An Allusion in Webster

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MISCELLANEOUS NOTES.

AN ALLUSION IN WEBSTER.

AN interesting and suggestive reference made by Vittoria in her 'Arraignment' appears to have puzzled editors. With one consent they propose to tamper with the following passage in *The White Devil*, 1612, sig. E 4 (III, ii, 129—139 in Professor Sampson's edition):

Vit. 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 to the point.
Find mee but guilty, seuer head from body:
Weele part good frindes: I scorne to hould my life.
at yours or any mans intreaty, Sir,
Eng. Emb. She hath a braue spirit.

Except for some obvious errors of punctuation, the speech needs no correcting. But in the sixth line Mitford proposed, most unwarrantably, to substitute 'Portia' for 'Perseus'; it is not clear whether he read 'Portia' or 'Portia's,' but in the one form or the other scholars have welcomed this undesirable alien. Professor Sampson, who does not disturb the text at random, adopts 'Portia's,' and dismisses the original reading as 'obviously wrong.' On the contrary it is demonstrably right. It is an allusion to contemporary literature. In Jonson's *Masque of Queenes*, acted and first published in 1609, 'Heroique Vertue,' played by an actor in the dress of Perseus, is a prominent character. Jonson describes the appearance of the twelve masquers seated on a pyramid of light in the House of Fame,—'From whom a Person, by this time descended, in the furniture of *Perseus*, and expressing *heroique*, and *masculine Vertue*, began to speake' (Quarto,

1609, sig. D 2). The speech follows with a marginal note added to the opening lines :

'The Antients expressed a braue and masculine *Vertue* in three figures. (Of *Hercules*, *Perseus*, and *Bellerophon*.) Of which we choose that of *Perseus*, arm'd as wee haue describ'd him; out of *Hesiod. Scuto. Herc.* See *Apollodor*, the Gram-marian. *lib. 2. de Perseo.*'

The character, it should be noted, is not called 'Perseus'; it is 'Heroique Vertue' as typified by Perseus, wearing his attributes of the winged sandals, the cap of darkness, and the crooked sword. Webster's reference is therefore very explicit. He paid his famous tribute to contemporary playwrights in the preface to *The White Diuel*, and eulogised 'the labor'd and vnderstanding workes of Maister *Johnson*.' There is some irony in the fact that scholars have overlooked the laboured and understanding reference. But, when once pointed out, it is obvious and may be added to the group of allusions from which Professor Sampson deduces the probable date of the play.

Mr Charles Crawford has pointed to conclusive evidence that Webster was familiar with Jonson's masque. The 'doctrine of some great Inquisitors in Nature' that every royal or heroic form partakes of the heavenly virtue was borrowed by Jonson from Spenser and applied to Prince Henry in the dedication. Webster appropriated it almost verbally when celebrating the dead prince in *A Monumental Columne*, 1613, sig. A verso; the passage begins,

Some great inquisitors in nature say.

That Jonson, who disapproved of Spenser's style but 'would have him read for his matter,' should draw freely on his philosophy and with the help of Seneca's 'rerum naturae inquisitor' at once express and limit the acknowledgement, was very natural; but Webster's reborrowing is so curious as to suggest that he did not know the ultimate source of Jonson's inspiration.

PERCY SIMPSON.

THE WORD 'MOILLERE' IN 'PIERS THE PLOWMAN.'

It may be worth while to point out that the explanation of this word as meaning 'woman, wife,' given in my edition of Stratmann and in the glossary and notes to Prof. Skeat's editions of *Piers the Plowman*, is altogether wrong. The sense in all the instances is that of the well-known law term *mulier*, 'legitimate child,' 'person born in wedlock,'