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John Webster's Theater of (Dis)obedience and Damnation

Carson Bergstrom and Lucia Nigri

Two critical memes haunt the literary history which passes judgment on John Webster's importance as a dramatist: his socio- or psychopathology; to what degree in comparison with Shakespeare's sublime output he falls below Shakespeare as a successful artist.¹ The first meme posits a psychological profile for Webster by mapping its symptomology on the basis of an assessment of the characters and events of primarily two plays: *The Duchess of Malfi* and *The White Devil*. These two plays--both tragedies--function not as dramatic works in which genre authorizes and legitimizes meaning in terms of specific modes of representation and appropriate language but as the assumed determiners of a morbid state of mind and an imagination which, it is generally assumed, must be inimical to the production of truly great drama. Thus, for Ian Jack, "the fact that [Webster] chose to write in the Revenge tradition at all is itself evidence of a lack of harmony in his own mind" (77). The second meme applies an evaluative schema which not only assumes the correctness of the first meme but which also pursues a specious critical practice in which the comparison of often significantly dissimilar works (genre, story, characterization, language, and historical contexts) then underwrites supposedly authoritative critical statements about the artistic value of the respective writers. Interestingly, even if the evaluative schema inevitably confirms Shakespeare's superiority, that process led to a positive outcome for Webster: more careful critical examination of his work, as David Coleman notes, confirmed that Webster deserved to be seen as "one of the most distinctive voices of the English Renaissance" (18). Curiously, critics apportioned this high regard almost solely on the basis of his two most famous tragedies (Coleman 18), even as they argued (paradoxically) that his output could not match the imaginative extent or depth of Shakespeare's overall production. That unequivocal judgment of Shakespeare's superiority reminds us of an observation made by Donald Davie about the difficulty of abandoning a long-held critical commonplace: even when it appears to have been refuted, it typically goes "underground" (3) and then, disguised by a different terminology, resurfaces at some later time to maintain the evaluative paradigm once again.

In trying to avoid the influence (as much as possible) of these two memes, this special issue of *ANQ* contributes to, and shares, the more sympathetic view of Webster's dramatic output that informs recent work on his plays (Gunby et al., Luckyi, Frazer and Hanser). Accordingly, this issue adheres to Northrop Frye's argument that "Value-judgements are founded on the study of literature: the study of literature can never be founded on value-judgements" (20) because invariably such "literary value-judgements are projections of social ones" (22). We conceived, therefore, the critical objectives of this volume under the general rubric of "Theater of (Dis)obedience" as a means to encourage contributors whose interests, specialisms, and critical approaches to Webster's drama would work to construct an understanding of that drama which might potentially negate the influence of those critical memes. The rubric does not rule out discussion of Shakespeare, of course, since Shakespeare and Webster were dramatists working in the same period. Rather, the critical leeway of that rubric encouraged contributors either to engage with "typical" Webster issues such as violence,

vice, and disobedience in new ways or would expand how we situate and understand Webster's work in its historical contexts. Most obviously, the rubric welcomed work from a range of Webster's plays in order to generate a wider sense of his abilities as a dramatist of (dis)obedience.

The first two contributions in this volume focus on *The Devil's Law-Case*. Beatrice Montedoro and Laura Estill explore the importance of *The Devil's Law-Case* for understanding how early spectators responded to Webster's plays. They innovatively examine Webster citations in commonplace books, marking a new turn in Webster studies which have been, since John Dent's seminal *John Webster's Borrowing* in 1960, generally more interested in the number and range of the author's direct verbal borrowings from a variety of sources. The value of Montedoro and Estill's approach is that it roots the reception of Webster's work in a private cultural practice in which the practitioner's commonplace choices identify what the early spectator or reader of Webster found valuable in his plays. It comes as a surprise to learn that *The Devil's Law-Case* was immensely popular with seventeenth-century playgoers. Countering the view of Webster embedded in the socio- or psychopathological meme, Montedoro and Estill find that "early readers appropriated Webster's plays in a variety of ways: as commonplace wisdom, as templates for dialogue, and as vivid, original images often unrelated to violence and gore." Indeed, it might raise a few modern eyebrows to discover that several clergymen mined Webster's play in search of commonplaces which they could apply in their sermon writing.

The Devil's Law-Case is also the focus of Carol Blessing's article on how law informed Webster's dramatic imagination: for example, in language, in plotting, in the construction of particular scenes (trial scenes, in particular), in the representation and illumination of personal and public conflict, and in its significance as a means to fulfil particular generic conventions. What proves exciting about Webster's imaginative treatment of legal issues, embedding law in ways which produce unanticipated, subversive outcomes. As Blessing notes, the end of *The Devil's Law-Case* offers a "surprising Websterian twist" in that he rewards Leonora--clearly an unruly woman whose actions undermine social conventionalities--even though she initiates a false law claim and commits other crimes. Indeed, we might expect "natural justice" to have meted out a deserved punishment on Leonora because she functions as a figure of social, economic, and patriarchal subversion. Arguably, Webster felt that dramatic justice would best be served by the abandonment of the demands of natural justice in favor of an outcome which related to the realities faced by women such as Leonora. As Blessing's paper makes clear, the play needs to be understood in terms of the laws governing bastardy, inheritance, wills, patriarchy, and developments in Chancery and common law. Webster's reason for rewarding Leonora might well be found in the statement made by Ariosto, the play's honest lawyer, in which he asserts at the end of the play that the whole social and legal crisis represented in the play occurred because the laws were "built on rotten ground."

Law also features centrally in Jessica Apolloni's contribution, her argument showing conclusively that Webster's grasp of how law impacts on social behavior not only in Britain but also in Italy informs his dramatic imagination in significant ways (of particular interest is Webster's nuanced treatment of how law influences the emotional basis of social identity). Apolloni argues that we must assess carefully the trial scenes in Webster's works because such scenes, though seemingly loosely

structured on Italian models, combine both Italian legal formalities with English practices which were in a process of evolving from medieval and middle English court practice to more modern ones. This combination works to illuminate how and why changing aspects of English Law, particularly how the courts functioned, caused anxieties at every level of social life. As such, Apolloni concludes that any casual interpretation of Webster's representation of trial scenes as designed to criticize the corruption of the Italian court misses the careful way in which Webster combines Italian and English legal practices. In particular, his representations effectively raise issues about legal corruption in English courts and official complacencies about the function of the jury as a guarantor of impartial judgment. Apolloni's study thus not only adds to our understanding of Webster's use of law to investigate and illuminate social conflict but it also points to the centrality and topicality of Webster's drama in the social experiences of his age. Thus, the story and staging of Leonora's disobedience functions as a model for Webster of the ways in which law, especially law built on "rotten ground," deforms emotions and identity, two aspects of characterization which emerge prominently in the articles by Lucia Nigri and Iman Sheeha.

Lucia Nigri's contribution explores dramatic appropriations of Italian models and prose narratives with a specific focus on the emergence of the discontented character type on the English stage. By looking at how Shakespeare and Webster both structure specific discourses around socially marginal characters and outcasts as key figures who can function to illustrate and illuminate the anxieties and strains in contemporary cultural and social discourse, Nigri explores how Bandello's text provides a template for the representation of evil figures in *Much Ado about Nothing* (c. 1598) and *The Duchess of Malfi* (c. 1613). As such, Nigri's contribution offers an instructive comparison of the ways in which the respective authors approached their Italian source. The examples of Don John and Bosola show that both dramatists adapted their material to the respective genres in which they were working (which thus makes comparison of the excellence or inferiority of the one or the other writer a specious practice). The reconfiguring of these malcontents in, respectively, a comedy and in a tragedy indicates their value as vehicles for initiating moral questioning; moreover, such refiguring tells us that it does not pay to assume that the sole purpose of this type of character on the Jacobean stage was to prod the audience towards any simple condemnations of transgressive models.

Also focusing on Webster's ability to construct a dramatic work in which it proves difficult to determine whether or not the reader/spectator should condemn or celebrate the play's representations of disobedience in early modern English literature, Iman Sheeha's article focuses on Zanche, the disobedient domestic servant in *The White Devil*. Engaging with discourses and practices related to seventeenth-century household service as depicted in contemporary conduct literature, her paper invites us to read this play within the context of the popular genre of English domestic tragedy. Accordingly, it is both in and against these literary and cultural traditions that Zanche – and her relationship with Vittoria – can be fully appreciated. Arguing that we can see in Zanche's characterization "a site on which contemporary fears and anxieties . . . are projected," Sheeha questions any assumption that Webster's approach to Zanche's characterization as a servant yields to an easy interpretive formula for determining her "meaning" (and especially any interpretation heavily inflected by modern values). Indeed, by focusing on how these fears and anxieties mostly

reflect contemporary concerns about upheavals in the dominant socio-political order, especially in relation to class and gender distinctions, she argues that the tragic end of the disobedient (and unrepentant) servant in *The White Devil* is intentionally left open to interpretation: it is possible to see Zanche as either “a celebration of her disobedience or perhaps as a statement about the extremity of her corruption.”

Rather than attempt to deflect or to justify Webster’s supposed violent excesses, the contribution from Holly Morton engages directly with the issue of violence in Webster by trying to assess two key components of his approach to dramatic representation: one, the degree to which his dramatic and theatrical traditions utilized violence and violent representations and, two, the normative experiences of violence to which his audience would on a daily basis be exposed. Combining materials from medieval drama and from visual representations of violence, as well as exploring evidence for the types of violent punishments common in Webster’s day, Morton constructs a picture of a world in which violence and threats of violence stand out neither as scandalous nor as anomalous features of the common experience of the members of the audience who might watch a Webster play. Morton shows that a spectator attending a Webster play would not in fact be exposed to any non-normative expressions of violence. Indeed, in cases where Webster uses violent imagery, his language often draws upon and links to the types of religious punishments which we can see depicted in prints and illustrations (interestingly, she examines the graphic violence found in Bible illustrations); as well, Webster’s imagery of violence often relates to the types of punishments openly witnessed on the streets of London. Seen in this context of common and even almost casual violence, Webster appears no more morbid, pathological, or prone to excess than was typical in the general social culture of the time.

The “Laboratory” contribution by Jonathan Culpeper, Dawn Archer, Alison Findlay, and Mike Thelwall (see the note by the journal’s general editor regarding the status of the “Laboratory” section of the journal) brings a unique closure to this volume on Webster’s “Theater of (Dis)obedience.” The authors’ interdisciplinary interests forge literary criticism, history of language, linguistics, and computer programming and analysis into a methodology which yields suggestive and valuable insights to help us think profitably about Webster’s language and artistic skills. The construction of corpus research materials has developed significantly in the past couple of decades to become a complex, subtle, and flexible tool for the analysis and understanding of language in its social contexts. As with other computer-reliant research materials, its real value does not end with its technologically inert output but with its capacity to initiate and encourage different perspectives on how to understand the data-field from which the corpus was produced. The systematic and technologically ordered output must still be investigated and interpreted, and the interpretations must be conceptualized to produce useful discussion about its “meaning.” The authors set out to produce data which could engage with the rubric of this edition--as the question mark in their title “John Webster, the Dark and Violent Playwright?” indicates, they intend to confront the socio- or psychopathological meme head on to determine whether or not that meme fits with the empirical evidence found in the corpus. Rather than rest easy with a value-judgment reliant upon a vague “sense” that Webster’s plays are more violent and negative than those written by his contemporaries--his plays produce an “unwholesome chill”--

their method will involve “computer-assisted analyses of the language of emotion in his two most famous tragedies” because “Language is clearly central to the mediation of emotions.” In short, the authors consider it axiomatic that if we are to judge Webster’s character on the basis of the language of his (two) plays, then criticism must validate or repudiate the claim with empirical, not subjective, evidence. The results of their computer-generated corpus indicate that Webster’s language does not rely upon a greater degree of violent or emotional words than, say, is found in Shakespeare, nor does Webster’s language indicate a writer particularly obsessed with negative emotions. More relevantly, they point to Webster’s use of language in terms of genre--we should expect emotional and negative terms in a tragedy (and, obviously, a comedy would include more “happy” terms). Indeed, he shows no greater usage of negative terms than does Shakespeare. Thus, as a good dramatist Webster chose his language appropriate to his choice of genre, and readers should consider closely the authors’ discussion of Webster’s various and variable uses of “sad” and “sadness.” Interestingly, then, the authors’ computer-assisted analyses show that Webster’s two tragedies, as compared with Shakespeare’s tragedies, “do have an exceptionally small quantity of language associated with strong positive emotions.” If we wanted to explain how and why the socio- or psychopathological meme emerged and persisted, then the authors can point to this interesting lack of positive emotional terms. As interesting, Webster’s avoidance of positives produced a distinctive approach to the use of language in tragedy, an approach which should be considered in light of the authors’ comment that “Emotional language can have an effect on the speaker as much as on the hearer”--that is, Webster entered so intensely into the demands of his chosen genre that his imagination produced a work which both touches and tests the emotions of his spectators.

With the “Laboratory” piece by Culpeper, Archer, Findlay, and Thelwall, this special issue cyclically ends where it started: with an invitation, as any piece of research should do, to look differently, to think differently, and to feel differently about the phenomena before us. The essays collected here open up for critics and general readers alike new and important views on the unique artistic qualities and values which distinguish Webster’s drama, adding to the steadily growing critical recognition that watching or reading a Webster play offers us much more than his memes.

¹ A meme, by its nature, indicates a widely accepted view, perspective, assumption, opinion, or assessment which functions as a ready-to-hand interpretive “truth.” Widely spread, a meme infiltrates and integrates into cultural understanding. As such, they require little in the way of evidential support, though readers might note, for example, how we see them already established in many entries in *Webster: The White Devil and The Duchess of Malfi. A Casebook*, edited by Roger Holdsworth, Ian Jack’s “The Case of John Webster” providing a typical example (76-83). They form an obvious element in David Coleman’s summaries of the critical receptions of these two plays (55-66; 108-125), while the introductory paragraph to Jonathan Culpeper, Dawn Archer, Alison Findlay, and Mike Thelwall’s paper in this edition, in describing the film *Shakespeare in Love*’s characterisation of the young John Webster, indicates that the memes remain operative.

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