

# No SPRING TILL NOW:

## *The Countess of Pembroke and the John Webster Canon*

Stephanie Hopkins Hughes



HY does this seemingly innocent verse end with a quiet snarl? Was this song, sung near the end of Webster's *White Devil* by a grieving mother, no more than a touching flourish? Or was "the wolf that's foe to men" the playwright himself, out to dig up the truth about the cruel murder of a forgotten man? Are "robin-redbreast" and "the wren" simply stock characters from a nursery rhyme? Or is something deeper intended by this little verse?

Commentators on the Jacobean scene, both literary and historic, have sometimes noted similarities between the plot of Webster's *The White Devil* and a Court scandal involving the murder of a top government official, a scandal that rocked London for over two years and ended by toppling the regime in power. Similarities have been noted, but these have always been passed over as coincidental, as "life imitating art," because the date on the title page of the printed play puts it two years too early to be a comment on the murder scandal.

But what if the play *was* a comment on the murder? What if the playwright had been privy to information about the murder that only a Court insider could have had? What if Webster was sending an alarm to the Court community, and only later, when the scandal was a thing of the past, published his play as just a piece of entertainment, written too early to have any connection with the real situation it resembles? How much trouble would it have been to alter a single digit on that date on the title page? And who was John Webster, anyway?

Questions of authorial identity, of false information on title pages, that could not be asked for hundreds of years, can be asked now that we have the Authorship thesis to support such inquiries. Let's see what answers they bring.

### What scandal? Whose murder?

For a brief period from the spring of 1612 to the spring of 1613 it could be argued that Sir Thomas Overbury was the most influential man in England. As the personal secretary and friend of the King's favorite Sir Robert Carr (Viscount Rochester) anyone who sought the royal ear had to go through Carr, and to reach Carr, they had to go through Overbury. Since falling for Carr in

*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 robbed, sustain no harm;  
But keep the wolf far thence, that's foe to men,  
For with his nails he'll dig them up again.*

The White Devil, Act V Scene 4

1607, King James had rapidly metamorphosed the vapid youth into a knight, then a viscount, giving him one top level Court position after another as they became available. Since "sweet Robin" was neither interested in nor capable of performing the duties that accompanied these offices, it was his able and well-educated secretary who dealt with the day-to-day business of his offices and, in the process, made himself indispensable to both his master and the King, a situation that pleased hardly anyone but Overbury.

Although James made peace as best he could among the various Court factions when he took the throne in 1603, his poor management tactics caused endless problems for the functionaries that ran the government. Early on he had allowed Robert Cecil (now Earl of Salisbury) and Henry Howard, (now Earl of Northampton) to maneuver their way into the top offices. Northampton's nephew Thomas (now Earl of Suffolk) completed the faction that surrounded the King. A third Howard, Charles (Earl of Nottingham), still held the seat on the Privy Council he had been given years earlier by Queen Elizabeth.



*Sir Robert Carr*

Needless to say, this preponderance of Howards at the top level distressed Elizabethan courtiers who had hoped for some role in the new government. These tended to gather around Queen Anne, herself an outsider at her husband's Court. Anne kept Court at her private residence, the great river estate known as Somerset House on the Strand (directly across from Cecil House). This group included the old Essex faction, the Earls of Southampton, Bedford, and Rutland and the young Earl of Essex. It also included the Herberts, William, Earl of Pembroke, and his brother, Philip, Earl of Montgomery, their mother's brother, now Viscount Lisle, who held the post of Queen Anne's Lord Chamberlain. The offspring of Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford, were also part of this group: Henry the eighteenth Earl and his sister Susan, now Countess of Montgomery, Philip Herbert's wife. Also included were Lucy Harington, Countess of Bedford, who in time to come would be the central patroness of the group, and her cousin, Sir John Harington, Jr.. This group was as literary as it was political. Well-educated, many of them fluent in Latin and the modern continental languages, they admired classical literature and

---

Stephanie Hopkins Hughes, editor of THE OXFORDIAN, got her BA from Concordia University in Portland, Oregon after studies at Bennington College, Boston University, and Northeastern University. Since 1993 she has spoken regularly at Oxfordian conferences and published articles in Oxfordian newsletters, including "New Light on the Dark Lady," in the Fall 2000 SOS Newsletter in which she makes the case that poet/musician Emilia Bassano Lanier was the lover portrayed by Shakespeare/Oxford in Sonnets 127-152. As author of three pamphlets: in Oxford & Byron (1993), she explores the amazing similarities between these two writers' biographies; in The Great Reckoning: Who Killed Christopher Marlowe and Why? (1997) she argues that there is no solid evidence that Marlowe was ever a spy; and in The Relevance of Robert Greene to the Oxfordian Thesis (1997) she urges that the Greene canon represents a major part of the juvenilia of Shakespeare/Oxford. She is presently seeking a publisher for her book Shakespeare's Tutors: the Education of Edward de Vere.

patronized the foremost writers and poets of the day, Ben Jonson, John Donne, John Davies, and a host of lesser figures. But the professional writers were not alone, some of the lords and ladies wrote poetry and did translations themselves, which they passed around their coterie for reading and discussion. The Jacobean Court's fascination with plays and elaborate masques arose from the Queen's household (Brennan 107-8), whose interest in Shakespeare resulted in seven performances of his plays at Court in 1604-5. The King himself preferred hunting. He was known to fall asleep at plays (119).

In 1605, James tried to mend the gaps between the various factions by arranging alliances in the form of state marriages. Fifteen-year-old Robert Devereux, third Earl of Essex, was wed to Suffolk's thirteen-year-old daughter Frances Howard and Cecil's son William to another Suffolk daughter—an expensive maneuver that yielded few positive results.

1612

Years of experience as Elizabeth's Principal Secretary and representative in Parliament, plus the legacy bequeathed him by his powerful father, ensured that, no matter what offices might be held by others, as long as Robert Cecil lived it would be his policies that would dominate the Jacobean Court. But Cecil survived the advent of James for only nine years. Because he held so many offices (chiefly Lord Treasurer and Master of the Court of Wards), his death in early 1612 left a power vacuum at the top, one the Howards were eager to fill. The Essex faction was equally determined to get their share, while thirty-two-year-old William Herbert was ready for something more important than organizing entertainments for the Queen. The tension was compounded by the split between the Catholic Howards and the Protestant party over Cecil's recent peace agreement with Spain.

William Herbert, third Earl of Pembroke, was moving to a leadership role in the Protestant Party, a traditional role for the nephew of Sir Philip Sidney, still revered as the martyr who gave his life for the Protestant cause. Herbert made no secret of the fact that he desired the post of Lord Chamberlain. But rather than seek a balance by distributing Cecil's vacant offices among the various factions, James preferred to postpone hard choices. He transferred Suffolk from Lord Chamberlain to Lord Treasurer, giving his favorite, Carr, the post of Lord Chamberlain, while declaring that he would act as his own Principal Secretary!

The disgust this caused was overwhelmed by grief when that November the oldest son of the King and Queen, the nineteen-year-old Prince of Wales, died suddenly (some say of typhoid fever, some say smallpox). Prince Henry had begun to display the moral sense and statesmanship so lacking in his father. The thought that whatever foolishness the King might promote at a given moment could conceivably be mended once the Prince succeeded him had given the



*Northampton and Cecil*

Protestant party some hope, however distant. Now even this was dashed as they confronted a government controlled by the Howards and led by the devious and paranoid old Earl of Northampton. Grief was darkened further by suspicion of the Catholic Northampton, due to the fact that Henry had begun to demonstrate a strong preference for the Protestant cause and an obvious antipathy for Lord Northampton.

Despite these losses, a single channel to the King's ear remained open to the Protestants, Sir Thomas Overbury. Overbury remained a staunch member of the Protestant Party, firmly opposed to the Howard faction. As long as Overbury was advising him, Robert Carr remained aligned with Pembroke's party (Lindley 83). Events, however, were about to take an interesting turn.

### Enter Cupid



It was at some point in 1610-11 that Frances Howard, daughter of the Earl and Countess of Suffolk, fell in love with Robert Carr and decided that she must and would have him. Cupid's agent in this case took the unlikely form of her uncle Henry, Lord Northampton. Howard, one of the most intelligent and highly-educated men of his day, was also an inveterate plotter of whom much wickedness was suspected, if never proved. Now in his seventies, he had finally reached the position of political and financial power for which he had striven all his life.<sup>1</sup> With his niece married to the King's favorite, the Howard reign would be complete. Overbury, of course, would have to go.

Fanny, considered too young to cohabit at the time of her marriage to Essex in 1606, had remained with her parents while her young husband toured the continent for two years, but by the time he returned to take up married life she had drunk too deep of the licentious freedom of the Jacobean Court to give up her independence without a fight. Her passion for the King's favorite may have had less to do with his personal qualities than the fact that marriage to him meant a constant presence at Court while marriage to Essex meant a life lived mostly in the country, far from the theater, the shops and all that made life worth living for an aristocratic teenage beauty. That her passion fell serendipitously in line with the political ambitions of her parents—and more particularly those of her Uncle Henry—was hardly lost on the cynics, although they could not have known then, as we do today—being in possession of his letters—how deeply involved Northampton had been in orchestrating a romance between his niece and the sexually-ambivalent Carr.<sup>2</sup>

At first Overbury willingly assisted his master by composing the love letters that were *de rigueur* under the circumstances (Lindley 69), but as soon as he realized that plans were afoot to marry Carr to Frances, the frightened secretary, knowing that it would mean the end of his influential position, set himself against it, loud and shrill. At Northampton's suggestion, James attempted to silence him by appointing him ambassador to Russia and when the desperate secretary refused the commission—as Northampton no doubt suspected he would—James had him packed off to the

Tower for contempt, again at Northampton's suggestion (Peck 39).

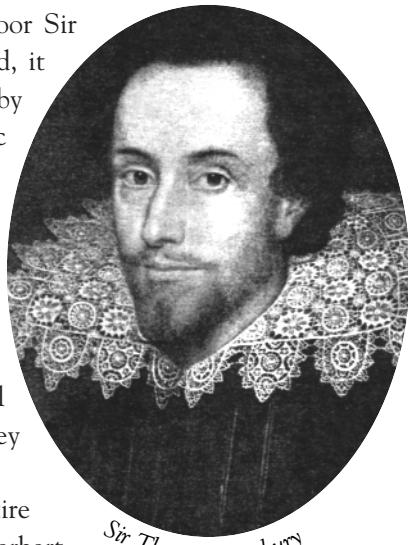
Meanwhile Frances and her family were pressuring the King for an annulment of her marriage to Essex. The bishops, concerned for their immortal souls, took some months before they could bring themselves to give in to the King's wishes. Finally they yielded, the annulment was achieved, and during the winter holidays of 1613-14, James threw his "dear Robin" a lavish Court wedding. Frances had her man and her Uncle Henry now wielded the kind of power that Robert Cecil had enjoyed. Ironically enough, he had no time to enjoy it. In less than three months he sickened and by July he was dead—of a gangrenous leg ulcer, it was said.

### The murder

Meanwhile, some nine months before Northampton's death, poor Sir Thomas Overbury died after weeks of horrendous suffering—poisoned, it was later revealed, by tarts laced with arsenic, supposedly provided by Frances.<sup>3</sup> When the sad story of Overbury's death finally went public over a year later it unleashed a demand for justice that dragged the Somersets and all who were in any way involved into court where they were subjected to horrendous public trials by legal eagles Chief Justice Sir Edward Coke and Chief Solicitor Sir Francis Bacon. The lesser figures were hanged. The King pardoned Frances and Robert—to the disgust of cynics and the writers of epigram. After some months in the Tower they were banished to the country. Frances's parents, the Earl and Countess of Suffolk, lost their Court positions. Four years later they were convicted of corruption and embezzlement.

With the disgrace of both Carr and Suffolk, by late 1615 the entire top tier of Court office became available. Thus it was that William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke, and along with him his brother Philip, Earl of Montgomery, the "incomparable paire of brethren" of the First Folio, acquired the access to office that they would hold to the end of the reign and beyond. Pembroke's office, Lord Chamberlain of the Royal Household, gave him complete control over Court entertainment, and a great deal of leverage with the acting and publishing communities of London. It was the office he had been preparing for since the days of Pembroke's Men, back in the nineties, when he was in his early teens. It was the post his uncle, Sir Robert Sidney, now Lord Lisle, was filling in Queen Anne's household. It was an office he would keep until his late forties, when he passed it on to his brother, thus ensuring that a Herbert would be Lord Chamberlain of the Royal Household as long as one of them was alive. Philip would hold it until the onset of Civil War in 1641.

Overbury died in September 1613. The Somersets were married in December. Northampton died in June 1614. Rumors that Overbury had been murdered began to reach the level of public documentation roughly a year later. The Somersets were placed under house arrest in October 1615, tried and convicted in May 1616, and imprisoned shortly after in the Tower. When confronted,



Sir Thomas Overbury

Frances quickly confessed and just as quickly was pardoned. Although Carr refused to confess, swearing that he had had nothing to do with the murder, he too was pardoned, perhaps because he knew too much that might be damaging to the King. Certainly he hinted as much.

But what is there to connect these events to the play?

### The plot of *The White Devil*

The main characters are the lady of the title, *Vittoria Corombona*; her lover and then husband the powerful Duke of *Bracciano*; her brother and the Duke's secretary, *Flamineo*; their mother *Cornelia*; Vittoria's first husband, *Camillo*; *Francisco de Medici*, Duke of Florence, and his brother *Monticelso*, *the Cardinal*; *Isabella*, their sister and first wife of Bracciano; *Marcello*, younger brother of Vittoria and Flamineo; *Lodovico*, a murderer for hire; and *Zanche*, Vittoria's Moorish maid.

Act I opens in a manner characteristic of Webster with the abrupt declaration, "Banished!" uttered by Lodovico, bitter at having been punished for murders he claims he committed at the behest of the Medici, who then deserted him. In Scene 2 the Duke of Bracciano is lured into a liaison with Vittoria by her brother Flamineo. Observing the seduction from a hidden corner, their mother Cornelia enters, cursing her daughter for her infidelity and her son for pimping for his sister. Infuriated, Flamineo justifies his behavior as necessary if he's to rise in the world.

Act II portrays Francisco di Medici and his brother Monticelso, the Cardinal, confronting Bracciano over his liaison with Vittoria. He defies them, and when they leave, spurns his wife (their sister) Isabella, when she begs for a kiss. Isabella shows her saintly nature as she protects her wayward husband by pretending to her dangerous brothers that it is she who has spurned the Duke, rather than the other way round. We see Bracciano and Flamineo plotting the murders of Isabella and Camillo and, in the final scene, a conjurer reveals to Bracciano, via a dumb show, the death of his Duchess after she kisses his poisoned portrait.

Act III Scene 2 consists of the Medici's trial of Vittoria for the murder of her husband. She protests when the prosecuting lawyer outlines the case against her in Latin, because, although she herself understands him, at least half of those who have come to hear her cause do not. Irritated with the lawyer's pompous verbosity, the Cardinal sends him away and takes it on himself to make the case against Vittoria, which consists of little more than name-calling and the fact that she holds expensive parties. To each point Vittoria responds with a spirited defense, concluding:

Sum up my faults I pray, and you shall find that beauty and gay clothes, a merry heart and a good stomach to a feast, are all, all the poor crimes that you can charge me with. In faith, my Lord, you might go pistol flies, the sport would be more noble. (3.2)

Vittoria is unjustly condemned to incarceration in a house of convertites or "penitent whores." The Cardinal remains behind to learn of his sister's death from her little son. News arrives that the Pope is on his deathbed and the cardinals are gathering to elect a new head of the Church. Francisco, plotting, writes a letter to Vittoria in which he pretends to confess his passion for her.

Act IV: The letter causes a realistically violent quarrel between Bracciano and Vittoria, who

bate each other until Flamineo assists the Duke in calming her. They plan to escape the plotting of Francisco by returning to Padua. Scene 3 shows the elevation of the Cardinal into Pope Sixtus V, who then coaxes out of Lodovico the plot to murder Vittoria. When the former Cardinal harshly condemns the plot, Lodovico decides to give it up. Soon, however, Lodovico receives money sent from the Pope, causing him to return to the plot in the belief that Monticelso's diatribe was mere posturing. But in fact the money comes from Ferdinand, who has instructed the messenger to tell Lodovico that it came from the Pope.

Act V begins with a gay procession following Bracciano's marriage to Vittoria. Francisco and Lodovico enter in disguise and are introduced to the Duke as brave Moorish soldiers. Flamineo reveals that he has promised to marry Zanche, his mother's maid servant, although he fears she knows too many of his secrets. Flamineo gets into a fight with his brother Marcello after Marcello insults Zanche. The inevitable bloodbath begins in Scene 2 when Flamineo, for no real reason, stabs Marcello to death. Refusing to believe that Marcello is dead, Cornelia attempts to revive him, then lies to the authorities to cover for Flamineo, hoping to keep at least one of her sons alive. In Scene 3 Bracciano staggers onstage in armor and in agony; his beaver (a pad between the face and the helmet) has been poisoned. His dying ramblings are brought to an end by Lodovico, who strangles him. Zanche then confesses to the disguised Francisco her knowledge of the murders of Isabella and Camillo and—in penance for her former silence—promises to steal her mistress's jewels so that she and the handsome Moorish stranger (Francisco in disguise) can run off and start a new life together. In Scene 4, Flamineo overhears his mother mourning his brother as she and her women clean his corpse. Bracciano's ghost appears to Flamineo, shows him a skull and throws dirt on him.

In Act 6 Flamineo, now frantic, accosts Vittoria in her chamber, demanding to know what she'll do for him now that she's inherited Bracciano's fortune. She tells him he'll get what Cain got for murdering his brother. He leaves briefly and returns in a rage with a set of pistols, ranting that he must fulfill his promise to Bracciano that no one would "enjoy" Vittoria after his death, adding that, with Bracciano gone, he himself has nothing to live for. When he insists that the women participate in a triple suicide, Zanche urges Vittoria to play along. Flamineo is to die first. Promising Flamineo that they will shoot each other as soon as he's dead, each woman takes a pistol. Both shoot him, but, just as they are congratulating themselves on his demise, up jumps Flamineo, still alive! The pistols weren't loaded! Ha ha ha! Just then the doors burst open to admit Lodovico and his henchmen, who throw off their disguises and, after much rhetoric, stab Vittoria, Zanche and Flamineo to death—whereupon Bracciano's young son Giovanni breaks in with his supporters. They shoot Lodovico and his crew, and the play ends with the stage littered with corpses—as required by the genre.

WEBSTER'S tragedy is loosely crafted out of a string of scenes, each depicting a moment of intense emotion, plotting, paranoia, or an eruption of violence. As the scenes follow one another in a downward spiral leading to the final bloodbath, the sensation for the audience is of being sucked into hell by a violent psychological maelstrom emanating from the central male characters. Although the play is based on a true story and retains both the actual names of those

involved and the outward form of the real events, this was no Greek-style tragedy intended to arouse grand sensations of pity and wonder at the fates of the mighty. Like a trip to Bedlam to see the lunatics,<sup>4</sup> this play was meant to horrify and disgust. It's filled with references to vomit, vermin and foul smells; the speeches require every sort of emotional extreme—ranting, raving, screaming and hysterical laughter.

The term *white devil* was in common use at the time, meaning someone whose attractive appearance masked an evil nature. It was used most often in referring to courtesans whose beauty lured men to their destruction. Since Webster's play was based on the life of a real Italian courtesan who flourished in the 1570s and '80s, this has always been understood to be the point of the title, but there may be more to it. A popular sermon preached in London in March, 1613 and published shortly after was also titled "The White Devil." The author, Thomas Adams, a clergyman who achieved popularity by haranguing Londoners from the pulpit at Paul's Cross, used it to denote a hypocrite who cloaks his sinful lifestyle in smooth language. Adams was more concerned with corrupt church officials than with courtesans (Waage 141). Thus Webster's title may be ironic, asking: who is the true "white devil" in this play: the temptress, or the Cardinal who contrives murders while he schemes to become Pope?

### The source of *The White Devil*

All of Europe was familiar with the story. The real Vittoria was born in 1557 to parents of minor gentry in a small town in Northern Italy. At sixteen, her astounding beauty encouraged her parents to take her to Rome, where they soon married her to an insignificant member of the Medici family. But when the powerful Duke of Bracciano showed an interest in the girl, Vittoria's ambitious mother quickly encouraged her to become his mistress and helped pave the way for their marriage by having her son-in-law murdered. Bracciano was already free to marry since his wife, Isabella de Medici, had died some years earlier, also under questionable circumstances.

Believing (or pretending to believe) that the Duke had murdered their sister and Vittoria had murdered their relative, her husband, the Medici brothers had Bracciano's marriage to Vittoria annulled. When they married again in secret, the brothers had Vittoria tried for her husband's murder, but the trial came to nothing, partly due to lack of evidence, partly to her phenomenal popularity with the people (Lucas 1.76, 84). She seems to have been a sort of Renaissance Eva Peron.

Some five years later, the Duke, whose health had never been good, died of cancer. Fearing that with her husband gone she was again vulnerable to their enemies, Vittoria sought sanctuary in Padua. This proved no solution, for she and her youngest brother were soon hunted down and murdered by Lodovico, a relative of Bracciano. Lodovico's motive remains obscure. Some attribute it to rage over the diversion of his inheritance from the Duke to Vittoria, others to frustrated sexual desire. The play portrays him as seeking revenge for the death of Isabella, the Duke's first wife, with whom he had been in love. Possibly he was on the Medici payroll, as the play also suggests, though his ferocious dedication to Vittoria's destruction argues more strongly for some form of passion. When Vittoria's adoring public saw her murdered body displayed in the town square, a great stab

wound in her naked breast, they attacked the building where Lodovico and his men were barricaded. Lodovico was captured and lynched. His retainers were tried, tortured and eventually executed by the Paduan authorities.

### Variations between the history and the play

Despite his adherence to the names, characters and action of the real story, a close examination reveals that Webster made a number of changes. This should be no surprise. Most playwrights find it necessary to simplify a complex tale to fit into two hours of stage time. But Webster's changes are bizarre in some cases, in others puzzling. His editor deals with this in some depth:

Webster has made Brachiano's Duchess and Vittoria's mother good characters instead of bad, Vittoria's husband a mere dolt in place of an unhappy youth of whom we know only that he loved and trusted and sacrificed himself too generously. His Cardinal has none of the greatness of Sixtus V and fades quite undramatically out of the action after amusing the audience with the pageantry of a Papal election. Nothing is preserved of the tragic irony of that twenty-fourth of April 1585 which saw Brachiano's [sic] final marriage and, an hour later, the election to the triple crown of the avenger he had frantically strained all his influence to exclude. Even the central vendetta of the play is different, and Brachiano's fall becomes revenge for the blood, not of Vittoria's husband, but of Brachiano's wife. Further, the murders of these two victims are linked by the playwright in time and in cause as they never were in reality and are effected in both cases by quite unhistoric means—a poisoned picture and a vaulting horse. Similarly the deaths of Brachiano and Vittoria are made to occur almost at the same time and in the same place—at Padua. Lodovico becomes, instead of a loyal kinsmen, the enemy and murderer of Brachiano and the lover of his Duchess. Webster has also added to Flamineo's already overburdened character the double fratricide, committed on Marcello, attempted on Vittoria; he has omitted the set siege of Lodovico by all Padua in arms; and he has added three mad scenes, two ghosts and a wealth of imaginative episode. (Lucas 86-87)

Of these changes, says Lucas, "The differences are obvious; [but] how far are they due to ignorance, how far to dramatic intention? Certain of the alterations have a definite appearance of design" (89). Yet, as he states earlier, "*The White Devil* contains many minor details which seem based on the actual facts in order to be fully understood" (87). However, as commentators never fail to note, none of these changes actually simplify the story; if anything, they make it less coherent. Harsh critics of Webster (and there are many) generally attribute this to his chaotic and amateurish writing technique. Least understandable is the most astonishing change of all, which is that Vittoria, from a villainess who—if she did not initiate the relationship with the Duke, acquiesced, also agreeing to the murder of her husband—has been transformed into a sympathetic character—if not a heroine, then the most appealing person in the play and certainly the one with the best lines.

### Comparisons with the Overbury murder scandal

These apparently purposeless changes make a great deal more sense when seen through the lens of the Overbury murder scandal. If Webster's intent was less to entertain his audience and more to awaken them to a situation unfolding behind the scenes at Court, he would have had to make it clear to them from the start which Court figure was really being portrayed by each of the characters. Thus Flamineo, whose only part in the real story was to introduce the Duke to his sister, possibly in all innocence, is portrayed as a devious paranoid, a man with a filthy mouth and an evil view of all humanity, a Machiavellian driven to plot and manipulate out of his fear of a forced return to the impoverished status of his early years—in other words, a caricature of the Earl of Northampton. Flamineo's efforts to effect a liaison between his sister, Vittoria, and his master, the Duke of Bracciano, reflect Northampton's efforts to bring his niece, Frances, together with the powerful Robert Carr, the King's favorite, whose standing at the Jacobean Court was the rough equivalent of Bracciano's status at the Papal Court. Flamineo's purpose, to raise himself to a level where he can feel secure, is identical to Northampton's. Vittoria's immoral maid, Zanche, is easily seen as a replica of the notorious Mrs. Turner who supplied Frances with the potions that were supposed to render her husband impotent, plus, possibly, the poison that killed Overbury.

Who then is Overbury, by this reckoning? As the partner of Carr, represented by Bracciano, Overbury's role in the play is supplied by Bracciano's first wife, Isabella. As Isabella is replaced in Bracciano's affections by the beautiful Vittoria, so Overbury was replaced in Carr's affections by Fanny Howard.<sup>5</sup> Ignoring the fact that the real Isabella died well before the Duke ever met Vittoria, Webster has Flamineo/ Northampton plot with Bracciano/Carr for the murder of Isabella/ Overbury so that he can marry Vittoria/ Frances. Despite Carr's protests of innocence, he was accused and eventually convicted. Certainly he ignored his poor secretary's desperate pleas for help. Thus the sweet-sad verse that Cornelia sang over her son's dead body was no innocent nursery rhyme. "Robin" was the standard diminutive for "Robert" and "the wren," a creature known for her wanton behavior, was Frances. "The wolf," of course, was the author.

**A**s with any comparison between two sets of events, some parts fit and some parts didn't. Those who were seeking to bring Overbury's murder to light were members of the Protestant party, making them comparable to the Medici who sought to avenge the murder of their sister Isabella. But since the Medici were the villains, and the playwright was obviously a member of the Protestant party himself, or at least working for it, he would hardly have wished to pursue the analogy. The real Flamineo was Vittoria's younger brother, the one murdered along with her in Padua, while Marcello was her older brother, the Duke's secretary; most likely Webster switched them because the name "Flamineo" better reflects the crazed, ranting nature of his character than does "Marcello." And although the two principals, Vittoria and Bracciano, match well with Fanny Howard and Robert Carr in terms of the roles they play in the story, like Flamineo, their personalities are very different from the originals. When tried for murder, Vittoria stands up to her persecutors with courage, defending herself readily with biting sarcasm, while Fanny pled guilty almost immediately,

her voice a whisper (Lindley 150). Nor was the bold Bracciano much like the stupid Robert Carr. Before their downfall, however, both Somersets would have been seen in the light of their lofty social position, that is, if the play was written before their fall.

Lucas wonders why Vittoria's husband is portrayed as a "mere dolt"—no one seems to have much respect for the young Earl of Essex, even members of his own party. He notes that "Webster has made Brachiano's Duchess and Vittoria's mother good characters instead of bad." If Vittoria represents Frances Howard, then Vittoria's mother, Cornelia, must represent Frances's mother, the unsavory Countess of Suffolk. Webster would no doubt have portrayed her as she deserved, and more, had it not meant losing the opportunity to dramatize something even more important, which we'll consider later. Lucas also wonders why Webster portrays Isabella as verging on sainthood when the real Isabella de Medici was infamous for her indiscretions and may even have been murdered by her own family to shut her mouth. But if the purpose of the play was to stimulate sympathy for Overbury, then Isabella, his dramatic counterpart, *must* be sympathetic. Lucas also wonders why the only interest shown by Webster in the dramatic Papal election of 1585 was a single scene that had nothing to do with the rest of the play. This because there was nothing about the papal election itself that served his purpose, although the glamour of the ceremony did serve to contrast nicely with the ugly behind-the-scenes conspiracy that followed.

Although in the first Act Vittoria seems to suggest, by means of an allegorical dream, the destruction of her husband and the Duke's wife, nothing after that indicates that she was involved with the death of either one. Webster, who, if we are correct about the play, must have known a great deal more than we do today about Overbury's death, may have thought Frances was guilty only of wishing him out of the way, a view completely at odds with that of her contemporaries and all later commentators. These may disagree about everything else, but not about Fanny's guilt, though none have tried to explain why she should continue to fear Overbury once he was locked away in the Tower with the King himself promoting her annulment and remarriage. Why risk damnation to kill an already defeated enemy? Overbury was politically naive, a conceited man who made it clear he wasn't about to go down in silence. As secretary to the King's favorite, he had naturally been privy to intimate stuff. The only persons beside Carr who had anything to fear from Overbury at that late date were the King and the Earl of Northampton.

IF it requires some patience on our part to see the parallels between the true stories of Frances and Vittoria and the plot of the play, such patience would not have been necessary for the original audience, particularly a Court audience. Habituated to recognize such subtexts, they would have grasped this one immediately. Most would have been familiar with the real Italian scandal that provided the basic plot of the play, while those who were present during the final days of Elizabeth's Court would remember the 1601 visit of Count Virginio Orsini, son of the real Duke of Bracciano and sole survivor of the vendetta that had taken the lives of so many members of his family.<sup>6</sup>

These comparisons hold up well for the first four acts of the play, but they fall apart at the end. Carr was not murdered as was Bracciano in the last act. It is unlikely that (*à la Flamineo*) Northampton made a pretense of a suicide pact with his niece and her servant; nor were all three stabbed

to death by servants of the King as in the play. The point at which the play departs from the history of the Overbury murder suggests that it was written and first performed at some point after the Howard/Carr marriage in December 1613, but before the political tide began to turn in mid-1614 with the death of Northampton in June and the fortuitous appearance of George Villiers in August. This puts the play almost a year before the scandal broke and a year-and-a-half before the trials and executions that brought it to its finish. The first three acts fit events up to early 1614. Since the last act of the real drama had yet to be played, Webster's finale was, if anything, just a warning.

Early modern audiences went to the theater expecting to find the kind of comparisons we are seeking here. It was through such subtle commentary that they derived the kind of inside information and opinion about current events that today we get from television talk shows and newspaper editorials. In their hunt for the playwright's hidden message a few inexact correspondences would have been no deterrence. The message would have reached them easily enough.

We think we know the nature of the message, but what about the messenger?

### Who was John Webster?

For the first three centuries of Webster scholarship, the answer to this question was simply "we don't know." Until 1974, all that was known about him was that he was the son of a London coach-maker. Even after researcher Mary Edmond managed to extract some facts from the London archives (Bradbrook 1, 10), nothing she found shows any real evidence for a life lived as a playwright or connects with anyone or anything in his plays, except perhaps for a couple of mentions of a "caroche" (French for coach).

As one of the many early modern authors from modest and/or illiterate backgrounds who lack anything resembling a writer's biography and whose writings are replete with Courtly themes and tropes, Webster's biography raises the same sort of suspicions raised by the biographies of Richard Edwards, Edmund Spenser, George Pettie, Robert Greene, Thomas Nashe, Thomas Watson, John Lyly, Thomas Lodge, Thomas Kyd, and, of course, most egregiously, Shakspere of Stratford.

Webster's father, John Webster Sr., was among the first to move from making the furniture and trappings for jousts to making coaches, an industry that called for the same skills and materials (11-12). Like jousting apparatus, coaches were things that only the nobility could afford, so their business brought the Websters into contact with the nobility. The 1624 title page of Webster's 1603 pageant for King James, *Monuments of Honor*, gives evidence that (like his father) John Webster was a member of the Merchant Taylors guild, while the epistle states that he was "made free" of that guild at some point (Holzknecht 302), a position of prestige in the trade community.

Records uncovered by Edmond reveal the standard pattern of a middle class merchant in the making: marriage to the daughter of a saddler with whom his father did business and the births (and deaths) of several children—nothing so far to suggest the life of a writer of imaginative literature. There is a reference to a small debt owed by John Webster to the playwright Thomas Dekker, but evidence of a business connection is not necessarily evidence of a writing partnership, or that the "John Webster" in question was the son and not the father. The Websters had dealings with many

in the theater community since they provided it with carts and pantomime wagons.

This is not to say that Webster's background in any way *prevented* him from becoming a writer; but getting born, attending a school where Latin plays may have been performed, marrying and eventually dying, is evidence only of a life, not necessarily one devoted to writing fiction. If Webster the coachmaker's son was also Webster the playwright, there should be at least minimal anecdotal information of the sort we have for Thomas Lodge, for instance, a writer from almost the same level of London society. In fact, there should be more, for unlike Lodge, Webster shared billing with the top playwrights and producers of his time, and also unlike Lodge, who deserted fiction in his thirties to become a doctor, Webster's name continued to appear on the title pages of plays until 1634.

It's also obvious that Webster could not have considered writing a full time or even a part time occupation. Despite the twenty-year span supposedly covered by his writing career (1602–1624), his entire canon consists of three plays that bear his name alone plus seven that he shares with collaborators, with here and there an odd bit of other kinds of writing. In a twenty-year career, Webster left less published work than Marlowe, who died at twenty-nine, or Sidney, who died at thirty-two, while all but three of his plays were collaborations with four, even five, other writers. This looks more like the career of a dilettante than a professional, yet Webster's writing was too good to be that of a mere dilettante. There are critics who place him second only to Shakespeare.<sup>7</sup>

Webster also shares with Shakespeare the problem of the nature of his work, which is not what we would expect from a successful member of the rising mercantile class, a background ignored by Webster, whose plays are steeped in the decadent milieu of the Jacobean Court. Two hundred years before the birth of the Gothic they are as gothic as anything by Chateaubriand or Edgar Allan Poe. Three hundred years before Existentialism they are as harshly existential as Kierkegaard or Beckett. Nothing could be farther from the kind of work we would expect from one of the most industrious and pious groups ever to emerge, the eager and upwardly-mobile seventeenth-century London bourgeoisie, a class that produced several excellent writers. Ben Jonson and Christopher Marlowe are both from that class and its viewpoints are easily found in their work. Thomas Dekker and Thomas Deloney created popular protagonists for this working class audience; honest, hard-working heroes with a broad streak of cunning. Over time, as their audience increased in wealth and sophistication, the so-called citizen play would develop comedies—sometimes fairly dark but still comedies—that satirized London merchants and their wives. But neither type of play could be farther from the world of Webster's masterpieces.

### Webster's career

Webster's documented writing career began in 1602 when—as title pages confirm—he collaborated on three plays with four of Henslowe's professionals. The theatres were dark throughout most of the following year, due to the death of Queen Elizabeth and a fierce outbreak of the plague. In 1604 he contributed to the celebrations that welcomed the new King and in 1605 he collaborated with Dekker on two comedies. This was followed by a seven-year hiatus which ended (we are told) in 1612 with his first masterpiece, *The White Devil*—also his first solo flight. In 1613 he pub-

lished an elegy for Prince Henry. This was followed closely (it is guessed) by his second dramatic masterpiece, *The Duchess of Malfi*, also solo, in 1614. In 1615 several vignettes commonly attributed to Webster appeared in the sixth edition of Overbury's *Characters*, a popular work by the same courtier whose death was under investigation. In 1618 Webster's third and last solo effort, *The Devil's Law Case*, opened the season at the new Cockpit playhouse. His name was listed on two comedies published in 1624/25 in which he shared credit with Ford and Rowley. Although the Theater continued unabated until closed by Act of Parliament at the onset of the Civil War, nothing more by Webster was published after 1625. In 1634 he was referred to in the past tense.

Although it's barely possible that the coachmaker's son was drilled in the details by members of the Protestant Party, it seems unlikely that he was capable of the aristocratic attitudes or the hysterical style of *The White Devil*. But a single play is insufficient to conclude more than guesswork. Luckily Webster had a second masterpiece. That might offer some clues.

### The real Duchess

Like *The White Devil*, *The Duchess of Malfi* is based on reports of a scandal that took place in Italy within the memory of the older members of Webster's audience. News of the second marriage and later disappearance of the real Duchess of Amalfi was first reported in 1513 by the Italian writer Matheo Bandello, shortly after he personally witnessed the murder of her husband, Antonio Bologna, on the streets of Milan (Lucas 11). Bandello's account was later translated into French by Belleforest from whose version William Painter translated it into English for his popular 1567 *Painter's Pallace of Pleasure*, the source of many plays and novellas of the period.

The real-life Duchess of Amalfi was the younger widowed sister of two powerful Italian princes, The Duke of Calabria and the Cardinal of Aragon. Against their wishes, she married Antonio Bologna, whom she had hired as her household steward long after her husband's death. Antonio was beneath her in rank, though her equal in education and sensibility. Aware that her powerful brothers would regard her liaison with a man of lower rank as a dishonor to their family, they kept the marriage a secret, even managing to keep secret the births of two children. When her brother the Cardinal finally found out, he had the Duchess and her children kidnapped and probably murdered, then had her husband assassinated by hired killers, including one Bozolo, as Antonio waited in Naples for the promised return of his family. Although it isn't known exactly how she or the children died, they were never seen again (10).

*The full text of The Duchess of Malfi is available online at either of the following:*

<http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/%7Erbear/webster1.html#1>

<http://www.bartleby.com/47/4/11.html>



### The plot and cast of characters of *The Duchess*

Five characters dominate the play: *the Duchess*; Antonio Bologna, her household steward and secretly her husband; her powerful brothers: her twin, *Ferdinand*, Duke of Calabria and their older brother *the Cardinal of Aragon*; *Bosola*, her horse-keeper and spy for her brothers; and *Delio*, Antonio's friend, who acts as something of a chorus, reporting and reacting from the sidelines.

Act I is one long scene which begins with Delio welcoming Antonio back to Italy from the French Court. After Bosola enters and reveals his angry, misanthropic nature in a series of taunts, Delio describes the powerful brothers to Antonio: Ferdinand as a toad and the Cardinal as a spider. Ferdinand asks the Duchess to hire Bosola as her captain of horse, then demands of Bosola that he spy on her in return for getting the job. Alone with their sister, the brothers condemn widows who remarry. The Duchess swears to remain single, but laughs off their warning as soon as they leave as she has already decided to marry Antonio. In a lovely moment, the Duchess tells Antonio of her love and of "the misery of us that are born great. We are forced to woo because none dare woo us."

Act II takes place some two years later. Bosola suspects the Duchess is pregnant, but needs more proof, so gives her apricots, which cause her to go into labor ahead of schedule. Antonio orders the gates of the estate closed so no one can leave because the Duchess's jewelry is missing—a ruse to prevent disclosure of her condition. In Scene 3, outdoors at night, Bosola, sneaking about in search of information, runs into Antonio, who orders him to return to his quarters until morning when they will investigate whether the apricots were poisoned and if Bosola has stolen the jewels. After he leaves, Bosola finds the baby's horoscope, dropped by Antonio, which tells him all he needs to know. In Scene 5, Ferdinand, having heard from Bosola, rants to the Cardinal about their sister's wanton behavior and what he will do to her, though he is still ignorant of Antonio's true role.

In Act III, at Court, Bosola tells Ferdinand that he's discovered that the Duchess has had three children, but he's still ignorant of the father's identity. He gives Ferdinand the key to her bedchamber. In Scene 2, she and Antonio laugh and joke with each other in her bedroom. To tease her, Antonio sneaks out of the room as she continues to talk to him over her shoulder. She chatters on about their marriage and children until the silence causes her turn around and, where she thought to see her husband, she sees her brother instead.\* Ferdinand threatens her as yet unknown husband, condemning her lustful behavior, to which she responds: "Why should only I, of all the Princes of the world, be cased up, like a holy relic?" After

\*T.S. Eliot was so impressed by this scene that he incorporated it into his great poem, "The Wasteland":

"You have cause to love me,  
I did enter you in my heart  
Before ever you vouchsafed to call for the keys"  
With her back turned, her arms were bare,  
Fixed for such a question, her hands behind her hair,  
And the firelight shining where the muscle drew . . .  
There I suppose they found her  
As she turned  
To interrogate the silence fixed behind her.

*This kind of "borrowing" in Webster's time was not seen as plagiarism, but simply the impulse, to repeat, to give again, what moved one artist in the work of another.*

Ferdinand leaves, Bosola enters to tell her that her brother has said she is “undone.” She covers by explaining that it’s due to Antonio’s mismanagement of her accounts. She sends Bosola to call for help so she can persuade Antonio to flee to Ancona with their oldest son and wait for her there. Before Antonio has had a chance to leave, Bosola returns, so the Duchess feigns rage and pretends to fire Antonio. Bosola feigns admiration for Antonio, thereby tricking the Duchess into trusting him with their plans. In Scene 3 he tells Ferdinand and the Cardinal what he has learned about her. In Scene 4 the Cardinal banishes the Duchess and her children. After she says goodbye in Scene 5 to Antonio and their oldest son, Bosola has her arrested.

Act IV, Scene 1: at Ferdinand’s orders, Bosola arranges a display of waxworks that show the Duchess a vision of Antonio and the children lying dead. In Scene 2 a company of madmen are brought in to torment her further. They leap about, uttering satirical comments disguised as madman’s chatter. Bosola enters dressed as one of the madmen; he lets in the executioner, who strangles the Duchess, then her maid-servant. Ferdinand enters and, seeing his dead sister, utters the famous line: “Cover her face; mine eyes dazzle; she died young.” Ferdinand, suddenly remorseful, condemns Bosola for not refusing to obey his wicked orders. The Duchess revives just long enough to whisper “Antonio,” causing Bosola as well to show remorse.

Act V opens in Milan with Delio informing Antonio that his property has been seized by the Marquis de Pescara, acting on the Cardinal’s orders. In the second scene we see a doctor visit Ferdinand, who’s now afflicted with lycanthropy and behaves like a madman.<sup>8</sup> Pretending not to know that the Duchess is dead, the Cardinal sends Bosola to kill Antonio, explaining that this will free the Duchess so she can be married to someone appropriate. When Julia, the Cardinal’s mistress, attempts to seduce Bosola, he persuades her to coax the Cardinal into revealing his dark secret: the murder of the Duchess and her children by his order. The Cardinal makes Julia kiss the Bible to promise not to tell; she does so and dies; the Bible was poisoned. When Bosola presses the Cardinal to make good his promise of reward, the Cardinal insists on one last job, the murder of Antonio. In Scene 3 the Cardinal, in need of privacy so he can remove Julia’s body without being seen, orders his men not to come to him even if they hear him call for help.

Thinking he’s alone, the Cardinal considers openly how he’s going to kill Bosola as soon as Bosola has killed Antonio, but is overheard by Bosola. Antonio enters hoping to beg the Cardinal to return his wife and children. Bosola stabs Antonio, who dies after making a rather lengthy speech. Weirdly, Bosola praises Antonio as “the man I would have saved ‘bove my own life.” Bosola then turns to kill the Cardinal, whose cries for help are ignored by his men, as he instructed. Ferdinand enters, raving, and attacks the Cardinal. All three villains wound each other and die following lengthy philosophical statements. As in *White Devil*, the play ends with the arrival onstage of the next generation, the little son of the Duchess and Antonio, escorted by Delio.

**T**HE *Duchess of Malfi* is (marginally) a kinder, gentler play than *The White Devil*. The two love scenes between the Duchess and Antonio and the happy moments she shares with her maid-servant balance the brutality of the scenes with the evil brothers and Bosola’s ugly rants. *Duchess* is the example of Webster’s work most often chosen for anthologies. As in opera, the plot seems but

a peg on which to hang richly pungent rhetoric, witty aphorisms and rhyming couplets. It's still performed to commercial audiences today, something that can be said of few Jacobean dramas.

Although it was never entered in the Stationers' Register and remained unpublished until 1623, the title page of *The Duchess* gives 1613-14 as its date of first performance, also that "it was presented privately at the Blackfriars and publicly at the Globe, by the King's Majesty's Servants."

In most respects Webster stuck closer to the actual account than he did in *The White Devil*; closer that is, but for one thing. But that one thing is so radical that it cries out for explanation. Webster has turned what was originally an ordinary cautionary tale, one like so many others of the period, into an extraordinary feminist tract. Where some accounts, including that of Webster's primary source, Painter, portray her as a wanton who brings her fate on herself, Webster's Duchess is a brave, proud soul who refuses to be denied her birthright as a woman.

Who in the early seventeenth century would have written so intimately of pregnancy and cough medicine, with such understanding of how it must feel to be the one "to woo, who was not meant to woo," of leaving orders for her children's bedtime before facing the executioner, who knew how lady and maid-servant could have a relationship superceding that of mistress and servant, due to their common bondage as females? And even had he known, what man would have cared, or dared, to dramatize such matters for a male audience? A single play with a strong female protagonist is one thing, but two plays with the same radical viewpoint demand an explanation.

#### "We think caged birds sing when indeed they cry"<sup>9</sup>

I had read enough material from the period by then to know that fully-dimensional female characters simply did not exist in fictional works at that time. In the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, female characters were invariably stereotypes created by men, for men, and even (in England) acted by men. Shakespeare's women are the most real, but even his display a variety of male fantasy traits, and, unlike Webster's women, they are invariably matched with male characters of equal or surpassing strength and interest.

Yet here was a playwright for whom not one but both of his great plays are dominated by female protagonists, plays in which most of the women are stronger, more fully drawn, more believable and certainly more sympathetic than any of the men. Much of what gives the Duchess her depth are the many tender maternal touches, unnecessary to the plot, together with certain insights into the way a woman thinks that only another woman would find significant.<sup>10</sup> *The White Devil* also contains a litany of nasty anti-feminine remarks put in the mouths of the male villains—so many one would think the author was obsessed with them. The (for me) inescapable conclusion was that Webster was a stand-in for a female writer. What woman could have written these plays, one who was also a fierce anti-Papist and involved at the highest level in Jacobean Court politics?

Such a woman was easy to find. Mary Sidney, Dowager Countess of Pembroke, was not only the mother of the man who had the most to gain from investigating Overbury's death, she was also the only female Court personality who had published her own work.<sup>11</sup> Anyone who has read Mary's translations of the Psalms of David knows her to be a poet of surpassing power and flexibility,

passionate yet subtle. That she wrote nothing after the age of thirty-five has struck most of her commentators as unlikely, but where was the evidence for more? <sup>12</sup>

As for religious bias, Mary was raised in an atmosphere of devout Protestant piety, the sort that believes that politics is not only not a sin, it is a duty. Her brother Philip was an outspoken member of the Protestant Party at Elizabeth's Court, arguing whenever he had occasion that England should assist their Protestant brethren in the low countries in their fight to keep Spain from adding them to their Catholic empire. He ended by giving his life for the cause.

These two plays, the first attributed to Webster sans collaborators, reveal a writer in the full maturity of a serious career, a profile that fits Mary, who was by then in her mid-forties with translations and long poems to her credit. *The Duchess* and *The Devil* have both had a strenuous going-over by nineteenth- and twentieth-century literary scholars, revealing Webster's knowledge of the Geneva Bible and of contemporary French literature, particularly Huguenot moralistic literature, a rather idiosyncratic list of sources, all prominent features of Mary's training and personal interests. Little has been said of his classical references, which her education would have given her as well.<sup>12</sup> Mary also had the inside knowledge of the Court community as revealed in scores of details in the two great plays, hardly the sort that could have been picked up by a coachmaker's son.

Yet, apart from the plots and details of these plays it is their tone—hypersensitive, witty, world-weary, even at times hysterical—that is so intensely aristocratic in its nature. This was not the satire of the upper classes that would be seen in the citizen comedies of Jonson or Middleton. This was the self-disgust of someone writing about their own kind with vengefulness and fury. This was bitter family stuff: son versus mother, brother versus sister, brother versus brother. Much of the dialogue throughout both plays is family quarreling at its most devastating, the kind of cruel wit for which the British upper classes are still infamous.

### Mary's story

Born into a family of immense importance, for most of Mary's childhood her father served as President of the Council of Wales and also for a time, Lord Deputy of Ireland. Mary grew up worshipping her brother, Philip, seven years her senior, who left home for school when she was three. Years later, when he turned to his sister at a low point in his Court career, it was she who fostered his development as a poet and storyteller (Waller Pembroke 45). By virtue of her marriage to the powerful second Earl of Pembroke, by sixteen she was elevated to the peerage and mistress of five estates. By eighteen she was, in many ways, the most influential member of the Sidney family. In her husband's arena, the Welsh border country, she was probably more important than the Queen, who was known to the Welsh only by hearsay. By twenty-three she was the mother of four children, the older boys the "incomparable brethren" of Shakespeare's First Folio.

But in 1586, one after another, three of the four pillars of Mary's personal world collapsed. Her father died in May, her mother in August, and then in November, just after she had given birth to her second son, came news that Philip had died of a wound received in battle overseas.

### Sorrow “dissolved to ink”

Stricken with grief, Mary remained isolated at Wilton, the Pembroke estate in Wiltshire, drawing the traditional year of mourning out to two. During this time she kept her brother's memory alive by copying and editing his translations of the Psalms of David, his romance—written for her and dedicated to her, *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*, and the epoch-making sonnet cycle, *Astrophil and Stella*. As she went back and forth from her translations to her brother's writing, Mary's own poetic voice began to emerge (162).

Leicester's death in 1588 left the Sidney family without an advocate at Court. Mary decided it was time to cast off mourning and take action. The English defeat of the Spanish Armada earlier that year meant that the November Accession Day festivities would bring the aristocracy to London for a massive celebration, the perfect occasion to launch her influence campaign. She ordered a stylish new wardrobe, dressed eighty retainers in the blue and gold of the Sidney colors, and made her entrance in a coach decorated—lest anyone be confused about where her allegiance lay—with the Sidney crest (Hannay 59), a coach she had ordered especially for the occasion.

### The reincarnation of Philip

“I rise in flames cried the phoenix” was a metaphor for Mary's flamboyant return to Court life among those who saw her as the reincarnation of her brother (Hannay 82), and as poets and other writers looked to her for the patronage they previously sought from Philip. In 1592 she published two of her own translations from French, and the following year, published an official version of her brother's *Arcadia*; thus violating at one stroke two powerful cultural conventions: one prohibiting the nobility from publishing under their own names and the other prohibiting women from publishing at all. She also “published” their combined translations of the Psalms of David in an elegant manuscript copy that was widely circulated at Court (193).

Vowing that she would pursue her brother's goals to the best of her ability and unable as a woman to do it with a sword, Mary—as her biographer Margaret Hannay puts it—took up his other weapon, the pen. Not only would she get him recognized for posterity as the great writer she believed him to be, she would take on his role as protector of poets and promoter of English literature. By publishing her own work under her own name she would encourage her male peers to publish. If Philip's death had cost Mary her dreams, it had also destroyed her inhibitions. What did it matter what people said here below? Her eye was fixed on posterity, whence her brother had already departed.<sup>14</sup> The full extent of her publishing activities during this period can only be conjectured—true as well of her involvement in the London theater. Surely it was she who was the real patron of the acting company known as Pembroke's Men, and not her busy and aging husband.<sup>15</sup> And who but she could have been “the Gentlewoman” of Nashe and Harvey's pamphlet duel of the same period (139-42)?<sup>16</sup> That it was she and her brother Robert Sidney who were responsible for the elegant anthology of poetry titled *The Phoenix Nest*, published in 1593, makes far more sense than any others that have been suggested.<sup>17</sup>

### Young William

As the last decade of the sixteenth century drew to a close and the old Earl's health continued to deteriorate, Mary became increasingly concerned that, should Pembroke die before William came of age, she and her son could fall victim to the Court of Wards. She did her best to finesse the situation, maintaining close touch, first with Lord Burghley, Master of the Court of Wards, and after his death, with Robert Cecil, now in his father's post. In hopes that contact with young William might influence the Queen and Cecil in his favor, she used her diplomatic skills to persuade Elizabeth to bring him to Court. There was talk that he might marry Cecil's niece (Oxford's daughter) Brigid de Vere.<sup>18</sup> If Mary could get William married before Pembroke died, they would both be out of reach of the Court of Wards.

William, however, was not to be manipulated, whether for his own good or anyone else's. No sooner had he got to Court than he impregnated one of the Queen's Maids of Honor, refused to marry her, and pouted childishly when banished from Her Majesty's Presence. He was still underage and unmarried when his father finally died in January 1601, but with only three months to go before he turned twenty-one, and with Cecil and the Queen perhaps anxious to prevent another young Earl from joining the Essex faction, William managed to escape the Court of Wards.

For those three months, however, it was up to Mary to maintain the estate left him by his father, specifically Cardiff Castle in Wales—no easy task. Many Welsh saw the Earl of Pembroke as a tyrant imposed by the English Crown. Confident that a woman who was not even Welsh would lack the political will to defy them, some of the more militant launched a campaign of harassment as soon as the old Earl died, defacing the castle walls and grounds, refusing to follow orders, and setting up their own courts in defiance of the one she was supposed to maintain by law (English law of course). When she refused to let this scare her away, they beat her servants, stole her jewels, and murdered her steward (177-82).

### "Banished"!

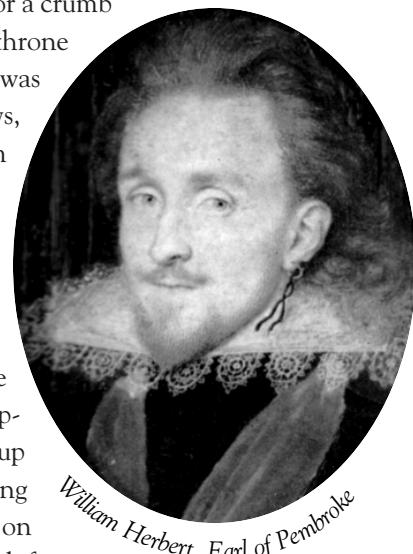
When William Herbert finally came of age in April of 1601 the vast estates and powers of the Pembroke earls came into the hands of a spoiled twenty-one-year-old with little knowledge of the world and no interest in the advice of his elders. At the same time, his mother Mary lost her beloved Wilton in Wiltshire, the nearby estates of Ivy Church and Ramsbury, the laboratory and gardens created and tended by her over the years. She lost her childhood homes: Ludlow Castle and Cardiff Castle in Wales, Baynard's Castle in London, with their familiar rooms, furnishings, grounds, ponds, rivers, gardens and support staffs. Just about everything that had been hers for twenty-five years, some for her entire life, now belonged to her son. Even the literary dedications that for so long had been the public symbol of her importance were now directed to the new Lord Pembroke. Three years later, when he made the traditional dynastic marriage, she lost even her name; the title *Countess of Pembroke* now belonged to her daughter-in-law. From this time on she would be referred to as "the Dowager Countess of Pembroke" or the "old Countess of Pembroke" (she was just

entering her forties) or—as the composer of her epitaph would put it—“Sidney’s sister, Pembroke’s mother.” Of course she had always known that it would happen eventually, but that could not have made it any easier. Mary was far from broke; she had her marriage jointure and a generous bequest from the old Earl; but it was clear she would have to make a new life for herself.

**A**t eighteen and twenty-one the incomparable brethren were not particularly interested in their mother’s problems. Mary had a hot temper and was used to getting her way, while William, who proved in time a master politician, had his future to think about.<sup>19</sup> There is evidence that the two of them did not speak during this period, possibly for several years.

It’s easy to see how the two young brothers would be swept up in the hysteria that surrounded the end of a long forty-year reign. The Court under James I must have seemed a brave new world to those who had languished at the Court of the old Queen, hoping for a crumb or two from the parsimonious royal hand. Having just acquired a throne with an exchequer infinitely greater than that of Scotland, James was freely dispensing largess to his new constituents. The Herbert boys, young, handsome, still unmarried, were especially favored. William invited James and his Court retinue to stay at Wilton until the plague was over. They ended by spending the major part of five months at the Pembroke estate throughout the autumn and early winter of 1603. Still unmarried, William perhaps had no choice but to ask his mother to serve as hostess (187).

Once the festivities of 1604 celebrating the coronation of the King and the weddings of her sons fade from the record, Mary disappears for ten years. According to her biographer, nothing has turned up to tell us where she was living, with whom or what she was doing (193).<sup>20</sup> She surfaces again in June 1614 as she is about to embark on a two-year tour of the Continent. From now on, letters to and from Germany document her activities at the Spa, a favorite watering hole for wealthy English travellers, and her relationship with a younger man, Dr. Matthew Lister (201). She returned in a hurry late in 1616 in an effort to reach Wilton in time to act as godmother to William’s firstborn, so at some point during the years when she was out of touch with history, the breach between herself and her son was mended. Whatever his behavior in 1604 at age twenty-three, by 1614 a decade of life at the Jacobean Court had matured William Herbert into an experienced, clever politician, patient in waiting yet capable of moving quickly when action was required. At a morally bankrupt Court where excellence was less a spur to advancement than it was a block, he perfected the gentle craft of acting without seeming to act. He not only survived, but gradually acquired, increased and maintained political power for thirty years, power he used to establish the Herbert family at the centers of government authority and Court society. When Mary died intestate in 1621, contemporaries commented on his generosity in sharing his mother’s estate with his brother Montgomery, his brother’s children, and with his mother’s long time companion, Dr. Lister (Waller Pembroke 28).



William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke

### The White Devil as a feminist tract

It's not difficult to understand why Mary might be willing, even eager, to use her pen to destroy Northampton and assist her son. With William at the heart of Court politics, she would have been privy, perhaps as soon as he was, to the rumors circulating Overbury's death. As "Webster," contributing enough new material by early in 1614 so that Overbury's *Characters* could be published in a new edition would have been one more effort by the "wolf . . . that's foe to men" to drag all that was left of poor forgotten Sir Thomas Overbury back to center stage.<sup>21</sup>

But Mary had a personal stake in the issues she raises in *The White Devil*, issues of small interest to a male playwright. Although she and William had achieved a detente at some point (probably with the death of his sister in 1606) deep wounds remained. Here was an opportunity to descant publicly on the sorrows of women in general and of mothers in particular. It was for this reason that the nature of Cornelia, which should have been a combination of the venal Countess of Suffolk and Vittoria's murderous mother, was changed into that of a decent, caring woman, since strict adherence to the analogue was less important than the opportunity to portray the feelings of a loving mother (Cornelia) tormented by a heartless son (Flamineo).

Since both were members of the same small Court community, Mary would have been well-acquainted with young Fanny Howard, if not intimately then certainly through personal observation and Court gossip, and as one who had herself been "given in marriage" at age fifteen to cement a political alliance, she would surely have sympathized with the reckless, unhappy girl. Thus it was, I believe, that the author of *The White Devil* created a version of Vittoria Corumbona who, despite her sins, was the most honest and appealing character in the play. Vittoria's ringing defense of her love for Bracciano, the high point of the play, may well be the author's defense of her own choice of partner, the young and handsome Dr. Lister.<sup>22</sup>

This speech occurs during the trial scene, the centerpiece of the play, in which Vittoria, who speaks little but sarcastic asides throughout the early part of the play, speaks convincingly in her own defense. It is evident that the author also regarded this scene as central, for although the original published version of the play has no other breaks for acts or scenes, this scene is set apart. If we are correct about the actual date of composition, Frances had not yet been brought to trial when the play was written, but a Howard trial was, of course, what the Pembroke faction craved. It was this trial, or rather, series of trials, that ultimately assured their ascendancy at Court. All of Webster's plays center around a trial that is, whether tragically or humorously, a travesty of justice.<sup>23</sup>

Webster's view, that it was not Vittoria's evil nature but her fatal beauty that got her into trouble, was very different from the portrait of Fanny Howard painted by the poets and playwrights who dramatized her afterwards, or the one accepted at face value by later historians. Uniformly they portray her as a whore, a demon, a poisoner. They revel in her downfall, describing her death of uterine cancer with disgusting relish. Only her most recent biographer, David Lindley, suggests that Frances was more sinned against than sinning, that she showed courage in struggling to free herself from the bondage of a loveless marriage, and morality in her effort to marry the man she loved (191-2). Most noblewomen would simply have remained in the marriage while taking lovers on the side.

### **The White Devil as political coup**

To use this play as an opening move in a complex political conspiracy may have been risky, but during the winter of 1613/14 the Pembroke faction must have felt they had to use whatever means they could to stop Northampton. Mary would have known him well enough to put some identifying phrases in the mouth of Flamineo, nor would a Court audience be in any doubt about his original, particularly if Perkins, the actor who played Flamineo and who was praised by Webster in his preface, managed a convincing imitation. It's most unlikely that the first audience was public. And even if Northampton saw or heard about the play, what was the old devil to do? He had already attacked playwrights like Ben Jonson and George Wither for what he regarded, no doubt correctly, as personal attacks on himself, yet to have raised the question of who was being pilloried as Flamineo would have been to open a can of worms that he could only pray would remain tightly sealed. His most likely response was the realization that the jig was up. His greatest stroke of luck was the fact that he died when he did—if, indeed, it was luck.

Finally, what about that title date—1612—how firmly fixed is it? There's no certainty about when the play was actually published since it was never registered with the Stationers, nor have I seen anywhere comments on the play quoted from contemporary documents. At this point the date of the first performance relies solely on the title page and the peculiarly descriptive preface. There are enough instances of incorrect dating on title pages of plays and other printed works that we needn't feel that title page dates are solid facts, never to be questioned (Chambers *Shakespeare* 133-5). Something may yet turn up to prove that the play was, as it says, produced for the first time in 1612. So far I know of no contemporary record that secures that date.

So much for *The White Devil*. But what about *The Duchess*? Does Webster's second, and some feel, even greater play show evidence of Mary's authorship? In fact, although *The Devil* ties in well with her politics and with her desire to further her son's ambitions, it is *The Duchess* that most reflects Mary's personal life and feelings.

### **Mary and *The Duchess of Malfi***

How can we doubt that the Countess of Pembroke felt a kinship with the Duchess of Malfi? From the popular 1566-67 collection, *Painter's Palace of Pleasure*, she would have learned the story of Giovanna d'Aragona. Like Mary, the Duchess was born into one of the premiere aristocratic families of her country. This was the noble house of Aragon, her own branch ruling the district of Calabria (Lucas 2.7), located in the toe of the Italian boot, one of the most distant from Rome—just as Mary was raised in Wales and Dublin, provinces the most distant from London. Both Mary and Giovanna were married at an early age (twelve and fifteen) to great noblemen and, although the dates are not given for the Duke of Amalfi, we may assume that, like the Earl of Pembroke, he was considerably older than his bride, since he died of gout when Giovanna was twenty. Both women lost a daughter named Catherine in infancy. Mary gave birth to a son just as she received news of her brother's death; similarly Giovanna gave birth to her husband's heir soon after his death (2.8).

As a capable administrator and one who was well aware from personal experience of the difficulties faced by a widow in administering her dead husband's estate, Mary would sympathize with Giovanna, who, alone and unmarried, was required to manage the dukedom for many years until her infant son came of age. Like Giovanna, Mary had two male relatives, brothers, who had a good deal of control over her fortunes. Most uniquely similar, Mary, like Giovanna, had fallen in love with a man from a lower station in society following the death of her husband.

Webster keeps more to the true story of the Duchess as told by Bandello and Painter than he does to the true story behind *The White Devil*, but where he deviates it's in ways that reflect situations in Mary Sidney's personal life, such as the scene where the Duchess declares her love to Antonio. Lucas terms it "exquisite wooing . . . Here are new colors for Webster . ." (19). Lucas speaks of the "charming, gay, spontaneous young sovereign of the earlier acts," whose "half-blush" so gracefully becomes her in the sudden wave of "unneeded shame" that follows her successful wooing. "Happily," says Lucas, "we have emerged from an age where that wooing was felt to be 'painful,' and it was necessary to defend or excuse this figure of fresh, high-spirited youth for loving with the body as well as with the soul" (21-22). Is Lucas ignorant of the fact that in Webster's own time such shamelessness on the part of a woman "of quality" was not merely unusual, it was considered dangerous to the social order?

In *The Duchess*, Mary may have been speaking for more than just herself. The Lady Arbella Stewart, whose strong claim to the throne worried the King, had secretly married, in the summer of 1610, Lord William Seymour, who also had the blood royal. This combination presented too great a threat to ignore, so James had the pair imprisoned in the Tower, where Arbella gave birth to two sons. During a daring escape in 1611, Seymour made it to France, but Arbella was captured and returned to the Tower, where, during the period the play was written (1613-14), she slowly went insane while Seymour waited helplessly in Paris—like Antonio in Milan. She died the following year. "I do not wish to exaggerate the resemblances," states Lucas with typical scholarly caution, "though it will be seen that there are several: but it is perhaps a little surprising that the authorities did not feel the subject of the persecuted Duchess a dangerous one for popular sympathy" (17).

Other noblewomen who suffered from James's misogynistic disdain were the widowed Anne Spencer, Lady Dorset, who was thrown into the Fleet in 1610 for importuning the King at a moment when he was not disposed to listen (Hannay 180), and Essex's sister, Penelope Devereux, Countess of Devonshire, whose long affair with Lord Charles Mountjoy was finally resolved in 1605 by her divorce from her husband, Lord Rich. The King allowed the divorce, but when she and Mountjoy married soon afterwards, he refused to acknowledge their marriage, thus making their five children illegitimate (Bradbrook 66, 151).

Although Bandello and Painter make it clear that the Duchess is afraid to let her brothers know of her marriage, neither suggests that they openly threatened her as in the play.<sup>24</sup> We don't know whether Mary's liaison with Dr. Lister caused her sons to threaten her—if with nothing else then at least with the loss of her annuity, should she marry him—but it is an easy guess. Grown sons are rarely happy when their mothers have affairs with younger men. During the years they spent together abroad, Mary made no secret of her relationship with Lister. Both Chamberlain and

Aubrey report that it was thought she married him. If so, like the Duchess, she would have had to keep it a secret because her husband's will stripped her of everything but her own dowry should she marry again. Lister was a physician to the nobility, so it's likely he and Mary got to know each other through his profession during her daughter's series of illnesses. Twenty-three-year-old Anne Herbert died in 1606. Thus, as with the Duchess and Antonio, their relationship began in the shadow of approaching death. Lucas sees an atmosphere of "profound, unalterable sadness" in the play:

Bosola is "melancholy"; and Antonio and the Duchess become so; and her brother Ferdinand goes mad with it; and the Cardinal is haunted by it. . . . We come to feel that this phantom of insane melancholia pursues, like a hereditary curse, the last generation of the House of Aragon in Amalfi. (2.21)

Can there be any doubt that Mary was depressed after losing her home, her coterie of writers, her identity as Countess of Pembroke, her close relationship with her son, and finally, her daughter?

There is reason to think also that there was a strain of mental instability in Mary's family. Her brother Philip shows symptoms of the kind of mood disorder that has haunted so many great artists (Jamison), both in his rages and depressions and in the brilliant innovation of his poetry. Despite his supposed cruelty, neither Bandello nor Painter portray the Duke of Calabria as insane, as he is portrayed in Webster's play, where, after pointlessly torturing his sister and having her strangled, he proceeds, in a weirdly realistic scene, to go completely mad. Contemporary reports suggest that Mary's younger son Philip was emotionally unstable. Although there is much to suggest that he could be charming and perceptive, a modern historian terms him "foul-tempered and foul-mouthed, with a nasty streak of malice"; another: "violent and contemptible, indeed, almost crazy"; while his second wife, Lady Ann Clifford, described him as "of a discerning spirit, but extremely choleric by nature" (Brennan 205-6). Webster's Duke is more like Philip Herbert than any of Webster's sources.

When Flamineo's mother in *The White Devil* castigates her son for pimping his sister to the nobleman whom he serves, he taunts her with his poverty, the reason, he claims, why he must pander to his employer's lowest appetites if he's to rise in the world. At the time the play was written, Mary's son Philip was maintaining his high place at Court primarily by means of his physical appeal to the homosexual King.<sup>25</sup> Even their reasons were the same, for although William, as the Pembroke heir, had been well-provided for, we know that Philip, as a second son, had not. Even in middle age he was able to contribute only a small portion to the dowry required to acquire a good marriage for his oldest son, relying on his wealthier brother to provide the rest (Brennan 179).<sup>26</sup>

But, was Mary truly so angry that she would satirize her own sons so harshly?

#### "Hell hath no fury . . ."

For some years early in the seventeenth century we can be certain that Mary felt herself "a woman scorned"—by the King as well as her sons. We know that Mary and William were not on speaking terms at some point during the early years of this period. Her brother Robert (Viscount Lisle) wrote to his wife in 1604 that William might not want to come to a family gathering if he

knew that his mother would be there (Hannay 188), a break that apparently had something to do with Mary's former steward, Edmund Mathew (180).<sup>27</sup>

Mathew, a member of the Welsh faction that sought the removal of the Pembroke's early on, had angered Mary for a number of reasons (173-8). According to her, he had one of his henchman attack her steward, Hugh Davyd, while he was on his way to London with the money and jewels she needed for the funeral obsequies for Queen Elizabeth. This henchman stole her valuables from her steward, beating him so severely in the process that he died soon after (181). When Mary tried to bring Mathew to justice she found herself up against the King's pathological unwillingness to get involved in disputes, an unwillingness intensified by his pathological mistrust of females. Meanwhile it seems that Mathew had succeeded in getting himself installed as a Justice of the Peace in Cardiff and in attaching himself to the King and so to William Herbert as well.

Mary petitioned the King and his ministers for two years with no success. In a letter written in July 1603 to Julius Caesar, James's Master of Requests, she said that although she knew that Caesar might wish to help her, she realized he must be powerless, adding, "Well then must I work otherwise what I may" (180). Shortly before her son's marriage, she wrote a letter to his soon-to-be in-laws, the Earl and Countess of Shrewsbury, in which she referred to Mathew as "such a monster as hath divided mine own from me, he that was held the dearest part of me" (183). Other letters indicate that she felt that Mathew had caused her to lose face with the Court community. She did manage finally to bring him to trial in 1605. Although the outcome remains unknown, it's unlikely that she got what she wanted. After all, by 1605, no one had anything to gain in assisting a woman who was, by then, only the mother of her grown sons and the widow of her dead husband.

The fact that these problems with Mathew developed after he quit (or was fired) as steward of one of the Pembroke estates (173), suggests a possible connection between the fictional Bosola of *The Duchess of Malfi* and the real Mathew. In terms of time onstage and number of lines, Bosola is the most important character in the play, more important even than the Duchess, who has far fewer lines. But while the Duchess is complete as a character, Bosola, though intriguing, is ultimately a psychological dead-end. His motives don't make sense. His compassion for both the Duchess and Antonio, even as he prepares to destroy them, takes his character in a direction that is never resolved. Since it's clear that Bosola has already suffered imprisonment in the galleys for having trusted the Cardinal in an earlier murder scheme, his naive surprise when he is denied his reward at the end can't help but ring false.

Mary was angry at Mathew for what she believed was his involvement in the theft of her jewels and money and the death of her steward. While the steward's death may be reflected in the numerous deaths laid at Bosola's door, theft of jewels or money belonging to the Duchess also plays a part at two points in the play: once when Antonio needs an excuse to keep the servants in their quarters, and again when the Duchess needs an excuse to fire Antonio so he can make his escape. Neither of these incidents derive from Bandello or Painter; both were created by the playwright. They don't fit Mary's situation exactly, but they may show that misuse of funds and theft of jewels were readily called to mind while creating incidents involving Bosola.

As with *The Devil*, the plot of *The Duchess* parts company with its sources after the third act

at the same place that Mary's life experience necessarily parts company with the Duchess's story. (For the rest of the play, she is simply improvising, wallowing in madness and gore.) But up to that point the only difference between her personal experience and that of the Italian Duchess is the fact that the Duchess is tormented by her brothers, while Mary's problems (not quite so dire) lay with her immature sons. Still, the point is clear: both brothers and sons misused power wrongly given by a patriarchal society fixated on preserving masculine prerogative.

Did Mary Sidney use the stage to make her case against Mathew before her community? In 1603, Mary had used the expression "then must I work otherwise what I may." As confidential secretary to her irascible husband for twenty years (153), she had become adept at using her pen to persuade and mollify. It is impossible to read this play without getting the feeling that its use of strong language and disturbing events were devices intended to have the opposite effect. Did she overstate her case? Perhaps—but no doubt she had a grand time doing it, and worked off a good deal of piss and vinegar in the process. For this is one of the great uses of art, particularly the art of the theater, where an author's personal rage can leave a stagefull of bloody corpses that, as soon as the curtain falls, spring magically to life, ready to do it all over again at tomorrow's matinée.

### Webster's idiosyncratic style

"We seem to detect . . . an undertone of personal grievance and disappointment with the world, as we read [Webster's] growling prefaces or watch his characters rend one another and the whole human race," says Webster's editor: "he needed some impulse like anger. . ." (Lucas 1.32). In fact, *The White Devil* is one long howl of rage. The language is as dark as its plot; metaphors of death abound, images of wolves, ravens, rats, lice, festering wounds, putrid smells. Villains in both plays revel in the nastiest kind of sexual innuendo and imagery. In *The Duchess*, this ferocity is tempered to some extent with sorrow. But four years after *The Duchess*, Webster's next play (and last written without a collaborator) *The Devil's Law Case*, is much lighter in tone. From now on he treats with a wry cynicism bordering on farce the very things he took so seriously in his earlier plays.

This change in tone conforms to changes in the lives of Mary and her son. For some period of time preceding the composition of *The Devil* and *The Duchess*, we know that they were not on speaking terms, but by 1619, when *The Devil's Law Case* was written in a much lighter and more upbeat tone, the two were once again on good terms. William had achieved high office and was rapidly building a power base that would last for generations, while Mary had succeeded in making a new life for herself with the partner of her choice.

There are several shooting metaphors in the plays and much use of shooting terms. We know that Mary liked to shoot; letters mention her shooting parties while at the Spa (Hannay 196). The plays contain metaphors based on chemistry and many references to particular potions and poisons. We know that she created and maintained a lab in her home at Wilton where Sir Walter Raleigh's half-brother Adrian Gilbert assisted her in distilling medicines and perfumes (130). Commentators have sought without much success for sources for Webster's frequent references to Irish customs (Lucas 1.68), things Mary would easily recall from her childhood in Dublin (Hannay 18).

All of Webster's plays feature maternal emotions, those of the mother of grown children in *The White Devil*, and those of a mother of small children in *The Duchess*. Mary knew well the joys and sorrows of motherhood. Of her four children, only the boys achieved adulthood; both daughters died, one as a three-year-old, the other in her early twenties.

Even the earliest works that bear Webster's name show connections to Mary Sidney. *Caesar's Fall*, the first play to credit Webster (along with almost every writer who ever worked for Henslowe) deals with a subject that she addressed in her 1592 translation of Garnier's *Antonie*. The second play, *Lady Jane Grey*, in which credit is shared with Thomas Dekker, dramatized a subject familiar to Mary as a major chapter in her own family history.<sup>28</sup> It was followed by *Sir Thomas Wyatt*, also written in collaboration with Dekker, in which Mary's uncle Guildford is portrayed as the unwitting victim of a ruthless power struggle. In his farewell speech at the block, Wyatt notes that because his cause is lost, Philip of Spain will soon be taking over England. The play was staged in 1605 just as peace was being signed with the Spanish (Bradbrook 102), a peace hateful to the Pembroke faction.

### **Was Mary Sidney the true author of the Webster canon?**

Taking these connections one at a time, we might well question the attribution as far-fetched, but seen in its entirety it's hard to dispute. The way the facts of the Overbury murder scandal fit the changes to the Vittoria Corumbona story in *The White Devil* together with the desperation of the Protestant Party in 1613-14, their need to do something to oust Carr and Northampton; the similarities between the cruel treatment of the Duchess of Malfi by her male relatives and Mary's frustration with her sons; the similarity of the Duchess's situation in having to hide her marriage to a social inferior to Mary's situation with her lover, whom she could not marry—or if she did marry, had to keep secret due to a clause in her dead husband's will. It's hard to see all of these similarities as mere coincidence.

But could it be that Webster worked for Mary—that she provided the story while he did the actual writing? No, for quite apart from the many connections between Mary's life and her politics and the plots of Webster's plays, the most convincing connections are his sources.

### **Webster's sources**

Sources are not something that can be transmitted to a ghost writer. In a time when it was considered appropriate to display one's erudition by quoting the pithy sayings of classical and continental writers—a practice that to us borders on plagiarism—Webster is considered the greatest “borrower” of all. “The reader is dismayed,” says one commentator, “to discover one after another of his favorite passages to be lifted straight out of Sidney or Montaigne” (Lucas 1.59).

All agree that it is Sir Philip Sidney's *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia* that is the work most frequently quoted in *The Duchess of Malfi*, sometimes word for word (Dent 5). Mary edited the most complete edition of her brother's pastoral romance in 1598, but it was in 1613 that the ultimate edition was published. It was in this that William Alexander, Earl of Stirling, “completed” the story that Sidney had left unfinished at his death, imitating Sidney's own style (Brennan 117).

Although Mary is not named as editor of this edition, it is unlikely that she who knew her brother's style better than anyone else would not have been closely involved in the production of this edition by someone so closely allied with herself and her family.<sup>29</sup> Conversely, as Bradbrook states:

Webster makes wide use of the classical tragic writing of William Alexander, Earl of Stirling, whose *Monarchical Tragedies* . . . were written for . . . the Countess of Pembroke and her circle . . . Webster . . . took Alexander's chorric maxims and put them into his dialogue, sharpened and improved by his mordant wit. . . . (48-9)

Webster's second most-frequently-quoted writer is Michel de Montaigne, in particular John Florio's translation of his *Essays* (Lucas 1.60). This was first published in 1603, but a second edition had been published in 1613. Florio had close ties to both the Sidneys and Pembrokes. He was involved in editing the first edition of Sidney's *Arcadia* in 1590 (Hannay 71) and it was he who translated the 1585 Italian report on Vittoria and Bracciano (Lucas 1.121). His father, Michaelangelo Florio, was employed by Leicester's father and had tutored the same Lady Jane Grey (Brennan 28), whose life was the subject of Webster's second play. Florio's first book was dedicated to Mary's uncle Leicester, and when he died in 1625, Florio left all his books to her son William (Hannay 74). Pure coincidence?

Webster liked to quote John Donne (Lucas 60). In Flamineo's rant during his pretended suicide, Waage finds an ironic application of the arguments for and against suicide as presented in Donne's *Biathanatos*, written around 1608-9 though not published until 1646 (161-7). Although Waage can only guess that Webster might have read Donne's work in manuscript, we can be reasonably certain that Mary did. In a community that entertained itself by exchanging manuscripts, Donne was closely allied with members of the Pembroke's intellectual circle. He referred in letters and in print to Mary's excellence as a poet (84). In 1660, an edition of William Herbert's poetry was published by John Donne, Jr., evidence that Donne and the third Earl had had the kind of personal relationship that such an exchange requires (Brennan 146).

Another source for Webster are the sermons of Thomas Adams, whose Paul's Cross sermon of March 7, 1613, titled "The White Devil," was published in 1615. Waage devotes all of Chapter IX of his book *The White Devil Discover'd* to Adams as a major source for Webster. All of Adams's works were dedicated to the Pembroke (Brennan 138).

In his chapter on Webster's sources, Dent states: "Of works more strictly in the *memento mori* tradition, only one I have seen seems at all probable as a source: Mornay's *Discourse of Life and Death* as translated by the Countess of Pembroke" (50).

A full examination of the connections between the sources known and used by Mary Sidney and those used by John Webster deserves an article (or chapter) all to itself. We can only give a hint of them here, but that hint suggests that a full review would provide all the proof needed to close the case for Mary as author of the Webster canon.

### Webster improves his sources

Webster remains, with Virgil and Horace, with Michel de Montaigne and Lawrence Sterne, one of the great writers whom borrowing has not impoverished, but enriched. Like Midas, what they touch they turn to gold. . . . Where Webster does make changes they are almost always for the better, to something more definite, more concrete, more poetical. (Lucas 63)

The significant term here is “concrete.” Webster compacts, sometimes to the point where the meaning is endangered, because in an effort to scan while keeping the word count as low as possible he will leave out articles, prepositions, even verbs. His speeches are like a series of jabs and lunges, short, sharp and deadly, a style that closely resembles that of Mary Sidney

as revealed in her translations of the Psalms and other poems. Commentators all praise Webster’s writing in similar terms: “economy,” “subtlety,” “spare brevity,” “laconic unexpectedness,” “the single deft touch,” while Mary’s biographer terms her translation of Garnier “succinct and terse” (Waller Pembroke 119), her translation of Petrarch “remarkable [for its] tightness of form . . . a triumph of tightly controlled, evocative verse” (150). Both the plays of John Webster and the works of Mary Sidney are among the most idiosyncratic of all writers of the period. What a coincidence that their idiosyncrasies should be so much alike.



Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke

### Too “unladylike” perhaps?

It might be argued that, although Webster shows an unusual interest in feminine subjects and their points of view, his style is simply too masculine to be the work of a member of “the gentle sex.” Harsh, abrupt, often violent, how is it possible that these plays reflect the mental processes of a seventeenth-century noblewoman, denied the kind of education and worldly experience that one would assume were the foundation for Webster’s plays? The traditional view of Mary is of an intellectual bluestocking, one who actively disliked the theater of Shakespeare (Hannay 122). Though bold to publish under her own name, in fact she never published anything that didn’t conform to traditional views of what was appropriate to a woman of her standing. A portrait of her in her sixties (above) shows her draped in pearls and lace, holding her Psalms. In later years, when her niece, Lady Mary Wroth, published her *roman à clef*, *The Countess of Montgomery’s Ourania*, Wroth was held to brutal public scorn by Sir Edward Denny for not following the precepts of her “virtuous and learned aunt,” whose pretensions to literary fame had extended no further than her translation of the Psalms (209).

There might be something to this argument were it not for the fact that as long as Mary was writing under a male persona she had no need to be “an example to her sex.” As “John Webster” she was free to be, not just herself, but more than herself—free to be the very opposite of the “lady-like” Countess of her portrait, free to be fiercely, even demoniacally masculine, swaggering and

filling the air with monstrous blasphemies and condemnations of Court society. Webster has been slighted for taking so much from books, but this is to be expected if "Webster" was actually a female writer whose main contact with the wider world of human experience was confined to reading. We know that Mary was attracted to masculine pursuits: she smoked cigars, she enjoyed shooting pistols, she was an amateur chemist, and she showed courage in publishing under her own name before any of her male peers dared to. That she would not wish to step outside the boundaries of what was considered appropriate to females in her persona as the Dowager Countess of Pembroke is not surprising, nor should it be surprising, considering her evident concern for her family and their good image that, as a genuine writer of great talent, she would delight in shedding her Countess persona so as to write as though she were in fact a coachman's son and bound by no conventions.

### "I am Duchess of Malfi still"!

We suggest that with her son's assumption of the estates and titles of the Pembroke earldom in April of 1601, thirty-nine-year-old Mary Pembroke returned to London and to her greatest love, literature, primarily that most exciting and influential form, plays for the stage, both private and public. We believe that she purchased or rented a house in London near the theaters—Crosby Hall on Bishopsgate Street has been frequently suggested (*Waller Pembroke* 27)—and that, because as a member of the highest level of the aristocracy it was unthinkable that her involvement with theatrical lowlife become known, she made an under-the-table deal with her coachmaker's son for the use of his identity, a deal that she, and later her sons, honored as long as Webster lived.

We suggest that Mary began her career as "John Webster" in 1602, shortly after she handed over the Pembroke estates to William, writing as a member of the team that wrote for Henslowe, where her early efforts were rendered stageworthy by professionals like Henry Chettle and Thomas Dekker, then for the Queen's Men in private performances in noble households and at Blackfriars; and finally after 1616, for the Queen's Men at the Red Bull in Clerkenwell and the Cockpit. Her many collaborators may or may not have known who actually wrote the draft versions of the early plays they rendered stageworthy, but we can be certain that the Lords Chamberlain of the Royal Household knew who wrote them and that they also knew how to keep it to themselves.

Mary and her sons may have been at loggerheads for awhile, but when suspicions aroused by Prince Henry's sudden death in 1612 were exacerbated by the death of Sir Thomas Overbury the following year, personal issues gave way to a mutual concern over the future of England. Two Protestant courtiers dead of poison, possibly three, seemed to be threatening England with the kind of bloody Mafia-type politics that was destroying Italy from within. To the Protestant party the villain was never the feckless Fanny Howard but her uncle, Henry Howard, Earl of Northampton. A more general cause was Papism, which these Protestants still saw as an evil system that tolerated and even promoted corruption. As patrons of the sciences as well as the arts, they also saw the Inquisition as a tyranny that set itself above the truth. To the Pembroke circle, Papism was a threat, not only to political freedom, but to intellectual and artistic freedom as well.

In an effort to strip the Howards of their power, Mary used her writing skills to provide the

Protestant party with works that carried a political subtext: in 1613, the memorial for Prince Henry, in 1614 *The White Devil* and *The Duchess*,<sup>30</sup> plus thirty-two new vignettes to be added to a new edition of Overbury's *Characters*, published in 1615. Although *The Duchess* was a far more personal play, it was also a ringing denunciation of the way the Stuart Court treated noblewomen like herself, Penelope Devereux, and poor Arbella Stuart.

That the Pembroke would use the stage and the press as means of manipulating public opinion cannot be doubted. Certainly they did, many times over. As Pembroke's biographer points out, the outpouring of anti-Papist literature published between 1604 and 1611 was all dedicated to William Pembroke (Brennan 121). The plays that satirized the Court, *Eastward Ho!*, *Isle of Gulls* and *The Tragedy of Byron*, were all produced at Blackfriars Theater, a five minute walk from Baynard's Castle, the Pembroke city mansion (114). Certainly Pembroke was behind the production in 1624 of Middleton's *Game at Chess* (Heinemann 166), a play intended to throw a wrench into the King's plans for a detente with Spain.

Nor did they confine their efforts to stage and press. Knowing that as long as Carr remained number one with James he would be invulnerable to prosecution for Overbury's death, in August 1615 Pembroke and his supporters purposely introduced the King to George Villiers, hoping that the attractive youth would edge Carr out of first place in the King's affections (Brennan 135). This may have been the single most effective stroke of all.

### **The true date of *The White Devil***

For what particular audience or event, then, was *The White Devil* written? Despite the detailed description in the epistle to the printed play of a failed public performance in 1612, it is unlikely that it was intended for widespread public performance at the time it was written. Most likely it was first performed in private for Queen Anne and her household. Embittered by her husband's callous treatment, shattered by the death of her son and frantic with suspicion of Northampton (Lindley 65), it would have been the Queen and her supporters who were most receptive to the desperate mood of the play. However false may be the date and the tale told by the epistle, there is no reason to doubt the title page statement that the play was "acted by the Queen's Majestie's Servants" or that its first public performance was at the Red Bull Theatre in Clerkenwell, or the note at the end of the play complimenting Richard Perkins on his performance as Flamineo. The Red Bull was the home of the Queen's Men,<sup>31</sup> and Perkins was their leading man. No doubt there was such a public performance at some point, though it was not necessarily the first, nor was it necessarily in that "so dull a time of" winter in 1612 as claimed by the play's published prologue.

Lindley mentions a large party held in February 1614 in celebration of the marriage of Lord Roxborough to which all the members of the Protestant Party were invited (Lindley 84). Plays were frequently performed at such gatherings. *The White Devil* could have been performed at this or a similar private gathering, one not attended by members of the King's party.

We know that Northampton was paranoid about the theatre. He had initiated Star Chamber proceedings against several playwrights for satirizing him.<sup>32</sup> His letters reveal that he was afraid of

the enmity of the Queen by early 1614, as also of Southampton and Essex (Lindley 84). In fact, his last letter, written in June of 1614 when he knew he was dying, begs Carr to do what he can to prevent Southampton and Pembroke from getting any of his offices after his death (Brennan 135).

## 1614

We believe that one of the other Court writers besides Oxford who used a stand-in to publish her work was Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke and that this stand-in was the son of her coach-maker, John Webster. We are led to this thesis by Webster's lack of a writer's biography, by the excellence of Mary's known writing and by the writer's need to reach an audience, a need frustrated by the constraints of the proscription against publishing by peers or courtiers seeking professional advancement. We believe that the fact that all of Webster's solo plays have female protagonists and that the feminine perspective is so prominent in these plays suggest a woman writer, that the aristocratic tone suggests a Court writer, that the anti-Papist tone suggests a member of the Protestant party, and since Webster's sources and his unusual style point towards Mary Sidney, that it is she who is, in fact, the author of most of John Webster's works.<sup>33</sup>

We believe that acknowledging Mary's authorship of the Webster canon is important, not only for what it says about her and about the authorship question, but also because it shows that Oxford's use of William Shakspere's name was not the anomaly it appears to be, but a means adopted by more than one Court writer to evade the problems attending an open acknowledgment of their published work. We believe that in time more Court writers will come to be matched with works attributed to the two dozen or so writers-without-bios from this period.

THERE'S a portrait of Mary dated March 12, 1614 in which the motto inscribed in the upper right hand corner reads: "No Spring Till Now" (page 107). We can only guess at its significance; obviously the date was meaningful for her. It is interesting that it falls in the middle of the brief period that we suspect saw the first private production of *The White Devil*. The date may signify the moment when she and William were officially reconciled. Or the moment when she and Lister cemented a relationship that would last until her death. Or even that moment in time—most important of all moments to a born playwright—when she stood in the back of a darkened theater and felt for the first time an audience respond to words that she, and she alone, had written. Whatever the specific meaning, it is curiously similar to a statement made by Flamineo in *The White Devil* when, with his sister safely married to the Duke, he finally feels himself secure: "In all the minutes of my life, Day ne'er broke till now. . . ."

Webster: "Day ne'er broke till now"; Sidney: "No Spring Till Now."\_\_\_\_\_ ♡

## Notes

1 Northampton was the oldest living son of Oxford's uncle, Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, "the poet earl." Northampton had been accused of urging his older brother, Thomas, Duke of Norfolk, into the plot to marry the Queen of Scots that ended his life in disgrace on the block in 1572. In 1576, Howard's Iago-like interference was a major cause of the breakup of Oxford's marriage (Ward 115-121).

2 There is evidence that Northampton acted as go-between, bringing his niece Carr's letters (Lindley 69). His own letters to Carr urging the relationship were considered too salacious to read aloud at Carr's trial (71).

3 When Overbury managed to survive the tarts he was finished off by an enema that was supposed to soothe him but that killed him instead. The truth of who actually administered it and who ordered it is apparently impossible to determine at this point (Lindley 147).

4 During the Elizabethan and Jacobean period, lunatics incarcerated at Bedlam were exhibited to visitors much as animals are exhibited at zoos today (WB), one of the "sights" to be taken in by visitors to London.

5 That the relationship between Carr and Overbury was homosexual and not just master/secretary was understood at the time (Lindley 126).

6 When Orsini visited England in 1601, he "was greeted by Lord Burghley and Gray's Inn prepared a show for him; while the Queen 'to show that she is not so old as some would have her,' danced galliards in his presence" (Lucas 88fn, qtd. from *Letters of John Chamberlain*). Even more intriguing: "a great-nephew of Cardinal Montalto (Sixtus V) and nephew of Vittoria's husband was in England, incognito" in August 1612 (Lindley, qtd. from Birch, *Life of Prince Henry*, 1760, p 286).

7 "Only since the Romantic revival has [Webster] risen to rival Marlowe and Jonson for the place of honor next Shakespeare himself. To Lamb and Swinburne indeed he seemed at this best almost Shakespeare's equal . . ." Swinburne wrote: "Except in Aeschylus, in Dante, and in Shakespeare, I at least do not know where to seek for passages which in sheer force of tragic and noble horror . . . may be set against the subtlest, the deepest, the sublimest passages of Webster" (Lucas 16). Rupert Brooke and T.S. Eliot were also fans.

8 Probably the first appearance ever of the Wolf Man on stage or screen.

9 Flamineo: Act V, Scene 4: *The White Devil*.

10 Just as white screenwriters and directors made movies for all-white audiences until the 1970s, with blacks portrayed as stereotypes, so sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century writers wrote for audiences they saw as predominantly male. The sexes lived in separate worlds; they were raised and educated apart and even married couples spent very little time with each other. Marriage was a business partnership (Stone 7, 99). It is extremely unlikely that any man then would know as much about the way a woman thinks as some men do today, or, knowing this would think it worthwhile to share with an audience they saw as mostly male.

11 This requires something of a caveat. Francis Bacon's mother, Anne Cooke, had been a tutor to Edward VI in her youth; her translation from Latin of Bishop Jewel's *Apologia for the Church of England* was published in 1564 (Dumaurier 15). Emilia Bassano Lanier, vaunted by A.L. Rowse as the Dark Lady of Shakespeare's Sonnets, published her own original poetry in 1611 in *Salve Deus Rex Judeorum*. But Lady Bacon's was a translation of a work of sober Protestant piety while Lanier, though "raised" at Court in the home of the Countess of Kent and later the mistress of Elizabeth's Lord Chamberlain, was only the daughter of a Court musician. Thus, strictly speaking, although Mary Pembroke's major published work (Robert Guarnier's *Antonie*, 1592) was a translation, it was a translation of a work of the imagination, while her rank guaranteed her permanent Court status.

12 Gary Waller calls her “the most undeservedly neglected writer of her age” (*Pembroke* i); and “. . . her writings add up to a frustratingly small amount when we consider the extremity of praise and dedication she received in her own age. . . .” (105). Margaret Hannay quotes Mary’s contemporary Francis Osborne, who stated in regard to Mary and Philip: “her pen was nothing short of his” (205) and lists letters by Mary that indicate that she wrote a great deal more than we have at present (256 fn150). After praising her for her patronage of poets, Francis Meres, in his *Wit’s Treasury* of 1597, terms her “a most delicate poet” which suggests that he had seen her poetry in manuscript (110). In the dedication of her 1611 book, *Lanier*, after complimenting Mary on her known works, speaks of the “many Books she writes that are more rare” (207).

13 R.W. Dent (1960) holds that “Webster . . . must have failed to realize how often his borrowings had ultimate classic origins. Thus the learned in his audience, unlike those in Jonson’s would have perceived more classical echoes than did the dramatist himself” (54). As with Shakespeare, orthodox scholars would not look for what they could not expect to find in the works of a man of Webster’s limited education. It’s true that Webster (like Shakespeare) uses classical references infrequently, but when he does, he uses them in the same offhand fashion as does Shakespeare and with similar awareness of their context.

14 Admittedly Mary was not risking much by publishing. The concerns that male Court writers had over risking their status or their eligibility for important or lucrative posts would not concern her since she would never get such a post anyway and nothing (but her son’s marriage) could take her title from her. Her brother was in no danger of losing status, of course, since he was dead.

15 A company known as “Pembroke’s Men” flourished for brief periods in 1593-95 and 1597-98. They appeared at a critical moment in the development of the commercial London theater, a period that saw the deaths of Christopher Marlowe and of his patron, Lord Strange, then fifth Earl of Derby, and a general shifting about from one company to another of actors, plays and patrons that has never been completely sorted out. Pembroke’s Men produced several of the earliest and most critically controversial of Shakespeare’s plays. (Chambers 128-34). They also produced the controversial *Isle of Dogs*.

16 Harvey’s claim in *Pierces Supererogation* (1593) that “the Gentlewoman has published more works in a month than Nashe published in his whole life” could hardly refer to anyone else (Hannay 140).

17 The title page gives the credit to one “R.S. of the Inner Temple,” unconvincingly identified as various individuals with those initials, although as far as I know, never to the most obvious candidate, Robert Sidney. The rare defense of Leicester, their uncle, certainly suggests a member of the Sidney family or retinue. Although I have found no evidence that Robert Sidney was a member of the Inner Temple, we do know that the Earl of Leicester was a member of the Inner Temple, and that Inns of Court memberships were often passed down to sons, and lacking sons, to nephews.

18 Historians invariably connect Brigid and Susan Vere either with their grandfather Burghley or with their uncle Robert Cecil, symptomatic of the way in which orthodox historians have persistently erased Oxford’s name from the history of this period.

19 Both Brennan and Waller give evidence of the extensive wheeling and dealing that Pembroke used in his first decade at Court to obtain the perquisites that had belonged to his father plus others that would insure his social and financial stability (*Romance* 87).

20 This long hiatus is broken at only one point: a letter to Robert Cecil in 1607 seeking a particular wardship. The letter was posted from Ditchley, home of Sir Henry Lee and Ann Vavasor (Hannay 192).

21 According to Muriel Bradbrook, the sixth edition of 1615 sold “like hotcakes.” (167)

22 That Lister was “handsome” was a contemporary opinion handed down and reported by John Aubrey (Hannay 201).

23 Frederick Waage devotes a chapter of his book on *The White Devil* to the many similarities between the Vittoria's trial and Raleigh's 1603 treason trial. As Waage states: Raleigh "was on trial for his values and beliefs, not for his actions. . . . The unprovable circumstantial charges against him are, as in the case of Vittoria, more or less a front for judging him simply for what he is." That Mary was deeply concerned about Raleigh's trial is clear from contemporary documents which show that while she was playing hostess at Wilton to the King in 1603, she urged James to spare the great courtier's life (Hannay 122-4). A letter from Dudley Carleton hints that Mary and Raleigh had been lovers at one time (Waller *Pembroke* 27).

24 Boklund states that, apart from Bandello, there is no historical evidence that the brothers were opposed to the marriage. Bandello, however, speaks with the authority of a bystander (3).

25 Raised in almost Puritan piety, Mary would have regarded Philip's relationship with James, if not with moral indignation then certainly with cynicism, particularly if at the same time Philip allowed himself to pass judgment on her relationship with Lister (Brennan 106). That Philip's relationship with the King was not purely sentimental is clear from an anecdote related by Brennan: "[In 1604] Philip Herbert was exploiting to the full the effect which his physical charms were having upon the King. When he was asked for an interpretation of his device [on a shield at a masque], a 'horse colt in a fair green field,' Philip explained that it signified, 'a colt of Bucephalus's race and had this virtue of his sire that none could mount him but one as great at least as Alexander.' The King, delighted, replied with a similar innuendo (108).

26 We should note that this boy was Pembroke's heir as well, since he had no legitimate son of his own.

27 Although Mary's letter to her in-laws puts the burden on Mathew, Gary Waller thinks that the trouble had to do with the fact that William had by then begun the long-term liaison with his married cousin, Lady Mary Wroth, that would eventually result in the birth of two (illegitimate) children (Waller *Romance* 94 et seq). That Mary should be unhappy about this is understandable. Wroth was the daughter of her brother Robert, a replacement in her affections for her own daughters, who had died. Wroth followed her aunt in having a genuine career as a writer, even managing to publish a novel, *The Countess of Montgomery's Urania* (*a roman à clef* based on her relationship with Pembroke) dedicated to her friend Susan Vere, Countess of Montgomery. Their friendship was facilitated by the close proximity of their country estates (88). Waller offers the interesting possibility that Wroth may be the grandmother of novelist Aphra Behn, which, if true, would mean that Mary Sidney founded something of a dynasty of women writers (126).

28 Lady Jane Grey, who had a modest claim to the throne, was crowned Queen in 1553 by Mary's great-uncle, John Dudley, (Earl of Warwick/Duke of Northumberland), in his attempt to continue as surrogate King of England. To this end he married poor scholarly little Jane to his oldest son, Mary's uncle, Guildford Dudley, another unfortunate innocent. They were both convicted of treason and beheaded.

29 One must suspect that these additions were Mary's own work published as by Alexander. Who but Mary, who had edited Philip so often, who had completed his Psalms, published his sonnets and who knew his style backwards and forwards, could be trusted to put the finishing touch on the book she had given so much effort to preserving. It was in any case an effort that paid off handsomely since this version of *The Arcadia* maintained best-seller status for two hundred years, far outshining other works of its time, including anything by Shakespeare. "It went through fifteen editions during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, until no gentleman's residence in England can have lacked a copy" (Duncan-Jones x).

30 The dates on the title pages have naturally required that *The Duchess* be seen as the later of the two great plays. Lucas speaks for most commentators when he says, "*The Duchess of Malfi* seems the work of a dramatist definitely older, in mind as well as in years, than the creator of *The White Devil*. There is here a sadder, tenderer, less violent mood. . . ." (2.18) True, but the two or three years he sees separating the play are hardly sufficient for a maturity that normally takes decades, nor is there any reason why rage and sorrow must

follow any particular order. Perhaps partly because *The Duchess* is a somewhat gentler play it is often considered the better play, though not all agree. Lucas himself is outspoken in his view that *The White Devil* is not only a better play, but a *much* better play. Based on evidence presented here, we agree that *The Duchess* was probably the earlier play, written while Mary was grieving for her daughter and Prince Henry. The opportunity to write straight from the heart sharpened the tools that she would then use for the *tour de force* that moral outrage produced in *The Devil*. Based on his studies of Webster's borrowing, Lucas suggests rather lightly that Webster was about halfway through *The Duchess* in late 1612 when he wrote the elegy for Prince Henry (2.3).

31 The Queen's Men was the same company known as Worcester's Men in Elizabeth's time. In 1602 Worcester's Men had combined with Oxford's Men. (Chambers 102).

32 Northampton's touchiness resulted in Star Chamber hearings for three of the major writers of the period: Jonson for *Sejanus*; Chapman for *The Tragedy of Byron*, and Wither for his satire *Abuses Stript and Whipt*, for which he was condemned to prison by a Star Chamber dominated by Northampton (Brennan 134).

33 Since the works published after Mary's death are the weakest of those attributed (in part) to Webster, it seems likely that after Mary's death, her sons allowed the name to be used as a front for someone else.



Mary Sidney, Dowager Countess of Pembroke

## Works Cited:

- WB World Book Encyclopedia, 1972.
- Boklund, Gunnar. *The Duchess of Malfi: Sources, Themes, Characters*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1962.
- Bradbrook, Muriel C. *John Webster: Citizen and Dramatist*. New York: Columbia UP, 1980.
- Brennan, Michael. *Literary Patronage in English Renaissance: The Pembroke Family*. London: Routledge, 1988.
- Chambers, E.K. *The Elizabethan Stage*. Vol 1. Oxford: Clarendon, 1923.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *William Shakespeare: A Study of Facts and Problems*. Oxford: OUP, 1930.
- Dent, R.W. *John Webster's Borrowing*. Berkeley: UCP, 1960.
- Dumaurier, Daphne. *Golden Lads*. Garden City: Doubleday, 1975.
- Duncan-Jones, Katherine, ed. *Sir Philip Sidney: The Old Arcadia*. 1985. Oxford: OUP 1994.
- Hannay, Margaret. *Philip's Phoenix*. Oxford: OUP, 1990.
- Heinemann, Margot. *Puritanism and Theatre: Thomas Middleton and Opposition Drama under the Early Stuarts*. Cambridge: CUP, 1980.
- Jamison, Kay Redfield. *Touched With Fire: Manic Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament*. New York: Free Press, 1993.
- Lindley, David. *The Trials of Frances Howard: Fact and Fiction at the Court of King James*. 1993. London: Routledge, 1996.
- Lucas, F.L. *The Complete Works of John Webster*. 4 vols. New York: Gordian Press, 1966.
- Miller, Ruth Loyd ed. *Shakespeare Identified as Edward de Vere, Seventeenth Earl of Oxford*. Vol 1. New York: Kennikat, 1975.
- Paylor, W.J., ed. *The Overburian Characters*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1936.
- Peck, Linda Levy. *Northampton: Patronage and Policy at the Court of James I*. London: George Allen, 1982.
- Waller, Gary. *The Sidney Family Romance*. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1945.
- Rowse, A.L. *The Poems of Shakespeare's Dark Lady*. New York: Potter, 1979.
- Stone, Lawrence. *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500-1800*. New York: Harper & Row, 1977.
- Waller, Gary. *Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke: A Critical Study of Her Writings and Literary Milieu*. Elizabethan & Renaissance Studies. Ed. Dr. James Hogg. Salzburg: Institut fur Anglistik und Amerikanistik Universitat Salzburg, 1979.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Sidney Family Romance: Mary Wroth, William Herbert, and the Early Modern Construction of Gender*. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1993.
- Ward, Bernard M. *The Seventeenth Earl of Oxford*. London: John Murray, 1928.
- Weiss, Rene, ed. *John Webster: The Duchess of Malfi and other plays*. Oxford World's Classics. Oxford: OUP, 1998.