

**From your readings of Acts 1-3 (inclusive) show how Webster presents the play as set in a paternalistic world.**

In “The Duchess of Malfi”, Webster seems to present the play from a paternalistic perspective. The play is dominated by two central characters, the Cardinal and Ferdinand, who represent the religious and secular powers of the corrupted court. Throughout Acts 1-3, these central characters use their power to ruin their widowed sister, the Duchess. Although the Duchess attempts to break free from her brothers’ influence by marrying Antonio, their domination will destroy the Duchess’ power and reputation since she has abandoned her brothers’ wishes.

Webster seems to portray the Duchess as a symbol of the Jacobean view of the roles of women. A widow, such as the Duchess, was considered to be an ‘ungoverned woman’, one who threatened the social normalities of the period. The Duchess is also portrayed in this way, because she ‘threatens’ the reputation of the court. Ferdinand fears that the Duchess will marry for pleasure, and warns his sister of the destructive nature of marrying for pleasure:

“I’th’ court,  
There is a kind of honey-dew that’s deadly:  
‘Twill poison your fame.”

Ferdinand also suggests that by marrying twice the Duchess will be seen as ‘luxurious’, suggesting that a second marriage is portrayed as wicked. The Duchess sees it differently; she compares a second marriage to diamonds:

“Diamonds are of most value  
They say, that have pass’d through most jewellers’ hands.”

It is obvious that the Duchess disagrees with Ferdinand’s view of her reputation. This defiance will lead her to remarry, even though she tells her brothers ‘I’ll never marry’.

The Duchess seems to confront the conventions of the day and the paternal control of the Cardinal and Ferdinand by taking control of her own life and following her private pleasures rather than public responsibility. This is shown through her marriage of Antonio, where she woos him into marriage. She defies the principles of the court and the society of the day, because she not only remarries without the guidance of the church, she remarries a social inferior. Even Antonio shows his doubt of her ambition when he puts the ring to his eye:

“There is a saucy and ambitious devil  
Is dancing in this circle.”

It is apparent that the Duchess is taking a step forward for women controlled in a paternalistic society. She defies not only the reputation of her brothers, but her own reputation since society would see her as a strumpet. Cariola sees her bravery as honourable, but at the same time perilous:

“Whether the spirit of greatness, or of woman  
Reign most in her, I know not, but it shows  
A fearful madness: I owe her much of pity.”

But the Duchess does not see it in this way. To the Duchess, the ‘spirit of woman’ and the ‘spirit of greatness’ are synonymous because the combinations of both challenge the paternalistic conventions of her world. She sees her marriage as her right to fulfilment.

Of all the characters in this play, Webster presents the two paternal leaders, Ferdinand and the Cardinal, as the most corrupt. This is evident from the beginning of the play, as Antonio compares a Prince’s court to a fountain. Although the fountain creates ‘pure silver drops in general’, it can still be corrupted:

“Some curs’d example poison’t near the head,  
*Death and diseases through the whole land spread.*”

The court of Malfi has been poisoned by the Cardinal and Ferdinand, who represent twin powers: religious and secular. Both of these characters seem to control not only the Duchess, but the other women in this play as well.

Webster uses the fiery Ferdinand as the main adversary against the Duchess. He is portrayed as passionate and choleric, and he is zealous to preserve the family honour. This extreme passion for the family honour will destroy his confidence in his sister since she will challenge his position.