

Critical opinion about the ways Webster presents the Duchess is divided. Some critics blame her for being irresponsible, bold and too passionate. Others praise her for her courage in fighting against tyrannical authority.

Consider these two opinions in the light of your study of the play. What do you think of Webster's Duchess?

In good pieces of literature such as Webster's *Duchess of Malfi*, an intriguing and captivating character should always have two sides, and with such a complex character critical opinion will always be divided. In this essay I will assess ways in which the character of the Duchess causes conflict in opinion, and show my opinion as to whether she is courageous or perhaps irresponsible.

During the course of the play, the Duchess can be seen to commit a lot of irresponsible actions, ones, some might say eventually cause her own downfall and some what tragically, her death. It could be argued that the Duchess asking Antonio to marry her was an irresponsible action, she knew the society they lived in would not allow someone of her status to marry a man beneath her like Antonio, therefore some critics would argue she brought on her death herself by being irresponsible and also too passionate.

At the beginning of the play, Antonio is describing how a good court should be run and sets up a contrast early on between the corrupt Italian court the play is based in and the model French court, "Quits first his royal palace of flatt'ring sycophants." Antonio explains how an honest court makes a successful court, and shows the Duchess as irresponsible as it is her who starts the deceit and lies which lead to the court becoming a shambles.

Critics describing her as 'bold' seem to be using it in a negative manner, however in the play she is bold in a number of different ways, and not all portray her character in a negative light. At her death the Duchess is extremely bold, proclaiming "I am the Duchess of Malfi still." She could have broken down distraught, however her boldness allows her to accept her death with humility. However in Act 3, Scene 2 her boldness is shown to aggravate Ferdinand and it can be seen as a weakness in her character. When Ferdinand enters her chamber, the audience would gasp and be afraid for the Duchess, however she is bold and brave, showing little fear of her crazed brother, thus seemingly aggravating him and encouraging further anger towards her.

Some critics would argue whether being too passionate was a flaw to the Duchess' character, yes passion and love is an important emotion to have, however the Duchess is often too passionate and in being this way she shows no awareness to other people and to the society she lives in. Her passion for Antonio causes her to neglect the rules of the 17th century society she lives in. It is ignoring these rules which cause her brothers anger, when she marries a man beneath her, which in turn leads to her death.

Although there are some negative opinions about the Duchess, others would argue that she is an extremely courageous woman to fight against the tyrannical authority that faces her. She goes against her brother's even though she must realise what they are capable of doing to her. She shows courage in proposing to Antonio, she knows this relationship is against the order of society but for her, love prevails above anything else. The Duchess

is often presented as a victim, and this allows her courage at her death to stand out. Throughout the play the Duchess is presented by Webster as a victim of entrapment, trapped by the rules of society, and more obviously trapped by her brothers and their views on their sister's marriage.

Her courage is portrayed positively as it is this which inspires Bosola to change his ways and to take revenge on what society and her Aragonian brothers had done to her. Bosola is clearly touched by the stoicism of the Duchess, "you may discern the shape of loveliness more perfect in her tears than her smiles" and is angered that he has had to go against his character and ethics to kill the Duchess and still does not receive payment for it. The Duchess' courage at her death brings out Bosola's true character and we see the façade in conflict when he speaks of wanting to "save your life" and lamenting on "this world a tedious theatre."

A clear way in which we see the Duchess fighting against the tyrannical society is when she cunningly uses her knowledge of the way society is run to allow Antonio to escape, by the pretence that he has robbed her. Allowing her husband to be used as a scapegoat is risky and shows she is courageous.

In my opinion in some ways I can see that the Duchess is bold, irresponsible and sometimes too passionate however she shows alarming courage in order to face the situation she is in with dignity. She is courageous in her boldness and in her passion hence the Duchess is a character to be admired and respected. Webster uses the Duchess of Malfi, a historical figure, to highlight the problems and orders of the society. I believe the Duchess illuminates that there is goodness in the society and this was Webster's point in creating her. Webster's play hence is a statement against the society at the time, however the Duchess doesn't survive the society, therefore I think Webster is trying to point out that the corruption that occurs in such a society has to end before more innocent lives are tragically ended.

In conclusion although opinion about Webster's Duchess of Malfi is critically divided, I would sooner praise her for her courage in fighting against tyrannical authority rather than blame her for her own death due to being irresponsible, bold and too passionate. I think Webster created his Duchess in order to show that the Jacobean society they lived in was corrupt and it takes a strong person like the Duchess of Malfi to stand dignified within it.