

**Classic Poetry Series**

**John Webster**  
**- poems -**

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# John Webster(1578 - 1632)

John Webster was an English Jacobean dramatist best known for his tragedies *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*, which are often regarded as masterpieces of the early 17th-century English stage. He was a contemporary of [William Shakespeare](http://www.poemhunter.com/william-shakespeare/).

## Biography

Webster's life is obscure, and the dates of his birth and death are not known. His father, a coach maker also named John Webster, married a blacksmith's daughter named Elizabeth Coates on 4 November 1577, and it is likely that Webster was born not long after in or near London. The family lived in St. Sepulchre's parish. Father John, and Uncle, Edward Webster, were Freemen of the Merchant Taylors' Company and Webster attended Merchant Taylors' School in Suffolk Lane, London. On 1 August 1598, "John Webster, lately of the New Inn" was admitted to the Middle Temple, one of the Inns of Court; in view of the legal interests evident in his dramatic work; this is possibly the playwright. Webster married the 17-year-old Sara Peniall on 18 March 1606, and their first child, John, was baptised at the parish of St Dunstan-in-the-West on 8 March 1605 or 1606. Bequests in the will of a neighbour who died in 1617 indicate that other children were born to him.

Most of what is otherwise known of him relates to his theatrical activities. Webster was still writing plays as late as the mid-1620s, but Thomas Heywood's *Hierarchie of the Blessed Angels* (licensed 7 November 1634) speaks of him in the past tense, implying he was then dead.

## Early Collaborations

By 1602, Webster was working with teams of playwrights on history plays, most of which were never printed. These included a tragedy *Caesar's Fall* (written with Michael Drayton, Thomas Dekker, Thomas Middleton and [Anthony Munday](http://www.poemhunter.com/anthony-munday/)), and a collaboration with Thomas Dekker *Christmas Comes but Once a Year* (1602). With Dekker he also wrote *Sir Thomas Wyatt*, which was printed in 1607. He worked with Thomas Dekker again on two city comedies, *Westward Ho* in 1604 and *Northward Ho* in 1605. Also in 1604, he adapted John Marston's *The Malcontent* for staging by the King's Men.

## <b>The Major Tragedies</b>

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 the intrigues involving Vittoria Accoramboni, an Italian woman assassinated at the age of 28, was a failure when staged at the Red Bull Theatre in 1612 (published the same year), being too unusual and intellectual for its audience. *The Duchess of Malfi*, first performed by the King's Men about 1614 and published nine years later, was more successful. He also wrote a play called *Guise*, based on French history, of which little else is known as no text has survived.

*The White Devil* was performed in the Red Bull Theatre, an open-air theatre that is believed to have specialised in providing simple, escapist drama for a largely working class audience, a factor that might explain why Webster's highly intellectual and complex play was unpopular with its audience. In contrast, *The Duchess of Malfi* was probably performed by the King's Men in the smaller, indoor Blackfriars Theatre, where it would have played to a better educated audience that might have appreciated it better. The two plays would thus have been very different in their original performances. *The White Devil* would have been performed, probably in one continuous action, by adult actors, with elaborate stage effects a possibility. *The Duchess of Malfi* was performed in a controlled environment, with artificial lighting, and musical interludes between acts, which allowed time, perhaps, for the audience to accept the otherwise strange rapidity with which the Duchess is able to have babies.

## <b>Late Plays</b>

Webster wrote one more play on his own: *The Devil's Law Case* (c. 1617–1619), a tragicomedy. His later plays were collaborative city comedies: *Anything for a Quiet Life* (c. 1621), co-written with Thomas Middleton, and *A Cure for a Cuckold* (c. 1624), co-written with William Rowley. In 1624, he also co-wrote a topical play about a recent scandal, *Keep the Widow Waking* (with John Ford, Rowley and Dekker). The play itself is lost, although its plot is known from a court case. He is believed to have contributed to the tragicomedy *The Fair Maid of the Inn* with John Fletcher, Ford, and Phillip Massinger. His *Appius and Virginia*, probably written with Thomas Heywood, is of uncertain date.

## <b>Reputation</b>

Webster's major plays, *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*, are macabre, disturbing works that seem to prefigure the Gothic literature of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Intricate, complex, subtle and learned, they are difficult but rewarding, and are still frequently staged today.

Webster has received a reputation for being the Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatist with the most unsparingly dark vision of human nature. Even more than John Ford, whose 'Tis Pity She's a Whore is also very bleak, Webster's tragedies present a horrific vision of mankind. In his poem "Whispers of Immortality," [T. S. Eliot](http://www.poemhunter.com/thomas-stearns-eliot/) memorably says that Webster always saw "the skull beneath the skin".

On the other hand, Webster's title character in *The Duchess of Malfi* is presented as a figure of virtue by comparison to her malevolent brothers, and in facing death she exemplifies classical Stoic courage. Her martyr-like death scene has been compared to that of the titular king in Christopher Marlowe's play *Edward II*. Webster's use of a strong, virtuous woman as his central character was rare for his time and represents a deliberate reworking of some of the original historical event on which his play was based. The character of the duchess recalls the Victorian poet and essayist [Algernon Charles Swinburne's](http://www.poemhunter.com/algernon-charles-swinburne/) comment in *A Study of Shakespeare* that in tragedies such as *King Lear* Shakespeare had shown such a bleak world as a foil or backdrop for virtuous heroines such as Ophelia and Imogen, so that their characterisation would not seem too incredible. Swinburne describes such heroines as shining in the darkness.

While Webster's drama was generally dismissed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, many twentieth century critics and theatregoers find *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi* to be brilliant plays of great poetic quality and dark themes. One explanation for this change is that only after the horrors of war in the early twentieth century could their desperate protagonists be portrayed on stage again, and understood. W. A. Edwards wrote of Webster's plays in *Scrutiny II* (1933–4): "Events are not within control, nor are our human desires; let's snatch what comes and clutch it, fight our way out of tight corners, and meet the end without squealing." The violence and pessimism of Webster's tragedies have seemed to some analysts close to modern sensibilities.

### **<b>Webster in Other Works</b>**

The eighteenth-century play *The Fatal Secret* by Lewis Theobald is a reworking of *The Duchess of Malfi*, imposing Aristotle's "unities" and a happy ending on the plot

The short story "A Christmas in Padua" in F. L. Lucas's *The Woman Clothed with the Sun* (1937) retells the final hours of Vittoria Accoramboni (the original of

Webster's White Devil) in December 1585, slanting the narrative from her perspective.

The 1982 detective novel *The Skull Beneath the Skin* by P. D. James centres around an ageing actress who plans to play Webster's drama *The Duchess of Malfi* in a Victorian castle theatre. The novel takes its title from T.S. Eliot's famous characterisation of Webster's work in his poem "Whispers of Immortality".

The song "My White Devil" from Echo & the Bunnymen's 1983 album *Porcupine* refers to Webster as "one of the best there was" and mentions his two tragic plays by name.

*Webster* a play by Robert David McDonald. Written for and premiered at the Glasgow Citizens Theatre 1984

A young John Webster, played by Joe Roberts, appears in the 1998 film *Shakespeare in Love*.

A fragment of Scene Two, Act Four of *The Duchess of Malfi* is shown in the 1987 BBC TV film version of Agatha Christie's detective novel *Sleeping Murder*

Webster's quote, "Cover her face; mine eyes dazzle: she died young", is used in the novel *Queen of the Damned* by Anne Rice, as well as in *Sleeping Murder*.

Mike Figgis's 2001 film *Hotel* involves scenes from *The Duchess of Malfi*

The antagonist in Paul Johnston's "The Death List" and "The Soul Collector" mimics *The White Devil* in character names and actions.

In Episode 11, Season 2 of HBO's *Boardwalk Empire*, *The White Devil* is discussed in a Princeton classroom during a scene that takes place in Jimmy Darmody's past. At the end of the scene the teacher references the line "What because we are poor shall we be vicious?" to which Jimmy responds "Pray what means have you to keep me from the galleys, or the gallows?" Later in the episode, the teacher refers to Jimmy's life as Jacobean.

# 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 d 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

# Death Song

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

# Hark, Now Everything Is Still

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John Webster

# Honourable Employment

O my lord, lie not idle:

The chiefest action for a man of great spirit  
Is never to be out of action. We should think  
The soul was never put into the body,  
Which has so many rare and curious pieces  
Of mathematical motion, to stand still.

Virtue is ever sowing of her seeds;

In the trenches for the soldier: in the wakeful study  
For the scholar; in the furrows of the sea  
For men of our profession; of all which  
Arise and spring up honour.

John Webster

## Qualis Vita, Finis Ita

Here-vnder lyes the wonder of her kinde,  
The Quintessence of Nature and of Grace,  
Wit, Beauty, Bounty, and (in Nobles race  
The rarest Iewell) a right humble minde;  
Here lyes her body, but her soule refin'd  
Aboue th'impyreall, hath imperial place,  
In blisse so boundlesse, as no words embrace,  
Nor Art can feigne, nor mortall heart can find.  
Her fame remaines a Monument of honor,  
Built by her vertue gilt with purest gold,  
With Lilly-flowres and Roses strewed vpon her,  
Her Epitaph Urania thus enrol'd:  
Mild child, chaste mayden, and religious wife:  
The Euen crownes the day, Ioane Essex death her life.

John Webster

# The Madman's Song

Oh, let us howl some heavy note,  
Some deadly-dogged howl,  
Sounding as from the threatening throat  
Of beasts and fatal fowl!  
As ravens, screech-owls, bulls, and bears,  
We'll bell, and bawl our parts,  
Till irksome noise have cloyed your ears  
And corrosived your hearts.  
At last, whenas our quire wants breath,  
Our bodies being blest,  
We'll sing like swans to welcome death,  
And die in love and rest.

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