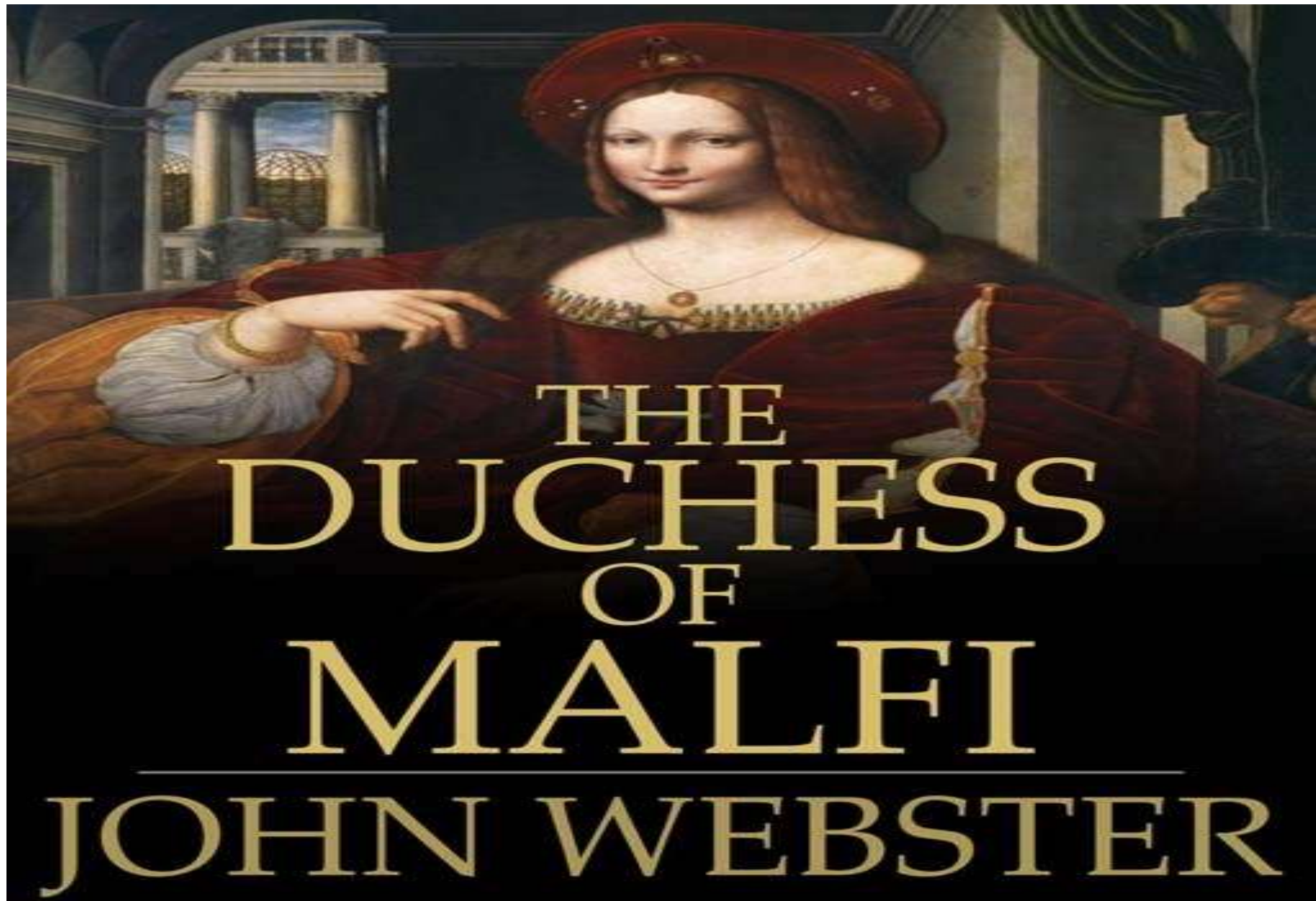


# The Duchess of Malfi

Written By—  
John Webster

For,  
First Semester  
BA English General  
PHGC

Presented By –  
Ashraful Haque



THE  
DUCHESS  
OF  
MALFI

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JOHN WEBSTER

# Portrait of John Webster



# THE AUTHOR: 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 and regarded as the paramount 17th-century English tragedies apart from those of Shakespeare.
- John Webster's father was a coachman also named John Webster and it is guessed that Webster Jr. was born in or around London.
- He has worked with many other playwrights including Michael Drayton, Thomas Dekker, Thomas Middleton and Anthony Munday.
- From his plays it is clear that Webster was a learned man, but nothing is known of his education.
- 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.



# DRAMATIS PERSONAE / CHARACTER LIST

## Male Characters

- FERDINAND (Duke of Calabria and brother of the Duchess, Given to fits of rage and violent outbursts. Has incestuous desire for his sister. (Historical name Carlos, the Marquis of Gerace)) [the antagonist]
- CARDINAL (brother of the Duchess and Ferdinand)
- ANTONIO BOLOGNA, (Steward of the Household to the Duchess) [later her husband from a secret marriage]
- DELIO (his friend).
  
- DANIEL DE BOSOLA (Gentleman/Steward of the Horse to the Duchess) [antagonist & later avenger]
- CASTRUCCIO (an old Lord)
- The MARQUIS OF PESCARA (COUNT and a Soldier)
- MALATESTI RODERIGO, (a lord/ a courtier)
- SILVIO (a lord/ a courtier)
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- GRISOLAN (a lord/ a courtier)
- DOCTOR.
- The Several Madmen.



## DUKE FERDINAND & BOSOLA

Bosola is revealing the secret marriage of the Duchess to her brother the Duke Ferdinand

# DRAMATIS PERSONAE / CHARACTER LIST

## Female Characters

- DUCHESS (OF MALFI,) [the protagonist]
- CARIOLA (the Duchess' waiting woman)
- JULIA (Castruccio's wife, and the Cardinal's mistress)
- An Old Lady

## Other Minor Characters

- Ladies,
- Three Young Children,
- Two Pilgrims,
- Executioners,
- Court Officers, and
- Attendants.

# TEXT SUMMARY / SYNOPSIS

- *The Duchess of Malfi* is a play by John Webster in which the widowed Duchess secretly remarries. Her brothers are angered and they attempt to discover the identity of her husband.
- The Duchess secretly remarries after the death of her first husband, and she and her new husband, Antonio, have three children together.
- When the Duchess's brothers find out about Antonio, they banish the couple and their children. In exile, the Duchess and two of her children are killed.
- Antonio, Bosola and one of the Duchess's brothers seek revenge against the other two brothers, but in the ensuing madness, all of them die.



# PLOT IN DETAILS

- The Duchess, was born in Giovanna d'Aragon. She married in 1490 at age 12 to Alfonso Piccolomini, son and heir of first Duke of Malfi. He succeeded to the dukedom in 1493 but died of gout in 1498
- The Duchess of Malfi 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.



## ANTONIO & THE DUCHESS

They are marrying secretly

# PLOT IN DETAILS CONTINUES...

- 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.

# PLOT IN DETAILS CONTINUES...

- 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 unorthodox 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.



# 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.
- While typical tragedies, such as *Oedipus Rex* or *King Lear* feature a great man who is destroyed by a fatal flaw in his character, **Senecan tragedy** is marked by a love of bloody, spectacular violence and a focus on revenge.
- 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 work 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.
- 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”**.