The Duchess of Malfi

The Duchess

- The Duchess transcends conventional roles.
- She is barred from normal feminine experiences by her political position.
- What is Webster saying about female rule?
- Female rulers (Elizabeth I and Duchess of Malfi) - women are seen as inferior and yet they have superior power as rulers.
- John Knox (1558) believed that womanhood and sovereignty are logically incompatible.
- Knox argued that the nature of female rule was ‘un-natural’.
- A female ruler’s marriage poses problems - she is ruled by her husband, yet she is his ruler.
- In the mid 16th century there were three reigning female monarchs - Mary Tudor, Mary Stuart and Elizabeth I.
- Is there much anti-feminist and misogynist comment in the play?
- Bosola seems to blame women for man’s disorder (takes on the role of a satirist and preacher).

What are her flaws?
Irresponsible? Overly passionate? Too bold?

What are her strengths?
Is the Duchess responsible for her tragic fate?

- Does Webster endorse the Duchess’ marriage? Or is this left ambiguous?
  
  “Webster clearly approves of the Duchess of Malfi’s marriage beneath her, though it horrifies her court.”  
  
  Christopher Hill

- Does the Duchess begin as a strong character and then become more passive?

- Susan Baker believes the Duchess is a ‘static figure’ who does not develop or grow.

- By challenging marriage, the Duchess challenges the very essence of gender relations within patriarchal society.

- The Duchess fails to control the results of her private life from affecting her public life.

Sexuality

- Ferdinand’s request for Bosola to spy on the Duchess is more than a little voyeuristic (visual penetration of a private space).

- In Painter’s version of the story the Duchess is treated as a ‘lusty widow’.

- The brothers believe that because all women are driven by lust, widows who re-marry are not far removed from whores.

- Brothers can be justified in taking an interest in her marital affairs (in the context of Jacobean society), but not in her sexual being.

- Woman’s sexuality became public concern - chastity becomes economic and political (carry on ‘pure’ blood line).