John Webster

Edited by
Don D. Moore

The Critical Heritage

JOHN WEBSTER: THE CRITICAL HERITAGE

THE CRITICAL HERITAGE SERIES

General Editor: B. C. Southam

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General Editor's Preface

The reception given to a writer by his contemporaries and near-contemporaries is evidence of considerable value to the student of literature. On one side we learn a great deal about the state of criticism at large and in particular about the development of critical attitudes towards a single writer; at the same time, through private comments in letters, journals or marginalia, we gain an insight upon the tastes and literary thought of individual readers of the period. Evidence of this kind helps us to understand the writer's historical situation, the nature of his immediate reading-public, and his response to these pressures.

The separate volumes in the *Critical Heritage Series* present a record of this early criticism. Clearly, for many of the highly productive and lengthily reviewed nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers, there exists an enormous body of material; and in these cases the volume editors have made a selection of the most important views, significant for their intrinsic critical worth or for their representative quality—perhaps even registering incomprehension!

For earlier writers, notably pre-eighteenth century, the materials are much scarcer and the historical period has been extended, sometimes far beyond the writer's lifetime, in order to show the inception and growth of critical views which were initially slow to appear.

In each volume the documents are headed by an Introduction, discussing the material assembled and relating the early stages of the author's reception to what we have come to identify as the critical tradition. The volumes will make available much material which would otherwise be difficult of access and it is hoped that the modern reader will be thereby helped towards an informed understanding of the ways in which literature has been read and judged.

B.C.S.

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Introduction

In his address to the reader in the 1612 quarto of 'The White Devil', John Webster, responding to charges of his slowness as a writer, seems confident of his own critical heritage:

> To those who report I was a long time in finishing this tragedy, I confess I do not write with a goose-quill, winged with two feathers, and if they will needs make it my fault, I must answer them with that of Euripides to Alcestides, a tragic writer: Alcestides objecting that Euripides had only in three days composed three verses, whereas himself had written three hundred: 'Thou tells't truth,' (quoth he) 'but here's the difference, — thine shall only be read for three days, whereas mine shall continue three ages.'(1)

Indeed, as in his Preface to 'The Devil's Law Case', Webster never seemed to doubt that his works would be found worthy. And if 'The White Devil' failed at the Red Bull Theatre, it was due to the absence of 'a full and understanding auditory',(2) not to the absence of the writer's art.

More than three ages have now passed, and Webster's self-evaluation has proven, in many ways, accurate. His major tragedies, 'The White Devil' and 'The Duchess of Malfi', are the focus of attention in the study, the school, and, increasingly, on the stage. Dissertations are written; symposia are held; editions are plentiful. At the same time, however, Webster's prophetic comments are not wholly accurate. For almost two ages Webster was available, having not fully disappeared with his fellows; but few seemed to care. And with his revival in the early nineteenth century, heralded by Lamb's appreciation, Webster began to generate one of the most

peculiar critical histories of any author of any time: by some he is praised unstintingly as being second only to Shakespeare in tragic art, and he is damned to the lowest circles by others. Since 1850 his tragedies have been staged more often than those of any of Shakespeare's contemporaries except Jonson; the results have brought delight and dole in equal scale. Webster endures, but not quite in the fashion he may have imagined: in 1949, for example, we learned that Webster rose above his fellows through his 'intellectual and spiritual insight',(3) but elsewhere that there is, finally, 'something a trifle ridiculous about Webster'.(4)

CONTEMPORARY REPUTATION

As has often been noted, what we know about Shakespeare seems voluminous when compared with what we know of Webster in his own time. Until recently, the primary biographical facts were these: in 1602, Henslowe made five payments to John Webster and several other playwrights; we have dates for Webster's collaborative efforts; we know that 'The White Devil' failed at the Red Bull Theatre in 1612 but that 'The Duchess of Malfi' was produced at the Globe in 1614, representing a gain in prestige for the dramatist; by 1615 Webster was a freeman of the Merchant Taylors' Company; we have later dates of plays written alone and with his fellows. However, Mary Edmond has recently discovered some valuable additions to these meagre facts, concerning Webster's family:(5) through a study of wills and other evidence she has made a probable case that the dramatist's parents were John and Elizabeth Webster of St Sepulchre's without Newgate, and that John senior and, later, the dramatist's younger brother Edward were important figures in the rapidly developing road transport business as makers of waggons, carts, and coaches.(6) Records indicate that the playwright's father had dealings with theatre people and their pageantry in the early 1590s; and given the last journeys taken by condemned men from Newgate prison to their execution in one of Webster's carts, we can agree with Edmond that 'it is not surprising that his elder son's thoughts turned toward the stage, and sombre themes'.(7) She further names, through wills of two neighbours near Webster, a Sara Peniall as the dramatist's wife and his children as John, Elizabeth, Sara, and others. Edmond conjecturally places Webster's birth in 1578 or not long after, and his death between 1632 and 1634.(8)

Yet we remain in a mist, to use a Websterian image, regarding his general reputation in his own time. Certain things are sure: from Webster himself we learn the fate of 'The White Devil' (No. 1), which was not surprising. The theatre audience at the Red Bull in Clerkenwell was 'a plain man's playhouse, where clownery, clamor, and spectacle vied with subject matter flattering to the vanity of tradesmen'.(9) Such a house might well have been confused by a drama of old conventions but troublingly new ideas, with characters who did not fit the older stereotypes. Webster did not lack confidence, however, and perhaps never did, as evidenced by his dedications to 'The Duchess of Malfi' (No. 2) and 'The Devil's Law Case' (No. 3). We have in the Preface to 'The White Devil' his well-known references to his colleagues; we note that he begins the list with the two serious and classical writers, Chapman and Jonson, and ends with the master writers of the popular theatre, Shakespeare, Dekker, and Heywood. There is little doubt that Webster would prefer to be read by the 'light' of the first two learned playwrights, and with Jonson's defensive Preface to 'Sejanus' before him, no doubt saw himself as above the popular theatre. Still, his 'good opinion of other men's labors' is not particularly effusive, and Webster here, as in the other dedicatory epistles, seems at this time an independent, confident man. That near the end of his career he would return in a collaborative role to the Red Bull was an unanticipated and probably an unpleasant irony: 'Keep the Widow Waking', written with Ford, Dekker, and Rowley, was performed there in 1624.

The commendatory verses for the 1623 edition of 'The Duchess of Malfi' (No. 4) are from three playwrights not praised in 'The White Devil' preface, and we may wonder at Webster's reputation in 1623 because of the absence of certain of those mentioned. Instead, we have Middleton, Ford, and Rowley, all collaborators with Webster but of different levels of learning and interests. Yet though Rowley's verse befits his usual hack level, Middleton's and Ford's do indicate a genuine awareness of the merit of the play; and we may note also that Middleton and Rowley wrote no other prefatory verse. The famous description by Henry Fitzjeffrey (No. 5) remains our only personal glimpse of Webster, and the unflattering portrait therein is the first of many intermittent but vivid assaults on Webster and his art which continue well into the twentieth century. Objecting to 'The Duchess' for religious reasons is Orazio Busino, Venetian envoy in England in 1618 (No. 6). That the play was thus available in 1618 indicates, along with the cast-lists, its

theatrical success, as does the printing of 'The Duchess' in 1623 when presumably it was off the stage. Nevertheless, after rising briefly to great heights, Webster's power in the field of tragedy declined: 'The Devil's Law Case' is a less than challenging play of episodic structure belonging to 1616-20; there were dull collaborations; 'Appius and Virginia', in the 1620s (?), does manifest a unity of tone, but that tone is unexciting and simplistic. In his end was his beginning.

WEBSTER IN THE LATER SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

For a period of time afterwards we find Webster in the commonplace books (Edmund Pudsey had earlier garbled eight quotations from 'The White Devil', c. 1616) and as a ghostly influence on such writers as James Shirley, Nathaniel Richards, and Robert Baron. In 1648, an unlicensed royalist newsbook, 'Mercurius Pragmaticus', referred to 'famous Webster' in a roll-call of poets including Seneca, Sophocles, Shakespeare, and Jonson(10) (Webster being singled out for the lone adjective); but it is Samuel Sheppard who provides us with the one mid-century appreciation with his epigram on 'The White Devil' in 1651 and his inclusion of Webster in a literary hall of fame in his laboured epic 'The Fairy King' (No. 8). The latter effort includes Webster in a House of Eloquence, ranking behind More, Sidney, Spenser, Chapman, and Wotton. The work was never published, a blessing for the public. His epigram on 'The White Devil', however, marks the beginning of a rudimentary character criticism: Vittoria is a 'fam'd whore', Flamineo is 'The Devil's darling', and the like. Given the absence of any kind of real criticism, we have o settle for Sheppard. Webster shortly made his first of many appearances in poetic anthologies in John Cotgrave's 'The English Treasury of Wit and Language' (1655), and is represented by 104 quotations from his plays. We may credit Cotgrave as the first anthologist to present dramatic poetry by minor as well as major dramatists, and to place the passages under topics from A to W, that is, from 'Accident' to 'World'. Webster ranks sixth behind Shakespeare (154 quotations), Beaumont and Fletcher (112), Jonson (111), Chapman (111), and Greville (110).(11)

The early 1660s found Webster on the stage once more: 'The White Devil' was performed twice in October of 1661 and again the following December; there would be another recorded performance in late summer of 1671. The quarto of 1671 tells us that it had been 'divers times Acted by the Queenes Maiestes seruants in Drury Lane'; the third

and fourth quartos (1665 and 1672) note performances at the Theatre Royal by the King's Company. More successful seems 'The Duchess of Malfi': it was performed on 30 September 1662, with London's finest talent. Betterton played Bosola, Mary Saunderson was the Duchess, with Henry Harris as Ferdinand. John Downes records that it was 'so exceedingly excellently acted in all parts, chiefly Duke Ferdinand and Bosola, it filled the house eight days successively, proving one of the best stock tragedies'.(12) Samuel Pepys, however, had some opinions of Webster which sound similar to those of some modern reviewers (No. 9). Taking advantage of this brief revival of Webster was Francis Kirkman, who published 'A Cure for a Cuckold' in 1661 with a Preface which is of interest: 'As for this play, I need not speak anything in its commendation, and the author's names, Webster and Rowley, are (to knowing men) sufficient to declare its worth.'(13) Again, Rowley was in good company.

Thus Webster was kept tenuously alive through sporadic performances and new editions of his plays. 'Appius and Virginia' was reprinted in 1654 (reissued in 1659) and again in 1679, due to Betterton's adaptation called 'The Roman Virgin'. (The actor's revision never saw print, which may tell us something of its merit.) Webster's appearance in play lists such as Edward Archer's (1656) and Kirkman's (1661 and 1671) indicates that the reading of old plays did not stop for a Civil War and a Restoration.(14) Edward Phillips made Webster the subject of a brief but error-filled account in his effort at theatre history in 'Theatrum Poetarum' (1675); William Winstanley did little better in his 'Lives of the Most Famous English Poets' (1687), usually copying indiscriminately from Phillips. It remained for Gerard Langbaine to bring together the play lists and the attempt at biographies in his 'Account of the English Dramatic Poets' in 1691 (No. 10), a revision of his 'New Catalogue of English Plays' of 1688. His account is given here chiefly for the historical record; but for a century it was the standard source for Webster documentation. In 1698 Charles Gildon republished the material in his 'Lives of the Poets', adding almost as an afterthought that Webster was at one time clerk of St Andrew's parish, thus confusing the dramatist's biography for over a century. Dyce in his 1830 edition firmly challenged the accuracy of the remark, C.W. Dilke having been dubious in his 'Old English Plays' (1814-15) which included 'Appius and Virginia'.

James Wright in 'Country Conversations' (1694) helps bring the sparse Webster references to a placid and perhaps symbolic close at the end of the century. A country

gentleman, Trueman, chats with his visiting city friends on a variety of topics, from the merits of the older drama and the new to proper garden arrangement. We eventually hear one Julio, upon seeing some picturesque ruins preserved by a neighbouring squire, quoting Antonio's 'ruins' speech from 'The Duchess' (V, iii, 9-19). Indeed, we learn that Julio was one 'who omitted no occasion to magnify the wit of the dramatic poets of the last age'.(15) The passage, soon to be the Webster favourite in eighteenth-century anthologies, is ascribed to Webster, the play, and the speaker, and is the only quotation in the book apart from translated passages. Wright, son of Abraham Wright (No. 7), produced in 1699 the 'Historica Histronica', in which he briefly refers to 'The Duchess' as the first of a group of plays that had the names of the actors set against their parts.

Between the publications of Wright, there had been a touch of Webster in another play: Joseph Harris's 'The City Bride' (1696) was a reworking of 'A Cure for a Cuckold' with poetry turned to prose amid music, song, and the latest in Restoration repartee. The plot at least remained essentially Webster's. However, Webster was briefly taken to task in 1698 for one aspect of his plotting in 'The Duchess' (No. 11).

Thus if the years immediately following the Restoration were briefly propitious for Webster, the next twenty-five years were not. He had not completely disappeared, but we have fewer and fewer straws to grasp. Shakespeare, Jonson, Beaumont and Fletcher remain visible, sometimes on stage and in books of poetic miscellany, dedications of Restoration plays, and in critical works of Dryden, Cowley, and others.(16) Nevertheless, Webster, if less acknowledged, still had an influence in the melodramas of Southerne, Otway, and others who dealt with the themes of lust and betrayal. As Allardyce Nicoll has noted,

> The horrible presentments that are put forward in so many of the Restoration tragedies, heroic and otherwise, make us realize that, if the poetic spirit of Webster and Ford was in many ways lost, certainly their love of blood and of riotous torment never was.(17)

THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

Generally speaking, there is no critical heritage of John Webster between 1700 and 1800. The dramatic bibliographers were acquainted with him; poetry anthologies sometimes included him; and scholars, turning increasing attention

to the age of Shakespeare, knew his plays.(18) But even for Malone, Steevens, and Capell, Webster was for an age, not for all time. Pope's one allusion in 1728 sums up most of the commentary: 'Webster, Marston, Goff, Kyd, and Massinger were the persons instanced as tolerable writers of tragedy in Ben Jonson's time.'(19) And Webster's stage history for over a century can be told as quickly: three performances of a revised 'Duchess of Malfi', and two adaptations, one not staged, the other lasting two performances.

On 22 July 1707, 'The Unfortunate Duchess, or, The Unnatural Brothers' was performed at the lavish Queen's Haymarket, the first playhouse to be constructed in the century. Two more performances followed on 29 July and 8 August. The reviser is unknown, but the cast was excellent, including John Verbruggen, Mary Porter, John Mills, Barton Booth, and others. The text, in the form of the fourth quarto, was published in 1708 and indicates cuts and stage directions. Missing was the pilgrim scene (III, iv), the fables, and the lines in Act III, scene iii indicating a son of the first marriage. Some of the language is, of course, purged: 'lecher' becomes 'lover', for instance, amid other laundering. Compared to what awaited Webster, however, the 1708 text seems pure.

In 1707, Nahum Tate, plagiarist and poet laureate, favoured his public with a newly published play called 'Injur'd Love, or, The Cruel Husband' (No. 12). Nowhere does Tate admit his theft (who would know?); he does admit in an epilogue that he 'chose a Vessel that would bear the shock / Of Censure; Yes, old built but Heart of Oak'. The vessel, however, cannot bear the shock of Tate. Though 'The White Devil' fares better than did 'King Lear' in Tate's hands — some scenes follow in their regular Websterian order with little rewriting, and the villains meet their deaths as in the original — conformity and convention are observed. Vittoria, no longer the blazing Jacobean femme fatale, is truly innocent of adultery with Brachiano (making the trial scene ridiculous), and, indeed, in her own praise of Isabella's purity we realize we have reached the age of sentimental drama, an age wherein, on stage at least, the earth groans at the thought of a broken marriage. It is salutary to know that 'Injur'd Love' never injured an audience: no record of a performance exists.(20)

On 18 December 1731, Lewis Theobald writes to William Warburton:

> I have apply'd my uneasie Summer Months upon the Attempt of a Tragedy. *Sit verbo venia*! I have a Design upon the Ladies Eyes, as the Passage to their Pockets.... I'll indulge myself, in submitting a Pair of soliloquies to you, as a taste of my poor Workman-

> ship. I lay my scene in Italy. My heroine is a young Widow Dutchess, who has two haughty Spanish Brothers, yet enjoin her not to marry again. She, however, marries the Master of her Household on the morning I open my scene....(21)

There follow two soliloquies from his 'tragedy' with lines from Webster sometimes recognizable, but not apparently to the scholar Warburton. Such was the state of Webster scholarship.

The play, now called 'The Fatal Secret' (No. 13), was staged twice at Covent Garden on 4 and 6 April 1733, with James Quin as Bosola, Lacy Ryan as Ferdinand, and Mrs Hallam as the Duchess; and it is worse than 'Injur'd Love'. Theobald in his Preface, which affords us our one piece of neo-classic comment on Webster, blames politics and the weather for the brief run of the play; we can blame Theobald. Admitting his larceny in the Preface (one hopes he'd been caught), he writes of Webster's violation of the unities and his 'wild and undigested Genius'. In the process of taming and digesting this genius, however, Theobald regularizes the play into an unintentional farce. If the plot consequently moves more quickly, it is at the expense of everything else. No children are born, obvious morals are drawn, horrors are softened, Webster's lines disappear, but in this brave new world the Duchess herself does not: at the end of the play, having been safely stowed away by Bosola, she emerges alive, well, and tedious. An anonymous letter writer to the 'Grubstreet Journal' on 25 April, protesting the refusal of his own work by the theatre manager who has instead staged lesser plays, reports triumphantly that 'The Fatal Secret' 'met with the Fate it deserved'.(22) On this note, Webster's plays left the English stages for over a century.

Indeed, it may be said that Webster left the English consciousness for almost the same period, until Lamb's 'Specimens of the English Dramatic Poets' in 1808. There are small sightings during the remainder of the century, yet Webster is relegated even there to one of a crowd, leading no individual life and noted only by anthologists and scholars.

In 1738 Thomas Hayward, drawing from the remarkable library of Edward Harley, second Earl of Oxford, and with the help of Harley's librarian, William Oldys, put together 'The British Muse' ('A Collection of Thoughts Moral, Natural, and Sublime of our English Poets; who flourished in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries'). Two hundred plays furnished proper comment on alphabetized subjects (Cotgrave's legacy), from Adversity into the Y's.

If we pit Shakespeare against Webster in citations, the score is 427 to 93, in Stratford's favour. The anthology was published again in 1777 as 'Beauties of the English Drama', and perhaps caught Lamb's attention. 'The White Devil', not known even to Fielding when he parodied Tate's 'Injur'd Love' in 'The Tragedy of Tragedies, or the Life and Death of Tom Thumb' (1731), reappeared for the reading public when Robert Dodsley published his 'Old Plays' (1744). Webster's play goes unannotated, but later editions in 1780 and 1825 include the erroneous 'parish clerk' biography (Gildon's causal contribution to the critical heritage in 1698) and list his plays and their dates. (The 1825 edition by Reed, Collier, and Gilchrist includes the Fitzjeffrey portrait and Theobald's Preface to 'The Fatal Secret', not much of an editorial favour.) Thus in 1744, one could read 'The White Devil', but with Tate's 'King Lear' playing at the Garden, one probably wouldn't bother.

Webster is mentioned in David Erskine Baker's 'Biographica Dramatica' (1764) as a 'tolerable poet'; his plays are listed with their earliest productions and with fragmentary commentary: 'The Duchess of Malfi', for instance, 'is a story well known in history and was acted with success'. Such was the process in the various 'histories' of the times.

The scholars continued their work in Shakespeare, and while we may patronize Lewis Theobald as artist, we owe him a debt for his awareness that the method of editing classical texts would also be of value in the editing of the English classics.(23) Following Theobald's edition in 1733, the regular procedure in the editing of Shakespeare came to include not only collation of texts and explication of passages in an individual play with similar speeches elsewhere in the canon, but also the comparison of Shakespeare's work with that of his contemporaries. Thus in 1783 Edward Capell's 'The School of Shakespeare', the third volume in his 'Notes and Various Readings to Shakespeare', included the 'Notitia Dramatica', a large selection of extracts from old plays and from Shakespeare's sources. Capell includes from Webster the Preface to 'The White Devil' and several somewhat garbled lines from the play, the Induction to 'The Malcontent', three quotations from 'Appius and Virginia', and a long dialogue from 'A Cure for a Cuckold'. Oddly enough, 'The Duchess of Malfi' is overlooked, although 'The White Devil' is on a list of plays that for Capell rival Shakespeare's. Malone and Steevens also were busy reading old plays (Malone would include a 'Historical Account of the English Stage' in his 1790 edition of Shakespeare); yet in the work of all three, the earlier dramatists were there pri-