JOHN HOward LAWSON'S COLLEGE ESSAYS ON "JOHN WEBSTER" AND "ROMANTIC COMEDY" (c. 1913-1914)

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In "John Howard Lawson at Williams College", 1) I summarized John Howard Lawson's prose writings in the Williams Literary Monthly from late 1910 to mid 1914. The present article summarizes two other essays, "John Webster" and "Romantic Comedy", written by Lawson (then seventeen or almost eighteen years old) at Williams. 2)

These essays are not dated but may have been written sometime after May 1913, when Lawson's essays in the Monthly dealt almost entirely with art, literature, movies, theatre and vaudeville. The essays have never been published.

The following summaries of these essays and the biographical note that follows regarding John Howard Lawson's college love affair with Berenice Dewey will provide historians of American drama with further information about the life and writings of John Howard Lawson that has both historical and biographical importance. 3)

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"John Webster"

Elizabethan dramas, rich in colorful horrors, abound in passion and pathos, misery and death, hellish revelry and insatiable revenge. 4)

1) Bulletin of the Faculty of Liberal Arts, Humanities, Vol. 20, No. 1 (September 1979).
2) These essays were made available on microfilm by the curator of the Lawson papers at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale.
3) These summaries will closely follow Lawson's organization and, although quotation marks are omitted except when Lawson quotes, his language.
4) Many of Lawson's own later dramas abound in similar qualities. Much of what Lawson says in these college essays, particularly the one on John Webster, is applicable to his own work as a playwright.
Elizabethan dramas seem rather uncivilized to us. They smack of primitive man, primitive heroism, primitive villainy, primitive jealousy and revenge and love and hatred. (Shaw calls them "vaguely distressing".)

We have grown too sophisticated to appreciate the crude passions and virtues of melodrama. But the Elizabethans were almost a primitive people. Their passions and thoughts were bold and fresh. They had cast aside the warped beliefs of medieval Christendom. They revelled in new discoveries and newly conceived purposes. Their point of view was new and their spiritual attitude was new, "new as Adam’s when he awoke to the glory of the Garden of Eden." 5)

Like children, the Elizabethans considered nothing wholly vile or false or ridiculous. They rejoiced at the sight of terrifying horrors or fantastic apparitions. They did not find anything incongruous in the appearance of a ghost. They delighted to see Tamerlane torture the "petty kings of Turkey" and to see Faustus borne to eternal damnation by little devils all in red. 6) Strange to say, by the skill and poetic power of the Elizabethan dramatists such melancholy scenes became things of beauty and wonder.

The Elizabethans had an abiding idealism. 7) Proof of their idealism is that the most sordid and pitiful events are enlightened beneath their touch. They longed to understand and appreciate

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5) Thirty-seven years after "John Webster", Lawson attributed the vitality of Elizabethan plays to "the political conflict that raged on the boards and in the audiences of the playhouses." The Hidden Heritage (1951).

6) Marlowe’s Dr. Faustus is echoed in Lawson’s Success Story (1932).

7) Lawson’s first essay in Williams Literary Monthly (December 1911) was “Idealism”: the great business of life is to idealize realities and to realize ideals. In Theory and Technique of Playwriting (1936) Lawson (at 42 years of age) says that idealism “manifests itself in courage, a willingness to face danger, to oppose accepted standards.”
the new life of the Renaissance.\(^8\)

Earlier English drama was a narrow, shallow reflection of national thought. The Elizabethans demanded that their plays reproduce the entire pageantry of general history and individual life.

The Elizabethans were a race of titanic dramatists. In the foremost rank was John Webster.\(^9\)

Webster reveals a wonderful intensity of insight and power of spiritual revelation. He is a master of dramatic situation. He reveals character in a single tense line, a sudden flash of emotion. He understands that men open the secret portions of their souls under the strain of a great spiritual crisis, that only in the stress of an awful moment does man show himself in all his naked meanness or glory.\(^10\)

John Webster’s art is one of selection and repression. He shows character in a flash, e. g., Brachiano’s fretful exclamation after being poisoned: “How miserable a thing it is to die ‘mongst women howling.” Webster shows a lover’s repentance in three lines; he shows the tensest longing of a human soul in Ferdinand’s passionate line: “Cover her face; mine eyes dazzle; she died young.”\(^11\)

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8) In *Theory and Technique of Playwriting* Lawson writes: “The moral structure of Elizabethan drama is not based upon a belief in guile, but on a boundless faith in man’s ability to do, to know and to feel.” “Shakespeare summed up the driving energy of the Renaissance, which combined the thirst for power and knowledge with the Protestant ideal of moral citizenship.”

9) In the late 1970s the reputation of John Webster was reassessed upwards by academic writers.

10) In *Atmosphere* (1914) and *Souls* (1915) Lawson deals with a similar theme. To the time of his graduation from college, the two main spiritual crises of Lawson’s life were the death of his mother when he was seven, and the loss of his sweetheart Berenice Dewey to another fellow when he was about eighteen.

11) In *The Hidden Heritage* Lawson again refers to this line (see footnote 19 above) and contradicts his assertion of 1913 or 1914.
True melodrama is distinguished from other forms of dramatic literature by an overflow of exuberant poesy. Only because of the grandeur of its effective diction can romantic tragedy be other than farcical or ridiculous. Elizabethans are successful in melodrama because of their poetic quality. Their productions gush and swell like bursting waves with the glamor of poetic thought.

John Webster’s imagination is quiet, subdued, ironical. He uses weird symbolism. He uses metaphors in bewildering abundance. “Call forth the robin red-breast and the wren.” This song smells of newly-turned earth and fresh grass. The soft hum and odor of fields and woods is interwoven with its tragical fervor.

Webster’s scene is constructed of “infinitude of detail,” minuteness. There is too much elaboration. A student feels the bewildered sensation of a spectator at a three-ring circus.

Webster is accused of undramatic obscurity, but his striking theatrical force and effect in individual scenes make up for lack of harmonious inter-relation of the whole. (Here, Lawson quotes John Addington Symonds on the coherence of Webster’s plays in performance.)

In Webster there is a predominance of the female element. This shows growth from the crudities of earlier Elizabethan playwrights. Ability to portray the subtle passions of a woman’s mind is always evidence of advanced dramatic understanding. Webster made the first consistent attempts to study female intellect and emotions.

Vittorina Corombona is “radiant with evil,” majestic in her wickedness. She is the original prototype of various morbid heroines of modern drama, e.g., Hedda Gabler or the Vampire. She is a complex combination of feminine sweetness and detestable deceit. The brazenness of her guilt is transfigured by the spiritual intensity

12) One of the main charges against many of Lawson’s own later plays was that they were obscure.
13) This can also be said of most of Lawson’s own plays.
of her love. She is inscrutable, abounding in sudden contrasts of weakness and glorious strength.

John Webster is a student of the abnormal.14)

The pitiful Duchess of Malfi is of the same type as Vittorina. She differs only in environment. The Duchess is a creature of moods.15) She has towering strength and tearful weakness. She has a tense nervous temperament.16) She has sudden whims and passions. She is born to luxury, flattery, obedience. She chooses a husband among her followers as an ancient goddess might select a lamb for the sacrifice.17) The interest in the play lies in the process of her mental development, in the growth of her overpowering love for her husband,18) in the destruction of her regal pride, in her gradual acquaintance with horrors of suffering and torture, and her despair,19) and the magnificent bravery of her

14) In 1914 and for a long time thereafter Lawson himself had a strong interest in abnormal psychology.
15) So is the heroine of The Spice of Life (1916, 1919).
16) This is also true of most of Lawson's own main characters in the 1920s and 1930s before Marching Song (1937).
17) In The International (1928) the goddess-like Alise chooses a middle-class young man David Fitch, and both are sacrificed to Revolution.
18) In his childhood play Savitri (1908) Lawson idealizes a young princess with an overpowering love for her husband, in whose place she is willing to die.
19) Thirty-seven years later, Lawson referred to The Duchess of Malfi as an "index" of the cultural life of the early 17th century. "Few Elizabethan dramas achieve such a concentrated mood of despair. The Duchess, condemned to torture and death by her own brother, waits for the horror to engulf her. When she is told that her brother has sent a "wild consort of madmen" to frighten her, she says:

    Indeed, I thank him. Nothing but noise and folly Can keep me in my right wits; whereas reason And silence make me stark mad.

She watches the executioners enter with her coffin. She is strangled slowly, deliberately. And her brother's words, as he looks down at what he has done, are passionless.

    Cover her face; mine eyes dazzle; she died young.

The refinement of horror replaced the hopeful poetry of a happier day. To Shakespeare, the lust for money was the root of evil. To Webster, in a darker period, corruption was man's life, evil was purposeless and all-consuming." The Hidden Heritage.
death. Suffering transforms Vittorina into a malignant being. The purer more spiritual anguish of the Duchess transforms her into a being radiant of womanly love and virtue.\(^{20}\)

John Webster has one interesting villain. Bosola is not an ordinary court sycophant. He is a man of learning. (Here, Lawson quotes Schelling.) He is an informer, torturer, murderer, with an analytic curiosity in the processes of his own villainy and a psychological interest in the conduct of his victims. Bosola’s moral force is warped by the vileness of his surroundings. He is a contemplative type who lacks moral stamina. He easily becomes a victim of corruption which is “candied o’er”.\(^{21}\) (Here, Lawson says he is inclined to pity Bosola.)

It is difficult to find an expression of deep faith, or hope, or charity in John Webster’s plays. Webster has a melancholy mannerism. He dislikes optimistic moralizing, but his plays are no more dismal than *Oedipus Colonmus*. He has a profound sense of the depth and of the mystery of life. Pessimism denotes his *way* of thinking rather than his actual mental attitude. He has broad sympathies so cannot be accused of pessimism. He believes in the worthiness and existence of the soul.\(^{22}\)

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“Romantic Comedy”

Love and romance are fast disappearing from our drama, as well as from our thoughts and lives. Delicious comedies of pure love and innocence are of the past.

We believe we live in an age of shrewd common sense. We used to take the dreams of our youth for granted. Now we study them and catalogue them and ascribe them to mesmerism, mental

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20) In *Roger Bloomer* (1920, 1923) Louise Chamberlain’s spiritual anguish causes her to commit suicide. In Roger’s nightmare she returns as a radiant woman who loves him.

21) Most of Lawson’s plays deal with people who because of a lack of moral stamina become victims of corruption.

22) When Lawson was about seventy years old he began to write his autobiography, for which, he said, he was examining his soul.
suggestion, or temporary insanity. 23)

We believe that we are gifted with a peculiarly keen sense of humor. We maintain that on account of that sense of humor we scorn all idea of the tender sentiments. 24)

The theatre, the home of American humor, has banished romantic comedy from its sacred boards. We have relegated the glamor of romance to magazines. The stage has cast romance aside like a tattered garment. Instead of love we exploit divorce.

Supposedly romantic or sentimental comedy is generally insipid, or shallow, or false, or ironical. 25) Romantic comedy is out of harmony with the spirit of the times.

We make a mistake in banishing romance from our humorous efforts. Idealism and humor, love and laughter, can exist side by side. (Here, Lawson quotes Meredith's "The Comic Spirit".)

Love, the tenderest of human emotions, is susceptible of comic treatment. Comedy in its essence is the portrayal of human character. In matters of love, character shows itself in its truest, most complex form.

Love is an emotion which combines in extraordinary fashion the elements of the sublime and the ridiculous. The most heroic characters become petty under its influence. The pettiest characters rise to heights of heroism and self-sacrifice.

The reader cannot deny that when he is in love he is either a greater fool or a greater hero than he has ever believed possible. 26)

Love teems with possibilities of joy and sadness. A dramatist

23) Mesmerism, mental suggestion and temporary insanity enter into several of Lawson's plays before 1934.
24) In "Oriental Drama" (Williams Literary Monthly, February 1914) Lawson denies that romance is childish simplicity or senile sentimentality.
25) Between 1914 and 1917, Lawson, then show-business oriented, wrote three romantic comedies, one of which, Servant-Master-Lover (1915), he, as an old man, referred to as meretricious.
26) Here, Lawson may have had in mind his own behavior in his love affair with Berenice Dewey in the summer and fall of 1913. See the biographical note that follows.
has opportunities for subtlest irony, most delightful situations, cleverest contrasts, clearest characterizations.

This subject is exceedingly difficult to handle. It is the supreme test of a comic writer's powers. Many a young author discovered too late that it is easier to stir a fire with a white hot poker than a reader's heart with an inexperienced portrayal of the tender passion.

The most thrilling romance is awkward and absurd without a rich endowment of the comic spirit. Perhaps this is the reason that modern dramatists avoid the love motive or use it sarcastically.

Another reason for neglect of this subject is that this is an age of commercialism, age of complicated social standards which befuddle men's minds.27)

Every few centuries the machinery of life gets hopelessly clogged up with forms and conventions.28) The webs of civilization are woven so tightly about us that we are terribly entangled in artificial restrictions.29)

Adam was unsophisticated, but he could at least look upon life clearly and without prejudice. We look through the kaleidoscope glass of many centuries. We may be less fortunate than our earliest ancestors. Adam with his primitive zest of life could find more enjoyment outside Paradise than we, satisfied with artificial Edens, could find in the heavenly garden itself.

Is it not possible that we have become too narrow and sophisticated to appreciate the wonder of love in all its glorious fulness?30)

28) *The Mad Moon* (1917) deals with this theme.
29) *Roger Bloomer* (1917, 1920, 1923) deals with this theme. In Lawson's plays there are many images of webs and nets and entanglements, e. g., in *Processional* (1925) Dynamite Jim is entangled physically and symbolically in the American flag.
30) Lawson's plays often deal in part with a conflict between sophisticated and unsophisticated, e. g., Eugene Poppin, who knows only the mechanics of sex, versus Roger Bloomer, who appreciates the wonder of love. *Roger Bloomer*.
Haven’t we forgotten some of the important realities of existence?

In Elizabethan comedy there is a dazzling array of burlesques, farces, pastorals, comedies of character, comedies of manner, stinging social satires, airy conglomerations of mythology and fancy, all these varieties classifiable as romantic comedy. There is a romantic vein in the Elizabethan’s most realistic, most bitter, most ironical plays, because romance was part and parcel of their intellectual life.

The Elizabethans, under the shadow of mystery and wonder of the Middle Ages, lived in a time of romance and excitement, picturesque events, inspired discoveries. They were almost a primitive people; their passion and their thoughts were bold and fresh. “Apollo and the Muses dance. Art has banished ignorance.”

Elizabethan drama is aglow with romance and love. Amidst the ribaldry of crudest farce flash poetic expressions that ring true in their uncouth surroundings.

The Elizabethans are unequalled in the treatment of the love motive. They combine delicate tact and bold freedom, poetic sweetness with strength and virility.

(Here, Lawson refers to the blighting influence on Restoration drama.)

The most ironical moments of School for Scandal overflow with unconscious romantic exuberance. The play breaks forth gloriously in an impassioned love lyric. But Restoration dramas lack humanity, the thrill of life, the wonder of love.

Lawson concludes by prophecying the arrival of a great American playwright.33) God knows we need one, he says. Pray

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31) As a young boy, Lawson was thrilled by the mystery and wonder of the Middle Ages, and he tried to write plays about Charlemagne and other great heroes.

32) In the 1920 draft of Roger Bloomer Roger breaks out with an impassioned love lyric, but this is omitted in the 1923 production.

33) As a boy of 12 or 13, Lawson sat in the chair of William Shakespeare, and later decided to become a playwright. As late as 1916, he still dreamed he would write plays that were beautiful and great—and successful.
that he is a humorist as well. He will need courage, vitality, faith and insight. His words will need to flow in a "sweet and curious harmony". Perhaps when men see his plays they will laugh and tremble and feel their hearts throb in their breasts.

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A Note on John Howard Lawson's Love Affair with Berenice Dewey.

In 1908, when he was fourteen years old, John Howard Lawson wrote a verse drama entitled Savitri, "A Mythical Romantic Drama of Mythological India, Founded on Edwin Arnold's poem of Savitri, one of his Indian Idylls." Lawson's Savitri, a beautiful princess, inspires love and praises love eternal. When Death (Yama the Destroyer) comes to take her fate-doomed husband the prince, Savitri is willing to die with him. Death, impressed, lets the prince live. The main theme of Savitri is: "One good soul can break all decrees." The main emphasis of the drama is on Savitri's beauty, goodness and purity.

In 1910, when he was sixteen years old, John Howard Lawson entered Williams College as the youngest man in the Class of 1914. In his first two years at college he published in the Williams Literary Monthly several poems on love, about which he still had a romantic, idealistic view. In his motivation for writing, the real and the ideal were mixed. He was practically concerned with making friends and gaining prestige. Yet he also wanted to fulfill his soul. His romantic view of love was not a figment of his imagination. It was a moral imperative. And he tried to apply it to the hard business of living.

He was still in the Cloud-Cuckoo Land of his childhood, but there was a contradiction in his emotional life. His mind moved uneasily in many directions, but his adolescent heart was painfully concerned with sexual images. His dreams were full of vague sexual imagery—vague in its wording but compulsively real in the body's needs. He had a burgeoning and irrepressible desire but only a painfully limited range of possibilities of expressing it.

He had overcome some if not all of his awkwardness with girls. He accepted a rigid distinction between good girls and bad girls. He

34) Much of the language that follows herein is Lawson's, taken without the use of quotation marks from his as yet unpublished autobiography, parts of which his daughter Susan Amanda Lawson has permitted me to read.
knew several good girls. According to the rules, he stole occasional modest caresses, but these good girls were too coy, too careful, to armored in virtue to meet his romantic requirements.\(^{35}\)

In the summer of 1913, when John Howard Lawson was not quite nineteen years old, he joined his family for a summer vacation\(^{36}\) in a rented cottage on a hill near a Westchester County country village, Pleasantville—and his adolescence came to an improbable climax.

At eighteen, Berenice Dewey, the girl next door, was a perfect incarnation of his dreams. She was a pastoral dream, impossibly lovely, impossibly intellectual. She read all the books Lawson read—philosophy, drama, poetry.\(^{37}\) She enjoyed intellectual conversation. She wrote poems. And she was fabulously beautiful. She was slim and black-haired, and her beauty was as ethereal as a fairy tale.\(^{38}\)

John Howard Lawson could not believe her when he first saw her, and the wonder grew when it turned out there was a perfect mating of interests and illusions. It all happened with the effortless grace of a dream. When he asked her to marry him, she said “Of course” as if there had never been any question about it. They became engaged.\(^{39}\) But Lawson was afraid to touch her.\(^{40}\)

When Lawson returned to college in the fall,\(^{41}\) he and Berenice

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35) In New York he watched prostitutes parade on Broadway, but he sweated with fear at the possibility of going to a room with one of them. That was so alien to him he could not even think of it.

36) He was working part-time at Reuters and commuted with his father, Reuters' manager, to New York.

37) In Chapter IV “Liberal Arts” of his autobiography Lawson says she had read more than he had.

38) In Chapter III “College” of his autobiography Lawson says: “I do not exaggerate her beauty. It was less ethereal but no less stunning when she became one of the ornaments of the Ziegfield Follies a few years later.”

39) Their engagement angered both their families. Lawson's father felt he was throwing his life away. Berenice's stepfather, an artist, thought they were young idiots and was bored by the solemn conferences Lawson's father insisted on holding.

40) Lawson adds: “incredible as it may seem.”

41) Lawson's friends at Williams College were astonished by his engagement, for he was obviously the most bashful one among them. They looked at snapshots of Berenice and wondered how he had had the courage to propose to her.
wrote letters to each other every day, letters which began dearest or darling and then proceeded with poetic abstractions. This idyll lasted for a few months.

Then Lawson received a letter from Berenice saying she had made a mistake and that she really loved a boy she had known since childhood. Lawson hurried to Pleasantville and pleaded with her hysterically. She convinced him that pleading was of no avail. He suggested that he speak with Berenice and the other boy together. As soon as he saw Berenice and Billy together, Lawson realized they had a physical relationship. He was sick with jealousy.

He and they talked soberly for many hours. The three of them were serious people and they were more honest than they had ever been. Lawson felt that he had lost everything and that whatever he could salvage or cherish depended on the outcome of that conversation. He proposed that the three of them be friends for the rest of their lives. Under the circumstances this was an improbable romantic proposal, but to a large extent they made it true.

In a sense Lawson won a victory, for what came out of it was a relationship with Berenice which was far less fragile than the vows they had exchanged. Whether Berenice had ever thought of him as friend until then, Lawson later doubted, but now she saw it and believed it with total sincerity.

During the rest of Lawson’s final year at college, Berenice wrote to him every day, even after she was married in the summer of 1914. Her letters were now more intimate than anything she had dared to write to Lawson when they were engaged. These constant letters from Berenice had a great deal more sense than her letters had had before. They stirred Lawson’s emotions.

Many years later, Lawson thought it was easy to laugh at the

42) Lawson says that it is a rare thing for a woman on her honeymoon to write daily letters to another man. Every evening as she and Billy sat by the oil lamp, Berenice wrote a comic account of the day’s adventures to Lawson. Later, when he was in Europe, she continued to write to him regularly, and when he returned to the U.S.A. their friendship was renewed and lasted until her sudden death from pneumonia in 1933.
sorrows of a mooncalf. But disappointment in love hastened the process of his growing up. The immediate effect of his disappointment was beneficial. He renounced love, which had tortured his mind, and he found his energies released for more independent thought and greater literary activities at Williams.

These activities at Williams meant a great deal to him, but they were not enough to cure his wounded spirit. The loss of love was also a romantic experience. It did not dispose of his dreams but made them more subjective and unrealizable. He felt a creative need to express the passion that was denied physical expression.

Lawson wrote Berenice a long letter describing *Savitri*, the play he had written when he was fourteen. He decided to write another play on a related theme. He wrote it at night, sometimes continuing until he was interrupted by the call to morning chapel. He finished the play just before he graduated from Williams College in June 1914. Using the "fictitious" name Rabindranath as his pseudonym, John Howard Lawson submitted the Prologue of *A Hindoo Love Drama* in competition for the Williams College Poetry Prize of 1914.

Later Lawson showed *A Hindoo Love Drama* to dramatists' agent Mary Kirkpatrick, who offered it to famous actors whom Lawson had seen perform. *A Hindoo Love Drama* was never performed, but it was Lawson's introduction into the commercial theatre, under the aegis of Mary Kirkpatrick, who oriented him toward show business.

Fifty years or more later, when he was in his seventies, Lawson looked back on *A Hindoo Love Drama*. He says that its imagery is conventional but that the drama has urgency, a kind of fever, which was the product of his adolescent grief.

Lawson's heartache in 1913–1914 was more than the collapse of a

43) He uses the word *admitted*, but it is not clear whether he is referring to his laughing or the reader's.
44) He says his mind was absorbing new ideas so fast he could not digest them.
45) Lawson says: "When I was a child."
46) Lawson did not complete the whole play in time to meet the deadline of this contest, so he submitted only the Prologue as an "independent entity" having "no intimate connection" with the story and whose purpose is "atmospheric" rather than explanatory.
juvenile delusion. He later suspected that, although its manifold conse­quences are difficult to analyze, it had a lasting effect on, his character, creating an ambivalent attitude towards sex, a conflict between an idea­lization of sexlove and a cynicism expressed in brutal pursuit of sex adventure, a conflict which was part of a deeper, unacknowledged conflict between the world of his mind and the real world.

John Howard Lawson never forgot Berenice Dewey. He had many recollections of her—the glittering show girl in the Ziegfield Follies, the gay frantic woman she became, the gifted minor poet in her last years before her sudden death. But the clearest image he had was of Berenice as the girl in the summer fields.\footnote{Lawson says that Berenice Dewey knew that he kept that image. She wanted to keep that part of herself, too, but it was lost in the tangle of lies and compromises that became her life. But it enabled her to give Lawson a confidence which she could not give to anyone else.}