

Renaissance and Reformation
Renaissance et Réforme



Webster, John. The Duchess of Malfi: An Authoritative Text, Sources and Contexts, Criticism. Ed. Michael Neill

Goran Stanivukovic

Volume 40, Number 2, Spring 2017

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1086299ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v40i2.28536>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Stanivukovic, G. (2017). Review of [Webster, John. The Duchess of Malfi: An Authoritative Text, Sources and Contexts, Criticism. Ed. Michael Neill]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 40(2), 236–238. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v40i2.28536>

area of political and social development; he draws on an impressive array of scholarship, and is able to combine it and establish his position, while at the same time constructively addressing meaningful diverging perspectives. Moreover, von Friedeburg's acute sensitivity to the development of language as it relates to ideas and practices will be appreciated by any scholar, and especially by those interested in the changes in the German government from the time of Luther to the emergence of the modern state. Though his book will be of most benefit to scholars engaged in its particular field of study—scholars equipped to mine all the riches of the footnotes and finely-tuned linguistic analysis—von Friedeburg has also laboured to make it accessible to others, through various added translations for English readers and the employment of an accessible style of argumentation.

This work is a *tour de force* on the development of the modern state in Germany, and a gift for all who are fascinated by the way ideas and passions can transform an empire. It is also a reminder of how voices from the past, and Luther's in particular, continue to speak to critical issues of injustice today.

BRENDEN BOTT

Wycliffe College, University of Toronto

Webster, John.

The Duchess of Malfi: *An Authoritative Text, Sources and Contexts, Criticism.*
Ed. Michael Neill.

A Norton Classical Edition. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2015. Pp. xlii, 405 + 4 ill. ISBN 978-0-393-9235-4 (paperback) US\$13.75.

First performed by The King's Men (one of London's most prestigious companies of players) in 1613–1614, *The Duchess of Malfi*, as Michael Neill states in his critical edition of this play, has gone from being one of the most popular stage plays of the English Renaissance to being neglected during the Restoration and the eighteenth century. The play underwent a renaissance in theatre and criticism in the twentieth century, largely under the influence of feminist criticism and an interest in how fictions of women and discourses of their agency and social roles contributed to the portrayal of women in cultural history.

Neill's engagingly written introduction, which runs to forty-two pages, provides ample new evidence for both the textual and thematic features of the play. He shows how the Duchess of Malfi developed from what are most likely the play's main sources—in William Painter, Matteo Bandello, and François de Belleforest—to a character whose rhetorical and moral agency made her one of the most impressive dramatic creations in early modern English drama. Neill discusses the Duchess's confrontation of the "prerogatives" of both gender and social rank as part of his larger analysis of "the nature of true greatness" which "lie[s] at the heart of the play's moral and political concerns" (xxxii).

The introduction places Webster in the socio-political and theatrical milieu of his time, mapping the trajectory of Webster's creative life, as both a hack writer who collaborated with his fellow contemporaries and a playwright who, like many Jacobean writers, was "keen to claim priority for the printed text" (xvi) over an anonymous playtext aimed at performance, as had been common among his Elizabethan precursors, Shakespeare included. Neill makes original claims about the relationship between the ruling oligarchy of the old (pre-Reformation) order, challenged by Webster, and ambitious rhetoric of the play's protagonists. One of those ambitious yet abject protagonists, who fuels the plot of the play, is Bosola, "a frustrated scholar and malcontent hireling" (xx) who serves as a miniature case study for Neill to demonstrate one of his remarkable skills as a critic: to identify precise and often fresh sources in the socio-historical and political past of England that inform dramatic discourses. In the case of Bosola, his criticism brims with acute observations and original insights about the intertwining of social rank and drama.

A major part of the introduction is devoted to an analysis of the role of women in the play and the social context ("The Spirit of Greatness or of Woman") and the status of women in Jacobean England, moving seamlessly between socio-cultural and philological explorations. In the introduction, Neill explores Bosola's relationship to the culture of service (a topic he has treated in depth elsewhere) and writes probingly and succinctly about the "lunatic tormentors" (xxviii), the Duchess's two brothers, working cunningly against her under the veil of mental sickness and secrecy. Neill's clear and probing analyses come out of an interpretation of a plethora of new pieces of evidence.

The modern-spelling edition of the play itself starts with a series of preliminaries, including Webster's dedication, the commendatory verses by Webster's contemporaries, Thomas Middleton, William Rowley, and John

Ford, and the list of actor's names. The text of the play is generously glossed, with explanatory notes ranging from explications of verbal meanings, which are usually brief, to more extensive critical explanations of specific meanings, allusions, and thematic points, in which Neill continues to demonstrate his skill as one of the most imaginative and clear historicist critic-philologists. Explanatory notes contain more secondary sources that reflect back to Neill's discussion of the sources from the introduction, and reveal new critical dimensions of Webster's text. The secondary sources, which frequently fill the endnotes in the edited texts and illuminate Webster's lines and allusions, often expand on the critical points raised in the introduction.

The high quality of explanatory notes, arranged at the bottom of the page for easy reference with the text of the play, is matched by a wide selection of contextual material, ranging from excerpts from the early modern documents shedding a direct light onto Webster's text to some of the key critical responses published over the past fifty years. Neill has organized the contextual material in a user-friendly way, providing relevant segments from each contextual text in chronological order, and separating some of the critical material thematically. For example, the reader can easily find a contemporary account on widows in the form of sources and analogues, but also documents describing commemoration of the dead, focusing specifically on funerary monuments.

The final segment of the contextual part of the book covers highlights of the social history and literary criticism, which are directly relevant to the play's themes. This is an important and student-friendly solution, which will help students orient themselves in social history—i.e., responses to the reputation of Webster from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, the theological take on the play, the play in the context of performance, and dramaturgical and feminist approaches to the play—and look for interesting leads on how the writing about monuments, ruins, bonds of service, and modern cinema can illuminate the play's long afterlife as a text, cultural artifact, and resource for new creation.

The depth of criticism, the reliability of the editorial procedure, the precision of textual and explanatory notes, and the highlights of some of the best literary criticism of Webster will make this book of use not only to students but to scholars alike.

GORAN STANIVUKOVIC

Saint Mary's University, Halifax