

Out of Place, Out of Time: Anachronisms in Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*
(Penn State University English 221w: Spring 1997)
by Fred CopperSmith

Why would a playwright attempt to establish, at considerable length, a specific and historical time and place for a dramatic work and then proceed to incorporate a myriad of references anachronistic to that time and place? More specifically, why would John Webster, having selected sixteenth century Italy as the backdrop for *The Duchess of Malfi*, then elect to include a multitude of images and allusions topical to his seventeenth century audience but unknown in the world his characters supposedly inhabited? An answer to these questions lies, perhaps, in that very audience itself and, more importantly, in the expectations they had of the theater and entertainment in 1613, when Webster's play was first publicly performed at the Globe Theater in London. For as critics such as Mary A. Blackstone and Cameron Louis have suggested, playwright and playgoer -- particularly in both Elizabethan and Jacobean England -- share an umbilical connection.¹ Through a close reading of *The Duchess of Malfi*, as well as an examination of its seventeenth century audience, I hope to prove that this connection is reflected in Webster's inclusion of anachronisms and topical references in the text.

Revenge tragedy, of which *The Duchess of Malfi* is a prime example, was an extremely popular dramatic genre in Elizabethan, and later Jacobean, England. For a dramatist to remain popular, however, audiences demanded that his plays remain true to the established form: a four or five act structure of murder, seduction, greed, insanity, et cetera, among a royal or privileged class. A tragedy that failed to include these elements, that failed to titillate the crowds, was rarely a financial success, as playwrights like William Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, and John Webster knew quite well. As critic F. L. Lucas writes of their audiences: "...It was a succession of great moments that they wanted on the stage, not a well-made play. They did not at each instant look forward to what was coming or back to what had been."² Webster is certainly not above providing this string of great moments, nor is he hesitant to include topical references to amuse his audience, despite having already introduced a *mise en scène* where these references are anachronistic. A playwright of his day, whose chief competitors were bearbaiting and executions, had little choice but to pander, at least occasionally, to the wishes of his audience.

The Duchess of Malfi, therefore, is concerned less with historical accuracy than with entertaining as wide a spectrum of people as possible. Indeed, afternoon performances at the Globe Theater attracted a motley collection of audience members, many of whom, as critics Mary A. Blackstone and Cameron Louis indicate, were often "inattentive to the play and intrusive" and demanded much of a dramatic work if it were to hold their attention for any given span of time.³ "Quite possibly," Blackstone and Louis continue, "the success of *The Duchess* had much to do with...the playwright's more sophisticated understanding of the audiences and their participation in the theatrical interaction and communication."⁴ Webster, although ultimately attempting to reach what he termed the more sophisticated "full and understanding auditory," understood that success hinged on the satisfaction of the masses.⁵ Like Shakespeare and Jonson, Webster knew that a playwright in sixteenth and seventeenth century London must appeal equally to the upper class intelligentsia in the boxed seats or on stage and the common "groundlings" in the one-penny seats below.

Webster's veritable cornucopia of anachronisms, then -- references that range from astronomer Galileo and poet Torquata Tasso to the Bermudan islands -- can easily be viewed as a conscious attempt on his part to capture the attention of a habitually inattentive audience. Moreover, his choice of setting -- which, for all his antedated allusions, Webster firmly establishes as the Italy of the Renaissance -- might be seen as an attempt to dissociate his audience personally from the action, to place them at a safe remove from the debauchery and malevolence viewed on-stage. As William Poel argues: "Webster wrote his play not for the purpose of dealing 'in horror for horror's sake', nor 'just to make the flesh creep,' but with a desire to give vital embodiment to the manners and morals of the Italian Renaissance, as they appeared to the imagination of Englishmen....It was the very strangeness and horror of Italian life, as compared with the dull decorum of English

households, that constituted the attraction of Italian tragedy for Elizabethan playgoers."⁶ Webster has, in effect, covered all the bases; by setting the action of *The Duchess of Malfi* nearly a century before the play's first appearance but by also making it topical to early seventeenth century audiences, Webster has ensured playgoers will be neither offended nor disinterested.

In *The Duchess of Malfi* Webster also utilizes virtually every conceivable aspect of revenge tragedy, scripting scene after scene of deception, murder and intrigue, and, in the words of critic William Archer, "drenching the stage with blood even beyond the wont of his contemporaries and searching out every possible circumstance of horror -- ghosts, maniacs, severed limbs and all the paraphernalia of the charnel-house and the tomb..."⁷ However, Webster is further willing to tinker with the genre, to blend certain elements (as his audience would have no doubt expected, if not demanded, for by 1613 revenge tragedy itself would have become somewhat stale). *The Duchess of Malfi*, therefore, while in many respects the epitome of seventeenth century revenge tragedies, is in many ways atypical of the genre. As David Cecil states: "Webster's horrors -- his ghosts and torturers -- are not, as with his lesser contemporaries, mere theatrical devices to awake a pleasing shudder."⁸ Webster, while sympathetic to the wants and needs of his audience and knowledgeable about how to meet these desires through the action of his play, himself desired to present "the most sententious Tragedy" he was capable of, a drama laden with message and meaning, though by necessity masked by humor, bloodshed and all the other elements expected by his audience.

John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* cannot be readily divorced from its audience of seventeenth century London. Webster's reliance on anachronistic references to amuse this audience, despite quite obviously situating the tragedy in a Renaissance-era setting, proves rather sufficiently the close bond between playwright and spectator. As critic Pete Brook writes, "...In the theater the audience completes the steps of creation."⁹ John Webster, therefore -- and likewise Shakespeare, Jonson, and other playwrights of their day -- cannot be appreciated fully without an understanding and appreciation for their original intended audiences.

Endnotes

1 "Towards 'A Full and Understanding Auditory': Evidence of Playgoers at the First Globe Theater," Blackstone, Mary A. and Louis, Cameron. *Modern Language Review*, v. 90, July 1995, p. 556-571.

2 "Introduction to *The Complete Works of John Webster*," Lucas, F. L. *Webster: The White Devil and The Duchess of Malfi: A Casebook*, Holdsworth, R. V., ed., Macmillian Press, London, 1975, p. 57-58.

3 "Towards 'A Full and Understanding Auditory': Evidence of Playgoers at the First Globe Theater," Blackstone, Mary A. and Louis, Cameron. *Modern Language Review*, v. 90, July 1995, p. 556-571.

4 "Towards 'A Full and Understanding Auditory': Evidence of Playgoers at the First Globe Theater," Blackstone, Mary A. and Louis, Cameron. *Modern Language Review*, v. 90, July 1995, p. 556-571.

5 *The White Devil*, Webster, John (Hart, Clive, ed.), University of CA Press, Berkeley, 1970, p. 15.

6 "A New Criticism of Webster's *Duchess of Malfi*," Webster: *The White Devil and The Duchess of Malfi: A Casebook*, Holdsworth, R. V., ed., Macmillian Press, London, 1975, p. 48-51.

7 "Webster, Lamb, and Swinburne," Archer, William, Webster: *The White Devil and The Duchess of Malfi: A Casebook*, Holdsworth, R. V., ed., Macmillian Press, London, 1975, p. 45-48.

8 "Poets and Story-Tellers," Cecil, David, Webster: *The White Devil and The Duchess of Malfi: A Casebook*, Holdsworth, R. V., ed., Macmillian Press, London, 1975, p. 66-68.

9 *The Empty Space*, Brook, Peter. Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1986, p. 142.