

**Sophie Chiari and Sophie Lemerrier-Goddard, eds.
2019. *John Webster's "Dismal Tragedy",
The Duchess of Malfi Reconsidered.*
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This collection of essays originated in an international conference on John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* at École Normale Supérieure de Lyon in 2018. The conference had the goal of discussing the long-lasting relevance of a tragedy which has never ceased to appeal to readers and audiences and exploring new perspectives in its study. The subject matter of the volume needs little justification. 2010s productions of the play at the Old Vic, the Sam Wanamaker playhouse and the Swan Theatre attested to its enduring popularity; the questions it poses about female empowerment, misogyny, corruption, and theatre itself allow for countless responses. Its eerie pessimism resonates loudly in these pandemic times.

Scholars of multiple nationalities and at different stages of the academic career—ranging from doctoral students to Professors Emeriti—are the contributors to this collection; their varied interests add to its richness. The editors have exercised a sound rationale in their organization of the contents, by sorting them out into four thematic sections, preceded by an introduction and followed by a coda and a general bibliography.

In their general introduction, editors Sophie Chiari and Sophie Lemerrier-Goddard, plus Anne-Valerie Dulac from the Sorbonne, discuss the tragedy as a multi-sensory experience that haunts the imagination through the power of suggestion rather than sight. They aptly call the tragedy a “kaleidoscopic play” and emphasize the “mist” that seems to enwrap the stage of *The Duchess* and makes it “impossible to draw any single or simple conclusion from the tragic spectacle” (21). The second half provides an overview of the volume contents and the valuable contributions made in the thirteen essays, which may prove useful to the reader seeking to navigate the collection with specific interests in mind.

The first section, "Looking Backwards," focuses on the sources of *The Duchess*, its early performances, the editorial cruxes it presents, and the Duchess as a tragic heroine that reveals Webster's proto-feminism. In chapter 1, Anna Demoux highlights the relevance of source studies as she investigates the origin and the role given to the character of Delio, Antonio's friend, who is a fundamental framing device in the play. Inspired by the fictional persona of Bandello in one of the Italian sources, Delio is a commentator on characters and events, and at the same time underscores the metatheatrical aspects of the tragedy. Roberta Barker provides a fascinating exploration of the early "boy actresses" (50) who played the Duchess, Richard Robinson and Richard Sharpe of the King's Men, in chapter 2. She looks at how their differing repertoires and ranges inform and influence which aspects of the female protagonist would have been foregrounded onstage. Sharpe's performance, memorialized in the printed cast list, probably emphasized the romantic heroine dimension, female desire, and defiance in the face of male oppression. Jane Kingsley-Smith grounds chapter 3 on her own experience editing the play for Penguin and facing some critical editorial decisions. She reflects on the editing process of *The Duchess* as one that may "hide things from sight" (67) and deals with three textual issues: the signposting (or lack thereof) of Webster's sententiae in the printed editions, the practice of creative editing of stage directions—which supplies or subtracts information—and the different options as to the punctuation of Ferdinand's famous line beginning "cover her face." This all serves as an important reminder that readers peruse a text informed, and even altered, by editorial interpretation. In chapter 4, Dympna Callaghan convincingly argues that the Duchess's central role in her own tragedy, too often dismissed by critics and performance reviewers, must be emphasized not only in a twenty-first-century context, but also as transgressive and proto-feminist in its own time; her decision to exert her will and remarry whom she chooses contrasts sharply with the violence enacted by men.

The second section, "Looking Outside," revolves around the external Jacobean world and how aspects of it pervade the play. Unlike Callaghan, who places the Duchess at the center of the tragedy, Eike Kronshage views it as decentered, oscillating between the "ultimately colliding viewpoints" of the Duchess and Bosola (105). In chapter 5, the transformative power of money articulated by Marx, he

argues, is at play both in the Duchess's acquisition of a lower-class husband, commodified through language, and in Bosola's fixation with payment. Kronshage focuses on the financial dimension of Ferdinand's motives, which is often overlooked, and views the play as influenced by the context of an emerging mercantilist society, in which economic concerns were increasingly replacing ideas of blood and honor. Chapter 6, by Sophie Lemerrier-Goddard, deals with travel and mobility in the play, and how it relates to cultural and social mobility; there is an emphasis on returned travelers and on confined characters whose freedom is restricted. She looks at the Duchess's feigned pilgrimage to Loreto and identifies resonances of the destroyed shrine of Walsingham, which still haunted the English imagination. In chapter 7, Sophie Chiari studies the atmospheric imagery scattered throughout the play and extreme weather conditions (heat, cold, storms, whirlwinds) which add to the unstable, dismal cosmography evoked by Webster. Together with the foul air of the play, they affect characters or are embodied by them; they prefigure events and lead to a progressive darkening and even "dissolution" (150) of the world. At the core of the noxious atmosphere lie the Duchess's humorally-imbalanced brothers.

The third section, "Looking Inside," examines the inward world of the play and, especially, bodies. In chapter 8, Misako Takahashi explores canine imagery, particularly in connection with the Duchess and Ferdinand; one noteworthy idea is that the animal comparisons meant to belittle the Duchess (i.e., "hyena" or "mastiff") can be read as representing her resilience and agency. Animal-human hybridity is also the focus of chapter 9; Joseph Kidney delves into the obsession with death, the funereal, and the digging up of bodies in the tragedy. As in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, the audience of *The Duchess* is made to confront corpses and body parts. Ferdinand's lycanthropic hybridity draws attention to the dehumanization of corpses and the early modern debate on the separation between species. The lack of human exceptionalism is further stressed by Wendy Wall in chapter 10; in her analysis, human bodies are viewed as part of the physical world and occupying a place in the food chain of consumption, decomposition, and regeneration. She brings together references to human remains and bodies as nourishing vermin and draws attention to words that can both depict macabre imaginings of death and common kitchen

ingredients used for cooking or medicinal purposes in the female-managed domestic space.

The last section, "Looking Forwards," explores the ways in which Webster's interest in different areas of knowledge can be traced in *The Duchess*. In chapter 11, Lisa Hopkins analyses the prevalence of the number two in a tragedy made of dualities, doubles, and mirror-images. Both characters and settings are read as having dual natures and interpretations which contribute to the proto-Gothic atmosphere. She also establishes connections with other plays and even later cultural manifestations. Mickaël Popelard looks at the presence of geometry in the tragedy from a linguistic, metaphorical, and even structural level in chapter 12. He makes the point that Webster's geometry is "negative" in that "geometrically-minded" characters, who are also the greatest intriguers and politicians, only achieve destruction and their own annihilation (231); thus, the tragedy seems to lead to arithmetic nothingness, a nihilistic zero. In chapter 13, François Laroque reflects on the darkness that has so often been associated with the play by alluding to the painting technique of chiaroscuro, the alchemical *nigredo*, and the field of optics. In a tragedy which grows increasingly dark and misty, the reader/spectator is tasked with looking at it from oblique perspectives, as if using optical implements. This unveils the topical references to the contemporary Jacobean court and its scandals.

The coda section begins with a conversation held at the Lyon conference and led by Anne-Valérie Dulac; the participants include some volume contributors plus other specialists such as Michael Neill. Overall, the ideas expressed round off the volume. There follows a conversation between the editors and Anne-Laure Liégeois, the director of a 2010 production of *The Duchess*, noting some of its highlights. The editors have purposefully left this in the original French arguing that this production "was [...] aimed at a French audience" (24). However, this may come across as off-putting to scholars without a strong command of French, who may feel they are missing out on some content and can only find solace in the beautiful color photographs of the production. The volume ends with a general bibliography put together by José Ramón Díaz Fernández; it is comprehensive and well-organized into sections by source type, and it will prove an invaluable resource for scholars and students.

Reviews

Overall, this volume offers a stimulating collection of essays that may appeal to a wide variety of readers with an interest in Webster's tragedy and encourage further exploration of the issues discussed and their ramifications. It clearly shows that *The Duchess of Malfi* has lost none of its edge and capacity to fascinate, and that the interpretive possibilities are by no means exhausted.

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