Book Reviews

Comptes rendus

The Works of John Webster, Volume 1. "The White Devil" and "The Duchess of Malfi," edited by David Gunby, David Carnegie, and Anthony Hammond. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995. Pp. xxxiv, 713.

This is the first volume of a new, two-volume, old-spelling edition of the *Works* of John Webster, containing his two best known plays, which William Hazlitt described in 1820 as "upon the whole . . . the nearest to Shakespear [sic] of anything we have upon record." Gunby is the biographical and literary editor, Carnegie the theatrical editor, and Hammond — assisted by Doreen DelVecchio — is the bibliographical editor. Each contributes a third of the introduction, and they combine on the full, informative, and frequently witty commentary notes, which even accommodate their occasional disagreements. The result is an impressive and complex piece of scholarship containing a great deal that is valuable and new.

The last complete old-spelling Webster was F. L. Lucas's four-volume edition of 1927. As is to be expected, the present edition goes beyond his work in nearly every aspect, but its most striking difference is the amount of attention it devotes to the *performance* dimension of the plays. Webster is remarkable among his contemporaries for acknowledging performance and actors in the *impedimenta* to his plays; and the Cambridge editors adopt the distinction he makes between "Poem" (i.e. the words on the page, intending for reading) and "Play" (those words as presented collaboratively in performance). In acknowledging that *both* these elements must be subsumed in the "Text" of modern editions, they are following the trail recently blazed by bibliographers such as T. Howard-Hill and D.F. McKenzie, and it is accordingly on this aspect of the edition I shall concentrate in the limited space at my disposal.

The main responsibility for this theatrical element falls on David Carnegie, who emphasizes in his part of the general introduction that stage history constitutes a tradition of "accumulated mimetic criticism" that complements written interpretation of the plays. Besides listing data for all known production of the two strategies, his

introduction first discusses the main production and acting choices in each play, then provides much fuller, more analytical stage histories than have hitherto been available, beginning with the original Jacobean productions considered in detail. Carnegie is particularly helpful in providing contemporary illustrations for the elaborate, emblematic visual effects which are such an important aspects of Webster's dramaturgy — the Jacobean fad for exercising on vaulting horses in *The White Devil*, for example, and the same play's processions of resplendently costumed ambassadors, Vittoria's trial, and the elaborate costuming and ceremonial of a "Barriers" entertainment; or, in *The Duchess of Malfi*, the *momenti mori* waxworks used to torment the heroine. Carnegie also has a sharp eye for parallelism in props and stage situations, another staple of "the double pattern of Webster's dramaturgy" (p. 411). He emphasizes that, pragmatically, the texts work best uncut, and that their malcontent characters are crucial to the plays' theatrical effect: Flamineo's flamboyance is necessary to establish a special rapport with the audience ("underplaying Flamineo has been consistently disastrous"), and it is Bosola, not Ferdinand or the Duchess, who is the key character in *The Duchess of Malfi*, with more lines and business than anyone else and a listing at the head of the printed *dramatis personae*, despite his lack of rank. These introductions are supplemented in the two "Commentaries" by a stimulating flow of more tentative suggestions, often keyed to particular productions, about specific acting choices and possible stage business. Thus a keen directorial awareness pervades the whole volume and brings the two plays to crackling, imaginative life. My only regret is that, because it is in an old-spelling edition which is also very costly, Carnegie's work may reach fewer students and (especially) actors than it deserves.

As bibliographical editor, Hammond has collaborated in the theatrical emphasis vigorously but also with proper caution. He has not repeated the mistake of the Oxford Shakespeare editors in trying to reproduce the plays' original performances because he recognizes that far too much remains merely conjectural about Jacobean acting and production methods. Instead, he honours the theatrical intentions of the texts by adding many more clarifying stage directions than are usual in critical editions (all identified by square brackets and collated, and if necessary also discussed in the "Commentary"), and has subjected the quartos' stage directions in general to a much more searching bibliographical and practical scrutiny than was usual in the earlier Bowers school of editing. Consequently, he is able to reposition several original directions in ways that have a persuasive bibliographical rationale yet also clarify key actions. The only anomaly (of which Hammond is quite conscious) is that, accepting John Russell Brown's suggestion that stage copy for *The Duchess* was probably censored in conformity with King James's 1606 proclamation against blasphemy, in twelve instances Hammond has changed the quarto's "Heaven" to "God", because, he says, the former weakens "the Christian characteristics of the plays" (p. 460). Since even the first-night audience would have heard "Heaven," this is a very questionable emendation in terms of Hammond's own criteria; but it is bold and imaginative, and, in spite of inconsistency, it does more good than harm from a performance point of view.

Hammond's appeal to "Christian characteristics" may have been influenced here by the emphasis of David Gunby. Like his co-editors, Gunby pays attention to theatrical aspects of the plays, such as the motifs of kissing and kneeling in *The White Devil*, the influence of *entr'acte* music on time-gaps in *The Duchess*, and the use of identifying props to emphasize parallel situations. However, this dimension of the plays is not his primary concern. After recounting Webster's career and summarizing critical attitudes to his dramaturgy and lurid view of life, Gunby concludes his section of the general introduction with a clear statement of his own admittedly "partial (in both senses)" interpretative aim (p. 27).

By concentrating on the moral and theological implications of imagery and tracing modulations of the doubled characters and repetitions of action so characteristic of Webster's technique, Gunby believes he can show that, below their ambiguities of character and disjunctions of plot, there is "cyclical progression" of ethical implication in Webster's plays that supports a traditional "providentialist" worldview. This helps to restore to the two tragedies a seventeenth-century ethical sensibility that has often been lost in recent skeptical or existentialist interpretations; but by itself it is too rigidly one-sided, and sits awkwardly with his collaborators' concern for complexity of response. Gunby several times acknowledges that the plays are very ambiguous, but he does not relate the implications of their negative elements to the "providentialism" he is stressing; and, even on its own terms, his interpretation strikes me as at times too biased. Even if one can accept "I am the Duchess of Malfi still" as *solely* a statement of spiritual pride from which Bosola's torments must redeem the Duchess so that she may attain heaven (I cannot read it so simply), it is surely unacceptable even in terms of structuralist close-reading to alibi the villainous Francesco's escape from punishment at the end of *The White Devil* by referring to the bad end earlier of his "doubled" character, Brachiano, which Gunby claims should reassure us that Francesco too will *eventually* be punished. This goes beyond both text and performance, and is "partial" in the sense of special pleading.

There are things to question, then; but there is no doubt that this is a major new and exciting edition. It is a significant piece of rethinking which, in Hammond's words, advances "a new editorial attitude [which is still] in the process of creation." It is certain to supersede Lucas as the standard reference text for Webster's *Works*, and its second volume will be eagerly awaited by Webster scholars everywhere.

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