An Unpublished Epigram, Possibly by John Webster

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Some giue there wiues these tytles
    good, faire sweete.
as they find beautie loue or honesty
but for to call them deare wiues
    were more meete,
though in the word be ambiguity
for they bring men to troble cost & care
then deare they are, be thy good swet or faire.

Those lines appear in manuscript, in an italic hand, in one of
the many impressions of Sir Thomas Overbury's A Wife. The copy
of the octavo containing them is that in the Henry E. Huntington
Library.¹ They appear at the bottom of the final page (S₃) after
the FINIS which terminates the little book, and, as far as has been
ascertained, they have never appeared in print.

The circumstances which led to the suggestion that the lines
may be the work of John Webster lie largely in the nature of ac-
cretions which occurred during the successive impressions of the
work to which it was appended. Overbury's poem itself, A Wife,
had first appeared in 1611, though no copy of that impression is re-
corded in the Short-Title Catalogue.² A Wife was probably written
to discourage Overbury's patron and employer, Sir Robert Carr, in
his pursuit of Frances, the wife of the Earl of Essex, as were per-
haps two or three of the Overbury "Characters." After Overbury's
death in The Tower in 1613, the publisher Lawrence Lisle pro-
duced the Second Impression, with the title page A Wife, Now the

¹ This poem is printed with the kind permission of the Trustees of the
Henry E. Huntington Library. A photographic reproduction of the poem
appears on page 14.
² The existence of a first impression of A Wife is indicated by a note in
manuscript in the British Museum's copy of the Fifteenth Impression.
Characters.

To square out a Character by our English lenell, it is a picture (real or personal) quaintie drawne in vario
ous collours, all of them heightned by one shadowing.

It is a quicke and soft touch of many
strings, all shuttine vp in one musical
close: It is wits descant on any plaine
song.

FINIS.

Sonne quire thes wyes thes tyles
as they finde haue thes honnesty
but for to call them drawrewies
were more meet,
in the word be ambiguity
for they bring men to trouble cost or care
true draw. they oue thsy good vnte or
faire.

Reproduction of sig. S3 of the Ninth Impression of A Wife.
A Bururons of tobacco.

Call him a broker of tobacco,
Bob bound up yield, so bad,
I can be turned in a proper
man and get a bottle of rums.
So well to make your self
all a take mud your self, only a
wind of wind of wind of tobacco
at bottle sale. Go talk no
knew mind to undo any man,
Go fly, go sail, go dog,
In God'a face I know no
power, but you know to speak
right you by few number.

She once was get wife to him, go
and broken to no use or purpose,
Upon cake & counter put your
Shall we be Almack in God's eye.

Shall will get inhouse and
saying M. Mr. For, in man can
this of God's weight,
I do not
love God, for my God I love plan
dealing, and in a question,
 Says I, go bound in liking to am
As king bound in tobacco, many
tried to say, so tall some, but
and making of firework s through
most rumour, you. Go held God
in God's face I can turn, God's eye.

Shall we be Almack in God's eye?

Reproduction of sig. S3* of the Ninth Impression of A Wife.
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Widdow, of Sir Thomas Overburye, as one of four impressions that were to appear in 1614. To make his book of respectable size, he introduced A Wife with many commendatory poems by Overbury's friends. He printed the first twenty-one of the Overbury "Characters," and he also printed a delightful group of items of "Conceited Newes" by Overbury and others of the courtiers. To the Fourth Impression Lisle added nine new characters; to the Sixth Impression (1615) he added forty-one more. The last addition falls into three groups, the third of which, thirty-two in number, have with good reason been attributed to John Webster.3

Of these thirty-two characters first presented in the Sixth Impression, one is "A Purueiour of Tobacco." This character did not appear in the Seventh Impression in 1616; it reappeared in the Eighth (also 1616), but it did not appear in the Ninth or in any of the eight other impressions that were to come out in the seventeenth century.

But some anonymous owner of a copy of the Ninth Impression perhaps thought that justice should be done. He wrote in manuscript, or caused to be written, on the verso of page S3 "A Purueiour of Tobacco." A copy of his handiwork, largely in the secretary hand, is here reproduced, perhaps for no more than antiquarian interest.4

It is likely that this unknown scribe may have been doing justice to John Webster, as well as making his own book complete. Since he also chose to reproduce on the recto of that same leaf the little poem quoted above, it seems not improbable that he knew it belonged to the writer of the "Purueiour."

The assignment to Webster of the thirty-two characters is based largely on close verbal parallels between them and Webster's undisputed work. There appears to be no such close kinship between "Some glue their wines" and any of Webster's lines, but one or two things suggest themselves. These wives are "good, faire


4 The Trustees of the Henry E. Huntington Library have granted permission to reproduce the ms. "Purueiour." A photographic reproduction appears on page 15. With the permission of The Folger Shakespeare Library the text of the character as it appeared in the Sixth Impression is here quoted for comparison with the ms. version.
sweete.” In *The Duchess of Malfi* in a passage that is almost a character (I,ii,113-137), Webster works altogether in terms of these three qualities, using the word *sweet* three times. In the character “A Fair and Happy Milkmaid” the charming young woman is praised almost entirely in terms of these three qualities—good, sweet, fair. She is also praised because she is frugal—not “deare”—in her ornament and dress. Even Vittoria Corombona of *The White Devil* is “sweet” in three speeches on the occasion after her trial when Brachiano is trying to regain her favor. Finally, in what Lucas takes to be the Websterian parts of *Anything for a Quiet Life*, Lady Cressingham is characterized almost altogether by the quality of extravagance, to the extent that she destroys her husband’s estate.

Even if the poem is Webster’s, it certainly does little to enhance his reputation as a poet. But, in any case, the earnest efforts of the scribe who recorded it, and supplied for his book the missing “Purueiour,” deserve a footnote in the world of letters.

*A Purueiour of Tobacco*

Call him a Broker of Tobacco, he scornes the title, hee had rather be tearmed a cogging Merchant. Sir *John Falstaffe* robb’d with a bottle of Sacke; so doth hee take mens purses, with a wicked roule of Tobacco, at his girdle. Hee takes no long time to vndoe any man hee hath to deale with, he doth it in halfe a yeare, aswell as twenty; and then brags he has nipt them by the members. Hee causes his wife to sit in his Warehouse, to no other purpose, then (as a Countrey Poticary hangs vp an *Aligarta* in his shop) that while his Customers are gaping at her, hee may cosen them of their waight. Hee does not louse God, because God louses plaine dealing; and tis a question, whether he louses the King, because the King louses no Tobacco. Many trades hath he filcht through; but this making of Fire-workes, brings most commodity: For hee sels his Tobacco with this condition, that they that buy it, shall bee vndone by it. Such fellowes that haue tane so
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many by the nose, should hang vp for their signe
Diues smoaking in hell, and the word vnder it:
Eever man for himselfe, and the Diuell for them
all.