Agrégation 2019
John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*
A selective bibliography by Florence March

* One star signals articles and books that will be particularly useful to prepare the Agrégation.
** Two stars signal texts that should be a priority.

** Recommended edition **

=> The section "Contexts", p. 125-88, includes an excerpt from Webster's source, William Painter's *Palace of Pleasure*, as well as a selection of primary sources. The section "Criticism", p. 189-398, includes reprints of a selection of essays and articles that are also listed below.

It would be useful to read *The White Devil* (1612), as *The Duchess of Malfi* is often discussed in relation to Webster's earlier play.

** Other recent critical editions of the play **

=> See the "Theatrical Introduction" to *The Duchess of Malfi* by David Carnegie (vol. 1, p. 408-49).

=> Includes an excerpt from Webster's source, William Painter's *Palace of Pleasure*.


=> The introduction and notes focus on historical stage interpretations and business.

=> See the extensive introduction and the two appendices devoted to the play's sources.

Translations


=> See the critical introductions of these editions.


General studies, monographs and collections of articles


=> Includes a chapter devoted to *The Duchess of Malfi*.

=> Foregrounds gender and feminist critiques.

=> Includes chapters on the play's sources and cultural context, key productions and performances, the play on screen, and critical assessments.


=> Chapter 4, p. 79-129, is devoted to *The Duchess of Malfi* ("'Rich Tissue': The Duchess of Malfi").

=> Chapter 7, p. 296-369, is devoted to *The Duchess of Malfi* ("The Tragic Indeterminacy of The Duchess of Malfi").


=> Chapter 3, p. 66-86, discusses the play in the light of contemporary critical debates ("The State of the Art: Critical Approaches 2000-08" by Dympna Callaghan).

=> Chapter 8, p. 153-174, offers an annotated bibliography on *The Duchess of Malfi* ("A Survey of resources" by Christy Desmet).


=> A collection of all major critical voices from 1617 to the end of the 19th century. The introduction is partially reprinted in the Norton Critical Edition of *The Duchess of Malfi*, p. 201-17.


=> The essays on *The Duchess* offer theatrical, theological and generic perspectives.


=> Essays focusing on structural, ethical and symbolic interpretations.


=> Chapters on the plays provide information about the text, date, stage history, sources and critical comments.


=> Chapter 5, p. 97-122, is devoted to John Webster.

Dramatic form and structure


The book targets general readers. Part 1 deals with openings, endings, turning points, tragic heroines, heroes and villains, society and politics, theatricality, iconography and imagery. Part 2 explores themes: evil, the law, and knowledge in *The Duchess*.


Part 1 focuses on technique: Webster as Baroque artist; sensationalism and movement; irony, parody and caricature; character; multiplicity and unity. Part 2 explores themes: evil, the law, and knowledge in *The Duchess*.


For Best, the play is structured by antithesis.


A groundbreaking study of the context of emergence of radical drama, with a specific focus on the decentring of man. *The Duchess of Malfi* is analysed p. 65-67.


Argues that the masque of the madmen mirrors the play's structure.


=> For Luckyj and Bliss, *The Duchess of Malfi* is structured by repetition.


=> Maillard discusses the dramatic works of Corneille, Webster, Shakespeare and Greene in particular.


=> See chapter 1: " 'A play it is: Elizabethan dramatic nomenclature and the development of tragicomedy'", p. 7-19 ; chapter 2: " 'Beginning mournfully and ending merrily': the development of Jacobean tragicomedy'", p. 20-39 ; chapter 3: " 'Spectators sate part': the audience and the tragicomic ending", p. 40-52 ; chapter 4: "Tragedy and idle mirth: comedy and tragicomedy in *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*", p. 53-70 ; chapter 6: " 'To behold my tragedy': tragedy and anti-tragedy in *The Duchess of Malfi*, p. 84-95.

Pearson discusses the development of tragicomedy as a genre and argues that the play is a tragedy until the duchess's death, at which point the tragic ethos is distorted into comedy, satire and tragicomedy.


=> Pearson deals with three main categories: difficulties about the unity of structure of each of the two tragedies, difficulties caused by the jungle of imagery, and difficulties of assessing the moral nature of the characters.


**Characters and identity**

=> The duchess is a static protagonist insofar as she remains true to herself throughout the play and defends her position even to death.

=> Analyses Antonio as a Christian stoic.


=> Kernan analyses Bosola as the ideal, and one of the last, of the Elizabethan satirists.


Gender and politics

=> See in particular the sections on physiology, conduct books, sexuality and motherhood.

=> The theory of the king's two bodies (a political body of divine right that is infallible and a natural body that is not) is complicated by the generally accepted view that women's bodies were weaker and more corruptible than men's.

=> An enlightening comparison between English and Spanish early modern drama traditions, in which domestic ideology is negotiated through physical violence.


Behling focuses on the transgression of gender boundaries, due to the masculinity of Webster's heroines in their political actions, and argues that this is conflated with transgressive sexuality, as any sexual activity or desire centered on them appears unnatural.


=> Examines the impact of gender on the speaker-listener relationship.


=> Compares the duchess to Mary Stuart.


=> Kimberly's essay is a response to Desmet's position in "'Neither Maid, Widow, nor Wife': Rhetoric of the Woman Controversy in The Duchess of Malfi" (see above).


=> Whigham's argument is challenged by Linda Woodbridge in "Queen of Apricots: The Duchess of Malfi, Hero of Desire" (see below).

=> Winston reads the play as the longing of Webster for Queen Elizabeth I, the duchess's death in act 4 showing how the world decays when she is gone.


** Social structures and representations **

=> Explores the power relationships between masters and their underlings.


Theology, religious ethics and issues


=> p. 53-55 are devoted to the analysis of The Duchess of Malfi.

Science, medicine, sickness and madness


Ceremony, spectacle and metatheatre


Includes a close reading of the duchess's wooing of Antonio.


Rhetoric, symbolism, imagery and iconography


For Belsey and Best (see above), the play is structured by antithesis, whereas for Bliss and Luckyj, it is structured by repetition.


=> Focuses on the play's connections to Mannerist art.


=> The essay examines image clusters in the play.


=> Discusses the symbolic significance of the dead man's hand and the apricots, in particular.


The Duchess and its adaptations in performance and on screen


=> A useful complement to Aebischer's article on Figgis's Hotel.

Reviews of productions of The Duchess of Malfi in Cahiers Élisabéthains:

Radio, stage and screen productions

To be noted: La Duchesse de Malfi, dir. Guillaume Séverac-Schmitz, collectif Eudaimonia, translation and adaptation by Clément Camar-Mercier, will premiere in January 2019 (23-25 January) at Théâtre Le Cratère in Alès. The production is then programmed in Marseille, Nîmes, Versailles, Saint-Brieuc.
Very recent productions of *The Duchess of Malfi* by the Royal Shakespeare Company:

2018  dir. Maria Aberg. Cast: Joan Iyiola as the duchess. **At the Swan theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, until 3 August 2018.** Find more about the production (cast, trailer, gallery of photos, reviews…) on the website of the RSC: [https://www.rsc.org.uk/the-duchess-of-malfi/feature-trailer](https://www.rsc.org.uk/the-duchess-of-malfi/feature-trailer)


2014  dir. Dominic Dromgoole. Cast: Gemma Arterton as the duchess. Find more about the production (cast, interviews, gallery of photos…) via the following links:

- [http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/2lgYCM97SXBVgwnBNKMW2VXv/a-tragedy-by-candlelight](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/2lgYCM97SXBVgwnBNKMW2VXv/a-tragedy-by-candlelight)


[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2p2EjIt8Ohw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2p2EjIt8Ohw)

"Three Dames and a Duchess": Helen Mirren, Eileen Atkins and Peggy Ashcroft perform the same scene – the wooing scene – from *The Duchess of Malfi*:


Act III, scene 2 of *The Duchess of Malfi*. A film from The Inner Below, dir. Benjamin Capps. Cast: Becky Brown as the duchess, Benjamin Capps as Ferdinand (duration: 9'27”).

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OfwrPs7MXno](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OfwrPs7MXno)


[http://www.lefestival.org/fiche_spectacle.cfm/135292-6812_la-duchesse-de-malfi.html](http://www.lefestival.org/fiche_spectacle.cfm/135292-6812_la-duchesse-de-malfi.html)


A gallery of 115 photos is available here (performances at Théâtre de la Ville, Paris): [https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b9064995s/f83.item](https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b9064995s/f83.item)

A radio production of *The Duchess of Malfi* on BBC, R3, 1992 (duration: 2:26:46). Director: Alison Hindell; The Duchess: Fiona Shaw; Bosola: Roger Allam; Ferdinand: Adrian Dunbar; The Cardinal: John Shrapnel; Antonio: Patrick Brennan; Delio: Simon Harris; Julia: Helen Griffin; Pescara: John Webb; Cariola: Manon Edwards; Roderigo: Peter Gunn; Silvio: Robert David; Old Lady: Lawmary Champion.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=idhOPFBrlA4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=idhOPFBrlA4)

The film comes in 13 parts on youtube:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RMbk7WD_SZo

or in its entirety, via this link:
