ENGLISH LITERATURE

The Duchess of Malfi

December 2014
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This guide will focus on The Duchess of Malfi, listed for study in Section 2, Component 01: ‘Drama and Poetry pre-1900.’ For Section 2 students study one drama and one poetry text. There will be six questions, each with a different thematic or literary focus. Candidates must choose one question worth 30 marks and base their answer on a comparative study with substantial discussion of both texts. In addition to AO1, Section 2 requires students to establish connections between their chosen texts from the genres of poetry and drama (AO4); demonstrate their appreciation of the significance of cultural and contextual influences on writers, readers and/ or audiences (AO3) and to read texts in a variety of ways and respond critically and creatively (AO5).

AO2 is not assessed in Section 2 of this component. Setting aside AO2 gives candidates greater opportunity to build and sustain a comparative discussion focusing upon the contexts, connections and interpretations of their chosen poetry and drama texts, without having to interrupt the continuity of their comparisons in order to ‘step aside’ and demonstrate AO2 in a single text. However, where learners discuss, for example, dramatic devices or structure in their chosen texts, such discussion can be rewarded under AO1 (‘informed’ responses to literary texts), AO4 (‘connections’ across literary texts) or AO5 (‘different interpretations’). Opportunity to satisfy AO2 is afforded by Section 1 of this component where candidates write a detailed critical analysis of an extract from their chosen Shakespeare play. In this way Section 1 ensures candidates have an opportunity to address AO2 directly.
### Introduction

A precondition of much Jacobean drama is that revenge should be an essential element of a play. Revenge is a primitive force often associated with ancient mythology and the Greek dramatists. Revenge becomes ‘fashionable’ once more in the Jacobean era to the extent that Shakespeare, whose plays dealt with more complex themes, felt compelled to write his own revenge tragedy – *Hamlet*. The worksheet provided (please see Learner Resource 1.1) directs students to significant characters in *The Duchess of Malfi* and requires them to explore individual characters’ motives for revenge supported by quotations from the play.

The outcomes of acts of revenge are always ironic. In *The Duchess of Malfi* the consequences of the desire to be avenged are chaotic. The innocent are killed along with the guilty and others are killed by accident or mistaken identity. The worksheet activity provided (please see Learner Resource 1.2) will help students understand the complex web of intrigue and cruelty the play presents in requiring them to provide an explanation of who kills whom and for what reason.

Bosola is often regarded as a malcontent: a ‘stock’ character who considers himself to have been badly treated whether or not this is actually the case. Malcontents are constitutionally at odds with other characters. Iago in *Othello* and Don John in *Much Ado About Nothing* are examples from Shakespeare’s plays. This activity (please see Learner Resource 1.3) asks students to focus upon Bosola and consider his actions, motivations, his shifting loyalty and the ‘reward(s)’ he reaps. In considering these questions students will explore the extent to which Bosola can be interpreted simply as a malcontent.

For much of the play Ferdinand is obsessed with the notion of his twin sister, the Duchess, remarrying. When he discovers that she has remarried, he imprisons her, taunts her and has her executed. This activity (please see Learner Resource 1.4) will focus students’ attention upon Ferdinand in considering whether he is simply motivated by revenge because the Duchess refuses to obey him and deceives him or whether other, more complex motives underpin his actions.

This activity (please see Learner Resource 1.5) directs students to a passage from Act 4, scene 2 in which the Duchess briefly revives after being strangled. Students are required to analyse the extract in the light of Bosola’s contradictory conduct (in following a truthful response with a lie) and consider why Webster might have felt the scene necessary given that it required him to include the unlikely event of the Duchess temporarily recovering briefly from ‘death.’
Approaches to teaching the content:

An effective starting point would be to familiarise students with Jacobean Revenge Tragedy, a very specific genre in terms of content, form and period. Comparisons can be made with Hamlet and with other texts from the genre such as The Spanish Tragedy and The Revenger’s Tragedy. Students should be made aware of the dramatic function of the ‘malcontent’ in relation to this genre. They should be able to comment upon Webster’s use of blank verse and prose as an indication of status, mode and character (Bosola’s use of both blank verse and prose is an indication to the audience of his duality and as an aspect of verse drama). Making students aware of the playwright’s use of verse in drama will alert them to comparisons that may be made between drama and the poetry text. Exploring Webster’s use of ambiguous similes (Bosola: ‘He and his brother are like plum trees that grow crooked overstanding pools...’ Act 1, scene i, ll. 48-9), puns, riddles, anecdotes, mythology and aptronyms (e.g. Castruchio, Malateste), will assist students in interpreting the presentation of the play’s complex themes. The analysis of The Duchess of Malfi’s techniques can be linked to those used in the Shakespeare text in Section 1. Webster’s use of innovative props and stage effects (the severed hand, the waxwork replicas of the Duchess’s murdered children, the use of a ‘dark lantern’ and so on) can be analysed in terms of their effect upon audience response and considered in relation to the play having been written for performance in an ‘indoor’ theatre (Blackfriars). Webster was one of the first playwrights to realise the potential offered by an entirely enclosed theatrical space. His carelessness/indifference towards ‘realism’ can be highlighted by discussing the erasing of the Duchess’s first son when it becomes dramatically necessary for her to have been childless when she remarried. Students should also be aware of the temporal impossibilities that arise in the play, such as the two year gap between the end of Act II and beginning of Act III. They should consider matters such as the ‘echo’ in act V, scene iii and the riddle it apparently speaks, an episode that is not crucial to the plot and is never fully explained. The themes of power, corruption, toadyism, women rulers, lust, incest and religion are presented through a broad range of dramatic techniques which will be best explored through close reading and experience of the play in performance.
Common misconceptions or difficulties students might have.

- Students who know little about Jacobean Revenge Tragedy may be daunted by the idea of studying a text from such an ‘exotic’ genre or they may be perplexed by Webster’s language. The first can be resolved by an explanation of the universality of the play’s themes and its resemblance, in many ways, to a TV soap opera. Apparent difficulties presented by Webster’s language can be dispelled by demonstrating how, although more idiosyncratic, it is essentially the Early Modern English of Shakespeare’s plays.

- Those who come to the text with some knowledge of the play’s critical reception, in particular the attention paid to Webster’s alleged ‘delight’ in the gory and gruesome, should be encouraged to consider the violence and cruelty in terms of their relation to the moral framework of the play.

- Though the play’s exploration of power and politics presents both in a very negative light, this should be understood in relation to Antonio’s speech at the play’s opening in which he sets out an example of good governance. Antonio’s delineation of the ‘fixed order’ established by a ‘judicious king’ established a contrast that should not be overlooked. Considering the dedication to Webster’s patron, will make clear that he does not ‘look up at’ nobility but instead values learning and ‘great examples.’

Conceptual links to other areas of the specification- useful ways to approach this topic to set students up for topics later in the course.

The approaches outlined above will assist students in developing the analytical skills and strategies that will enable them to formulate, test and articulate personal and creative responses to any of the texts they study as part of the A level English Literature course. The approach to Webster’s drama outlined here draws particular attention to its use of dramatic techniques and the insight these afford readers/audiences to the play’s themes, plot and characterisation. In identifying Webster’s use of blank verse and iambic pentameter, students will exercise the critical skills they will also apply to the poetry text they discuss alongside The Duchess of Malfi and to the unseen extract and Shakespeare essay in Section 1. It is important that students are made aware that, even though the focus of Component 01 is poetry and drama, the fundamental questions they will ask when they read (who is speaking, in what context, who is watching/reading, how can this be interpreted) apply universally, regardless of genre.
### Thinking Conceptually

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>Resources</th>
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<td>‘Morality.’ One of the controversies generated by Webster concerns the question of whether or not <em>The Duchess of Malfi</em> is a ‘moral’ play. It does not appear to conform to the Christian moral framework that is evident in Shakespeare’s plays. In the carnage at the climax of the play, both good, or mostly good characters, evil characters, victims and bystanders are all murdered, whatever their motives, whatever their deeds. This activity requires students to consider the extent to which characters’ acts can be considered moral and/or immoral and to weigh against this their ‘punishment.’ Students should consider to what extent plotting ‘morality’/‘immorality’ in this way helps them to determine the moral content of the play (please see Learner Resource 1.6).</td>
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<td>The concept of ‘Governance’ as it is explored by Webster in <em>The Duchess of Malfi</em> can be read as reflecting our contemporary concerns about the integrity of those who govern and the ways that they govern. This activity (please see Learner Resource 1.7) asks students to consider Antonio’s speech at the beginning of the play in which he gives his opinion of the French court, from the point of view of Webster’s original audiences and modern audiences.</td>
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<td>Despite the complex structure of the play, it could be argued that <em>The Duchess of Malfi</em> is primarily a play about fate. No matter what plans are made, no matter whether a character is good or bad, it is fate that decides destiny. Characters’ lives are concluded without any of their desires being satisfied other than their ephemeral pleasures. This activity (please see Learner Resource 1.8) asks students to look closely at Act 5, scene 5 and consider Bosola’s murder of Antonio.</td>
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<td>Love and Sexuality. Webster’s portrayal of love and sexuality were more frank than those of his contemporaries. The subjects are hardly ever made bawdy, but treated with a good deal of seriousness. The secret marriage between the Duchess and Antonio in Act 1, Scene 1, and the relationship between the Cardinal and Julia in Act 2, Scene 4, are presented as contrasting aspects of human relationships. This activity focuses students’ attention upon the Duchess and Julia (please see Learner Resource 1.9).</td>
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<td>Webster’s play challenges audiences to consider whether Ferdinand’s response to the Duchess can be explained simply in terms of misogyny. The critical debate concerning Ferdinand questions his disturbingly sexualised response to his sister. This activity (appendix please see Learner Resource 1.10) highlights extracts from the play that will provide a focus for students to consider whether Ferdinand’s responses can be explained simply by dismissing him as a misogynist.</td>
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*Resources:* Learner Resource 1.6, Learner Resource 1.7, Learner Resource 1.8, Learner Resource 1.9, Learner Resource 1.10.
The content of *The Duchess of Malfi*, though it arises directly out of the ideas and anxieties of the early 17th Century, has a continuing relevance today. The question of how a country should be governed is central to Webster’s text, as it is to many of Shakespeare’s plays. However, in common with opinion today, Webster seems to have had less faith in the capacity of rulers to rule ethically than Shakespeare did. Ferdinand, Duke of Calabria, uses spies, orders assassinations, betrays whoever gets in his way and plans the murder of the Duchess, his sister. The Cardinal, who ought to be a moral character, is a Machiavellian politician who is as ruthless and bloodthirsty as his brother Ferdinand, who has a mistress, whom he treats deplorably. The Duchess, who marries beneath her class for love, who tries to protect her children and who dies willingly, is arguably the only moral character in the play. The role of women was a topic much discussed at the time, partly because of the number of notable women rulers (queens regnant) during the previous century (Mary Queen of Scots, Elizabeth I, ‘Bloody’ Mary).

Webster represents the Duchess as a woman who expresses her sexuality. She understands Bosola’s innuendo about ‘lampreys’ (Act 1, scene 1) and engages in sexual banter with her husband. Indeed, many of the characters in the play are obsessed with her sexuality and her possible pregnancy. There was great concern in the patriarchal societies of the period about the status of widows. Only by surviving her husband could a woman own property and such women were regarded with suspicion. The Duchess not only inherits her husband’s property, but also his role as head of state. The nature of marriage was also a concern. A ‘private’ marriage, such as that between the Duchess and her steward was legal, but the Duchess never acknowledges her husband publicly. Conflicts between religion and politics that had dominated the previous century are explored in the play and were to erupt once more in the mid-17th Century. These important contextual factors can not only be related to the history and literature of the period in which the play was performed, but also to our own times.
Thinking Contextually

### Activities

This first research activity requires students to gather information relating to the circumstances surrounding the play’s production (please see Learner Resource 1.11).

The title page of the first edition of *The Duchess of Malfi* states that it was ‘Presented privately, at the Black-/Friers; and publicly at the Globe’. The Globe was an open amphitheatre playhouse, Blackfriars an indoor playhouse. Blackfriars afforded Webster opportunity for dramatic innovation and enabled more subtle stage effects (in lighting, the use of waxwork dummies, and a ‘dark’ lantern). Students should research the theatrical and performance contexts of the play.

The Duchess and Antonio, as presented in the play, are not entirely Webster’s inventions but are based on real historical figures. Students should research Webster’s sources and be aware of the substantial changes made and new material introduced in his adaptation.

Students will read Webster’s dedication to Baron Berkeley and consider the ways in which he appears to be persuading the Baron to be his patron (the dedication suggests that he was seeking patronage, not thanking Baron Berekeley, as is sometimes supposed). Students will discuss why Webster reveals hostility to the titles of noblemen in a dedication seeking financial support from a member of the nobility. Students will research which other writers to whom Baron Berkeley gave financial support and explore the relationships between these writers and their texts and Webster and *The Duchess of Malfi*. Students should also explore patronage in a more general sense and draw conclusions about the nature of the relationship between writers, audiences, publishers and theatres (the reception and production of literary texts).

### Resources

Learner Resource 1.11
For each of the following characters, give their motivation for committing, or attempting to commit, an act of revenge. You should quote and provide references to support your responses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Motive for revenge (include quotations and references)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bosola</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ferdinand</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cardinal</td>
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<td>Antonio</td>
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<td>Julia</td>
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</table>
For each of the following characters, provide an explanation of who kills them and for what reason. You should quote and provide references to support your responses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Who kills the character? For what reason? Quote and provide references.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Duchess</td>
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<tr>
<td>The two youngest children</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cariola</td>
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<tr>
<td>Julia</td>
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<tr>
<td>Antonio</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>The Cardinal's servant</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>The Cardinal</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Ferdinand</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Bosola</td>
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</table>
Bosola: stock malcontent or complex character?

In groups or pairs, discuss Webster’s characterisation of Bosola.

Your discussion should focus upon the question:

Is Bosola merely a malcontent or is he justified in acting the way he does?

The following should help you to consider this question:

• Why does Bosola seek revenge upon the Cardinal?
• Why is Bosola prepared to spy on the Duchess, to assist Ferdinand to take her prisoner and to organise her execution?
• Why does Bosola appear to change sides immediately after the Duchess has been killed?
• To what extent is Bosola’s motivation simply financial gain?

Make notes and quote from the play to support your responses.
Ferdinand’s ‘revenge’?

In groups or pairs, discuss Webster’s characterisation of Ferdinand. Your discussion should focus on the question:

Is Ferdinand’s treatment of his sister merely revenge because she has disobeyed and deceived him (in marrying Antonio) or are his motives more complex?

The following should help you to consider this question:

• Read at the following extract:

FERDINAND: Me thinks I see her laughing – Excellent hyena! Talk to me somewhat quickly, Or my imagination will carry me To see her in a shameful act of sin.
CARDINAL: With whom?
FERDINAND: Happily with some strong-thighed bargeman: Or one of the woodyard that can quoit the sledge Or toss the bar; or else some lovely squire That carries coals up to her privy lodgings.
CARDINAL: You fly beyond reason.
FERDINAND: Go to, mistress, 'Tis not your whore's milk that shall quench my wild fire, But your whore's blood!
Bosola: Act 4, scene 2.

In this scene the Duchess briefly revives after being strangled by hired assassins.

Read the following:

BOSOLA:
[Duchess moves ]
She stirs! Here's life!
Return fair soul from darkness, and lead mine
Out of this sensible hell! She's warm, she breathes:
Upon thy pale lips I will melt my heart
To store them with fresh colour. [Kisses her] Who's there –
Some cordial drink! – Alas I dare not call;
So pity would destroy pity. Her eye opes,
And heaven in it seems to ope, that late was shut,
To take me up to mercy.

DUCHESS: Antonio.

BOSOLA: Yes Madam he is living,
The dead boodies you saw were but feigned statues,
He's reconciled to your brothers, the Pope hath wrought
The atonement.

DUCHESS: Mercy. She dies.

Bosola tells the Duchess the truth and then follows it with a lie.

• What might be his motives for doing so?

Clearly Webster considered this an important aspect of the play since he creates the unlikely event of the Duchesses brief recovery.
### MORALITY/IMMORALITY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHARACTER</th>
<th>MORAL ACTS</th>
<th>IMMORAL ACTS</th>
<th>PUNISHMENT</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ANTONIO</td>
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<td>BOSOLA</td>
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<td>THE DUCHESS</td>
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<td>CARIOLA</td>
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<td>JULIA</td>
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<tr>
<td>FERDINAND</td>
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<tr>
<td>THE CARDINAL</td>
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Learner resource 1.7

Governance

Act 1, scene 1.
[Enter Antonio and Delio]

DELIO:  You are welcome to your country, dear Antonio;  
You have been long in France, and you return  
A very formal Frenchman in your habit.  
How do you like the French court?

ANTONIO:  
I admire it:  
In seeking to reduce both state and people  
To a fixed order, their judicious king  
 Begins at home, quits first his royal palace  
Of flatt’ring sychophants, of dissolute  
And infamous persons – which he sweetly terms  
His Master’s masterpieces, the work of heaven –  
Consid’ring duly that a prince’s court  
Is like a common fountain, whence should flow  
Pure silver drops in general, but if’t chance  
Some cursed example poison’t near the head,  
Death and diseases through the whole land spread.  
And what is’t makes this blessed government  
But a most provident council, who dare freely  
Inform him the corruption of the times/  
Though some o’th’court hold it presumption  
To instruct princes what they ought to do,  
It is a noble duty to inform them  
What they ought to forsee.
The murder of Antonio.

Focus questions:
• Why, in Act 5, scene 5, does Bosola kill Antonio?
• How does this murder relate to the events of the play up to this point?
• Why does Ferdinand stab both his brother and Bosola?
• How do these acts relate to the events of the rest of the play?

Read the following extract from Act 5, scene 5:

MALATEST: Thou wretched thing of blood, How came Antonio by his death?
BOSOLA: In a mist; I know not how; Such a mistake as I have often seen In a play. Oh I am gone. We are only like dead walls, or vaulted graves, That ruined yields no echo. Fare you well. It may be pain but no harm to me, to die In so good a quarrel. Oh this gloomy world! In what a shadow, or deep pit of darkness, Doth womanish and fearful mankind live! Let worthy minds ne’er stagger in distrust To suffer death or shame for what is just. Mine is another voyage.

Consider this extract carefully in the light of the focus questions above. What view or views of the events of the play are suggested by Bosola’s final words?
Learner resource 1.9

Love and Sexuality

An examination of the characterisation of the Duchess and Julia reveals much about the ways in which they might be compared (both are strong-willed women of the court, both conduct clandestine affairs, both will meet their deaths at the hands of Ferdinand and the Cardinal).

Read the extracts below and consider what they reveal about the Duchess and Julia in terms of love and sexuality.

Act 1, scene 1.

DUCHESS: Now she pays it. The misery of us that are born great, We are forces to woo because none dare woo us: And as a tyrant doubles with his words, And fearfully equivocates, so we Are forced to express our violent passions In riddles and in dreams, and leave the path Of simple virtue which was never made To seem the thing it is not. Go, go brag You have left me heartless, mine is in your bosom, I hope it will multiply love there. You do tremble. Make not your heart so dead a piece of flesh To fear more than to love me. Sir, be confident, What is't distracts you? This is flesh and blood, sir, 'Tis not the figure cut in alabaster Kneels at my husband's tomb. Awake, awake man,

I do here put off al vain ceremony And only do appear to you a young widow That claims you for her husband; and like a widow, I use but half a blush in't.

1. Why must the Duchess be so guarded in expressing her feelings?
2. Does the Duchess regret the ‘equivocations’ imposed by her status?
3. How does the Duchess express her basic humanity to Antonio?
4. Does this speech reveal: a) tenderness? b) sensitivity to Antonio’s position?
5. Why does the Duchess show ‘but half a blush’?
6. Is the Duchess motivated by love or lust?
CARDINAL: You fear my constancy because you have approved
Those giddy and wild turnings in yourself............
CARDINAL: Why do you weep?
Are tears your justification? The self-same tears,
Will fall into your husband's bosom, lady,
With a loud protestation that you love him
Above the world. Come, I'll love you wisely,
That's jealously, since I am very certain
You cannot make me cuckold.
JULIA: I'll go home
To my husband.
CARDINAL: You may thank me, lady;
I have taken you off your melancholy perch,
Bore you upon my fist, and showed you game,
And let you fly at it. I pray thee kiss me.
When thou wast with thy husband thou wast watched
Like a tame elephant – still you are to thank me–
Thou hadst only kisses from him, and high feeding,
But what delight was that? 'Twas just like one
That hath a little fingering on the lute,
Yet cannot tune it – still you thank me.

1. How does this passage compare to that quoted above? Is it 'love' that is expressed in this extract.
2. Is it the case that both extracts express 'sexuality'? How do the two women's expression of this differ?
3. Would it be more accurate to characterise the Cardinal's and Julia's responses as deriving from 'lust' rather than 'love.'
4. What, dramatically, is the effect of juxtaposing these two views of love and sexuality?
Is Ferdinand simply a misogynist?

1. Ferdinand imagines the Duchess having sex with a man of lower rank. What is suggested by his focus on the virile masculinity of the men he visualises?

‘Happily with some strong-thighed bargemen;
Or one o’th’woodyard that can quoit the sledge
Or toss the bar; or else some lovely squire
That carries coals up to her privy lodgings.’

Act 2, scene 5 (42-5)

2. Here Ferdinand appeals to his brother, the Cardinal:

‘Methinks I see her laughing –
Excellent hyena! Talk to me somewhat quickly,
Or my imagination will carry me
To see her in the shameful act of sin.’

Act 2, scene 2 (38-41)

What does his need for this kind of distraction suggest about the degree of self-control Ferdinand is able to command on his own behalf?

3. ‘Tis not your whore’s milk that shall quench my wild-fire,
But your whore’s blood!’

Act 2, scene 5 (47-8)

What is the nature of Ferdinand’s ‘wild-fire’? What does the reference to the Duchess’ maternity (‘whore’s milk’) suggest?

4. Ferdinand fantasies about giving the Duchess’ child a handkerchief so that it can staunch his mother’s blood:

‘when I have hewed her to pieces’

Act 2, scene 5 (31)

He then goes on to imagine, with obvious relish, different ways he might murder the Duchess and her family:

‘I would have their bodies’

Burnt in a coal pit with the vantage stopped,
That their cursed smoke might not ascend to heaven;
Or dip the sheets they lie in, in pitch or sulphur,
Or else boil their bastard to a cullis
And giv’et his lecherous father to renew
The sin of his back.

Act 2, scene 5 (66-70)

What does the fact that Ferdinand’s venom seems not to be exclusively directed at the Duchess suggest?
Is fantasising about harming those she loves simply another way Ferdinand can fantasise about harming his sister or is his hatred more widely targeted?

5. What is the effect of Webster’s hint that Ferdinand’s deranged determination to harm his sister might be due to a sense of guilt:

‘I could kill her now
In you or in myself, for I do think
It is some sin in us heaven doth revenge
By her.’

Act 2, scene 5 (64-66)

Could Ferdinand be referring to incest?
**THE CONTEXT OF PRODUCTION**

What was the political structure of Italy at the time the play was written?

Italy is the setting for many plays of the era, including those by Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, Middleton and Rowley. What opportunities would setting a play in Italy have given to these playwrights?

The Duchess becomes a female head of state. Was this unusual at the time of the play or were there other women rulers?

How were women rulers regarded at the time?

When the play was written, England was a Protestant country. Italy was overwhelmingly a Catholic country. To what extent is religion an aspect of the play?

What was Webster’s attitude towards the aristocracy? Is there evidence of his views in the presentation of the characters in the play?