David Gunby, David Carnegie, and MacDonald P. Jackson (eds). *The Works of John Webster: An Old-Spelling Critical Edition.* Volume Three. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. Pp xli, 533.

This is the final volume of the handsomely-produced Cambridge edition of Webster, arriving twelve years after the publication of Volume One. It is not properly a 'complete' *Works* since, as the editors made clear at the outset, those collaboratively-written plays already published in the Cambridge editions of Dekker or Beaumont and Fletcher are omitted. This seems to me a pity, provoking as it does a disconcerting sense of absence or exclusion. Roughly half of the new volume consists of Webster's non-dramatic writings. Pride of place, however, goes to the 1621 city comedy, *Anything for a Quiet Life,* co-authored with Middleton and thus offering interesting scope for comparison with the modern-spelling version offered in the new Oxford edition of Middleton's works.

Knowing what we do about Webster's slow and laborious process of composition, attested to not only in Henry Fitzgeffrey's satirical portrait of him in *Notes from Blackfriars* (1617) but also in Webster's own preface to *The White Devil* (1612), we might conclude that he was something of a nightmare as a collaborator — particularly with a dramatist of such astonishing textual productivity as Middleton. Nevertheless, judging from David Carnegie's account of the 2001 student production at Wellington's Victoria University *Anything for a Quiet Life* is efficiently put together and eminently playable. It is tempting here to review not the edition but the play, which as David Gunby reminds us 'has generally been neglected by Middleton and Webster scholars alike' (4). Its most famous editor, F.L. Lucas, admitted that he would gladly have suppressed the play, which gave him no pleasure to edit (5), but Gunby offers a persuasive reading that focuses on its considerable dramatic strengths and its intriguing ambiguities without glossing over its evident weaknesses.

The text is clearly presented. Frustratingly, however, the explanatory commentary appears as a post-script, necessitating constant flicking backwards and forwards in a pretty hefty volume. A running reminder of those parts of the play confidently assigned to Webster would have been particularly helpful; although attributions are spelt out in MacDonald P. Jackson's textual introduction, I felt left to my own devices in spotting incidental reminders of Webster's better-known plays as I read. Mistress Chamlet's 'Black-book' (1.1.141), in which she itemises her husband's misdemeanours, harks back to Monticelso's more sinister black book in *The White Devil;* Knaves-bee's

recounting of his supposed dream to persuade his wife to confess her infidelities (2.1.10–21) reflects the similar use of dream accounts in the same play; the fable of the frogs and the stork (5.1.157–60) recalls a familiar device from both of the great tragedies; and the comic use of an echo (5.2.117–33) is oddly reminiscent of the echo scene in *The Duchess of Malfi.* The editors might also helpfully have drawn our notice to powerfully typical Websterian passages enriched by his characteristic metaphorical flourishes and moral *sententiae,* particularly in the unfolding of the Cressingham plot when, in Jackson's words, 'Old Cressingham's wife urges him to sign away his land, in the face of his son's fervent dissuasion' (51). Although this play may not represent Webster at his greatest, it contains some highly effective and individual dramatic writing.

The only other dramatic text in the volume comprises Webster's Induction and additions to *The Malcontent.* The editors might usefully have included the whole play, as those of the Oxford Middleton included *Macbeth* and *Measure for Measure;* after all, one cannot assume that all readers of the Cambridge Webster will be familiar with Marston's tragicomedy. The omission leads to oddities such as the negative observation that Dominic Cooke's 2002 RSC production of the play 'cut the Induction and all of Webster's additions' (307) — though I suppose it makes the point that the recent stage history of the text published here is a mere absence. Theatrical neglect of the Induction is understandable; this metatheatrical 'warm-up act before the main bill', as David Carnegie calls it (299), may be a key document in the records of early modern theatre but can have no performance validity outside its precise context in the King's Men's revised and expanded presentation of the play in 1603–4. The comic potential of having Burbage, Lowin and Condell playing 'themselves', with Sly as a gallant asking to speak to Sly the actor (lines 10–2), entirely collapses when we imagine modern performers taking these roles in a modern theatre. Even if the actors were to use their own names, instead of those of their Jacobean counterparts, Webster's original effect cannot be replicated. Cutting the Induction is therefore always likely to be the sensible option.[1] The comic additions to the play, conversely, remain performable; though Carnegie has found no evidence that they were played in Jonathan Miller's 1973 Nottingham Playhouse version, a few minutes' research of my own turned up a photograph from Miller's production that includes 'the fool Passarello' — a character who exists only in Webster's additions.[2]

Webster was evidently much in demand for 'additions', and his expansion of Overbury's *Characters* includes the remaining text in this volume that is of

direct interest to students of early modern theatre. This text is, of course, 'An Excellent Actor': a 'clear riposte', as the editors point out, to the 'Common Player' of J. Stephens's *Satyricall Essays* (439). In a brilliant metaphor Webster places the great actor centre-stage, charismatically 'charm[ing] our attention' (lines 2–3) and attached by an invisible fan of radial lines to the 'eares' of the audience (line 4) — a striking confirmation of the contemporary emphasis on 'hearing' rather than 'seeing' a play. Little has changed in 400 years; when a great actor dies we still 'cannot be perswaded', as Webster affirms, that 'any man can doe his parts like him' (lines 24–5). The editors are surely right to argue that Webster's portrait must stand as a generous panegyric to Richard Burbage. It gains interest here from its contextualization within the bitter feuding between Webster and Stephens, expertly summarized in David Gunby's introduction.

The non-dramatic works in this volume might be considered less interesting than the dramatic ones to students of early modern theatre. In fact, of course, nothing in Webster's life and works can fail to throw some light, however diffused, on his plays. For example, the editors usefully elucidate many cross-references between the remaining 'characters' and the dramatic works. I should like to focus here, though, on two particular aspects of Webster's plays that I found strikingly echoed in his poetic output.

The first of these relates to one of Webster's favourite abstract nouns, 'action'. Apparently a morally neutral term, it actually acquires surprising ethical connotations in a number of contexts, particularly in *The Duchess of Malfi* where it becomes almost a key word. The play makes a clear distinction between 'action' in the singular — an idealized concept embodying moral virtue — and 'actions' in the plural, denoting the things people actually do, which are not necessarily so virtuous. In *Monuments of Honour,* Webster's spectacular 1624 pageant for the installation of the new Lord Mayor, the opening 'Sea-Triumph' (line 20) celebrates England's 'famous Navigators' (line 25) such as Drake, Hawkins, and Frobisher, of whom Oceanus comments:

> Tis action valews honor as the flint
> Lookes blacke and feeles like ice, yet from within't
> There are strooke sparkes which to the darkest nights
> Yeeld quicke and percing food for severall lights. (lines 69–72)

The image is complex and the application of the simile not immediately clear, with the meaning of 'valews' the key to its interpretation. The notes to this edition, deferring to the *OED*'s definition of value, suggest that action 'raises the estimation' of honour (275), an interpretation repeated in Carnegie's introduction (230). The editor, who is not afraid to question the *OED* elsewhere (for instance over the meaning of 'galley-foist', 227), should perhaps have engaged more closely with the whole simile. Surely 'valews' here must mean 'gives value to' or even 'validates'; in other words, honour is like the dark, cold flint in that it acquires value only through the 'action' that strikes 'sparkes' from it. Without action, honour resembles the rusty armour invoked by Ulysses in his attempt to urge Achilles to action in *Troilus and Cressida* (3.3.145–7).[3] A glance at *The Devil's Law-Case* will perhaps confirm this interpretation. Urging Contarino to travel, Romelio comments that 'the soule was never put into the body … to stand still'. Whether activity resides 'in the Trenches for the Souldier; in the wakefull study / For the Scholler' or 'in the furrowes of the sea' for the merchant, Romelio asserts that 'the chiefest action for a man of great spirit, / Is never to be out of action'. From this, he concludes, 'Honor' arises, and he therefore advises Contarino to 'lye not idle' (1.1.64–74).[4] Romelio may be an untrustworthy moralist, but clearly in his speech Webster once again debates the moral virtue of action.

Monuments of Honour is a fascinating document through which Carnegie's introduction skilfully leads us. He compares such Lord Mayors' Triumphs to 'the opening and closing spectaculars of Olympic games, and university graduation ceremonies' (224), though surely such events are pale, vestigial shadows of the lavish splendour embodied in Webster's pageant, with its complex and often obscure iconography. A London street-map would have helped readers to follow the route of the procession and some relevant historical information could have usefully been explicated for non-historians; references such as those to 'Elizabeth of Bohemia, the current exile from the Palatinate' (235) or the 'European anti-Hapsburg alliance to regain the Palatinate' (235) needed a touch more context.

The final section of *Monuments of Honour* is dedicated to Prince Henry, who had died ten years earlier, and incorporates an apparently generous acknowledgement to his successor as Prince of Wales, the future Charles I. Webster's recurrent interest in Prince Henry, a fascination also reflected in his major plays, is the second key aspect of his work demonstrated in this volume. He had already published *A Monumental Column,* one of what David Carnegie calls 'a deluge of verse tributes' to the prince (360), shortly after his

death in 1613. Evidence suggests that Webster took a break from his work on *The Duchess of Malfi* to compose it,[5] and David Gunby takes us through the numerous verbal and thematic echoes of that play in the elegy, illustrating both Webster's central concerns at the time and his habit of frequently quoting himself. This is most notably shown in his assertion that the beams of the prince's glowing virtue will 'breake forth from [his] hollow Tombe, / Staine the time past, and light the time to come' (lines 277–8): a virtual repetition of Antonio's praise of the Duchess (1.1.197). The tribute to Prince Henry's 'Integrety' (lines 332, 342) and the celebration of his lasting fame are evidently genuine — perhaps giving pause to those readers who see irony in the apparent celebration of these same virtuous abstractions at the conclusion of *The Duchess of Malfi.* In passing, we might also note that one of Prince Henry's virtues specified in *A Monumental Column* takes us back to Webster's interest in 'action'. The prince, we are told, chose his friends 'In action, not in complementall voice' (line 101). 'Complementall' must surely mean 'flattering', rather than 'accomplished' as the *OED*-derived notes suggest; the point is that the prince judged men on what they did rather than on the flattering words they spoke — an implied criticism, perhaps, of his father's very different character.

A Monumental Column and *Monuments of Honour* did not exhaust Webster's interest in Prince Henry. In one of this volume's most interesting texts, he provides inscriptions below an engraving of King James and his family dating from late 1624 or early 1625; here, his praise of the late prince takes the form of a metaphorical couplet that would not be out of place in one of his great tragedies: "Never did a great Spright, earlier shoot / But the Prime blossomes, seldome become fruict" (lines 14–5). Fascinatingly, Webster's recurrent interest in Henry seems to have predated the prince's death. Carnegie notes the connection between Prince Henry and the young prince, Giovanni, in *The White Devil* (246).[6] Webster presents Giovanni as the ideal of princely virtue from his childish obsession with soldiership in his first appearances, imagining himself leading his army from the front, to the impressive moral authority with which he dispenses judgment in the final scene. There is enough in the role to diminish these qualities, such as his precociously bawdy humour and his initial status as a bargaining chip in the adults' power-play. Even so, Webster's presentation of Giovanni's growing maturity may justly lead us to view him as an embodiment of Cornelia's idealized prince and therefore of the real-life Prince Henry: "The lives of Princes should like dyals move, /

Whose regular example is so strong, / They make the times by them go right or wrong" (1.2.271–3).

To the credit of the Cambridge editors (among whom must be included the late Antony Hammond, who died shortly after the publication of Volume One), this final volume, which could have seemed like a mere footnote to Webster's great dramatic works, sustains our interest in and enthusiasm for a playwright too often characterized, even today, as a purveyor of mere Gothic frissons illuminated by brilliant flashes of charnel-house verse.

Peter Malin

Notes

1 Such an option is not available to the director of *The Devil Is an Ass,* where a similar metatheatrical joke is far more integral to the text (Richard Robinson playing Wittipol playing the Spanish Lady who would, it is said, be better played by Robinson). The RSC had problems with this conceit in Matthew Warchus's 1995 production of Jonson's play.

2 This production photograph features in John Marston, *The Malcontent,* with a Commentary by Simon Trussler and Notes by William Naismith (London: Methuen, 1987; repr. 1994), 114. In a slightly different shot, Passarello even features prominently on the front cover of this edition.

3 William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works,* Compact edn, ed. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford: OUP, 1988).

4 References to plays not included in the volume under review are to Volume One (*The White Devil, The Duchess of Malfi*) and Volume Two (*The Devil's Law-Case*) of the Cambridge Webster.

5 See Volume One (379).

6 See also Carnegie's theatrical introduction to *The White Devil* in Volume One (106).