

**Examine the ways in which the political and
familial contexts and relationships are established
in Act I of the play.**

The politics of the Italian Court in the play are revealed to the audience as corrupt and unethical, also exposing the state of the English Court in this period. Webster could not have written about it directly and so it is shown through the setting in Malfi. This corruption is mainly embodied by Ferdinand and the Cardinal, who are the most politically powerful characters in the play. Their power in the Court is reflected in their familial relationships with the Duchess.

The venality of the Court in Malfi is first suggested by Antonio who describes the general make-up of politics in any region using the analogy of a fountain, 'whence should flow pure silver drops' but can be poisoned at the top thereby, 'death and diseases through the whole land spread.' As it seems to have done in Malfi, as the two most powerful figures are so morales. Antonio is also describing the effectiveness and purity of the French Court in this dialogue, which emphasises the corruption in Italy. Bosola who himself is seemingly amoral, being introduced to the audience by Antonio as the 'court-gall', directly refers to Ferdinand and his brother, the Cardinal likening them to 'plum trees that grow crooked'. He suggests that too much power and riches has made them so, but also that they are surrounded by 'flatt'ring sycophants' who are like 'crows' and 'caterpillars' and use them to gain power and wealth for themselves. This analogy can be linked with Antonio's, to say that the corruption at the top of Ferdinand and the Cardinal has affected the rest of the court and made them equally depraved and greedy. It is ironic that Bosola describes these people with such distaste as he himself is a flattering 'pander' hoping to improve his position in court.

The Cardinal could be seen as possibly the most underhanded character in the play because he is supposed to be a man of God and so his crookedness is emphasised. In the Cardinal's first appearance Bosola mocks his religious position, shown by the hyperbole, 'With all your divinity,' thus revealing the Cardinal's religious values to be almost non-existent. Delio explains Bosola's bitterness towards the Cardinal to Antonio, and reveals that he was put in the galleys for seven years for a murder he was commissioned to do by the Cardinal. This blatant unjust act again is an example of his clear corruption.

Further into Act One, the Cardinal initiates the employment of Bosola as a spy in order to keep an eye on the Duchess, his power is clear at this point because he makes Ferdinand negotiate with Bosola as he 'would not be seen in't', demonstrating his apparent control even over his own brother, the Duke of Malfi. His power is paralleled with his astuteness, as Ferdinand suggests Antonio instead of Bosola for the job and the Cardinal correctly observes 'His nature is too honest' showing his ability to read people making him all the more powerful.

Ferdinand is also clever, he can see through the flatterers in the court purposely trying to get in his favour such as Castruchio, who constantly and unnecessarily addresses him as 'my lord' and tries to dissuade him from going to war. Ferdinand recognises this and makes a mockery of him, sarcastically commenting about his pun, 'Why, there's a wit were able to undo all the surgeons of the city'. His power and control here is also made clear, as he gets angry when they laugh without him laughing, 'take fire when I give fire, that is, laugh when I laugh.'.

Antonio reveals much about the brothers and the Duchess when he describes them all to Delio. He speaks freely in this dialogue as they are close friends, and so the audience gets an insight into what people truly think of them, although his description of the Duchess is biased as he clearly loves her. He refers to her as 'the right noble duchess' showing his feelings toward her. He also reveals that she does 'talk much', which would be unusual at the time as women were expected not to speak openly, as it states in St Paul, 'let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness' summing up the attitudes of the period. Antonio is very honest about the Cardinal, and shows he has the potential to be very cruel, 'Where he is jealous of any man he lays worse plots for them than ever imposed on Hercules'. This should be a forewarning to the audience for the evil yet to come for Antonio and the Duchess. Ferdinand is described as having 'A most perverse and turbulent nature', again establishing the cruelty of his character and suggesting to the audience what will come.

The forcefulness of the Cardinal and Ferdinand when talking to the Duchess and telling her not to re-marry shows how their power in court is reflected in their family relationships. The Cardinal is most controlling as he even orders Ferdinand to do things for him, (such as employ Bosola). This could be because he is the oldest, but also because it seems he is less emotionally involved with the Duchess than Ferdinand, who is more ardent in his desire to

prevent the Duchess re-marrying. Ferdinand's enthusiasm could be due to his more than familial feelings for the Duchess, hinted at in the play. For example, he says about her, 'This was my father's poniard ... I'd loath to see't look rusty' suggesting that perhaps procreation between the two of them rather than with an outsider would be purer. Their threat is a very serious one although the Duchess does not seem to realise it, Ferdinand's doomful words, 'Such weddings may more properly be said to be executed than celebrated', show their graveness and offer again a premonition to the audience of what is to come. It establishes the brother's adamant attitudes that she will not disobey them, and shows their power over her.

The duchess greatly underestimates her brother's, 'let old wives report, I winked and chose a husband', and marries Antonio. Within their relationship it is apparent that the duchess is in control, as Antonio is very much in awe of her, he addresses her as 'your beautiful excellence'. It is she who initiates the marriage, '*she puts the ring on his finger*'. She also has to remind him that she is only 'flesh and blood' like him, and she is no better than him.

The first Act establishes the authority of Ferdinand and the Cardinal and demonstrates the corruption of the court, possibly down to them as they have poisoned the fountain from the top. It reveals some of the characters as 'flattering panders' such as Castruchio, Silvio and Bosola, although he is less flattering and more ambitious and deceitful. It also establishes the relationship between the duchess and her siblings and shows their attempt to exert authority over her, which she unwisely ignores. Finally, it shows the nature of the relationship between Antonio and the Duchess and that he feels very much below her (which he is in nobility).