

## Quadrant II – Notes

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**Unit:** 1

**Module Name:** The Duchess of Malfi: Act-wise Summary

**Module No.:** 03

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### Introduction

The Duchess of Malfi is a play written by the playwright John Webster. John Webster is an English Jacobean dramatist which means that he wrote his plays under the reign of James I in England. He is best known for his tragedies, mainly a play known as *The White Devil* and the play that we are going to discuss, that is, *The Duchess of Malfi*.

The play *The Duchess of Malfi* is considered to have been written either in 1613 or 1614 but records show that it was performed by the end of 1614. It has also been documented that it was first performed by the King's Men – a popular acting troupe of the time.

Dear learners, whenever we study plays of this sort, a lot of emphasis is placed on the 'source' of the play, that is, the source of the story. Some of these tragedies were based on true stories and *The Duchess of Malfi* was one of them. The play is based on the true story of Giovanna of Aragon, a real Duchess of Malfi who was widowed at an early age and subsequently went on to marry a man called Antonio Bologna. Not all details of the original source are available to us. However, critics assert that most of the major plot points of the stories are based on events that *actually* unfolded in the life of Giovanna of Aragon and her husband.

*The Duchess of Malfi* has been written in the form that has been known as a 'revenge' tragedy. Critics have been very appreciative of the fact that John Webster popularized a form that was going out of practice at the time. We will, of course, discuss this point further in the next module.

Now, let me provide a brief Act-wise Summary of this play.

### Act One

*The Duchess of Malfi* begins in the Duchess' chamber in Malfi in 16<sup>th</sup> century Italy. The first two characters we meet are Antonio Bologna, the Duchess' steward and his friend Delio. Antonio has recently returned from France and he speaks very highly of the King there saying that the King has cleansed the court of all the corrupt courtiers.

Just then, two other characters arrive: these are Bosola and the Cardinal. The Cardinal is one of the brothers of the Duchess. Through their conversation we come to know that the Cardinal had hired Bosola as a henchman to commit an offence. When caught, the Cardinal had left Bosola to his own devices. Bosola had not been rewarded; on the contrary, he had been put in the prison. This had made him a very bitter man. When the Cardinal leaves, Bosola tells Antonio that both the Cardinal and his brother Duke Ferdinand are extremely wicked and debauched individuals.

As Bosola leaves, Duke Ferdinand enters with a few other courtiers. He congratulates Antonio on winning a jousting contest and regrets the fact that they are not able to fight in a real war. Once they leave, Antonio tells Delio about both the brothers. He tells him that although the Cardinal appears to be very jovial in nature, in reality he is a cold, calculative and cruel man. Similarly, Duke Ferdinand is a very unpredictable, turbulent and violent man. Their sister, the Duchess, however, is totally different. She is the epitome of beauty, virtue and dignity.

As the two brothers prepare to leave Malfi, they both come to speak with their sister. Ferdinand appoints Bosola as the horse provisor in the Duchess' court but in secret tells him to act as a spy to report on the Duchess. Both the brothers subtly threaten their sister against remarriage and ask her to protect her 'virtue'. The Duchess shows implicit irritation at being controlled this way, but she nevertheless agrees with them. However, as soon as they leave, she calls Antonio, with whom she is in love, and in the presence of her waiting woman Cariola, asks him to marry her. After initial hesitation, Antonio agrees and they both enter the sacrament of marriage.

## **Act Two**

As Act Two begins, it is suggested that some time has lapsed between the Duchess' marriage with Antonio and present time because, as we come to know later, the Duchess is pregnant. Her marriage is still a secret and has not been revealed to anyone except Cariola and Delio. Bosola, who has been appointed as a spy, becomes suspicious that the Duchess is pregnant, however, he doesn't discuss with anyone unless it is confirmed. Just then Delio and Antonio enter and Antonio accuses Bosola of becoming a proud man due to his promotion as horse provisor. The Duchess enters; in order to confirm whether she is pregnant, Bosola offers her apricots – fruits which are believed to induce labour. As soon as the Duchess eats them, she gets sick and Bosola's suspicion is confirmed.

Antonio and Delio come up with a quick plan to hide the Duchess' pregnancy and the fact that she has gone into labour. On the pretext that the Duchess' jewels have gone missing, they send all the servants away so that the Duchess may undergo delivery of the baby. Antonio also sends Delio to Rome to keep a watch on the Duchess' brothers – the Cardinal and Ferdinand – so that they don't come to know about the Duchess and wreak any havoc in their lives. Just then, Cariola enters with a baby boy – the first child of Antonio and the Duchess.

On the same night, Bosola comes near the Duchess' chamber once again to confirm his doubt. Here, he meets Antonio. In order to stop Bosola from going close to the Duchess' chamber, Antonio accuses Bosola of being the prime suspect in the case of the Duchess' missing jewels as his apricots seemed to poison her. Bosola denies this. Antonio has to leave suddenly because he gets an erratic nosebleed, but in a hurry, he drops a paper containing the horoscope of the new-born baby. This is enough proof for Bosola. He realises that Antonio is aware of the Duchess' pregnancy but he doesn't realise that Antonio is the father of the baby. He decides to send a letter informing the Duchess' brothers of her baby. The next scene takes place in Rome where the Cardinal's mistress Julia meets Delio who has arrived from Malfi on Antonio's request. In the next scene we realise that Ferdinand has received Bosola's letter. He

knows about the baby but not about the Duchess' marriage. As expected, he becomes extremely violent upon reading the news. The Cardinal reacts in a calmer manner but we know that he is also going to do something damaging.

### **Act Three**

A considerable time passes within the play between Act Two and Act Three. Delio returns from Rome and he is informed by Antonio that the Duchess has given birth to two more children. We also come to know that Ferdinand has arrived in Malfi and behaves very strangely. The general public knows about the Duchess' children and speak ill of her. However, none of them know that she is married to Antonio. The Duchess tries to tell Ferdinand but he doesn't let her fearing extreme violence. When she tells him that her children are not born out of wedlock and she is in fact married, he tells her to cut off her tongue so that she may never tell him the name of her husband; if she does so, Ferdinand is sure to kill him. Fearing danger, the Duchess decides to send Antonio away. She tells him to go to Ancona. She puts up an act to show that she is banishing Antonio because he has manipulated her accounts as the steward. While the other courtiers seem to agree with the Duchess, only Bosola stands up for Antonio's honesty. The Duchess thinks that Bosola is a good friend of Antonio and therefore tells him the truth about their marriage. Bosola is now confused as to whether he should be loyal to the Duchess or inform Ferdinand.

In the meantime, we see that Antonio has gone away to Ancona and now the Duchess plans to go meet him there on the pretext of going on a pilgrimage. But Bosola gives away her plans to her brothers. The Cardinal and Ferdinand are furious; they decide to destroy this plan and separate both of them. They do so; Antonio, the Duchess and their children are banished from Ancona, the Duchess' dukedom is taken away from her. Ferdinand sends a letter saying that he would like to meet Antonio and negotiate with him peacefully. But the Duchess can immediately read between the lines and realises that Ferdinand has in fact sent a threat. Fearing that all their lives are in danger, she tells Antonio to go to Milan with their son while she stays with her two children and Cariola. Antonio does so; soon after, the Duchess, Cariola and her two children are apprehended by the Cardinal and Ferdinand's men and put in prison.

### **Act Four**

Act Four is replete with cruel acts. The Duchess is put in prison but she bears this torture with great dignity. Ferdinand, who expects his sister to suffer, gets even further frustrated with this. So he devises a number of mechanisms to torture the Duchess further. Firstly, he makes Bosola put off the lights in the prison. Then he comes to meet the Duchess in the dark and places a severed arm in her hand. Then he makes Bosola show her the corpses of Antonio and their children. Please note, that this is just Ferdinand's trick. Antonio and the children are not dead; Ferdinand merely places wax statues. But the Duchess falls for this trick. She goes into complete despair. But Ferdinand is not satisfied with this too. He further sends what he refers to as 'madmen' to make a lot of noise and cause further trauma to the Duchess. Bosola tells Ferdinand to stop all this torture but Ferdinand doesn't listen to him.

The Duchess only has one wish now – that she may die and reunite with her family in heaven because she believes they are dead. Soon enough, Ferdinand sends executioners who strangle the Duchess. They kill Cariola too despite her protestations. The Duchess' children are killed too. Bosola brings Ferdinand to see the corpses. Ferdinand largely remains unaffected by the corpses of the children but on seeing the Duchess he gets greatly distressed. In fact, he starts shouting at Bosola for undertaking his orders. In his frenzy he also admits that the reason why he was so angry with the Duchess' remarriage was because he was hoping to inherit her fortune. He shows signs of going completely erratic and departs. Bosola realises that he has

undertaken all these cruel acts on behalf of Ferdinand only for rewards but now he isn't even going to get them. He immediately sees that the Duchess has not passed away as yet. So he quickly goes to her and tells her that Antonio is alive. The Duchess dies soon after, peaceful in the knowledge that her beloved Antonio survives. Bosola however is extremely repentant and disturbed and thinks of how is going to seek revenge on behalf of the Duchess.

## **Act Five**

With the Duchess no more, the play move towards Antonio who is still unaware of his wife's death. Delio warns Antonio not to meet the Cardinal or Ferdinand because they might kill him. They come to know that Ferdinand has returned to Milan and acts very strangely out of sickness.

The doctors inform that Ferdinand suffers from lycanthropia, that is, he believes that he is wolf and digs up bodies from the graveyard at night. This is a likely outcome of the death of the Duchess. The Cardinal makes an effort to hide Ferdinand's condition. It is here that we come to know actually the Cardinal was behind the Duchess' execution. But he pretends as though he doesn't know anything about it. On the contrary, he offers Bosola more rewards for killing Antonio.

Just then the Cardinal's mistress Julia enters and threatens to kill Bosola for a strange reason. She says that she is in love with Bosola and feels that this is because Bosola has used some love potion on her. Bosola asks her to prove her love to him by finding out what is wrong with the Cardinal. Julia agrees, Bosola hides in the chamber and Cardinal enters. When Julia urges the Cardinal, he confesses his part in killing the Duchess. But the Cardinal is a cunning man. He does so only because he knows he is going to kill Julia. He makes her swear to keep his secret by kissing on the Bible. But he has placed poison upon it and Julia dies immediately. Bosola, who witnesses all this, comes out of his hiding; he demands for his reward and the Cardinal tells him that he will receive it only once he kills Antonio and helps the Cardinal remove Julia's body. Bosola however decides to find Antonio and protect him and also avenge the Duchess' death.

Meanwhile, Antonio decides to go to the Cardinal's chamber and resolve the matter once and for all. In order to dispose Julia's body, Cardinal tells all the courtiers not to be present around the chamber on the pretext that having too many people around may disturb Ferdinand. He also tells them not to come near the Chamber even if they hear noises. The Cardinal then plans to kill Bosola too. Bosola overhears this. The next scene is very dramatic. Ferdinand enters the Chamber claiming to strangle, Bosola thinks its for him. In the meantime, Antonio enters but Bosola, thinking that they are coming to kill him, stabs Antonio. He regrets it immediately. Before Antonio dies, Bosola tells him what has happened to the Duchess.

Bosola then goes to kill the Cardinal. The Cardinal calls out for help; the courtiers hear it but they remember the Cardinal's orders and stay put. Bosola stabs him shouting that he is doing so to avenge the Duchess' death. Ferdinand enters, unable to comprehend the situation, he first attacks Cardinal and then kills Bosola. Before he dies, Bosola kills Ferdinand and relates all the happenings to the courtiers who come in after listening to the commotion. They all die; the only surviving member of the Duchess' family is the first son. The courtiers including Delio vow to give the boy a good life as a tribute to his father and mother.

We come to the end of this module. Hope you got a good insight into the plot of the play. In the next video we discuss the important themes and characters in the play.