



The evaluation art of Webster as a dramatist

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Abstract

Webster is one of the greatest dramatists in the Post- Elizabethan period and his place is among the tragedy writers of the Elizabethan Age. *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*, in these two tragedies, he reveals himself as great dramatist, and his power to grip the imagination by subtle suggestions. Both these plays present a study in revenge-a subject dear to the heart of the Elizabethan dramatists. Webster used psychological approach to characters, pessimism, satirical intent and humanity in sense of pathos in his plays. That plays are value of men and women have been plunged into and also struggled against wickedness have been the object of his study. Webster's reputation rests on *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*. Opinions differ as to which is the better. *The Duchess of Malfi* would probably be if votes were taken but for freshness and intensity of passion the white devil could be regarded as Webster's masterpiece.

Keywords: psychological approach to characters, pessimism, satirical intent and humanity in sense of pathos

Introduction

John Webster began to write for the stage in the first decade of the Seventeenth century, collaborating, after the usual manner, with other playwrights. Webster achieved his two greatest successes, which place him above all other writers of tragedy except Shakespeare alone. His first masterpiece, *The White Devil* or *Vittoria Corombona* was produced in 1612, and his second, *The Duchess of Malfi* in 1614. In his two great Italian tragedies, intrigue, the anguish and suffering of the innocent, the seeming triumph of the guilty. However, Webster's power found full scope. Both plays are heavy with doom, madness, and lawless.

Webster A Morality Noble Writer

Webster was a great moralist at heart and it was the avowed object of his dramatic art to glorify virtue, morality, justice, condemn, sinful and vicious courses of life. Webster's philosophy of the scheme of things deals with a world of sorrow at which he gazes through an imagination clouded with gloom. Yet he never shrinks from agonies that are beyond hominid resolution. "There is no poet ethically nobler than Webster". Each play of Webster contracts a inspiring study in sin and the final retribution that comes upon the sinners. Evil and sin appear to be very alluring in the act of commission, but the ultimate consequence of sin is always terrible:

"Majesties like glow-worms forms far off-shine bright,
But saw at near have neither heat nor light".

-Webster

The most serious error that critics of Webster have committed has been to regard him as a dramatist lacking in moral vision and therefore, incapable of more than partial view of human experience, content to limit his genius within the bounds of a philosophically barren tradition of revenge tragedy. His

metaphors are of coffins, death, fevers, the lazar-house, and the grave. In *The Duchess of Malfi*, as pointed above, the villains and evil characters are made to repent for their evil deeds. They meet condign punishment. Such then is Webster's tragic vision of the world a fallen place in which suffering out weights happiness and all activities are tainted with sin. *The White Devil* Webster states the moral truth which the whole preceding drama has been designed to illustrate. In the end virtue is glorified, but only beyond death. Webster the moralist also condemned the glittering gadgets and shining material prizes held dear by the people of the world.

Subject Matter of Webster's Play

Webster seeks his subject matter from the Italian life of the sixteenth century. He directs our attention to the Post-Renaissance conditions in Italy and it is the Italian life that figures prominently in his plays. In *The Duchess of Malfi* and *The white Devil* both of the plays are Italian life of the Post-Renaissance period is presented with all its intrigues and corruptions, cunning hypocrisy of courtiers, the horrors and tortures to which innocent people were subjected by courtiers and princess, the sexually depraved life of courtesans and all the evils associated with that life. The greed, lust, sexuality and other vices of the people of the period are portrayed realistically. Webster's plays also take their subject matter from the conflict between the forces of good and evil. In his plays, evil characters are creating difficulties in their life. God is not mocked; the evildoer is caught in the net which he has woven for others. The good may be defeated on the material plane but morally they are triumphant. Ultimately it is good that is victorious.

Beauty and Pathos in the Two Tragedies

The tragedies of Webster are marked with a note of pathos. There is a touch of humanity in his writings. Webster knows

the art of touching the heart of the readers by presenting spectacles of pathos in the plays. *The Duchess of Malfi* is marked with a note of deep pathos and the heart of readers is touched for sad lot of the Duchess and Cariola who meet their end at the hands of the executioners. In passionate vigour, Webster is inferior to Beaumont and Fletcher, but for downright imaginative beauty and pathos, Webster is unapproachable, except by Shakespeare. Take for instance this;

“I have lived
Hilariously unkind, like some that lives in court,
And infrequently when my face was full of smiles
Have touched the labyrinth of conscience in my heart”
(The White Devil)

There is much pathos and beauty also in *The Duchess of Malfi* especially in the scene of the murder, though the play as a whole strikes one as less fresh in conception and more obvious in its claim upon our sympathies. The tragedy is marked with a note of pathos and we feel sorry for the deaths of the innocent persons in the play.

Webster's Pessimism

Webster's pessimism is a well-marked quality of his dramatic art. His pessimism seems to be diffused through the atmosphere of his two tragedies; it is not in his heart and his mind. His imagination seems to linger round thoughts and symbols of mortality and to take in strange images of death. Though apparently Webster appears to be pessimistic since he draws pictures of death and destruction, yet the close study of his plays shows that behind all this pessimism there is the ray of hope in the heart of the dramatist. In a parable inserted in the elegy, pleasure is said to have come to earth from heaven only to be recalled on account of the prodigality of time. The loss of pleasure and the masquerade of care from the crux of the tragedies, to Webster's 'despair, or confusion'. At the same time, the revenge theme is both secondary ambiguous, since Webster's avenging Dukes and cardinals are at once the upholders of public conventions and deep-dyed Machiavellians. His pessimism is a part of his technique-and it is in conformity with the characters, their outlook, and their doing in his tragedies.

Episodic Structure

The White Devil and *The Duchess of Malfi* are by far Webster's best play. They are both episodic in structure, allowing the author to arrest the dramatic movement while he exploits with brilliant poetic affect the terror or grandeur or pathos of the moment. The moral lines are less clearly drawn than in Tourneur.

Conclusion

Nevertheless, *The white Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi* are two of our major English tragedies. Perhaps Webster did not fully understand what he had achieved but that may be no uncommon characteristic. Dramatists are rarely the wisest men of their generation. Almost the best of them may say more than realize or wish and leave blemishes on their work which puzzle and distract us. A serious dramatist is the

principal artist of the theatre, but his utterance will not always contrive. He is no prophet, no complete philosopher, and no Omni competent magician. His purpose seems to be to create as rapidly as is consistent with fullness and depth a picture of the world in which is characters move a world created of their thoughts and the deeds which are the outcome of their thoughts. Any process which will quickly make us free of this country is fitting for his purpose whether dramatic revelation or repeated analysis of one character by the others any process that will bring us quickly to knowledge of and intimacy with a lifetime familiarity, the field of the mind in which each moves.

References

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