

Classic Poetry Series

John Webster

- poems -

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John Webster (1578 - 1632)

Though he has since become recognised as one of the greatest writers of the Jacobean era, Webster's plays were not particularly popular in his own lifetime, and very little is known about him. His father was a successful coachmaker in Smithfield, London, and Webster may have earned a living by combining this trade with his writing.

It seems likely that the playwright was the same 'Master John Webster of London, gentleman' who is listed as a law student at the Middle Temple, London, in 1598. The next record of Webster is supplied in 1602 by the theatre owner Philip Henslowe, who describes him as writing a play with a group of others, including Thomas Middleton. He continued as a hack writer for several years, learning his trade on the production line which kept the Jacobean stage supplied with new plays.

The first of his two great tragedies, *The White Devil*, was poorly received when it was first performed by the Queen's men, but Webster was not discouraged; when the play was published in 1612 he included a preface attributing the failure to the weather, the shoddy condition of the theatre, and an audience he describes as 'ignorant asses'. His next play, *The Duchess of Malfi*, was performed by a rival company, the King's Majesty's Servants; it was much more successful, justifying Webster's estimate of his own ability.

Though he never equalled the achievement of these two tragedies, Webster continued to write drama and poetry, as well as contributing to Sir Thomas Overbury's prose collection, *Characters*, in 1615. The only other thing we know about him is that his wife was called Sara, and they had several children. Interest in Webster's plays was revived by Charles Lamb in his *Specimens of English Dramatic Poets Who Lived About the Time of Shakespeare* (1808), and they are still frequently performed. As he remarked to his critics, '[thy work] shall only be read for three days, whereas mine shall continue for three ages'.

A Dirge

CALL for the robin-redbreast and the wren,
Since o'er shady groves they hover,
And with leaves and flowers do cover
The friendless bodies of unburied men.
Call unto his funeral dole
The ant, the field-mouse, and the mole,
To rear him hillocks that shall keep him warm,
And (when gay tombs are robb'd) sustain no harm;
But keep the wolf far thence, that 's foe to men,
For with his nails he'll dig them up again.

John Webster

A Land Dirge

Call for the robin-redbreast and the wren,
Since o'er shady groves they hover
And with leaves and flowers do cover
The friendless bodies of unburied men.
Call unto his funeral dole
The ant, the field-mouse, and the mole,
To rear him hillocks that shall keep him warm
And, when gay tombs are robb'd, sustain no harm;
But keep the wolf far thence, that's foe to men,
For with his nails he'll dig them up again.

John Webster

A Monumental Column

TO THE RIGHT HONOURABLE SIR ROBERT CARR, VISCOUNT ROCHESTER, KNIGHT OF THE MOST NOBLE ORDER OF THE GARTER, AND ONE OF HIS MAJESTY'S MOST HONOURABLE PRIVY COUNCIL.

My right noble lord,

I present to your voidest leisure of survey these few sparks found out in our most glorious prince his ashes. I could not have thought this worthy your view, but that it aims at the preservation of his fame, than which I know not anything (but the sacred lives of both their majesties and their sweet issue) that can be dearer unto you. Were my whole life turned into leisure, and that leisure accompanied with all the Muses, it were not able to draw a map large enough of him; for his praise is an high-going sea that wants both shore and bottom. Neither do I, my noble lord, present you with this night-piece to make his death-bed still float in those compassionate rivers of your eyes: you have already, with much lead upon your heart, sounded both the sorrow royal and your own. O, that care should ever attain to so ambitious a title! Only, here though I dare not say you shall find him live, for that assurance were worth many kingdoms, yet you shall perceive him draw a little breath, such as gives us comfort his critical day is past, and the glory of a new life risen, neither subject to physic nor fortune. For my defects in this undertaking, my wish presents itself with that of Martial's;

O utinam mores animumque effingere possem!
Pulchrior in terris nulla tabella foret.

Howsoever, your protection is able to give it noble lustre, and bind me by that honourable courtesy to be ever

Your honour's truly devoted servant,

JOHN WEBSTER.

A MONUMENTAL COLUMN.

A FUNERAL ELEGY.

The greatest of the kingly race is gone,
Yet with so great a reputation
Laid in the earth, we cannot say he's dead,
But as a perfect diamond set in lead,
Scorning our foil, his glories do break forth,
Worn by his maker, who best knew his worth.
Yet to our fleshy eyes there does belong
That which we think helps grief, a passionate tongue:
Methinks I see men's hearts pant in their lips;
We should not grieve at the bright sun's eclipse,
But that we love his light: so travellers stray,
Wanting both guide and conduct of the day.
Nor let us strive to make this sorrow old;

For wounds smart most when that the blood grows cold.
 If princes think that ceremony meet,
 To have their corpse embalm'd to keep them sweet,
 Much more they ought to have their fame exprest
 In Homer, though it want Darius' chest:
 To adorn which in her deserved throne,
 I bring those colours which Truth calls her own.
 Nor gain nor praise by my weak lines are sought:
 Love that's born free cannot be hir'd nor bought.
 Some great inquisitors in nature say,
 Royal and generous forms sweetly display
 Much of the heavenly virtue, as proceeding
 From a pure essence and elected breeding:
 Howe'er, truth for him thus nuch doth importune,
 His form and value both deserv'd his fortune;
 For 'tis a question not decided yet,
 Whether his mind or fortune were more great.
 Methought I saw him in his right hand wield
 A caduceus, in th' other Pallas' shield:
 His mind quite void of ostentation,
 His high-erected thoughts look'd down upon
 The smiling valley of his fruitful heart:
 Honour and courtesy in every part
 Proclaim'd him, and grew lovely in each limb:
 He well became those virtues which grac'd him.
 He spread his bounty with a provident hand,
 And not like those that sow th' ingrateful sand:
 His rewards follow'd reason, ne'er were plac'd
 For ostentation; and to make them last,
 He was not like the mad and thriftless vine
 That spendeth all her blushes at one time,
 But like the orange-tree his fruits he bore,-
 Some gather'd, he had green, and blossoms store.
 We hop'd much of him, till death made hope err:
 We stood as in some spacious theatre,
 Musing what would become of him, his flight
 Reach'd such a noble pitch above our sight;
 Whilst he discreetly-wise this rule had won,
 Not to let fame know his intents till done.
 Men came to his court as to bright academies
 Of virtue and of valour: all the eyes,
 That feasted at his princely exercise,
 Thought that by day Mars held his lance, by night
 Minerva bore a torch to give him light.
 As once on Rhodes, Pindar reports, of old
 Soldiers expected 't would have rain'd down gold,
 Old husbandmen i' the country gan to plant
 Laurel instead of elm, and made their vaunt
 Their sons and daughters should such trophies wear
 Whenas the prince return'd a conqueror
 From foreign nations; for men thought his star
 Had mark'd him for a just and glorious war.

And, sure, his thoughts were ours: he could not read
 Edward the Black Prince's life but it must breed
 A virtuous emulation to have his name
 So lag behind him both in time and fame;
 He that like lightning did his force advance,
 And shook to th' centre the whole realm of France,
 That of warm blood open'd so many sluices
 To gather and bring thence six flower-de-luces;
 Who ne'er saw fear but in his enemies' flight;
 Who found weak numbers conquer, arm'd with right;
 Who knew his humble shadow spread no more
 After a victory than it did before;
 Who had his breast instated with the choice
 Of virtues, though they made no ambitious noise;
 Whose resolution was so fiery-still
 It seem'd he know better to die than kill,
 And yet drew Fortune, as the adamant steel,
 Seeming t' have fix'd a stay upon her wheel;
 Who jestingly would say, it was his trade
 To fashion death-beds, and hath often made
 Horror look lovely, when i' the fields there lay
 Arms and legs so distracted, one would say
 That the dead bodies had no bodies left;
 He that of working pulse sick France bereft;
 Who knew that battles, not the gaudy show
 Of ceremonies, do on kings bestow
 Best theatres; t' whom naught so tedious as court-sport;
 That thought all fans and ventroys of the court
 Ridiculous and loathsome to the shade
 Which, in a march, his waving ensign made.
 Him did he strive to imitate, and was sorry
 He did not live before him, that his glory
 Might have been his example: to these ends,
 Those men that follow'd him were not by friends
 Or letters preferr'd to him; he made choice
 In action, not in complimentary voice.
 And as Marcellus did two temples rear
 To Honour and to Virtue, plac'd so near
 They kiss'd, yet none to Honour's got access
 But they that pass'd through Virtue's; so, to express
 His worthiness, none got his countenance
 But those whom actual merit did advance.
 Yet, alas, all his goodness lies full low!
 O greatness, what shall we compare thee to?
 To giants, beasts, or towers fram'd out of snow,
 Or like wax-gilded tapers, more for show
 Than durance! thy foundation doth betray
 Thy frailty, being builded on such clay.
 This shows the all-controlling power of fate,
 That all our sceptres and our chairs of state
 Are but glass-metal, that we are full of spots
 And that, like new-writ copies, t'avoid blots,

Dust must be thrown upon us; for in him
 Our comfort sunk and drown'd, learning to swim.
 And though he died so late, he's no more near
 To us than they that died three thousand year
 Before him; only memory doth keep
 Their fame as fresh as his from death or sleep.
 Why should the stag or raven live so long,
 And that their age rather should not belong
 Unto a righteous prince, whose lengthen'd years
 Might assist men's necessities and fears?
 Let beasts live long, and wild, and still in fear;
 The turtle-dove never outlives nine year.
 Both life and death have equally exprest,
 Of all the shortest madness is the best.
 We ought not think that his great triumphs need
 Our wither'd laurels. Can our weak praise feed
 His memory, which worthily contemns
 Marble, and gold, and oriental gems?
 His merits pass our dull invention.
 And now, methinks, I see him smile upon
 Our fruitless tears; bids us disperse these showers,
 And says his thoughts are far refin'd from ours:
 As Rome of her beloved Titus said,
 That from the body the bright soul was fled
 For his own good and their affliction:
 On such broken column we lean on;
 And for ourselves, not him, let us lament,
 Whose happiness is grown our punishment.
 But, surely, God gave this as an allay
 To the blest union of that nuptial day
 We hop'd; for fear of surfeit, thought it meet
 To mitigate, since we swell with what is sweet.
 And, for sad tales suit grief, 'tis not amiss
 To keep us waking, I remember this.
 Jupiter, on some business, once sent down
 Pleasure unto the world, that she might crown
 Mortals with her bright beams; but her long stay
 Exceeding far the limit of her day,-
 Such feasts and gifts were number'd to present her,
 That she forgot heaven and the god that sent her,-
 He calls her thence in thunder: at whose lure
 She spreads her wings, and to return more pure,
 Leaves her eye-seeded robe wherein she's suited,
 Fearing that mortal breath had it polluted.
 Sorrow, that long had liv'd in banishment,
 Tugg'd at the oar in galleys, and had spent
 Both money and herself in court-delays,
 And sadly number'd many of her
 By a prison-calendar, though once she bragged
 She had been in great men's bosoms, now all ragg'd,
 Crawl'd with a tortoise pace, or somewhat slower,
 Nor found she any that desir'd to know her,

Till by good chance, ill hap for us, she found
 Where Pleasure laid her garment: from the ground
 She takes it, dons it; and, to add a grace
 To the deformity of her wrinkled face.
 An old court-lady, out of mere compassion,
 Now paints it o'er, or puts it into fashion.
 When straight from country, city, and from court,
 Both without wit or number, there resort
 Many to this impostor: all adore
 Her haggish false-hood; usurers from their store
 Supply her, and are cozen'd; citizens buy
 Her forged titles; riot and ruin fly,
 Spreading their poison universally.
 Nor are the bosoms of great statesmen free
 From her intelligence, who lets them see
 Themselves and fortunes in false perspectives;
 Some landed heirs consort her with their wives,
 Who, being a bawd, corrupts their all-spent oaths;
 They have entertained the devil in Pleasure's clothes.
 And since this cursed mask, which, to our cost,
 Lasts day and night, we have entirely lost
 Pleasure, who from heaven wills us be advis'd
 That our false Pleasure is but Care disguis'd.
 Thus is our hope made frustrate. O sad ruth!
 Death lay in ambush for his glorious youth;
 And, finding him prepar'd, was sternly bent
 To change his love into fell ravishment.
 O cruel tyrant, how canst thou repair
 This ruin, though hereafter thou shouldst spare
 All mankind, break thy dart and ebon spade?
 Thou canst not cure this wound which thou hast made.
 Now view his death-bed and from thence let's meet,
 In his example, our own winding-sheet.
 There his humility, setting apart
 All titles, did retire into his heart.
 O blessed solitariness, that brings
 The best content to mean men and to kings!
 Manna there falls from heaven: the dove there flies
 With olive to the ark, a sacrifice
 Of God's appeasement; ravens in their beaks
 Bring food from heaven: God's preservation speaks
 Comfort to Daniel in the lions' den;
 Where contemplation leads us, happy men,
 To see God face to face: and such sweet peace
 Did he enjoy amongst the various preace
 Of weeping visitants, it seem'd he lay
 As kings at revels sit, wish'd the crowd away,
 The tedious sports done, and himself asleep;
 And in such joy did all his senses steep,
 As great accountants, troubled much in mind,
 When they hear news of their quietus sign'd.
 Never found prayers, since they convers'd with death,

A sweeter air to fly in than his breath:
 They left in's eyes nothing but glory shining;
 And though that sickness with her over-pining
 Look ghastly, yet in him it did not so;
 He knew the place to which he was to go
 Had larger titles, more triumphant wreaths
 To instate him with; and forth his soul he breathes,
 Without a sigh, fixing his constant eye
 Upon his triumph, immortality.
 He was rain'd down to us out of heaven, and drew
 Life to the spring; yet, like a little dew,
 Quickly drawn thence: so many times miscarries
 A crystal glass, whilst that the workman varies
 The shape i' the furnace, fix'd too much upon
 The curiousness of the proportion,
 Yet breaks it ere 't be finish'd, and yet then
 Moulds it anew, and blows it up agen,
 Exceeds his workmanship, and sends it thence
 To kiss the hand and lip of some great prince;
 Or like a dial, broke in wheel or screw,
 That's ta'en in pieces to be made go true:
 So to eternity he now shall stand,
 New-form'd and gloried by the all-working hand.
 Slander, which hath a large and spacious tongue,
 Far bigger than her mouth, to publish wrong,
 And yet doth utter 't with so ill a grace,
 Whilst she's a-speaking no man sees her face;
 That like dogs lick foul ulcers, not to draw
 Infection from them, but to keep them raw;
 Though she oft scrape up earth from good men's graves,
 And waste it in the standishes of slaves
 To throw upon their ink, shall never dare
 To approach his tomb: be she confin'd as far
 From his sweet reliques as is heaven from hell!
 Not witchcraft shall instruct her how to spell
 That barbarous language which shall sound him ill.
 Fame's lips shall bleed, yet ne'er her trumpet fill
 With breath enough; but not in such sick air
 As make waste elegies to his tomb repair,
 With scraps of commendation more base
 Than are the rags they are writ on. O disgrace
 To nobler poesy! this brings to light,
 Not that they can, but that they cannot write.
 Better they had ne'er troubled his sweet trance;
 So silence should have hid their ignorance;
 For he's a reverend subject to be penn'd
 Only by his sweet Homer and my friend.
 Most savage nations should his death deplore,
 Wishing he had set his foot upon their shore,
 Only to have made them civil. This black night
 Hath fall'n upon 's by nature's oversight;
 Or while the fatal sister sought to twine

His thread and keep it even, she drew it so fine
It burst. O all-compos'd of excellent parts,
Young, grave Mecaenas of the noble arts,
Whose beams shall break forth from thy hollow tomb,
Stain the time past, and light the time to come!
O thou that in thy own praise still wert mute,
Resembling trees, the more they are ta'en with fruit,
The more they strive and bow to kiss the ground!
Thou that in quest of man hast truly found,
That while men rotten vapours do pursue,
They could not be thy friends and flatterers too;
That, despite all injustice, wouldst have prov'd
So just a steward for this land, and lov'd
Right for its own sake,- now, O woe the while,
Fleet'st dead in tears, like to a moving isle!
Time was when churches in the land were thought
Rich jewel-houses; and this age hath bought
That time again: think not I feign; go view
Henry the Seventh's Chapel, and you'll find it true:
The dust of a rich diamond's there inshrin'd;
To buy which thence would beggar the West-Inde.
What a dark night-piece of tempestuous weather
Have the enraged clouds summon'd together!
As if our loftiest palaces should grow
To ruin, since such highness fell so low;
And angry Neptune makes his palace groan,
That the deaf rocks may echo the land's moan.
Even senseless things seem to have lost their pride,
And look like that dead mouth wherein he died:
To clear which, soon arise that glorious day
Which, in her sacred union, shall display
Infinite blessings, that we all may see
The like to that of Virgil's golden tree,
A branch of which being slipt, there freshly grew
Another that did boast like form and hue.
And for these worthless lines, let it be said,
I hasted till I had this tribute paid
Unto his grave: so let the speed excuse
The zealous error of my passionate Muse.
Yet, though his praise here bear so short a wing,
Thames hath more swans that will his praises sing
In sweeter tunes, be-pluming his sad hearse
And his three feathers, while men live or verse.
And by these signs of love let great men know,
That sweet and generous favour they bestow
Upon the Muses never can be lost;
For they shall live by them, when all the cost
Of gilded monuments shall fall to dust:
They grave in metal that sustains no rust;
Their wood yields honey and industrious bees,
Kills spiders and their webs, like Irish trees.
A poet's pen, like a bright sceptre, sways

And keeps in awe dead men's dispraise or praise.
Thus took he acquittance of all worldly strife:
The evening shows the day, and death crowns life.

My impresa to your lordship,
A swan flying to a laurel for shelter, the mot, Amor est mihi causa.

John Webster

The Shrouding of the Duchess of Malfi

Hark, now everything is still,
The screech-owl and the whistler shrill,
Call upon our dame aloud,
And bid her quickly don her shroud!
Much you had of land and rent;
Your length in clay's now competent:
A long war disturbed your mind;
Here your perfect peace is signed.
Of what is't fools make such vain keeping?
Sin their conception, their birth weeping,
Their life a general mist of error,
Their death a hideous storm of terror.
Strew your hair with powders sweet,
Don clean linen, bathe your feet,
And (the foul fiend more to check)
A crucifix let bless your neck:
'Tis now full tide 'tween night and day;
End your groan, and come away.

John Webster

Vanitas Vanitatum

All the flowers of the spring
Meet to perfume our burying;
These have but their growing prime,
And man does flourish but his time:
Survey our progress from our birth;
We are set, we grow, we turn to earth.
Courts adieu, and all delights,
All bewitching appetites!
Sweetest breath and clearest eye,
Like perfumes, go out and die;
And consequently this is done
As shadows wait upon the sun.
Vain ambition of kings
Who seek by trophies and dead things
To leave a living name behind,
And weave but nets to catch the wind.

John Webster