malfi*. Detection operates in isolated courts in which everyone is interested in each other's affairs and "gossip [...] and espionage is universal";[2] allusions to Webster in these novels evoke a whole world of spying and intrigue, sometimes to the detriment of psychological consistency.

P.D. James's The Skull Beneath The Skin, for example, featuring the female private detective Cordelia Gray, looks back at Agatha Christie's classic party murder mysteries: it is set on a fictional island on the Dorset Coast, in a Victorian castle in which *The Duchess of Malfi* is to be performed for a selected number of guests. Clarissa Lisle, the actress playing the Duchess, has received death threats in the form of quotations from Webster's and other Jacobean plays. Shortly before the performance Clarissa is killed, leaving Cordelia to deal with solving the crime and interrogate the guests in the claustrophobic space of the castle. Once again the aesthetics of excess, sexual extravagance and violence traditionally associated with things Jacobean, combine with Victorian gothic: Clarissa/Duchess is killed with a marble carving of a baby's arm stolen from the cabinet of Victorian necrophilia that belongs to Ambrose Gorringe, the owner of the castle —and he regrets not being able to use it for one of the props of the play as "even the Duchess in her extremity could hardly mistake this for the dead hand of Antonio".[3] Skulls appear on the threatening letters and in the castle, as well as the title —unlike the Duchess, Clarissa is terrified by death: "I knew the facts of death before I knew the facts of life. There never was a time when I didn't see the skull beneath the skin".[4] The scene in which Clarissa scrutinises her face in the mirror, sitting at the toilet in her room, is reminiscent of the mirror scene in *The Duchess* (3.2), but in the

1. See for example John Kerrigan, *Revenge Tragedy. Aeschylus to Armageddon*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1996, p. 59, 83.
2. Dena Goldberg, "'By Report'. The Spectator as Voyeur in Webster's *The White Devil*", *English Literary Renaissance,* 1987, n°17, p. 67-84, p. 67.
3. P.D. James, *The Skull Beneath the Skin, op. cit.*, p. 31.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 125.

novel this private moment is placed immediately before her brutal murder. Memento mori are everywhere on paper and on the island, although the horrors of the castle, past and present, do not fall short of those devised by Webster, described by the director of the performance as "a charnel house poet" (words not dissimilar from those employed by several Victorian critics). The compenetration of Jacobean and Victorian creates an atmosphere of morbidity and mortality in which murder cannot be inspired by anything else but revenge. As Campbell has written of P.D. James's novel, "*The Skull Beneath the Skin* is a step away from realism and a step toward revenge tragedy in the form of detective fiction, and the detective heroine and her problems consequently lose their central place". [1]

4. From "Strategic Opacity" to "Filling the Gaps": F.L. Lucas and David Stacton

In *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*, one searches in vain for clues (an attitude shared by the characters, who endlessly try to interpret one another's behaviour), and for "novelistic psychological consistency". [2] It is not therefore surprising that it will be narrative appropriations that will try to dispel the dramatic opacity of these plays and "reveal the secrets" of their characters. Genette, in his *Palimpsestes* (1982), a detailed examination of the manifold relationships a text can establish with prior texts, writes extensively about "transmotivation", [3] the process which he describes as providing a motive when the source text (which he calls "hypotext") does not provide it —it basically answers the questions "why" about characters' actions in the "hypertext" (the derivative text). There are two contemporary narrative versions of, respectively, *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi* that reshape and amplify Webster's plays by adding characters' motivations and "filling the gaps". These narrative versions do not simply *allude* to Webster's plays —they retain the basic plot lines and situations of the original plays, but refashion and supplement them with interpretations,

1. Sue Ellen Campbell, "The Detective Heroine and the Death of Her Hero: Dorothy Sayers to P.D. James", *in* Glenwood Irons (ed.), *Feminism in Women's Detective Fiction*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2014, p. 12-28, p. 25-26.
2. Roberta Barker, "'Another Voyage': Death as Social Performance in the Major Tragedies of John Webster", *Early Theatre,* 2005, n°8, p. 35-56, p. 43.
3. Gérard Genette, *Palimpsestes. La littérature au second degré,* Paris, Seuil, 1982, p. 372-383.

developing events and situations that are only mentioned in the plays, or happen "offstage". In Webster's plays, violence, death and disobedience play a central role, and the violation of social and moral boundaries is a transgression that cannot be forgiven. The Duchess "is guilty in that she does transgress —eagerly— the unjust boundary set by her brothers";[1] similarly, in *The White Devil* social climbing and transgression are central preoccupations.

Both narrative appropriations try to make sense of Vittoria's and the Duchess's disobedience and transgression, and establish degrees of responsibility in their behaviours. They expand Webster's plots by adding references to fictional accounts of the stories available to Webster or other kinds of historical sources: the result is an interesting interplay between real-life characters, historical accounts, fictional accounts, and Webster's plays —although it is precisely Webster's tragedies that have contributed to giving everlasting notoriety to obscure names in the history of Italian Renaissance minor dukedoms.

F.L. Lucas's short story "A Christmas in Padua (A.D. 1585)" (1937)[2] is an atmospheric rendering of the last days of Vittoria Accoramboni, after the death of her husband the Duke of Bracciano. Lucas, the editor of Webster's works for OUP in the thirties, for many decades the most prestigious reference work on the dramatist, has Vittoria as the main focaliser. The tale opens with the newly widowed Duchess of Bracciano feverishly writing a letter to the Doge of Venice asking for protection. As she writes, she starts remembering: the reader is given the back story of the Duchess's family ruthlessly planning to "sell her to some rich Roman husband",[3] her subsequent unhappiness with her husband Francesco Peretti, and the way "she found herself deep in love"[4] with the Duke. Peretti's house is described as a prison, not unlike that of her family home: "she had found it merely an escape from one prison to another".[5] Rumours of the Duke having strangled his faithless first wife Isabella de Medici (more historically accurate than Webster's saintly character) and murdered Francesco Peretti do not appear to move her. The Duke "became for her a god who could do no

1. David K. Anderson, *Martyrs and Players in Early Modern England: Tragedy, Religion and Violence on Stage*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2014, p. 133.
2. F. L. Lucas, "A Christmas in Padua", in *The Woman Clothed With The Sun and Other Stories*, London, Cassell and Company, 1937, p. 27-44.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 31.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

wrong",[1] although in later years, and especially after the days spent in Castel Sant'Angelo in which she attempts suicide, she starts to see her husband as more human: "weak, yet lovable. She had exchanged passion for ambition".[2] In Lucas's narrative, she is used by her brother Marcello as an instrument to forward his ambition, while Flaminio is young and innocent: "She had not guessed what a brave ladder a sister's honour may make for a brother bent on higher things".[3] Webster's first tragedy systematically uses wolf imagery, and several wolf references in the play disparage women, as when Brachiano affirms that "Woman to man is either a god or a wolf" (4.2.89) or Flaminio declares that he loves Zanche "just as a man holds a wolf by the ears" (5.1.153). In contrast, the short story combines traditional symbolic associations with the wolf (greed, cruelty etc.) with Christian legend. Vittoria is fascinated with the legend of Saint Francis taming and forgiving the "wolf" from Gubbio (a nickname for a notorious criminal): "She longed, above all, for peace, for pardon, for protecting arms —like San Francesco's. [...] even San Francesco's wolf had been forgiven at last".[4]

The story ends with the Duchess's murder by the hand of Lodovico's henchmen and, a couple of days later, the fearful night of Lodovico Orsini's execution. Thoughts of mortality extend to rulers more familiar to an English reader —"That night [...] amid the galliards and corantos of Whitehall a Queen sat silent, thinking of Lord Leicester far in the Low countries and of old age close at hand".[5] The focus returns for a moment on the decomposing corpse of the Duchess buried in the Church of the Eremitani in Padua, and the same question left unanswered by the play "was she devil or heroine?"[6] is followed by an unexpected comparison with Mary Magdalene and the perspective of forgiveness.

Embracing Vittoria's focalisation on the events of the play in the last few days of her life, as Christmas approaches, creates a melancholic and regretful mood: in the dignified way she faces death, Vittoria is very similar to the Duchess in Webster's later play, her eyes fixed on the crucifix across the room and asking Jesus for forgiveness.

1. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 39.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
6. *Idem*.

The American novelist David Stacton's *A Dancer in Darkness* (1960)[1], a narrative rewriting of *The Duchess of Malfi*, is focalised mainly through Bosola. As Whigham has noted, "In examining Bosola's 'neglect', Webster offers us the first tragic figure whose isolation is formulated in terms of employment by another".[2] Stacton's Bosola allows the reader to access the psychology of the spy much more thoroughly than the play: through his eyes we watch the Duchess's movements, but for all his talent as a spy —"A spy has two abilities. The one is to find out secret information. The other is to see the hidden significance of information that is not secret at all".[3] Very soon he comes to realise that he is also, constantly, spied upon by the Cardinal— "the spies he set upon his spies were multiple".[4] The metatheatricality which is characteristic of *The Duchess* appears to be embodied by Bosola, "a dancer in the darkness, a man who is free only when the lights are out and the audience has gone".[5] As in a performance, the stage is a surface that hides the secret world of the backstage: "Antonio only saw the world from the front, and so, apparently, did the Duchess. It made them both vulnerable to anyone who moved backstage".[6]

The novel expands the courtship phase and the consequences of the all-consuming passion that develops between the Duchess and Antonio, their disobedience and the brothers' ensuing violence. Even more explicitly than in the play, the Duchess is a hero and a champion of desire,[7] and her psychology is very effectively investigated: her early, vain attempts to fight her feelings for Antonio, for instance, depict a far more nuanced character than the stereotypical lusty widow of Painter's novella. Her concern for Antonio's safety and especially her attempts to fashion a private, happier identity as a wife, are justified by the "meaningless little court" in which she lives and does not place any trust: "To them [...] she was merely a source of favour. [...] They were less loyal than her servants, for servants work for a fixed wage, but courtiers could only be bribed".[8] As in the play, she is trying to define and combine both her public role and her private one:

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1. David Stacton, *A Dancer in Darkness*, London, Faber and Faber, 2012.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 177.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 92.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 137.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 139.
7. Linda Woodbridge, "Queen of Apricots. The Duchess of Malfi, Hero of Desire", *in* Naomi Conn Liebler (ed), *The Female Tragic Hero in English Renaissance Drama*, New York, Palgrave, 2002, p. 161-215, p. 162.
8. David Stacton, *A Dancer in Darkness, op. cit.*, p. 163.

> Court life did not interest her. Unlike her brothers, she had not risen by petty intrigue, but had been raised by it. It did not have for her the charm that it had for them. She was only a woman, wedged between the world she ruled and the world that sought to rule her. [1]

And yet, in this version, not even her maid Cariola stays loyal to her: she becomes Bosola's lover and reveals her mistress's secret —it is from her and not from the Duchess as in the play, that Bosola learns that Antonio is the Duchess's husband. The novel reveals the personality and feelings of the Duchess at certain key moments of the play, from the "apricot scene" ("She had a nature that took a greedy pleasure in very little things, and liked them better than anything ostentatious" [2]) to the wooing scene ("she was in such a position that she who should have been wooed was forced to do the wooing [...] it was not a position that a woman could endure with dignity" [3]) to the masque of madmen, after which she counteracts her brother Ferdinand's accusations with clarity as to his real motives:

We made love as you could never do. I would let him do anything with me. [...] we were young and alive. [...] That will drive you mad. Perhaps you are mad already. You are impotent, and laughable, and very sad to think about. Do you not think everyone knows that? [4]

Added incidents include the Duchess escaping to Ancona cross-dressed as a man, a typical Shakespearian device, and enjoying the safety and the power that comes with male identity: "The clothes for some reason made her feel safer. For a moment she wondered what it was to be a man". [5]

In the novel the Duchess is not the only powerful woman who is unhappy in the prison of her role. The invented character of the nun Juana, Bosola's sister, provides another powerful focaliser which gives an insight into a typical circumscribed female space of the early modern period:

> In truth a convent was little better than a prison. It had the same pleasures, the same excitements, and the same alarms. But even the most coddled prisoner is still a prisoner. No matter how fine his condition, he still has the same limitations. He cannot move freely in the world. [6]

1. *Ibid.*, p. 81.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 134.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 95.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 222.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 192.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

Court and convent deprive these resourceful women of the freedom to choose their place in the world. Both the regent Duchess and Juana must struggle with male antagonists (Ferdinand, the Cardinal) who ultimately force them to submit to their power. The intellectual, artistic Juana's aspiration is to escape from her convent, found a holy order and build a new, beautiful, convent. At the end of the novel, with the money that she has made as a usurer, she fulfils her dream: "she would have her cloister frescoed with the best art. At last she had something to do".[1] Her convent, under construction, would be splendid, and contain "musical instruments and a telescope and a celestial sphere. [...] It was to be ornate".[2] In order to keep her convent, she yields to the Cardinal's blackmailing (he is the mastermind of all the intrigues in the novel) and reveals the place where her brother Bosola is hiding so that he is apprehended, and publicly disembowelled. On the night of his execution she completes a poem, called "the Dream": "it was not pious. She had seen though piety. That is why she wrote it. She would rather have been a man".[3] In Lucas's and Stocton's narratives new relationships between female characters are established, and new characters are introduced, in a play of mirrors in which female attempts to counteract male intrigue and plotting are never successful.

Hamlet ends with the Prince asking Horatio *twice* to tell his story: "report me and my cause aright / To the unsatisfied"(5.2.323-324) —and then a few lines later: "If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart, / [...] in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain, / To tell my story" (5.2.330-332).[4] Before killing himself, Othello begs Lodovico and Cassio, when they "shall these unlucky deeds relate" (5.2.339), to speak of him as he is, "Nothing extenuate nor set down aught in malice" (5.2.341).[5] What story will Horatio tell? What letters will Lodovico write? Will they clarify, explain, supply information about scenes that they have witnessed, or will they rely on hearsay or prejudice? I often feel that narrative versions of these plays are a means of responding to Hamlet's and Othello's appeal. But the Duchess and Vittoria never ask for their stories to be told—in the play we don't even

1. *Ibid.*, p. 235.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 246.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 254.
4. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor, London, Thomson, "The Arden Shakespeare" (third series), 2006.
5. William Shakespeare, *Othello*, ed. Michael Neill, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2006.

know the Duchess's name, and Vittoria never soliloquises so we are not even allowed to access her thoughts. In spite of the fact that historical interest in the life narratives of Vittoria and Giovanna has been relatively constant in the last two centuries, very few authors have complied with these characters' unspoken requests to relate their "unlucky deeds", "nothing extenuating". Lucas and Stacton have taken up the challenge. Although they follow relatively closely the main plot lines of Webster's tragedies, and supplement their narratives with the tales of Vittoria Accoramboni and Giovanna d'Aragona as reported in the Renaissance Italian sources, their versions re-motivate, explain and expand the scope of Webster's main characters. The light of a new modern sensibility is thrown over these stories of social and sexual disobedience punished by death, as well as stories of violent male policing of the boundaries of acceptable female behaviour.

Laura TOSI