

# The Duchess of Malfi – Context Work

## INTRODUCTION FOR TEACHERS

The context, period and genre of the play are an important part of almost any higher level course/exam. Students should therefore research a relevant historical and literary topic and do a presentation to the class.

Below, you'll find a range of 23 different topics, together with appropriate sub-topics. Simply print out and distribute as required.

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## The Duchess of Malfi – Context Work

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### YOUR TOPIC

**William Painter: *The second tome of the Palace of Pleasures* (1567)**

### SUB-TOPICS

Matteo Bandello's *Novelle* (1554-73)

Francois de Belleforest's *Histoires Tragiques* (1565) & the moralising frame

Antonio Bologna

Giovanna d'Aragona

Alfonso Piccolomini

Daniele da Bozolo

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### YOUR TOPIC

#### The life and work of John Webster

##### SUB-TOPICS

Merchant Taylors Company

Coach makers

*The White Devil*

The King's Men

*A Monumental Column* & Prince Henry

Webster's marriage and children

*The Devil's Law-Case*

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### YOUR TOPIC

#### Shakespeare's *Othello*

#### SUB-TOPICS

Desdemona

The importance of Othello's handkerchief in the plot

Betrayal in *Othello*

Richard Burbage & The King's Men

Judas

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### YOUR TOPIC

#### Lycanthropia

#### SUB-TOPICS

Goulart's *Admirable and Memorable Histories*

Werewolves

Dog days and Sirius

Wolf-cubs

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### YOUR TOPIC

#### **Renaissance ladies marrying beneath them**

#### **SUB-TOPICS**

Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*

Beard's *Theatre of God's Judgements*

Whetstone's *Heptameron of Civil Discourses*

Catherine, Duchess of Suffolk & Richard Bertie

Troubadour tradition & folk ballads

*Matty Groves*

*The Gypsy Laddie*

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### YOUR TOPIC

#### Henry Stuart, Prince of Wales

### SUB-TOPICS

*A Monumental Column*

Public display of the wax effigy of Henry

Relationship to James I

Henry Carr

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### YOUR TOPIC

#### Revenge Tragedy as a Renaissance genre

#### SUB-TOPICS

Cyril Torneur & Thomas Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy* & Vindice

Marston's *The Malcontent*

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Titus Andronicus*

Webster's *The White Devil*



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### YOUR TOPIC

#### Philip Sidney's *Arcadia*

#### SUB-TOPICS

Popularity among University wits  
Popularity of *Arcadia* among junior lawyers of the Inns of Court  
Cecopria's psychological torture of the princesses  
Sidney's use of language  
Elizabeth I  
Gnosticism in Renaissance literature

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### **YOUR TOPIC**

*Verfremdungseffekt*

### **SUB-TOPICS**

Alienation technique

Bertolt Brecht

The effect of reminding audiences they are watching a play

Epic Theatre

Political & Social message in drama

Metatheatricality

Willing Suspension of Disbelief

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### YOUR TOPIC

#### Renaissance scepticism

#### SUB-TOPICS

*Hamlet*

Montaigne's *Essays*

Reactions to Renaissance Humanism

Francis Bacon

Stoicism

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### **YOUR TOPIC**

#### **Jacobean attitudes to Catholicism**

#### **SUB-TOPICS**

The Gunpowder Plot

Jesuit infiltration

Calvinism & Puritanism in the 1610s

Orazio Busino

Relics of the Saints

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### YOUR TOPIC

#### Renaissance attitudes to Astrology & Omens

#### SUB-TOPICS

Johannes Kepler

Tycho Brahe

Alchemy

Dramatic Irony

Relics of the Saints

Sirius and the dog days

Lord of the ascendant

Galileo's telescope

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### YOUR TOPIC

#### Perspective Glasses

#### SUB-TOPICS

Camera Obscura

Galileo's Telescopes

Fairground Mirrors

Johannes Kepler

Hans Lippershey and Zacharias Janssen

Refraction through concave and convex lenses

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### YOUR TOPIC

#### Renaissance attitudes to madness

#### SUB-TOPICS

Hysteria and the womb  
Legion, Beelzebub and the Demons  
Imbalances of Humours  
Sin leading to madness  
Demonic Possession  
Witches  
Bedlam  
Dog days and Sirius  
Urine as an indicator of madness

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### YOUR TOPIC

#### Aristotle's Theory of Tragedy

#### SUB-TOPICS

Unities of time, place & person  
Hubris-Nemesis-Catharsis  
Hamartia-Anagnorisis-Peripeteia  
Offending the Gods



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### **YOUR TOPIC**

**Jacobean attitudes to marriage and betrothal**

### **SUB-TOPICS**

Handfasting

*Sponsalia per verba*

*Copula carnalis*

Henry Swinburne – *Treatise on Spousals* (1600)

Troth-plight

Contracts *de praesenti*

'Making Sure' in a seventeenth century marital context

Wedding masques

Charivari

Marriage as a sacrament and the Council of Trent

Epithalamion

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#### The Festival of Twelfth Night and Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*

##### SUB-TOPICS

Feast of Epiphany

Lord of Misrule

Marriage to a steward

Temporary release from normal standards

Bean King

Shakespeare's use of twins as a dramatic device

Malvolio

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### YOUR TOPIC

#### The Charivari

#### SUB-TOPICS

Marriage-masques

Banging metal pots as part of the celebration

The Council of Tours

Complaints of headaches after charivari

Unwise or too quick marriages

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### YOUR TOPIC

#### The Dance of Death

##### SUB-TOPICS

Danse Macabre

Mirror as image of Vanity

Black Death

Pieter Brueghel

2 *Maccabees* – martyrdom of the mother and her seven sons

Memento Mori

Vaulted tombs

The Old Man as a figure of Christian death

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### YOUR TOPIC

#### Gnosticism

#### SUB-TOPICS

Valentinus, Basilides & Marcion

Demiurges

The Soul as a spark of God

Manicheanism

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### YOUR TOPIC

#### Jacobean Court Masques

#### SUB-TOPICS

Jacobean theatre

Ben Jonson

Inigo Jones

Palladianism

Renaissance attitudes to Pagan gods and goddesses.

Onstage props

Weddings & Charivari

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### YOUR TOPIC

#### Frederick IV of Naples

### SUB-TOPICS

Louis XII of France

Relations with Aragonese court

Ferdinand of Aragon, Duke of Calabria

Aragonese power in the Sixteenth Century

Extension of legal systems

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### YOUR TOPIC

#### The King's Men in the 1610s

#### SUB-TOPICS

Richard Burbage

Henry Condell

The different audiences and styles of the Globe and the Blackfriars Theatres

Retirement of Shakespeare

William Ostler

Boy-actors playing women





Because plays are  
written to be seen.