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AN UNPUBLISHED EPIGRAM, POSSIBLY BY JOHN WEBSTER

by James E. Savage

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 accretions 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 recorded 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 perhaps two or three of the Overbury "Characters." After Overbury's death in The Tower in 1613, the publisher Lawrence Lisle produced 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 leuell, it is a picture (reall or personall) quaintlie drawne in various collours, all of them heightned by one shadowing.

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

FINIS.

*Some give these wives these titles
good, faire, sweete.
as they find brautie loue or honesty
but for to call them deare wives
were more meete,
though in the word be ambiguity
for they bring me to trouble cost or care
then deare they are, for they good sweet or
faire.*

Reproduction of sig. S3 of the Ninth Impression of *A Wife*.

A Parution of tobacco.

Call him a broker of tobacco,
 He should be hild, he had
 walgebo toward a robbing
 more aut. St Iohn Halpuffe robb'd
 us a bottle of carke; he sold
 he take more purse, oge a
 winked woulde of tobacco,
 at his wille. He take no
 longer time to vnder any man,
 he goes to dale us, he does
 it in Galles & yarele upstool as
 he oute, and you brage he had
 miss you by his members
 he cause he wife to sit in his
 on wedgus to no oge purpose,
 upon Car & Cunter pottrarie
 change us in Aligatha in his (so p)
 he at hisild his rustomere and
 yapping at for, he in any corde
 upon of your weight. he does not
 loud god, because he loud plain
 dealing, and we a question
 a geige he loud he thing, because
 he thing loud us tobacco. many
 hadde say he fild of Grange, but
 he making of fireworke bring
 most summer time, for he held he
 to beare us the winter, and he y
 buy it stalle bound by it. he follow
 that have time so many by the nose,
 she who have us for these figure drels.
 I smelt in hell and the wind in the air

Reproduction of sig. S3^v of the Ninth Impression of *A Wife*.

Widdow, of Sir Thomas Overbrye, 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 Overbrye's friends. He printed the first twenty-one of the Overbrye "Characters," and he also printed a delightful group of items of "Conceited Newes" by Overbrye 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 giue their wiues" and any of Webster's lines, but one or two things suggest themselves. These wives are "good, faire

³ See articles by H. Dugdale Sykes and Baron A. F. Bourgeois in *Notes & Queries*, 11th Ser., Vol. VIII, September 20, 27, October 4, 11, 1913; Vol. X, July 4, 1914; Vol. XI, April 24, May 1, 8, 15, 1915. The editor of Webster's *Complete Works*, F. L. Lucas, concurs fully in that attribution.

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 “Puru-eiour,” 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 *Iohn 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 loue God, because
 God loues plaine dealing; and tis a question,
 whether he loues the King, because the King
 loues 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

AN UNPUBLISHED EPICRAM

many by the nose, should hang vp for their signe
Diues smoaking in hell, and the word vnder it:
Euery man for himselfe, and the Diuell for them
all.