Pindus Journal Of Culture, Literature, and ELT
ISSN: 2792 – 1883 **Vol 2 No. 5**
https://literature.academicjournal.io

John Webster as a Dark Playwright: a Brief Outline of His Literary Career

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Abstract

This article is dedicated to the literary works of John Webster, one of the prominent playwrights of Jacobean era. We tries to discuss why his writings are so 'dark' and what are the factors, that made him be a 'Senecan playwright'. While scholars have disagreed about the direct influence of Seneca on Elizabethan drama, Janis Lull points out that certainly Elizabethan revenge tragedy shares many conventions with the plays of Seneca, including, as ´the revenge theme, the ghosts, the Play-within-the play, the dumb show, the soliloquy, the declaration and bombast, the emphasis on macabre brutalities, insanity and suicide´ (James E. Ruoff).

Key words:

Jacobean drama, playwright, dark playright, Senecan tragedy, the Duchess, tragedy, eschatology, death, play

Introduction

Even though John Webster's literary works are various in nature, we know very little about his life. '*We only study from the preface to Monuments of Honor(1624), that he was born a freeman of the Merchant Taylors' Company. He was probably a coach maker, and possibly, he was an actor'*[1]. The social profile of John Webster is that of a Londoner. Everything we know about Webster points to a secure position among the city's aristocratic ruling elite social and organizational networks.

His literary career appears to be inconsistent. There are bursts of activity in 1602–5, 1612–17, and 1623–5, with periods of silence in between. Webster's early plays were written in collaboration with other playwrights. The title page of John Marston's *The Malcontent*, published in 1604, states that Webster gave the play's induction and other material. In 1604–05, he collaborated with Thomas Dekker on the city comedies *Westward Ho* and *Northward Ho*. Until his first great tragedy, *The White Devil*, presented by Queen Anne's Men at the Red Bull in approximately 1612, Webster appears to have produced work that is little more dramatic. As Peter Womack declares, there are clear signs that playwriting for him was not just either an expedient or a diversion, but a serious identity[2]. In a preface to *The White Devil*, he refers respectfully to Chapman, Jonson, Beaumont and Fletcher, Shakespeare, Dekker and Heywood, 'wishing that what I write may be read by their light'.

Analysis and Discussion

[1] https://www.britannica.com/biography/John-Webster-English-dramatist/additional-info#history
[2]Womack, Peter 'English Renaissance Drama', Blackwell Publishing, 2006, pp 104-106

ISSN 2792-1883 (online), Published in Vol: 2 No: 5 for the month of May-2022

Anything for a Quiet Life, co-written with Thomas Middleton (c. 1621), and *The Fair Maid of the Inn*, co-written with John Ford and Philip Massinger, were among his future pieces (1625). In 1624, he also helped the Merchant Taylors' Company with the Lord Mayor's pageant Monuments of Honour.

Webster's wider creative career included an elegy for Prince Henry's death in 1612, as well as several prose 'characters' (sketches of various types of personality and occupations) in subsequent versions of Sir Thomas Overbury's poem *The Wife* (1615 onwards). In the 1630s, he most likely died.

Despite his ability to write comedy, Webster is best known for his two brooding English tragedies based on Italian sources. *The White Devil* - a retelling of intrigue featuring Vittoria Accoramboni, an Italian woman murdered at the age of 28 - flopped at the Red Bull Theater in 1612 (published the same year), being too unusual and intellectual for audiences. *The Duchess of Malfi*, first performed by the King's Men around 1614 and published nine years later, was more successful. Irving Ribner says that, these two great tragedies 'represent the artist's concentrated attempt to express a tragic vision which he imperfectly perceived in *The White Devil*, and realized fully in *The Duchess of Malfi*, after which his career could only culminate in anti-climax'[3]. Otherwise he had too many literary works which are various in genre, according to Ribner, Webster 'had nothing more to say'[4] except for these tragedies. Webster also wrote a play, *Guise*, based on a French story about which little is known, as no text survives. *The White Devil* was shown at the Red Bull Theatre, an open-air theater believed to have specialized in providing simple, escapist drama for the predominantly working class—a factor that might explain why Webster's highly intellectual and complex play was unpopular with audiences.

In contrast, *The Duchess of Malfi* was probably performed by the King's Men at the smaller, enclosed Blackfriars Theatre, where it would have been played for a more educated audience who might better appreciate it. Thus, the two pieces would have been very different in their original performance. *The White Devil* could have been performed by adult actors, probably in continuous action, with possible elaborate stage effects. *The Duchess of Malfi* was performed in a controlled setting, with artificial lighting and musical breaks between performances, which may have given audiences time to accept the otherwise bizarre speed at which the Duchess can have children. Being a contemporary of Shakespeare, Webster is often compared with him. In 1819 Edwin P. Whipple argued that "of all the contemporaries of Shakespeare, Webster is the most Shakespearian," a remark that prompts us to be ready for similarities between their language[5]. Not only the language, but the style of harsh death scenes also suggest that the two playwrights shared the same age. Whipple's sharp observation that Webster's genius was "influenced by its contact with one side of Shakespeare's many-sided mind" (Moore 102) suggests the greater significance of our second study, which narrows the comparison to "one side" of Shakespeare's "many-sided mind": that which is represented by the tragedies[6]. As the analysis shows, *The White Devil*, like *Macbeth*, is a tragedy of action; and *The Duchess of Malfi*, like *King Lear*, is a tragedy of suffering[7].

[3] Ribner Irving. 'Jacobean Tragedy: The Quest for Moral Order', Rowman and Littlefield, 1979
[4] Ribner Irving. 'Jacobean Tragedy: The Quest for Moral Order', Rowman and Littlefield, 1979
[5] Jonathan Culpeper, Dawn Archer, Alison Findlay & Mike Thelwall (2018) John Webster, the dark and violent playwright?, ANQ: A Quarterly Journal of Short Articles, Notes and Reviews, 31:3, 201-210, DOI: 10.1080/0895769X.2018.1445515 https://doi.org/10.1080/0895769X.2018.1445515
[6] Jonathan Culpeper, Dawn Archer, Alison Findlay & Mike Thelwall (2018) John Webster, the dark and violent playwright?, ANQ: A Quarterly Journal of Short Articles, Notes and Reviews, 31:3, 201-210, DOI: 10.1080/0895769X.2018.1445515 https://doi.org/10.1080/0895769X.2018.1445515
[7] https://www.britannica.com/biography/John-Webster-English-dramatist/additional-info#history

On the other hand, Webster's plays often have been compared to Tourneur's[8], largely because both dramatists avail themselves of the neo-Senecan horror devices made popular by John Marston, but there is a difference between the two men which is far greater than any similarity. Tourneur, as we have seen, is the explicit moralist, preaching in effect an orthodox Christianity to which he is firmly committed. Webster is no less the moralist, but he does not preach. His plays are an agonized search for moral order in the uncertain and chaotic world of Jacobean scepticism by a dramatist who can no longer accept without question the postulates of order and degree so dear to the Elizabethans. In *The White Devil* Webster creates a poetic impression of this world with its inherent contradictions, but he can find in his story no pattern to relate good and evil and provide a basis for morality. In the heroic death of his heroine, her preservation even in evil of her 'integrity of life', however, he is able to excite admiration and thus to leave his audience with the impression that there is at least one certain value, if attainable only in death, in a world seemingly without value. In *The Duchess of Malfi* Webster goes on to explore the implications of this value. If death may reveal an inherent nobility in human life, such nobility is real, and it may be the basis of a moral order. In *The Duchess of Malfi* we see a new morality emerging in the final act out of evils more chilling in their horror than those of the earlier play. This search for moral order links Webster to Shakespeare in the highest range of tragedy, and to fully perceive Webster's achievement we must see his later play as the exploration of a value postulated in the earlier one and as the final resolution of the problem with which both plays are concerned. The Italian tragedies have been celebrated for their unity of tone and temper, for their realism of characterization in spite of a glaring weakness in psychological motivation, and for the brilliance of their dramatic verse. They have been criticized for their plot construction, with its gross improbabilities, and for a concern with 'perfection of detail rather than general design' which has made it difficult for most critics to find even in these greatest of Webster's plays such thematic unity as may be found, for instance, in the tragedies of Chapman or Tourneur. T. S. Eliot has called Webster 'a very great literary and dramatic genius directed toward chaos', and Clifford Leech expresses a common judgment when he writes that *The Duchess of Malfi* 'is blurred in its total meaning. Writing in 1808, Charles Lamb believed that the "dialect of despair" and the skillful spectacles of horror in *The Duchess of Malfi* were things "only a Webster can do"[9], a view shared by later admirers such as Swinburne, who praised Webster's "command of terror" as the chief mark of his genius[10]. In 1823 the minor poet Bryan Proctor described Webster as a writer whose imagination "rioted upon the grave"[11] and whose dreams were full of "frenzy and murder" and
melancholy, concluding that he "had too gloomy a brain"[12]. The Times review of an 1850 production at Sadler's Wells noted "a brilliant scintillation of a kind of ghastly wit" at the end of *The Duchess of Malfi*, but George Henry Lewes condemned the play as "a nightmare, not a tragedy". These nineteenth-century viewpoints are perhaps best summed up by T. S. Eliot's lines "Webster was much possessed by death/And saw the skull beneath the skin." Charles R. Forker took the phrase as the title of his 1986 book *The Skull Beneath the Skin:* The Achievement of John Webster, which uses biographical research by Mary Edmonds

[8] Ribner Irving. 'Jacobean Tragedy: The Quest for Moral Order', Rowman and Littlefield, 1979
[9] Womack, Peter 'English Renaissance Drama', Blackwell Publishing, 2006, pp 225-230
[10] Womack, Peter 'English Renaissance Drama', Blackwell Publishing, 2006, pp 225-230
[11] Jonathan Culpeper, Dawn Archer, Alison Findlay & Mike Thelwall (2018) John Webster, the dark and violent playwright?, ANQ: A Quarterly Journal of Short Articles, Notes and Reviews, 31:3, 201-210, DOI: 10.1080/0895769X.2018.1445515 https://doi.org/10.1080/0895769X.2018.1445515
[12] Womack, Peter 'English Renaissance Drama', Blackwell Publishing, 2006, pp 225-230

ISSN 2792-1883 (online), Published in Vol: 2 No: 5 for the month of May-2022

to trace the origins of Webster's morbidity and melancholy in St. Sepulchre's parish, where, as he grew up, he heard the "passing bell" tolling for members of the parish or for prisoners led off to execution. Steven Marche has affirmed that a "fascination with death and the dead is uniquely central to Webster's drama" but argues that that this obsession "can only be explicated by means of his complex eschatology", an

awareness that the final judgment is always beyond the reach of human understanding and is therefore always a source of deep uncertainty and incompleteness. In Webster, according to Marche, "everything is colored" by a dark sense of lack[13].

It is a collection of brilliant scenes, whose statements do not ultimately cohere'. The final act of this play has been called an unnecessary and anti-climactic extension of what should have ended with the death of the heroine

The play is a dramatic symbol of moral confusion, the impossibility of distinguishing appearance from reality in a world in which evil wears always the mask of virtue and virtue the mask of evil. In this world, morality seems impossible, but in *The Duchess of Malfi* Webster reveals how it may be possible in spite of this world. Webster's cosmic view is not the optimistic one of Hooker, Shakespeare or Heywood. His is the decaying universe of Chapman and Tourneur, hastening towards destruction. Although there are references to heaven and hell in his plays, Webster's world is 'a mist' without order or design, and with no certainty of a divine providence directing the affairs of men. The two plays taken together, however, do not reveal a philosophy of negation or despair,

The tragedy *The Duchess of Malfi*, Webster's masterpiece, was initially played at the Blackfriars Theatre by the King's Men before 1614, but it wasn't printed until 1623. The secret marriage at the center of the plot adds to the appeal. The Duchess, a young widow, marries Antonio Bologna, her household's master, and they have three children together. She maintains her marriage partly, because her despotic brothers have forbidden her from doing so. Perhaps, partially because she has crossed a line of authority: Antonio is a gentleman, but he is not a nobleman. The Duchess and her brothers are of royal blood; the family is a highly public authority for them, and it is as protectors of that authority that the brothers take the ability to dominate and eventually punish their misbehaving sister. The Duchess and Antonio's family, on the other hand, is isolated and helpless. It has no exterior relationships since no one realizes it exists, and no internal hierarchy because the husband continues to treat as the wife's paid servant: it is a formless intimate space that is socially invisible and politically unaffected. As a result, what we see is an idealized nuclear family, odd and sad because of its fragile position in the center of a Renaissance society. In short, despite her aristocratic sublimity (or all the more effectively because of it), she is a *bourgeois* tragic heroine[14]. However, this has the unintended consequence of giving the marriage a modern look.

The tragicomedy *The Devil's Law-Case* was Webster's next extant play. Each is clearly defined as "Tragedy" in the first editions, unlike Webster's this unequivocally single- authored text The Devil's Law-Case, which is advertised as "A new Tragecomedy." As D. C. Gunby notes, The Devil's Law Case (1616) is "planned from the first with a tragicomic denouement in mind" and, as such, "stands in direct

[13] Jonathan Culpeper, Dawn Archer, Alison Findlay & Mike Thelwall (2018) John Webster, the dark and violent playwright?, ANQ: A Quarterly Journal of Short Articles, Notes and Reviews, 31:3, 201-210, DOI: 10.1080/0895769X.2018.1445515 https://doi.org/10.1080/0895769X.2018.1445515

[14] Womack, Peter 'English Renaissance Drama', Blackwell Publishing, 2006, pp 225-230

ISSN 2792-1883 (online), Published in Vol: 2 No: 5 for the month of May-2022

descent" but distinctive from "the two great tragedies"[15]. He is also believed to have worked to varying degrees with William Rowley, Thomas Middleton, John Fletcher, John Ford, and perhaps Philip Massinger. Eight extant plays and some nondramatic verse and prose are wholly or partly his; the most standard edition is *The Complete Works of John Webster*, ed. by F.L. Lucas, 4 vol. (1927)[16].

Conclusion

Webster's vision is not just mortal, but also apocalyptic. He is a writer who is just as concerned about the dead as he is about the dying. Webster's tragedy is guided by the dead in a way that is unique to him, a way that can only be explained through his complicated eschatology.

In general, Elizabethan as well as Jacobean plays, not only those of Shakespeare, were more or less influenced by the tradition from which they had arisen, by the sources of information on which they were based, and also by the current political situation in which they were written. While scholars have disagreed about the direct influence of Seneca on Elizabethan drama, Janis Lull points out that certainly Elizabethan revenge tragedy shares many conventions with the plays of Seneca, including, as ´the revenge theme, the ghosts, the Play-within-the play, the dumb show, the soliloquy, the declaration and bombast, the emphasis on macabre brutalities, insanity and suicide´ (James E. Ruoff). One can really trace all of these in Elizabethan plays: elaborate speeches, violence and horror onstage, characters who are dominated by a single, obsessive passion, or an interest in the supernatural. Yet, prior English dramatic forms, such as mystery and morality plays, also contributed their influence to the plays of the Elizabethan period. The playwrights had to, at least partly; adjust the plays to the expectations of their audience that ´was used to places changing and action onstage from the mystery plays´ (Michael Best, 1998, internet source). At the same time, the leading and most popular character of most morality plays was Vice, who played tricks on the Virtues and other Vices alike. Vice took up most of the stage time, and often ended by fighting with the other Vices and was banished to Hell at the end of the play. According to Lull, Vice, in its changed form, could be seen onstage even in the plays of Elizabethan authors. Lull explains that ´to the delight of spectators, the Vice would introduce himself and his schemes directly´ at the beginning of the performance. The same can actually be seen, for example, in *Richard III*, where Richard in his first soliloquy explains that he is ´determined to prove a villain´, then continues by explaining his plans, and, of course, is then ´doomed to Hell´ at the end of the play.

From around 1610, in comedy, the Elizabethan concern with characterization and romantic love gave way to a penchant for caustic sarcasm and increasing realism. Webster's The White Devil (1612) and The Duchess of Malfi (1619), as well as Beaumont and Fletcher's The Maid's Tragedy 1610, demonstrate a similar fixation with the idea of moral degradation in Jacobean tragedy. The plays, which are shockingly violent, portray a cynical and pessimistic view of life. From 1605 onwards, Jonson worked with Inigo Jones to create the lavish and intellectual court masques that James 1 and his queen adored. Thus drama was used to criticize the government's policy[17].

[15] Womack, Peter 'English Renaissance Drama', Blackwell Publishing, 2006, pp 225-230

[16] https://www.britannica.com/biography/John-Webster-English-dramatist/additional-info#history

[17] Gonsalez, Jose Manuel "Political strategies of drama in Renaissance England", University of Alicante, 1990, p.93

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ISSN 2792-1883 (online), Published in Vol: 2 No: 5 for the month of May-2022