

**“I am Duchess of Malfi still”: the Framing of
Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi*.**

Submitted by Jeremy Charles Bloomfield, to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English, June 2011.

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the ways in which Webster's *Duchess of Malfi* has been framed and interpreted, selecting various case studies from the four hundred years of the play's history. It analyses the way in which a number of discourses have been brought to bear upon the play to delimit and shape its meanings, in the absence of a powerful determining author-figure such as Shakespeare.

The investigation is organised around three "strands", or elements which reappear in the commentary on the play. These are "pastness", the sense that the play is framed as belonging to an earlier era and resistant to being completely interpreted by the later theatrical context being used to reproduce it; "not-Shakespeare", the way in which *Malfi* has been set up in opposition to a "Shakespearean" model of dramatic value, or folded into that model; and "the dominance of the Duchess", the tendency for the central character to act as a focus for the play's perceived meanings. It identifies and analyses the co-opting of these elements in the service of wildly varying cultural politics throughout the play's history.

Sited within the assumptions and practices of Early Modern performance studies, this thesis constitutes an intervention in the field, demonstrating the possibility of a radically decentred approach. Such an approach is freed from either a reliance on Shakespeare as a prototypical model from which other works are imagined as diverging, or from the progressive narrative of theatre history in which twentieth century scholars "discovered" the true inherent meaning of early modern drama which had been "obscured" by the intervening centuries of theatre practice. It reveals blindspots and weaknesses in the existing Shakespeare-centred conception of the field, and opens up new possibilities for understanding Early Modern drama in historical and contemporary performance.

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