

The Duchess of Malfi Study Guide

The Duchess of Malfi by John Webster

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Plot Summary

In *The Duchess of Malfi*, a play by John Webster, friends Delio and Antonio are chatting. Antonio has returned from France, where he favored the honest courtiers. Unhappy, sinister Bosola receives gold coins from Duke Ferdinand to spy on the Duchess as the horse manager. Both Ferdinand and his brother, the Cardinal, instruct their sister not to remarry and she obliges. However, she secretly confides with her maid Cariola that she desires to remarry. She proceeds to secretly marry Antonio, her gallant steward.

Bosola gives the Duchess apricots. When she falls ill, Antonio uses the apricots to try to cover up her pregnancy. He announces that she was poisoned by the fruit. Antonio orders the house locked and everyone to their rooms due to a fictitious Swiss burglar who stole the Duchess's jewels. She secretly gives birth to a baby boy. Ferdinand flies off the handle and wants to kill his sister, her lover, and the baby. The Cardinal slyly plots his next move.

Ferdinand visits his sister. Handing her a knife, he commands her to commit suicide. The Duchess devises a plan to banish Antonio from the palace for stealing. Bosola insists that she is making a mistake, and the trusting Duchess reveals to him her husband's identity. He informs the Duchess's brother that Antonio is her husband. The Duchess and her family rendezvous at the Shrine and are shocked to discover that they have been banished. Antonio heads toward Milan, while Bosola takes the Duchess back to her palace prison.

The Duchess is led to believe that the wax figures are the dead bodies of her family. She wants to die but Bosola encourages her to live. Ferdinand tries to make his sister become mad by housing madmen in her palace. It has the opposite effect and enables her to be sane. Bosola orders the executioners to strangle her. She submits to death peacefully, while Cariola fights for every last breath. Ferdinand is pleased with the deaths, while Bosola is unnerved. Nevertheless, he seeks his financial reward.

Antonio naively plans to visit the Cardinal during the night. Pesacara and the Doctor are concerned about Ferdinand's unusual were-wolf behavior. The Cardinal admits to his lover Julia that he plotted his sister's death. Then, he poisons Julia. He orders Bosola to kill Antonio. The Cardinal makes everyone promise to not leave their rooms during the night, even if they hear strange noises from his brother. He tells them this because he wants to move Julia's dead body. Due to Bosola's terrified state of being killed by the Cardinal, he stabs the next person he comes across with in the dark which happens to be Antonio. Antonio dies.

The Cardinal tries to pay off Bosola, but Bosola stabs him. Ferdinand stabs his brother, too, before attacking Bosola. Bosola stabs Ferdinand who dies. The Cardinal is not dead yet when the others enter and demand an explanation. Bosola states that he took revenge for the previous deaths. The Cardinal and Bosola die.

Delio enters with Antonio's eldest son, and they witness the results of evil acts. Delio wants the remaining men to join together to help raise the boy.



Act 1

Summary

Act 1

In Act 1, Scene 1, friends Delio and Antonio speak to each other after Antonio returns from France. They talk about society and corruption. Bosola and the Cardinal enter. Bosola is not happy with the Cardinal, as Bosola served time due to committing a murder for the Cardinal. Bosola feels slighted by the Cardinal, who tells Bosola that he could become honest and does not show concern for him. Bosola complains to Delio and Antonio about the Cardinal and his brother Ferdinand, Duke of Calabria. Delio and Antonio discuss what happened to Bosola after he leaves.

In Act 1, Scene 2, Ferdinand enters, inquires who won the sporting event, and laments that they are not in a real battle. Antonio is announced as the winner and Ferdinand's ring is given to him. Ferdinand's brother, the Cardinal, arrives. Delio and Antonio focus their conversation on the Duke and Cardinal's characteristics. Antonio describes them as superficial, jealous, revengeful, and unstable. On the other hand, Antonio talks about the Duchess as being very different from her brothers. She is lovely, moral, and a great communicator.

Ferdinand asks his sister if Bosola can be her horse manager, and she agrees. The Cardinal is surprised with Ferdinand's choice and admits that he has slighted him in the past. The Cardinal states that Antonio would have been too honest to spy on their sister as the horse manager.

Bosola is bribed by Ferdinand with gold to keep an eye on the Duchess. At first, Bosola rejects the new job, but changes his mind.

In Act 1, Scene 3, the Cardinal and Ferdinand are about to leave and they express their concerns to their sister about her remarrying. She states that she will never marry again, but she is weary of her brothers' advice not to marry again. The Duchess confides in Cariola that she will marry again. Cariola states that she will hide this knowledge, like keeping poison away from children.

Antonio visits the Duchess after she calls for him to come and take dictation for her will. She wants to make Antonio the overseer of it. Antonio suggests that she remarry and leave her estate to her new husband. They discuss marriage, and the Duchess removes her ring. She expresses her love for him. He is surprised and shocked. Antonio is worried about her brothers and what they will think, but the Duchess calms his fears. Cariola interrupts their conversation, but the Duchess uses this opportunity to make a marriage contract with Antonio. Cariola thinks the Duchess is crazy and pities her.



Analysis

In Act 1, Scene 1, Delio is inquisitive as he asks Antonio about his trip to France. The theme of good versus evil is touched upon in the opening scene. Antonio states that Bosola is valiant and expresses concern for him, even though Bosola is a villain.

In Act 1, Scene 2, Ferdinand feels that it would be more honorable if they were in a real battle rather than a sporting event. Foreshadowing takes place of Antonio's goodness when he receives Ferdinand's ring. Additionally, Ferdinand tells him that he is a good horseman. Furthermore, the Cardinal states that Antonio would have been too honest to spy on the Duchess. Antonio was not asked to be the horse manager because Ferdinand and the Cardinal wanted someone to spy on their sister. They wanted someone that was not going to spill the beans to their sister.

The Duke's and the Cardinal's negative behaviors are contrasted with their sister's positive behavior. The theme of good versus evil is contrasted in this scene with the character traits of the Duke, the Cardinal, and the Duchess.

In Act 1, Scene 3, the Cardinal and Ferdinand instruct their sister to not remarry in their absence. Their warnings are a foreshadowing of how much the brothers want to control her and her estate. Interestingly, Ferdinand pulls out his father's knife, which oddly prepares the audience for the bloodshed that will take place later in the play. The Duchess states that she will not remarry. This proves to be a lie when she secretly marries Antonio in this scene.

Another point is made about death as the Duchess instructs Antonio to write up her will. Cariola is their witness who hides when Antonio attends to the Duchess' needs. She can overhear their conversation and makes herself shown right before they secretly marry so that she can be a witness for them.

Discussion Question 1

What is sibling rivalry? If you have siblings, can you relate?

Discussion Question 2

What does Ferdinand do with his father's poniard? How can this foreshadow what is to come?

Discussion Question 3

Is the Duchess a follower or a leader? Why? Are you a follower or a leader?



Vocabulary

Judicious, sycophants, whence, provident, court-gall, piety, lecherous, galleys, mantle, arrant, knaves, panders, horseleech, supportation, valiant, partaker, courtiers, surgeons, gennet, melancholy, mirth, rapture, penance, galliard, countenance, lascivious, shrifts, caroches, physiognomy, ere, poniard, revels, arras, sacrament, purgatory, wanton, stark, conjuration, visitants, lunatic, wares, alabaster, gordian.



Act 2

Summary

Act 2

In Act 2, Scene 1, Bosola and Castruccio chat about Castruccio's desire to be a famous aristocrat. Bosola gives him tips on how to act, but is judgmental in their conversation. An old lady enters the scene and while Bosola chats with her, he judges her for her appearance. Bosola ponders why the Duchess is wearing loose fitting clothes and she is getting heavier. He plans to find out if she is pregnant.

Delio is surprised to discover that Antonio is married. Antonio requests that he keep his knowledge a secret. The Duchess acknowledges her weight gain and shortness of breath. She asks for Antonio's hand while asking Bosola to provide her with a litter like the Duchess of Florence rode in. Bosola is quick to point out the Duchess of Florence was pregnant. Bosola presents apricots to the Duchess and points out they were ripen in horse dung. The Duchess feels ill. Delio suggests that Antonio call a midwife after Antonio fears she will deliver her baby soon. Delio points out that they could tell everyone that Bosola has poisoned her with the apricots. Antonio fears that the physicians will be called and he does not know what to do.

In Act 2, Scene 2, Bosola concludes from the Duchess ravenous eating the apricots that she is pregnant. He continues to talk to the old lady, who states that she needs to quickly go on her way and that he is unkind to women. Antonio orders the court gates to be locked. A servant announces that a Swiss burglar has stolen the Duchess' jewels. He orders the officers to lock themselves in their rooms until the morning and give their keys to her, as she is ill.

Delio asks Antonio how the Duchess is doing. She is in pain, according to Antonio, who relies on Delio to help him. Cariola enters and tells Antonio that he is the fortunate father of a baby boy.

In Act 2, Scene 3, Bosola enters and thinks he heard a woman scream from the Duchess's room. Antonio finds Bosola, who asserts he is his friend. Antonio questions why is he out of his room. Bosola states that he came out to say his prayers. Antonio brings up that Bosola gave the Duchess poisoned apricots earlier in the day. Bosola takes offense. Antonio presses on and says that Bosola may have stolen the Duchess' jewels. Bosola is disrespectful to Antonio. Antonio recalls his conversation with Delio about superstitions as he gets a nosebleed. He forbids Bosola to go by the Duchess's room.

After Antonio leaves, Bosola finds a birth announcement and horoscope for the Duchess' son. The child will have a brief life and brutal end. Bosola is excited that he



found the paper and plots to find out who is the father. He intends to send a letter through Castruccio to Ferdinand and the Cardinal explaining the birth.

In Act 2, Scene 4, the Cardinal talks with Julia, who came to Rome without her husband. The Cardinal tells her that they should borrow Galileo's telescope to view space. He asks her to kiss him and tells her to thank him. A servant interrupts them with news about a man from Malfi who wants to see Julia and tells her that her husband Castruccio is coming to Rome. It is Delio, one of Julia's old suitors. Julia tells Delio that she knows her husband is coming to Rome and he offers her some of his own money. A servant tells them about a letter that has driven Ferdinand mad. Delio is concerned for his friend Antonio that he has been found out to be the father.

In Act 2, Scene 5, Ferdinand visits his brother and is very upset about the news of their sister. The Cardinal wants to know why his brother is so very angry. Ferdinand wants to kill her while the Cardinal wants him to settle down. Ferdinand talks about setting their sister on fire and boiling her child. As Ferdinand is leaving, he states that he wants to find out who is their sister's lover.

Analysis

In Act 2, Scene 1, Bosola is critical of Castruccio and the old lady. Bosola is not kind about her wrinkled face and make-up. He is plain mean when he tells her that she should hate her life. He plots to find out if the Duchess is pregnant by giving her apricots. Apricots were thought to speed up pregnancy delivery. Delio is a good friend to Antonio and is surprised to find out that his friend has married. Antonio asks him to keep it a secret. Delio helps his friend by saying that he could tell everyone that Bosola poisoned the Duchess since she fell ill. Antonio is not sure what to do and his confidence wanes.

In Act 2, Scene 2, Delio continues to be a true, loyal, and quick thinking friend to Antonio. Antonio is fearful and thinks danger is lurking. Delio speaks with comforting words and instills Antonio with courage. The burglary is made up so that no one will find out that the Duchess is delivering her baby. They will all be locked in their rooms. The baby boy will play an important role at the end of the play, but the audience is unaware of his role at this point.

In Act 2, Scene 3, Bosola is caught out of his room, disobeying Antonio's orders. He asserts that he is Antonio's friend. This information is foreshadowing what will take place in the last act when Bosola stabs Antonio. For this scene, however, Bosola states that he is out praying, but Antonio accuses him of poisoning the Duchess and stealing her jewels. Bosola's true character traits are brought about when he is disrespectful to Antonio. Bosola plots to tell the Duchess' brothers about the Duchess giving birth this day, which will anger them. In the fourth act, Bosola is responsible for the Duchess's death, not just poisoning like in this scene. Again, there is foreshadowing of what will come in the later acts.



The horoscope is proven wrong, as the child lives and will be protected by Delio and others who promise to take care of him. Their friends will honor the Duchess and Antonio, even though they both die, as their friends will raise their son. Both the Duchess and her husband die from violent murders committed by Bosola in later scenes.

In Act 2, Scene 4, Julia is deceitful to her husband and tricks him by saying that she is visiting a religious hermit. She is having an illicit affair with the Cardinal. Julia informs the audience that Delio was once her suitor.

In Act 2, Scene 5, In comparing and contrasting the two brothers, Ferdinand is very upset and angry while the Cardinal is calm and collected. Evil Ferdinand is out of control wanting to harm the Duchess, her lover, and their child. The Cardinal is not acting wildly, but instead wickedly plots his next move.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Delio promise to keep Antonio's marriage a secret? Are you able to keep secrets? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

How does Delio help his friend Antonio? How do you help your friends?

Discussion Question 3

Compare and contrast the Cardinal and Ferdinand's behavior and reactions when they find out that their sister has had a child. Do you display your emotions or do you hide them from others?

Vocabulary

Fain, eminent, scurvy, sloughs, careening, morphewed, disemboque, spittle, ominous, ulcerous, preferment, vicar, tedious, techiness, vultuous, posterns, moulds, stratagem, sooth, imputation, saucy, anchorite, cuckold, spake, prelates, breech, cullises, mandrake, strumpet, rogues, balsamum, bargeman, intemperate, lecherous.



Act 3

Summary

Act 3

In Act 3, Scene 1, Delio comes to visit Antonio with Ferdinand. It has been a while since Delio has visited and the Duchess has given birth to 3 children now. Delio questions Antonio about the news reaching the brothers. According to Antonio, Ferdinand has been acting warily, the common people think the Duchess is promiscuous, but his secret marriage remains undisclosed. Ferdinand tells the Duchess that he is going to find a husband for her. It is Count Malatesti, but the Duchess is not interested in him. She thinks the air is cleaned when her brother leaves.

Ferdinand asks Bosola about his spying job. He tells Ferdinand that the Duchess has 3 kids already and that he suspects sorcery has been used since her lover has remained unnamed. Ferdinand states that he will get to the bottom of this matter tonight. Bosola hands over a false key to her bedroom, thinks Ferdinand compliments himself too much, and leaves the scene. Ferdinand thanks Bosola for his honest opinion.

In Act 3, Scene 2, the Duchess is getting ready to go to sleep. She tells Antonio that he cannot stay the night. She kisses him and he asks for another. He asks Cariola when she will marry, and she responds that she will not ever marry. Antonio and Cariola play a trick on the Duchess and quietly leave the room, while she continues to talk. Her brother Ferdinand enters while the Duchess continues to talk about her lover.

The Duchess wonders why Antonio and Cariola have not responded. Ferdinand speaks up and commands her to die. He hands her a knife and does not listen to her when she tries to explain herself. Ferdinand is disenchanted with her. The Duchess tells him that she is married and wants him to meet her husband. He does not want to meet her husband and wishes that her husband were dead. The Duchess points out that she has a right to marry. Ferdinand talks about reputation, love, and death. He leaves telling her that he will never see her again.

Antonio and Cariola enter after Ferdinand leaves. Antonio has a pistol and accuses Cariola of betraying them. She pleads innocent. Antonio becomes upset when he sees the knife that Ferdinand left behind for the Duchess. He suggests turning it toward Ferdinand instead of killing herself with it.

A knock at the door interrupts and disturbs them. It is Bosola who has come to check on the Duchess. Ferdinand told Bosola that she was unnerved as he left to go back to Rome. The Duchess claims that Antonio has stolen from her and asks Bosola to get the officers. She tells Antonio to go to Ancona and will pay for him to stay there. She accuses Antonio of a contrived crime in front of Bosola and the officers. Antonio leaves in disgrace.



The Duchess asks them what they think of Antonio. The officers put him down and mock him for not listening. After the officers leave, Bosola commends him for his faithfulness and virtue. He says that Antonio was too honest and that the Duchess has made a terrible mistake. He wishes Antonio well.

The Duchess is delighted to hear Bosola's praising words and tells him that Antonio is her husband. Bosola pretends to be happy for her and states he will keep her secrets. The Duchess orders Bosola to go find Antonio in Ancona and take her money with him. She will meet them there in a few days. Bosola devises a better plan that the Duchess will visit the Lady of Loretto, which is nearby. Cariola speaks up and suggests going to the Lucca baths or the German Spa as they are less religious than Bosola's pilgrimage idea. The Duchess dismisses her concern and tells Bosola to prepare the trip. He muses to himself about his spying talents.

In Act 3, Scene 3, Malatesti has a map drawn for a new defense at Naples. He is going to show it to the Cardinal. Delio and Silvio make fun of Malatesti and his inability to be a soldier.

Bosola enters and speaks with Ferdinand and the Cardinal. Pescara, Silvio, and Delio talk about Bosola and the reactions of Ferdinand and his brother. Silvio asks about Bosola. Delio tells him that he knew him in Padua. Bosola was an extraordinary scholar and enjoyed learning the details of Greek mythology. Pescara notes that Ferdinand has troubles brewing. Silvio states that the Cardinal has been unhappy.

Bosola informs Ferdinand and the Cardinal about the Duchess's plan to go to reunite at Ancona. The Cardinal plans to have them banished from there. Ferdinand tells Bosola to write to the Duchess's son about her. Ferdinand is surprised to find out that Antonio is the Duchess's husband.

In Act 3, Scene 4, there are two pilgrims at the Shrine of our Lady of Loretto. They narrate what takes place in the scene. The Cardinal resigned his Cardinal's hat in exchange for his soldier's helmet. The Duchess arrives at the Shrine with Antonio and their children. They are shocked when the Cardinal violently took off her wedding ring from her finger. The Duchess and her family are banished from Ancona. The Pope took away the Duchess's title due to the Cardinal pressing him. The two pilgrims remain at the Shrine while everyone else exits.

In Act 3, Scene 5, the Duchess and Antonio try to face what their future will bring since they are banished. The Duchess points out that the birds are free to choose their mates, are happy, and sing beautiful songs in the spring. Bosola enters and has a letter from Ferdinand. It states that Ferdinand wants Antonio's head. The Duchess notes it is not for advice, but his actual head and wants Antonio dead. The letter also accuses Antonio of amounts overdue from Naples. The Duchess tries to explain that Antonio loves her and her brothers will not understand. Antonio refuses to go see Ferdinand and the Duchess suggests that he goes towards Milan with their eldest son. As he leaves, the Duchess points out that he seems cold, like he knows death is coming soon. Antonio leaves with a heavy heart.



Several guards arrive with Bosola and they take the Duchess, Cariola, and the children back to the palace. It is their prison. Bosola tries to convince her to forget about her low class husband, but the Duchess cannot. They talk about class and virtue.

Analysis

In Act 3, Scene 1, the Duchess's secret marriage has not been disclosed. Ferdinand shows concern and wants to find a husband for the Duchess. She does not accept Ferdinand's suggestion that Count Malatesti should be her husband. It is interesting to note that the Duchess has three children already and that Bosola still does not know whom her lover is. Ferdinand takes matter into his own hands because Bosola has been unsuccessful in his detective job. Ferdinand is much more calm in this scene than the prior one where he wanted to kill the Duchess, her lover, and their child. Bosola is thanked for his honest opinion, but yet due to his background, he cannot be fully trusted to speak the truth.

In Act 3, Scene 2, the audience is able to view a humorous side of Antonio when he jests that he rules only at night. Antonio brings up names from Greek mythology, such as Daphne, Syrinx, and Anaxarete. He mentions Paris' name after Cariola asks him if she should go after a man that would give her wisdom, riches, or beauty. The Duchess is unaware of Antonio and Cariola's absences after they sneak away from her. This little trick does more harm, as Ferdinand is able to ease drop on his sister's conversation. The Duchess does not want to have another child until her brothers approve of her lover.

Ferdinand hands his sister a knife to kill herself. He is very angry with her and tells her to cut off her tongue so that she will not reveal who is her husband. Ferdinand tells her that he came to find out what's been going on with his sister and now he thinks it is a tragic situation. The Duchess states that she has youth and beauty on her side and she questions why she has to be stashed away from everyone.

The Duchess points out Antonio's lowly social class, but Bosola states his honesty is more important than his class. It is ironic that Bosola, who will betray the Duchess about her husband, is able to note excellent qualities in Antonio, but is unable to display these qualities himself. Bosola is manipulative and is able to get the naive and gullible Duchess to reveal whom her husband is.

In Act 3, Scene 3, Pescara, Silvio, and Delio give the audience background information on Malatesti and Bosola through conversations.

Bosola has not kept his word to the Duchess and informs Ferdinand who she is married to. Ferdinand and the Cardinal are upset by this news and plan their next moves.

In Act 3, Scene 4, the two pilgrims have such high hopes for a dignified ceremony, but it quickly went downhill. The Duchess loses her wedding ring to her brother and is banished. The pilgrims were shocked at the events and note that the Cardinal is very cruel. The Pope became involved due to the Cardinal's influence and actions.



In Act 3, Scene 5, the Duchess is able to see right through her brother's double meaning words. She wants to protect Antonio from harm. The Duchess suggests that they separate as to give them a better chance of surviving her brother's wrath. This scene foreshadows Antonio's death when he leaves her, he feels cold. The Duchess remarks that his last words to her are those of a dying father.

Discussion Question 1

The Duchess and Antonio have three children and Bosola is still unable to find out their father's name. What would you do if you were Ferdinand and had hired Bosola to spy on the Duchess?

Discussion Question 2

Ferdinand gives the Duchess the poniard in this Act. How does this Act differ from Act 1 when he showed it to her?

Discussion Question 3

Compare and contrast the Duchess and Antonio reactions to that of the two pilgrims at the Shrine of our Lady of Loretto. How would you react if you were the Duchess? Antonio? One of the pilgrims?

Vocabulary

Dormice, graver, coulters, mountebanks, lenitive, divers, basilisk, confederacy, vile, paraquito, apparition, quietus, extortion, hermaphrodite, reverend, sumpter cloth, leprosy, dowager, instigation, buntings, adamant, cassia.



Act 4

Summary

Act 4

In Act 4, Scene 1, Ferdinand and Bosola discuss the Duchess and her captivity. She is bearing it gallantly. This angers Ferdinand and he plans to visit her. He will keep his vow not to see her, but he seeks to visit with her. The Duchess asks for pardon while Ferdinand asks about her “bastard” children. His words anger her and she points out that he is violating a sacrament of the church. She kisses what she thinks is his hand and he gives her back her ring. He states that she can have the hand and the ring as a love token. He will also give her the heart too. She states that his hand is very cold and asks for the light to be turned on. Ferdinand exits while she finds a dead man’s hand on the ground.

Bosola points out that Antonio and their first-born child are dead and that she should not grieve anymore. She wants to be tied to their bodies and freeze to death. Bosola tells her that she must live. The Duchess leaves with distraught. Ferdinand comes back into the scene to reveal that the bodies are made of wax. Bosola tells Ferdinand to stop his cruelty. Instead, Ferdinand makes plans to worsen her condition. He is going to take all the hospital patients and move them close to her. Bosola refuses to do anything else for Ferdinand but comfort the Duchess. Ferdinand mentions that Antonio is near Milan and Bosola will go there.

In Act 4, Scene 2, the Duchess and Cariola hear a dreadful noise. It is the scream of one of the madmen. The madmen have come to live near the Duchess and drive her crazy. The noise has the opposite effect on the Duchess. The silence would have driven her mad. The Duchess tells Cariola to sit and they will talk to relieve their grief. The Duchess explains that certain birds do not live well in cages and she asks questions about heaven. She wants to communicate with the dead and states that she is simply sad.

Noises interrupt their conversation. A servant enters and tells them that when the Pope was depressed, having several madmen nearby which forced him to laugh cured him. Ferdinand hopes the same treatment will cure his sister. The servant introduces the madmen with a variety of occupations. They are a lawyer, a priest, a doctor, an astrologian, a tailor, a farmer, and a broker.

The madmen say crazy things to the Duchess. After they leave, Bosola talks to the Duchess. He tells her that he is there to prepare her deathbed. The Duchess states that she is not dying nor is she sick. Bosola says that her soul is gone. She tells him that she is still the Duchess, but it does not matter to him. The executioners enter with a coffin, which is a gift from her brothers. Cariola is disturbed. Bosola tells her that he is there as the common bellman and sent to the condemned before they die. The Duchess recalls



that he originally said he was a tomb-maker. Bosola replies that he wanted to get her closer to death. Cariola wants the Duchess to call for help and Bosola has Cariola removed from the room. Bosola informs the Duchess that she will die by strangling and she bravely forgives them for what they are about to do. Bosola tries to scare her with a cord, but she is unafraid. She kneels and is ready to die. The executioners strangle her.

Bosola calls for Cariola and orders the children to be strangled, too. Cariola does not want to die and confesses to be in a contract with a young gentleman. She tries to ask for the Duke, declares she has not been to confession for two years, and then states she is pregnant. Bosola continues with his job and she is strangled.

Ferdinand enters, and Bosola tells him that the Duchess is dead. Bosola asks why the children had to die. Ferdinand is heartless as he refers to his sister as a wolf. He tells Bosola that the Duchess was his twin. Ferdinand wants to know why Bosola carried out his orders. He could have done other things, if he were an honest man, says Ferdinand. Bosola reminds him of his reward for his service. Ferdinand pardons him for the murder, but tricks Bosola as he will not give him a reward. Ferdinand tells him to leave. Bosola points out that he was only following orders and tried to be an honest man. Ferdinand leaves.

Bosola ponders to himself if he would do it again if he had a second chance. The Duchess stirs and he notices that she is not cold. He calls for help. The Duchess says Antonio's name and Bosola confesses that Antonio is alive. The Duchess dies after calling out for mercy. Bosola will carry out her will against Ferdinand's orders and will go to Milan.

Analysis

In Act 4, Scene 1, deception runs deeply in this scene. Ferdinand's attempt to make the Duchess believe that she is kissing Antonio's dead hand backfires. She thinks it's Ferdinand's hand and shows concern that he may be ill from traveling. Her goodness is contrasted with Ferdinand's evilness. The life-like wax figures that the Duchess saw made her think that it was her beloved deceased Antonio and their eldest son. Ferdinand was successful in deceiving his sister, which leads her to want to die.

Bosola wants nothing to do with the Duchess again, except to console her. He is tired of Ferdinand's evil and deceptive ways. For all the negative things Bosola has done in his life, his desire to not hurt or harm the Duchess any more is admirable. He has caused her enough grief and does not want to participate in Ferdinand's evil plans.

In Act 4, Scene 2, Ferdinand's plans involving the madmen backfires. Instead of driving the Duchess mad, it keeps her sane. She does not have to suffer in silence. The Duchess and Cariola face their deaths with two different perspectives. The Duchess is not afraid to die and looks forward to being in heaven. She thinks her family members are there and she will be reunited with them. Ferdinand's wish to make the Duchess despair also backfires as she is at peace with the men that are going to strangle her to



death. She submits and surrenders by kneeling before the executioners. On the other hand, Cariola does not want to die. She is not ready to die. Cariola tries to say that she is married, is pregnant, and has information about a traitor. None of her remarks affect her upcoming death.

Comparing and contrasting the two figures of Bosola and Ferdinand reveal that both men have evil in their hearts. However, it is actually Ferdinand who is more wolf-like and not the Duchess. Bosola feels guilty for his crimes, while Ferdinand feels justified.

Discussion Question 1

Compare and contrast the deaths of the Duchess and Cariola. How does Bosola treat each of them? How does he respond to their deaths?

Discussion Question 2

Bosola's heart changes as he does not want to harm the Duchess anymore, but he follows orders to murder her for a financial reward. How does he begin to right the wrongs in this Act? How can you relate to his situation?

Discussion Question 3

Compare and contrast Ferdinand and Bosola's reactions to the Duchess's death.

Vocabulary

Penitential, imposthume, milch-bats, possets, salvatory, mandragora, infelicity.



Act 5

Summary

Act 5

In Act 5, Scene 1, Antonio asks his trusted friend Delio about the reconciliation agreement from the Cardinal and Ferdinand. Delio thinks it might be a trap and tells him that the Marquis of Pescara has seized Antonio's land. The Marquis approaches and Delio plans to ask for some of the land while Antonio withdraws. The Citadel of Saint Bennet is where Antonio has land. Pescara does not give it to Delio, but instead gives it to Julia, because of the Cardinal's letter. Delio asks Pescara why he gave it to Julia. The response was because the Cardinal and Julia asked and it would not be noble to give the land to a friend.

Pescara tells Delio that Ferdinand is coming to Milan and he is going to visit him. Pescara has heard that the Duke is ill or in a rage. As Pescara leaves, Antonio tells Delio his plan to sneak into the Cardinal's bedroom. Antonio wants to find out if they can be reconciled or if there is more trouble to come.

In Act 5, Scene 2, Pescara talks with the Doctor about visiting Ferdinand and asks what is wrong with him. The Doctor responds that he has lycanthropia, which means exhibiting were-wolf behavior. A man found Ferdinand behind St. Mark's Church with a man's leg on his shoulder and he was howling like a wolf. Ferdinand wanted to sword fight against the men that saw him. Instead, they called the Doctor who has been treating the Duke. The Doctor fears a relapse might happen to his patient.

Ferdinand enters and tells his brother, Malatesti, and Bosola to leave him. Malatesti asks him why he wants to be alone. The Duke argues that some birds that fly alone while others flock together. He points out his shadow, becomes angry at it, and tackles it on the floor. Pescara tells him to get up. The Doctor tries to perform mad tricks on him to get him back to acting normal.

They exit as the Cardinal tries to deceive Bosola by saying that he knew about the Duchess's death. The Cardinal commands Bosola to find Antonio and kill him. He suggests finding Delio and following him, as he will lead Bosola to Antonio. Bosola could even bribe Delio's priest, says the Cardinal. Bosola agrees to find Antonio. The Cardinal exits as Bosola reflects on the Cardinal's evil ways.

Julia holds a pistol to Bosola and demands to know who put a love-powder into her drink. She does not know why she loves Bosola. She feels that she has suffered enough pain. He takes away her pistol as she entices him. Bosola is worried about the Cardinal finding out. Julia tells him that she loves him. Bosola wants Julia to find out why the Cardinal is depressed. She agrees and visits the Cardinal to ask him what is wrong. He denies anything is wrong, even after she presses him for information.



However, he confesses to her that by his direction, his sister and her two children were strangled to death four nights ago. Julia is shocked. The Cardinal makes her swear upon the Bible not to tell anyone. She kisses the Bible as he admits that he poisoned it and now she will die.

Bosola enters as Julia forgives the Cardinal for what he has done and admits that she betrayed the Cardinal by allowing Bosola to hear the Cardinal's confession. She dies. Bosola states that he wants money as the Duke is out of his mind. The Cardinal asks if Bosola will still kill Antonio; and, he confirms that he will. The Cardinal will give him several attendants to help with the murder. Bosola does not want help, but will follow the Cardinal's directions to cover up Julia's death. According to the Cardinal, Julia's husband is in Naples. Bosola ponders how he can keep Antonio safely away from the evil brothers. He is frightened that the Duchess is haunting him.

In Act 5, Scene 3, Delio takes Antonio outside the Cardinal's residence and points out his bedroom window. They hear an echo that repeats Antonio's words about death. The echo sounds like the Duchess's voice and it eerily picks up some of their conversation. Delio is worried about Antonio visiting the Cardinal tonight. Antonio feels compelled and thinks about his wife and children sleeping. Delio has high hopes that Antonio's good virtue will save him. He will fetch Antonio's eldest son, who is so lovable and will compel the Cardinal to have compassion upon Antonio and his family.

In Act 5, Scene 4, the Cardinal tells Malatesti that his brother is feeling better. The Cardinal tells everyone to go to sleep and to not get up even if they hear Ferdinand in a violent spasm. Even though Pescara and Malatesti comply, the Cardinal makes them promise. The Cardinal is concerned about getting Julia's dead body back to her bedroom. He feels guilty but cannot pray about it as he thinks about killing Bosola next. Bosola overhears the Cardinal talking to himself, as the Cardinal exits. Ferdinand appears and tries to get Bosola to leave his guard duty.

Ferdinand leaves and Antonio enters in the darkness. In confusion, Bosola stabs him with his sword and does not recognize him until the servant brings a lantern. Antonio listens as Bosola pities him. Bosola wants to break Antonio's heart with the news that the Duchess and their two children have been murdered. Antonio wishes to be admired by Delio, but he dies. The servant that was with Antonio states that he brought him to reconcile with the Cardinal. Bosola tells the servant to take Antonio's dead body and place it next to Julia's. Bosola plots his next move against the Cardinal.

In Act 5, Scene 5, the Cardinal enters with a book and thinks about the fire burning in hell. Bosola enters with Antonio's dead body and announces that he is there to kill the Cardinal. Bosola reminds him that no one will come even after the Cardinal screams for help because the Cardinal had made them all promise to not get out of bed no matter what they heard. The Cardinal says he will pay Bosola for his work, but Bosola is not convinced. Pescara, Malatesti, Roderigo, and Grisolan are awoken and they discuss trying to help the Cardinal. Pescara goes downstairs to help and the others follow, as they want to see Pescara get into trouble for disobeying the Cardinal.



Bosola turns and kills the servant so that he could not let others in to rescue the Cardinal. The Cardinal wants to know why Bosola has turned on him. Bosola points out Antonio's dead body and the Cardinal cries for mercy. Bosola stabs him. Ferdinand enters and stabs his brother before attacking Bosola. Bosola stabs Ferdinand as payback. Ferdinand blames his sister and then dies. The Cardinal is not dead yet when Pescara, Malatesti, Roderigo, and Grisolan enter and demand to know what has been going on. Bosola states that he took revenge for the Duchess, Antonio, and Julia. He pointed out how each was murdered. The Cardinal dies and so does Bosola, as he is ready to accept death after seeking justice.

Delio enters with Antonio's eldest son, even though it is too late and many have died. Delio wants them to join together to help raise the boy.

Analysis

In Act 5, Scene 1, Delio continues to help his friend Antonio. He asks Pescara for Antonio's seized land, listens to his plans, and wishes him luck. Antonio is unaware that his wife and two children have been murdered upon Ferdinand's orders. Antonio naively plans to seek knowledge from the Cardinal.

The Duke is either sick or in a frenzy, according to sources close to Pescara.

In Act 5, Scene 2, it is ironic to note that Ferdinand had referred to his sister as a wolf in earlier scenes and now he has become a werewolf. He was seen one night behind a church with a man's leg on his shoulder and wanted to fight those that saw him. According to the Doctor, Ferdinand admitted he was a wolf that had hairy wolf skin on the inside rather than on the outside. Ferdinand's strange behavior, like tackling his shadow, is unbecoming of a Duke. He is losing his mind to his evil ways.

Killing his mistress does not bother the Cardinal. He even uses a Bible as he poisons his lover. This is his first direct killing in the play, as he manipulates others to follow his orders to kill or abuse the truth. Julia dies quickly from the poison since the poison entered her body through her kiss. His hatred for others demonstrates that he seeks power and wealth at any cost, which contradicts everything a Cardinal is supposed to believe in or live for such things. He is deceptive toward Bosola and instructs him to kill Antonio. Bosola continues to seek his reward money and plots without receiving anything extra from his wicked ways.

In Act 5, Scene 3, the eerie echo outside the Cardinal's residence makes Delio concerned for his friend. He is not sure what Antonio's fate will be if Antonio visits the Cardinal tonight. Since Delio and Antonio do not know that the Duchess, Cariola, and the two children have been murdered, Antonio does not suspect any harm can come to him if he visits the Cardinal. If they were located in France, all of this drama would not have happened, perhaps, since Antonio believes that the French courtiers are honest with each other and are not contriving.



In Act 5, Scene 4, Bosola and the Cardinal are not working together and are actually scheming how to kill the other. By accident, Bosola kills Antonio because it is dark and he cannot see who it is. Bosola did not have to track down Antonio in Milan, as he had planned to do, but rather Antonio presented himself in the dark to Bosola. Bosola's evil side continues to show as he tries to break Antonio's heart. Antonio was already in physical pain from being stabbed and Bosola desires for him to suffer further with news about the Duchess and their children.

In Act 5, Scene 5, Bosola is direct in saying that he wants to kill the Cardinal. He does not stop killing, as earlier he killed Antonio, and now in front of the Cardinal, he kills a servant. Bosola is determined to kill the Cardinal and does not accept any more bribes from him. Wild Ferdinand joins in by wounding his brother.

The only positive thing that concludes the play is Delio brings Antonio and the Duchess's eldest son to the horrific scene. They witness all that have died that night, including the servant, Antonio, Julia, Ferdinand, the Cardinal, and Bosola. Delio and the remaining men vow to raise the son so that his life will be different from all the wickedness they observed.

Discussion Question 1

How is Julia deceptive to the men she loves including her husband, the Cardinal, and Bosola?

Discussion Question 2

How does Bosola's character change in the play? What events are critical to his development?

Discussion Question 3

Explain how and why Delio took on the responsibility in the final Act about raising his friend Antonio's son.

Vocabulary

Heretic, demesnes, entreaty, apoplexy, lycanthropia, cullis, canopied, ague, osier, vexation, proffers, leveret.



Characters

Ferdinand, the Duke of Calabria

Ferdinand is the twin brother to the Duchess. He is perverse and turbulent, according to Antonio. Ferdinand asks his sister if Bosola can be the horse manager and bribes Bosola to spy on the Duchess in his new job. Originally Ferdinand thinks that Antonio would have been a better fit for the job, but comes to understand from his brother that Antonio is too honest.

Ferdinand and his brother instruct and warn the Duchess not to remarry. Before he leaves the scene, he pulls out his father's knife in front of his sister. Ferdinand is furious after finding out that his sister is pregnant. He gets out of control and speaks of killing her.

While visiting his sister, Ferdinand commands that she kills herself and hands her a knife. After the Duchess and Antonio find out they are banned, Ferdinand writes a letter stating that he wants Antonio's head. His attempt to make the Duchess believe that she is kissing Antonio's dead hand backfires. She thinks it's Ferdinand's hand and shows concern that he may be ill from traveling. Ferdinand tries to make his sister become mad by housing madmen in her palace. Ferdinand is pleased with the deaths of the Duchess, her children, and her maid.

Ferdinand exhibits unusual were-wolf behavior. Pesacara and the Doctor are concerned about him. The Cardinal makes everyone promise to not leave their rooms during the night, even if they hear strange noises from Ferdinand because he wants to move Julia's dead body. Ferdinand wildly stabs his brother before attacking Bosola. Ferdinand dies from Bosola's cuts.

The Cardinal

The Cardinal is the brother to Ferdinand and the Duchess. According to Antonio, he is jealous, revengeful, and deceitful. The Cardinal states that Antonio is too honest to spy on the Duchess.

The Cardinal and his brother instruct and warn the Duchess not to remarry. He makes a comment about being wise at the end of life. Although he is in a religious role and does not want his sister to remarry, the Cardinal is having an affair with Julia, a married woman. He remains calm and collected while his brother furiously tells him about their pregnant sister. The Cardinal is able to orchestrate the Pope into banishing his sister and Antonio. The pilgrims were shocked at the events that took place at the Shrine of our Lady of Loretto and note that the Cardinal is very cruel.

The Cardinal admits he plotted his sister's death to his lover Julia and then poisons her to death. He makes her swear upon the Bible and after kisses the Bible as he admits



that he poisoned it. He orders Bosola to kill Antonio. The Cardinal makes everyone promise to not leave their rooms during the night, even if they hear strange noises from his brother because he wants to move Julia's dead body. Bosola becomes afraid of the Cardinal when he overhears the Cardinal plotting to kill him. Later, the Cardinal tries to pay off Bosola, but Bosola stabs him. Ferdinand stabs his brother too before attacking Bosola. The Cardinal is not dead yet when the others enter and demand an explanation. The Cardinal dies from his wounds.

Duchess of Malfi

Duchess of Malfi is lovely, moral, and a great communicator, according to Antonio. The protagonist is a young widow and her brother Ferdinand does not want her to marry again. Ferdinand hires Bosola to spy on the Duchess to find out who visits her and what she is doing. The Duchess tells her brothers that she has no desire to remarry after they instruct her to remain a widow. She secretly plots with Cariola to remarry and draws up a marriage contract with Antonio.

Bosola notices the Duchess' weight gain and loss of breath. He correctly surmises that she is pregnant. She eats the apricots that Bosola provides and becomes ill. The sickness is used as an excuse to cover up that the Duchess actually gives birth to her son. Her jewels are fictitiously reported to be stolen by a Swiss burglar. The Duchess devises a plan to banish Antonio from the palace for stealing and reveals to Bosola who her husband is. The Duchess and her family rendezvous at the Shrine and are shocked to discover they are banished.

Bosola takes the Duchess back to her palace prison. The Duchess is deceived in believing that the wax figures are the dead bodies of her family. She wants to die but Bosola encourages her to live. Ferdinand tries to make his sister become mad by housing madmen in her palace. It has the opposite effect and enables her to be sane. Bosola orders the executioners to strangle her and she submits to death peacefully.

Daniel de Bosola

Daniel de Bosola feels slighted and is not happy with the Cardinal. He worked for the Cardinal and had to serve seven years due to committing an infamous murder. Bosola receives gold coins from Ferdinand to become the new horse manager and spy on the Duchess. At first, Bosola rejects the new position, but changes his mind and accepts the new job.

Although Antonio thinks that Bosola is valiant, he is mean and judges others. Bosola is unkind to the old woman and is judgmental of Castruccio. Bosola plots to find out if the Duchess is pregnant by giving her apricots to eat. He notices her weight gain and loss of breath. After being caught outside his room, Bosola finds the birth announcement and horoscope for the Duchess's baby. He decides to give it to the Duchess's brothers.



In Act 3, Bosola enters and speaks with Ferdinand and the Cardinal. Pescara, Silvio, and Delio talk about Bosola and the reactions of Ferdinand and his brother. Delio tells Silvio that he knew Bosola in Padua. Bosola was an excellent scholar and enjoyed learning the details of Greek mythology.

Bosola is responsible for the deaths of the Duchess, her children, her maid, Antonio, and a servant. He states that he took revenge for the Duchess, Antonio, and Julia by killing the Cardinal and Ferdinand. He told the remaining courtiers and Antonio's eldest son how each was murdered. Bosola dies at the end of the play from stab wounds from Ferdinand, as he is ready to accept death after seeking justice.

Antonio Bologna

Antonio Bologna is the steward in the Duchess' household. He returns from France and enjoys talking to his friend Delio about the honest French court. Antonio receives Ferdinand's ring because he is a good horseman.

Antonio responds to the Duchess' call and he starts to write up her will. Their conversation leads to the Duchess proposing a marriage contract to him. They secretly wed in front of Cariola.

Antonio relies on Delio's helpful advice. He orders all the doors to be locked and everyone locked in their rooms while he searches for a fictitious Swiss burglar. Later, the Duchess devises a plan to banish Antonio from the palace for stealing so that Antonio can escape safely. Antonio and his family rendezvous at the Shrine and are shocked to discover they are banished. He heads toward Milan and plans to speak with the Cardinal. Bosola stabs Antonio without knowing whom it was and Antonio dies.

Delio

Delio is Antonio's inquisitive friend. He asks about the French court and is eager to learn about the Cardinal, Ferdinand, and the Duchess. Delio is a good friend to Antonio and gives him wise advice. Delio was once Julia's suitor and he offers her money in Act 2.

In Act 3, Delio and Silvio make fun of Malatesti and his inability to be a soldier. Pescara, Silvio, and Delio talk about Bosola and the reactions of Ferdinand and his brother. Delio tells that he knew Bosola in Padua.

In the final act, Delio and the remaining men vow to raise the son so that his life will be different from all the wickedness they observed.

Castruccio

Castruccio is married to Julia and does not want Ferdinand to go to war after Ferdinand complains. He talks to Bosola about being a famous aristocrat in Act 2. Castruccio is



unaware that his wife is unfaithful and visits the Cardinal. Bosola sends a letter through Castruccio to Ferdinand and the Cardinal explaining the birth of the Duchess's eldest child.

Marquis of Pescara

In Act 3, Pescara, Silvio, and Delio talk about Bosola and the reactions of Ferdinand and his brother. Pescara notes that Ferdinand has troubles brewing. In Act 5, the Marquis of Pescara has seized Antonio's land. Delio plans to ask him for some of the land. Pescara does not give it to Delio, but instead gives it to Julia, because of the Cardinal's letter.

The Cardinal made Pescara, Malatesti, Roderigo, and Grisolan promise to not get out of bed no matter what they heard. They are awoken and want to help the Cardinal. They witness all the dead bodies and Bosola's brutal account. In the final act, Delio and the remaining men, including Pescara, vow to raise the son so that his life will be different from all the wickedness they observed.

Roderigo

Roderigo is a courtier. The Cardinal made Pescara, Malatesti, Roderigo, and Grisolan promise to not get out of bed no matter what they heard. They are awoken and want to help the Cardinal. They witness all the dead bodies and Bosola's brutal account. In the final act, Delio and the remaining men, including Roderigo, vow to raise the son so that his life will be different from all the wickedness they observed.

Count Malatesti

Ferdinand tells the Duchess that he is going to find a husband for her. It is Count Malatesti, but she is not interested in him. Malatesti has a map drawn for a new defense at Naples. He is going to show it to the Cardinal. Delio and Silvio make fun of Malatesti and his inability to be a soldier. The Cardinal made Pescara, Malatesti, Roderigo, and Grisolan promise to not get out of bed no matter what they heard. They are awoken and want to help the Cardinal. They witness all the dead bodies and Bosola's brutal account. In the final act, Delio and the remaining men, including Malatesti, vow to raise the son so that his life will be different from all the wickedness they observed.

Silvio

In Act 3, Scene 3, Delio and Silvio make fun of Malatesti and his inability to be a soldier. Pescara, Silvio, and Delio talk about Bosola and the reactions of Ferdinand and his brother. Silvio asks about Bosola and states that the Cardinal has been unhappy.



Grisolan

Grisolan is a courtier. The Cardinal made Pescara, Malatesti, Roderigo, and Grisolan promise to not get out of bed no matter what they heard. They are awoken and want to help the Cardinal. They witness all the dead bodies and Bosola's brutal account. In the final act, Delio and the remaining men, including Grisolan, vow to raise the son so that his life will be different from all the wickedness they observed.

Cariola

Cariola is the Duchess' maid. Cariola states that she will not tell anyone about the Duchess' desire to remarry. She overhears the Duchess and Antonio talking in Act 1 Scene 3 and bears witness to their secret marriage contract. Cariola is not sure about the mental state of the Duchess at the end of Act 1.

In Act 4, Cariola wants the Duchess to call for help instead of being killed. Bosola has Cariola removed from the room. After the Duchess dies, he calls for Cariola and orders the children to be strangled, too. Cariola does not want to die and confesses to be in a contract with a young gentleman. She tries to ask for the Duke, declares she has not been to confession for two years, and then states she is pregnant. Cariola fights for every last breath. Bosola continues with his job and she is strangled.

Julia

Julia is Castruccio's wife and the Cardinal's mistress. She cannot endure fighting. Julia is having an affair with the Cardinal in Rome. She was able to meet the Cardinal without her husband in Act 2. Delio comes to speak with her and offers her money. In the last act. The audience finds out that Julia is in love with Bosola, too. The Cardinal admits to Julia that he plotted his sister's death.. He makes her swear upon the Bible. After she kisses the Bible, he admits that he poisoned it. She dies after forgiving him.

Old lady

Old lady enters the play in Act 2. Bosola is not kind to her about her appearance. She helps deliver the Duchess's baby.

Two Pilgrims

There are two pilgrims at the Shrine of our Lady of Loretto. They narrate what takes place in the scene. The two pilgrims have such high hopes for a dignified ceremony, but it quickly goes downhill.



Doctor

In the last act, the Doctor is concerned about Ferdinand's unusual were-wolf behavior. Pescara talks with him about visiting Ferdinand and asks what is wrong with him. The Doctor responds that he has lycanthropia, which means exhibiting were-wolf behavior. He fears a relapse might happen to his patient.

Several Madmen

In Act 4, a story was told of a depressed Pope being cured by having several madmen nearby who forced him to laugh. Ferdinand hopes the same treatment will cure his sister. The madmen have a variety of occupations. They are a lawyer, a priest, a doctor, an astrologist, a tailor, a farmer, and a broker. Ferdinand's plans involving the madmen backfire. Instead of driving the Duchess mad, she keeps her sanity. She does not have to suffer in silence.



Symbols and Symbolism

France

Antonio had been in France prior to the beginning act. He was impressed with the righteousness of the French court.

Malfi, Italy

The play takes place in Malfi, Italy, at the Duchess's palace.

Laban's Sheep

Laban's sheep are mentioned in Act 1 Scene 3. Ferdinand compares the spots in Laban's sheep to the livers of suitors. Laban's spotted sheep are a reference from Genesis, Chapter 30.

The Poniard

Ferdinand showed his father's poniard to the Duchess in Act 1. Later, he gave the knife to the Duchess when he visited her in Act 3, Scene 2. He ordered her to use it on herself to commit suicide.

Ancona

The Duchess tells Antonio to flee there in Act 3, Scene 2. She will pay for a house there for him.

Bermoothes

Bosola states that he would rather swim to Bermoothes, than to not know Antonio's honesty. Bermoothes is a reference to Shakespeare's haunted island in "The Tempest."

The Baths of Lucca

Cariola suggests that the Duchess visit the baths in Act 3, Scene 2, instead of following Bosola's plan to see the Lady of Loretto.



The Spa in Germany

Cariola also suggests that the Duchess visit the spa in Act 3, Scene 2 instead of Bosola's plan to see the Lady of Loretto.

Naples

Malatesti has a plot for the new fortification at Naples in Act 3, Scene 3.

Padua, Italy

Delio knew Bosola from Padua.

The Shrine of our Lady of Loretto

There are two pilgrims discussing the shrine and hoping for a noble ceremony. They are shocked to find out that the Duchess and her family is banned.

Milan, Italy

Milan is where Antonio flees to after being banished. Delio meets him there in Act 5, Scene 1.

The Citadel of Saint Bennet

The Citadel of Saint Bennet is where Antonio has land, in Act 5, Scene 1. It has been seized by Pescara. Delio asks him if he can have some of Antonio's land and is not given permission. Pescara gives it to Julia, however.

St. Mark's Church

A man found Ferdinand behind St. Mark's Church with a man's leg on his shoulder and he was howling like a wolf.



Settings

Palace

The play opens at the Duchess of Malfi's palace in Malfi. Servant Antonio and friend Delio discuss Antonio's trip to France and the courtiers who are passing by the chamber.

In Act 2, the play continues at the Duchess's palace several months later as the Duchess is pregnant but does not want anyone to know, especially her brothers.

The Cardinal's home

In Act 2, Scene 4, the play is set in the Cardinal's place, where his mistress Julia visits. Later, in Act 2, Scene 5, the setting is in Rome at Ferdinand's place.

Palace

In Act 3, the play focuses on the Duchess in her palace a few years later. She has three children now with her unidentified husband Antonio.

Ancona

The Duchess plans to reunite with Antonio in Ancona after she falsely accuses him of stealing from her. Cariola suggests that the Duchess visit the baths of Lucca or the German spa in Act 3, Scene 2 instead of Bosola's plan to see the Lady of Loretto. However, at the Shrine of our Lady of Loretto, in Ancona, there are two pilgrims discussing the shrine and hoping for a noble ceremony.

Palace

After being banned, the Duchess returns to her palace as a prisoner, while Antonio and their eldest son flee to Milan. The play continues with the Duchess's palace in Act 4 where she is subjected to the madmen's crazy wailing. She later dies.

Milan

In Act 5, Scene 1, Antonio talks with Delio in Milan, Italy, the place he fled to after being banished in Act 3. The rest of the play is focused in Milan as Ferdinand becomes a were-wolf, Bosola kills Antonio, and eventually the Cardinal, Bosola, and Ferdinand die.



Themes and Motifs

Good versus Evil

The theme of good versus evil is expressed throughout the play. In the beginning of the play, the audience is introduced to noble Antonio expressing his thoughts on his recent trip to France. Antonio favors their honest courtiers. He receives Ferdinand's ring for winning the sporting event. His fine character is contrasted with the appalling character of Bosola who has served time for his crimes. Unhappy sinister Bosola receives gold coins from Duke Ferdinand to spy on the Duchess as the horse manager. In the final act, edgy Bosola accidentally stabs and kills harmless Antonio. Antonio listens as Bosola pities him. Bosola wants to break Antonio's heart with the news that the Duchess and their two children have been murdered. Antonio wishes to be admired by his trusted friend Delio, but he dies.

Ferdinand's attempt to make the Duchess believe that she is kissing Antonio's dead hand backfires. She thinks it's Ferdinand's hand and shows concern that he may be ill from traveling. Her goodness is contrasted with Ferdinand's evilness. The life-like wax figures that the Duchess saw made her think that it was her beloved deceased Antonio and their eldest son. Ferdinand was successful in deceiving his sister, which leads her to want to die.

The only positive thing that concludes the play is Delio brings Antonio and the Duchess's eldest son to the horrific scene. They witness all that have died that night, including the servant, Antonio, Julia, Ferdinand, the Cardinal, and Bosola. Delio and the remaining men vow to raise the son so that his life will be different from all the wickedness they observed.

Betrayal

Ferdinand asks his sister if Bosola can be the horse manager. He really wants him to spy on his sister. He bribes Bosola in his new job with gold. The Duchess obliged her brothers' wishes for her not to marry, but then does not follow through with their commands. She secretly marries Antonio with Cariola as the witness. As a result of her secret marriage, the Cardinal uses his power to take Antonio's land and has the Pope banish the Duchess and Antonio from Ancona. Ferdinand orders Bosola to kill the Duchess out of his greed and jealousy.

The Duchess is deceived in believing that the wax figures are the dead bodies of her family. She wants to die but Bosola encourages her to live. Ferdinand deceitfully comes back into the scene to reveal that the bodies are made of wax. Bosola tells Ferdinand to stop his cruelty. Instead, Ferdinand makes plans to worsen her condition. He is going to take all the hospital patients and move them close to her. Bosola refuses to do anything else for Ferdinand but comfort the Duchess. Bosola wants nothing to do with the



Duchess again, except to console her. He is tired of Ferdinand's evil and deceptive ways. For all the negative things Bosola has done in his life, his desire to not hurt or harm the Duchess any more is admirable. He has caused her enough grief and does not want to participate in Ferdinand's evil plans. However, it is Bosola that orders the executioners to strangle her.

Death

Many characters die in this tragic play. The Duchess, her maid, her husband, and two of her children die from Bosola's orders. He also proceeds to kill a servant, the Cardinal, and Ferdinand out of revenge for the deaths of the Duchess, Antonio, and Julia. To top it off, Bosola dies from stab wounds from wild Ferdinand. Before he dies, though, Bosola recounts the murders for the remaining and shocked courtiers. Bosola accepts death after seeking justice.

Bosola orders the executioners to strangle the Duchess and she submits to death peacefully. Cariola, on the other hand, fights for her life. Cariola does not want to die and confesses to be in a contract with a young gentleman. She tries to ask for the Duke, declares she has not been to confession for two years, and then states she is pregnant. Bosola continues with his job and she is strangled. Later, he anxiously stabs Antonio without knowing who it was and Antonio dies. Bosola's evil side continues to show as he tries to break Antonio's heart. Antonio was already in physical pain from being stabbed and Bosola desires for him to suffer further with news about the Duchess and their children.

The Cardinal admits to Julia, his lover, that he plotted his sister's death. He then poisons Julia, too.



Styles

Point of View

The *Duchess of Malfi* is a play written by John Webster. As a play, it is presented in first person from the limited perspective of the various characters, though there is an omniscient quality as well. This comes from the fact that various characters take the stage, each revealing information about himself or herself at various times throughout the play.

Language and Meaning

The play is difficult to read due to the intricate language and the time frame in which it was written, around 1611. Words such as sycophants, horseleech, surgeons, etc. are archaic. The reader must reread parts to fully comprehend the unfamiliar vocabulary.

In the beginning of the play, Antonio asks Bosola about the Duchess's brothers. Bosola responds by comparing the brothers to twisted fruit-bearing trees, but they are by stagnant water and only pesty birds and insects desire to eat the fruit. "He and his brother are like plum-trees that grow crooked over standing-pools; they are rich and o'erladen with fruit, but none but crows, pies, and caterpillars feed on them."

Webster, John (2011-03-24). *The Duchess of Malfi* (Kindle Locations 40-41). Kindle Edition. The "standing pools" are like sluggish water that just sits around, does not flow, and enables mosquitoes to breed.

Later in the play, Antonio describes married women as fruit-bearing trees, such as olives, pomegranate, and mulberry trees. The brothers do not want the Duchess to marry and bear fruit. "We read how Daphne, for her peevish flight, became a fruitless bay-tree; Syrinx turn'd to the pale empty reed; Anaxarete was frozen into marble: whereas those which married, or prov'd kind unto their friends, were by a gracious influence transhap'd into the olive, pomegranate, mulberry, became flowers, precious stones, or eminent stars."

Webster, John (2011-03-24). *The Duchess of Malfi* (Kindle Locations 541-544). Kindle Edition.

The Duchess refers to herself like a diamond when her brothers command her not to marry again. "Diamonds are of most value, they say, that have pass'd through most jewellers' hands."

Webster, John (2011-03-24). *The Duchess of Malfi* (Kindle Locations 153-154). Kindle Edition.



Julia speaks about stealing diamonds when she talks to her third lover, Bosola. “For if I see and steal a diamond, the fault is not i' th' stone, but in me the thief that purloins it.” Webster, John (2011-03-24). *The Duchess of Malfi* (Kindle Locations 1171-1172). Kindle Edition.

Lastly, Ferdinand talks about diamonds before he dies. “Whether we fall by ambition, blood, or lust, like diamonds, we are cut with our own dust.”

Webster, John (2011-03-24). *The Duchess of Malfi* (Kindle Locations 1355-1356). Kindle Edition.

Structure

The tragic play is comprised of five acts. Each act has between two and five scenes.

The play is about the life and death of the Duchess of Malfi. As the play begins, the Duchess is a widow. Her jealous and power hungry brothers tried to dictate her life so that she will not marry again. They want to gain her wealth for themselves, even though one of them is a Cardinal in the Catholic Church. The Duchess obliges her brothers at first, but then she tells her maid Cariola that she wishes to marry. She expresses her love to Antonio, her gallant steward, and he is surprised and shocked. Antonio is worried about her brothers and what they will think, but the Duchess calms his fears. They secretly wed.

The action escalates as the brothers find out that the Duchess has borne children. Their reactions differ somewhat, but they are both angry with her. Both the Cardinal and Ferdinand commit malicious deeds throughout the play. In the final act, most of the main characters are dead from being stabbed.

The play uses dialog throughout. Narrators are not used in the play, except in Act 3 when two pilgrims describe the shocking actions. The play is difficult to read due to the complex language and the time frame in which it was written, around 1611.



Quotes

He and his brother are like plum-trees that grow crooked over standing-pools; they are rich and o'erladen with fruit, but none but crows, pies, and caterpillars feed on them."

The Duchess of Malfi (Kindle Locations 40-41). Kindle Edition.

-- Bosola (Act 1 paragraph Kindle Locations 40-41)

Importance: In the beginning of the play, Antonio asks Bosola about the Duchess's brothers. Bosola responds by comparing the brothers to twisted fruit-bearing trees, but they are by stagnant water and only pesty birds and insects desire to eat the fruit. The "standing pools" are like sluggish water that just sits around, does not flow, and enables mosquitoes to breed.

Nobly, my lord: as out of the Grecian horse issued many famous princes, so out of brave horsemanship arise the first sparks of growing resolution, that raise the mind to noble action." The Duchess of Malfi (Kindle Locations 76-77). Kindle Edition.

-- Antonio (Act 1 paragraph Kindle Locations 76-77)

Importance: Ferdinand just told Antonio that Antonio is a good horseman and asked him what Antonio thinks about good horsemanship. Although Antonio was not born into a noble family, noble actions are a priority for him.

Fare you well. Wisdom begins at the end: remember it." The Duchess of Malfi (Kindle Locations 167). Kindle Edition.

-- Cardinal (Act 1 paragraph Kindle Location 167)

Importance: The Cardinal is leaving after commanding the Duchess not to remarry. It is foreshadowing the end to her life.

Shall this move me? If all my royal kindred lay in my way unto this marriage, I 'd make them my low footsteps." The Duchess of Malfi (Kindle Locations 274-276). Kindle Edition.

-- Duchess (Act 1 paragraph Kindle Locations 173-174)

Importance: The Duchess had just been commanded and warned not to remarry. She is speaking with Cariola and stating that she is going to do her own thing, even if it is against her brothers' wishes.

Lay a naked sword between us, keep us chaste. O, let me shrowd my blushes in your bosom, since 'tis the treasury of all my secrets!" The Duchess of Malfi (Kindle Locations 248-249). Kindle Edition.

-- Duchess (Act 1 paragraph Kindle Locations 248-249))

Importance: The Duchess suggests that Antonio and her keep to their own side of the bed even though they are married. This quote introduces a weapon, the sword, which will separate them. Sadly, Antonio will be killed by a sword later in the play.



Though we are eaten up of lice and worms, and though continually we bear about us a rotten and dead body, we delight to hide it in rich tissue: all our fear, nay, all our terror, is, lest our physician should put us in the ground to be made sweet.—” The Duchess of Malfi (Kindle Locations 274-276). Kindle Edition.

-- Bosola (Act 2 paragraph Kindle Locations 274-276)

Importance: Bosola is saying that humans are nothing but worm food. Human bodies decay after death. He says this to Castruccio and the old woman who are in a hurry to deliver the Duchess’s firstborn child. This quote is foreshadowing all the deaths that will take place later in the play.

Tis welcome: For know, whether I am doom'd to live or die, I can do both like a prince.” The Duchess of Malfi (Kindle Locations 561-562). Kindle Edition.

-- The Duchess (Act 3 paragraph Kindle Locations 561-562))

Importance: The Duchess is afraid that her brothers will find out about her secret marriage. She thinks she is talking to Antonio and Cariola, but they have slipped out of the room. Her brother Ferdinand is actually there and hears her talking. The Duchess states that she is royalty.

I am Duchess of Malfi still.” The Duchess of Malfi (Kindle Location 942). Kindle Edition.

-- The Duchess (Act 4 paragraph Kindle Location 942)

Importance: The Duchess has just endured Ferdinand’s madmen in her palace and has not gone mad yet. She proudly says this to Bosola before she is murdered. Bosola told her that he is there to prepare her tomb.

Cover her face; mine eyes dazzle: she died young.” The Duchess of Malfi (Kindle Location 1001). Kindle Edition.

-- Ferdinand (Act 4 paragraph Kindle Location 1001)

Importance: Ferdinand is pleased that the Duchess is dead. He says this to Bosola after seeing her dead body. It is one of the nicest things he says about his sister, in a twisted way, since he refers to her with derogatory names in other parts of the play.

In all our quest of greatness, Like wanton boys whose pastime is their care, We follow after bubbles blown in th’ air.” The Duchess of Malfi (Kindle Locations 1307-1308). Kindle Edition.

-- Antonio (Act 5, Scene 4 paragraph Kindle Locations 1307-1308))

Importance: Antonio says this right before he dies. He just found out from Bosola that his wife and children have been murdered. Antonio is saying that human beings chase after nothing.

Now my revenge is perfect.—Sink, thou main cause of my undoing!—The last part of my life hath done me best service.” The Duchess of Malfi (Kindle Locations 1350-1352). Kindle Edition.



-- Bosola (Act 5 paragraph Kindle Locations 1350-1352)

Importance: In the middle of the quote, Bosola kills Ferdinand. Bosola was seeking justice for the deaths of the Duchess, Cariola, Antonio, and their children.

Let us make noble use of this great ruin; and join all our force to establish this young hopeful gentleman in 's mother's right. These wretched eminent things leave no more fame behind 'em, than should one fall in a frost, and leave his print in snow; As soon as the sun shines, it ever melts, both form and matter." The Duchess of Malfi (Kindle Locations 1373-1376). Kindle Edition.

-- Delio (Act 5 paragraph Kindle Locations 1373-1376)

Importance: Delio said this at the end of the play after they witnessed all that have died that night, including the servant, Antonio, Julia, Ferdinand, the Cardinal, and Bosola. Delio and the remaining men vow to raise the son so that his life will be different from all the wickedness they observed.