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Article

Decadent Webster: Swinburne, Symonds and the Poet of 'dreadful stuff'

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According to John Addington Symonds's introduction for the Mermaid Series edition of the plays of John Webster and Cyril Tourneur (1888), Webster excelled at depicting the 'dreadful depths in human nature'. The fin-de-siècle fascination with humanity's 'dreadful depths' is well-known, and the word 'dreadful' has long been synonymous with the late Victorian urban concoction of sexual delight and danger. What Symonds terms the 'dreadful stuff' of Webster's tragedies *The White Devil* (1612) and *The Duchess of Malfi* (1614) derived from the criminal history of the Italian Renaissance, of which Symonds was the pre-eminent nineteenth-century historian. Symonds and the leading Victorian critic of Elizabethan drama, Algernon Charles Swinburne, both took Webster as the subject of their earliest dramatic criticism and returned frequently to the 'dreadful stuff' of these two plays. This article traces the roots and implications of that preoccupation, arguing that the 'dreadful stuff' of Webster's Italian tragedies was integral to these writers' sexual as well as critical psychologies. For Swinburne, the suffering of Webster's Duchess presented a study in the connoisseurship of pain and the power of erotic pathos, while for Symonds the gender-ambiguous 'dreadful daring' of Vittoria Accoramboni in the trial scene of *The White Devil* was rapturously arousing. The article underscores the importance of Webster's tragedies in creating a space in the late nineteenth century for critical and erotic speculations about art, pain and desire.

For many writers located along the aestheticism-decadence axis, including Algernon Charles Swinburne, John Addington Symonds, Arthur Symons, Oscar Wilde, Vernon Lee and Edmund Gosse, the Elizabethan dramatists (as they called early modern playwrights from the Reformation to the end of the reign of Charles I) exerted a life-long attraction. Writing essays on early modern drama, and in some cases pastiche plays, was an intellectual rite of passage. Formative encounters with early modern drama typically began with Dodsley's *Select Collection of Old Plays* (1744) and its successor editions or the extracts in Charles Lamb's *Specimens of the English Dramatic Poets* (1808) and Thomas Campbell's *Specimens of the British Poets* (1819), were developed through undergraduate leisure reading and compositions for essay societies and periodical reviews, and often proceeded to full-blown book publication as single volume surveys reworked out of early assays in dramatic criticism.[1] The primary attraction, but also the puzzle, of Elizabethan drama for Victorian readers lay

[1] Examples other than Swinburne and Symonds include Edmund Gosse, *Seventeenth-Century Studies* (London, 1883), Rupert Brooke, *John Webster and the Elizabethan Drama* (London, 1916) and Arthur Symons, *Studies in the Elizabethan Drama* (London, 1919).

in its alterity. Eighteenth-century editors and anthologists had used the drama as a window on the manners and customs of the past and a means of understanding the language and allusions of Shakespeare. For many Victorian readers the oddness and oldness of Elizabethan plays also made them beguiling and imaginatively energizing. Virginia Woolf, brought up as a Victorian reader, was exasperated by the plots of Elizabethan plays but acknowledged that they allow one 'to wander in the land of the unicorn and the jeweller among dukes and grandees, Gonzaloes and Bellimperias, who spend their lives in murder and intrigue, dress up as men if they are women, as women if they are men, see ghosts, run mad, and die in the greatest profusion on the slightest provocation'.[2]

As hinted in this reference to cross-dressing, the otherness of Elizabethan plays facilitated for some readers the exploration of subjective identities that were culturally constrained or inadmissible. In Symonds's case, his adolescent self-in-formation became layered into the idea of the Elizabethan as demonstrated in his meditations on the nineteenth-century Elizabethan revival: the 'essence of Elizabethanism', he wrote in his diary in 1866, 'is freedom'—in thought, religion and politics.[3] He imagined it as a time without burdensome precedents, the period when 'England was free and adolescent' (p. 357), enjoying 'the freedom of youth, untrammelled, with a boundless future and no past, with the luxuriance of young blood, the consciousness of youthful beauty, the carelessness of young audacity, the fields untrodden and the flowers unpicked' (p. 356). 'Adolescence' and 'audacity' were resonant words with homoerotic overtones for Symonds: in his *Studies in the Greek Poets* (1873), they facilitate what Stefano Evangelista describes as Symonds's 'reconfiguring [of] the scholarly desire for the knowledge of the Greek past into the homoerotic desire for the adolescent male body'.[4] Symonds's own encounter at a young age with Shakespeare's erotic poem *Venus and Adonis* (1593) provided a galvanizing insight into his emergent sexuality and became integral to the narrative of sexual selfhood later elaborated in his *Memoirs*: the poem 'gave form, ideality and beauty to my previous erotic visions … I yearned after him [Adonis] as an adorable object of passionate love … it stimulated, while it etherealized, my inborn craving after persons of my own sex'.[5]

Elizabethan drama played a role similar to Hellenism and the study of the Italian Renaissance in articulating Victorian non-normative and queer subjectivities. It is well known that the Victorian study of ancient Greek literature and culture served as a medium for exploring homosexuality.[6] The same is also true of Italian history and art criticism, as evidenced by Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873), which blended sexual and aesthetic responses in a recognizably queer criticism expressed as the desire for beauty. As scholars such as Yvonne Ivory and Dustin Friedman have demonstrated, the study of the Renaissance and the practice of aestheticism were overlapping activities in which queer identity could be 'tried on, thought through, assessed, and even practiced', as Ivory puts it, in a more flexible way than the emergent, pathologizing discourse of sexology allowed.[7] The non-normative appeal of Elizabethan drama for late Victorian writers and readers lay in two connected but contradictory properties. Firstly, many early modern plays express a triumphant erotic individualism, offering the delight of exploring an explicitly sexual urban

[2] Virginia Woolf, 'Notes on an Elizabethan Play', in *The Common Reader* (London, 1925), 72–83 (73).

[3] Horatio F. Brown, *John Addington Symonds: A Biography Compiled from his Papers and Correspondence*, 2 vols (London, 1895), 1. 355.

[4] Stefano Evangelista, 'Platonic Dons, Adolescent Bodies: Benjamin Jowett, John Addington Symonds, Walter Pater', in George Rousseau (ed.), *Children and Sexuality: From the Greeks to the Great War* (Basingstoke, 2007), 206–30 (214).

[5] *The Memoirs of John Addington Symonds: A Critical Edition*, ed. Amber K. Regis (London, 2016), 101.

[6] Linda C. Dowling, *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford* (Ithaca, NY, 1994), Yopie Prins, *Victorian Sappho* (Princeton, NJ, 1999) and Stefano Evangelista, *British Aestheticism and Ancient Greece: Hellenism, Reception, Gods in Exile* (Basingstoke, 2009).

[7] Yvonne Ivory, *The Homosexual Revival of Renaissance Style, 1850-1930* (Basingstoke, 2009), 2, and Dustin Friedman, *Before Queer Theory: Victorian Aestheticism and the Self* (Baltimore, MD, 2019), 15.

world untrammelled by nineteenth-century moralism and accommodating a potentially shocking range of sexual behaviours. Even within the limitations of permitted critical discourse, Marlowe was singled out for attention as poet of the homoeroticism Symonds called 'L'amour de l'Impossible',[8] as was John Ford, whose sexual frankness could easily be cast (both positively and negatively) as perversity.

This way of reading Elizabethan drama underpinned the Mermaid Series of early modern plays, launched in 1887 as the brainchild of the sexologist Havelock Ellis, who collaborated with Symonds on the book *Sexual Inversion* (1897). Ellis believed that Elizabethan plays should be published entire and 'unexpurgated', concluding that 'the best of these plays ought to be made generally accessible, and in such a way that the finest of all were not omitted for the sake of some absurd prudery'.[9] Ellis recruited the publisher Henry Vizetelly out of admiration for Vizetelly's 'fairly literal' translations of Zola—literalness for which Vizetelly was ultimately prosecuted—and assembled a like-minded group including Symonds, Swinburne, Symons and Gosse to edit and write introductions to the plays.[10]

In contrast to this celebration of erotic individualism, reading or performing Elizabethan drama also helped articulate the sense of asynchrony, loss and dislocation often identified by modern scholars as a feature of Victorian queerness. Fraser Riddell, for example, has shown that in performances of Elizabethan pastoral dramas 'idealized idyllic spaces are used to shape queer subjectivities … through voice and sound'.[11] Furthermore, a studied Elizabethanism in style and anachronism could be deployed to signal cultural oppositionality, as in the case of Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper ('Michael Field') who thereby constructed a 'deliberately vexed' relationship with literary modernity.[12]

This essay adds Webster's tragedies to the established list of those better-known Elizabethan referents (primarily Marlowe's plays and poems and Shakespeare's *Sonnets*) through which a fin-de-siècle queer sensibility was expressed.[13] It argues that, like late-Victorian Hellenism and studies of the Italian Renaissance, Webster's tragedies functioned within the circles of English aestheticism and decadence as a site of exploration in respect of non-normative sexuality, which encompasses 'sexual inversion' but also the aesthetics of pain. *The Duchess of Malfi* was regarded with a high level of personal attachment by Oscar Wilde and was a fixture of the queer theatrical culture of Cambridge in the early 1920s as exemplified by Dadie Rylands's renowned performance as the Duchess in 1924.[14] Richard Ellmann gives a plangent illustration of Wilde's decline with the story of how Wilde offered the copy of *Malfi* carried in his pocket to the translator Henry Davray as security for money to pay his Paris café bill, inscribing it as he did so.[15] *Malfi* bookends Wilde's writing life, having also provided the inspiration for his play *The Duchess of Padua*, which was privately printed in 1883 and later characterized by Arthur Symons as 'an imitation of Webster or Marston, a macabre tragedy of blood'.[16] In a letter to Mary

[8] John Addington Symonds, *Shakspere's Predecessors in the English Drama* (London, 1884), 608.

[9] Havelock Ellis, *My Life* (London, 1940), 166.

[10] Ellis, *My Life*, 166. See Nicholas F. Radel, 'Havelock Ellis's Literary Criticism, Canon Formation, and the Heterosexual Shakespeare', *Journal of Homosexuality*, 56 (2009), 1046–70 (1051), Alex Murray, '*Fin-de-Siècle* Decadence and Elizabethan Literature', *Literature in Transition, 1880–1920*, 62 (2019), 482–505 and Anthony Cummins, 'Émile Zola's Cheap English Dress: The Vizetelly Translations, Late-Victorian Print Culture, and the Crisis of Literary Value', *RES*, 60 (2008), 108–32.

[11] Fraser Riddell, 'Queer Pastoral Soundscapes and the Idyllic Voice: Vernon Lee, A. Mary F. Robinson, and Lady Archibald Campbell', in Thomas Hughes and Emma Merkling (eds), *The Victorian Idyll in Art and Literature: Subject, Ecology, Form* (New York, NY, 2024), 125–44 (126).

[12] Joseph Bristow, 'Michael Field in Their Time and Ours', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 29 (2010), 159–79 (161).

[13] Laurence Danson characterizes the recourse to past literature as a means by which unnameable desire 'could both declare and efface itself' (*Wilde's Intentions: The Artist in his Criticism* (Oxford, 1998), 126).

[14] Simon Goldhill, *Queer Cambridge: An Alternative History* (Cambridge, 2025), 181–6.

[15] Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (London, 1987), 531.

[16] Oscar Wilde, 'The Duchess of Padua', in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Joseph Donohue, vol. 5 (Oxford, 2013) and Arthur Symons, unsigned review, *Athenaeum*, 16 May 1908, 598–600, reprinted in Karl Beckson (ed.), *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage* (London, 1997) 325–30 (326).

Anderson, the American actress for whom Wilde wrote this play (but who disappointed him by declining it), he claimed that 'the essence of art is to produce the modern idea under an antique form'.[17] It is the antique form of Webster's tragedies that undergirds what Wilde describes as 'the two great speculations and problems of the play, the relations of sin and love' (p. 196). Webster's plays were ubiquitous within the literary culture of aestheticism and decadence. As this essay explores, it was Swinburne and Symonds—two writers at the forefront of the Victorian rediscovery of Elizabethan drama from the 1850s (Swinburne's first published essay was on Marlowe and Webster) through the 1890s (and beyond, in Swinburne's case)—who probed the 'dreadful' subject matter that spoke directly to the late Victorian interest in crime, sexuality and oppositionality.

WEBSTER'S 'DREADFUL STUFF'

Charles Lamb's *Specimens of the English Dramatic Poets* (1808) laid much of the groundwork for the later nineteenth-century appreciation of Webster's 'dreadful stuff'.[18] Walter Pater declared in an 1878 essay that Lamb shared a unique and profound bond with Webster above all the Elizabethan dramatists, a bond that Pater attributed to the domestic tragedies of Lamb's life: 'So he becomes the best critic, almost the discoverer, of Webster, a dramatist of genius so sombre, so heavily coloured, so macabre'.[19] Much later, in 1933, Edmund Blunden also remarked Lamb's importance to the nineteenth-century reception of Webster—'who at that date had wrestled with that dark mind?', 'his bellman is Webster'—but attributes it to a shared mental disposition rather than domestic circumstances: Lamb 'is called (deep calls to deep), and he answers with sublimity'.[20] At the heart of this affinity, and indeed of Webster's own version of sublimity, lay the dramatist's command of terror. The exceptional cruelties practised upon the Duchess—their 'strange character', in Lamb's words—are 'beyond the imagination of ordinary poets', as is Webster's ability to verbalize suffering through the Duchess, who has 'lived among horrors' until she speaks 'the dialect of despair'.[21] Webster's skill, Lamb sees, lies not only in the delineation of horrors—something lesser poets can also do—but in the affective imitation of suffering he can produce in the reader:

> To move a horror skilfully, to touch a soul to the quick, to lay upon fear as much as it can bear, to wean and weary a life till it is ready to drop and then step in with moral instruments to take its last forfeit: this only a Webster can do. (p. 217)

Lamb saw that the poetic skill of Webster in moving the soul of the audience or reader is founded upon his ability to torture his own characters, mortifying them by degrees to the limits of human endurance. In this manner, what Lamb calls Webster's 'dreadful apparatus' (p. 217) achieves poetic sublimity.

Symonds was writing in this tradition when he characterized Webster as a poet who excelled in depicting the 'dreadful depths in human nature'.[22] This anticipates, but is subtly

[17] 23 March 1886, *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (London, 2000), 197.
[18] Havelock Ellis (ed.), *Webster and Tourneur*, intr. and notes by John Addington Symonds (London, 1888), xxi.
[19] Walter Pater, *Appreciations, with an Essay on Style* (1889) in *The Works of Walter Pater*, 8 vols (London, 1900–1901), 5. 10.
[20] Edmund Blunden, *Charles Lamb and his Contemporaries* (Cambridge, 1933), 99, 100, 144.
[21] Charles Lamb, *Specimens of English Dramatic Poets* (London, 1808), 217.
[22] Ellis/Symonds, *Webster and Tourneur*, xi.

not the same as, T. S. Eliot's famous invocation of the sepulchral Webster, 'much possessed by death'.[23] Symonds's designation of Webster as 'dreadful' in 1888 invokes the thrill as well as the horror inherent in the criminal and sexual matter of the two tragedies. The core meaning of 'dreadful' is the traditional one—'inspiring reverence or fear' (*OED*)—but overlaying this are the 1880s meaning of 'morbidly exciting', as in 'penny dreadful' (*OED*, 1874) and a fugitive, personal usage hinting at a proscribed and dangerous impulsion. This meaning surfaces in correspondence between Symonds and his friend Robert Louis Stevenson discussing the latter's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886). At the end, Dr Jekyll (long identified as having hints of Symonds about him) describes the 'dreadful shipwreck' of his case.[24] In an uneasy exchange about the novella as a 'dreadful book', Symonds manifests the desire for sexual honesty and sympathy that characterizes his *Memoirs*, whilst also hinting at the danger of scandal that is risked by a double life:

> My dear Louis
>
> At last I have read Dr Jekyll. It makes me wonder whether a man has the right so to scrutinize the "abysmal deeps of personality". It is indeed a dreadful book, most dreadful because of a certain moral callousness, a want of sympathy, a shutting out of hope … The fact is that, viewed as an allegory, it touches one too closely. Most of us at some epoch of our lives have been upon the verge of developing a Mr Hyde.[25]

In reply, Stevenson amplifies the adjective 'dreadful' with a Biblical reference (James 4:1 and Romans 7:23) to the internal conflict between good and sinful desires: '*Jekyll* is a dreadful thing, I own; but the only thing I feel dreadful about is that damned old business of the war in the members. This time it came out; I hope it will stay in, in future'.[26] The adjective 'dreadful' as used in Symonds's Webster introduction therefore belongs within a coterie language of simultaneously critical and psychosexual analysis that encompasses *Jekyll and Hyde*, Websterian tragedy and Symonds's habitually conflicted erotic longing. In all these contexts, 'dreadful' signals something irresistible and alluring, yet also fearsome, draining and pathological.

The criminal and sexual 'dreadful stuff' of Webster's tragedies that so commanded Symonds's attention was drawn from sixteenth-century Italian stories that foreground their female protagonists as sexual dissidents who defied marital norms and resisted the authority of family and Church. *The White Devil* concerns the affair of Vittoria Accoramboni and Duke Bracciano, which culminated in her murder in 1585. *The Duchess of Malfi* adapts the story of the historical Giovanna d'Aragona, Duchess of Amalfi from 1493 until she disappeared around 1511; her husband Antonio da Bologna, whom she had married in secret, was murdered in 1513. In Webster's dramatizations, these women's resistance to familial and ecclesiastical tyranny through sexual non-conformity generates extreme forms of retributive violence that are both 'dreadful' in a conventional sense and perversely enlivening. Symonds was an architect of

[23] T. S. Eliot, 'Whispers of Immortality', in *The Poems of T.S. Eliot*, ed. Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue, 2 vols (London, 2015), 1. 47, l.1.

[24] Robert Louis Stevenson, 'Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde', in *The Collected Works of Robert Louis Stevenson: The Centenary Edition*, ed. Richard Dury (Edinburgh, 2004), 59. Dury discusses the homosexual overtones of Stevenson's novel and the changes he made to earlier drafts in this respect on pp. xxii and xxx–xxxi.

[25] 3 March 1886, *The Letters of John Addington Symonds*, ed. Herbert M. Schueller and Robert L. Peters, 3 vols (Detroit, MI, 1967–1969), 3. 120–21.

[26] Early March 1886, *The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*, ed. Bradford A. Booth and Ernest Mehew, 8 vols (New Haven, CT, 1995), 5. 220–22 (220); see also Shane Butler, *The Passions of John Addington Symonds* (Oxford, 2022), 186–7. The 'war in the members' is a phrase used by Jekyll himself in the 'dreadful shipwreck' passage quoted above; its function within the Symonds-Stevenson friendship is discussed by Sally Shuttleworth in 'Robert Louis Stevenson: Itinerant Invalid', *In Quest of a Cure: Literary and Medical Cultures of the Health Resort* (Oxford, forthcoming 2026), ch. 4.

the Victorian fascination with 'dreadful' Italy through his seven-volume study *Renaissance in Italy* (1875–1886), a work that became an integral part of the decadent canon. The first volume, subtitled *The Age of the Despots* (1875), was a popular and critical sensation, detailing sexual, familial and political intrigues that defined Renaissance Italy for a generation and more. *The Age of the Despots* was reviewed approvingly by Walter Pater in 1875, Vernon Lee blended *Renaissance in Italy* with Webster's plays in her essay 'The Influence of the Italian Renaissance on the Elizabethan Stage' (1882) and Oscar Wilde reviewed the final volumes in 1886.[27] In language that strikingly echoes his own *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, Pater's review praised the retelling of stories 'which have made Italian history the fountain-head of tragic motives, all the hard, bright, fiery things' and endorsed Symonds's emphasis on liberty and 'the magnificent restlessness and changefulness' of these Italian lives (p. 105). The importance of *The Age of the Despots* to the decadent canon is further attested by its function as the source for the tapestry in Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) depicting Renaissance tyrants in 'the awful and beautiful forms of those whom Vice and Blood and Weariness had made monstrous or mad'.[28]

The closer one looks, the more decadent Webster's 'dreadful stuff' appears. Writing in 1913, Holbrook Jackson listed the characteristics of decadence as perversity, artificiality, egoism and curiosity, all of which are recurrently identified in the Elizabethan drama and Italian Renaissance as critiqued by Swinburne, Symonds and their peers.[29] There is a marked similarity between what Holbrook Jackson describes as the decadent impulsion 'to adventure at whatever personal hazard, for sheer love of expanding the boundaries of human experience and knowledge and power' (p. 76) and late Victorian readings of early modern plays, especially when those plays depict material attractive to what Holbrook Jackson called the decade's 'craving for forbidden fruit' and 'sex-inquisitiveness' (p. 154). Symonds's introduction to Webster is rich in heightened fin-de-siècle sentiment and feeds in particular on the paradoxes of Websterian tragedy, in which 'flowers of the purest and most human pathos' bloom next to the charnel house.[30] The 'dreadful stuff' attributed to Webster by Symonds reads like a rollcall of decadent motifs:

> No dramatist showed more consummate ability in heightening terrific effects, in laying bare the inner mysteries of crime, remorse, and pain combined to make men miserable. He seems to have had a natural bias toward the dreadful stuff with which he deals so powerfully. He was drawn to comprehend and reproduce abnormal elements of spiritual anguish. The materials with which he builds are sought for in the ruined places of abandoned lives, in the agonies of madness and despair, in the sarcasms of reckless atheism, in slow tortures, griefs beyond endurance, the tempests of sin-haunted conscience, the spasms of fratricidal bloodshed, the deaths of frantic hope-deserted criminals.[31]

The co-existence in Webster's plays of perverse sexuality, crime and violence alongside poetic eloquence and sublime pathos practises the same forced conjunction between beauty and cruelty that was advocated by aestheticism. It also taps into the aesthetic preoccupation with the

[27] Walter Pater, *The Academy*, 31 July 1875, 105–6; Vernon Lee, 'The Influence of the Italian Renaissance on the Elizabethan Stage', *British Quarterly Review*, 75 (1882), 295–323 (reprinted as 'The Italy of the Elizabethan Dramatists', in *Euphorion*, 2 vols (London, 1884), 1. 55–108); Oscar Wilde, *Pall Mall Gazette*, 10 November 1886, 5.

[28] Oscar Wilde, 'The Picture of Dorian Gray: The 1890 and 1891 Texts', *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Joseph Bristow, vol. 3 (Oxford, 2005), 124.

[29] George Holbrook Jackson, *The Eighteen Nineties: A Review of Art and Ideas at the Close of the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1913), 76.

[30] Ellis/Symonds, *Webster and Tourneur*, xxi.

[31] Ellis/Symonds, *Webster and Tourneur*, xxi.

sad and strange: Swinburne's praise of Baudelaire in his 1862 review of *Les Fleurs du Mal* deploys the same language of sadness and sorrow that characterizes his own and others' aesthetic-decadent reading of Webster. Swinburne remarks that Baudelaire 'has chosen to dwell mainly upon sad and strange things—the weariness of pain and the bitterness of pleasure—the perverse happiness and wayward sorrows of exceptional people'.[32] As a critical judgement, this is equally true of Webster, and the congruence of Webster's poetry with that of Baudelaire and Swinburne is itself striking: perfume, poison, shadows, mist—all are Websterian staples. Most importantly, Webster shares with Baudelaire a preoccupation with what Swinburne calls 'ruined bodies and souls diseased' (p. 1000) and an ability to 'make some noble use' 'even of the loathsomest bodily putrescence and decay' (p. 999).

In both tragedies, hyper-theatrical psychological and/or physical pain is visited on transgressive women; their suffering is ruthlessly displayed to the audience but so too is their defiance. Key to the decadent reading of Webster was his technique of building horror as a prelude to what Symonds in an early essay of 1867 called the 'thrilling pathos' exemplified by the Duchess's 'tenderness and tranquillity' in the face of the physical and psychological tortures visited on her by her brother Ferdinand and his agent Bosola in Act 4 of *Malfi*.[33] The fundamental importance of the horror-pathos arc to Webster's worth is seen in Swinburne's sonnet on Webster in the series 'Sonnets on English Dramatic Poets' (1882), which invokes thunder, darkness, night and monstrosity—'Rage, anguish, harrowing fear, heart-crazing crime'—but ends with searing pathos encapsulated by the Duchess's flight: 'Frail, on frail rafts, across wide-wallowing waves, / Shapes here and there of child and mother pass'.[34]

The theatrical revival of *The Duchess of Malfi* in William Poel's production for J. T. Grein's Independent Theatre Society at the Opéra Comique on the Strand in October 1892 bestowed a physical as well as intellectual presence on Webster's fin-de-siècle dreadfulness.[35] Swinburne was a supporter of Poel's lifelong project to reclaim conjectured Elizabethan staging practices and he wrote prologues for several of Poel's revivals; his *Malfi* prologue was published in *The Nineteenth Century* in 1899.[36] As T. S. Eliot later observed, Swinburne was 'more inward with the Tudor-Stuart dramatists than any man of pure letters before or since' and it was in tribute to this erudition that Swinburne was invited by Poel to attend the revival of *Malfi*, to which he brought along his copy of the 1623 First Quarto.[37] Swinburne wrote to Poel:

> I must send you a word of thanks for the honour done me as a Websterian by your gift of a box on the 25th, and for the great pleasure I had in seeing that transcendent masterpiece of tragedy restored to the stage under such favourable auspices. How great that pleasure was, you may judge when I tell you that I was just twelve years old when I first read so much of 'The Duchess' as is given in Campbell's 'Specimens', and was as much entranced and fascinated at that, not very mature, age, as I am now, and have been ever since by its unique beauty and power.[38]

[32] Algernon Charles Swinburne, 'Charles Baudelaire: *Les Fleurs du Mal*', *The Spectator*, issue 1784 (6 September 1862), 998–1000 (999).
[33] John Addington Symonds, 'Webster', *Pall Mall Gazette* (9 October 1867), 11.
[34] Algernon Charles Swinburne, 'John Webster', *Tristram of Lyonesse and Other Poems* (London, 1882), 285.
[35] The peculiarity of this choice for the progressive Society is discussed in Jem Bloomfield, 'Two 'Jacobean' Malfis: Controversy and Reception in 1892 and 2010', *Shakespeare Bulletin*, 31 (2013), 29–40.
[36] Robert Speaight, *William Poel and the Elizabethan Revival* (London, 1954), 115–16 and Swinburne, 'Prologue to the Duchess of Malfy', in *The Poems of Algernon Charles Swinburne*, 6 vols (London, 1904), 6. 411–12.
[37] T. S. Eliot, 'Swinburne as Critic', in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London, 1997 [1920]), 14.
[38] 27 October 1892, *The Yale Edition of the Swinburne Letters*, ed. Cecil Y. Lang, 6 vols (New Haven, CT, 1959–1962), 6. 40–41.

Poel's staging of *Malfi* acted as a magnet for the London literary set: Edith Cooper (one half of the poet Michael Field) recorded not only the luminaries she saw there, but also their comically decadent relishing of Webster's play:

> "The Duchess of Malfi" at the Opera Comique!
> Fitzgerald gloats over executions behind us; Le Gallienne wanders about like a young Dante in the shades; Oscar sits as if blowing bubbles of enjoyment, so pervasive are his smiles—they float through the milieu[39]

The poet Richard Le Gallienne and Oscar Wilde were intimate friends at this time, and Wilde's *The Duchess of Padua*, with its echoes of *Malfi*, had been produced in New York the previous year under the title *Guido Ferranti*. 'Fitzgerald' may be the fairy painter John Anster Fitzgerald, and the reference to gloating over executions would accord with his taste for the macabre.[40] The author of a notice on Poel's *Malfi* in the *Glasgow Herald* was in no doubt about the play's decadent credentials, dubbing it 'a marvellous instance of what may be called abnormalism in literature' as exemplified by Baudelaire and Verlaine.[41] The 'dreadful stuff' of Webster that was brought to a new readership with the Mermaid edition of 1888 seemed as much of the moment as it was possible for an Elizabethan play to be.

SWINBURNE AND THE DUCHESS: PATHOS AS PERVERSITY

Swinburne's first published essay was an undergraduate paper on Marlowe and Webster called 'The Early English Dramatists' (1858); he returned to Webster with a lengthy essay in *The Nineteenth Century* in 1886 (reprinted in *The Age of Shakespeare*, 1908) and followed this up with an entry on Webster for the ninth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1888)—further evidence of the way critical attention was pivoting to Webster in the late 1880s. As reported by his friend Edmund Gosse, Swinburne 'brooded over the history of the Elizabethan poets' for more than 60 years, and repeatedly expressed his unfulfilled intention to write an expansive study of the whole field; the extant materials from this project show that Marlowe and Webster were the lodestones (alongside Shakespeare) to which he kept returning.[42]

Swinburne's enthusiasm for early modern drama was characterized not only by voracious reading but also the writing of pastiche Elizabethan tragedies at Oxford and a lifelong taste for faux-Elizabethanism which took the form of dramatic poetry, notably the trilogy of Mary Stuart plays (*Chastelard* (1864), *Bothwell* (1875) and *Mary Stuart* (1881)). These bear the stamp of Petrarchan convention (especially in its violent aspects) and Elizabethan tragic high style; they also invoke through their erotic subtexts the greater licence permitted to the early modern stage in matters of sex and violence. Georges Lafourcade, the first biographer to openly address Swinburne's sadomasochism, makes a direct link between 'the horrible and mysterious character' of plays such as *Malfi* and 'the love of terror' manifested in Swinburne's early pastiche dramas and poetry.[43] Swinburne's undergraduate paper amplified Lamb's view of Webster as gifted in the evocation of horror and pathos:

[39] T. and D. C. Sturge Moore (eds), *Works and Days. From the Journal of Michael Field* (London, 1933), 140.
[40] John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. Leah S. Marcus (London, 2009), 100.
[41] *The Glasgow Herald*, 4 October 1892, 6.
[42] Edmund Gosse, 'Introduction', in Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Contemporaries of Shakespeare* (London, 1919), vii.
[43] Georges Lafourcade, *Swinburne: A Literary Biography* (London, 1932), 37.

> None ever went beyond him in power and beauty of words; no one could have drawn in firmer outline the scenes of suffering which he loved to lay bare before his readers.[44]

An extended passage deals with Webster's evocation of spiritual terror. Transcending the play is the Duchess's performance for herself of the offices of the dead, which brings Swinburne (like Lamb and Pater) to declare that 'there is somewhat in this man's clear, sad insight into sorrow and sin, which makes one shrink' (p. 14). The inescapable presence of death and its material trappings in Webster's plays makes him, therefore, a poet of the charnel house not just in subject matter but also in aesthetics, weighed down (like Pater) by the inescapability of mortality and turning to the sublime beauty of art to express beauty even in the presence of corruption.

There is no doubt that the terror visited upon the Duchess in the notorious Act 4 was a source of aesthetic pleasure for Swinburne in and of itself. He was not alone in this: the powerful emotion aroused by witnessing torture and pain inflicted on the innocent has been an integral part of *Malfi*'s dramatic force throughout its reception. Thomas Middleton's commendatory verse for the play's first printing records its lachrymose effect on early audiences:

> Thy Epitaph onely the Title bee,
> Write, Dutchesse, that will fetch a teare for thee,
> For who e're saw this Dutchesse live, and dye,
> That could get off under a Bleeding Eye.[45]

Swinburne's relish for the Duchess's suffering blends the orthodox eighteenth-century view that pity could operate as a kind of pleasing or even exquisite anguish with his own, unorthodox, interest in sadism. Swinburne manifested a lifelong love of the horrible and macabre, described somewhat evasively by Gosse as 'a sort of aesthetic value in the circumstance of pain and horror, with a rather childish dwelling upon dead bodies and skeletons', but known to modern criticism as algolagnia (a pathological association of eroticism and pain).[46] The algolagnia of poems such as 'Dolores' and 'Anactoria' that elicited both excitement and censure from Victorian readers is thus closely related to the aesthetic pleasure taken in the psychological torture of the Duchess. Swinburne's embracing of what he called in an essay on Lamb and Wither 'the sublimity of suffering' therefore gives voice to and covertly legitimizes the algolagnia that is expressed more directly and dangerously in *Poems and Ballads* (1866), in his private correspondence, and unpublished flagellation poems.[47] Tellingly, Swinburne declares that of all the early moderns it is Webster who excels in this erotics of pathos, 'with his two sovereign types of feminine daring and womanly endurance, the heroine of suffering and the heroine of sin' (p. 90). A few years later, in his *Encyclopaedia Britannica* essay, he reprises the theme with his praise of the 'wild and fearful sublimity of invention' in *Malfi*'s horror-laden Act 4.[48]

This erotic aspect to Swinburne's Elizabethan aesthetics leads into unsettling territory with the realization that in his reading of dramatic pathos the suffering of children is valorised as

[44] Algernon Charles Swinburne, 'The Early English Dramatists. No.1 Christopher Marlowe and John Webster', *Undergraduate Papers* (1858), 7–15 (9).
[45] *The Works of John Webster*, ed. David Gunby, David Carnegie and Antony Hammond, 4 vols (Cambridge, 1995–2019), 1. 470.
[46] Edmund Gosse, *The Life of Algernon Charles Swinburne* (London, 1917), 300.
[47] Algernon Charles Swinburne, 'Charles Lamb and George Wither', *The Nineteenth Century*, 17 (1885), 66–91 (90).
[48] Algernon Charles Swinburne, 'John Webster', *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 9th edn (1888), 24. 473–4 (474).

especially moving (and therefore arousing) to an extent that exceeds the convention, derived from Greek tragedy, of children as peculiarly effective vectors of pathos.[49] This convention was widely embraced by Jacobean theatre and emphatically so by Webster: Marcus suggests that the inclusion of three children in the cast list of the 1623 First Quarto of *The Duchess of Malfi* is intended for 'maximum pathos'.[50] In his 1886 essay, Swinburne singles out the 'unsurpassable beauty' of the scene in *The White Devil* in which Isabella's young son Giovanni relates his mother's sorrows and his grief that 'They wrapt her in a cruell fould of lead, / And would not let mee kisse her' (3.2.330–31).[51] Admiration for the pathos of Webster's children is a theme of fin-de-siècle criticism perpetuated in the first modern edition of his plays by F. L. Lucas (1927), who declares that the 'perfect simplicity' of the scene should 'leave criticism dumb'.[52] Vernon Lee, writing in 1882, was riven by the 'extremely pathetic death' of young Marcello in *The White Devil*, indicative of the 'sad and savage' Webster.[53] Symonds jotted a note in his copy of Lamb's *Specimens* on this subject, expressing surprise that Elizabethan dramatists did not more frequently deploy the pathos of childhood; his examples include young Arthur from *King John* and (like Swinburne) the young Duke of *The White Devil*.[54]

In Swinburne's case, the pathos of children arouses not just pity but also what Gosse described in his account of Swinburne's 'mania about flagellation' as 'the excitement of the nerves caused by enduring pain, and seeing it inflicted'.[55] The association of children with pain is evident throughout Swinburne's personal and published writings and it combined perversely with his theatrical knowledge of the early modern period in *The Children of the Chapel* (1864), a cruel and cod-Elizabethan flagellation fantasy about the choristers of the Children of the Chapel Royal, co-written with his cousin Mary Gordon (also a devotee of the 'English vice'). *The Children of the Chapel* services the pair's aesthetic/erotic punishment fantasy and features multiple flogging scenes of screaming, weeping and bloodied boys, yet it masqueraded as a morality tale for young readers and managed to cover its tracks (or perhaps not) with such success that it went through three editions between 1864 and 1910. Every genre to which Swinburne turned his hand is at some point inflected by the 'excitement' of looking at suffering children, a preoccupation that reaches back to the institutionalized abuse he experienced at Eton and outwards to the network of sexual sympathizers with whom he shared his 'swishing' and other fantasies.[56] Even when writing as Victorian sentimentalist or art critic, Swinburne seeks and finds vicarious excitement in the pain of children. The innocuous-seeming poem 'A Child's Pity', for example, depicts a child moved to tears by the 'piteous tale' of the starving offspring of a slain crocodile. Its macabre sentimentality is signalled in the opening stanza with a knowing pseudo-aphorism that surely spoke to those who had ears to hear:

> No sweeter thing than children's ways and wiles,
> Surely, we say, can gladden eyes and ears:
> Yet sometime sweeter than their words or smiles
> Are even their tears. [57]

[49] Swinburne, *Contemporaries of Shakespeare*, 165, 190, 192; Emma M. Griffiths, *Children in Greek Tragedy: Pathos and Potential* (Oxford, 2020).
[50] *Malfi*, ed. Marcus, 132.
[51] Algernon Charles Swinburne, 'John Webster', *The Nineteenth Century* (June 1886), 861–81 (873).
[52] *The Complete Works of John Webster*, ed. F. L. Lucas, 4 vols (London, 1927), 1. 100.
[53] Lee, 'Influence of the Italian Renaissance', 303 and 300 ('sad and savage').
[54] Symonds's copy of Charles Lamb, *Specimens of English Dramatic Poets*, 2 vols (London, 1854), BL shelfmark C.28.b.17, interleaved with blue paper, vol 2, interleaf opposite p. 336.
[55] Edmund Gosse, 'An Essay on Swinburne', in *Letters*, ed. Lang, 6. 233–48 (234 and 247).
[56] Yopie Prins, 'Metrical Discipline: Algernon Swinburne on "The Flogging-Block"', in Catherine Maxwell and Stefano Evangelista (eds), *Algernon Charles Swinburne: Unofficial Laureate* (Manchester, 2013), 95–124.

This paradoxical function of children as both the embodiment of sublime, pathetic feeling and as arousingly pained subjects hides in plain sight in Swinburne's art criticism, in which the pain/pleasure conjunction is routinely present thanks to the conviction of aesthetic criticism that 'a pleasure acute even to pain' can be aroused by the 'intolerable' beauty of art.[58] In 'Notes on Designs of the Old Masters at Florence' (1868), Swinburne is struck by Filippo Lippi's study of 'a schoolboy or chorister seemingly' whose face, 'grave and of exquisite male beauty', is looking down 'as if in pain or thought'.[59] Throughout Swinburne's writings, and especially in relation to children, the presence of pain and sorrow in a work of art or drama afforces its aesthetic merits, the often androgynous beauty of its subjects, and consequently the elation of the viewer.

It was not just Webster's command of child-pathos that spoke to Swinburne's aesthetically tuned algolagnia: in the character of the Duchess's brother Ferdinand he found early modern drama's most practised connoisseur of art and pain. The shedding of blood is erotically charged in Ferdinand's fantasies about punishing his sister, and he even imagines deploying whips with metal spikes for this purpose ('i'll find Scorpions to string my whips' (2.5.78–9); also invoked in *WD* 2.1.244). Ferdinand is an expert in 'dreadful' ingenuities of torture and, with his sponsorship of the artist who created the waxworks of the Duchess's husband and children in Act 4 scene 1, an outright patron of pain. The scene initially takes place in darkness, which allows Ferdinand to present his sister with a dead man's hand (probably made of wax) followed by a 'sad spectacle' (4.1.56) of '*the artificiall figures of Antonio, and his children; appearing as if they were dead*' (SD). Ferdinand's gloating reaction to the Duchess's pain articulates an incongruous pride at the artist's skill in devising these engines of psychological torture:

> Excellent; as I would wish: she's plagu'd in Art.
> These presentations are but fram'd in wax,
> By the curious Master in that Qualitie,
> *Vincentio Lauriola*, and she takes them
> For true substantiall Bodies. (4.1.109–13)

The adaptation of *Malfi* by R. H. Horne that was used in the 1850 production by Samuel Phelps at Sadler's Wells set the tone for nineteenth-century performances by paring back these horrors, omitting the dead man's hand (the Duchess kissed Ferdinand's hand instead) and removing the children from the tableau.[60] The production toured widely until 1868. The theatrical dominance of Horne's adaptation meant that it was only readers (whether of original texts, Lamb's *Specimens*, or nineteenth-century editions) who could access the true dreadfulness of the scene. Horne's theatrical excision thus created a privileged, study-based, voyeuristic and predominantly male community of knowledge in respect of the full extent of Webster's 'dreadful stuff'.

Swinburne's attachment to the erotics of pathos is also evident in another of his lifelong passions: Mary Stuart, the sixteenth century's archetypal fatal woman. The Swinburne family

[57] Swinburne, 'A Child's Pity', *Tristram of Lyonesse*, 262.

[58] Algernon Charles Swinburne, 'Notes on Designs of the Old Masters at Florence', in *Essays and Studies*, 2nd edn (London, 1876), 314–57 (324).

[59] Swinburne, 'Notes', 325; see also Thaïs E. Morgan, 'Reimagining Masculinity in Victorian Criticism: Swinburne and Pater', *Victorian Studies*, 36 (1993), 315–32 (326). Fraser Riddell examines Symonds's comparably problematic fascination with the 'fetishized innocence' of the chorister voice in *Music and the Queer Body in English Literature at the Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge, 2022), 104.

[60] R. H. Horne, *The Duchess of Malfi* (London, 1850), 24, and Kathleen McLuskie and Jennifer Uglow (eds), *The Duchess of Malfi: Plays in Performance* (Bristol, 1989), 151.

tradition of Jacobite sympathy formed a key part of his self-identity, and he exhibited a passionate attachment to Mary and her 'diamond heart unflawed and clear … so deadly dear / So cruel'.[61] Swinburne was expert as well as emotional on the subject of Mary: in addition to his dramatic trilogy, he wrote a 'Note on the Character of Mary Stuart' (1882) and the essay on Mary for the 1883 edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.[62] In Swinburne's plays Mary figures both as the exemplar of Stuart pathos and a real-life Lady of Pain, acting out the stinging, biting and blood-letting of *Poems and Ballads*. It is therefore no surprise to see Swinburne's imagination pivoting to Mary Stuart as he meditates in his 1886 Webster essay on the 'arraignment' scene of *The White Devil* (3.2). Vittoria in her courtroom defiance of sexual convention and legal authority was thrillingly vital to Swinburne and the parallel with Mary seemed inescapable:

> Her bearing at the trial for her husband's murder is as dexterous and dauntless as the demeanour of Mary Stuart before her judges … It is impossible not to wonder whether the poet had not in his mind the actual tragedy which had taken place just twenty-five years before the publication of this play: if not, the coincidence is something more than singular.[63]

SYMONDS AND VITTORIA ACCORAMBONI: VENETIAN MEDUSA

The genesis of Symonds's enthusiasm for early modern drama is very similar to that of Swinburne. It took root as a distraction from his Oxford Finals in 1862 and developed via essays published in the *Cornhill* and *Pall Mall Gazette* between 1865 and 1867, which formed part of a broader project on the history of Elizabethan drama that was then laid aside until *Shakspere's Predecessors* (1884).[64] Elizabethan plays introduced Symonds to the Italian tales from which they were drawn, and provided the inspiration for the seven-volume *Renaissance in Italy*. The 'divine Webster' and his plays (not just the tragedies, but also *The Devil's Law Case* (*c.*1618) and *A Cure for a Cuckold* (1624)) provided a common reference point and source of quotation in letters to Symonds's close friends Henry Graham Dakyns, Edmund Gosse and Robert Louis Stevenson.[65] Like other Victorians, Symonds responded strongly to passages of Webster's taking death as their subject and exposing the fragility of life.[66] In an 1887 letter to his daughters describing the funeral in Switzerland of their sister Janet, Symonds evokes the moment when the flower tributes were thrown into Janet's grave, which he rounds off with a quotation from *The Devil's Law Case*:

> I thought of Webster's Dirge:
> Are [*sic*] the flowers of the spring
> Meet to perfume our burying;
> For these have but their growing prime,
> And man doth flourish but a [*sic*] time.[67]

[61] Gosse, *Life*, 3, and Swinburne, 'Adieux à Marie Stuart', *Tristram of Lyonesse*, 238–43 (240).

[62] Algernon Charles Swinburne, 'Note on the Character of Mary Queen of Scots', *Fortnightly Review*, 31 (1882), 13–25 and 'Mary Queen of Scots', in *Miscellanies* (London, 1886), 323–59.

[63] Swinburne, 'John Webster', *The Nineteenth Century*, 872.

[64] Symonds, *Shakspere's Predecessors*, vii.

[65] Symonds, *Letters*, 1. 668 ('divine Webster', to Dakyns, 22 August 1866); also *Letters*, 2. 487 (Gosse), 2. 876 (Gosse) and 3. 39 (Stevenson).

[66] Three selections from Webster were included in Arthur Quiller-Couch's canon-forming *Oxford Book of English Verse 1250–1900* (Oxford, 1900), 198–9, all on this theme: 'A Dirge' from *The White Devil*, 'The Shrouding of the Duchess of Malfi' from *Malfi* and a verse from *The Devil's Law Case* given the title 'Vanitas Vanitatum'. This funereal characterization of Webster was perpetuated by the retention of these extracts in Helen Gardner's *New Oxford Book of English Verse 1250–1950* (Oxford, 1972), 217–18.

Symonds published four critical engagements with Webster's plays in addition to his Mermaid introduction. The first of these forms a substantial part of his essay 'The English Drama during the Reigns of Elizabeth and James', published in the *Cornhill Magazine* (May 1865); the second was a *Pall Mall Gazette* essay on Webster (October 1867), the third the essay 'Vittoria Accoramboni, and the Tragedy of Webster' in his collection of travel writing *Italian Byways* (1883), and the fourth the revision and amplification of these earlier materials in *Shakspere's Predecessors*. Underpinning all these publications are the notes (composed *c*.1865) that Symonds made in his copy of the 1854 edition of Lamb's *Specimens*, which constitute an important early witness to his views on early modern plays and their role in the expression of his aesthetic selfhood.[68]

In Webster's plays the young Symonds found the germ of his preoccupation with Renaissance Italy as a site of sexual dissidence and an exemplification of the conjunction of criminality with beauty. Indeed, John Pemble credits Symonds with being, alongside Pater, the 'rediscoverer and connoisseur of the artistic crime and criminal of the Renaissance'.[69] Venice and Venetian art in particular exerted a lifelong fascination for Symonds and exemplified this conjunction of depravity with beauty and creative potentiality; visiting Venice with his father in 1862, he marvelled at the light and colour of the city, and the incomparable excellence of Venetian masters in commanding 'the breadth and colour and perfume of luxurious reality'.[70] From the 1880s the Symonds family spent the spring and autumn in Venice, with Symonds ultimately residing there semi-permanently in the company of his beloved gondolier Angelo Fusato.

In the story of Webster's 'White Devil', the Venetian Vittoria Accoramboni, Symonds found the perfect example of Italian beauty and violence, all packaged up in a figure of proud and arousingly androgynous rebellion. Vittoria, Symonds exhales in *Shakspere's Predecessors*, is the climactic example of the Jacobean stage woman possessed of 'virile boldness or bravado', who is 'masculine for good or evil, and of indomitable will'.[71] For Symonds, *The White Devil* exemplifies the sexual dissidence of Renaissance Italy and offers a covert mechanism for celebrating a narrative of seemingly untrammelled sexual desire and self-fulfilment that could still, thanks to the remarkable dramatic force of Vittoria, retain the marks of beauty. Within this narrative of heterosexual passion, therefore, lurks a model of unconstrained sexual identity and determined physical fulfilment (the 'insolence and lawlessness' also attributed to Marlowe)[72] that could be overtly condemned but secretly celebrated. In her anticipation of the sexually provocative and empowering figure of the post-Romantic Medusa, Vittoria came to assume a central role in Symonds's interconnected sexual and critical aesthetic. Symonds's Medusan Vittoria links back to the 'aesthetic minoritizing discourse' of Pater and Swinburne, as Thaïs Morgan (following Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick) terms it, that through the motifs of androgyny and the ambivalence of the Medusa created a space for the 'double-voiced discourse' of conventional and homoerotically invested art criticism.[73]

Symonds's retelling of the story of the historical Vittoria Accoramboni in *Italian Byways* sets the scene by describing the decline and decay of Rome, presented as the natural location

[67] Symonds, *Letters*, 3. 228 and Webster, *The Devil's Law Case*, 5.4.122–5.
[68] Phyllis Grosskurth, 'The Genesis of Symonds's Elizabethan Criticism', *Modern Language Review*, 59 (1964), 183–93.
[69] John Pemble, 'Art, Disease, and Mountains', in John Pemble (ed.), *John Addington Symonds: Culture and the Demon Desire* (Houndmills, 2000), 1–21 (5).
[70] Brown, *John Addington Symonds*, 1. 238–9.
[71] Symonds, *Shakspere's Predecessors*, 59, adapting phrases first used in 'The English Drama During the Reigns of Elizabeth and James', *Cornhill Magazine* (May 1865), 604–18 (617).
[72] Symonds, *Shakspere's Predecessors*, 608.
[73] Morgan, 'Reimagining Masculinity', 326.

for 'the grisliest tragedies'.[74] The account of Vittoria is emblematic of the paradox and cliché expounded throughout the volume, namely that in Italy beauty and violence are inextricable, and that the country is drawn, despite its high-souled aspiration, towards vice, villainy and atrocity. Vittoria is the embodiment of this Italian paradox for Symonds—she is beautiful and graceful but mired in a world of courtly vice and ambition. The display of Vittoria in her coffin feeds Symonds's fascination, evident throughout these essays, with the peculiar function of Italy as a place for encountering beauty in the presence of death:

> Vittoria's wonderful dead body, pale yet sweet to look upon, the golden hair flowing around her marble shoulders, the red wound in her breast uncovered, the stately limbs arrayed in satin as she died, maddened the populace with its surpassing loveliness. (p. 168)

Ever the art historian, he notes that 'the spectacle must have been impressive', with the coffin looked down upon by 'those grim gaunt frescoes of Mantegna' in the Ovetari chapel of the church of the Eremitani in Padua; Symonds had visited the church with his father in 1862 and made notes on the frescoes.[75]

Symonds is expertly attuned to Webster's Italian detailing and particularly admires the elaboration of Vittoria's character and dramatic force in the play. He is rhetorically stricken by her combination of beauty and deadliness: she is 'perhaps the most masterly creation of Webster's genius' (p. 173), 'a woman of a very marked and terrible nature' (pp. 173–4), 'possessed with the cold demon of her own imperial and victorious beauty', exercising 'the courage of her criminality' and 'dreadful daring' (p. 174). At the trial 'she stands defiant, arrogant, vigilant … blazing throughout with the intolerable lustre of some baleful planet' (p. 174). This is the fatal beauty of Paterian, Pre-Raphaelite and Swinburnian imagination, written back upon early modern drama via Symonds's energizing encounter with the Italian cohabitation of beauty and death, sublimity and atrocity. In her last moment, Webster's Vittoria is transformed into the vampire-Medusa of nineteenth-century male fantasy in a mini-ekphrasis:

> she takes her station like a lady in some portrait by Paris Bordone, with gleaming golden hair twisted into snakelike braids about her temples, with skin white as cream, bright cheeks, dark dauntless eyes, and on her bosom, where it has been chafed by jewelled chains, a flush of rose (pp. 176–7).[76]

This description references the erotic portraits of courtesans by the Venetian painter Bordone (1500–1571), who trained with Titian. Bordone's portraits of semi-nude yet oddly muscular women are now discussed in terms of their innovative combination of ideal beauty with a voluptuous sensuality; Symonds's comparison with Vittoria is therefore to modern eyes a strikingly good choice that aptly underlines her dual role in his analysis as both beautiful and dreadful. Symonds's recollection of Bordone is imprecise ('some portrait') yet its detail is specific enough to show that he had seen and noted a Bordone courtesan painting. The most famous is now in the Louvre (ironically enough, displayed in the same room as the Mona Lisa, subject of Pater's foundational essay 'La Gioconda'); it is titled 'Flore' in French and 'Cortigiana come Flora' in Italian (Fig. 1).[77] The portrait was donated to the Louvre in

[74] John Addington Symonds, 'Vittoria Accoramboni, and the Tragedy of Webster', in *Italian Byways* (London, 1883), 156–93 (157).

[75] Symonds, 'Vittoria Accoramboni', 168 and Brown, *John Addington Symonds*, 1. 244.

[76] A re-working of a sentence first used in his 1867 *Pall Mall Gazette* essay (11), with the noteworthy substitution of 'dauntless' for the original 'dazzling', thus enhancing Vittoria's majesty and masculine vigour.

1903 but resided in England during the nineteenth century in various private collections and was one of the Venetian Old Masters lent to the 'blockbuster' Manchester Art Treasures Exhibition of May–October 1857, where it was highly commended.[78] The Exhibition transformed British art culture by bringing together over 16,000 works in a purpose-built iron and glass 'Art Palace' that welcomed more than 1.3 million visitors.[79] The 16-year-old Symonds was one of them, visiting the Exhibition on his way back home to Bristol from a tour of Scotland.[80]

Vittoria is a splendidly fatal woman, but when rendered a Venetian Medusa by Symonds she also bears witness to his tormented sexual identity. As Robert Dellamora notes, one of the many Victorian functions of the vampire-Medusa was as 'a means for men to own their desire for other men'.[81] Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads* exemplifies this phenomenon: in the words of Elisabeth Gitter, 'Swinburne's ladies of torture are at times so powerfully phallic that they become androgynous'—notably the boy-maiden Medusa of 'Fragoletta' who is possessed of his/her own hair-serpents.[82] Symonds's aesthetic transport whilst imagining Webster's Vittoria is therefore driven by the homoerotic potential of the splendid energy manifested by Webster's tragic heroine, an energy that is cast as heroically and vigorously masculine during her trial scene. In addition, her defiance during the trial of what Symonds called Italian 'ecclesiastical tyranny and craft'[83] to his eyes made her 'virile boldness or bravado' an act of political as well as sexual resistance.[84] Reimagined as a Renaissance anticipation of the fatal woman type, Vittoria therefore serves to enlist Webster easily and naturally into the pantheon of Medusa-devotees such as Leonardo da Vinci and Shelley, and to assert his affinity with the macabre, sensual and terrifying aesthetic of Baudelaire and the Symbolists.

Although it is Symonds's private sexual longings that drive his reading of Vittoria as Medusa, he also uncovered (or responded subconsciously to the thrill of) an encrypted Medusa moment in the trial scene of *The White Devil* itself. It is encrypted because the referent is Perseus, but the tropes of later Romantic and decadent Medusa-horror are there for those who wish to see, in the snaky word 'intangled' and in the hybrid sexuality of Vittoria's performance of 'masculine vertue' even as she curtseys ostentatiously to the ambassadors in the courtroom:

> *Vittoria.* Humbly thus,
> Thus low, to the most worthy and respected
> Leigier Embassadors, my modesty
> And womanhood I tender; but withall
> So intangled in a cursed accusation
> That my defence of force like *Perseus*
> Must personate masculine vertue.
> (3.2.130–36)[85]

[77] Andrea Donati, *Paris Bordone: Catologo Ragionato with English Text* (Soncino, 2014), 402–3, #200.
[78] *Catalogue of the Art Treasures of the United Kingdom. Collected at Manchester in 1857* (London, [1857]), 29, #216, lent by Abraham Darby.
[79] Elizabeth A. Pergam, *The Manchester Art Treasures Exhibition of 1857: Entrepreneurs, Connoisseurs and the Public* (Farnham, 2011).
[80] Brown, *John Addington Symonds*, 1. 100.
[81] Richard Dellamora, *Masculine Desire: The Sexual Politics of Victorian Aestheticism* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1990), 80.
[82] Elisabeth Gitter, 'The Power of Women's Hair in the Victorian Imagination', *PMLA*, 99 (1984), 936–54 (952).
[83] Symonds, 'Webster', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 11.
[84] Symonds, *Shakspere's Predecessors*, 59.
[85] Webster borrowed the phrase 'masculine vertue' from Ben Jonson's *Masque of Queens* (1609), in which it is represented by the figure of Perseus. Percy Simpson, 'An Allusion in Webster', *Modern Language Review*, 2 (1907), 162–3 bears witness to the gender ambiguity present in these lines that foxed nineteenth-century scholars as they puzzled unnecessarily over whether to emend 'Perseus' to 'Portia'.

Fig. 1: Paris Bordone, *Flore* (1540). Masterpics/Alamy Stock Photo.

Symonds was surely alive to the lightly coded homoeroticism of Medusa moments in literature and art. As the translator of Cellini's autobiography, he was fully aware of the rumours of 'darker lusts' that circulated around Cellini's life,[86] and he is transported by the homoerotic potential of Cellini's daringly sensual 'Perseus with the Head of Medusa' (1545; Fig. 2):

> it has something of fascination, a *bravura* brilliancy … the Perseus soars into a region of authentic, if not pure or sublime, inspiration. No one who has seen it once will forget that

[86] Symonds, 'Introduction', *The Life of Benvenuto Cellini*, 2nd edn, 2 vols (London, 1888), 1. xl.

ornate figure of the demigod, triumphant in his stately pose above the twisted corpse of the decapitated Gorgon.[87]

Although Vittoria in her guise as virile fatal woman dominates Symonds's reading of Webster, it is the Duchess who supplies the words that twice serve for Symonds as a shorthand gloss of his psychosexual agonies. At Harrow, he remembers in the *Memoirs*, 'I learned to be acquainted with work, "as the tanned galley-slave is with his oar"'—a quotation from *Malfi*.[88] The same quotation is applied also to the fatigue produced by writing that repeatedly drives him 'to find relief in passion'.[89] There are two other allusions in *Malfi* to rowing, a subject of enduring sexual fascination for Symonds on both the Serpentine in London and in Venice: the murderer Bosola served as a galley slave (1.1.65) and the Duchess's brother Ferdinand fantasizes about her having sex with 'some strong thigh'd Bargeman' (2.5.42). The full quotation reveals why the Duchess's words resonated so much with Symonds:

> I am acquainted with sad misery,
> As the tan'd galley-slave is with his Oare (4.2.27–8)

Symonds often expressed his sexual yearnings as a mixture of sorrowful exhaustion and impelling desire, and it is easy to see why the Duchess's lines, with their blend of sadness and (homo)eroticism, provided Symonds with a coded epigraph to his sexual life. In a phrase from his 1867 *Pall Mall Gazette* essay on Webster that was later re-used in *Italian Byways*, the young Symonds observed that 'No dramatist has ever shown more consummate ability in producing terrible effects, or in laying bare the innermost secrets of crime and pain combined to make men miserable'.[90] Nested in its original—closeted—context, this observation is a textbook example of criticism in the expressive mode he inherited from Charles Lamb. When read from the perspectives deployed in this article, however, and with the hindsight provided by the *Memoirs*, it signals Webster as a poet with whom Symonds, like Lamb, spoke 'deep … to deep'.

The legacy of Swinburne's and Symonds's attentiveness to the 'dreadful stuff' of Webster's tragedies continued to be intermittently visible throughout the twentieth century, for example in the Shakespearean scholar Leo Salingar's characterization of Webster's matter as 'the agonies of the torture chamber—battering, choking, flaying, beheading, toothache, insomnia, fever; the stinging of bees; pressing to death with weights'.[91] (The affinity of this with the language of Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads* and Mary Stuart plays—and their reviews—is itself striking). Webster's 'dreadful stuff' functioned for many Victorian readers as a portal into a version of Renaissance Italy in which aestheticism and eroticism blend into and are elevated by pain inflicted on women and boys, and the perverse arousal occasioned by dreadful matter could be legitimately sublimated into pathos. In Swinburne's reading of Vittoria Accoramboni as Mary (his 'queen of snakes and Scots')[92] and Symonds's reading of her as Medusa, the dreadfulness at issue moves from the tortures of *Malfi* to *The White Devil*'s androgynous amalgamation of beauty and destruction, male and female, in the snake-hair of the Gorgon.

[87] Symonds, *Cellini*, 1. liii–liv.
[88] Symonds, *Memoirs*, 422.
[89] Symonds, *Memoirs*, 446.
[90] Symonds, 'Webster', 10 and 'Vittoria Accoramboni', 179.
[91] Leo Salingar, 'Tourneur and the Tragedy of Revenge', in Boris Ford (ed.), *The Age of Shakespeare* (London, 1982 [1955]), 436–56 (451).
[92] *Chastelard*, in Algernon Charles Swinburne, *The Tragedies of Algernon Charles Swinburne*, 5 vols (London, 1905–1906), 2. 30.

Fig. 2: Benvenuto Cellini, *Perseus with the Head of Medusa* (1545). Hyder Images/Alamy Stock Photo.

Legitimized by the label 'Elizabethan' and the critical tradition stemming from Lamb, the dreadfulness of Webster provided Swinburne and Symonds with space for speculations about art, pain, beauty, perversity and gender mobility. Like Swinburne's 'cross-voicing' of Sappho in 'Anactoria',[93] Webster's plays facilitated erotic possibilities that were otherwise dangerous in print, enabling the inadmissible to become strikingly present in the act of criticism. By blending the discourses of literary and art criticism with their own forms of sexual dissidence, Swinburne and Symonds embraced the queer potentiality of Webster's 'dreadful stuff' to give voice to their erotic individualism and to enable its expression through criticism.

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[93] Dellamora, *Masculine Desire*, 71.