

John Webster: A Darker Playwright for Renaissance England

In the 1998 film *Shakespeare in Love*, a young boy seen feeding a live mouse to a cat identifies himself as John Webster (1580-1634). When Will Shakespeare asks the boy what he thought of *Titus Andronicus* [1], Webster replies, "I like it when they cut the heads off. And the daughter mutilated with knives? Plenty of blood. That's the only writing."

While hyperbolic, Hollywood, and of course fictional, the joke about the budding playwright John Webster [2] is grounded in reality. His plays would introduce a new grittiness to the English stage. He was a playwright unafraid to grapple with the darker sides of mankind: whether in *The White Devil* [3] (1612) or *The Duchess of Malfi* [4] (1614), Webster was willing to deal out gruesome ends to his characters.

The White Devil tells the story of the affair between the Duke of Brachiano and Vittoria Corombona (both married to other people), encouraged by the pandering of Vittoria's brother Flamineo. Brachiano has his wife and Vittoria's husband murdered, and Vittoria is tried for the murder of her husband and sent to a convent for penitent whores. The banished Count Lodovico, in love with Brachiano's now dead wife, returns and avenges her death with an impressive array of murders. Vittoria's dying words are, not unreasonably:

*"O happy they that never saw the court,
Nor ever knew great man but by report."*

In *The Duchess of Malfi*, the widowed duchess marries her social inferior, Antonio, against the wishes of her two brothers. Her brothers' spy in her court, Bosola, reveals her pregnancy to her brothers. When troops are sent to collect the Duchess, Antonio, and their children, the Duchess and her two youngest children are captured. She is tortured with waxen images of her husband and her oldest son, who appear dead, then she and her children are executed. Bosola becomes disgusted with his masters' cruelty and decides to kill the brothers, but accidentally kills Antonio. Bosola then murders one of the Duchess' brothers, and he and the remaining brother stab one another to death.

Little is known about John Webster's early life. He was born not long after 1577, the son of a freeman of the Guild of Merchant Taylors, and Webster likely attended the Merchant Taylors' School; he may have continued working in his father's office even after he began his career as a playwright. He wrote a number of great plays, including *The White Devil*, *The Duchess of Malfi*, and *The Devil's Law-Case*. He also collaborated with other playwrights, particularly on his comedies, including: *Westward Ho* (1604) and *Northward Ho* (1605) with Thomas Dekker [5]; *Anything for a Quiet Life* [6] (1621) with Thomas Middleton [7]; and *A Cure for a Cuckold* (1624) with William Rowley. On a personal note, Webster was no stranger to the extra-marital sex that appears in his works. His first child was born only two months after his marriage to Sara Peniall in 1606.

Although Webster's plays include adultery, murder, treachery, and political machinations, he doesn't write that way just for the shock value. His plays reveal real, albeit unpleasant, truths about people: he brings out

issues of class divide, the nature of justice, love and lust, the role of religion, political obligation, sibling relations, and immorality in the courts. Webster creates characters that both are and are not sympathetic, complex in a manner not unlike real human beings. All the while he masterfully crafts the play's structure to prolong suspense.

To hear a wonderful lecture about the questions of sexual autonomy and class distinction, listen to Emma Smith's podcast on *The Duchess of Malfi* [8].

Also check out Smith's podcasts on Thomas Dekker (*The Shoemaker's Holiday* [9] and *The Roaring Girl* [10]), with whom Webster collaborated on *Westward Ho* and *Northward Ho*, and Thomas Middleton [11], with whom Webster wrote *Anything for a Quiet Life*.

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