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CHAPTER TWO

Out of the Repertoire: *Women Beware Women* and Performance History

Paul Innes

The performance history of Middleton's *Women Beware Women* is peculiar, in both senses of the word. The play's relationship with the stage is strange because of the paucity of references to performances in the period for which it was written. The tragedy also has a very specific performance record which begs many questions, not least of which is: what is this play precisely about that appears to have rendered it unplayable for most of its existence.

The sordid world of the play, with its intermixing of sexual and political power, may well be the reason why *Women Beware Women* has often suffered such neglect. It is relatively easy to envisage why the play should disappear from sight at the Restoration, despite that period's own fascination with erotic representation on stage: the difficulty lies in the nature of sexual relations as they are presented by Middleton. Rapid changes in modes of characterization and the spectacular finale may also have deterred theatre companies. The eighteenth century's neo-classical literary culture and veneration for polite society would also have marked it as less than sympathetic to the excesses of Middleton's dramatic culture, in much the same way that Shakespeare is 'cleaned up' (or 'refined') for presentation on the post-Restoration stage.¹ And in the Romantic period, with its profound literary concern with the imaginative life of the individual, readers were for the most part similarly unreceptive to Middleton's art.²

Such historicizing comments provide a possible context for the neglect from which *Women Beware Women* has suffered. However, more detailed examination is required to determine what it is about *Women Beware Women* in particular that caused its absence from the repertoire for centuries, only to be rehabilitated in a spectacular fashion in the modern period.

Theorizing Early Modern Stage Culture

Since the 1980s there has been a significant and long overdue renewal of interest in the circumstances of writing and acting in the Tudor and Stuart playhouses.³

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Unsurprisingly, given the relative infancy of this area when compared with textual history, the lion's share of the scholarship has been devoted to Shakespearean theatre, although a great deal of the commentary that has resulted can also usefully inform a discussion of Middleton's tragedy. The criticism of Robert Weimann in this area is particularly important here in delineating the popular roots of Renaissance drama and revealing their influence upon early modern dramaturgical practice.⁴ Weimann also takes into account the necessary contexts of the Reformation and an evolving print culture as the overarching conditions in which shifting conceptions of authority impinged upon various areas of early modern cultural production, including English Renaissance drama.⁵ More recently, he has developed his work with specific reference to the structural logic of Shakespeare's stagecraft:

what would it mean to situate Shakespeare's text in the environment of a culture in which the new learning and writing had not fully supplanted the vitality in the oral communication of the unlettered, particularly when the transaction of that text on a stage – theatrical performance – was itself an oral-aural process?⁶

In this way Weimann interrogates Shakespeare's plays with the intention of recovering (as far as is possible) the dramatic indices that underpin the logic of Renaissance dramaturgy. It should be stressed that such a project goes against the grain of many well-mined textual readings, but it does not reject this more established form of engagement with the plays. Rather, in Weimann's words,

My suggestion is that Elizabethan performance practice cannot be subsumed under any one purpose of playing; it must be viewed as plural, serving a number of diverse functions, as – far from being unified or unifying – a contested field in which early modern literary meanings can be constructed but also intercepted.⁷

Drawing attention to what he calls 'doubleness' (a given play's use of both literary and dramatic qualities),⁸ Weimann investigates the different possibilities raised by the various texts of *Hamlet*, noting that there are dramaturgical as well as semantic conclusions to be drawn from them.⁹ Weimann argues that 'the agency of playwriting is reconstructed as an important component of a larger nexus of socio-cultural and economic relations'¹⁰ and, equally importantly, quotes Stephen Greenblatt's observation that 'It is impossible to take the "text itself" as the perfect, unsubstitutable, freestanding container of all its meanings'.¹¹ This enables him to elaborate a space for theorizing the practically unattainable recovery of Renaissance acting techniques on their own stages.¹²

Accordingly, we need not endorse the superior position traditionally accorded the dramatic text over and above that of a concern with the conditions of performance. Indeed, Weimann urges readers and audiences to consider a form of theatre study which points 'beyond any binary opposition between performance and text'.¹³ In this context, it is important to note how dynamic is the exchange between the play as text and the play in performance, such that an easy opposition between the two is unsustainable. Indeed, the gap between these two poles itself inflects, or affects, the written text as well as the

performance. This is a particularly critical observation, because it allows us to envisage how the practices of the theatre as an institution prefigure the written play as well as the play in performance.

The Dramaturgy of *Women Beware Women*

This brief conversation with Weimann can assist us enormously in contextualizing a performance study of Middleton's tragedy.¹⁴ In his critical discussions, Weimann does gesture towards other dramatists in a way that allows wider possibilities of application to be inscribed in the processes he describes. Names such as Jonson and Marston reverberate throughout his discussions but, interestingly, Middleton is the one major figure missing from Weimann's account. The issue at stake, at least as far as *Women Beware Women* is concerned, is just how much this play's dramaturgy does indeed fit Weimann's model. What follows will be a necessarily schematic overview of the play's development, an attempt to highlight and bring together the various elements of stagecraft that occur in the play, and indeed that structure it in dramatic terms. The play will be discussed more or less a scene at a time, initially with the intention of bringing out the structuring stage techniques, up to and including the important chess scene (2.2). After that, the analysis will move to the second crucial area of character in performance, to be followed, finally, by some commentary on the conditions of playing before contemporary audiences. All three stages will be used to divide the text up into manageable sections, with a view, ultimately, to establishing what each of the three elements can tell us about the play's relationship with performance history. As an exercise, such a procedure has the added advantage of making us re-read the play afresh in the order in which it occurs on stage.¹⁵

In a sense two questions are at work in this analysis. First, just what is the relation of this particular play to the expectations of its own performance culture? And, secondly, what does this enable us to say about the resulting performance history? To reiterate: what is it about this play in particular that causes it to disappear from performance for so long, before returning to the stage with such startling vigour?

Like *Hamlet*, the initial scene of *Women Beware Women* begins with a visually differentiated tableau. In the earlier play, the passage of the ghost across the stage is watched and commented upon by two sentries; in Middleton's play, a similar enactment of the gaze occurs between Leantio (who is as yet unnamed) and his mother on the one hand, and Bianca on the other. This staging logic marks out both plays immediately as embodying a differentiated play world; the stage spacing elaborates a visual split between those who gaze and comment, and the one who is subjected to their discussions. The difference inscribed here accords with Weimann's theorizing of the *locus* and *platea*, the upstage and downstage position on the open platform stage respectively.¹⁶

The concept is a deceptively simple one. The *locus* is the upstage area that corresponds most closely with the static proscenium arch stage, since it is located farthest from the audience and presents a relatively unified field of view. It is important to note that this relation is only provisional, since the architectural

space of many Renaissance theatres permitted a much more diverse set of audience positions and, correspondingly, audience gazes. The *platea* is the more open downstage position, right in the middle of the audience in at least some of the apron stage playhouses. This is the position from which actors closest to the audience can comment on the action and the *locus* in ways that are extremely difficult to understand, let alone reproduce, on most modern stages. Additionally, this is the area or zone in which some of the play action most closely accords with the expectations of audiences in Renaissance performance and play-going culture.¹⁷ The term ‘zone’ is especially useful here because it denotes relative rather than absolute spheres of influence. It implies that movement is possible between the *locus* and the *platea*, turning the differentiation between the two into an interweaving of performative possibilities on the Renaissance stages.

Such a dynamic relation is exactly what occurs in the first scene of *Women Beware Women*. Leantio’s mother, in her downstage position of collusion with the audience, says to her son ‘What’s this gentlewoman?’ (1.1.11). Her question comes after Leantio’s ‘aside’ to the audience, directly describing his own view of his mother to them. The *platea* enables direct audience address by means of conventions such as the aside; it is the space from which Bianca in the *locus* zone is pointed out, as if by someone in the midst of the audience itself. I will return to the implications of this technique later, as they relate directly to the question of characterization and the status of the audience in its own right.¹⁸ What matters for the moment is the spatial logic of the relationship between the two zones. It must be noted in this context that Bianca stands there for 110 lines before her new mother-in-law crosses the threshold from one zone to the other in order to kiss her. This visual objectification of Bianca is the choreographic equivalent of Leantio’s warning to his mother about the ramifications of his marriage at 1.1.46–567, which establishes the importance of money, status and sexual relations in this dramatic world. The dynamic complexity here can only be treated by recognizing the layering effects of the spoken word and its relationship with dramatic action; neither is necessarily privileged over the other and indeed both must operate effectively for the play to be successful. Weimann’s portmanteau German term for this very specific element of Renaissance performance is *figurenposition*.¹⁹ It should be noted that the scene ends with another convention, that of the soliloquy (1.1.151–76).

The action now moves to the play’s second grouping of relations between the sexes, and it does so in ways that directly recall the first scene. The character denoted as ‘Guardiano’ comments directly to the audience, employing the convention of the aside in the same manner as Leantio in the previous scene; in particular, Guardiano’s description of Isabella at 1.2.69–73 parallels Leantio’s earlier description of Bianca. Significantly, it is exactly at this moment that Fabritio orders Isabella to mask herself – it would not be too far-fetched in performance for the company to have Bianca initially veiled or masked, as in scene 1, so as to point up the parallels even further. Conventionally, of course, the masked woman is often seen as a woman silenced. Costuming here could become a visual echo of Fabritio’s attempts to silence any reservations Isabella might have about the stupidity of the Ward he has chosen to be her husband.

However, the play very quickly subverts any easy assumptions about such an attempt to objectify the silent woman by revealing in this very scene the possibility of incestuous desire and Isabella's own ambivalent status as a desired object and desiring subject.

The third scene of the first act returns to Leantio, his mother and Bianca, but in ways that significantly change the exposition. Leantio enters in soliloquy, almost picking up from where he left off at the end of scene 1. Bianca and her mother-in-law enter separately after this above the stage. In an open air theatre similar to the Swan or the Globe, the two characters would presumably be located at an aperture in the upper gallery of the tiring house. The symbolic location is again the *locus*, but this time with a difference: the vertical dimension could be used further to isolate them from Leantio in the *platea* (and thus, by extension, the audience as well).²⁰ Leantio reinforces the importance of the gaze here as he describes to the audience the effect this sight has upon him by repeating the verb 'see' at 1.3.13 and 1.3.17. His first use of the term is a typical *platea* injunction to the audience.

Leantio leaves on business and is replaced in the *platea* by citizens preparing for the Duke's procession. It is clear by this point that the two women above the stage are effectively looking out of the main façade of the house. The placing of the citizens reinforces the communality of the audience and *platea*, while the simultaneous staging of Bianca and Leantio's mother continues as the latter describes for the former what is about to take place. The clarity of the stage division inevitably draws attention to the acts of specularity: not only is the pair upstage (and up high) about to watch a procession, but those down below will be able to see the two women, Bianca included, which is precisely what Leantio was so desperate to avoid. And, at the same time, the audience sees all of this unfolding.²¹ The complex logic of this kind of staging of multiple viewpoints enables Middleton to take advantage of the rich potentialities of the Renaissance stage. Interestingly, however, the play does not force the issue by immediately denoting some form of recognition or acknowledgement on the part of the Duke. Rather, it postpones this stage business by simply using the convention of the procession in dumb show, thus varying the exposition still further. The possibilities are left open:

Bianca: Did not the Duke look up? Methought he saw us.

Mother: That's everyone's conceit that sees a duke (1.3.105–6)

However, such staging does allow for the possibility of 'wrong seeing', an element that the play will go on to develop much more fully.

Rather than expand immediately upon the various possibilities left open by the third and final scene of Act 1, the action now shifts back again to the other main plot strand. In a sense this patterning is now becoming a form of ironic counterpointing by close dramatic association: the sexual conversation that takes places between Livia and Hippolito contaminates the hitherto separate world of Bianca. In the meantime Livia spins Isabella a tale that effectively bastardizes her niece, and in a paradoxically positive manner, because it means that there is now a way out from Fabritio's dictates for Isabella (2.1.92–177). The thematic importance of sexual deceit is being brought more and more into the open in a

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network of associations of wealth and social status: according to Livia, Isabella's real father was the Marquis of Coria. Livia's explanation ostensibly clears the way for Hippolito to make his advances to Isabella – if Fabritio is not her father, then Hippolito is not her uncle. In this way the second main strand of the plot is used to introduce obliquely, as it were, the tragedy's obsessive interest in upper-class corruption and sexual incontinency that will inevitably infect the Bianca plot. In strictly literary critical terms, there is nothing new in making these points, but what I am trying to do is provisionally reconstruct how the staging itself is utilized to produce the same meanings, in a kind of double relationship of the kind envisaged by Weimann.

The latter part of 2.1 is acted out by means of a series of 'asides' interspersed among the conversations between characters. This includes a direct address by Livia to the audience about her craftiness at 2.1.178–79 as she is on her way out. She encounters Hippolito as he enters the stage, and there is a short epigrammatic utterance as Livia tells him 'She's thine own. Go' (2.1.179). Not only does this complete the second line of her aside, it makes use of another dramatic convention, the conversation between some characters that is not overheard by others, the 'mishearing' equivalent of 'wrong seeing'. The interaction between Isabella and Hippolito that follows is structured by means of 'asides' which constitute separate addresses to the audience. What happens here is not just a series of short comments; these are long descriptions by each character made directly to the audience while the other character is still onstage. Presumably each is to one side of the stage in the *platea*, splitting the location further and reinforcing the sense of audience collusion. The fact that so many characters have now used the technique of the aside means that it becomes a vehicle, in this play at least, for simultaneous staging of multiple character viewpoints, all within the purview of the audience's direct engagement. Middleton uses this well-established stage convention to invigorate the plot element of character motivation and manipulation, reinventing its purpose as a tool of more than just one character at a time. In other words, the *platea* aside functions emblematically as a visual enforcement of a play world in which almost everyone has a hidden purpose, and only the audience is made fully aware of what is going on. Indeed, Hippolito directly draws attention to the events that unfold by means of a soliloquy after Isabella has left him alone on the stage.

Such shifting engagements produce a skilful use of the physical resources available to the Renaissance stage. Perhaps the single most commonly cited performance element of the play now begins to unfold in 2.2, the game of chess. However, it should be noted that this emblematic game occurs in the context of a particularly complex long scene that consists of many internal shifting sub-scenes. It begins by picking up on the potential options deferred from the Duke's earlier procession. The conversation between Guardiano and Livia leaves the audience in no doubt that the Duke desires Bianca. Guardiano has been charged with enabling the Duke to gain access to the unknown lady and Livia will help out by manipulating her old neighbour, Leantio's mother. The character developments glimpsed here will be revisited later; what is important for the moment is the exploitation of sexual favours for political gain is not confined to one sex alone. Moreover, it is interesting to note that the subsequent onstage

antics and sexual punning of the ‘useless’ Ward and his foil, Sordido, act as a visual enactment not just of a related plotline, but of the excesses of acting that are part and parcel of the expectations of this performance culture.

As the two fools leave, the Mother comes on, and the game of chess is set up, symbolizing the *motif* of human manipulation in evidence throughout the play. The Mother is inveigled by Livia to send for Bianca, and then to allow Bianca to be taken off by Guardiano to see the rest of the house. At this point (292ff) the full resources of the Renaissance stage are brought into play. Not only is there simultaneous staging, possibly with Guardiano and Bianca (and then the Duke) vertically removed from the chess game, but the rape of Bianca takes place off stage. The layering of effects that results again reveals the multiple relationships of surveillance between the characters. And in direct comparison with many of Shakespeare’s plays, the singular importance of the crucial act of violence is emphasized by the fact that it exists in a life beyond the stage: compare, for example, the death of Duncan in *Macbeth*, the supposed sexual incontinence of Hero in *Much Ado About Nothing*, and the drowning of *Ophelia*.²² These unshown scenes carry so much symbolic weight that subsequent cultures have felt a requirement to fill them in, as it were, with their own interpretations. One only has to think of the Romantic and pre-Raphaelite obsession with painting Ophelia in the water, or indeed the need felt by modern film directors directly to show such events to their audiences. Nor is this a trivial point; the later necessity to represent these unrepresented events may hint at a major difference between later cultures and the Renaissance. Given the often volatile nature of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century society, a Renaissance company would have had to be very careful about staging something like regicide – if staging it were a possibility in the first place. But there is a further paradox: not to show such a major plot element draws attention to it as something crucial to the play’s representations. Thus, the meanings generated by the event will be represented in different ways by different people, as well as providing plot momentum. On this stage, absence has its own dynamic.

The scene ends with a split in Bianca’s own speech patterns after she returns to the main part of the stage. Her conversation with her mother-in-law is interspersed with imprecations made aside to Livia before the latter is left on stage alone. Her final soliloquy sets the seal on an extremely complicated series of movements; it also links her indissolubly to a very specific set of performance requirements which are, in turn, shaped by the larger culture for which the tragedy was produced. To recap: since these circumstances are historically precise, it does not take a great shift in the cultural environment to render the play as a performance piece problematic indeed, perhaps even alien to subsequent generations – and thus unplayable.²³

Character in Performance

Livia’s soliloquy at the end of the second act also draws attention to characterization in performance, as indeed does the whole scene. At first sight, this may seem an obvious point to make, but in terms of Renaissance dramatic exposition it is not trivial. As the antics of the Ward and Sordido in this very long

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scene remind us, there is a logic of dramatic performance for its own sake that is embedded in the very structure of this drama.²⁴ The contemporary audience expects the acting it sees and hears not only to advance the story, but also to be worth watching in its own right, over and above any plot exigencies or requirements of dramatic writing. *Women Beware Women* provides a very sophisticated example of this dramatic art at its richest, with characters moving dynamically across the stage, exploiting the full range of its zonal organization. Additionally, at least some of them must move between roles, in order that the full potentialities of the *figurenposition* may be teased out. There is a productive tension between the role played and the person playing the role; the historical root of the Brechtian *gestus* in which the actor enacts a part and at the same time shows great awareness of the process of acting itself.²⁵ The actor does not submerge himself entirely in another (fictional) psychology; this is not a theatre for Stanislavski.

All of which brings me to the second important issue raised by the play's performance history: this kind of characterization may provide another part of the explanation for the play's peculiar history in performance. In direct comparison with the earlier consideration of performance techniques, characterization in *Women Beware Women* can be examined in the context of the prevailing dramatic conventions. For example, Livia and Guardiano can both be seen as stage types common to Jacobean tragedy. As a manipulator, the figure of Livia compares well with, say, Beatrice in *The Changeling*, another woman who operates by undermining the ideological basis for codes of sexual behaviour. Guardiano can similarly be compared with Bosola in *The Duchess of Malfi*. Both are malcontents because of their lack of social advancement, and both initially operate on behalf of powerfully corrupt patrons at the apex of the social pyramid. Such figures recognize the innocence of the people they are to victimize, and the ethical dubiety, to put it mildly, of those they serve. Bosola and Guardiano change from this knowing acquiescence to agency against their employers. It is perhaps this shifting logic of character presentation that is at the root of the historical problem of *Women Beware Women* in performance. Moreover, Guardiano is not alone in changing in this way – Leantio also tries to become a kind of revenger figure, moving radically away from his initial passivity.

It seems reasonable to suggest that such a movement depends on something other than what a later period might consider to be consistent or realistic internal character psychology. However, this is a performance point, differing in its implications from other forms of critique: 'the most striking thing about *Women Beware Women* is the very consistent and comprehensible human and psychological motivation of the characters, given the social circumstances, a consistency uncommon in Jacobean drama'.²⁶ Here Margot Heinemann argues that the social world of the play produces consistent character motivation in a uniform manner. While this is persuasive within a narrative of literary criticism, the fact that several of the onstage figures change, and not all at the same time or at the same speed, disturbs any easy assumptions of a primacy of coherence, at least for a modern audience. The comparison between Bosola and Guardiano is a case in point: in the long second scene of Act 2, Guardiano begins to assume the

role of plot motor familiar from Webster's play, enacting the convention of the outsider.

'Tis for the Duke; and if I fail your purpose,
All means to come by riches or advancement
Miss me and skip me over. (2.2.28–30)

He speaks these lines to Livia, enacting a cue to the audience that will enable them to recognize his character type. Guardiano is now becoming a lynchpin to the double plots of sexual corruption, both Livia's and the Duke's. His unspecified position in the households of Fabritio and Livia makes him useful in such business, as well as rendering him available to the Duke as part of his plans. The *figureposition* thus generated for Guardiano is crucial, marking him off as a socially and dramatically liminal personage. The way the actor puts this role into action makes him a dramatic threshold, precisely because he is able to comment on his own conduct and that of others while still remaining a participant in the intrigue.²⁷

The way in which the Guardiano *figureposition* is able to do this is by occupying the *platea* and acting as an 'intervenient' figure.²⁸ A good example occurs when Bianca curses him in an aside at 2.2.425–43. His response is particularly illuminating:

Well, so the Duke love me,
I fare not much amiss then. Two great feasts
Do seldom come together in one day;
We must not look for 'em. (2.2.443–46)

His comment is noted in the stage directions as an aside, but again it is much more a direct address to the audience, encapsulating his success in both plotlines. Of course, it is important to note in this context that Guardiano does not necessarily always act in this way: the 'intervenient' pose is one that is conventionally available to him as one of many stage personae.

In addition, dynamic characterization is not limited to him alone; in the next scene, Bianca also begins to show signs of a rapidly-changing stage presence. This is prepared for by another character in soliloquy, this time Leantio's mother, as she tells the audience about the difference she has noticed in Bianca since the visit to Livia's house. Bianca then enters, argues with her mother-in-law about the meanness of the house, and exits. The Mother then speaks a second soliloquy and withdraws to another part of the stage, the cue for Leantio's entrance. When Bianca returns to greet him, she does so rather frostily, employing a number of sexual puns. The conflict becomes more and more open as a messenger arrives from the Duke, inviting Bianca to a banquet at Livia's house; this leads to a full-scale argument because Leantio is shocked by the fact that the Duke knows about his wife. Bianca and her mother-in-law now ally against Leantio and go off to get ready for the banquet against his orders. The messenger reappears to invite Leantio as well. This short overview of the scene does not do justice to its complex staging and use of asides, but in the context of the discussion of characterization it raises the major issue of change in several figures at once.

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The differences in Bianca are perhaps the most obvious, and as part of the sexually corrupt world depicted in the play, her role has attracted the most critical attention.²⁹ Understandable as this may be in terms of the play's sexual politics, an analysis of the effects of her rape on her character and the beginning of her change into accepting the role appointed for her in the moral economy of the Duke (as well as that of her husband), can underplay the performative element of the play's treatment of Bianca. This is a particularly difficult point to unpick, because it requires a way to see such character change via the actor's performance, in addition to the words provided by the dramatic text. In this instance, one has to assume provisionally that Bianca's sexual vocabulary combines with her own more aggressive use of asides in this scene to highlight exactly the associations noted earlier. To reiterate: in this play, the aside is never simply a neutral utterance and its prior uses by Livia and Guardiano in particular associate the aside with the play's preoccupation with sexual and politic manoeuvring. The fact that Bianca now participates fully in this usage marks her out as having become another such figure. It could, of course, be argued that this is over-reading; but the point is, precisely, that reading is not enough – this is a point which continues to be neglected on account of the modern privileging of literary culture, even on the stage. However, *Women Beware Women* was written for a radically different stage culture and we should not underestimate its performance assumptions, even if they have subsequently become alien to the conventions of our own theatre experiences.

In the next scene, change comes to Livia as well as she falls in love/lust with Leantio at the banquet. Initially, she warns the Duke about him and, interestingly, she begins to fall for him after the Duke rewards him with the Captainship of the citadel of Ruinse – perhaps his social elevation has something to do with her attraction. Leantio, in the meantime, is also changing, as denoted by his use of the aside. He sees that there is some sort of relationship between the Duke and Bianca, but is not powerful enough to say or do anything about it; interestingly, he confides in the audience as a result. Leantio begins his character shift to revenger in aside at lines 89–98 as he sees the Duke and Bianca drinking together. The distance between husband and wife might be emphasized by placing the Duke and Bianca in the *locus* zone, with Leantio in the *platea* commenting to the audience. Leantio's conversion to an active character seeking vengeance adds to a steadily growing list of changing figures, and this is important. Almost all of the major figures are now shifting, in one way or another, as they take turns to use the aside and the *platea*. It would seem sensible to suggest as a result that character change alone is not sufficient to account for the play's difficulty for subsequent readers and audiences, but that the extent of multiple change to a range of characters has posed real challenges to generations of readers and actors. There is a good historical reason for such difficulty: the growth in importance of the individual as a concept in subsequent centuries has created an appetite for less fluid and more coherent characterization than is to be found in *Women Beware Women*.³⁰ Later reception of the play may well be affected by the extravagance and rapidity of change in multiple characters, such that for an audience used to a more managed form of characterization, simultaneous changes in so many figures may result in affective and moral disengagement.

A great deal more than this occurs in 3.2, but the focus on the performance of character needs to be glossed further with reference to the Isabella plotline. As the banquet progresses, Guardiano is seen at a different part of the stage trying to deal with the Ward and Isabella, just as the Duke finishes off the arrangements for their marriage. This is developed further in 3.3, and here again we find another use of the aside convention. At 3.3.33–42, Isabella develops upon her previous asides in the company of Hippolito, commenting ironically on her arranged marriage with the Ward. The broad comedy in this scene is reminiscent of the Ward's earlier appearances on stage, but this time it occurs in the context of Isabella's grudging acquiescence in a match that is necessary to conceal her interest in Hippolito. The scene as a whole is framed in movement by Guardiano; he sets up the encounter between Isabella, Sordido and the Ward. He leaves the scene to take its course, and returns when it is over. The result is to emphasize Guardiano's liminal function and role as surveillant.

The beginning of Act 4 now requires a further series of changes related in this instance to the Duke. Bianca, who is now his in the fullest sense of possession, tells him about Leantio's knowledge of their affair. The Duke decides to make use of Hippolito in an aside at 4.1.132–41 that marks him out as an expert machiavel. The relentless logic of change marches on, with so many characters now undergoing radical transformations that only an audience steeped in this performance culture will be able to attend to these shifts. What is needed to make this work is ensemble performance of the highest order, with no one single character predominating, something that is again extremely difficult to pull off on the modern stage. Even Hippolito changes, as the Duke reveals to him the relationship between Leantio and Livia, putting all the blame on the former, of course. It is only when this final movement takes place that the Cardinal finally appears on stage. Even though he witnesses some form of repentance in his brother, it is only provisional. After the Lord Cardinal's exit, the Duke re-emerges as a machiavel, this time in soliloquy.

It is clear that character is not some stable unity of coherent psychology. Rather, it is a set of performative possibilities over and across which a multiplicity of meanings can be played out. Such a dynamic conception of how meanings occur in and through performance serves as a critical foil to historically subsequent assumptions that the prime generator of meaning is the text.

Audience engagement

If techniques of performance and character in *Women Beware Women* are culturally and historically specific, what about the assumptions held by the play's contemporary audiences? This is the last of our three major elements under investigation, and it is inevitably linked with the first two. This drama is structured by a prior recognition of the accepted parameters of playing. As successful practitioners of the craft, the company of players has a professional working knowledge of what will succeed on these stages for its paying contemporaries.

But recovering such audience assumptions is perhaps an even more difficult

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task than imagining performance or character techniques: 'For the audience itself to be acknowledged as the supreme court of appeal is an act of authorization that goes beyond that of the representation of dramatic action'.³¹ Weimann goes on to explore this formulation. However, in the context of a discussion of *Women Beware Women*, a further operation needs to be managed so as better to understand the reasons for this play's peculiar performance history. Taking into account the critical perspectives of Weimann and our earlier discussions of performance and characterization, it is possible to discern here a complex dramaturgy that is aimed very precisely at a specific culture, that of the contemporary play-goers. And if the two interrelated elements of performance and character are difficult for later cultures to decipher, this situation should also give us cause in terms of a possible shift in audience tastes which has led to the sustained neglect of plays such as *Women Beware Women*.

At 4.2 Hippolito does indeed kill Leantio, but this action leads to a further dynamic of revenge. In her grief, Livia reveals to everyone present his lust for Isabella as well as her lies about Isabella's ties of kinship. There now follows a swift sequence of multiple shifts: Guardiano decides to become an agent of revenge; Isabella scorns Hippolito and vows revenge on Livia; and this results in a final extravagant commitment to deceit on the part of all the major players.³² It is clear that the logic of character change is by Act 4 so fundamental that it becomes the driving force of the drama as it moves inexorably towards its conclusion in the traditionally excessive bloodbath. The death of Leantio and the reactions of the characters who become involved engender as a kind of psychologized chaos before the final catastrophe is enacted on stage. The logic that underpins the play's representations of sexual and political power becomes so entangled that it unravels. In the case of *Women Beware Women*, the signal to audiences that this play will indeed fulfil their expectations comes with the announcement of the Duke's marriage and the wedding masque that will accompany it. Guardiano makes the required performative comment: 'The plot's full then' (4.2.214).

The appearance in a Renaissance play of such self-artifice is well known in terms of the self-referentiality so beloved of literary critics, but here it has added meaning. It points to the play-within-the-play, completing Middleton's display of his command of the full repertoire of Renaissance techniques of enactment. However, at the same time it also acknowledges the audience's expectation of an explosive finale.³³ The play prepares the way for its own use of the sub-play by sweeping on through two short scenes. In 4.3 the wedding procession is interrupted by the Lord Cardinal, who is then disdained by Bianca and the Duke. The Lord Cardinal is left alone on the stage to utter his prophetic epigram:

Lust is bold,
And will have vengeance speak ere't be controlled. (4.3.71–72)

The anticipated bloodbath arrives in a quite spectacular fashion. In turn, Livia starts to die from poisonous fumes exuded by Isabella's censer; Livia retaliates by throwing fire on Isabella's lap, which kills the niece; Guardiano falls onto his own caltrop when Hippolito stamps in anger at Livia's death; Hippolito is shot by the masqued Cupids with poisoned arrows and finishes himself off by running

onto a halberd; the Duke dies of the poisoned cup Bianca had intended for the Cardinal; and Bianca kills herself with the same poison. The sheer performative excess generated by all of these accidental and stage-managed deaths inscribes Renaissance performance culture onto the play, as does the Lord Cardinal's final four-line comment.

There is a very good reason for rehearsing the final bloodbath at such speed: it points not only to the conventions of early seventeenth-century tragedy, but also the problem posed for subsequent performance cultures. On its own stage, the ending of *Women Beware Women* may have been a specific requirement, even an expectation. And when the play is finally revived for modern audiences who are perhaps more than ready for its multiple treatments of sex and politics (the more easily available textually generated meanings), the problem of performing it looms large, precisely because it can seem so absurd. John Jowett describes the strategy adopted by Howard Barker for the 1986 Royal Court Theatre production:

a pared-down text of the first four acts was followed by a second part in modern idiom written entirely in Barker's own hand. Barker notes that in Middleton 'lust leads to the grave'; in his own version, which rejects the Cardinal's moralizations as a lie, 'desire alters perception', becoming a frenzy that leads towards political revolution.³⁴

Such massive cutting of the finale could be seen as the solution to an insurmountable problem. It could also, of course, point to a structured historical shift, since Barker's production is aimed at a modern audience who might accept the play's dealings with sexual and social power politics, while at the same time being irretrievably alienated from at least some of the staging techniques it uses. Indeed, the Lord Cardinal's final epitaph may in fact have drawn attention to the inadequacy of the wider moral culture of this dramatic world.³⁵

Jowett's 'Introduction' to the play replays its recent performance history in exactly the terms delineated above. The way in which the play disappeared from the stage for so long is a direct result of its fidelity to its own performance culture in the three areas of technique, characterization and the relationship with its own audience. This seems persuasive enough, but what is particularly interesting is that even its modern revivals have a sense of partiality to them, as though the production of meaning is somehow demeaned by some of the play's own stagecraft. I would contend, rather, *pace* Robert Weimann, that a very precise structural change in the conditions of reception has inevitably led this play to a history of non-performance. This is not to denigrate modern performances; rather, it takes cognisance of the fact that at root they recognize that a long-term change has occurred – it is not possible for modern productions simply to *replay this play*.

In this context, it is important to note that one of the most recent major revivals of the play took such issues as a major point of departure. The Red Bull Theater's New York production of the play ran from December 2008 to January 2009 and received a number of reviews.³⁶ Some of these are shorter than others, but a distillation gives some flavour of the production. First of all, the costuming was very sumptuous, giving a gloss of excessive luxury to the play world. Secondly, the staging was elaborately designed so as to give a sense of elaborate

intertwining between levels and stage areas, a labyrinthine visual reminder of the play's intertwining plots. Thirdly, the language was somewhat pared down, presumably to relieve a contemporary New York audience of some verbal excesses that would be difficult to convey. Fourthly, some interaction was enacted between the cast and the audience. And, finally, the Cardinal was rewritten to be just as corrupt as the rest of the characters. All of these directorial/cast choices make judicious choices in restaging the play in a meaningful way for a much later audience.

Our own conditions of performance are radically distinct from those of Middleton's contemporaries, especially given the rise of the individual and the appetite for more psychologically coherent characterization. Singleness of purpose in playing and character is a completely different cultural *milieu* from the liminal locations of theatrical practice operational in Renaissance London,³⁷ not to mention the threshold characteristics of Renaissance characterization. The primacy of the unitary gaze associated with the proscenium arch theatre reaches its *apogee* with modern visual media: Granada Television broadcast a televised performance in 1965.³⁸ It is difficult to conceive of a play less suited to the gaze of an individual directed towards a single point of light in a corner, cut off from all possible audience interaction.

Notes

- 1 For a reminder of the literary and cultural bias of the early editorial business, see Robert Weimann, *Author's Pen and Actor's Voice: Playing and Writing in Shakespeare's Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 31–36.
- 2 Recently recounted in Margreta de Grazia, *Hamlet Without Hamlet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 7–22.
- 3 A representative sample would include Steven Mullaney, *The Place of the Stage: License, Play, and Power in Renaissance England* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1988); Louis Montrose, *The Purpose of Playing: Shakespeare and the Cultural Politics of the Elizabethan Theatre* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Pauline Kiernan, *Shakespeare's Theory of Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); W. B. Worthen, *Shakespeare and the Authority of Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Leeds Barroll, *Politics, Plague and Shakespeare's Theater: The Stuart Years* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); Meredith Anne Skura, *Shakespeare the Actor and the Purposes of Playing* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993). All of these works could be considered as sympathetic to my own present endeavour, in that they attempt to theorize the relationships between dramatist, actors/players and audiences, rather than simply use them to account for the pre-eminence of Shakespeare. The most important body of work in this respect is that of Robert Weimann, *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theater: Studies in the Social Dimension of Dramatic Form and Fiction*, ed. by Robert Schwartz (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), and his updating and extension of that work, and Robert Weimann, *Author's Pen and Actor's Voice: Playing and Writing in Shakespeare's Theatre*, ed. by Helen Higbee and William West (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). See also Andrew Gurr, *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) for the impact of the socially disparate composition of the audiences. There is of course a much longer (and uneven) history of attempts to address the void in studies of Renaissance performance. The texts cited above seem to me to attempt most directly to account for this much neglected aspect of the period's output.
- 4 Weimann, *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition*, pp. 73–84.

- 5 Robert Weimann, *Authority and Representation in Early Modern Discourse*, ed. by David Hillman (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).
- 6 Weimann, *Author's Pen and Actor's Voice*, p. 7. Compare the comments on modern assumptions about textual primacy even in drama in Worthen, *Shakespeare and the Authority of Performance*, p. 27.
- 7 Weimann, *Author's Pen and Actor's Voice*, p. 8.
- 8 Weimann, *Author's Pen and Actor's Voice*, pp. 10–11.
- 9 Weimann, *Author's Pen and Actor's Voice*, pp. 20–21. He goes on later to adopt a similar technique in relation to Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great* at pp. 58–61. By way of comparison, see also Leah Marcus, *Unediting the Renaissance: Shakespeare, Marlowe, Milton* (London: Routledge, 1966), pp. 38–67, a chapter in which she analyses in subtle depth the nuances of the two texts of Marlowe's *Dr Faustus*.
- 10 Weimann, *Author's Pen and Actor's Voice*, p. 39.
- 11 Stephen J. Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1988), p. 3; quoted in Weimann, *Author's Pen and Actor's Voice*, p. 38.
- 12 Weimann, *Author's Pen and Actor's Voice*, p. 40.
- 13 Weimann, *Author's Pen and Actor's Voice*, p. 55.
- 14 I make no apologies for my shameless use of Weimann's work in this way. It seems to me to be the most sophisticated and complex work to date that analyses both the context and practical exigencies of Renaissance dramatic production.
- 15 The alternative would be to adopt a purely thematic methodology, reading the whole play in three different ways. In one sense this would be a more sophisticated argument, but there is the danger that the three main issues would become relatively isolated one from another. By reading the text in sequence, but subdividing it into three categories for investigation, I am trying to get to a baseline for each that will help to explain the play's disappearance from the performance record.
- 16 Weimann, *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition*, pp. 73–84, and as further developed in Weimann, *Author's Pen and Actor's Voice*, pp. 180–95.
- 17 For the term 'zone', see Weimann, *Author's Pen and Actor's Voice*, p. 202. Paul Innes, "'Pluck but his name out of his heart': A Caesarean Cross-section", in *Refiguring Mimesis: Representation in Early Modern Literature*, ed. by Jonathan Holmes and Adrian Streete (Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press), pp. 79–98 (p. 89), discusses a moment in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* at which a character in one part of the stage points to another in exactly the same way as occurs at the beginning of *Hamlet* and *Women Beware Women*, albeit in the context of a different argument. This is glossed later in the same essay at pp. 92–95, with specific reference to Weimann, *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theater*.
- 18 'technique' seems such a weak term for what is in fact a major constituent element of a performance culture that is alien to later stages.
- 19 Weimann, *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theater*, pp. 224–36.
- 20 Adrian Streete makes a similar point in relation to performance in his article on the religious iconography of the play: "'An old quarrel between us that will never be at an end": Middleton's *Women Beware Women* and Late Jacobean Religious Politics', *Review of English Studies*, published online at <http://res.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/content/full/hgm167v1> (2008), 12.
- 21 Kiernan, *Shakespeare's Theory of Drama*, uses the suggestive term 'layering' to describe a similar complexity in *Measure For Measure* at p. 103.
- 22 For some useful comments on the representation of offstage events, see Kiernan, *Shakespeare's Theory of Drama*, pp. 71–72.
- 23 Again, a comparison with Shakespeare's fortunes is illuminating. The ways in which the older writer's plays were removed from history and subsumed under the rubric of a literary and increasingly psychologically focused culture are radically different from the reception of *Women Beware Women* by later audiences and readers. Indeed, the occlusion of his contemporaries that goes hand in hand with Shakespeare's elevation to Bardhood depends on their plays being seen as somehow second-rate by later cultures, at least in the terms by which they familiarized his plays. Much work has

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- been done on the idolatry of Shakespeare, of course, but far less on the effects of the process on the reputations of his peers in the profession.
- 24 On antic acting of the old, antique style in *Hamlet* see Weimann, *Author's Pen and Actor's Voice*, pp. 161–68, and also de Grazia, *Hamlet Without Hamlet*, pp. 171–96.
- 25 Worthen, *Shakespeare and the Authority of Performance*, pp. 95–150, investigates these issues and their implications.
- 26 Margot Heinemann, *Puritanism and Theatre: Thomas Middleton and Oppositional Drama under the Early Stuarts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 181.
- 27 By way of comparison, see Weimann's analysis of the figure of Apemantus in *Timon of Athens* (*Author's Pen and Actor's Voice*, pp. 208–15). Interestingly enough, this play is included in *Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works* (ed. Taylor, Lavignano et al.) because of Middleton's collaboration with Shakespeare.
- 28 The term is Weimann's, used of Apemantus (Weimann, *Author's Pen and Actor's Voice*, p. 211).
- 29 See the comments made summing up critical judgements of Bianca in Martin White, *Middleton and Tourneur* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan), p. 117.
- 30 For some comments on the primary importance of the unified subject that comes about as a result of the rise of individualism, see Worthen, *Shakespeare and the Authority of Performance*, p. 91.
- 31 Weimann, *Author's Pen and Actor's Voice*, p. 218.
- 32 See Weimann, *Author's Pen and Actor's Voice*, p. 225. Here, he discusses how the ending of a play may be fashioned in such a way as to meet the audience's expectations and approval.
- 33 Weimann explicitly links the play-within-the-play to the doubled logic of textual representation and played presentation; see Weimann, *Author's Pen and Actor's Voice*, p. 83.
- 34 Jowett, *Women, Beware Women*, p. 1488.
- 35 See Weimann, *Author's Pen and Actor's Voice*, pp. 226–40 for a thorough discussion of the endings of Renaissance plays, and Kiernan, *Shakespeare's Theory of Drama*, pp. 98–100.
- 36 Website citations as follows:
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www.nytheatre.com/nytheatre/showpage.php?t=wome7699.
www.highbeam.com
- 37 See Mullaney, *Place of the Stage*.
- 38 Jowett, *Women, Beware Women*, p. 1488.