CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Pascale Aebischer and Kathryn Prince

In the summer of 2010, almost exactly four centuries after its première by the King's Men,[1] John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* was once again London theatre's hot ticket. The production sold out within four hours, the weight of demand crashing the English National Opera's website and overwhelming the box office's phone lines. *The Duchess of Malfi* has enjoyed a spate of recent productions that make it a key player in the contemporary revival of early modern drama, alongside such currently popular plays as *The Changeling*, *Dr Faustus* and *Volpone*. The secret of this particular production's box-office success, however, was the conjunction of Webster with other spheres of theatrical influence, as a co-production between ENO and the immersive theatre company Punchdrunk. In place of Webster's text was a specially commissioned operatic adaptation by the controversial German composer Torsten Rasch, with a libretto by Ian Burton, whose previous credits include the libretto for the Flemish Opera's award-winning *Richard III* and whose subsequent projects include libretti for *Titus Andronicus*, *Hamlet* and *Pericles*.

The ENO/Punchdrunk co-production of *The Duchess of Malfi* brings together many of the issues addressed in various ways by the contributors to this volume. For one thing, the publicity and reviews surrounding it provide solid evidence that Webster's play is now understood as a canonical text,[2] a known quantity that, like a Shakespeare play, might legitimately and intelligibly serve as the starting point for the sort of irreverent creative vandalism that Alan Sinfield describes as 'blatantly reworking the authoritative text so that it is forced to yield, against the grain, explicitly oppositional kinds of

[1] The play was first performed in 1613 or 1614, at both the Globe and Blackfriars, according to the Quarto title page.

[2] In his paper for the 'Counter-Shakespeares' session co-organised by the volume editors and Roberta Barker at the 2011 World Shakespeare Congress, Jem Bloomfield described how the commentary of this production seems to have thoroughly naturalised *The Duchess of Malfi* into the 'canon of "harmlessly classic" works'.

understanding'.[3] The sense of responsibility that the site-specific company *angels in the architecture* express in their contribution to our volume in terms of representing Marlowe's *Dido Queen of Carthage* to an audience probably entirely unfamiliar with it is not one that necessarily applies, any more, to those few early modern plays that have achieved canonical status based on the frequency with which they are performed (for evidence of this frequency, see Lopez and Brown's performance listings in the appendices). Included in the twenty-first century's early modern canon are several plays from Marlowe's oeuvre (and now, arguably, *Dido* in light of its burgeoning performance history in the wake of the *angels* production) and from Webster's, Ford's, Jonson's and Middleton's. Since Derek Jarman's iconic film adaptation of *Edward II* (1991), it has become almost standard practice, in productions of tragedies by Marlowe, Middleton, Webster and Ford in particular, to push this creative vandalism in a feminist or 'queer' direction.[4] Many productions thus stress in these plays a resistance to patriarchal hierarchies and hetero-normative sexualities that allows them to appear as a distinct feminist or, more often, overtly 'queer' corpus of works that challenge received norms and allow for a freer exploration of alternative sexual and social identities than Shakespeare's plays seem to permit. In this respect, too, the co-production of *The Duchess of Malfi* by the ENO and Punchdrunk was representative of a larger trend, since it emphasised the non-normative sexuality of the lycanthropic Ferdinand. Played in a naked and bloodied frenzy by counter-tenor Andrew Watts, Ferdinand's high-pitched voice contrasted with the dark-hued tones of the Duchess as sung by mezzo-soprano Claudia Huckle, suggesting an inversion of expected gender roles. Here was a production that not only enshrined, but that was contingent on, an understanding of *The Duchess of Malfi* as a canonical text exploring alternative, 'queer' identities and sexualities.

One question that arises from what we would argue is a recent shift in the cultural status of this group of early modern plays has to do with their cultural function: if some early modern plays have now become canonical, what does this mean in terms of their ability to serve as counterpoints to Shakespeare that stand in a binary, dialectical relation to the 'mainstream', implicitly conservative, institutionalised Shakespearean canon? Are some of

[3] Alan Sinfield, *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992) 22.

[4] We use the term 'queer' not simply as a synonym for homosexual, but in its broader sense of a more general resistance to 'regimes of the normal', as Michael Warner defines it in the introduction to his edited collection *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993) 2.

these plays gradually being absorbed by the conservative canon to which they were once the alternative? The perception among contributors to a session on 'Counter-Shakespeares' that we chaired with Roberta Barker at the World Shakespeare Congress in 2011 was that while the political potential that Susan Bennett's *Performing Nostalgia* (1996) recognised in non-Shakespearean drama remains vital, it is not always present in actuality. Outside the Anglophone context, especially, other alliances, for example with cinematic traditions, often loom larger than any conservative Shakespeare tradition to which these productions would serve as counterpoints.[5]

While the performance history of some early modern plays is now growing, their still-sparse performance record overall leads to considerable latitude in the ways that the notion of 'a performance' is applied to what would, in the case of Shakespeare, be classified as an adaptation. The ENO/Punchdrunk *Malfi* is clearly a very loose interpretation of Webster's original, with the text translated into a sparse libretto, the dramatis personae reduced to the Duchess, Ferdinand, the Cardinal, Antonio, Julia and Bosola, and the plot both streamlined and, because of the nature of the immersive experience, fragmented. To what extent should this production be considered within a performance history of *Malfi*, and at what point do the spectacular elements of the production – its choreography and elaborate set as well as its musical score – overwhelm the source text? In contrast to, say, the experience of an original practices production at Shakespeare's Globe, where audience members might receive seat cushions or rain ponchos as nods to modern sensibilities, audience members for the ENO/Punchdrunk *Malfi* were handed white bird-like masks reminiscent of Venetian *medico della peste* (plague doctor) masks, and invited to wander freely through three floors of a disused office building in East London. Some were offered champagne in quaint china cups, while others were given inoculation cards; some had 'immense fun' at this 'fairground ride for adults',[6] while others stumbled through the darkened building, worrying about health and safety regulations as they tripped over elements of the set that included a laboratory where medical texts about lycanthropy and sample jars of urine, blood and hair suggested that a diagnosis of Ferdinand's ailment was in progress; some encountered the naked and bloodied Ferdinand himself in various stages of lycanthropic delusion, or promenaded through his scratched and faeces-smeared cell; a

[5] See, for example, Sarah Hatchuel and Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin, 'Nationalizing *Volpone* in French Cinema and Television: Mediating Jonson through Molière, Shakespeare and Popular Screen Comedy', *Shakespeare Bulletin* 29.4 (Winter 2011): 509–23.

[6] Andrew Billen, 'The Duchess of Malfi', *New Statesman* 30 July 2010.

circle of television screens, a room full of trees made of office wiring, and other less decipherable spaces made some spectators feel 'baffled' or even 'bullied and bored'.[7] In the production's spectacular and gruesome finale, to which spectators were almost imperceptibly herded, the Duchess, surrounded by dancers in penitential hoods, was stripped to her undergarments and suspended from the ceiling, where her corpse joined hundreds of other dangling, anonymous carcasses.

Artistically, the production was unquestionably innovative, experimental and ambitious. The critical reception of this production acknowledges its aesthetic triumph, but also indicates ways in which, for reviewers, at least, intellectually the field of early modern drama in performance has in some ways not really moved on at all. The general consensus was that Webster's play, or at least the general trajectory of a Jacobean tragedy, would be sufficiently familiar to many spectators, who could safely lose themselves in the promenade without losing the plot, or, alternatively, that the plot itself was not essential to the experience of this production. What *was* essential was an understanding of the centrality of the Duchess' role, of the spectacle of her victimisation and of general 'Jacobean' tropes of over-the-top madness, deviant sexuality and gendered violence: the same feminist and queer preoccupations, in other words, which critics have been noting in the performance of early modern drama over the last two decades. Absent from these responses was the scholarship of the past three decades, which, under the influence of new historicism and cultural materialism, has worked to embed early modern tragedy in its theatrical, political and social contexts.[8] Commentators on the ENO/Punchdrunk *Malfi* instead situated the source play in terms that revealed the extent to which decades-old critical formulations have simply been upended in a perverse 'what's bad is good' characteristic of the postmodern moment: the decadence, violence and sensationalism decried nearly half a century ago by critics such as Robert Ornstein and T. B. Tomlinson have become an expected and accepted part of the present-day theatrical repertory; something, indeed, that the Jacobean has come to represent. At the same time, while the Jacobean once had a level of political resonance, the postmodern theatrical stance is more often apolitical, as Hans-Thies Lehmann acknowledges in his epilogue to *Postdramatic Theatre*, precisely because in the

[7] Igor Toronyi-Lalic, 'The Duchess of Malfi, ENO, Punchdrunk: An Unmissable New Show but a Mess of an Opera', *The Arts Desk*, 14 July 2010. www.theartsdesk.com/opera/duchess-malfi-eno-punchdrunk, and Anna Picard, 'The Duchess of Malfi, Great Eastern Quay, London: A Ghost Train for Grown-ups That Sets You Down Feeling Bullied and Bored', *Independent*, 18 July 2010.

[8] For a discussion of these trends, see Pascale Aebischer, 'The Critical Trail', *Jacobean Drama* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) 7–25.

postmodern era politics 'increasingly elude intuitive perception and cognition and consequently scenic representation', displaced instead on to the 'plainly *non*-political terror, anarchy, madness, despair, laughter, revolt, [and] anti-social behaviour' that, we would argue, are hallmarks of Punchdrunk's *Malfi*.[9] It is now clear that one influential strand of early modern drama in performance, distinct from the Jarman tradition, uses these plays as source of radical theatrical experimentation where the queerness which was intrinsically political in Jarman is now not also, but only, an aesthetic.

On the other hand, the radical potential that Susan Bennett identified in performances of early modern plays in the 1980s and 1990s remains part of their appeal today. For the RSC's 2005 'Gunpowder' season, Michael Boyd and Gregory Doran selected early modern plays expressly for their political resonances with the Gunpowder Plot and its contemporary echoes. Alongside Frank McGuinness's *Speaking Like Magpies* (a commissioned play about Catholics blowing up Protestants), the season included the banned-in-its-own-time *Thomas More*; the allegedly treasonous *Sejanus*; the comedy about making way for the young by euthanising the old; *A New Way to Please You*; and Massinger's Middle East terrorism play, lightly retitled as *Believe What You Will* rather than *Believe As You List* (see Heijes' discussion in this volume). At the National Theatre in London in 2011, gender and class oppression were certainly the subjects of critique in Katie Mitchell's production of *A Woman Killed with Kindness*. With the reattribution of Frankford's last line, 'Here lies she whom her husband's kindness kill'd' (17.140) to the outraged Susan, Mitchell allowed her spectators no space for complacent acceptance of patriarchal 'kindness', whether early modern or present-day. In productions such as hers, 'Renaissance history continues to act as an ideological provocation to the present', as Burnett and Streete contend.[10] The enduring power of *A Woman Killed with Kindness* as a text through which marital violence and class struggle might be explored can be seen from the fact that in this production, Mitchell was revisiting a play she had previously directed for the RSC in 1991 so as to incite 'action that might change contemporary gender relations for the better'.[11]

Despite the presence of some early modern plays in the contemporary repertory, there has been relatively little scholarly attention to these plays' performance histories. Modern editions, like the Revels, New Mermaid,

[9] Translated (from the German) by Karen Jürs-Munby (London: Routledge, 2006) 175.
[10] Mark Thornton Burnett and Adrian Streete, eds., *Filming and Performing Renaissance History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) 14.
[11] Roberta Barker, *Early Modern Tragedy, Gender and Performance, 1984–2000: The Destined Livery* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) 165.

Arden Early Modern Drama and Garland series increasingly do include performance listings and an acknowledgement that performance is a vital element of drama. What they do not always provide is the kind of detailed performance history and alertness to performance in the annotation that is now an accepted component of scholarly Shakespeare editions. Admittedly, in many cases providing this material is often near-impossible, either because the play has not been revived since the early modern period or because reviews of early modern plays often focus less on noticing performative choices than on summarising the plot of plays assumed to be unfamiliar. Editions are indeed often the starting point of a performance history, as Lopez and Munro both argue in this volume, because new editions often lead to the revival of plays left out of the current repertory. This, arguably, is one of the chief purposes of the Globe Quarto series of early modern playtexts. As the Globe's Director of Education, Patrick Spottiswoode, writes in the preface to several titles in the series, the intention is 'to enable more people to read, study and, ideally, to produce' these plays.[12]

Despite the perceived paucity of the performance record, performances of early modern plays have taken place across a wide range of venues, as Karin Brown's list of professional productions and Jeremy Lopez's of amateur ones for this volume amply indicate. These include explorations by experimental companies whose interest in contemporary theatre practice has turned towards the early modern, such as Punchdrunk, *angels in the architecture* and Cheek by Jowl, alongside more sustained engagements by companies who specialise in staging early modern drama. In New York, the Red Bull Theater has, since 2005, produced six non-Shakespearean early modern plays using contemporary mainstream performance styles and has hosted staged readings of over twenty-eight plays; in Canada, Halifax-based Vile Passéist Theatre company started 'challeng[ing] its audiences by presenting decadent tragedies and irreverent comedies of the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras' in 2009, and in the UK, the White Bear, a pub theatre in London, has over the past twenty years revived twenty-three early modern plays on a shoestring budget.[13] As contributions to this volume suggest, there are high concentrations of revivals at London's National Theatre (see Barker on the National Theatre's *Malfi*), the American Shakespeare Center with its Actors' Renaissance Seasons (see

[12] Prefaces to Globe Quartos editions of *The Antipodes*; *The Custom of the Country*; *The Devil's Charter*; *The Honest Whore*; *King Leir*; *A Mad World, My Masters*; *A Shoemaker, a Gentleman*; *The Wise Woman of Hoxton*; and *The Witches of Lancashire*.

[13] 'What is Vile Passéist Theatre?' http://vpt.littlefoible.net/about.html 27 October 2011. See, furthermore, Munro's discussion of the White Bear in this volume, pp. 29–30; thanks to artistic director Michael Kingsbury for information about the White Bear repertoire.

Bessell), the Royal Shakespeare Company (see Heijes) and Shakespeare's Globe, whose Education wing runs a highly influential series of staged readings (see Karim-Cooper).[14]

As these latter three examples suggest, the framework for these productions is often, literally, Shakespearean. Non-Shakespearean early modern drama is excluded from the names of some of the main venues for its revival, including the Royal Shakespeare Company, Shakespeare's Globe, and the American Shakespeare Center, but it is regularly used to supplement and occasionally even threatens to supplant Shakespeare, as chapters 4, 5 and 6 discuss. The relationship between Shakespeare and other early modern dramatists in these institutions in particular can be understood in relation to a process that Joseph Roach, in *Cities of the Dead*, has described as surrogation.[15] What are these early modern plays providing at these institutions that Shakespeare is not? Sometimes, as in the RSC's 'twinning' of Shakespearean and non-Shakespearean plays, the suggestion is that the latter, less familiar play will illuminate the themes or provide an alternative perspective on the issues raised in the former, opening up the possibility of political dissidence. It is precisely in this role that the other playwrights threaten to become Shakespeare's surrogates, since, as twentieth-century playwrights such as Edward Bond and Frank McGuinness have dramatised in their plays featuring these playwrights as characters, the alternative point of view is often the more appealing to current sensibilities. By calling into question the 'universal' and 'humanist' Shakespeare with their emphasis on these other playwrights' greater humanity, sincerity and independence, Bond, McGuinness and to some extent strategies like the RSC's, have taken a swipe at the cultural dominance of Shakespeare. The plays of his contemporaries may be revived to 'enhance and intensify our understanding of Shakespeare's language, his time, his culture', as the RSC's Michael Boyd suggests,[16] but as part of the same process they may also illuminate Shakespeare's shortcomings or insufficiencies. The result can be the rise of 'canon-anxiety' that is inextricably linked to the desire to maintain the authenticity and centrality of the Shakespearean canon to which cultural hubs like the Royal Shakespeare Company or the American

[14] A 'map' of theatrical revivals of early modern drama in the UK can be found in Lois Potter, 'Tragedy and Performance', *The Cambridge Companion to English Renaissance Tragedy*, ed. Emma Smith and Garrett A. Sullivan Jr (Cambridge University Press, 2010) 102–15.

[15] That is, 'to blur the obvious discontinuities, misalliances, and ruptures or, more desperately, to exaggerate them in order to mystify a previous Golden Age, now lapsed' (Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996) 3).

[16] Coen Heijes in this volume, 78.

Shakespeare Center are dedicated, and a concomitant need to cut these challengers down to size.

Such canon-anxiety generates the contradictory impulses and mission imperatives outlined in Farah Karim-Cooper's explanation of the creative tensions between what she calls the 'commercial Globe', with its need to keep Shakespeare at the centre of marketing and programming, and Globe Education's dedication to examining the wider early modern theatrical culture.[17] It is present, too, in Coen Heijes' conversations with RSC directors Barry Kyle, Laurence Boswell, Gregory Doran and Michael Boyd, in which it becomes clear that the staging of Shakespeare's contemporaries, while desirable, is also fraught with dilemmas that are not only box-office related but also to do with 'the specific nature of the RSC, with its house playwright'.[18] At the American Shakespeare Center, too, Jaq Bessell indicates how Shakespearean programming during the main season both enables and is reciprocally propped up by performances of his contemporaries: the 'Bring 'Em Back Alive' readings of long-neglected plays by a whole range of early modern playwrights, and the cheaply budgeted 'Actors' Renaissance Season' showcasing Shakespeare's contemporaries, are what enable the ASC's reconstructed Blackfriars Theatre to host performances all year round.[19]

There have been border skirmishes at these bastions of the Shakespearean canon, to be sure, but among scholars the main field of contention since 2007 has surrounded Gary Taylor and John Lavagnino's edition of *Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works* (2007). The marketing discourse for this edition has relentlessly presented Middleton as the most powerful surrogate, 'our other Shakespeare', and the edition consciously replicates the format familiar from Oxford's edition of Shakespeare's complete works, which Taylor had co-edited a generation earlier. Some reviewers have, just as relentlessly, sought to counter this claim by cutting Middleton down to size. Jonathan Bate, for example, comprehensively dismantles the case for Middleton's status as Shakespeare's equal in his substantial *TLS* review, as does Lukas Erne in his review for *Modern Philology*.[20] Nonetheless, the importance of this edition for Middleton scholarship, something both reviewers acknowledge, is already evident in Jonathan Heron, Nicholas Monk and Paul Prescott's contribution to this volume, and, if Jeremy

[17] Farah Karim-Cooper in this volume, 55. [18] Heijes in this volume, 70.
[19] Jacquelyn Bessell in this volume, 86.
[20] Jonathan Bate, 'The Mad Worlds of Thomas Middleton', *Times Literary Supplement*, 23 April 2008: http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/the_tls/tls_selections/literature_and_criticism/article3801281.ece, last accessed 7 August 2011; Lukas Erne, '"Our Other Shakespeare": Thomas Middleton and the Canon', *Modern Philology* 107.3 (2010): 493–505.

Lopez is right about the causal relationship between editions, scholarship and performance, its impact is only beginning to be felt.

Canon-anxiety is not the sole preserve of academics, as is suggested by the example of Dominic Hill's production of Massinger's *The City Madam* in the RSC's Swan Theatre in 2011. Marking the company's fiftieth anniversary and the triumphant reopening of the Royal Shakespeare Theatre and Swan Theatre after a lengthy period of refurbishment, the choice to revive a play that combines traces of *King Lear*, *Measure for Measure* and *The Winter's Tale* in an extravagant pastiche of Shakespearean motifs and city comedy plotlines and character types is a striking example of the effect of topicality and relevance that can be achieved by a symbiosis between Shakespeare and other early modern English drama. It was near impossible for the playgoer – especially a playgoer who might have seen *A Midsummer Night's Dream* performed by a virtually identical cast in the Royal Shakespeare Theatre at the other end of the foyer that same week – not to experience this production as 'haunted', in Marvin Carlson's term, by Shakespeare.[21] In some sense, any production of any early modern play in this theatre dedicated to the continued survival of the Shakespearean canon would be haunted in this way, but the Shakespearean ghosts were particularly active in light of cross-casting between *The City Madam* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, matching the citizen's daughters Mary and Anne to Hermia and Helena (Matti Houghton and Lucy Briggs-Owen respectively) and Luke Frugal and Shave'em to Oberon and Titania (Jo Stone-Fewings and Pippa Nixon). It was also a matter of recognising the repurposing of properties with a Shakespearean pedigree: cushions, wigs and fabrics seem to have travelled straight from *Antony and Cleopatra* into Massinger's brothel, to be recycled there in a frank burlesque of Shakespeare's tragedy. *The City Madam* excoriates the social aspirations of the citizen class, focusing its satirical energies on low-born women who aspire to courtly status and fashionable display. So when the prostitute Shave'em exclaims 'I am starved, / Starved in my pleasures; I know not what a coach is, / To hurry me to the Burse, or old Exchange' (Act 3, scene 1) while pointing at the coach on the cover of *Hello!* magazine's royal wedding edition, the audience's laugh was prompted partly by the recognition of the topicality, in 2011, of the satire on social aspiration. If the play duly ended with Lord Frugal's final injunction that the city dames should 'confess . . . / A distance 'twixt the city and the court' (Act 5, scene 3), that chastening was belied by the real-life rise of Kate Middleton from the merchant class to royalty, and visually undercut by the

[21] Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001).

citizen wife's exit from the stage, graciously waving at the audience in an *ersatz* royal wave. In its production of *The City Madam*, then, the RSC staged the competition between Shakespeare and his citizen rivals within a context of cross-casting, cross-marketing and topical allusion, all the while good-humouredly sending up its own conferral of royal status on Shakespeare.

Companies without an investment in Shakespeare are less susceptible to this kind of cross-marketing, though the Shakespeare connection is often mined in publicity materials to entice and orient audiences. Within experimental theatre, however, where Shakespeare and text-based drama in general has been devalued, the Shakespearean connection is not a selling point. It is perhaps with the surge of early modern drama within these more experimental companies, where Shakespeare is neither a gatekeeper nor a door-opener, that the implications of Shakespeare's surrogation by his less shopworn contemporaries is most fully expressed. It is the myth of what Emma Smith has recently termed 'Shakespearean singularity' that is challenged by surrogates who threaten to supplant Shakespeare or even to erase him instead of simply remembering and reinventing him.[22]

If the response to the Middleton complete works is symptomatic, as Roach would see it, of a nostalgic mystification of a previous Golden Age in which Shakespeare's primacy went unchallenged, what remains to be worked out is what is being forgotten when Shakespeare's contemporaries move into spaces – whether on shelves or on stages – hitherto reserved for Shakespearean performances. Erne supplies a part of the answer when he compares Middleton's status in the first part of the twentieth century (measured by the number of his plays included in the 1934 anthology *Elizabethan and Stuart Plays*) with his vastly increased popularity at the beginning of the twenty-first century (measured by the plays anthologised in the 2002 *English Renaissance Drama: A Norton Anthology*). Erne attributes this change to the scholarly activity of Taylor and Lavagnino's editorial team of seventy-five academic collaborators, whom he credits with 'advanc[ing] the dramatist's reputation to that of one of Shakespeare's chief contemporaries'.[23] Might it be, then, that what is suppressed in the proposed surrogation of Shakespeare by Middleton, that the factor Taylor 'forgets' even as his case crucially depends on it, is the scholarly labour that underpins the reputation and popularity of any 'world champion playwright'?[24]

[22] Emma Smith, 'Shakespeare and Early Modern Tragedy', *The Cambridge Companion to English Renaissance Tragedy*, ed. Emma Smith and Garrett A. Sullivan Jr (Cambridge University Press, 2010) 132–49, 138.

[23] Erne, '"Our Other Shakespeare"', 500.

[24] *Middleton: The Collected Works*, 58.