



Waters, Wells and Spas in John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*: An Impossible Purification?

François Laroque, Sorbonne Nouvelle (France)

flaroque@orange.fr

Abstract:

Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* (1614) presents us with a mix between domestic tragedy and what might be called revenge tragicomedy with its scenes of grotesque horror and black comedy. Most of the action, which takes place indoors, indirectly evokes for Bosola, "the only court gall" (1.1.23), some hospital riddled with infectious diseases ('smallpox', 'the ulcerous wolf', 'the swinish measles', skin rashes, plague) as well as with lunacy and delirious sexual fantasies. In the play, the many water images hopefully suggest the idea of purgation and purification while ultimately showing that, in a world where evil and irrational passion run so deep, such a cure is impossible to achieve and can only end in a general bloodbath.

At the start Antonio, who has just arrived from his exile in France, compares a good prince's court to "a common fountain whence should flow / Pure silver drops" (1.1.12-13). But the play sadly exposes the insidious work of poisoned words and polluted waters ('standing pools', dark 'fishponds' reflecting images of Death, wells into which one sinks and drowns) that reverse the beneficent action of holy, or simply purgative, waters. Ferdinand asks for 'desperate physic' 'to purge infected blood' so that, contrary to Cariola's idea of "a progress to the baths / At Lucca" or of a visit to "the Spa / In Germany" (3.2.301-303) with its restorative power, the bloodbath at the end will serve as the only possible catharsis to the crazy aftermath of the incestuous madness and Machiavellian manipulation of the two Aragonian brothers.

Biography:

François Laroque, emeritus Professor at Université Sorbonne Nouvelle (Paris), is the author of *Shakespeare's Festive World* (Cambridge University Press, 1991) and of several books and articles on Shakespeare and the Elizabethan and Jacobean drama. His last two publications are *Dictionnaire amoureux de Shakespeare* (Plon, Paris, 2016) and *John Webster. The Duchess of Malfi* (Ellipses, Paris, 2018).