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The Playhouse Effect: John Webster, *Deixis* and Story-Telling in the Theatres of Jacobean London

DAVID J. AMELANG

Universidad Autónoma de Madrid

david.amelang@uam.es

The recent (2014) inauguration of the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse, a reconstruction of an archetypal Jacobean indoor playhouse, on London's Southbank, has led students and scholars of early modern theatre once again to focus attention on original playhouse performances, just as they did when its older sibling Shakespeare's Globe opened its doors in 1996. The earlier assumption that the differences between open-air amphitheatres and indoor playhouses conditioned the way plays were written and acted is now enjoying a new lease on life, and yet there has been little research conducted in order to substantiate this otherwise perfectly logical intuition. Drawing on the insights of drama theorist Manfred Pfister as well as the linguistic concept of *deixis*, this article compares the language and plotting of three plays by the Jacobean playwright John Webster: *The White Devil*, *The Duchess of Malfi* and *The Devil's Law Case*. Each play was first staged under significantly different circumstances within the theatrical landscape of Jacobean London, which makes them a singularly illustrative case study of how an early modern English dramatist adapted his style in order to meet the demands of the city's diverse performance conditions.

Keywords: Theatre History; John Webster; Playhouses; Language; Audience; London

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El efecto teatro: John Webster, la *deixis* y la narración de historias en los teatros del Londres jacobeo

La reciente inauguración (2014) del Sam Wanamaker Playhouse, una reconstrucción de un teatro cubierto arquetípico jacobeo, en el Southbank de Londres, ha animado a los estudiantes

y a los estudiosos del teatro moderno temprano a centrar una vez más su atención en las representaciones teatrales originales, tal y como lo hicieron cuando su hermano mayor el Globe de Shakespeare abrió sus puertas en 1996. La anterior suposición de que las diferencias entre los anfiteatros al aire libre y los teatros cubiertos condicionaban la forma en que se escribían y actuaban las obras disfruta ahora de una nueva vida y, sin embargo, se ha realizado escasa investigación al respecto para fundamentar esta intuición que, por el contrario, podría ser perfectamente lógica. Basándonos en las ideas del teórico dramático Manfred Pfister así como en el concepto lingüístico de déixis, este artículo compara el lenguaje y la trama de tres obras del dramaturgo jacobeo John Webster: *The White Devil*, *The Duchess of Malfi* y *The Devil's Law Case*. Cada obra se representó por vez primera en circunstancias significativamente diferentes dentro del panorama teatral del Londres jacobeo, lo que las hace parte de un estudio de caso singularmente ilustrativo de cómo un dramaturgo inglés del periodo moderno temprano adaptaba su estilo para satisfacer las demandas de las diversas condiciones escénicas de la ciudad.

Palabras clave: Historia del teatro; John Webster, teatros; lenguaje; auditorio; Londres

I. JOHN MARSTON, JOHN WEBSTER AND SOME “IGNORANT ASSES”

At some moment in 1603 or 1604 Shakespeare’s playing company—formerly the Chamberlain’s Men, but by then the King’s Men—procured the rights to perform John Marston’s *The Malcontent* in its Globe theatre in Southwark. The play had been quite a success when acted earlier that season by the Children of the Chapel at the indoor, and elite, Blackfriars playhouse. But before being performed at in its new venue, Marston’s original text required some adjusting, since the shows the youths put on at the Blackfriars and the adults at the Globe were not the same. In terms of architectural design, as well as audience composition, the indoor playhouses of Blackfriars and St. Paul’s differed significantly from the open-air amphitheatres of suburban London, and this in turn meant that the plays written for each of these types of venue were also considerably different.¹ Evidence suggests that a young playwright by the name of John Webster—best known today for writing the Jacobean blockbuster tragedy *The Duchess of Malfi* (1612) and for his cameo as the rat-friendly youth in the film *Shakespeare in Love*—was brought on board to help Marston adapt his play for its re-staging at the Globe (Lake 1981). The new adaptation included an induction scene in which a fictionalised Richard Burbage, lead actor of the King’s Men, explains to a gallant onstage that the original Marston text had been augmented in order “to entertain a little more time and to abridge the not received custom of music in our theatre”

¹ The canonical study of Jacobean London’s indoor playhouses is Irwin Smith’s *Shakespeare’s Blackfriars Playhouse* (1964). For a brief up-to-date survey of all of Jacobean London’s playhouses see Ichikawa 2013, 1-12.

(Ind.83-84).² In other words, plays in the indoor playhouses tended to be shorter than those in the amphitheatres not only because they had many more songs embedded into them, but also due to the four breaks that were needed to trim and relight the candles that lit the venue and during which chamber music would be played to entertain the audience while it waited (Smith 2012, 486). In the open-air theatres, on the other hand, plays were performed without any breaks in order to capitalise on the natural light of the early afternoon.

In addition to making the play longer, the new additions presumably had two other objectives. The first was to adjust the play to the needs of the King's Men: in addition to increasing the lines of some other characters, Marston and Webster created the role of Passarello, a fool tailor-made for the company's celebrated clown, Robert Armin. The second was to address certain technical aspects that arose during performance; for instance, the lack of planned breaks between acts in the Globe productions meant that the actors needed more time to get from one side of the tiring house to the other and not break the sacrosanct law of re-entry (Cathcart 2006, 43-54; Wiles 1987, 145-146, 188-189). As a playwright who worked exclusively for the boy companies of the indoor theatres, Marston—or, rather, the acting company that owned the rights to the play—would have enlisted the help of “someone familiar with the London theatre and the requirements of its different venues” (Marcus 2009, 5) in order to adjust the play for its new house.³ That versatile someone was John Webster, who had up until that point collaborated on several plays written for Philip Henslowe's Southbank playhouses.

That indoor, as opposed to outdoor, theatres required different approaches to writing as well as acting suggests that venue specificity was an acknowledged reality in the playmaking world of Jacobean London. It is not far-fetched to suppose that the two types of commercial playhouses—that is, the open-air amphitheatre and the indoor candlelit playhouse—would have given rise to distinct types of dramatic texts. Not only did the venues themselves differ, especially in that one was significantly larger and noisier than the other, but both the playing companies and the receiving audiences of the Globe and the Blackfriars at this point in time were also perceived as different; as the printer of *The Two Merry Milkmaids* (1620) informs in his address to the reader, “Every Writer must governe his Penne according to the Capacitie of the Stage he writes too, both in the Actor and in the Auditor” (quoted in Keenan 2014, 129). With so many contextual factors in play, it makes sense to assume that in certain situations a dramatist's writing style would differ in order to address the specificities of a play's staging conditions, in particular with regard to the two main type of venues that existed in London at the

² This is the third quarto of the play, printed in 1604. The first two editions (which mention Marston as the sole author of the play) are believed to be associated with the Blackfriars production. The title page of the 1604 quarto edition confuses the role of each playwright by naming Webster as the main writer and Marston the helping hand. More in Cathcart (2006, 137-38); Weiss (1976).

³ See Dillon (2000, 35) and Ouellette (2005, 376-377) for the idea that each venue type required a different kind of writing, and that some playwrights were better prepared to handle this than others.

time. The following small yet insightful case study explores the formal differences in the language devised for the indoor and outdoor playhouses of Jacobean London. It focuses in particular on how Jacobean writers negotiated the different performance conditions of the London commercial theatre venues in the way they ‘tell’ their stories to their audiences. By turning to the linguistic field of pragmatics, specifically to the sub-field of *deixis*, this article explores different story-telling and plot-constructing techniques in three texts written by the same playwright, John Webster, but for completely different performance circumstances and which met with considerably different levels of success: *The White Devil* (1612), *The Duchess of Malfi* (1613-1614) and *The Devil’s Law-Case* (c. 1618), arguably Webster’s best-known works.⁴

The three plays selected were written and first performed in the second decade of the seventeenth century, in the peak moment of coexistence between public and private playhouses. In 1608 the London city council gave the King’s Men the right to perform at their indoor theatre in Blackfriars, and the acting company established a pattern of using the indoor playhouse during the winter season and the open-air Globe during the summer months. Other companies, such as the Queen Anne’s Men, copied this formula soon thereafter with the Red Bull amphitheatre and the Cockpit indoor playhouse (Gurr 1987, 170-77; Gurr 1992, 14-15). Jacobean playwrights clearly understood that their work had to satisfy the demands of both types of venue, given that they may be performed in either. Indeed, the logical consequence of this plurality of playhouses is that many if not most plays written at this moment, including the three Webster texts, would have been conceived with certain venue-neutral characteristics. What is more, the stages of London’s indoor playhouses were originally designed to accommodate the existing repertoire of amphitheatre plays: the overall area of the average indoor theatre stage may have been considerably smaller, but each tiring-house façade had the same number of doors (two), with a discovery space in the middle, along with an upper gallery that served as a secondary acting space. Consequently, none of the three Webster plays under analysis demanded a stage layout that varied from the standard stage layout. Even the very different atmospheric conditions of the venues—one indoors and candlelit, the other outdoors and naturally lit—did not constitute that much of an altering factor. Moreover, one should not forget that the indoor playhouses were partially lit by natural light as well: candles were an added expense, so most private playhouses featured windows in their upper galleries to let as much of Jacobean London’s afternoon sun as possible to shine through. In this sense, it is telling that the acting companies still scheduled their indoor performances at two o’clock in the afternoon, the same time as in the open-air theatres (Dustagheer 2017, 15). And even in these performances the audience members were asked to suspend their disbelief when plays invoked pitch

⁴ The editions used here are Christina Luckij’s *The White Devil*, Leah S. Marcus’ *The Duchess of Malfi* and David Gunby’s *The Devil’s Law-Case* (all dates derive from Gunby et al. 2007, xl-xli).

darkness, as happens twice in *The Duchess of Malfi*. As a matter of fact, *The Duchess of Malfi* was performed at the Blackfriars and then later at the Globe in the same season, and as far as we know both performance runs were successful and no one expressed disappointment with the lack of true darkness in the amphitheatre.

Needless to say, this does not mean that all plays that were minimally well-written and -acted in this period did well, and environmental conditions often proved critical in determining a performance's success. For instance, *The White Devil's* opening performance by the Queen Anne's Men in the Red Bull theatre was not well received, as John Webster confesses in his address to the reader in the first printed edition of the play. Not that Webster puts the blame on himself for its failure, of course; his complaint that the theatre was too "open and black" (1996, 5) for the play to work properly suggests that the weather for the winter matinee at which it was first performed must have been less than ideal, and/or that the theatre was too spacious for his court tragedy. But in truth, the real culprit, in Webster's eyes, for the performance's failure was the patrons at the Red Bull, who were infamous for their rowdiness, lack of refinement and appetite for sensationalism.⁵ "I have noted," Webster writes, that "most of the people that come to that playhouse, resemble those ignorant asses who, visiting stationers' shops, their use is not to inquire for good books, but new books" (Webster 1996, 5).⁶ He published the playtext that same year, with this damning preface, to compensate for having been deprived of a "full and understanding auditory" (Webster 1996, 5) in the Queen Anne's Men's performance. It is perhaps thanks to his distaste for the patrons of the Red Bull that Webster took his next play, *The Duchess of Malfi*, to the King's Men's playhouses. There, theatregoers were accustomed to the "subtler, romantic repertory" of dramatists such as Shakespeare and Fletcher and thus better prepared for Webster's more refined writing style than the Red Bull audience, which was used to the more "heroic and spectacular plays" of Thomas Heywood and his *Ages* cycle (Luckij 1996, xxvi).⁷ The Queen Anne's Men staged the next piece Webster wrote for them, *The Devil's Law-Case*, which, like *The White Devil*, has a central trial scene, at the indoor Cockpit theatre and not the Red Bull (Gunby 2003, 5-7), a clear sign that certain stories simply did not work well in

⁵ In 1935 Louis Wright recovered a period quotation about the Red Bull plays that describes them as "no idle tricks of love, but many plays, full of vigour" (quoted in Reynolds 1940, 8). Prejudice against the Red Bull was taken as gospel by theatre historians until recently, when Eva Griffith challenged these assumptions in her monograph on the Clerkenwell playhouse. That said, Griffith's line of argumentation is not to negate the premise of rowdiness altogether—"let me confirm that this Clerkenwell playhouse was always an exciting and excitable place", she writes—but rather to moderate academia's preference for drawing "extreme distinctions between theatres, auditors and sets of plays—the Red Bull representing the most distinctive set of all" (Griffith 2013, 16).

⁶ While most scholars agree that *The White Devil* was probably first performed at the Red Bull, Griffith adds a cautionary asterisk to this conventional wisdom since "the title-page does not have a playhouse ascription, meaning, technically, that the first performance *could* have been produced at the Curtain" (Griffith 2013, 94; emphasis in the original), the other open air venue occasionally used by the Queen's Servants.

⁷ More on the performance history of *The Duchess of Malfi* can be found in Barker 2011.

every playhouse.⁸ This article, however, discusses the style of Webster's plays and not their content, in order to suggest that *how* the different stories were told also played a part in their subsequent success or failure in the different commercial theatres of Jacobean London. To this end, the following section focuses on the use of deictic markers in Webster's three plays as a representative feature of the innovations in dramatic story-telling that marked not only the works of this particular playwright but also those of this period as a whole.

2. *DEIXIS* IN THE JACOBEAN THEATRE

"The single most obvious way in which the relationship between language and context is reflected in the structures of languages themselves," linguist Stephen Levinson explains, "is through the phenomenon of *deixis*. [...] The term is borrowed from the Greek word for pointing or indicating" (Levinson 1983, 54). *Deixis*, or deictics, focuses on the way language refers and relates to the context in which linguistic utterances are enunciated. The language of an audio-visual medium such as the theatre is heavily embedded with deictic elements or markers, "a subtype of definite referring expressions [...] which 'point to' their referents" (Cruse 2006, 44-45) and which play an active role in creating the fictional arch of a theatrical representation. In Keir Elam's words, *deixis*:

allows the dramatic context to be referred to as an 'actual' and dynamic world already in progress. Indeed, deictic reference presupposes the existence of a speaker referred to as 'I', a listener addressed as 'you', a physically present object indicated as 'this'. It resides in 'shifters' ('empty' signs) in so far as it does not, in itself, specify its object but simply points, ostensibly, to the already-constituted contextual elements (Elam 1980, 86).

When an actor playing a role addresses another actor by their fictional name, the deictic element becomes an instrument in the service of illusion, giving the audience member the tools with which to suspend his or her disbelief if desired. The reference not only establishes relations between components of the same shared-logic environment, but also plays a role in allowing the audience to perceive the fictional worlds that the elements of the plot inhabit. This is why much of a play's success relies on the proper and clear deployment of references, and why playwrights have made it a priority to equip their audiences with the tools necessary to head off any possible misunderstandings. The actors play a crucial part in delivering the speech lucidly, as well as supplementing the playtext with articulate non-verbal communication. The audience is another key participant in the creation of an alternative world that depends on suspending disbelief, since the playwright's stagecraft "often relies on the unwritten contract with

⁸ Many of the plays written for indoor playhouses, such as the Cockpit or the King's Men's Blackfriars, placed legal issues at the heart of their stories. One reason behind this is that students at the Inns of Court were frequent patrons of the indoor theatres. More in Finkelpearl (1969, 12-32); Gurr (1987, 67).

the playgoers' collaborative imagination" (Kinney 2003, 30). But playwrights have an assortment of linguistic instruments at their disposal when pursuing theatrical eloquence. Thanks to these means they can find various ways of making sure the audience has enough information to understand the progression of the plot without losing its thread. In the early days of theatre in ancient Greece, playwrights introduced the chorus to help the multitudinous audience to understand and judge each action appropriately. Although nowadays plays are full of deliberate holes and obscurities, the theatre of Elizabethan and Jacobean England was still heavily embedded with over-explicitness and redundancies. *Hamlet's* mousetrap scene (3.2.128-262) is a perfect example of this practice: it begins with a dumb show that visually evokes the upcoming play's plot, which is followed by a player delivering a brief prologue, and only then does the *Murder of Gonzago* finally begin. To make matters even more explicit, Hamlet explains every cue and clue throughout, digesting the plot for his neighbouring spectators to such a degree that Ophelia describes him as being "as good as a chorus" (3.2.238).

Webster, like all early modern English playwrights, was aware that his text had to be almost entirely self-sufficient and that everything taking place on the stage—including the non-verbal aspect of the performance—had to be accompanied by a verbal translation of sorts.⁹ This was especially important since Elizabethan and Jacobean plays were acted mostly on only-slightly-more-than-bare stages that depicted the inside of a palace one moment and then a far away forest the next, thus the dramatists had to create environments, atmospheres and scenarios through the characters' words, and the audience's ability to suspend its disbelief depended on the self-evident nature of the text being performed. This necessity for constant explanation is something Philip Sidney picks up on when he criticises, in his *Defence of Poesy* (first printed in 1595), the spatial and temporal jumps taking place in early Elizabethan public theatre,

where you shall have Asia of the one side and Afric of the other, and so many other under-kingdoms, that the player, when he cometh in, must ever begin with telling where he is, or else the tale will not be conceived? Now you shall have three ladies walk to gather flowers, and then we must believe the stage to be a garden. By and by we hear news of shipwreck in the same place, and then we are to blame if we accept it not for a rock (Sidney 2004, 45).

As Sidney explains, even a subtle yet timely deployment of clarifying linguistic markers served to reveal to the audience a play's multiple reference points: not only when and where the scene is set, but also who is who, what is happening and even the motive behind certain actions and behaviours. This was ever more necessary in

⁹ When discussing "the relationships linking the various sign systems or codes that constitute a dramatic text," Manfred Pfister points out that in "certain historical periods, the visual means of presentation that we take for granted, such as lighting and set, are almost completely absent, with the result that the verbal element gains in importance—quantitatively at least" (Pfister 1988, 17).

London's early modern playhouses, where the complete hearing or viewing of the play was not always guaranteed, which playwrights compensated for by providing various theatrical and metatheatrical elements of positive redundancy—that is, repetitions of a previously stated fact or event—in order to make sure the gist of the matter at hand got through to the audience. The Elizabethan bare stage, Robert Weimann writes, “placed rigorous demands on the dramatist’s use of language, the actor’s use of gesture, and the audience’s attentiveness and imagination” (Weimann 1978, 215-16). One important consequence of this challenging situation is that the surviving texts of Elizabethan and Jacobean plays, even when sparse in stage directions, are reasonably intelligible despite the scarcity of non-verbal signs. It is because the texts, through the constant use of implicit stage directions, are for the most part deictically self-sufficient. The numerous positive redundancies and continuous clarifying references that mark early modern dramatic texts reflect the artisanal pragmatism of the dramatists of the period and their frank awareness of performance conditions. Or, in other words, the attributes of the playhouse and its spectators’ ability to understand were very much present in the writing process.

Webster seems to have been particularly worried about the possibility that playgoers might lose the thread of his plots during the frequent interludes that took place in Jacobean performances. As noted above, in the indoor playhouses the plays were interrupted four times to relight and trim the candles, and that during these pauses chamber music was performed to entertain the audience while it waited; the breaks on the stage translate onto the page as the act divisions with which we are now so familiar.¹⁰ After each interlude, the play had to be reintroduced to the playgoing public that had been pulled out of the story-world for a good ten to fifteen minutes. In some ways, the process of reacquainting the audience with the story being presented resembled, on a smaller scale, the mechanics of a play’s opening scene. Such instances epitomise a playwright’s strategic effort to present the plot in a clear, yet not too obvious way, since they are moments when the audience has to process a large amount of unfamiliar information. As Manfred Pfister explains in his *The Theory and Analysis of Drama*,

¹⁰ The five-act play structure can be traced back to the ancient Roman dramatists. However, it would be naive to believe that Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights adopted this structure simply in homage to the classical models. In plays written for the public theatres, especially before the indoor playhouses became mainstream, play structure was a fluid concept that varied almost unpredictably. Even the so-called ‘university wits’ were inconsistent in modelling their plots according to the classical precepts. The emergence of the indoor theatre, however, did seem to facilitate a more standardised play structure. More in Gurr (1992, 177-79); Jewkes (1958).

in the sphere of verbal communication there are speeches that have scarcely any novelty value for the fictional listener on stage, but which serve to clarify certain relationships for the audience. Speeches of this kind are particularly common in the exposition sections, during which the audience has to be informed of the events leading up to the play, although these are already familiar to the fictional characters on stage (Pfister 1988, 40).¹¹

Robert F. Willson's *Shakespeare's Opening Scenes* (1977) provides a blueprint for analysing how Webster used linguistic formulas when reactivating his stories after each interlude. In his monograph, Willson concludes that Shakespeare structures the introduction to his plays around "compelling action or exposition or both, tending not to retard movement simply in order to explain antecedent action. He seemed conscious of both audience and the unity of his design in these scenes, rarely sacrificing one of these demands to the other" (Willson 1977, 1). Webster, much like in Shakespeare in his opening scenes, designates a couple of lines toward the beginning of each act to reminding the audience of what had happened right before the break in order to regroup the collective memory and from then on to keep the plot going forward. In other words, these lines served as recapitulation devices for whenever it became necessary, for technical reasons such as the retrimming of candles, to put the plays on hold. In the sub-field of *deixis* this type of devices fall under the category of anaphora, their purpose being to recall a prior point of reference within the frame of the story.¹²

The breaks between acts could not have been very long since these recapitulations tend to be minimal, a couple of lines at most, so as to not become intrusive or cumbersome. One way to explain the recapitulation aids would be to consider them to be the Jacobean equivalents of the 'in the previous episode' summaries we nowadays encounter at the beginning of each episode of a modern television series; or, to be more precise, they are akin to the one-liners meant to reintroduce the audience to the show after each TV commercial break, also known as 'Ad-break double-takes'. *The Duchess of Malfi* serves once again as an example since it is the best known of the three plays.

¹¹ Perfect illustrations of the "interrelationship of verbal and non-verbal information", as Pfister refers to it, take place in all three of our case studies; very often Webster supplements what is being acted or said with an almost simultaneous explanation in situations where the audience might fail to understand something crucial to the intelligibility of the story. The best examples of this practice are the dumb shows in *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*. The long stage directions found in the published playbooks would have been silently performed on the stage, leaving some room for audience interpretation (and misinterpretation, due to the lack of explicitness). In order to avoid any possible misunderstanding in these two crucial moments, Webster uses characters to verbalise the action that is taking place on the stage (2.2.20-51). In *The White Devil* Webster has the conjuror explain to Brachiano what happens following each of the dumb shows, whereas in *The Duchess of Malfi* Webster creates the roles of the pilgrims so that they can discuss out loud with one another the Cardinal's leaving the Church and the banishment of the Duchess (3.4.23-43). Since there is no dumb show equivalent in *The Devil's Law-Case*, it is difficult to say whether Webster would have tried to be as explicit in the later play as he had been in the earlier two.

¹² "The term 'anaphora'", Konrad Ehlich summarises, "is derived from the Greek 'anapherein'. The term 'anapherein' translates as 'to re-fer', 'to re-late', in the literal sense of the Latinate forms" (Ehlich 1982, 315). Stephen Levinson defines an anaphoric usage as an instance in which "some term picks out as referent the same entity (or class of objects) that some prior term in the discourse picked out" (Levinson 1983, 67).

In the first scene of the second act, after a short dialogue between Bosola and a maid, Antonio and Delio walk on stage toward the end of a conversation about Antonio's marriage to the Duchess that has taken place as act one finishes. "And so long since married? You amaze me", is all we need to hear Delio say to remind us of what has just happened. This exchange also serves to mark the passing of time within the onstage fiction for the audience, as will the following three. The third act begins with yet another dialogue between Antonio and Delio, with the former explaining to the latter all that has happened on and off the stage while he was away. Ferdinand and Bosola introduce the fourth act by discussing how the Duchess is faring in prison, a subtle reminder that she has been taken captive in the last scene of act three. And finally, act five starts off with—who other but—Antonio and Delio discussing Antonio's banishment from Malfi. These are not heavy reminders: they are subtle, and the perfect length to bring the theatregoer's attention back to the key points of the narrative line after listening to the unrelated chamber music while the theatre operators ready the candles for the following segment of performance. In fact, perhaps the most valuable knowledge these recapitulation devices provide to modern readers, and in particular theatre historians, is to help determine whether a specific Jacobean play was written with an indoor playhouse in mind, or not.

Other than these ruthlessly pragmatic recapitulation devices, the purest instances of clarifying *deixis* in Elizabethan and Jacobean plays, including Webster's, occur when characters are introduced. Most main characters, when they first appear on stage (and even on the second or third re-entry, as a measure of positive redundancy), are presented in a transparently utilitarian way.¹³ While these constant reminders of characters' names and their position within the fictional frame might be slightly superfluous in the eyes of lay readers who benefit from having the name of the characters always visible, first playhouse audiences—who had to negotiate a full cast of new personae (in addition to the possibility of a single actor performing more than one part)—would have welcomed these referential snippets. However, these constant artificial deictic presentations clashed with the English theatre's slow shift toward a more verisimilar form of theatre, for which—I would argue—the plays for the indoor public playhouses provide the clearest evidence. One can interpret the introduction of characters in Webster's *The Devil's Law-Case*, where the dramatist does not always cue in the main characters as transparently as he does in the other two plays, as proof of this development. At several points the playwright mitigates the effect of an artificial introduction by introducing the unknown character to a third-party member with whom they were not already acquainted. He also presents some characters fragmentarily: establishing a reference

¹³ *The White Devil*: Brachiano (1.2.2-5), Camilo (1.2.48), Vittoria (1.2.114), Giovanni (2.1.95-97); *The Duchess of Malfi*: Bosola (1.1.22), Cardinal (1.1.28) Ferdinand (1.2.5), Cardinal and Duchess (1.2.66), Bosola (1.2.148). It is worth mentioning that in both plays, but especially in *The Duchess of Malfi*, Webster casts these verbal pointers in a formulaic fashion, even if the character is re-entering the stage for a second or third time: 'Here comes ___', 'Here is ___' and similar variants.

point becomes a puzzle game for the audience, who have to put the pieces together and in the right order (name, profession, reason for being in Naples, reason for being in disguise, etc.).¹⁴ If Pfister discusses the differences between ‘isolated’ and ‘integrated expositions’ at the beginning of plays (Pfister 1988, 87-88), what Webster does in *The Devil’s Law-Case* is something analogous: he hides the deictic code, the pragmatic pointer, within the fabric of the plot through an ‘integrated introduction’. With this in mind, the question is whether the performance conditions of the indoor theatre—combined with the (in theory) better understanding of a more educated audience—did not require the playwright to engage in such an overt effort to keep re-establishing the points of reference, and thus enabled Webster to explore new techniques of deictically introducing his characters. And, if so, is it possible Webster could have also extrapolated this idea to other aspects of the play, leading him to find new, less deictically explicit ways of presenting his plots?

3. THE PLAYHOUSE EFFECT

Along with knowing that he had to deploy verbal pointers throughout the script as the conventional way of ensuring a minimal understanding of the play, Webster must have also been aware that one of the cardinal rules of early modern theatre, whether it was for a performance in an open-air amphitheatre or an indoor playhouse, was “that the audience should always be kept in the know all the time” (Dutton 1983, 105).¹⁵ Or, at least, that the audience should know more than the characters themselves do, enjoying a level of ‘superior awareness’ and acting as a sort of omniscient witness and judge of the story.¹⁶ It is very rare to encounter plays in which the dramatist takes the audience by surprise. While discussing Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*, Gotthold Lessing provides one of the most honest explanations as to why this is the case:

It is true, our surprise is greater if we do not discover with complete certainty that Aegisthus is Aegisthus before Merope discovers it herself. But the enjoyment gained from surprise is so thin! And why should a poet need to surprise us? May he surprise his characters as much as he wishes; we for our part know what to take even if we have foreseen the events that will befall them long before they do themselves (quoted in Pfister 1988, 51).

¹⁴ *The Devil’s Law-Case*: Crispiano, Julio, Ariosto and Romelio (2.1), Angiolella (5.1).

¹⁵ When he wrote these words, Richard Dutton was discussing Ben Jonson’s *Epicoene*, in which the playwright surprises the audience by having the cross-dressed boy actor (who was supposedly female) end up actually being a boy.

¹⁶ The terms ‘superior’, ‘inferior’ and ‘congruent awareness’ are codified by Pfister, who explains that in “the corpus of existing dramatic texts that stretches from classical antiquity to the present day, the quantitative bias in the discrepant levels of awareness has almost always been in favour of the audience rather than the dramatic characters” (Pfister 1988, 51).

This unspoken convention has been present since ancient times, although it is true that one sees more pronounced deviations from this rule in more contemporary and experimental works. In Elizabethan and Jacobean playhouses, a theatregoer would have been accustomed to playing the role of the omniscient overviewer, who not only knows what is happening everywhere but also what the characters' future intentions are. Very often characters openly discuss, whether alone in a soliloquy or with another character, the next steps they plan on taking, which enables the playgoer to identify the psychological process behind an action or a word and judge the characters' probable success or failure in achieving their goals. Thus *The White Devil's* Flamineo plans out loud to pretend to be mad—in clear reminiscence of Hamlet's antic disposition speech—in order to “keep off idle questions” about the Duchess's death (3.3.300-307). In *The Duchess of Malfi*, Ferdinand and the Cardinal's conversation after learning of their sister giving birth reveals Ferdinand's intention to kill her husband, her son and possibly the Duchess herself (2.5.62-79).

Webster nevertheless does seem to be ahead of his time, or at least more so than the majority of his contemporaries, when it comes to leaving his audience in a state of suspended ignorance. The two earlier plays, *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*, are much more obscure—in the literal sense of not being clear—than the average play of the period and are not above withholding surprises and plot-twists. In *The White Devil*, Flamineo fakes arranging a triple suicide with Zanche and Vittoria in order to test their loyalty, and when they fire their guns at him the whole audience thinks he is dying. Then suddenly Flamineo rises up from the ground and reveals to them that it was all a deception, with fake bullets, something not expected or hinted at previously anywhere in the text (5.6.117-165). And although this turn of events must have been quite a surprise, it does not compare with the one Webster had reserved for the first audiences of *The Duchess of Malfi*: the discovery of the wax bodies of Antonio and the children. If we are to buy into the suspension of disbelief (and we are meant to, seeing that the Duchess herself believes them to be real), we are not aware that Ferdinand has in fact not murdered Antonio and the children until 53 lines later when the Duke confesses his trick (4.1.109-113).¹⁷ If before we were talking about how Webster uses anaphoric references to recall specific parts of the plot, what he is doing here is explaining the event after it has taken place—in a fashion that would have surely left Lessing quite upset. By doing this, Webster situates the spectators on a level of ‘congruent awareness’ with only some of the characters: the audience knows only as much as the surprised Zanche and Vittoria in *The White Devil*, and as much as Bosola in *The Duchess of Malfi*.

But the most surprising narrative device Webster uses appears in his latest and most avant-garde play, *The Devil's Law-Case*, where he creates a situation whereby the audience knows less than most of the characters, leaving the theatregoer in the uncommon position of ‘inferior awareness’. He achieves this suspense, as one might call it, through the

¹⁷ The stage direction in the 1623 quarto, however, does reveal the truth: “artificial figures of Antonio and his children, appearing as if they were dead” (s.d. 4.1.54). This is just another example of how the dramatic experience differed for the original theatregoers and for the first lay readers of early modern drama.

use of a letter. Letters and similar readable props are always an interesting element to analyse, because—thanks to the occult nature of silent reading—characters often have, unrealistically, to read them aloud so as to not leave the audience in a state of ignorance. Flamineo in *The White Devil* thus reads Francisco's letter out loud to Brachiano (4.2.16-39). *The Duchess of Malfi's* Bosola reads the birth certificate of the Duchess's son out in full in soliloquy, even explaining the Latin dates to the audience (2.3.53-68). Ferdinand later reads the same letter off stage and on entering hands it to the Cardinal, who goes over it silently while Ferdinand continuously curses (2.5.3-11); another audible reading here would be redundant since the previous reading takes place just two scenes before in the same act. On the other hand, in *The Devil's Law-Case* both Ariosto and Contilupo read Leonora's legal brief in silence, and react to it differently but without ever giving away what the document contains (4.1.10-19, 4.1.76-101). In fact, the whole beginning of the fourth act revolves around this legal document, not revealed to the audience until the trial scene when the overly rhetorical lawyer Contilupo finally summarises the law-case.

While it is tempting to congratulate Webster for being such an innovative storyteller, one must not forget that not all three of the plays under discussion here were rewarded with commercial success during his lifetime. Even if as *literati* we can value his finding a way to push the boundaries of current dramatic art, the truth is that in at least one of the three cases he failed as a commercial playwright to provide his audience with what it desired to see and hear. Linking one fact and the other brings us back to the playhouses themselves, not as buildings made out of timber and plaster, but as microcosms of both a physical and a socio-economical dimension. Revisiting Robert Willson's study of Shakespeare's opening scenes one last time, Webster, much like his better-known contemporary, does not resort to a consistent deictic and story-telling formula throughout his plays. The variety of styles in Shakespeare's openings leads Willson to agree with Alfred Harbage in his canonical *Shakespeare's Audience* (1941) that the playgoers at the Globe and Blackfriars theatres were generally attentive, and if ill-read at least comprehending enough to follow intricate dialogue with ease (Willson 1977, 6-8). This postulate goes hand in hand with Mark Bayer's research into the different communities built around Jacobean London theatres: there is a strong possibility that audience distinction was related not only to the type of venue, but also to which social and professional networks the venue served. Webster would, then, not have minded having his *Duchess of Malfi*, with its story-telling innovations, performed in either of the King's Men's theatres since he could count on having an understanding audience in either of them. And when he went back to work for Queen Anne's Men's theatres with his *Devil's Law-Case*, he did so knowing that his play could be performed in the Phoenix-Cockpit, which had a theatregoing make-up similar to that of the Blackfriars collective (Bayer 2011, 87).¹⁸ What we can assume is that he

¹⁸ For a recent exploration of the relationship between the two King's Men's playhouses from a socio-cultural perspective see Dustagheer 2017.

was in no hurry to have any of his plays performed at the “open and black stage” of the ‘ass’-frequented Red Bull playhouse. In other words, a playwright such as Webster may have been fortunate enough to be able to choose an audience or a theatre he knew well, rather than having to adjust to a different setting with which he was less comfortable.

In conclusion, it seems not only possible but likely that the different staging conditions and other characteristics of the London playhouses affected the way dramatists wrote their plays from a practical point of view. That is, if one can extrapolate from the Webster case study, not only did the playhouse determine *which* story was to be told, but also to a certain degree *how* it should be told. In plays conceived for the open-air amphitheatres, which hosted a larger and more socially diverse crowd, the playwright had to address the diverse needs of the different theatregoing strata in a single inclusive style. When writing with the smaller indoor playhouses in mind, the playwright could push the boundaries of story-telling a little further thanks to the easier intelligibility of texts on the more intimate stage as well as the alleged greater acceptance the upper-class audiences had toward unconventional and more complex theatrical formulas. The Globe, if understood as the intersection of the two extremes, as Harbage (1941) and Willson (1977) suggest, may have also been partially responsible for some of the period’s dramatic innovations.

This is what I have named the ‘playhouse effect’, a pun playing on the much more serious yet equally gradual changes taking place in our ecosystem. Much like the greenhouse effect is altering the world in an immediately imperceptible yet eventually undeniable way, a variation in the theatrical environment must have disturbed the prior order of things, even if it only showed itself in small, faint flares. This, in the long run, would lead to very different conditions of production, and ultimately to a very different product: one that no longer caters to spectators in need of recapitulation devices and other clarifiers because we either know the literature beforehand, or because we have been educated to thrive on the unknown. If there is any reason for us to envy Webster’s original audiences it is that not a single line of his would have gone to waste.

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David J. Amelang is Assistant Professor in English Literature at the Department of English Studies of the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid. He also currently serves on the board of directors of the Madrid Institute for Advanced Study (MIAS) and of the Spanish and Portuguese Society for English Renaissance Studies (SEDERI). His research focuses on early modern European drama, and more specifically on the comparison between the plays and theatrical cultures of Shakespearean England and Golden Age Spain.