

## Summary and Questions on *The Duchess of Malfi*

### ACT ONE SCENE ONE:

The play opens with a discussion between two courtiers, Antonio & Delio, who watch, or are involved with, most of the rest of the Act. They talk about, or observe, most of the other characters we are going to see through the rest of the play.

Antonio, in his opening speech, compares the reforming purity of the French court under Louis XII to any court which allows flattery and toadying: in the light of what happens elsewhere in the play, this is dramatic irony.

They observe Bosola, recently returned from the galleys, in an argument with the Cardinal, in whose service (probably for murder) he spent two years as a slave and prisoner. The Cardinal scolds Bosola, who criticises him in reply.

Bosola complains to Antonio that the Cardinal and his brother never rewarded him in the way he was supposed to be rewarded.

### QUESTIONS:

Elizabethan & Jacobean plays very often start with two courtiers explaining the backstory of the play. Webster does this, however, in an oblique way: we have just come from an equestrian tournament (which Antonio has just won), we are preparing for the departure

---

This study resource is brought to you by Stage on Screen, the UK company staging classic stage plays of set texts for schools, students and theatre lovers everywhere. All productions are filmed and distributed on multi-region DVD, and are available in the UK and all over the world. For details, please see [www.stageonscreen.com](http://www.stageonscreen.com)

---

of the Duchess' brothers, Antonio has just been chosen as the Duchess' steward etc. Why does he not make the backstory much clearer? How "modern" is it to make this backstory slowly reveal itself, rather than having it explained clearly to the audience?

All the characters in this scene have clear emotional drives, but Webster does not (in the way that some of his contemporaries would) explain to us exactly what these drives are: there are very few asides, or short soliloquies, that explain what the characters are really thinking. How many of the characters are actually putting on a show in this Act? How much does this fit the themes of disguise running through the play?

Compared to the rest of the play, Act One is often described as "slow", possibly because of the courtly appearance of the characters: how deliberate is that for Webster? How much does he want us to see the Courtly behaviour of the characters before they are revealed in their id/animal desires?

How much is Webster trying to make us reassess what we have seen and expected in this first Act? How much is he asking us to take nothing for granted?

Bosola is traditionally dressed in the black clothes of a "malcontent" and is also known to have recently been released from the galleys. With how much of what he says are we supposed to sympathise?

The thing Bosola complains of the Cardinal and Ferdinand doing at the start of the play, is what they become at the end of the play: how much is this dramatic irony, or how much of this is simply Bosola confirming the prejudices of his listeners?

How corrupt is Bosola at the start of the play? Antonio refers to him as having "goodness", yet he has swapped the honour of being a soldier for the place in the galleys for (we assume) murder, and will shortly become a spy (and later a murderer again). In some ways, though, Bosola has to be the emotional and moral core of the play, and his conversion at the end of Act Four has to be emotionally realistic. How truthful is he being with the Cardinal in this opening scene, and how much is he putting on an act for Antonio and Delio?

It is often said that the best lies are the ones that have the most truth in them. How much is this true of Bosola?

**ACT ONE SCENE ONE (B)/ SCENE TWO:**

In the original Quarto edition of the play (1623), there was a scene break at line 80, yet Antonio & Delio continue their conversation.

Ferdinand, twin brother to the Duchess, comes on wanting to know who won the “rings” tournament, and then engages in a conversation with the old courtier Castruchio about whether or not to go to war.

Ferdinand also mocks Castruchio for getting a horse that is far too sprightly for an old man like him, much like his wife, Julia. Castruchio has to pretend to get the joke at his expense. Ferdinand tries to bring Antonio into the argument.

Antonio & Delio watch the Duchess with her brothers. Delio comments on the Cardinal's charm: Antonio comments that the Cardinal is as evil and black-hearted as the Duchess is pure and good. The Cardinal is calm, but will create more plots to cheat people he hates than anyone setting traps for Hercules. Ferdinand (the Duke), twin brother to the Duchess, is as wild and unpredictable as his brother is calm, but is more like the Cardinal than anyone would suspect to look at them. He thinks the Cardinal gets oracles from the devil, while the Duchess is religiously continent and brings people to virtue.

Cariola asks Antonio to meet the Duchess in half an hour.

Ferdinand makes a request of the Duchess that she employs Bosola as her “provisorship of your horse”. She agrees.

When the Cardinal and Ferdinand are left onstage alone together, they finally reveal that they are plotting to use Bosola to spy on the Duchess. Ferdinand wonders why the Cardinal doesn't use Antonio, but the Cardinal explains that Bosola is more corruptible.

Ferdinand tells Bosola to spy on the Duchess, to make sure she doesn't marry again: he refuses to give his reasons.

The Cardinal and Ferdinand threaten the Duchess that she must not marry again. Ferdinand says that to marry twice is “most luxurious”, that women who do so are “spotted”, are whores, and are witches who suckle familiar spirits; the Cardinal points out that marriage is a prison and that, so often, after a funeral, a widow remarries.

Ferdinand threatens the Duchess with his father's dagger and makes reference to the dangers of the part of a man's body that doesn't have a bone in it (he means the tongue).

The Duchess, left on stage alone, explains that she is going to do what she wants, and calls Cariola to be a witness to her seduction of Antonio.

The Duchess is distracted when talking to Antonio, until she finally gives Antonio her wedding ring, and proposes marriage. When Antonio responds, she has already arranged for Cariola to witness it.

They go off to bed together. Cariola is worried about the "fearful madness" of love that the Duchess is exhibiting.

#### **QUESTIONS:**

Some Renaissance dramatists followed the convention that a major exit or entrance justified a new scene number; others demonstrate the theory that a scene represents a place. In what sense does line 80 (with the entry of Castruchio, Silvio, Roderigo and Grisolan) represent a new scene? If you were directing or lighting this scene, how would you make the change more apparent?

Castruchio makes a reference to his wife (later revealed to be Julia, the Cardinal's mistress). Ferdinand makes him repeat a story about an army captain she knew. How much is Ferdinand taunting Castruchio that his wife is a whore? How deliberate is his behaviour towards Castruchio? How cruel is he?

The conversation about the young sporty horse (a Spanish Jennet) seems to be about Castruchio's wife as well. How many of these jokes does Castruchio get? Is he pretending to understand or is he pretending not to understand?

The Duchess, Ferdinand and the Cardinal are on stage (in dumb-show) for a full two pages (four minutes?) while Antonio comments on them. How much are we supposed to accept his views as being truthful? How much in love is Antonio already by the time he makes his judgements? If you were directing this scene, how would you have the Duchess and the Cardinal behave towards each other? How formal is their behaviour?

How alike are the Duchess, Ferdinand and the Cardinal? Some productions even go as far as

having them look alike. If you were directing the play, how would you make sure that their similarities, as well as their differences, were brought out?

The idea of twins and twinning reflects the ideas of echoing, reflecting and paralleling that run throughout the play, and there is a clear idea that the Cardinal and Frederick are twins in spirit while Ferdinand and the Duchess are twins in the flesh. How important is the twin theme in the play?

Antonio tells Delio that the Duchess brings men to religious virtue, yet by the end of the scene she is embarking on a morganatic marriage, unsanctioned by the church or state, with a man her social inferior. How religious is she? How sinful?

By Act Two, the servants are all making filthy jokes about her. How much is this a change, or how much out-of-touch is Antonio?

The scene between Ferdinand and the Cardinal confirms all that Antonio has said: they have even staged the show of Bosola's anger at the Cardinal to put Antonio off Bosola's scent. How truthful are they being in their scene between the two of them? How much does Bosola's opening scene accurately reflect his true feelings? Is Bosola trapped in his "personality" of being an assassin and a spy, which he already wishes to escape?

Ferdinand's reference to Bosola's face is the first reference to faces not telling us everything we need to know about a person in the play. Webster has a number of the characters either putting on a false face, or the face misleading. Why does this become such an important theme for him?

Bosola echoes this theme by his comparison of "Angels" (Italian gold coins) which make devils of us: the idea of reversing what is on one side of a man's face to see the opposite. How much does money corrupt him? How much does he want to escape from his own (assigned) "personality"?

Bosola calls himself the "familiar" of Ferdinand, a word meaning (a) a member of his household, (b) a devilish spirit, linking a witch to the devil and (c) a close personal friend. How should Ferdinand respond to these suggestions?

When Ferdinand says "luxurious", does he mean "uxorious"? The two words would have been very similar to Webster's first audience.

Ferdinand's "father's poniard" and referencing his penis seems quite explicit in terms of his feelings about his sister. Is there any way to act this to make it seem more repressed and subconscious, or is everything on the surface with him?

The exact moment of Cariola's entrance is left vague in the first Quarto. Is it better for the Duchess' speech (lines 333-341) to be addressed to her or is it better for that speech to be a soliloquy? If you were directing that scene, which would make the scene more powerful? Which is more psychologically interesting?

How funny is the scene between the Duchess and Antonio? How class-conscious is Antonio? How much has he been expecting any of this?

Webster is also playing with gender in this scene, exposing how much our expectations of a gender-role are based on the perceived power of women. With the Duchess as the powerful one in the relationship with Antonio, do the gender-rules no longer apply? Is it fair to apply a feminist reading of the play? How does Webster play with our expectations of who should be doing the wooing?

In the proposal scene, Antonio and the Duchess both use a lot of language of penetration in terms of metonymy (not simply putting fingers into rings, but thrusting hands into fire, breaking the ground etc). How much are they aware that their language has a sexual meaning? To what extent is it part of the seduction itself?

A lot of the images in this scene are prefiguring typologies of what will happen later in the play (the winding sheet and will, imprisonment and madmen's ambition, cold hands, figures in alabaster). Why does Webster lay out so much of the story in this scene? Is this scene the hamartia of the play?

How legal is the marriage between the Duchess and Antonio? The Jacobean church recognised as legally binding private marriage contracts ("handfastings"), with the expectation that these would be solemnized in church once conception had taken place.

The first act of spying and concealment in the play is actually done by the Duchess to get Cariola to witness her marriage to Antonio. As there is so much spying and concealment later in the play, how deliberate was it of Webster to have the first piece of spying so "happy" and fulfilled?

Antonio, having been the noblest and best horseman in the contest at the start of the play,

is increasingly “feminised” and weakened during the course of the play. Is Webster making a point about men who let themselves be ordered around by women?

Do they really believe Ferdinand and the Cardinal will come round to their way of thinking? Are they thinking at all?

The Cardinal’s name (in Painter, and briefly referred to elsewhere in the play) is Lodovico (Lodowick). Is Antonio making some reference to the Cardinal’s sexual feelings about his sister? Is this deliberate or subconscious?

**ACT TWO SCENE ONE:**

Bosola insults Castruchio, who wants to be known as an eminent courtier.

Bosola spends a lot of time abusing women for their weakness. First he insults the Old Lady for daring to use make-up to make herself look more attractive. He compares her to an “abortive hedgehog”.

He observes that the Duchess has been sick recently: the implication is that he has spotted her pregnancy.

He scolds Antonio on how quickly he has been rising in the household.

The Duchess pretends that she is just putting on weight. Bosola offers her apricots, and, once she has eaten them, tells her that they were ripened in horse-dung. She starts to become sick; she goes into labour.

Delio thinks of blaming the poisoned apricots, but Antonio realises that will bring doctors who will discover the Duchess condition.

**QUESTIONS:**

How much of an unpleasant sexist is Bosola? How much sympathy are we supposed to have for him?

On line 45, Bosola moves from prose to blank verse. What is the effect of this? Why does Webster change his style? Is the speech (lines 45-61) a soliloquy or aside, mocking himself and others, or is it continuing the attack on the Old Lady? This decision changes our perception of him: is he a self-hating, melancholic misanthropist? Or is he just an unpleasant misogynist? Or is he both?

Is Bosola’s idea that the Duchess wears “a loose-bodied gown” a suggestion that she herself is “loose-bodied” (a whore)? Or is it just that he has noticed her indulging in odd and unfashionable choice of clothing?

It is the effect of the Duchess’ pregnancy that betrays her to Bosola. How much is Webster arguing that the “natural” nature of women undermines their power as intriguers? How dangerous is love in this play?



The Duchess says “I fear I am undone”. In the seventeenth century, death in childbirth was the largest killer of young women (after plague). How much is she frightened of giving birth, and how much is she frightened of her relationship being discovered?

We generally see Antonio and Delio as being the good guys in the play, but Webster says that both of them would be willing to accuse Bosola of poisoning the Duchess if that would help their interests. Can that be reconciled with them being the moral centre of the play?

Antonio is left helpless at the end of the scene: is this just a typical new father’s reaction, or is Webster deliberately feminising and weakening him, after his seduction by the Duchess?

**ACT TWO SCENE TWO:**

Bosola interrupts and insults the Old Lady, who is now revealed to be a midwife.

Antonio orders the gates to be shut.

The servants gossip about someone being found in the Duchess' bedchamber, possibly a lover with syphilis.

Antonio tells them there's been a robbery, and has the estate locked up.

Cariola tells Antonio he is the father of a son. He goes to get the child's horoscope done.

**QUESTIONS:**

Bosola uses the word "breeding": is that in the sense of the Duchess' class, or the sense of her being too stupid to hide her pregnancy?

Why does Webster make the servants make filthy jokes at the Duchess' expense? Is he commenting on how badly she has kept her secret? Or is he making a statement about sexist servants always making jokes at their single boss' expense?

Why does Antonio pretend that there has been a robbery? Why does he still send Delio out anyway?

Does he have a nosebleed by this point in the story? His bleeding nose becomes important later in the play. If you were directing the scene, would you make his bleeding nose start at this point?

**ACT TWO SCENE THREE:**

Bosola, though confined to quarters, needs to find out what the cries from the Duchess' chamber were.

He and Antonio find each other skulking about in the dark. Antonio tells him he has been working out a horoscope for the lost jewels. He accuses Bosola of having poisoned the apricots. They get into an argument and Antonio's nose starts bleeding.

Antonio pulls out a handkerchief and his son's horoscope falls out of his pocket.

Bosola reads the boy's horoscope, declaring it is the Duchess' son, which warns of a violent death. He will send a letter to the brother in the morning via Castruchio: he wants to ruin their days.

**QUESTIONS:**

Pregnancy and childbirth are presented in this scene as dangerous and painful. Deaths in childbirth were (before the discovery of antibiotics) the largest cause of deaths in young women. How entertaining would this scene be for audiences in the seventeenth century, where one in ten births led to the death of either the mother or the child?

The issue with the blood-spotted handkerchief and the lost horoscope is clearly meant to remind the audience of Shakespeare's *Othello*, played by the same company in the previous years. Why did Webster want his audience to be reminded of a previous play by the same company? Is this part of the cultural code that runs through the play? Is he trying to remind us that we are watching a play in a certain genre?

The horoscope warns of a violent death, but in the play the boy survives and inherits his mother's lands. Why does Webster mislead us in this way?

**ACT TWO SCENE FOUR:**

The Cardinal and his lover, Julia, wife of the aged Castruchio, argue. The Cardinal says that he'd need to look as far as the moon to find an honest woman. He tells her that she should thank him for taking her away from her sexually useless husband. He compares her to a tame elephant.

When he leaves, she entertains Delio, one of her previous lovers, who comes with her husband from Malfi. They flirt and he gives her money.

The servant tells them that the message that Castruchio has brought to Ferdinand has driven him into a crazed rage.

Delio is worried that Antonio is betrayed.

**QUESTIONS:**

To what extent is Julia supposed to be a counterpoint to the Duchess, in that she has to lie about her sexual relations as well?

Orazio Busino, who saw the play in 1618, reported seeing the Cardinal "with a harlot on his knee". Other productions have taken this further, with the couple having sex at the start of the scene. To what extent is this scene, and the illicit relation between the Cardinal and Julia, supposed to be "sexy"? If you were directing this scene, how much would you play up (or down) the eroticism of this scene?

To what extent is Julia's deliberate targeting of a Cardinal (and a cruel one at that) part of the erotic risk (and excitement) for her? To what extent is that supposed to balance or reflect the Duchess' own sexual choice?

Delio's flirtation with Julia is both more innocent and less violent. How deliberate is this? Why?

**ACT TWO SCENE FIVE:**

Ferdinand is mad with rage, and accuses his sister of having slept with whole garrisons of men.

The Cardinal is worried about their “blood” (family) being tainted by association. Ferdinand thinks he means the Duchess has a sexually transmitted infection.

Ferdinand is “palsied” with rage, while the Cardinal is more calm and cold. Ferdinand will not do anything until he knows the identity of his sister’s lover.

**QUESTIONS:**

Both the Cardinal and Ferdinand seem to invent sexual degradations for the Duchess. How much are they disgusted with their own sexual feelings towards her?

Why is the accusation that a single woman of power enjoys sex with a large number of soldiers such a common accusation? A similar rumour was spread about Diana, Princess of Wales, before her death.

The implication is that Ferdinand is sexually inflamed by his imaginings of the Duchess’ behaviour, and is planning to rape her. Does he mean to say this? Is this in any sense an “honour killing”?

**ACT THREE SCENE ONE:**

Delio returns with Ferdinand. Antonio tells him that he and the Duchess have had two more children since he last saw them.

Both of them are worried about the behaviour of Ferdinand, and worry that he knows about the Duchess' children.

Antonio admits that keeping the Duchess' children secret has seriously weakened her as a ruler, and that the "rabble" think her a "strumpet".

Ferdinand comes in, and tries to provoke the Duchess by suggesting she marries again: she rejects his suggestion. She says she is worried about some lies that have been spread about her: he says he doesn't listen to gossip.

Once alone with Bosola, Ferdinand demands a key to the Duchess' secret chamber.

Ferdinand is impressed with Bosola's "honesty" (rudeness).

**QUESTIONS:**

Delio thinking that he had seen Antonio "within this half hour" is of course a joke to remind the audience that stage time and real time are different qualities. How does this help his drama?

The comment about Ferdinand being like a dormouse in winter echoes Ferdinand's own comment to Bosola about his behaviour at the Duchess' house (Act One Scene One, line 275). Why has Webster brought up this image again? What is the different meaning of it this time?

Why does Ferdinand dismiss so quickly the idea that the Duchess has been bewitched?

Why does Ferdinand admit that he normally gives money to flatterers? How does this match what Antonio says at the start of Act One?

**ACT THREE SCENE TWO:**

The Duchess prepares for bed, brushing her hair in front of the mirror.

Antonio and the Duchess play lover's word-games with each other.

Antonio and Cariola steal out of the chamber to mock the Duchess, while she continues to talk to them, unaware that they have gone. She complains that she is getting old.

Ferdinand creeps in, and catches her talking to her lover. He offers to kill her, and accuses her of being unnatural, a witch, a whore, and of destroying her family reputation.

After Ferdinand has left, Antonio accuses Cariola of betraying them.

In order to save Antonio, the Duchess accuses him of having robbed her and dismisses him from her service.

All the officers say how they have never trusted Antonio, and make racist comments about him.

Bosola, on the other hand, pities Antonio, praising him and saying how he can't believe he's guilty. The Duchess tells him that Antonio is her husband. She now entrusts her money to Bosola, to take to Antonio at Ancona.

Bosola advises her to pretend she is going on a pilgrimage to the shrine of Loretto, so that she is nearer to Antonio when they want to run away together.

Cariola dislikes the idea of mocking religion, and suggests the Duchess pretend she is going to a spa instead. The Duchess mocks her superstition.

Bosola reports what he has heard to Ferdinand.

**QUESTIONS:**

What is the importance of mirrors in this play? How does this fit into the idea that Jacques Lacan suggests, that we are all in love with our own reflection?

The first half of this scene is possibly the nicest bit of the play, where we see Antonio and the Duchess happily married. Why does Webster put this scene just after we are told that Ferdinand is about to invade the Duchess' room?

This is the second scene between the Duchess, Antonio & Cariola, which both involve Cariola hiding herself. With the dramatic irony that the audience know that Ferdinand has a key to the Duchess' chamber, how much of this scene is deliberately echoing the previous scene?

Bosola condemns flatterers, linking his comments to the previous scene. And yet he flatters Antonio in doing so. How much is this dramatic irony, and how much simple irony?

The Duchess is later held up as a moral and religious martyr, but here she mocks Cariola for her piety. How are these two sides of her personality reconciled?



**ACT THREE SCENE THREE:**

The Cardinal prepares for war, and mocks the Count Malateste.

Bosola arrives and the onlookers talk about him, Ferdinand and the Cardinal.

Ferdinand and the Cardinal plan ways to have the Duchess deposed (either religious or civil).

**QUESTIONS:**

Delio comments on how educated Bosola is: does he strike a modern audience as educated? What does his education consist of?

The lack of christening of her children makes the Duchess a target for the Church. Is it right for religious powers to have control over secular ones? Is a ruler obliged to follow the laws of her own country?

Ferdinand makes a reference to the Duke of Malfi, the Duchess' son by her late husband. He is never referred to again (indeed, it is implied that her son by Antonio inherits the Dukedom, which seems unlikely for the times). Why does Webster make this reference? Doesn't it confuse the story?

**ACT THREE SCENE FOUR:**

Two pilgrims watch at the Shrine of Loretto, as the Duchess and Antonio are humiliated, are forcibly divorced and the Duchess is deprived of her regency of Malfi, all by the Cardinal, who is now dressed in soldier's robes.

**QUESTIONS:**

Why is this scene performed in dumb-show with the pilgrims watching? Why does Webster not want to show us the actions of the characters and their voices? What does this tell us about his methods of having the story interpreted for us by onlookers throughout the play?

**ACT THREE SCENE FIVE:**

Antonio and the Duchess bewail their misfortunes and the Duchess tells him of an ominous dream she has had.

Bosola brings a threatening letter from Ferdinand, purporting to forgive Antonio but containing a lot of double meaning.

Antonio takes the eldest boy and parts from the Duchess, and the Duchess says that they will meet later "In the eternal Church". They take their leave of each other.

A masked Bosola brings a troop of masked men to arrest the Duchess.

The Duchess goes with him, telling him a tale of a dogfish and a salmon.

**QUESTIONS:**

How much of this scene sets up in dramatic irony what will happen later in the play? How much of the language of parting between Antonio & the Duchess sets up the moments of tragedy in the coming scenes?

The betrayal and arrest of the Duchess is reminiscent of the arrest of Jesus in the garden. How Christ-like a figure is the Duchess really? Is she really a martyr, or is that merely her own self-estimation?

Again the Duchess compares Bosola to a dog, in this case a dogfish. Why does Webster make so much of this comparison?

**ACT FOUR SCENE ONE:**

Ferdinand asks Bosola how the Duchess is surviving her imprisonment, and Bosola replies in glowing terms.

Bosola tells the Duchess that Ferdinand wants to be reconciled to her, but, because he has made a vow never to see her, must do this in the dark. This enables Ferdinand to pass the Duchess a dead man's hand as a cruel joke.

He then brings up the lights on a waxwork of the dead Antonio and her son, which the Duchess believes to be really them.

The hysterical Duchess threatens to commit suicide, but Bosola restrains her.

Bosola questions Ferdinand's motives and methods. Ferdinand wants to drive the Duchess mad, and "to bring her to despair".

Ferdinand will bring lunatics from the local mental hospital to make noise outside her chamber.

**QUESTIONS:**

Bosola's comments on the Duchess' nobility seem different from his sardonic comments from the first three acts. What has happened to Bosola? Is this an abrupt change in his personality and attitude or have there been signs of this change coming? Look back over the earlier Acts for these signs.

Bosola refers to Ferdinand as the Duchess' "elder brother", whereas elsewhere in the play he is called her "twin". Why does he make this comment? Is there a reading of the play that suggests it is deliberately sexist?

The Duchess refers to her life as a "tedious theatre". In what sense is she reminding her audience that they are watching a play? What is Webster's purpose in reminding his audience that what they are watching is not real? How is he using *verfremdungseffekt*?

The exit of the Duchess and Cariola has been used as a scene change by a number of directors, which would mean a time-jump in the next dialogue between Ferdinand and

Bosola. What are the advantages and disadvantages of making this decision?

“Despair” was a very important sin in Renaissance Catholic theology, as it denied hope of salvation (as did suicide). To what extent, then, is Ferdinand’s attempt to make the Duchess despair both a crime against her person and an ontological attack on her immortal soul?

#### **ACT FOUR SCENE TWO:**

The Duchess, imprisoned and dressed as a penitent, hears the noise of the mad people outside her window.

A servant tells her that Ferdinand has sent the mad people to her as entertainment: a mad lawyer, a secular priest, a doctor, an astrologer, and English tailor, an usher, and a farmer. They make mad comments and dance for her.

Bosola enters, dressed as an old man, and insults the Duchess again. He then becomes a tomb-maker, and then a bell-man.

Bosola moves from the standard blank verse into heroic couplets (rhyming iambic tetrameters) as he becomes more threatening.

Cariola is taken out. The Duchess gives her instructions for the care of her little boy.

Bosola shows the Duchess the noose that is going to kill her. She is not afraid, as she is going to meet Antonio on the other side.

The executioners strangle her. Then Bosola orders the deaths of Cariola and the children. Cariola tries to resist.

Ferdinand comes in to inspect Bosola’s work. When Bosola asks for a reward, Ferdinand gives him a pardon instead.

As Ferdinand leaves, the Duchess recovers enough to say two words: “Antonio” and “Mercy”.

Bosola determines to go to Milan and help Antonio escape the clutches of the Duchess' brothers.

### QUESTIONS:

Why does Webster choose these specific people to make comments on madness? Is there a satirical purpose in this? Do these specific jobs have specific people in mind?

The idea of the Old Man is often a symbol of death, as represented in traditional Danse Macabre pictures. Why is Bosola dressed in this way now?

Why is the use of heroic couplets so much more threatening? Why does the Duchess suddenly panic at this point?

Bosola presents the Duchess with a noose as an inversion of a wedding-ring, but she chooses to kneel to accept it like a Christian martyr. In what sense is Webster making a point about the Duchess' sainthood (and therefore the evil of those who would persecute her)? Is it this that causes Bosola to repent? Why does Cariola immediately negate this position by rejecting religion when she is brought in afterwards?

The kneeling is also an internal echo of the scene at the end of Act One where the Duchess proposes to Antonio. This is further supported when Ferdinand comes out from watching, hidden (like Cariola in the previous scene) and also the fact that Cariola is brought out immediately afterwards to be killed. How much of this would be apparent to Webster's audience? How much would be subconscious recognition?

Webster calls this play a "Tragedy", but the Duchess endures the suffering, and isn't broken by it. In what sense is this play a tragedy? Who is the tragic hero? Which of the characters is destroyed by her-his hubris? Which character has a hamartia?

In what sense is the Duchess presented as a saint in the story? In Painter, from whom Webster took the story, she was quite clearly seen as a sinful woman, but this scene presents her as a Christian soul, or at least a Stoic philosopher. Which is right?

Why is the stoic resignation of the Duchess so directly compared to the panic of Cariola? What point in Webster making through the character of Cariola?

How many of these murders has Ferdinand actually been watching? How much does this reflect the themes of spying and concealment that have run right the way through the play?

Ferdinand refers to his nephew and niece as “little wolves”: how much does this link to his later lycanthropia? Explore all the references to wolves in this scene.

Bosola regrets having killed the children: why is this so important to the development of the play?

Ferdinand comments that “Mine eyes dazzle. She died young”, without realising that the Duchess is not yet actually dead. Why does Webster make the Duchess not dead in this scene? What are the dramatic benefits of her coming back to life so briefly?

Ferdinand says that he had hoped to inherit the Duchess’ wealth after her death, but the existence of her son puts paid to that. How does this fit (or not) with other things he says in the play? Is this a real reason he has killed her?

Ferdinand accuses Bosola of “playing the villain’s part”. How much of this is simply reminding the audience that they are watching a play, and how much is Ferdinand aware that Bosola is merely “acting” a villain, rather than “being” one?

Can we trust what we see? Webster seems to be asking this question throughout *The Duchess of Malfi*, and yet in the theatre, apart from what we see and hear, there is nothing: everything is an illusion. Brecht called this decision to draw our attention to the fact that theatre is an illusion while we are watching it the “*verfremdungseffekt*” (distancing effect), and used it to bring our attention to the real “message” of the play. Is Webster doing the same thing? If not, what is he doing?

Why doesn’t Ferdinand pay Bosola? Does he not see the possible danger that could come from Bosola? How mad is he?

Why does Bosola decide to help Antonio? How much is this a change? How long has this change been coming? If you were playing or directing Bosola, how suddenly would you make him experience this change? Is this a moment of Anagnorisis, or has it been coming for a long time?

In Bosola’s last speech, he again refers to Galileo’s perspective glass. Why does he do this?

**ACT FIVE SCENE ONE:**

Antonio still thinks there's hope of reconciliation with the Duchess's brothers, but Delio tells him that they have already put his lands in escheat for the Marquis of Pescara, meaning that if he is found guilty, Pescara inherits them all. Any property that was technically ownerless would, in feudal situations, create unrest and would invite invasion. By putting Antonio's property in escheat is equivalent to making Pescara regent, governor or executor (depending on how permanent the Lords intended to make Antonio's dispossession).

Delio asks for a section of Antonio's land off Pescara, but Pescara will not talk in front of Julia, the Cardinal's mistress. In the name of the Cardinal, she asks for gift of the same piece of land, and Pescara feels bound to give it to her.

Pescara defends himself to Delio, saying that the land was stolen from Antonio, so it was corrupted land; therefore it would be dishonourable to give it to an honourable friend, but not dishonourable to give it to a whore like Julia.

Pescara has heard that Ferdinand is suffering from madness, and intends to visit him.

Antonio has obtained a key to the Cardinal's private chamber, and intends to confront him, just like Ferdinand did to the Duchess. He hopes to "work a friendly reconciliation". Delio agrees to come with him.

**QUESTIONS:**

Is the Cardinal's affair with Julia common knowledge? Pescara clearly seems to know about it, but in Act Two Scene Four the Cardinal clearly believes it is a secret, and Julia behaves as though it is to Delio. What has happened in the meantime?

Are Pescara's motives in giving the Friary to Julia as noble as he states them to Delio? Delio seems convinced, but Antonio clearly thinks he is a charlatan.

How stupid (or indeed effeminate) is Antonio? He has the key to the Cardinal's chambers, and could probably kill him, but (against the type of the play) he seeks reconciliation. Does he (the man who told us in Act One) not know what the Duchess' brothers are really like?

**ACT FIVE SCENE TWO:**

Pescara talks to Ferdinand's doctor, who tells him Ferdinand is suffering from "lycanthropy", a disease which makes him think himself a wolf.

He attacks his own shadow, raves and attacks the Doctor.

Pescara asks the Cardinal if he knows what caused his brother's illness. The Cardinal pretends that the family has a legend of an old woman appearing just before death.

Bosola asks to speak to the Cardinal, who pretends to know nothing of his sister's death. He asks Bosola to watch Delio, who will lead him to Antonio.

Julia attempts to seduce Bosola, first with a gun, then by accusing him of drugging her.

Bosola says he will make love to her if she finds out the Cardinal's secret. She hides him in her cabinet.

The Cardinal orders that no one is to come near Ferdinand unless he allows it.

He is tired of Julia and wants to get rid of her.

She wheedles the truth about his part in the Duchess' death out of him. He makes her swear not to tell anyone by kissing a Bible, which he has poisoned.

Bosola emerges, just too late to save Julia.

The Cardinal offers him money not to reveal what he knows. Bosola pretends to agree, and to kill Antonio, and the Cardinal gives him the keys to his chambers.

Bosola carries Julia's body off-stage, in much the same way he carried the Duchess' in Act Four Scene Two.

**QUESTIONS:**

How much has Ferdinand's lycanthropy been set up in previous scenes with references to wolves and dogs? Why are these references so central to the play? Who, apart from



Ferdinand, also talks a lot about dogs and wolves? What is Webster saying about that character?

How funny is this scene supposed to be? Do our modern attitudes to psychiatric illness change our attitudes to Ferdinand?

Bosola has a line which makes him appear to pity Ferdinand. Does he pity him? Why? How should that line be played?

The Cardinal's story of the appearance of the old woman before a family member dies is a very elaborate one to come up with on the spur of the moment. Where does this come from? How true is it? How linked is this to the scene with the Old Woman and Bosola in Act Two? Is there a sense of midwifery in death?

How much is Julia's sexual interest in Bosola (a) an interest in "a bit of rough", (b) evidence of her sexual attraction to cruel and unlikely sexual partners, (c) a deliberate echo-parody (by Webster) of the seduction of Antonio by the Duchess at the end of Act One?

How much does Julia really believe that Bosola has given her love-potion?

The Cardinal calls Julia his "consumption" (tuberculosis). How much is she a disease on him? Why is he thinking about disease?

"Secretaries" (as their name implied) were employed to keep secrets. Julia offers to be the Cardinal's Confessor, in a parody of the Catholic confessional. How offensive would this have been? How funny would this have been to Webster's anti-Catholic audience? Especially as they knew Bosola was overhearing everything?

Making Julia kneel to kiss the Bible is a parody of the proposal scene at the end of Act One. How deliberate is this?

Orazio Busino, one of the first reviewers of the play we know, thought that the Cardinal murdered his sister with a poisoned Bible. If you were directing the play, how similar would you make the Duchess and Julia in look, style or behaviour? Why?

Julia starts by accusing Bosola of having drugged her, and ends up dying from a drugged Bible. To what extent is this poetic justice?

Why does the Cardinal trust Bosola so quickly? Why doesn't Bosola kill the Cardinal now?

**ACT FIVE SCENE THREE:**

As Antonio and Delio go through the graveyard, the increasingly delusional Antonio hears his dead wife's voice in the echoes that come back to warn him of his impending death.

**QUESTIONS:**

This scene was invented by Webster, and shows the progressive delusions encountered by Antonio. How real are we supposed to take this scene? How much of a warning are we supposed to understand the echo is giving to Antonio? Why doesn't he listen?

So much of this play is about echoes; not only echoes of other plays and Webster's sources (what Structuralists call "the cultural code"); but also echoes and parallels of various scenes within the play (what Structuralists call "the symbolic code"), where the play is deliberately divided into various structural dyads. How much of this was Webster aware of? Does this scene suggest that Webster is deliberately bringing our attention to the way his play was constructed? Is he performing a form of *verfremdungseffekt* in this scene? Why do you think he might do this? If you were directing this play, would you make this more or less explicit? How?

The echo-line "Never see thee more" is a direct echo (repetition) of a line in Act Three Scene Two, where the Duchess is looking in the mirror while threatened by Ferdinand. Does this suggest that she is actually shown to the audience at the end of this scene, or should this be only in Antonio's mind?

**ACT FIVE SCENE FOUR:**

The Cardinal dismisses Ferdinand's companions, claiming he's feeling better and needs rest.

The companions all think the weather really bad, and wonder about the bad omen.

The Cardinal really wants solitude so that he can get Julia's body back to her own lodging, and pretend that she died there.

Bosola comes in but can't see the Cardinal; neither can Antonio when he arrives. Bosola, thinking Antonio is the Cardinal, stabs him.

Bosola realises his mistake and tells Antonio that his wife and children are also murdered. Antonio dies. Bosola and the servant carry his body off stage.

**QUESTIONS:**

The accidental murder of Antonio is a slight anti-climax. Why does Webster make Antonio die such an unheroic death?

Why does Bosola tell the dying Antonio that the Duchess and their younger two children are also dead? Is this cruelty or is it confession?

**ACT FIVE SCENE FIVE:**

The Cardinal, with a guilty conscience, explores the Bible to understand who gets the most punishment in the fires of hell.

Bosola brings Antonio's dead body into his rooms. The Cardinal calls for help, but Ferdinand's companions (following his instructions in the previous scene) ignore his calls for help, believing them to be the ravings of Ferdinand.

Bosola kills the servant, then wounds the Cardinal.

Ferdinand rushes on, believing himself to be on the battlefield, and also attacks the Cardinal, believing him to be the devil, and wounds Bosola in a scuffle.

Bosola kills Ferdinand.

Ferdinand's companions finally arrive, and Bosola reveals the whole plot to them, and dies.

Delio brings in Antonio's son, now seen as hope for the Duchess' line to continue as the Duke of Malfi.

**QUESTIONS:**

Why does Bosola kill the servant outright but merely wound the Cardinal? Is this merely "Torture Porn"?

By reminding the audience that the death of Antonio came about as a result of an accident "often seen/ In a play", how much is he reminding the audience that what they are watching is not "real"? How much is he simply increasing the hallucinogenic effect of the ending of the play? Why is this an effective technique for Webster to use?

How can the son of Antonio and the Duchess, born of a morganatic marriage (one not recognised by the Church or the feudal nobility), inherit her late husband's wealth and lands? Is Webster giving us the possibility that our children can move into the aristocracy even if we cannot? To what extent is this play holding out impossible hope to his audience? What happened to the son of the late Duke mentioned in Act Three Scene Three? Was that just an undeleted mistake by Webster?



Because plays are  
written to be seen.