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978-0-521-03332-9 - The Works of John Webster: An Old-Spelling Critical Edition,
Volume One - The White Devil the Duchess of Malfi

Edited by David Gunby and David Carnegie

Excerpt

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GENERAL INTRODUCTIONS



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The life of John Webster

‘John Webster Merchant-Taylor’: so the dramatist styles himself on the title-page of *Monuments of Honour*, the pageant he wrote for the Merchant Taylors’ Company in 1624 to celebrate the election of John Gore, one of their number, as Lord Mayor. In the dedicatory letter Webster adds that he was ‘borne free of your Company’, a phrase implying what we now know: that his father was a member of the Guild and that John Webster, as his eldest son, was entitled to take out full membership of the fraternity by patrimony, which he did in 1615. The Merchant Taylors were to loom large in his life.

Webster’s father, John Webster the elder, was born about 1550, probably in London, and perhaps in the parish of St Sepulchre’s where he was to spend his entire working life. On 10 December 1571, he was made free of the Merchant Taylors’ Company. Despite this membership, however, John Webster had trained as a coach and wagon maker. For at this time the coachmakers had no company of their own, and hence sought membership in others with which they felt some community of interest. As Mary Edmond has remarked, ‘there was . . . a close and obvious connection between tailors, who made trappings for funerals, plays and pageants, and the men who provided hearses for coffins and vehicles to transport the players’ baggage’.¹

By the sixteenth century, the streets adjoining the livestock market of Smithfield, to the northwest of London, just beyond the city walls, had become the centre of ancillary trades such as wagonmaking, and it was there, in Cow Lane, that John Webster the elder set up shop and, on premises which served both as workplace and home, built and hired out wagons and coaches.² His choice of craft was a singularly fortunate one, for the seventy years or so following the building of the first coach in England, in 1555, saw a phenomenal growth in the number of coaches in London. In 1624 John Taylor, the water poet, wrote that ‘your Coach-makers trade is the most gainefullest about the Towne’,³ and the elder John Webster certainly built up a prosperous business. One piece of evidence for this is the thirteen apprentices recorded as having been presented and made free by Webster. These apprentices (who included Webster’s younger son, Edward, made free of the Company on 3

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February 1611) came from all over England, and indicate both the size of John Webster's business and his standing.⁴ Another indication is found in the lay subsidy rolls, preserved at the Public Record Office, which in 1597–9 assessed him at £12 (higher than almost anyone else in the parish) and tax of 32 shillings. Likewise in 1614 we find a friend and neighbour, Thomas Andrewe, bequeathing £5 'vnto all the howsehold men seruaunts and apprentices of the said Iohn Webster thelder'. By then, clearly, the coachbuilder presided over a large household.⁵

On 4 November 1577 John Webster senior married, at St Giles' Cripplegate, Elizabeth, daughter of Thomas Coates, blacksmith.⁶ The parish records of St Sepulchre's having perished in the Great Fire of 1666, we have no precise details of the number of the Websters' children, their names, or their dates of birth, but that John Webster the younger, as he is referred to in documents of the time, was the eldest son is strongly suggested by the fact that he was given his father's Christian name. Since we cannot be sure that he was the first born, however, it is unwise to offer as the date of his birth anything more specific than 1578–80. Edward, his brother, seems to have been at least ten years his junior, born c.1590–1. No other sons are known, but that there were daughters born to John and Elizabeth Webster is very likely. Thomas Andrewe, the friend and neighbour of the Websters whose bequest to the latter's servants has already been mentioned, left twenty shillings each to 'Margery Webster and to hir two sisters', and it seems reasonable to assume that they were the dramatist's siblings.⁷

Of John Webster the younger's upbringing and education we know little, but can assume a good deal. John Webster senior was literate, though his wife was not,⁸ and though the incomplete nature of the records prior to 1611 makes it impossible to be certain, their sons presumably attended the Merchant Taylors' School. As M. C. Bradbrook observes, 'it would have been an act not merely of eccentricity but of ostracism for a member of the company to send his child anywhere else'.⁹

Founded in 1561, the Merchant Taylors' School rapidly became, through the genius of its first Master, Richard Mulcaster, one of the most notable in England. Mulcaster had a breadth and depth of educational vision which set him apart from most of his contemporaries, and he and his immediate successors gave boys in the latter part of the sixteenth century an education incomparable in its coherence and purposefulness. Mulcaster's aims were to nurture the whole child in two ways, 'the one whereof is knowledge, to encrease vnderstanding, the other is behauiour

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to enlarge vertew'.¹⁰ He also believed passionately in the virtues of his native tongue, and in the necessity of grounding instruction in English. When John Webster entered, presumably at the usual age of nine, in 1587–9, he would have been taught first to read and then to write in English, with Latin coming later. Drawing, painting, music-making, and acting were also encouraged, and Mulcaster's boys built up a reputation as a troupe often in demand at court, and at pageants and other civic events. There is reason to assume, therefore, that the dramatist would, like Lodge and Kyd before him, have had his first taste of theatre at the school.¹¹

In normal circumstances, John Webster would have remained at the Merchant Taylors' School until about the age of sixteen or seventeen—i.e. until about 1594–7. But 1592–4 were plague years, and schools, like theatres and other places of public assembly, were closed for lengthy periods. Since John Webster the elder would clearly have been able to afford private tuition for his son, however, we need not assume that the dramatist's education was seriously interrupted, nor adduce truncated schooling in explanation of his (much disputed) deficiencies as a Latin scholar.

If we are capable only of surmise concerning Webster's schooling, we come onto slightly firmer ground with an entry in the records of the Middle Temple, dated 1 August 1598, noting the admission to the Society of '*Magister Johannes Webster nuper de Novo Hospitio generosus, filius et heres apparens Johannis Webster de London generosi*' ['Master John Webster, formerly of the New Inn, gentleman, son, and heir apparent of John Webster of London, gentleman']. Assuming that this entry refers to the dramatist, what might we say about this phase of his life and education? Designed primarily to train the large number of lawyers needed in a fiercely litigious age, the Inns of Court did much more, since other subjects were available from private tutors or academies either within the Inns themselves or nearby. Sir George Buc, who in 1615 described the Inns of Court as 'The Third Vniversity of England', listed among the 'Arts and Sciences Read and Tavght in This Vniversitie', theology, grammar, rhetoric, and poetry; philosophy and logic, music and languages, physic and astronomy, dancing and painting, and, significantly, 'Art Memorative' and 'Art of Reuels'.¹² No doubt many who engaged in these ancillary studies did so in a dilettante fashion, but it was possible to obtain an education in some ways more wide ranging than that then available at Oxford or Cambridge.

Young men might be admitted to the Inns of Court directly from

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school, but usually spent one or two preparatory years in residence at an Inn of Chancery before proceeding to the Inn of Court with which their Inn of Chancery was affiliated. Thus, it may be assumed, having spent the customary one or two years at the New Inn, John Webster, gentleman, entered the Middle Temple in August 1598, aged between eighteen and twenty. It may be that he intended practising law, but it was not uncommon for young men of means to live and study at one of the Inns with no intention of entering the profession. M. C. Bradbrook has suggested, for instance, that John Webster was sent to the Middle Temple 'to qualify him for helping with large mercantile ventures, and for dealing with distinguished customers'. If John Webster the younger ran the office, while his brother Edward, as a qualified coachbuilder, ran the works, John Webster senior would have 'provided fairly for both'.¹³

Such a reason for John Webster's time at the Middle Temple would explain (if office duties subsequently occupied a good deal of his time) how the dramatist made a living, given his slow rate of composition and meagre dramatic output. Fitzjeffrey's famous jibe about 'Crabbed (*Websterio*) | *The Play-wright, Cart-wright*'¹⁴ is generally taken to be a jibe at Webster's family connections, but may allude to the fact that the dramatist was himself actively engaged in the running of the business in Cow Lane. As such it would cut deeper than a mere dig at the poet's origins. Another point, perhaps germane, is Webster's decision (in June 1615) to claim membership of the Merchant Taylors by patrimony. This is customarily, and appropriately, linked with the death of his father sometime between April 1614 and February 1615, when Edward Webster renegotiated a lease on the Cow Lane premises. But there would be added point to the dramatist's application for membership of the Merchant Taylors if he were actively engaged in the running of the business—perhaps even more actively, now that his father was dead.

This, though, is speculation, and it is equally likely that John Webster entered the Middle Temple to study law, found it not to his taste, and deserted it for literature. A fellow member of the Middle Temple who did just this was John Marston, for whose play, *The Malcontent*, Webster was in 1604 to write an Induction and other additions. Taking up residence at the Middle Temple in 1594 or 1595, Marston left in 1606, by which time he was a poet and dramatist with a considerable reputation. His presence must have been a powerful stimulus to writing on the part of others, like John Ford, who entered the Middle Temple in 1602, and Webster, if indeed it was the future dramatist who took up residence

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there in 1598. Whether or not John Webster intended taking up the law, it seems likely, from the knowledge that he displays in his plays and the frequency with which they include trial scenes, that some time, at least, was spent in legal study. Equally, the acridly critical portraits of the lawyer in *The White Devil* and Contilupo and Sanitonella in *The Devil's Law-Case* suggest a disenchantment that may have combined with a taste for literature and the theatre, nurtured at the Merchant Taylors' School and at the Middle Temple, to lead the young Webster away from the law and into the much less lucrative profession of dramatist.

We do not know when Webster began writing for the stage. The first documented evidence is an entry in Henslowe's *Diary* for 22 May 1602, noting a payment of £5 'vnto antoney monday & mihell drayton webester & the Rest mydelton in earneste of A Boocke called sesers ffalle'.¹⁵ A week later a further £3 is paid to 'Thomas dickers drayton mydellton & webester & mondaye in fulle paymente for ther playe called too shapes'.¹⁶ Clearly the entries relate to the same play, now lost, for which 'sesers ffalle' makes the more comprehensible title. Written for the Admiral's Men, it presumably dealt with that popular subject: the life and death of Julius Caesar.

We find further evidence of Webster's early dramatic activity in a series of entries in Henslowe's *Diary* during October and November of 1602. On 15 October Henslowe arranges payment of one shilling 'vnto harey chettell Thomas deckers thomas hewode & m^r smythe & m^r webster in earneste of A playe called Ladey Jane', following this with 'fulle payment' of five pounds ten shillings to the same group six days later and a further five shillings to Dekker alone 'in earneste of the 2 pte of Lady Jane' on 27 October.¹⁷ A week later, on 2 November, Henslowe pays 'Thomas hewode & John webster' £3 'in earneste of A playe called cryssmas comes but once ayeare', this being followed by forty shillings (£2) to 'hareye chettell & thomas deckers in pte of paymente of A playe called cryssmas comes but once A yeare' on 23 November and another forty shillings paid three days later 'at the A poyntment of Thomas hawode . . . harey chettell in fulle paymente of A playe called cryssmas comes but once A yeare'.¹⁸

The inference to be drawn from these entries is that Webster was learning his craft as part of a team in which professionals, like Dekker, Heywood, Chettle, and Munday, took the lead. Given the speed at which the teams were working, and their size, *Caesar's Fall* and *Christmas Comes But Once a Year* were presumably potboilers, but no doubt they,

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like the two parts of *Lady Jane*, which it is generally agreed survive, mangled and compressed, as *Sir Thomas Wyatt*, did a good deal to initiate Webster into writing for the theatre.

How long Webster's apprenticeship as one of 'Henslowe's Hacks' continued we cannot tell, since regular *Diary* entries cease in March 1603. But we have no surviving evidence of dramatic activity until 1604, when Webster was linked with Marston on the title-page of the third edition of *The Malcontent*. Quite what is meant by the words—'Augmented by Marston. | With the Additions played by the Kings | Majesties servants. | Written by Jhon Webster'—has long been debated, but the consensus is now that Webster wrote not only the Induction but also the additional material involving the clown, Passarello.¹⁹ What is significant is that Webster was asked to undertake this work. For the King's Men were the premier company in England, with some of the finest dramatists of the day, including Shakespeare, writing for them. That Webster was chosen for the delicate task of both justifying the 'theft' of *The Malcontent* from the boys' company, the Children of the Chapel Royal, and introducing a play rather different in kind from the fare to which habitués of the Globe were accustomed, speaks for the reputation he must by now have been building.

That reputation was further enhanced, later in 1604, by the appearance of *Westward Ho*, the first of two city comedies written by Dekker and Webster for the Children of Pauls. The appeal of this racy account of London middle-class mores must have been considerable, since it gave rise to a kindred piece by Chapman, Jonson, and Marston—*Eastward Ho*. Clearly capitalizing upon the success of *Westward Ho*—indeed referring to its predecessor in the prologue as 'that which was opposed to ours in title', and praising it as 'good'—*Eastward Ho* is undoubtedly the better play. But both *Westward Ho* and *Northward Ho* (the latter written by Dekker and Webster in 1605, no doubt to build on their earlier success and to cap *Eastward Ho*), were considerable successes, played frequently. With these, and with the publication, in 1607, of *Northward Ho*, *Westward Ho*, and *Sir Thomas Wyatt*, Webster had acquired a certain standing as a dramatist.

After 1607, there is a gap of five years before the appearance of Webster's next play, *The White Devil*. Such a hiatus invites speculation, even though we know, as Webster himself put it, in his address 'To the Reader', 'I was a long time in finishing this Tragedy'. Forker points out that most of Webster's borrowings in the play come from books published in 1608 or earlier, and speculates that Webster was assembling materials for

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his tragedy over the entire five years.²⁰ There also exists another possibility, however, raised by the discovery, at Melbourne Hall, Derbyshire, of a manuscript fragment of a play. Consisting of 144 lines in foul papers on the subject of Alessandro de' Medici, Duke of Florence, known as 'Il Moro', the fragment seems to have had a plot resembling that of James Shirley's *The Traitor*, though the latter's authorship of the Melbourne manuscript, proposed by I. A. Shapiro, has been convincingly rebutted by Hammond and DelVecchio.²¹

The dating and authorship of the Melbourne manuscript are uncertain. The nearest that Hammond and DelVecchio venture to a date is 1600–30. They note, however (p. 21), a likely borrowing from Jonson's *Sejanus* (1605) and observe that all the plays which might be thought to have influenced the writer date from before 1610, concluding that the evidence 'such as it is', 'suggests an earlier rather than a later date for the MS'. Given their conclusion, also, that Webster is more likely to be the author of this fragment than any known Jacobean dramatist, it seems not far-fetched to speculate that, in the five years between *Northward Ho* and *The White Devil*, Webster did some work on a tragedy which he either abandoned or never felt sufficiently happy with to offer for performance, publish, or even acknowledge. Even for a writer as slow as he, there would have been time enough for this before the appearance of *The White Devil*.

If Webster's literary activity during these years is uncertain, we can at least note with certainty significant moments in his personal life. His marriage, on 18 March 1606, took place, not at St Sepulchre's, nor in the parish of his bride, Sara Peniall, but at St Mary's, Islington (then a village outside London). The reason for this, and for the fact that the marriage took place, by special licence, during Lent, is to be found in the fact that less than two months later Sara Webster gave birth to their first child, John, whose baptism was recorded, on 8 May 1606, at St Dunstan-in-the-West, Fleet Street, 'out of Simon Penials sadler'.²²

Seventeen when she married, Sara was the first daughter (presumably, given her naming) of Simon and his wife Sara Coxe. At the time of her birth, in April 1589, the Penialls were living in the parish of St Bride's, Fleet Street, but by the time John Webster would have met her the increasing affluence of Simon Peniall had resulted in a shift to the more fashionable parish of St Dunstan-in-the-West. It was from his grandfather's house there that John and Sara Webster's son John was baptized.

That other children were born to John and Sara Webster is clear from the will of Margery Pate, who in 1617 left twenty shillings each to their

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son John, and to his sisters, Elizabeth and Sara, and forty shillings to 'the rest of Websters Children'.²³ By contrast Edward Webster and his wife, Susan, seem to have had no children, for on their deaths in 1644 and 1645/6 respectively, their considerable property was left to her relatives.²⁴

The White Devil was first performed by Queen Anne's Men at the Red Bull in Clerkenwell, probably early in 1612. Dekker, his longtime associate and collaborator, had wished Webster 'a *Theater* full of very *Muses* themselves to be *Spectators*'.²⁵ How far the audience fell short of this ideal can be deduced from the acerbity of Webster's comment that

most of the people that come to that Play-house, resemble those ignorant asses (who visiting Stationers shoppes their use is not to inquire for good bookes, but new bookes) . . .

('To the Reader', 7–9)

Webster's anger and mortification come through strongly here. Yet however right he was in his estimation of his worth as a dramatist, or of *The White Devil*, he might have pondered his wisdom in offering it to the Queen's Men. For the company catered for a clientele less sophisticated than that of the King's Men, and their repertoire of plays, of which Heywood and Dekker were principal purveyors, was suited to the audience's taste and expectations. To an audience which had perhaps come with expectations of a direct and literal handling of the diabolic, *The White Devil* must have been a puzzle and a disappointment.

Webster probably began work on his second great tragedy, *The Duchess of Malfi*, soon after the completion of *The White Devil*, but (so the close thematic and verbal links between the two, and their shared sources suggest) in November 1612 interrupted work on his new play to write *A Monumental Column*, commemorating the death, on the sixth of that month, of Henry, Prince of Wales. Webster's elegy, published with those of fellow dramatists Heywood and Tourneur, was entered in the Stationers' Register on Christmas Day 1612, and he excuses his 'worthlesse lines' on the grounds that 'I hasted, till I had this tribute paid | Unto his grave' (310–11). Haste may also have been the primary reason for Webster's extensive reuse of material from his half-finished tragedy, but parallels—e.g., between the experiences of Bosola and Webster's account, in the elegy, of 'Sorrow that long had liv'd in banishment, | Tug'd at the oare in Gallies' (162–3)—suggest that perhaps *A Monumental Column* embodies views important to Webster, and given utterance also in *The Duchess of Malfi*.²⁶

We do not know when *The Duchess of Malfi* was completed, or the

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date of the first performance, though it was prior to 16 December 1614, when William Ostler, the first Antonio, died. Significantly, it was to the King's Men that Webster had offered his second tragedy (or perhaps for whom he wrote it; see p. 422). Mindful, no doubt, of the debacle which had attended the production of *The White Devil* at the Red Bull, he ensured that the reception of *The Duchess of Malfi*, by the more sophisticated audience at the Blackfriars and the Globe, would be sympathetic. So, from the first it seems to have been. Despite his comparatively small output, John Webster's reputation was now secure.

Webster's next surviving play, *The Devil's Law-Case*, was probably completed about 1618, but on his own testimony it seems that in the interval there appeared another play, now lost, entitled *Guise*. Lists of printed plays dating from 1656–71 all assign such a play to Webster, though disagreeing as to its genre. But Samuel Sheppard, writing sometime between 1648 and 1654, speaks of Webster's 'three noble tragedies',²⁷ and unless we conclude that he confers such a title on *The Devil's Law-Case* (or on the play in the Melbourne manuscript), it seems safe to assume that the lost work was a tragedy. Knowing that Webster himself linked *Guise* with *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*, we may feel that a work of considerable importance has been lost.

Early in 1614, a few months after his death by poison in the Tower of London, there was published one of the best sellers of Jacobean England, Sir Thomas Overbury's *The Wife*. Later that year a second edition of the poem appeared, together with twenty-two 'Characters' written 'by [Overbury] *himselfe and other learned gentlemen his friends*'. By the eleventh edition, in 1622, these twenty-two characters had become eighty-three, of which fewer than twenty, in all probability, were by Overbury himself, and thirty-two, added in the sixth edition (1615), by Webster. It may be, moreover, that Webster, who (it is generally agreed) edited the sixth edition, also edited four previous editions, for as Forker points out, the unsigned preface to the second, headed '*The Printer to the Reader*', is in tone and style quite like Webster's.²⁸ Forker's further suggestion, that Webster may have acted, in a sense, as Overbury's literary executor, and gathered together the original collection of Characters, then circulating in manuscript, has an air of plausibility, as does his suggestion that Webster had known Overbury since their days at the Middle Temple, which Overbury also entered in 1598.

Though some of Webster's *Characters*, such as 'An Excellent Actor' and 'A Fair and Happy Milkmaid', describe idealized figures, the majority are satiric in tone. This tone persists in *The Devil's Law-Case*,