

LEANTIO AS AN OUTSIDER IN MIDDLETON'S *WOMEN BEWARE WOMEN*: TEXT AND PERFORMANCE

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I

There is a tendency to praise Middleton's insight into female psychology, particularly as shown in *The Changeling* and *Women Beware Women*, and some recent criticism has been considerably perceptive in this respect¹. However, it must be conceded that, as far as *Women Beware Women* is concerned, the character of Leantio is crucial: not only is he the most rounded portrait in the play, but his being an outsider in his new environment affects his behaviour and the action of the tragedy to an extent that has not always been sufficiently stressed. In this paper, a reappraisal of Leantio's rôle will be attempted, both by high-lighting some features that have been either played down or not always acknowledged, and by considering the stage conception and presentation of Leantio in the two most outstanding revivals of the play in the last twenty-five years.

II

As is well known, the main plot of *Women Beware Women* derives from Malespini's story of Bianca Capello and Pietro Buonaventura in *Ducento Novelle* (1609). According to the narrative, a bank-cashier (Pietro) eloped with a young Venetian noblewoman (Bianca), with whom he had been having sexual relations for some time. They went to live in his house in Florence, where Bianca had to perform the lowliest household tasks. Later on, Bianca became the mistress of the Duke of Florence, and Pietro, who strongly resented this indignity, started

¹ See, for example, Putt, S. Gorley: *The Golden Age of English Drama* (Cambridge, D.S. Brewer, 1981), pp. 112-27.

to have various love affairs. His liaison with the widow Cassandra Buognani proved disastrous, as Pietro boasted publicly about it, and this eventually led to his murder.

Drawing on these facts, Middleton gave the play an atypical approach. The psychological realism displayed in *Women Beware Women* was remarkable for his age, and, unlike his fellow-playwrights, he took great pains to reveal the influence of environment on human behaviour—in such a way that he has been said to anticipate modern naturalistic drama. In the first scenes, Middleton shows how a mercantile, lower-middle class milieu can shape the minds and attitudes of two specific characters: Leantio (the Pietro of Malespini's story) and his mother. But courtly life is presented as the more fearful and devastating environment: one dominated by hypocrisy, cynicism and irresistible corruption in which «Sin tastes at the first draught like wormwood water,/ But drunk again, 'tis nectar ever after» (II.ii.476-7)².

In *Women Beware Women* Middleton emphasises the imbalance brought about by the elopement: the meagre income of a poor «factor»—a commoner—like Leantio will not be able to meet the demands of a noblewoman who grew up in a wealthy household and is accustomed to luxuries. Whether this is Leantio's «tragic fault», as R.H. Barker calls it³, or a breach in a rigid class-system, the situation is serious enough, because Bianca does not belong to the shabby milieu where her marriage has placed her, so when the occasion arises, she will yield and let herself be seduced by the wealthier and stronger man. She is thus carried back to the society from which Leantio stole her, and, to make up for the deprivation, Leantio will be both offered a job by the Duke and seduced by a rich widow (Livia). The position is now reversed: Leantio, the poor factor, has entered a new environment and is now the stranger—a key-word in the play, as R.B. Parker has pointed out⁴.

The first scene has been developed by Middleton in order, among other things, to present Leantio as a characteristic product of the mercantile lower-middle class. To begin with, he refers to his wife as «the most unvalued'st purchase» (I.i.12), and as «that treasure» (I.i.14), and soon afterwards admits that he has committed a «theft», but deceives himself by believing that theft can be «noble» (I.i.37). The same basic imagery of mercantile acquisitiveness is found later in the scene, when he refers to Bianca as «a most matchless jewel» (I.i.162), and «a gem» (I.i.171), and thinks of her in terms of «treasures» to be kept away from thieves (I.i.166), lest they should steal his «wealth» (I.i.167). Besides, Leantio makes it clear that he is obsessed with sex, both in general terms and as regards his relationship with Bianca. His first speech shows his excitement on arriving home with Bianca, and maybe it is for this reason that he talks so much and tends to use clichés:

² All references to the play are to Middleton, Thomas: *Women Beware Women*, ed. J.R. Mulryne, The Revels Plays (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1975).

³ Barker, R.H.: *Thomas Middleton* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1958), p. 132.

⁴ See Parker, R.B.: «Middleton's Experiments with Comedy and Judgment», in *Jacobean Theatre*, eds. J.R. Brown & B.A. Harris, Stratford-upon-Avon Studies, I (London, Edward Arnold, 1960), pp. 179-99.

Which is a fearful living, and a poor one,
 Let a man truly think on 't.
 To have the toil and griefs of fourscore years
 Put up in a white sheet, tied with two knots -
 Methinks it should strike earthquakes in adulterers,
 When e'en the very sheets they commit sin in
 May prove, for ought they know, all their last garments.

(I.i.18-24)

What is curious about Leantio's platitudinous comments is the sort of sexual feeling they betray:

I find no wish in me bent sinfully
 To this man's sister, or to that man's wife.

(I.i.28-9)

As T.B. Tomlinson has remarked, «why on earth *should* he feel the need for anyone else's wife on such an occasion?»⁵. But it is towards the end of the scene when Leantio is somewhat more explicit about the nature of his love:

This day and night I'll know no other business
 But her and her dear welcome. 'Tis a bitterness
 To think upon tomorrow: that I must
 Leave her still to the sweet hopes of the week's end
 That pleasure should be so restrained and curbed...

(I.i.153-7)

And his feelings will be fully explicit in I.iii, in which it is clear that, after several days, Leantio cannot tear himself away from his wife to go off on a business journey: «'Tis e'en a second hell to part from pleasure / When a man has got a smack on 't» (I.iii.5-6). And when asked by Bianca to stay one more night, he answers:

Alas I'm in for twenty if I stay,
 And then for forty more: I have such luck to flesh
 I never bought a horse but he bore double.
 If I stay any longer I shall turn
 An everlasting spendthrift.

(I.i.50-4)

It is surprising that some critics refuse to see the true nature of Leantio's attraction for Bianca —and vice versa—, and tend to see in it a kind of idealistic and romantic love⁶. Others, like Schoenbaum⁷, Barker⁸, Ricks⁹, Ribner¹⁰,

⁵ Tomlinson, T.B.: *A Study of Elizabethan and Jacobean Tragedy* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1964), p. 168.

⁶ See Krook, Dorothea: «Tragedy and Satire in Middleton's *Women Beware Women*», in *Studies in English Language and Literature*, eds. Alice Shalvi & A.A. Mendilow (Jerusalem, The Hebrew Press, 1966), pp. 96-120. See also Brodwin, Leonora Leet: *Elizabethan Love Tragedy, 1587-1625* (London, University of London Press, 1972), especially p. 320.

Holmes¹¹, and Mulryne¹² see how Leantio's «love» is absolutely dominated by lust and materialistic motives. At the same time, Leantio thinks that he has nothing to fear as regards his «theft» after having married Bianca: «and I have my pardon for 't; / 'Tis sealed from heaven by marriage» (I.i.44-5). His words seem to imply that his having married Bianca places him in a class apart from those who indulge their sexual appetite outside marriage, and therefore, reinforce the materialism with which he is presented. But perhaps the most disconcerting feature of this character is the seeming inconsistency deriving from his adherence to specific bourgeois values —e.g., commercial prudence— and his self-congratulatory attitudes. Before introducing Bianca to his mother he gives a first glimpse of his character by considering himself as rascally:

and I know it is

The fortune commonly of knavish children
To have the loving'st mothers.

(I.i.9-11)

This, of course, could be self-deceptive in that it is not exactly what he knows himself to be, but what he would like to be. This impression is confirmed soon afterwards when he shows his excitement about his «theft», and refers to it as «my masterpiece» (I.i.41) and as «the best piece of theft / That ever was committed» (I.i.43-4). He seems to be thinking something like «How clever I am!», and he also wants to be clever by trying to dispel his mother's ominous misgivings about Bianca's insecure position in the poor and shabby milieu:

Speak low, sweet Mother; you are able to spoil as many
As come within the hearing; if it be not
Your fortune to mar all, I have much marvel.
I pray do not you teach her to rebel
When she's in a good way to obedience;

(I.i.71-5)

But, at the same time, there are practical limitations to what Leantio can plan and do that make him appear a rather pathetic figure, as when, in spite of his amorous appetites, he reflects:

Fondness is but the idiot to affection,
That plays at hot-cockles with rich merchants' wives-

⁷ Schoenbaum, Samuel: *Middleton's Tragedies: A Critical Study* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1955), p. 116.

⁸ Barker, R.H.: *Op. cit.*, p. 132.

⁹ Ricks, Christopher: «Wordplay in *Women Beware Women*», *Review of English Studies*, n.s. xii, 1961, p. 239.

¹⁰ Ribner, Irving: *Jacobean Tragedy: The Quest for Moral Order* (London, Methuen, 1961), pp. 142-3.

¹¹ Holmes, David M.: *The Art of Thomas Middleton* (London, Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 167.

¹² Introduction to *Women Beware Women*, ed. cit., pp. lxiii-iv.

Good to make sport withal when the chest's full,
And the long warehouse cracks.

(I.iii.24-7)

And, a few lines later: «But love that's wanton must be ruled awhile / By that that's careful, or all goes to ruin (I.iii.41-2). This seeming contradiction between his fatuity, on the one hand, and the pull of commercial prudence, on the other, is an important achievement in Middleton's depiction of the character and mentality of Leantio, because it is crucial for an understanding of the moral psychology of the mediocre bourgeois mind, and also because the insecurity it reveals carries the seeds of Leantio's irresponsibility and ultimate destruction.

Having established Leantio's mind and his bourgeois mercantile milieu, Middleton's next step will be to present Leantio's disillusion with marriage (III.ii.190-3), and his first glimpse into the possible consequences of his «theft» (III.ii.219). Of course, this glimpse is only a stepping stone towards his entrance into the courtly world as an outsider and his behaviour as such. The first feature he shows is his powerlessness before the Duke. In an extremely controlled way, Middleton has presented Leantio being given a shabby sinecure by the same man who has deprived him of his wife and who now cynically wants to keep him quiet. There is nothing Leantio can say or do, but humbly accept the captainship and be grateful for it. All he can hope for now is preferment based on «sin», as a «sallet growing upon a dunghill» (III.iii.51). But there is another type of preferment he does not reckon with: the one resulting from becoming Livia's lover, the benefits of which are going to be enjoyed immediately. Commencing by basing her seduction of Leantio on a mixture of «love / And pity to a man» (III.iii.-61-2)¹³, Livia ends up by fully revealing the carnal nature of her «love» (III.iii.263), and by making him what we nowadays would call her gigolo. Livia already counts on Leantio's weak position, and particularly on his restlessness and insecurity. In other words, she is «a masterly seducer because she knows her victims far better than they know themselves»¹⁴.

From Leantio's viewpoint, the seduction involves another step in his degradation, as he will not be reconciled to his fate, and will consider his newly achieved position as a kind of revenge. Furthermore, if this «revenge» underlines his vulgarity and inadequacy, as we already found in the first scenes, at the same time it suggests «an attempt to live a more sophisticated life, to 'keep up with' Bianca»¹⁵. It is important to point out, in this respect, that if Leantio becomes an outsider in the courtly environment through the captainship the Duke gave him, he will be even more of an outsider on becoming Livia's lover, as this entails the

¹³ That pity is one of the ingredients of Livia's falling in love with Leantio is, I think, an interesting insight into the female mind on the part of Middleton. Livia says later to Leantio: «Thou art too good and pitiful to woman» (III.iii.289).

¹⁴ Ornstein, Robert: *The Moral Vision of Jacobean Tragedy* (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1965), p. 193.

¹⁵ Brooke, Nicholas: *Horrid Laughter in Jacobean Tragedy* (London, Open Books, 1979), p. 104.

enjoyment of costly goods he would not have imagined in his previous life. The question that Middleton is going to answer next is this: Will Leantio prove equal to the new position? When first analysing the character of Leantio, I suggested that there was an element of irresponsibility in him which, I think, becomes evident in the confrontation scene with Bianca. What Middleton stresses is the extent to which one's milieu conditions one's attitudes to life and behaviour, and, therefore, the impossibility for a lower-middle class, mercantile-minded young man like Leantio to integrate into the aristocratic world, unless he is capable of assimilating its mores and values. Unlike him, Bianca, who has been carried back to the kind of society from which she was stolen, will be at ease with its ways, not least because she has also broken her moral ties and become a complete cynic. Leantio will try, but not be able, to become a cynic because he does not have enough self-control to keep up appearances as the members of the courtly world customarily do. In the first place, he shows that he cannot keep away from Bianca —«I long to see how my despiser looks» (IV.i.41)—, and then begins his interview in a way resembling a tense comedy of manners. But when Bianca suggests they had better keep apart —«We both thrive best asunder» (IV.i.61)—, Leantio is no longer able to play his part, and breaks out in a fit of resentment. He, the weaker of the two, tries to be the stronger by committing a fatal mistake: to reveal to Bianca the nature of his relationship with Livia in an irresponsible attempt to be, at least, Bianca's equal, even if this implies equality in baseness. Middleton, who has worked out the effects of Leantio's being an outsider in a courtly environment, will now work out the consequences of his mistake. On the face of it, it would appear that Leantio's death at the hands of Livia's brother is a question of honour, a typical motif in European 17th-century drama. A closer look, however, reveals that both the Duke and Hippolito are more concerned with reputation than with true honour -i.e., honour matters only in terms of appearance. The Duke persuades Hippolito to take revenge against Leantio, because he is «an impudent boaster» who «tells the midday sun what's done in darkness» (IV.i.152). And Hippolito reasons with himself thus:

Art, silence, closeness, subtlety, and darkness
 Are fit for such a business; but there's no pity
 To be bestowed on an apparent sinner,
 An impudent daylight lecher.

(IV.ii.7-10)

Another playwright would be content with this, but for Middleton there are also further considerations. The Duke points out to Hippolito that his sister is wasting her wealth (IV.i.153), and tells him that he has «picked out / A worthy match for her, the great Vincentio» (IV.i.157-8). Without having yet revealed the identity of the «abuser», the Duke's words imply that the «unworthiness» of Livia's lover is grounded on class difference. The following exchange clearly confirms this first suggestion:

Hip. Know you the name, my lord,
 Of her abuser?

Duke. One Leantio.
 Hip. He's a factor.
 Duke. He ne'er made so brave a voyage
 By his own talk.
 Hip. The poor old widow's son;
 I humbly take my leave.

(IV.I.161-5)

Bianca herself, at the end of the confrontation scene, had also shown her own class-consciousness:

His breath has made me almost sick in troth.
 A poor base start-up! Life! Because 'has got
 Fair clothes by foul means, comes to rail, and show 'em.

(IV.i.109-11)

And later, just before Hippolito's revenge, he is considering Livia's «advancement» with Lord Vincentio, and finishes his thoughts with:

I love her good so dearly, that no brother
 Shall venture farther for a sister's glory,
 Than I for her preferment.

(IV.ii.17-9)

Middleton shows how what would appear to be a question of honour is considered basically in terms of wealth and material advantage. But one could also argue that the reactions of the Duke and Hippolito actually conceal a very specific attitude: Leantio could be allowed to go on enjoying Livia if she so wished, but what would be unforgivable is Leantio's open boastfulness, because in the public eye this could be thought of as a kind of victory of a simple poor commoner over a member of the aristocracy. If this were so, one must concede that Middleton's insight into matter of class-consciousness was very remarkable indeed, and that in the delineation of the character and development of Leantio, he went much further than any of his contemporaries.

III

Women Beware Women has been professionally staged twice by the RSC. The first of these productions, in 1962, directed by Anthony Page, tried to bring out the «naturalistic» elements of the play. According to one reviewer, the production made Middleton appear as a kind of «Jacobean Tennessee Williams, dwelling on mankind as the victim of its own desires»¹⁶. Another reviewer pointed out the flat delivery of the verse: Nicol Williamson (Leantio) «does not attempt that resonant verse-speaker's voice which makes so many such revivals

¹⁶ Samuel, Graham: «A Jacobean Tennessee Williams», *Western Mail* (Cardiff), 7th July 1962.

sound like a poetry reading on the Third»¹⁷, which obviously fits with the type of unrheterical verse Middleton devised for this play, and with the conception of the production. But perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of the revival was the way in which Leantio's death was staged. According to Kenneth Tynan, «you know from the panicky way in which he fumbles and flinches that this is the first time he has ever wielded the expensive sword that hangs at his waist; he grips the hilt with both hands, and looks stupid as he is spitted, dying not comically or tragically, but in a state of bewildered unbelief, which must be how people die»¹⁸. Tynan, however, does not mention one important incident in the production that takes place before the duel proper: Leantio runs away from Hippolito. Before the stage direction (*They fight*), the prompt-book points to the following significant notes: «Lea. runs DL to UL, Hip. R to UL to block his exit with a sword», and «Hipp. UL forces Lea. at the point of sword to R»¹⁹. Thus the appearance of cowardice rounds off the picture of Leantio's psychological and sociological limitations.

The 1969 revival, directed by Terry Hands, seems to have been done in the grand classical manner in an attempt at coherence, with a particular view to integrating the final scene into an articulated whole. One of the most perceptive reviewers, Irving Wardle, said that the symbolic chessboard stage under a vast nude, reminiscent of the Palazzo Signoria where the play takes place, underlines the «powerlessness of Leantio to resist the Duke, driven home by the full spectacle of Renaissance ceremony», but, at the same time, he said that in the production there was «little sense of the humiliating social gulf between him and his betters»²⁰. Another reviewer said that Richard Pasco, who played Leantio in the production, «gives him the dignity of middle-class virtues»²¹, which suggests that the director conceived of Leantio in a sympathetic way, perhaps as the inevitable result of a comprehensive classical view of the play engulfing and concealing its «naturalistic» side.

IV

In the preceding pages I have endeavoured to demonstrate the importance of the character and development of Leantio in *Women Beware Women*, and to show that Middleton, in his «indifference to the ideal in human nature»²², does not make an exception in the case of Leantio. He presents him as an inevitable product and victim of a lower-middle class commercial environment, and makes

¹⁷ Brien, Alan: «Matter of Life and Death», *Sunday Telegraph*, 8th July 1962.

¹⁸ Tynan, Kenneth: «Dusting Off the Minor Jacobean», *The Observer Weekend Review*, July 8th 1962.

¹⁹ Prompt-book for the 1962 production, kept at the Shakespeare Centre, Stratford-upon-Avon.

²⁰ Wardle, Irving: «Middleton's Revival after 7 Years», *The Times (The Arts)*, 4th July 1969.

²¹ Jones, D.A.N.: «Corruption», *The Listener*, 10th July 1969.

²² Ornstein, Robert: *Op. cit.*, p. 199.

him vulgar, venal, cliché-ridden, mercantile-minded and... irresponsible. When he is transferred to an aristocratic milieu, he will prove to be an outsider incapable of conforming to the hypocritical-sophisticated customs and mores of that society. When he irresponsibly tries to be a cynic in an attempt to «keep up with» the cynical Bianca, he actually signs his own death-warrant. In this respect I have also aimed to show how Middleton does not make Leantio's death a question of honour, despite what the characters say, but rather a matter of reputation and class-consciousness.

There is always a great temptation to think of *Women Beware Women* as a «realistic» play, and to place Middleton alongside Ibsen, Chekhov and Tennessee Williams. Those who see it in this way tend, I think, to judge the whole of the play on the basis of only some of its elements. That the «realistic» elements are crucial is undeniable, but, considering the nature of drama and the theatre in Middleton's time, one should not overlook others that make up the framework of the play: Irving Ribner has pointed to the element of ritual²³, and R.H. Barker has referred to the non-realistic quality of *Women Beware Women*, especially considering the «pageantry and dancing» of the last scene, in which «drama yields to something like ballet with distinct overtones of symbolism»²⁴. And with regard to the plot itself, Irving Wardle, summarising it in his review of the 1969 production, said: «With its snake-pit contortions of rape and incest leading to a revenge finale featuring for kinds of poison and a Jacobean elephant-trap, I too had qualms over the word 'realism'»²⁵. In conclusion, *Women Beware Women* is not an absolutely clear-cut play, and, therefore, any production of it may tend to emphasise one of the above-mentioned qualities at the expense of others, as happened with the productions commented upon above. This has obvious implications for the stage conception of Leantio: a «realistic» production will bring out his psychological and sociological limitations, and devise non-textual action to underline them, but it will also run the risk of offering a distorted view of the whole play, as seems to have happened in the 1962 revival. On the other hand, a «non-realistic» production, one that aims at presenting a coherent framework in which the last act fits adequately, runs the risk of playing down or even overlooking the psychological and sociological component in the character of Leantio, as seems to have been the case with the 1969 production. If my conclusions are correct, then we could well do with a third production of the play that reconciles both the realistic and non-realistic elements, and harmonically unites the best qualities of the two previous productions.



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²³ Ribner, Irving: *Op. cit.*, p. 139.

²⁴ Barker, R.H.: *Op. cit.*, pp. 143 and 144.

²⁵ Wardle, Irving: «Resounding Jacobean Flops», *The Times*, 12th July 1969.