

**MICHAEL ARMSTRONG-ROCHE (Wesleyan University, Connecticut):**

***Lope de Vega, John Webster, and the Duchess of (A)malfi: Revisiting Comparative Narratives***

The Duchess of Amalfi that Lope de Vega (*El mayordomo de la duquesa de Amalfi* [The Steward of the Duchess of Amalfi], 1599/1617) and John Webster (*The Duchess of Malfi*, 1613/1623) wrote about was Giovanna d’Aragona, a young widow of the royal line that governed 15th-century Naples. In 1504, fearing the wrath of her brothers over the succession, she married the steward of her household (Antonio) in secret and bore him three children before their marriage was discovered in 1511. They attempted to flee but they, their two youngest children and a lady-in-waiting disappeared or were killed by 1513. Given the archetypal potency of this taboo-shattering story, it is no surprise that successive versions would criss-cross Europe over the course of the 16th century (a *novella* by Matteo Bandello, an *Histoire tragique* by Belleforest, and a translation of Belleforest by Painter), that they would disagree about what was more scandalous, and that Lope’s and Webster’s dramatizations – shaped among other ways by the peculiarly heterogeneous audiences of the Madrid and London theaters – should diverge significantly from their sources. Although Lope’s and Webster’s plays share a sympathy for the Duchess against her vengeful brothers, the similarities end there. Webster seems primarily interested in offering a nightmare vision of the court, associated with sexual aberration, infected bodies, madness, tainted blood, and revenge. Lope, on the other hand, gives us a pastoral idyll, an affirmation of female sexuality, a rare vision of domesticity on the stage, humor, the Icarus trope, and romantic intrigue. In significant ways these plays usefully cut against the grain of common broad-brush narratives about their respective national traditions: regarding, say, the prevalence of honor drama (particularly, wife-murder plays); the presence of a subjectivity defined by interiority and a bourgeois individualism shaped by an expanding market economy; or the subversive potential of comedy, tragedy, and tragicomedy. I review a number of possible explanations, but look especially at the ways in which local conditions such as the extraordinary commercial and legal innovations and institutional peculiarities of the Spanish stage (particularly the prominence of actresses) could have shaped Lope’s choices; I suggest they might also encourage us to rethink the comparative stories we tell about the larger theatrical tradition.