



The Duchess of Malfi

John Webster

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The play is set in the court of Malfi (Amalfi), Italy 1504 to 1510. The recently widowed Duchess falls in love with Antonio, a lowly steward, but her brothers, not wishing her to share their inheritance and desperate to evade a degrading association with their social inferiors, forbid her from remarrying. She marries Antonio in secret and bears him three children before they are found out.

The Duchess's lunatic and incestuously obsessed brother, Ferdinand threatens and disowns her. In an attempt to escape, she and Antonio concoct a story that he has swindled her out of her fortune and has to flee into exile. She takes Bosola into her confidence, not knowing that he is Ferdinand's spy, and arranges that he will deliver her jewellery to Antonio at his hiding-place in Ancona. She will join them later, whilst pretending to make a pilgrimage to a town nearby. The Cardinal hears of the plan, instructs Bosola to banish the two lovers, and sends soldiers to capture them. Antonio escapes with their eldest son, but the Duchess, her maid, and her two younger children are returned to Malfi and, under instructions from Ferdinand, die at the hands of Bosola's executioners. This experience, combined with a long-standing sense of injustice and his own feeling of a lack of identity, turns Bosola against the Cardinal and his brother, deciding to take up the cause of "Revenge for the Duchess of Malfi"

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