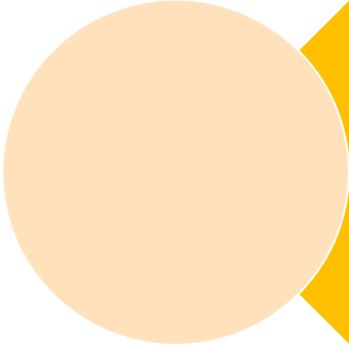


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**ENGLISH DEPARTMENT  
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# JOHN WEBSTER



**John Webster**, (born c. 1580, [London](#), Eng.—died c. 1632), English dramatist whose *The [White Devil](#)* (c. 1609–c. 1612) and *The [Duchess of Malfi](#)* (c. 1612/13, published 1623) are generally regarded as the paramount 17th-century English tragedies apart from those of Shakespeare.

- Little is known of Webster's life. His preface to *Monuments of Honor*, his Lord Mayor's Show for 1624, says he was born a freeman of the Merchant Taylors' Company. He was probably a coachmaker, and possibly he was an actor.
- Apart from his two major plays and *The Devils Law-Case* (c. 1620; published 1623), his dramatic work consists of collaborations (not all extant) with leading writers. With [Thomas Dekker](#), his main collaborator, he wrote *Westward Ho* (1604) and *Northward Ho* (1605), both of which were published in 1607.

## MAJOR TRAGEDIES

- 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.<sup>[6]</sup>

# REPUTATION

- Intricate, complex, subtle and learned, Webster's plays are difficult but rewarding and are still frequently staged. 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 humanity. In his poem "Whispers of Immortality", [T. S. Eliot](#) memorably says that Webster always saw "the skull beneath the skin".
- Webster's drama was generally dismissed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries but many twentieth century critics and theatregoers have found *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.

- 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.
- In the romantic comedy film *Shakespeare in Love* (1998), John Webster makes a brief cameo as a bloodthirsty child who claims that his favourite play is *Titus Andronicus* because 'I like it when they cut heads off'. Although Webster's bleak tragedies do feature a lot of death dealt out in various and lurid ways, both the man and his writings are more complex.

*Thank you*