



British Literature-I

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THE
DUCHESS OF

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ALFI
by JOHN WEBSTER

DRAMA



THE
DUCHESS
OF
MALFI
JOHN WEBSTER

John Webster

- It is estimated that John Webster was born in 1580 and died in 1634
- He is an Early Jacobean Dramatist (King James 1 reign).
- His tragedies, 'The Duchess of Malfi' and 'The White Devil' are often seen as masterpieces of the early 17th century.
- He has worked with many other playwrights including Michael Drayton, Thomas Dekker, Thomas Middleton and Anthony Munday.
- His tragedies are very morbid and dark pieces that are also quite disturbing, which seemed to be the beginnings of the Gothic literature of the seventeenth century.



The Duchess of Malfi as a revenge tragedy

- The revenge play or revenge tragedy is a tragedy in which a murder victim is avenged, often by a younger kinsmen, and usually resulting in the death of both murderer and avenger. The form of play was extremely popular in the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras with the best-known examples being Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* and William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The genre was first categorized by the scholar Fredson Bowers.
 - “*The Duchess of Malfi*” is a macabre, tragic play, written by the English dramatist John Webster. It begins as a love story, with a Duchess who marries beneath her class, and ends as a nightmarish tragedy as her two brothers exact their revenge, destroying themselves in the process. The play is sometimes ridiculed by modern critics for the excessive violence and horror in its later scenes. But the violence and horror scenes give it the touch it needs to be a revenge tragedy
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The Duchess of Malfi Themes

- Hell on Earth
- Disguise
- The Fertile Woman
- The Perversion of Justice
- Class
- The Costs of Evil
- Reputation and Legacy

Character List

- **Bosola**
- **The Duchess**
- **Ferdinand**
- **The Cardinal**
- **Antonio**
- **Delio**
- **Cariola**
- **Julia**
- The Children
- Count Malateste
- Marquis of Pescara
- Castruccio
- Silvio
- Roderigo
- Grisolan
- Old Lady
- Doctor
- Two Pilgrims
- Mad Astrologer
- Mad Doctor
- Mad Priest
- Mad Lawyer

Plot

- The Duchess, was born in Giordanna d'Aragona. She married in 1490 at age 12 to Alfonso Piccolomini, son and heir of first Duke of Melfi. He succeeded to the dukedom in 1493 but died of gout in 1498
- The Duchess of Melfi is a young widow whose two brothers, a Cardinal and Ferdinand, the Duke of Calabria, are desperately anxious lest she marry again, for they want to inherit her title and her estates.
- She secretly marries Antonio and secretly bears a son.
- The brothers send Daniel de Bosola to spy on her. He finds a document and learns about their secret child.
- This piece of news enrages the brothers.
- The years pass and the duchess bears Antonio two more children, a second son and a daughter.

- An attempt to escape from Ferdinand's rage, the Duchess and Antonio make up a story that says he swindled her money from her and had to flee to Ancona.
- She takes Bosola into her confidence, not knowing he's a spy for Ferdinand, and arranges for him to deliver her jewelry to Antonio's hiding place.
- She'll join them later, pretending to make a pilgrimage. The Cardinal is told of the plan, and sends soldiers to capture them.
- Antonio escapes with the eldest son to Milan, but the Duchess, two younger children and Cariola are returned to Malfi.
- At Malfi, the duke presents her with a dead man's hand, implying that it is from Antonio's corpse.
- Finally Bosola comes and strangles the duchess. Cariola and the children.

- When Bosola asks Duke Ferdinand for his reward, the hypocritical duke laughs and replies that, “the only reward for such a crime is its pardon.”
- This, combined with a long-standing sense of injustice and a feeling of lack of identity, turns Bosola against the Cardinal and Ferdinand, and he decides to take up the cause of Revenge for the Duchess of Malfi.
- The Cardinal confesses his part in the murder to his mistress Julia, and then silences her using a Bible.
- Bosola overhears the Cardinal plotting to kill him (though he accepts it as what he thinks he deserves), and visits the dark chapel to kill the Cardinal at his prayers. But stabs Antonio due to the darkness.
- Bosola stabs the Cardinal, who dies. Then Ferdinand happens upon the scene, and Ferdinand and Bosola stab each other to death.
- Antonio’s elder son by the Duchess appears in the final scene and takes his place as heir to the Malfi fortune, despite his father’s wish that his son leave the court.

Historical Context

- The period in which the play is written is a vital to our understanding of the play. It is important as topics of the time that were important to the Jacobean audience, were highlighted in the dramas of the time.
- Thus, in the *Duchess of Malfi*, Webster writes about un-orthodox marriage. To marry 'out of class' was a social wrong for the Elizabethans and Jacobeans.
- Inheritance issues were also a matter of national concern for audiences at this time. The Duchess' remarriage to Antonio opened for the Aragon brothers a dilemma of inheritance. They would not have any valid entitlement to the wealth and estates that came with the dukedom of Malfi.

A Revenge Tragedy

- In a tragedy, as Senecan model defines, "a shocking murder takes place and it cries out for their revenge". In *The Duchess of Malfi*, the Aragonian Brothers, Ferdinand and the Cardinal, takes their revenge on the Duchess for remarrying to her steward against their wishes.
- In revenge tragedy "the objects of the murder are often better are so called avengers". When Ferdinand refuses to pay Bosola, the latter realizes his guilt, he becomes avenger and he decides to works as an avenger for the murder of the Duchess.
- In a revenge tragedy, "the murder of the ghost stalks about and asks for his revenge". All the villains--Ferdinand, the Cardinal, Bosola and even the hero, Antonio--are haunted by the spirit of the dead Duchess. Bosola confesses that he sees an image of the Duchess.

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- *In a tragedy "some character becomes mad"*. Ferdinand becomes mad. He confesses that he is haunted by the spirit of the Duchess. In his madness he tries to throttle his own shadow and cries **"strangling is a cruel death"**.
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THANK YOU

