The Duchess of Malfi

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JOHN WEBSTER

John Webster led a relatively obscure life. The exact dates of his birth and death are unknown. He was born in London, probably in 1580, to Elizabeth Coates and his father, also named John Webster, who was a tailor in London. It's thought that Webster attended the reputable Merchant Taylor's School, though it is uncertain whether he did or not. He began his career collaborating with other playwrights, writing *The Malcontent* with John Marston in 1604 and *Westward Ho* with Thomas Dekker in 1607. In 1605 or 1606, Webster married Sara Peniall, a 17-year-old girl who was seven months pregnant at the time. They had several children. Little else is known about Webster, though we know from a reference to him in the past tense in a 1634 publication that he was dead by that year.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Webster wrote *The Duchess of Malfi* ten years into the Jacobean era in England and only a few years before Shakespeare's death. The play is based on an Italian novella, which in turn is based on true historical events. The real Duchess, Giovanna d'Aragona, married Antonio Beccadelli in secret and bore him three children. She was murdered by her brothers, one of whom was a Cardinal, in 1510. Webster's main changes to the true story are that Antonio didn't die until a few years after the Duchess' death, and Bosola's repentance and ultimate betrayal and murder of the brothers is fictionalized, as the two were never accused or killed.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The Duchess of Malfi takes most of its plot from *The Palace of Pleasure* by William Painter, which is the translation of an adaptation of an Italian novella. Webster is known for his play *The White Devil*, which is also set in Roman Catholic Italy. *The Duchess of Malfi* contains echoes of other Elizabethan revenge tragedies, such as Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus* and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, *Coriolanus*, and *King Lear*. Webster also references Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Tragedy of the Duchess of Malfi
- **When Written:** 1612-13
- **Where Written:** London, England
- **When Published:** 1623
- **Literary Period:** Jacobean Drama
- **Genre:** Tragedy
- **Setting:** Roman Catholic Italy: Amalfi, Rome, Loreto, and Milan
- **Climax:** The Duchess is killed / Antonio, Duke Ferdinand, the Cardinal, and Bosola all kill each other
- **Antagonist:** Duke Ferdinand and the Cardinal

EXTRA CREDIT

Based on Fact. The principal story of *The Duchess of Malfi* is factual. Giovanna d'Aragona was married at age twelve in 1490. Five months after her husband's death (in 1499) Giovanna gave birth to their son and became the regent of Amalfi since the duke (her son) was an infant. Antonio Beccadelli was hired to run her estate, and the two secretly married, had children, and faced the wrath of Giovanna's brothers, one of whom was truly a Cardinal.

The King's Men. *The Duchess of Malfi* was first performed by the King's Men, the theatre company to which Shakespeare belonged that performed all of his work. Though Shakespeare himself might not have acted in the first production of *The Duchess of Malfi*, the production was filled with his friends and peers. Richard Burbage, for example, who first played famous characters such as Hamlet and King Lear, was the first to play Duke Ferdinand. Henry Condell, one of the editors and publishers of Shakespeare's First Folio, first played the Cardinal.

PLOT SUMMARY

The Duchess of Malfi takes place in Roman Catholic Italy, which English audiences at the time when the play was written would have associated with corruption. It begins in the palace of the Duchess, a young widow and the ruler of the Italian town of Amalfi. Her steward, Antonio, has just returned from a visit to the French court, and Bosola, a murderer and former employee of her brother, the Cardinal, has just returned from his punishment. Soon Duke Ferdinand, the Duchess's other brother, enters with his whole retinue. In a private conversation with his friend Delio, Antonio reveals that though the Cardinal and Duke appear good, they are in fact jealous, conniving, and despicable. He adds that though her brothers are horrible, the Duchess is noble, temperate, beautiful, and intelligent.

Even though the Duchess is still young and beautiful, her brothers do not want her to remarry. They hope to both preserve their honor by ensuring for ongoing sexual purity, *and* to eventually inherit her fortune by forcing her to remain a

widow. In order to make sure they have their way, Ferdinand gets Bosola a position on the Duchess's estate and hires him to be his spy. Bosola doesn't want to be a spy, but he feels that it's his duty to obey the duke, even if doing so makes him corrupt. Ferdinand and the Cardinal then confront the Duchess with a rehearsed speech instructing her not to remarry. She agrees not to, but as soon as her brothers leave, she tells her maid Cariola that she will marry in secret. The Duchess then woos Antonio, inverting the traditional male and female roles in courtship. The two marry in secret.

Nine months later, the Duchess is pregnant with Antonio's child. Bosola, still spying for Ferdinand, notes the signs of her pregnancy and plans to give her apricots as a test, because they are known to induce labor. The Duchess eats the apricots and goes into labor, creating chaos in her palace. To try to maintain the secret, Antonio and the Duchess give out a story that the Duchess has fallen ill with some **disease**. Antonio confronts Bosola to ask if the apricots were **poisoned**. Bosola denies the accusation, but after the confrontation he notices that Antonio ha accidentally dropped a piece of paper: it is a horoscope for a baby, which provides Bosola with concrete evidence that the Duchess had a child. He decides to send the paper in a letter to the Duchess's brothers in Rome. When Ferdinand and the Cardinal learn that the Duchess has disobeyed them, they are infuriated, thinking their noble **blood** has been tainted (and Ferdinand seems also to be overwhelmed with anger by the idea that the Duchess has been having sex at all), but they decide to wait to find out who the father is before taking action.

A few years later, the Duchess has had two more of Antonio's children. Ferdinand, who learned of the children from Bosola, decides to confront the Duchess in her bedchamber. Ferdinand sneaks in and frightens the Duchess, giving her a knife and suggesting that she kill herself. She admits that she is married, and he becomes enraged. He says that she has lost her reputation, and he swears that he will never see her again in his life. Antonio and the Duchess make a plan to flee: the Duchess announces that Antonio has been using his position to steel from her, and has been fired, as an excuse to get him out of Amalfi. After Bosola privately defends Antonio to the Duchess as being honorable and worthy, the Duchess confides in Bosola that Antonio is innocent and is in fact her husband. She plans to flee to join him.

Back in Rome, the Cardinal and Ferdinand find out from Bosola about the Duchess's plan. The Cardinal then formally banishes the Duchess, Antonio, and their children. Ferdinand invites Antonio to reconcile, but Antonio believes this is a trap, so instead of accepting the invitation he flees with his eldest son to Milan. After he leaves, Bosola reenters in disguise and takes the Duchess and her other two children captive under orders from the brothers.

The brothers imprison the Duchess in her Amalfi palace. There, because Ferdinand has sworn never to see the Duchess, confronts her in the dark. He gives her his hand to hold, but then reveals that it is the hand of a dead man in order to convince her that Antonio is dead. He then plays a trick with silhouettes to convince the Duchess that her children are also dead, at which point the Duchess wants to die. Ferdinand reveals to Bosola that he plans to torture her by exposing her to madmen from the local insane asylum. While Bosola feels bad for the Duchess and dislikes that he is participating in her torture, he continues to obey the duke.

In her prison, the madmen confront the Duchess and Cariola. Bosola then enters, disguised as an old man, and he tells the Duchess that he's going to kill her. The Duchess maintains her composure and is unafraid, but executioners enter and strangle her, her two children, and Cariola. Though Ferdinand has no pity for the children, he immediately begins to feel remorse when he sees the Duchess's dead body. Ferdinand becomes maddened by guilt, and Bosola also acknowledges feeling a guilty conscience. Ferdinand then condemns Bosola for following his orders, and refuses to pay him for his work. After Ferdinand has departed, the Duchess wakes up, but only long enough for Bosola to tell her that her husband is still alive; she dies for real almost immediately after waking up.

Now in Milan, Antonio doesn't yet know his wife's fate. He decides to wager everything and confront the Cardinal in person in an attempt to defuse the situation. Ferdinand, meanwhile, has been diagnosed with lycanthropia (werewolf disease), and he begins acting like a madman, even attacking his shadow, clearly plagued by guilt. The Cardinal wants his involvement in the murder to remain secret, and he instructs Bosola to murder Antonio. A woman named Julia, with whom the Cardinal has been having an affair, becomes smitten with Bosola, and he convinces Julia to try and get a confession out of the Cardinal. Julia confronts the Cardinal and finds out his secret, so he forces her to kiss a poisoned book, thereby killing her. Bosola reveals to the Cardinal that he has overseen this murder and the Cardinal's confession. He agrees to help the Cardinal in return for payment, but in fact this is a trick. He decides that he will do everything in his power to save Antonio and get revenge on the brothers.

In the Cardinal's palace, the Cardinal tells all of his courtiers to stay away from his room, no matter what they hear, even if he tests them with screams and shouts. Bosola sneaks into the palace, and overhears that the Cardinal plans to kill him after he helps the Cardinal. Soon after, Antonio sneaks into the palace in his effort to find the Cardinal and end their quarrel. However, in the darkness, Bosola accidentally stabs Antonio, mistaking him for one of the brothers. Antonio lives just long enough for Bosola to inform him that the Duchess and two of their children have been murdered, at which point Antonio no longer wants to live. Bosola goes to find and kill the Cardinal, and when the Cardinal starts screaming for help, no one comes because of his instruction that they stay away. In the chaos,

Bosola stabs the Cardinal twice. Ferdinand then enters, and, mistaking, his brother for the devil, stabs both the Cardinal and Bosola. Bosola then stabs Ferdinand, who uses his dying words to say that our deaths are caused by our own actions. While Bosola explains what happened, the Cardinal dies, and after Bosola makes a final speech, he dies as well. After all of the deaths, Delio enters with Antonio's son, announces his intention to help the son to receive his proper inheritance, and ends the play.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

The Duchess of Malfi – The Duchess, a young widow and the ruler of the Italian town of Amalfi, is the intelligent, kind, virtuous sister of the Cardinal and the twin of Duke Ferdinand. Her brothers have prohibited her from remarrying because, they argue, her remarriage would ruin her honor and the honor of the family. The Duchess also seems to understand that her brothers have more nefarious aims, such as ensuring their own chances at inheriting her fortune, though her understanding is implied mainly by her actions rather than her words. Independent and defiant of her brothers' wishes, the Duchess decides to secretly marry her steward, Antonio, for love, and has three children with him. She keeps both the marriage and the children secret because she understands the threat her brothers would pose to her family should they find out. And, in fact, once her brothers do find out the Duchess seems almost completely unable to protect herself or her children. Perhaps because she is a woman, she lacks her brother's political power, and they quickly banish and split up her family. They then imprison, torture, and strangle both her and her children. Through all of these trials, the Duchess remains virtuous and good, and she faces both torture and death with bravery and dignity.

Ferdinand, Duke of Calabria – Duke Ferdinand is the brother of the Cardinal and the twin brother of the Duchess. He doesn't want his widowed sister to remarry, in part because of his pride and his greed for her wealth, but also because he harbors his own incestuous desires for her. It is Ferdinand who places Bosola in the Duchess's employment and then hires Bosola to spy on her activities. When rumors reach Ferdinand of the Duchess possibly giving birth to children (and thus also having sex), his anger is so overwhelming that his violent outbursts about the horrible ways he plans to revenge himself on her are too much even for the Cardinal. When he finds out that she has secretly married Antonio and had three children, Ferdinand acts decisively: he has her imprisoned, tortured, and killed. He seems to enjoy the torture, and act as if the torture he makes her endure is just payback for torture that *she* has made *him* endure, though the clear implication is that the "torture" he experienced was his sexual jealousy of the Duchess. Upon seeing the Duchess's dead body, however, Ferdinand almost immediately feels remorse, and his guilt eventually drives him insane. In his madness he stabs the Cardinal, and is killed by Bosola.

The Cardinal – The Cardinal is the brother of Duke Ferdinand and the Duchess. Though he is a religious figure, he is in fact just as immoral and despicable as his brother, facts made clear by his attempt to bribe his way into being pope, the fact that Bosola once killed a man on his orders, and the affair he carries on with Julia, Castruccio's wife. Like Ferdinand, he tries to prevent the Duchess from remarrying in order to preserve his sense of his family's purity and honor as well as his access to the Duchess's wealth. Unlike the wild Ferdinand, though, the Cardinal is careful, calculating, and controlled: he refuses to interact personally with the spy Bosola, and he threatens to walk away when Ferdinand becomes too overt about his plans for revenge on the Duchess. While it's never explained whether the Cardinal is upset by Ferdinand's violence or just trying to shut Ferdinand up in order to keep themselves looking clean while they plan their revenge, the fact that the Cardinal is entirely capable of murder – he later poisons Julia, after all, when she learns his secrets – suggests that it is the latter. Though he is aware of the religious consequences of his actions, he wields religion only as a tool to maintain his power. He never seems to feel true guilt for his actions, and there is a sense of poetic justice in the fact that ultimately the Cardinal dies after being stabbed by Bosola, the spy he used but refused to engage with or even pay, and his own brother, Ferdinand, who by the end of the play is guilt ridden and insane.

Antonio Bologna – Antonio is the Duchess's steward, and very capably runs the Duchess's estate. Despite the fact that he is neither wealthy nor high-born, the Duchess considers him to be a "complete" man, and the two of them secretly marry. He clearly reveres the Duchess – he is marrying for love, not just money. He is also knowledgeable about people: even early in the play he knows that Ferdinand and the Cardinal are duplicitous and murderous. Despite his knowledge of their characters, though, he proves entirely incapable of protecting his family from Ferdinand or the Cardinal. And while that failure seems to stem from his lower-class status and lack of political power of any sort, and while Antonio never seems anything less than morally good, his plan to sneak into the Cardinals home at the end of the play in order to try to convince the Cardinal to make amends also seems incredible naïve. During this effort, he is accidentally killed by Bosola, who mistakes Antonio for someone else.

Daneil de Bosola – Bosola is the spy planted by Duke Ferdinand as the stable master at the Duchess' estate. He is a man who is used to doing the dirty work for others: before the events of the play he spent time in jail for murdering a man on the orders of the Cardinal. He is also aware that the men who do the dirty work seldom actually get the rewards promised

them, as the Cardinal refuses to speak or be seen with him. Even so, though he feels guilty for all of his actions – and does not even want to become a spy when Duke Ferdinand offers him the payment to become one – he feels that it is his duty to obey the Duke and accepts that to follow orders he must become corrupt. After he participates in the torture of the Duchess, though, his guilt becomes so great, and Ferdinand's refusal to pay him for his services so outrageous, that he switches sides and plans to help Antonio and kill both Ferdinand and the Cardinal. That his plans go awry and he accidentally kills Antonio may suggest that it is not so simple to suddenly become good and moral, but he does willingly sacrifice himself and badly wound the Cardinal and kill Ferdinand.

Delio – Delio is Antonio's friend and is of the same social class. Totally loyal, he is privy to Antonio and the Duchess' secret marriage, and he looks after Antonio's sole surviving son at the end of the play. In a break from the Shakespearean tradition of giving a play's closing lines to the highest-ranking character, Webster gives Delio the play's final lines. Delio is also a former suitor of Julia.

Julia – Julia is Castruccio's wife and the Cardinal's mistress. Julia is the play's stereotypical fickle female, with constantly changing affections. Near the end of the play, she becomes enamored with Bosola, who then uses her to get the Cardinal to admit his involvement in the Duchess's murder. When the Cardinal finds out that Julia betrayed him, he kills her by making her kiss a **poison** covered book, but not before Julia reveals that she betrayed him to Bosola.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Castruccio – Castruccio is an old Italian lord, and his name is a pun on the word castrated. This pun is furthered by the fact that Castruccio's wife, Julia, is having an affair with the Cardinal.

Marquis of Pescara – A soldier and courtier in Ferdinand's court. Of all the courtiers, he alone seems to have some sense of honor and independence of mind.

Count Malateste –A Roman courtier, friend of Ferdinand.

Silvio – A courtier at Amalfi.

Cariola – The Duchess's waiting-maid. She is loyal to the Duchess throughout, and dies for it.

Old Lady – A courtier.

Roderigo – A courtier at Amalfi attending the Duchess.

Grisolan – A courtier at Amalfi attending the Duchess.

Doctor – A Doctor to Ferdinand who diagnoses the Duke with the **disease** Lycanthropia.

Madmen – Several insane people sent by Ferdinand to torment the Duchess, though she actually finds that they distract her from the torture of her thoughts that plague her when there is silence.

Executioners –The executioners work for Ferdinand and carry out the murders of the Duchess, her children, and Cariola.

Pilgrims – Witnesses to the banishment of the Duchess and Antonio.

Servants – Throughout the play there are several servants, some of whom are killed.

Children – Though they are not named and do not speak, the Duchess's three children appear on stage a number of times. The two younger children wind up murdered, but the oldest survives and under Delio's care seems likely to inherit his mother's wealth and lands.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

POLITICS AND CORRUPTION

The Duchess of Malfi takes place in Roman Catholic Italy, which English Renaissance audiences would have associated with the stereotype of "sophisticated corruption." The play begins with Antonio's speech about his recent return from the French court; he praises France and offers the play's notion of an ideal royal state. The French king, Antonio reports, in order to bring everything to order, has rid himself of all flatterers and "infamous persons" because he rightly understands that a court "is like a common fountain." Usually goodness flows, but if it is **poisoned** near the head (i.e., the monarch), death spreads throughout the entire fountain (the entire nation). The French court is especially good because there is a council unafraid to inform the King of the "corruption of the times." Some advisors tell rulers what to do, but in France the advisors tell the King what he should foresee. It's ideal that France is filled with nobles willing to speak against corruption and give genuine advice to rulers.

Webster juxtaposes the ideal court of France with the political situation in Italy, whose corruption is exemplified by Duke Ferdinand and his brother the Cardinal, who deal illicitly throughout the play. Both men make efforts to appear temperate, courtly, and honorable, but inside, they are both evil and corrupt. The Cardinal, for example, lays elaborate plots against anyone he is jealous of or doesn't like, and he surrounds himself with flatterers, spies, and "a thousand such political monsters." He is so corrupt as to have attempted to bribe his

way into becoming Pope. Likewise, Duke Ferdinand is perverse and corrupt. He is duplicitous and relies heavily on spies. Delio even describes the Duke as a spider and the law as his web: he uses the laws of the country as a means of security for himself and as a weapon against his enemies. It is through spies that the two find out about the Duchess' marriage and children, and through continual abuse of power that they break her family apart and ultimately slaughter them.

The Duchess of Malfi makes an argument about ideal government and the dangers (both physical and spiritual) of corruption. Though there are momentary gains and successes achieved by the brothers' plans, ultimately the play ends with the slaughter of nearly everyone involved in their web of influence. This ending suggests that corruption yields disastrous results; even beyond death, corruption can lead to damnation. This point is made explicitly when Bosola tells Ferdinand that taking a higher position in exchange for spying on the Duchess would make him a traitor and Ferdinand a corruptor, thereby leading both of them to hell.

Finally, the death of all of the play's major figures of political power leaves a vacuum at the end of the play; there is no new leader to take over. To show this, the play's final lines, often reserved for the highest-ranking character, are spoken by a mere courier. Ferdinand and the Cardinal's positions aren't filled, but are merely left vacant at the play's end. Thus political corruption and duplicitous behavior has the potential to lead to dire personal and religious consequences, and possibly to the collapse of government itself.

LOVE AND MALE AUTHORITY

The Duchess of Malfi explores love and male authority in a traditional society in which women are subjected to the wills of men. The Cardinal's illicit relationship with Julia provides an example of a woman successfully controlled by a man. Julia is depicted according to the stereotype of a fickle woman, while the Cardinal is the constant figure of authority. Webster even uses animal imagery to describe their relationship: the Cardinal is metaphorically a falconer who tames Julia, the falcon. Later, when Julia becomes infatuated with Bosola, she begs for him to tell her to do something so that she can prove that she loves him—clearly, she understands love to be an experience controlled by men.

The Cardinal and Ferdinand also try to exert their male authority over the Duchess. In order to preserve her honor and reputation (supposedly) and to take her fortune, the brothers seek to prevent her from remarrying. They deliver a rehearsed argument, in which they characterize marriage as a prison and forbid her from marrying again. Once she does so behind their backs, they use all of their power to correct the situation and get revenge on her. We should also note that Ferdinand's initial argument for the Duchess not to marry has undertones of incest.

The Duchess, however, inverts the pattern of male authority over love. Refusing to remain a widow, she covertly goes against her brothers' order and marries for love. What's more, she does so outside of the normal confines of courtship in which the man pursues the woman; in part due to her high birth, she is "forced to woo" Antonio. This marriage between Antonio and the Duchess is figured as a true partnership; the Duchess married Antonio purely out of love, in spite of custom and opposition, as he had no special status or nobility.

Throughout the play, the Duchess continues to defy male authority and assert her own agency, for love, for the sake of her children, and for her own self interest. Even facing her own execution, she remains proud and unafraid, and she undercuts the power of the men executing her by ensuring that her body will be cared for by women after her death. Even so, the Duchess's final, dying thought is that her husband is still alive. This gestures towards the fact that male authority is still powerful, despite the Duchess's assertions of her own power, for which she is being executed. The Duchess, then, can be seen both as a proud example of a woman exerting her will and a tragic example of society's refusal to relinquish the power of male authority.

GUILT, DEATH, AND SUFFERING

Put simply, this play is filled with death and suffering. In a tragedy, the deaths of most of the main characters are pretty much guaranteed, but Webster achieves a spectacular level of horror with the way that characters are killed and the tortures they undergo beforehand. In light of the Duchess being subjected to imprisonment, torture, and execution, it's notable that death itself doesn't frighten her. The Duchess possesses composure and dignity in the moments leading up to her death, even to the point of asking for her violent death in order to put her to sleep. In this way, death is shown as an escape that is preferable to a life of suffering. Death, no matter how gruesome, leads to "excellent company in the other world," and it frees the Duchess from the control and torture of her brothers. We can also note that the Duchess' death showcases the play's exploration of the permanence of death, as an echo rises from her grave in an attempt to tell Antonio of her fate.

While Ferdinand and the Cardinal are directly responsible for much of the suffering and death in the play (including and beyond what's mentioned above), the suffering they create does not lead to satisfaction or pleasure. Instead, it leads to guilt, as well as to more suffering and more death. Ferdinand, for example, begins to regret his actions immediately after seeing that the Duchess has died; he shows signs of guilt right away when he sees the Duchess' body. Soon this guilt progresses so far as to drive him mad. He acts so strangely that the doctor believes he has the **disease** of lycanthropia (that he is a werewolf), and at one point he starts attacking his own

shadow. He shows himself to be obsessed with the crime of the Duchess's death, saying to himself "Strangling is a very quiet death." Guilt, therefore, has the power to drive someone insane (and ultimately to his death).

As the Cardinal is a religious figure, his guilt (which, in a way, also leads him to death) is expressed in terms of faith instead of insanity. After killing Julia, he is plagued by guilt. He cries out, "Oh, my conscience!" and says that he would pray, but the devil is preventing him. Thus we see that guilt has the power to stop even a Catholic Cardinal from offering prayer. Since he cannot pray, he cannot be forgiven, and he later offers a brief soliloquy in which he explains that he has been thinking about hell, a symptom of his guilty conscience. The association with hell continues, as, in his insanity, Ferdinand becomes convinced that his brother is the devil, and he stabs the Cardinal. Guilt transforms a Cardinal into the devil and apparently indicates that he will go to hell. It's among the severe consequences of murder and evil.

Finally, Bosola is in a unique situation, as he is forced into killing and experiences guilt throughout the play. In all of his actions, he feels guilty, but this guilt is overwhelmed by a sense of duty to the Duke, emphasizing the play's suggestion that guilt or preemptive guilt is not enough to deter murder or bad behavior. Ultimately, though, guilt and desire for revenge take precedence over duty. Overwhelmed by guilt for the suffering he has caused, Bosola seeks to right his wrongs. Since he is guilty, however, he also suffers the fate of the diabolical brothers.

RELIGION AND SIN

Sin—and the religious consequences of sin—run rampant in *The Duchess of Malfi*. The tragic forces of the play's major plotline are primarily driven by sin: it is because they are greedy for her fortune and prideful of their noble **blood** that the Cardinal and the Duke do not wish the Duchess to remarry. Ferdinand also exhibits a strange incestuous desire for his sister (another glaring sin), which leads in part to his horrible treatment of her. Ferdinand's rage, lust, pride, and greed all upset him to the point of deformity, and he shocks the Cardinal with the horrible things he talks about doing to punish the Duchess. But Ferdinand also believes that his and the Cardinal's sins are being avenged by heaven through the Duchess. Further, his last lines before dying echo and reinforce the sentiment that we are punished and suffer fates according to our sins: "Whether we fall by ambition, blood, or lust, / Like diamonds we are cut with our own dust." These lines indicate that our own sins and our own actions are responsible for our downfalls.

The Cardinal is a religious figure, and most of the characters acknowledge the dangers of sin, the devil, and hell. Bosola knows, for example, that the devil makes sins look good and calls gracious whatever heaven calls vile. Likewise, the Cardinal at one point enters the stage carrying a religious book and, after murdering Julia, he ponders the nature of hell like a scholar and a believer. But despite this knowledge, most figures (especially the evil ones) are not deterred from sinning, even egregiously. Religion, then, is not presented as a force that prevents bad behavior.

The Duchess, we can note has a particularly conflicting view of religion. She is able to face death with such poise, in part, because she believes that she will meet greet people in her next life (i.e. in heaven). Her last spoken word is even "mercy." But during her life, she implies that certain religious practices or beliefs are mere superstition. When devising a plan for the Duchess to escape, Bosola suggests that she pretend to make a sacred pilgrimage. The Duchess thinks it is a good idea, but Cariola says that she should not "jest" with religion, and that it is better to avoid a fake pilgrimage. The Duchess doesn't take this advice seriously, calling Cariola a "superstitious fool."

Her brothers, though, recognize this tactic. The Cardinal says that she is making "religion her riding hood" to keep her from attention and trouble. Ferdinand's response is that it "damns her." He goes on to say that the more pure she pretends to be, given her devious intentions, the fouler she is actually being. In a strange way, this notion echoes the devil's means of profanity, which is accomplished by taking what heaven calls bad and making it good, and by inverting or twisting what is most pure and most holy. At the same time, we can note that the Cardinal uses his religious influence for immoral purposes. For example, he banishes the Duchess and Antonio in a formal ceremony at a religious shrine, thereby hypocritically doing exactly what he damned the Duchess for doing: using a religious exercise as a façade for personal gain.

Religion in this play, then, is generally acknowledged but ignored by its characters. Though the stakes of sin and mercy are real and high, and most characters acknowledge the dangers of sins, those sins simply prove too tempting for almost everyone in the play. While Webster sometimes shows religion to be a tool used by the suffering to find comfort, it's more commonly used by the powerful to seize or maintain power, and by the wicked to justify themselves and hide their terrible sins.

CLASS

The Duchess's marriage to Antonio is not just remarkable because she was the pursuer and because she married against her brothers' will. It is also remarkable because she married someone of a lower class. During their courtship, Antonio is careful not to appear to ambitious, which is considered dangerous for someone in a lower class. Further, in the marriage scene, the Duchess laments the misery of being high born, which forces her to woo because no one dares to woo her. Such a marriage would have been progressive and scandalous at the time. The significance

of this marriage is not lost on Bosola, another one of the play's lowerclassmen with upward mobility. When Bosola finds out about the marriage, he is stunned. He asks if in such an ambitious time, is there really a woman who would marry a man simply for his worth, without all of his wealth and honors. And when she confirms the marriage, Bosola launches into a speech about how praiseworthy the Duchess is for marrying Antonio, saying that she shows that some benefits in the world can still come from merit.

The marriage and Bosola's reaction to it, when paired with other details, suggest the play's treatment of class in general. First, we can note that Webster himself was not noble born; he was the son of a tailor. Next, we can note that Delio, a minor character and friend of Antonio (with whom he shares a social class), speaks the play's opening and closing lines. While Shakespeare, for example, often gave closing lines to the character of the highest status, Webster inverts this tradition, in part to emphasize the fact that most upper class characters have died. Class is shown, on the one hand, to be binding and restricting (as it is one of the reasons the marriage is so scandalous and ends so tragically), but Webster's play also suggests that class is fluid, that figures can rise and fall in status, and that true worth and merit should be given a greater value than birth, wealth, and social status.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

POISON

Antonio introduces the symbol of poison in the play's opening while making a political analogy about the ideal government, which, he says, should function like a fountain. Goodness should flow through the country, but if someone poisons the well then death and **disease** will spread. From this point forward, poisons serve as tools of the corrupt government and become symbols for corruption itself, for hidden threats, and for secrecy. The Cardinal, for example, tells Julia that his secrets are like lingering poisons that would slowly spread through her veins and cause her death. Once she gets the secrets out of him, the Cardinal then kills Julia by making her kiss a literally poisoned book.

DISEASE

References to **disease**, both figurative and literal, are made throughout the play. In an early speech, Bosola seems to indicate that disfigurement and disease signify a perversion and animalization of humanity. Two clear examples of the way disease is used are the Duchess's pregnancy and Ferdinand's Lycanthopia. When the Duchess is pregnant, it's her morning sickness that alerts Bosola to her pregnancy. And when the Duke is driven insane by his guilt, it manifests in what the Doctor diagnoses as Lycanthropia (werewolf syndrome). In both cases, disease is an outward manifestation of some inward guilt, sin, or secret.

BLOOD

In *The Duchess of Malfi*, **blood** works classically as a multifaceted symbol. First and most simply, blood symbolizes violence. When an act is particularly violent or cruel it is described as bloody. Blood is also used to refer to both status and family; it represents rank and lineage. Thus when Ferdinand and the Cardinal kill the Duchess, they are spilling the noble blood of their own blood (i.e. family member). Finally, blood is used by Ferdinand to represent passion when he says, "Whether we fall by ambition, blood, or lust, / Like diamonds we are cut with our own dust." In the Renaissance it was common to believe that people were ruled by the four humors, all of which run through the blood (blood itself was also a humor). Ferdinand's dying words contain multiple meanings for the word blood, including family and violence, but they also seem to evoke notions of passion and the four humors.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin Classics edition of *The Duchess of Malfi* published in 2015.

Act 1, Scene 1 Quotes

A prince's court
Is like a common fountain, whence should flow
Pure silver drops in general; but if't chance
Some cursed example poison't near the head,
Death and diseases through the whole land spread.
And what is't makes this blessèd government
But a most provident council, who dare freely
Inform him the corruption of the times.

Related Characters: Antonio Bologna (speaker), Delio

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 1.1.11-18

Explanation and Analysis

Antonio speaks these lines at the beginning of the play while describing to Delio his recent trip to the French court. His praise of the properly functioning French court sets up an implicit comparison with the Italian court, which is known to be corrupt. He compares a court to a fountain, saying that goodness should flow throughout a country. However, the structure of a government is such that if it is poisoned near the head (the monarch), then disease, death, and despair will spread throughout the land. This poisoning near the head could come from someone whispering in the ear of the ruler, which suggests early on the way that poison will be used to represent secrets in the play.

Part of what makes a government successful, Antonio argues, is a council that is unafraid to speak freely and to inform the monarch of corruption. In contrast to this ideal court, we'll see that the Italian court is filled with flatterers, and the corruption sprouts directly from the very top of the fountain itself. These lines can be seen as Webster's assessment of ideal and flawed governments.

> With all your divinity do but direct me the way to it. I have known many travel far for it, and yet return as arrant knaves
> as they went forth, because they carried themselves always along with them.

Related Characters: Daneil de Bosola (speaker), The Cardinal

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.1.40-43

Explanation and Analysis

Bosola says this to the Cardinal after the Cardinal ignores and dismisses him. The Cardinal tells Bosola to go become honest, and Bosola responds with this remark, saying that he wishes the Cardinal, with all his divinity, would show him how to properly become honest. Given what we learn about the Cardinal's despicable character, this appeal to his divinity might be read as sarcastic.

Bosola goes on to say that he has seen many that went on long journeys seeking to become honest, but they always come back just as bad as when they left, since throughout the entire trip they always carried themselves with them. This seems to suggest that Bosola believes that a person's true character is essentially set in stone. Bosola reasons that spending time with a knave makes one a knave, so, if you already are a knave, just by spending time with yourself you're liable to stay one. Bosola's thoughts on the immobility of character might also be applied to class immobility, which he struggles with in the play.

> Some fellows, they say, are possessed with the devil, but this great fellow were able to possess the greatest devil and make him worse.

Related Characters: Daneil de Bosola (speaker), Antonio Bologna, Delio, The Cardinal

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.1.44-46

Explanation and Analysis

The Cardinal ignores Bosola and then leaves, so Bosola says this line to Antonio and Delio. He says that while some men are possessed by the devil, the Cardinal is so foul that he could possess the greatest devil and make that devil worse. Here Bosola hints at the Cardinal's evil nature hidden beneath the appearance of being a holy figure. Later in the play, Bosola will say that spies are little devils, so by accusing the Cardinal of possessing devils, he alludes to the Cardinal being corrupt and having many spies. That the Cardinal can make the devils worse also suggests an unparalleled magnitude of evil, which will be proved later in the play, as the Cardinal is even less able to feel remorse than Ferdinand.

> This foul melancholy
> Will poison all his goodness, for, I'll tell you,
> If too immoderate sleep be truly said
> To be an inward rust unto the soul,
> It then doth follow want of action
> Breeds all black malcontents, and their close rearing,
> Like moths in cloth, do hurt for want of wearing.

Related Characters: Antonio Bologna (speaker), The Duchess of Malfi, Ferdinand, Duke of Calabria, The Cardinal, Daneil de Bosola, Delio

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 1.1.74-80

Explanation and Analysis

Antonio speaks these lines to Delio at the end of Act 1 Scene 1 after Bosola's exit. Bosola is frustrated with the Cardinal and with the lack of payment for Bosola's years of service, and he is therefore melancholy. Antonio comments that Bosola's bad mood will poison all of his goodness, just as a lack of sleep gets turned inward and hurts the soul. Idleness and lack of action, he says, generate bad behavior, just like moths ruin cloth if you don't wear it. The lines are essentially an elaboration on the phrase "idle hands are the devil's plaything," where external factors like sleep, lack of action, and a sad demeanor propagate inward like a poison and create bad effects.

Interestingly, in Act 1 Scene 3, Ferdinand actually suggests that the *reverse* is true while trying to convince the Duchess not to remarry. In that moment, Ferdinand argues that bad thoughts and feelings are reflected externally on the face (as opposed to Antonio's assertion here that sad or bad feelings poison inward).

It's also worth noting that this speech is somewhat stylistically unique ends with one of the play's few rhyming couplets.

Act 1, Scene 2 Quotes

❝ Believe my experience: that realm is never long in quiet where
the ruler is a soldier.

Related Characters: Castruccio (speaker), Ferdinand, Duke of Calabria

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.2.20-21

Explanation and Analysis

These short lines are spoken by Castruccio in a scene during which Duke Ferdinand is talking to his courtiers about the merits and pitfalls of going to war. Castruccio says that it's fitting that a soldier might rise to become a prince, but not that a prince should descend to be a soldier, and that lands with soldiers as rulers are never in peacetime long. In general, the play is much more concerned with the battlefield of love than the field of war, but these lines might be read as a continuation of Webster's criticism of certain practices in government and his assertion that monarchs should not be soldiers.

❝ Some such flashes superficially hang on him, for form; but observe his inward character: he is a melancholy churchman. The spring in his face is nothing but the engendering of toads. Where he is jealous of any man he lays worse plots for them than ever was imposed on Hercules, for he strews in his way flatterers, panders, intelligencers, atheists, and a thousand such political monsters.

Related Characters: Antonio Bologna (speaker), Delio, The Cardinal

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.2.70-76

Explanation and Analysis

While Ferdinand and his courtiers continue discussing war and horses (presumably), Antonio steps aside to tell Delio about the Cardinal. Delio notes to Antonio that the Cardinal seems like a "brave fellow," but in the excerpt Antonio assures Delio that any appearances are merely superficial. The Cardinal, he says, tries to appear good, but inwardly, he is melancholy, jealous, scheming, conniving, and despicable. He surrounds himself with flatterers, panderers, spies, and, even though he is a Cardinal, he consorts with atheists and other political monsters.

The Cardinal, then, is the exact opposite of the idealized court in France. From the first description of the Cardinal we learn that he is calculating and he strives always to conceal his true inner nature. We also learn that he relies heavily on spies. At hearing these lines, audiences would have their suspicions confirmed that the Italian court in the play is corrupt. We can note early on how important it is to distinguish outward appearance from inward character, something the play continues to explore.

❝ The Duke there? A most perverse and turbulent nature;
What appears in him mirth is merely outside.
If he laugh heartily, it is to laugh
All honesty out of fashion.
...
He speaks with others' tongues, and hears men's suits
With others' ears; will seem to sleep o'th' bench
Only to entrap offenders in their answers;
Dooms men to death by information,
Rewards by hearsay.

Related Characters: Antonio Bologna (speaker), Delio, Ferdinand, Duke of Calabria

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.2.82-89

Explanation and Analysis

After Antonio explains that, despite his appearances, the Cardinal is despicable, Delio asks Antonio to tell him about Duke Ferdinand. Antonio responds that, like his brother (the Cardinal), the happiness and goodness that appear in Duke Ferdinand are merely a false exterior or façade. Inside, Ferdinand has a "perverse and turbulent nature." Like his brother, he is extremely corrupt. He uses secret messengers and spies, entraps whomever possible, gives death sentences based on knowledge gained from spies, and deals in rumors. Delio goes on to compare Ferdinand to a spider; he uses the law as his home and his weapon simultaneously. From this point forward we know the brothers' despicable natures, and their ability to conceal those natures. However, throughout the play we will see them begin to unravel, as the evil underneath becomes more and more visible.

Act 1, Scene 3 Quotes

❝ You live in a rank pasture here, i'th' court.
There is a kind of honey-dew that's deadly:
'Twill poison your fame. Look to't. Be not cunning,
For they whose faces do belie their hearts
Are witches ere they arrive at twenty years,
Ay, and give the devil suck.
...
Your darkest actions - nay, your privat'st thoughts –
Will come to light.

Related Characters: Ferdinand, Duke of Calabria (speaker), The Duchess of Malfi

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 1.3.218-228

Explanation and Analysis

Ferdinand speaks these lines to the Duchess while he and the Cardinal are convincing (or ordering) the Duchess not to remarry. He says that the court is like a "rank pasture' where she lives, and that there is a kind of fruit that will poison her fame, meaning her reputation. Rank here suggests high social status, and the word hints at its other meaning (disgusting), which he will use later to describe the Duchess. He instructs her to be careful, since people whose faces try to conceal false hearts become contorted and turn to witches, who then "give the devil suck." This gruesome image is notably sexual, which hints at Ferdinand's incestuous desire.

He goes on to make the argument against internal/external dissonance even more explicit, saying that no matter what she does to conceal it, her darkest actions and most private thoughts will come to light. In one sense, this is a reaffirmation of Ferdinand's point that cunning in the heart is shown on the face; what is visible outside betrays what's on the inside, so her secrets will become known. But it is also a controlling imposition of authority over the Duchess, in which Ferdinand essentially forbids her from having any privacy.

❝ The misery of us that are born great!
We are forced to woo because none dare woo us;
And, as a tyrant doubles with his words,
And fearfully equivocates, so we
Are forced to express our violent passions
In riddles and in dreams, and leave the path
Of simple virtue, which was never made
To seem the thing it is not.
...
Make not your heart so dead a piece of flesh
To fear more than to love me. Sir, be confident.
What is't distracts you? This is flesh and blood, sir;
'Tis not the figure, cut in alabaster,
Kneels at my husband's tomb.

Related Characters: The Duchess of Malfi (speaker), Antonio Bologna

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 1.3.350-364

Explanation and Analysis

Immediately after being forbidden from remarrying, the Duchess begins subtly flirting with Antonio. The two discuss her will and the institution of marriage, and slowly it becomes clear that she is wooing him covertly with puns and double meanings. Here, the Duchess expresses her frustration that, since she is noble born, she is forced to woo Antonio, because he doesn't dare to woo her.

Having to invert the traditional courtship roles, she is forced

to mask her words, equivocate, and express herself in riddles as opposed to direct proclamations of love. This frustrates the Duchess, so she abandons it, and says outright that she loves Antonio and wants him to be her husband. She goes on to give Antonio confidence and simultaneously humanize herself by instructing him to be confident and love her more than he fears her noble status. She reminds him that she is flesh and blood, not just a stone statue forever kneeling at her husband's tomb; this implies that she is the same as Antonio—since she is human just as he is—and that she, as a human being, is free to remarry, not forever doomed to be a widow.

Act 2, Scene 1 Quotes

What thing is in this outward form of man
To be beloved? We account it ominous
If nature do produce a colt or lamb,
A fawn or goat, in any limb resembling
A man, and fly from't as a prodigy.
Man stands amazed to see his deformity
In any other creature but himself.

Related Characters: Daneil de Bosola (speaker), Old Lady, Castruccio

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 2.1.45-51

Explanation and Analysis

Bosola says these lines after making fun of Castruccio and making fun of an Old Lady for wearing cosmetics. He ruminates on the disgusting nature of man, asking what in our outward form should be appreciated or liked. In this way, he continues the play's exploration of interior and exterior by noting that when we see anything resembling a human in another animal, we think it is horrible—we're able to see our deformities, in other words, only in that which is external to ourselves. This isn't evidence that we aren't deformed, but rather evidence that we aren't inclined to see ourselves as we are. He goes on to note that human diseases are often named for animals, which blurs the lines between human and beast and foreshadows Ferdinand's belief that he is a werewolf towards the end of the play.

Act 2, Scene 4 Quotes

You may thank me, lady.
I have taken you off your melancholy perch,
Bore you upon my fist, and showed you game,
And let you fly at it. I pray thee, kiss me.
When thou wast with thy husband, thou wast watched
Like a tame elephant - still you are to thank me.

Related Characters: The Cardinal (speaker), Julia

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2.4.27-32

Explanation and Analysis

The Cardinal says these lines to Julia, his mistress and Castruccio's wife, in the privacy of his palace in Rome. If the Duchess inverts the traditional courtship dynamic between men and women, here the Cardinal reinforces it, playing on the common Renaissance trope in which the male is the tamer and the woman is a wild animal. Here the Cardinal figures Julia as a falcon and himself as a falconer (falcon tamer). In calling her a tame elephant he continues in this trope and also suggests that she may have been sexually frustrated before they started their affair. The Cardinal's adultery, despite the fact that he is a Cardinal, is another example of his duplicitous and despicable character.

Act 2, Scene 5 Quotes

I would have their bodies
Burnt in a coal-pit, with the ventage stopped,
That their curs'd smoke might not ascend to heaven;
Or dip the sheets they lie in in pitch or sulphur,
Wrap them in't, and then light them like a match;
Or else to boil their bastard to a cullis,
And give't his lecherous father to renew
The sin of his back.

Related Characters: Ferdinand, Duke of Calabria (speaker), The Duchess of Malfi, The Cardinal

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2.5.67-74

Explanation and Analysis

Ferdinand speaks these horrible lines to his brother the Cardinal after finding out that the Duchess has had an illegitimate child. His desire to control her and to preserve his own honor and bloodline is so extreme that he is thrown

into utter outrage, even to the point where the Cardinal continuously must ask him to calm down.

Here, Ferdinand offers a terrifying image of what he would to the Duchess for revenge: burn her and her lover in a coal pit with closed vents to prevent her from going to heaven, or dip their bed sheets in sulfur, wrap them up, and light them on fire, or boil the bastard child and give it to the father. These violent ravings, which contain small religious references, are indicative of Ferdinand's true character and his incestuous jealousy of his sister. His outbursts also show the way his carefully constructed façade begins to crack, as his interior begins to, according to the Cardinal, deform him.

Act 3, Scene 1 Quotes

Do you think that herbs or charms
Can force the will? Some trials have been made
In this foolish practice, but the ingredients
Were lenitive poisons, such as are of force
To make the patient mad; and straight the witch
Swears, by equivocation, they are in love.
The witchcraft lies in her rank blood.

Related Characters: Ferdinand, Duke of Calabria (speaker), The Duchess of Malfi, Daneil de Bosola

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 3.1.72-78

Explanation and Analysis

Ferdinand speaks these lines to Bosola after Bosola wonders if someone has used a love potion on the Duchess. Contrasting Bosola, Ferdinand does not believe in love potions. He says that some trials have been done, but in most cases it was discovered that the ingredients were poisons to drive someone into insanity and get them to think or mistakenly admit that they were in love. Ferdinand claims, on the other hand, that the Duchess doesn't need any witchcraft other than her rank blood. Rank here contains the dual meaning of status and disgusting, though the status implication is secondary here, as Ferdinand surely intends the negative connotation of the word. It's important to note, too, that the validity of superstition comes up throughout the play, and while Webster does not attempt to resolve the question, bringing up superstition usually foreshadows catastrophe.

Act 3, Scene 2 Quotes

Do I not dream? Can this ambitious age
Have so much goodness in't as to prefer
A man merely for worth, without these shadows
Of wealth and painted honours? Possible?

Related Characters: Daneil de Bosola (speaker), Antonio Bologna, The Duchess of Malfi

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3.2.276-279

Explanation and Analysis

This excerpt comes after Ferdinand has confronted the Duchess for having children, and the Duchess has pretended to fire Antonio to give him time to flee. The Duchess privately asks Bosola what he thinks of Antonio's fabricated crime, and Bosola defends Antonio so passionately that the Duchess confides in him the truth: Antonio is her husband and the father of her children.

Upon hearing this news, Bosola is shocked, and he responds with the lines quoted. He wonders if he is dreaming, because in the "ambitious age" they are in, it's unheard of that a Duchess would marry below her status just for love and the merit of her husband. He wonders if it is really possible that someone could prefer a man merely for his internal worth, rather than due to his wealth and honor (status elements that are purely external). Bosola even goes on to say that the Duchess will be praised for this deed, which suggests that the class structure might not always remain so rigid. Unfortunately, though, Bosola is employed as a spy, so after this genuine response, he still has to report the information to Ferdinand and the Cardinal, thereby exposing Antonio as the Duchess's husband.

Act 3, Scene 5 Quotes

Thou dost blanch mischief;
Wouldst make it white. See, see, like to calm weather
At sea, before a tempest, false hearts speak fair
To those they intend most mischief.

Related Characters: The Duchess of Malfi (speaker), The Cardinal, Ferdinand, Duke of Calabria, Antonio Bologna, Daneil de Bosola

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3.5.23-26

Explanation and Analysis

The Duchess says this to Bosola after she and her family have been formally banished by the Cardinal. Bosola has come bearing kind letters from her brothers that invite Antonio to come reconcile with them. But the Duchess rightly recognizes that Bosola is essentially whitewashing the true content of the letters. Like the calm before a storm, she says, false hearts speak kindly to those they are about to harm. The Duchess knows this to be true, since she employed a similar tactic, using a feigned pilgrimage as an excuse to flee. We can also note the exquisite poetry of these lines, which play with "see, see" and "sea," as well as use alliteration with "false and "fair." Such elevated poetry helps the lines stand out as a general truth.

Thou art happy that thou hast not understanding
To know thy misery; for all our wit
And reading brings us to a truer sense
Of sorrow.

Related Characters: The Duchess of Malfi (speaker), Daneil de Bosola, Children, Antonio Bologna

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3.5.66-69

Explanation and Analysis

The Duchess speaks these lines to her son after she and Antonio have decided to split up the children in the hopes that more of them will survive. Essentially, she says that ignorance is bliss. The boy is happy because he does not have the ability to understand the misery he is undergoing; intelligence and reading only lead to better understanding of sadness. These lines echo a sentiment expressed by Bosola earlier, that wisdom is like a disease that only leads to folly. The lines have a bleak outlook for scholarship, since they suggest that the more one studies the sadder one feels and the better one understands that sadness. It's also possible to read into these lines the Duchess's own sad knowledge that this is the last time she will see her family.

Act 4, Scene 1 Quotes

That's the greatest torture souls feel in hell:
In hell that they must live, and cannot die.

Related Characters: The Duchess of Malfi (speaker), The Cardinal, Ferdinand, Duke of Calabria, Children, Antonio Bologna, Daneil de Bosola

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4.1.70-71

Explanation and Analysis

The Duchess offers these dejected lines after Ferdinand has forced her to kiss a dead man's hand and has shown her silhouettes meant to convince her that Antonio and her children are dead. Upon learning that her family is dead, the Duchess loses all will to live, and she asks Bosola to kille her. Bosola denies her and says she must live, to which she responds that it's the greatest torture felt in hell: souls in hell have to live and cannot die. Living without her love and her children makes existence pain and suffering. Simply being alive in this state and being denied a death is torture to the Duchess. This torture is, however, a ruse by Ferdinand's design, as her family is (for now) still alive. This also foreshadows the way in which the Duchess will ultimately wrest control over her destiny from her brothers by relishing the death that they serve her. Instead of letting death be the punishment it's intended to be, the Duchess will view her death as liberation.

I account this world a tedious theatre,
For I do play a part in't 'gainst my will.

Related Characters: The Duchess of Malfi (speaker), The Cardinal, Ferdinand, Duke of Calabria, Children, Antonio Bologna

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4.1.83-84

Explanation and Analysis

The Duchess speaks this meta-theatrical line in another expression of her frustration that she cannot die. Since she believes Antonio and her children are dead, she no longer wants to live. As stated above, existence is torturous to the Duchess, which is exactly what Ferdinand intends. Here the Duchess expresses this frustration by comparing the world to a "tedious theatre" in which she is forced to play a part against her will. Webster makes uncanny, meta-theatrical references this one throughout the play, especially in situations that the characters seem to recognize as excessively tragic, theatrical, or dramatic. In a way, it lets

Webster have his melodrama while also winking to the audience that he's aware of its absurdity.

Damn her! That body of hers,
While that my blood ran pure in't, was more worth
Than that which thou wouldst comfort, called a soul.

Related Characters: Ferdinand, Duke of Calabria (speaker), Daneil de Bosola, The Duchess of Malfi

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 4.1.120-122

Explanation and Analysis

Ferdinand knows that his torture of the Duchess is working, as she is convinced that her family is dead and it agonizes her. Bosola tries to convince Ferdinand to stop torturing her now, but Ferdinand is still furious. He cries out for her to be damned, and he says that, while his blood ran pure through her, her body was worth more than her soul. He suggests, too, that Bosola is attempting to comfort her by ending the torture, which is something she does not deserve.

First of all, such an image reinforces the notion that Ferdinand did not want the Duchess to marry for selfish reasons; he feared that her remarriage would taint his own noble blood. This comment also shows Ferdinand's immense pride for his own status and bloodline. The notion that when the Duchess was pure her body was worth more than her soul, however, is a somewhat sacrilegious inversion of Christian doctrine, which classically holds the soul above the body. Ferdinand's preference of the Duchess's body over her soul indicates his evil nature and also may stem from his incestuous desire for her.

Act 4, Scene 2 Quotes

BOSOLA: Doth not death fright you?

DUCHESS: Who would be afraid on't,
Knowing to meet such excellent company
In th'other world?
...
I know death hath ten thousand several doors
For men to take their exits; and 'tis found
They go on such strange, geometrical hinges,
You may open them both ways.
...Tell my brothers
That I perceive death, now I am well awake,
Best gift is they can give or I can take.

Related Characters: Daneil de Bosola, The Duchess of Malfi (speaker), Children, Ferdinand, Duke of Calabria

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 4.2.200-214

Explanation and Analysis

This exchange happens in the moments before the Duchess's death. In the face of her executioner, she remains proud, composed, and unafraid, saying that she doesn't fear death because she knows she'll meet excellent company in the other world (meaning heaven). Though previously she dismissed religion as foolish superstition, in the face of death the Duchess turns to religion for comfort.

She continues that she is not afraid because there are ten thousand ways to die, and some doors to death so strange that they can be opened both ways. The implication of this statement is that death can come by being killed, but also by murdering (the implication, perhaps, is that the act of murder destroys the murderer's soul). The final lines demonstrate the Duchess's defiance of her brothers' will. Not only is she unafraid to face a death that is meant to terrify her, but because she thinks her family is dead and her life is torturous, she actually greets death as the best gift her brothers can give. Even in dying, she denies them the satisfaction of controlling her.

Only, I must confess, I had a hope,
Had she continued widow, to have gained
An infinite mass of treasure by her death,
And that was the main cause: her marriage -
That drew a stream of gall quite through my heart.
For thee - as we observe in tragedies
That a good actor many times is cursed
For playing a villain's part - I hate thee for't,
And, for my sake, say thou hast done much ill well.

Related Characters: Ferdinand, Duke of Calabria (speaker), Daneil de Bosola, The Duchess of Malfi

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4.2.270-278

Explanation and Analysis

Ferdinand speaks these lines over the Duchess's dead body, expressing his instant remorse for having her killed. He confesses finally that the reason he wanted her not to remarry was that he hoped to secure his own inheritance of her large fortune. Of course, the subtext of much of his speech throughout the play implies that another reason he wanted the Duchess dead was his own conflict over his incestuous desire for her, though he still does not confess this outright. He continues in another meta-theatrical moment, saying to Bosola that, as in tragedies, sometimes a good actor is cursed to play a villain.

This is clearly a reference to Bosola, as Bosola, despite his good nature, has done such a good job carrying out the evil that he was ordered to commit. This sentiment, that Bosola is a good actor forced into a bad role, is one that Bosola himself will later echo, and it signifies that he feels guilty for his crimes and does not want to commit them. Regardless, evil wins over, since Bosola ultimately has more respect for his sense of duty, his desire for wealth , and his yearning for improved social status than for his moral scruples.

Act 5, Scene 1 Quotes

It may be that the sudden apprehension
Of danger - for I'll go in mine own shape –
When he shall see it fraught with love and duty,
May draw the poison out of him, and work
A friendly reconcilement. If it fail,
Yet it shall rid me of this infamous calling;
For better fall once than be ever falling.

Related Characters: Antonio Bologna (speaker), The Duchess of Malfi, The Cardinal, Delio

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 5.1.67-73

Explanation and Analysis

Antonio speaks these lines to Delio outside of the Cardinal's palace. He plans to confront the Cardinal in a last ditch attempt to reconcile. He says that he hopes that sudden fear in the Cardinal (since Antonio will be appearing without disguise) will draw the poison of hate out of the Cardinal and help bring about a reconciliation between Antonio and the Cardinal. Antonio is especially hopeful that the Cardinal be sympathetic to Antonio once he sees that Antonio is driven by love and duty. Here hatred is compared to a poison, which, once removed from the body, will leave the body cured.

Antonio continues that if he fails, he'll at least be out of this horrible situation, and he concludes that he would rather fall once by risking everything than continuously fall for the rest of his life. Such a decision to take a large risk shows growth in Antonio, who was hesitant to take large risks when being courted by the Duchess. It also shows the tremendous stakes of the encounter—if Antonio fails, he is likely to die.

Act 5, Scene 2 Quotes

O poor Antonio! Though nothing be so needful
To thy estate as pity, yet I find
Nothing so dangerous.
... How this man
Bears up in blood, seems fearless! Why, 'tis well:
Security some men call the suburbs of hell -
Only a dead wall between. Well, good Antonio,
I'll seek thee out, and all my care shall be
To put thee into safety from the reach
Of these most cruel biters that have got
Some of thy blood already. It may be
I'll join with thee in a most just revenge.

Related Characters: Daneil de Bosola (speaker), Ferdinand, Duke of Calabria, Julia, The Cardinal, Antonio Bologna

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 5.2.326-339

Explanation and Analysis

Bosola speaks this soliloquy after the Cardinal kills Julia and instructs Bosola to kill Antonio. Bosola agrees, but once alone on stage, he expresses his pity for Antonio. At the same time, he recognizes that pitying Antonio puts him in a very dangerous position, since Antonio is "[borne] up in blood," meaning both that he is brave and that blood is being spilled everywhere around him.

Bosola goes on to say that security is considered by some to be the suburb of hell, so he'll take a risk and try to help Antonio to safety from the Cardinal and Ferdinand (thereby moving Bosola from the "suburb of hell" towards heaven). Bosola even says that he might join with Antonio and seek revenge. This moment demonstrates that Bosola's guilt and sense of moral obligation has finally outweighed his sense of duty to the Duke. Though he felt bad throughout the play, it is only now that he is overwhelmed by this guilt and driven to act virtuously. This shows that Bosola, who has long been envious of the benefits that fell on Antonio based on his worth as a man, is generally good natured, too—though the amount of time it took him to act on his good nature justifies the Duchess's choice of Antonio as her suitor rather than Bosola.

Act 5, Scene 4 Quotes

BOSOLA: O good Antonio,
I'll whisper one thing in thy dying ear
Shall make thy heart break quickly: thy fair Duchess
And two sweet children -

ANTONIO: Their very names
Kindle a little life in me.

BOSOLA: - are murdered!

ANTONIO: Some men have wished to die
At the hearing of sad tidings. I am glad
That I shall do't in sadness. I would not now
Wish my wounds balmed nor healed, for I have no use
To put my life to.

Related Characters: Antonio Bologna, Daneil de Bosola (speaker), The Duchess of Malfi

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5.4.57-66

Explanation and Analysis

This exchange is possibly the most perfectly tragic in the entire play. Bosola, who intends to save Antonio, has just accidentally stabbed Antonio in the dark, mistaking him for the Cardinal. This is especially tragic given Bosola's change of heart, which meant that he would gladly have died to *save* Antonio. As Antonio is dying, Bosola says he wants to whisper something into his dying ear. Bosola begins to speak of the Duchess and the two children, but Antonio cuts him off to say that hearing their names kindles life in him. The moment barely lasts long enough for the dramatic irony to register, as Bosola immediately tells Antonio what the audience already knows: that Antonio's family has been murdered.

At this point, Antonio, like the Duchess when she believed her family died, loses all will to live. He says that men have wished to die upon hearing such horrible news, and that he's glad to die in sadness. He's so sad that he would not want his wounds to heal, since he has nothing to live his life for. Like the Duchess, Antonio's death is shown to be a gift, since it means escape from the tortures and pains of life. These lines are brutally tragic, but it could be argued that Bosola helps Antonio by telling him about the Duchess death, since this knowledge makes it easier for Antonio to accept his own death.

Act 5, Scene 5 Quotes

My sister! Oh, my sister! There's the cause on't.
Whether we fall by ambition, blood or lust,
Like diamonds we are cut with our own dust.

Related Characters: Ferdinand, Duke of Calabria (speaker), The Duchess of Malfi

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5.5.73-75

Explanation and Analysis

These are Ferdinand's final lines, spoken after he has stabbed Bosola and his brother, whom he mistook for the devil. First, Ferdinand calls out to his sister; this is fitting given that he has been driven insane by guilt over his role in her death, and also because during her life he was utterly controlling and harbored secret incestuous desires for her.

He then concludes the sentiment that has been building throughout the play, one that he suspected when he first learned that the Duchess disobeyed him. Whether we fall because of our ambition, our blood (which here means both

our family and our passion), or our lust (both Ferdinand's incestuous lust and the Duchess's lust for Antonio), we perish because of our own sins and our own actions. Such a system of religious and moral judgment seems fitting in a world in which we are not always rewarded for our merit—it means that death can bring punishment or reward for those who did not receive what they deserved in life.

MALATESTE: Thou wretched thing of blood,
How came Antonio by his death?

BOSOLA: In a mist - I know not how.
Such a mistake as I have often seen
In a play. Oh, I am gone!
We are only like dead walls, or vaulted graves
That, ruined, yields no echo. Fare you well.
It may be pain, but no harm to me to die
In so good a quarrel.

Related Characters: Daneil de Bosola, Count Malateste (speaker), Antonio Bologna

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 5.5.95-103

Explanation and Analysis

After Ferdinand and the Cardinal have explained part of the chaotic final scene and died, Malateste calls Bosola a "wretched thing of blood." We can note that "thing of blood" echoes Shakespeare's revenge play *Coriolanus*. Malateste uses this epithet to ask Bosola how Antonio died, and Bosola offers a final meta-theatrical explanation, saying that Antonio died in a mist, and that he doesn't know how it happened. Such mistakes, he says, are often depicted in plays. This accidental death is a result of misfortune, and there is no explanation available to Bosola other than it seemed like it was scripted. In a way, this echoes Bosola's insistence throughout the play on not taking responsibility for his actions; Bosola consistently claimed, for instance, that he was not responsible for murders he committed on the brothers' orders.

Bosola interrupts this meta-theatrical thought by crying out that he is dying. He says that humans are like empty walls or graves, yielding no echo and leaving no mark. These lines are particularly difficult to interpret, given that we've seen an echo of a dead person only a few scenes earlier. Nonetheless, Bosola's words seem to suggest a permanence of death and a lack of any remnants of the dead in the human world. Bosola says that his death might be painful, but that he doesn't mind, since he died in such a good quarrel. Presumably, then, he has found some redemption and justification for himself by avenging the murders that the brothers ordered (even though it was Bosola himself who committed most of those murders).

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

ACT 1, SCENE 1

The play begins at the Duchess of Malfi's palace in Amalfi. Antonio, the Duchess's steward, has just returned from the French court to Amalfi, where his friend and confidant Delio greets him. Delio asks what Antonio thought about his time in France, and Antonio responds that the French king is ruling well by ridding himself of flatterers and by treating his court like a fountain; good flows throughout the land when it is properly functioning, but if the fountain is **poisoned** near the head, death and **disease** flow to the country. The king is also surrounded by council and people who are unafraid to warn him and speak their minds.

Antonio's opening praise of the French court sets up a comparison to the Italian court, which contemporary audiences would have associated with sophisticated corruption. An ideal court, he says, should spread goodness throughout a country, but the structure of government is such that by nature it is susceptible to poisoning by way of corruption or abuse of power. From the very start of the play, we are told that death and suffering have the potential to cascade downward from the head of a government.

Antonio changes the subject as he sees Bosola, a former employee of the Cardinal and known murderer, entering the room. Antonio then describes Bosola as a man who satirizes and speaks against the court, but only because he lacks the wealth and power to truly participate. After a few moments the Cardinal enters, and Delio and Antonio stand aside while the Cardinal and Bosola talk.

Bosola apparently takes a critical position in respect to government and courtly affairs, but Antonio believes this is only the case because Bosola lacks the money to be a courtier or a noble.

Bosola tries to talk to the Cardinal, but the Cardinal is extremely dismissive. Bosola believes he deserves better treatment, as he was formerly employed by the Cardinal and ended up serving a sentence in the galleys (forced labor whose severity is second only to the death sentence) while in his employment. The Cardinal dismisses Bosola and exits, and then Antonio and Delio approach.

The implication here (one that is reinforced later) is that the Cardinal ordered Bosola to commit the murder that landed him in the galleys. This is an early indication that the Cardinal is corrupt, though he tries to preserve his image by ignoring and not associating with Bosola.

Antonio asks Bosola what happened in the conversation, to which Bosola replies that the Cardinal and his brother are like plum trees rich with fruit, but only fed on by crows, magpies, and caterpillars. He says that he hopes to be one of their flatterers so that he can reap the benefits, advance his social status, and then leave. Bosola remarks that dogs and hawks get rewards after battle, but soldiers only get slings and crutches. He compares places in court to hospital beds and then exits.

The crows, magpies, and caterpillars in Bosola's imagery are all bad omens, again hinting at the sinister nature of the Cardinal and his brother. Always melancholy and contemplative, Bosola laments the way he is being treated for his service to the Cardinal, which he compares to that of a soldier. Bosola's unhappy comparison of the court with a place for sick people also reinforces Antonio's characterization of him as someone who criticizes the court because he is largely left out of it.

Once Antonio and Delio are alone, Delio explains that Bosola is known to have served seven years in the galleys for a "notorious murder," supposedly ordered by the Cardinal. Antonio says that it's unfortunate that the Cardinal is ignoring Bosola, because he has heard that Bosola is very valiant. Bosola's bad mood, Antonio says, will **poison** all of Bosola's goodness, since, just as insufficient sleep hurts the body, idleness breeds unhappiness and bad behavior.

Delio makes explicit the rumor that the Cardinal ordered the murder for which Bosola was convicted. Antonio compares a negative internal state to a poison which will ruin all of Bosola's good qualities (like being valiant) and generate bad behavior.

ACT 1, SCENE 2

This scene continues from the previous scene with the entrance of Castruccio, Silvio, Roderigo, and Grisolan, four courtiers to Duke Ferdinand, the Duchess's brother. Delio notes that the hall is filling up with people, and Antonio replies that Duke Ferdinand is arriving. When he enters, Ferdinand asks who won the ring (a common game around court), and Silvio responds that it was Antonio. Ferdinand recognizes Antonio as being the Duchess's steward, and instructs Silvio to give Antonio a jewel.

Here, the power dynamic in Amalfi and in Italy in general is established. Ferdinand is a Duke—an upper class ruler. The other men who enter to begin the scene are all courtiers under him. By giving out a prize to the winner of the ring, Ferdinand asserts his class and his wealth. Here we also learn officially what Antonio's social role is: he is the steward to the Duchess.

Ferdinand and his courtiers then begin discussing the merits and pitfalls of a leader going to war in person. Castruccio notes that it is fitting for a soldier to move up to become a prince, but not for a prince descend to be a soldier; better, he says, to lead in war through a deputy. Castruccio also notes that when a ruler is a soldier, the realm never has long-lasting peace. Ferdinand says he heard that Castruccio's wife could endure fighting, and Castruccio reminds the Duke of a joke his wife made, which punned on a wounded soldier's bandages resembling tents. Conversation is steered back to the best qualities of horses, and to Antonio and his horsemanship. The Cardinal and Duchess then enter.

Though not extremely pertinent to the plot, as there is no war, the debate about the dangers of leaders going to war can be seen as political commentary suggesting that soldier rulers rarely bring about extended periods of peacetime. Castruccio illustrates the duties of nobility and the workings of class mobility: a soldier has the potential to rise in class, but it's expected that those in the upper class will not descend or debase themselves. We can note that discussion of horsemanship here might hint at sexuality.

Once the Cardinal and Duchess enter, Antonio steps aside and begins quietly telling Delio about the character of the royal family. The Cardinal, he says, though he seems brave and courtly, is in reality a jealous, plotting, and "melancholy churchman" who surrounds himself with flatterers and spies. He might have been Pope if he hadn't tried to bribe his way into the office. Duke Ferdinand, Antonio continues, is just like his brother: he appears humorous and kind on the outside, but in reality he uses entrapment and spies and he judges people based on gossip. Delio describes the Duke as a spider using the law both as his protection and as his weapon against enemies.

Both the Cardinal and Ferdinand take care to preserve their outward appearances and hide their corruption, but both men are evil. Here Antonio explicitly finishes the comparison with the idealized French court, revealing the brothers' true character: they are spying, gosspiy power abusers. The corruption is so severe that Ferdinand seems to manipulate the law itself for his own benefit. Early on the brothers are established as dangerous figures.

The Duchess, on the other hand, he describes as noble and completely opposite from her siblings. Antonio says that her words are so full of rapture that when she stops speaking it makes one wish she didn't think it was vain to talk for a long time. She has sweet looks, a sweet countenance, and she is extremely virtuous. Delio says that Antonio is complimenting her too much, but Antonio responds that she is so worthy that she darkens the past and lights the future. As Antonio finishes his praise, Cariola, the Duchess's hand-maiden, then tells Antonio that he needs to attend to the Duchess in a half an hour, and Antonio and Delio leave.

Much like he contrasts the Italian court with the French court, Antonio praises the Duchess by stressing how opposite she is from her siblings. Her character is outlined as brilliant, virtuous, sweet, and modest, and Antonio's praises are so strong that they might foreshadow his marriage to her. Just as this romance is (possibly) hinted at, however, Cariola reminds Antonio (and the audience) that Antonio is on the Duchess's staff and is of a lower class.

After Antonio departs, Ferdinand tells the Duchess that he wants her to hire Bosola as the supervisor of her horses. She agrees to do it. Silvio announces that he is leaving for Milan, and everyone exits the stage but the Cardinal and Ferdinand. Once alone, the Cardinal tells Ferdinand to hire Bosola as a spy to observe the Duchess. The Cardinal explains why he was ignoring Bosola in the play's opening scene; The Cardinal says that he doesn't want to be seen involved with Bosola, since he doesn't want to be implicated in the murder that Bosola committed while in his service or in the spying that Bosola will be hired to do. Ferdinand believes Antonio would be better to spy on the Duchess than Bosola, but the Cardinal assures him that Antonio is much too honest for the position. The Cardinal sees Bosola coming and exits.

The Duchess immediately agrees to do as Antonio asks, exemplifying the control he has over her. Once Ferdinand and the Cardinal are alone, their corruption becomes immediately clear. As a religious figure, the Cardinal must preserve his image. To do so, he is much more cautious and calculating than Ferdinand is, exemplified by his refusal to be seen associating with Bosola. The Cardinal also seems to be a better judge of character than Ferdinand, as he assures his brother that Antonio is too honest to be their spy, opting instead for Bosola, who he already knows will do their bidding since he has "used" Bosola before.

Bosola asks Ferdinand why the Cardinal is avoiding him. Ferdinand replies that it's possibly because the Cardinal suspects Bosola of some character flaw. Ferdinand adds that great men are distrustful, which prevents them from being deceived. Ferdinand then gives Bosola some money, prompting Bosola to ask whom he must kill. But Ferdinand tells Bosola that he's overeager, and that he's not being hired to kill yet. Instead, he is simply being paid to observe the Duchess and report back to Ferdinand. Ferdinand explains that the Duchess is a young widow, and the brothers do not want her to marry again.

The Cardinal is corrupt, and part of that corruption is keeping his illicit dealings to the shadows. Bosola's inference that Ferdinand wants him to kill someone suggests that corruption leads to death and suffering. Bosola may be overeager here, but he rightly predicts that he'll eventually be required to kill. The source of this corruption (and the eventual murders) is Ferdinand's desire to exert control over his sister.

After receiving these instructions, Bosola says it seems like Ferdinand wants to turn him into an invisible devil-spy. Bosola comments that the payment would make Ferdinand a corrupter and him—Bosola—a traitor. He notes that if he agreed to the proposition he would go to hell for it. But Ferdinand tells Bosola about the horse master position that has been secured for him, and Bosola curses that this kindness will make him a villain. He wishes that he could refuse, but he knows it would be ungrateful to do so. Thus, he says, the devil glosses over sins and calls gracious whatever heaven calls vile.

Though Bosola was immediately willing to kill, he seems to associate spying with stronger religious consequences; spying and corruption, not murder, are what he believes will send him to hell, since they are so deceitful. While Bosola believes spying is wrong and does not want to be a villain, he believes that his obligation to the Duke is stronger than his moral obligation not to be a spy. He also provides a religious interpretation of the way that the devil achieves the highest profanity by inverting whatever is most sacred.

Ferdinand instructs Bosola to be himself and to keep up his melancholy demeanor since it will make him seem envious but not ambitious, thereby granting him access to everyone's private lodgings. Bosola says he will do as he has seen other men do: he'll seem half asleep and not attentive while dreaming of cutting the lord's throat. Since his new position makes him responsible for the Duchess's horses, Bosola jokes that one could say his corruption grew out of horse dung. He agrees to be Ferdinand's "creature" and then exits.

By instructing Bosola to seem sad and contemplative to avoid suspicion, Ferdinand shows again that he understands the difference between how people appear and how they truly are. Bosola's language about "horse dung," meanwhile, singals that he has no illusions about what he is agreeing to do. By accepting this role as a spy he believes himself dehumanized, since he feels that corruption is wrong but still agrees to spy, and thus he calls himself a "creature."

ACT 1, SCENE 3

The Cardinal, the Duchess, and the Duchess's hand-maiden Cariola enter and join Ferdinand. The Cardinal informs the Duchess that they are leaving, and then tells her that she must use her discretion. The Cardinal and Ferdinand then begin convincing and instructing the Duchess not to remarry. They say that she already knows "what man is" (i.e. she is not a virgin), and that she should not let anything sway or taint her high **blood**. Marrying twice, they say, is lecherous. The Duchess quips back that diamonds that pass through the most jewelers' hands are most precious, but Ferdinand responds that by that example whores are precious.

Ferdinand and the Cardinal's comments about the Duchess's high blood are an appeal to class. They suggest that her royal lineage and rank would be tainted if she married someone of a lower status. In this time period, women were subjected to the rule of their fathers and then their husbands. With the Duchess's husband (and presumably her father) dead, her brothers have become the de facto figures of male authority in her life. If she marries again, they will be forced to relinquish that control.

The Duchess concedes that she'll never marry again, but the Cardinal and Ferdinand continue telling her not to. The Cardinal says most widows promise not to marry, but usually that promise lasts no longer than the funeral sermon. Ferdinand continues that she currently lives in a high position, and that remarrying will **poison** her reputation. He tells her not to be cunning, since those whose faces contradict their hearts become witches and nurse the devil. Despite attempts to be secret and hypocritical, he counsels, her darkest actions and most private thoughts will come to light.

The Cardinal invokes the stereotype that women are fickle, and his comment about marrying immediately after a funeral sermon recalls the "o'er hasty marriage" of Queen Gertrude in Shakespeare's Hamlet. For Ferdinand to argue that deceitful intentions always come to light is ominous for himself; the audience knows that it's Ferdinand, not the Duchess, who is being deceitful here.

The Cardinal continues that the Duchess might want to get married privately or in secret, and Ferdinand adds that she might think that in doing so she is taking a good path because she is making her own way, but he says that secret weddings like these are "executed" rather than celebrated. After they conclude their speech, the Cardinal departs. The Duchess then comments to Ferdinand that the speech was so glib that it seems like they rehearsed it.

Ferdinand's use of the word "executed" puns on both enacted and killed, foreshadowing the Duchess's demise. The Duchess' comment about the brothers' speech sounding rehearsed can also be seen as referencing the fact that the actors rehearsed their lines for the play.

Ferdinand in response launches into an extremely uncomfortable speech in which he references his father's dagger and says that women like the body part that's similar to a boneless eel. The Duchess responds in shock, suggesting that she thinks her brother was using phallic imagery, but claims that he was simply talking about the tongue, which can be used to weave a tale that will convince women of anything. He calls her a "lusty widow" and then exits.

Ferdinand uses the Duchess' assumption that he is being lewd as evidence of her lustfulness. At the same time, even after she "mistakes" his meaning, he makes another sexual reference, as "tale" can also represent a phallus. The whole interaction, just by nature of the content and the fact that the two are siblings, has an uncomfortable feel to it, and the common interpretation is that Ferdinand harbors incestuous desire for the Duchess.

Once she is alone with Cariola, the Duchess asks if this speech should convince her to obey her brothers. She compares her situation to battle, and says that even amidst all this hate, she'll take a dangerous venture, "wink," and choose a husband. The Duchess tells Cariola that she is trusting her with her reputation, which is more important than her life. Cariola says both will be safe, since she will keep the secret and guard it like **poison** makers guard their poison from children. The Duchess then instructs Cariola to hide behind a tapestry while she talks to Antonio.

The Duchess inverts the tradition of male authority taking precedence over love and decides to pick a husband for herself in defiance of her brothers. While she refuses to obey them, she does seem to share their sentiment that reputation is extremely important, as she considers it more valuable than her life. Cariola's comparison of secrets to poison suggests the ways secrets can become dangerous in the play.

Antonio enters, and the Duchess tells him to start writing notes for her. She makes a pun on the word husband, and asks Antonio what the plans are for tomorrow. He responds by calling her his "beauteous excellence," and she focuses on the word "beauteous" and thanks him. When Antonio says he'll get her the financial figures for her estate tomorrow, the Duchess corrects him to say that she was actually talking about what the plans were in heaven, not tomorrow, and that she wants to make a will. She says that she wouldn't need to if she had a husband, but since she doesn't she'll make Antonio the overseer of her will.

It's notable that the Duchess uses finance to transition into courtship, as financial and commercial imagery are quite common in English Renaissance love poetry. It's also notable that her first indication that she wants a husband is in the context of a conversation about religion and death, which might not bode well for the potential marriage. Here her courtship of Antonio is done with puns, hints, and second meanings; it isn't direct and overt yet.

Antonio responds by saying that she should find a husband and give herself to him, and the two then make a joke about sheets and coupling. The Duchess comments that they are writing a strange will, but Antonio says it's even stranger if she has no will to marry again. The Duchess then asks Antonio what he thinks of marriage and he responds that he thinks of it like people who reject the idea of purgatory; marriage contains within it heaven or hell, it can be good or bad, but it's not its own entity or place.

Antonio at once seems to be aware that the Duchess is flirting with him while pretending that he isn't. He makes a sex joke with her and says he thinks it strange that she doesn't want to remarry, but when asked about his feelings on marriage he offers no indication of his desire to marry or not. In a sense, it seems that class structure is trumping gender roles here: the Duchess must flirt with Antonio because Antonio, as someone from a lower class, cannot court her.

The Duchess continues by asking him to expand on these thoughts and tell her what he feels about marriage. Antonio says that when his loneliness is making him sad, he often reasons that the only thing he loses by not marrying is the title of father and the small delights of watching his children play and ride on wooden horses. The Duchess notes that one of Antonio's eyes is **blood**shot and she offers him her ring, which she claims has healing and royal power. She notes that this is her wedding ring, which she vowed she would never give to anyone other than her second husband.

Again, the Duchess must court Antonio through innuendo and double meaning: by offering Antonio her ring, the Duchess offers a supernatural cure, but she also uses it as another indication that she wants to marry Antonio. At the same time, she reinforces her royalty, which Antonio conspicuously lacks.

Antonio notes that the Duchess has just given him the ring, and she says that she did to help his eyesight. He responds that it has made him blind, because there is a little devil in the ring. To remove the devil, the Duchess makes a small "conjuration" and puts the ring on Antonio's finger. He kneels, and she tells him that his head is built too low, and that to talk to him she needs to raise him up. He stands and responds that ambition is "a great man's madness" and extremely dangerous. He seems to know what she is suggesting (raising up his status), but he says it's foolish to take too extreme of a measure, like a cold man shoving his hands directly into a fire.

The devils, circles, and conjurations in the scene reference necromancy, popularized in Christopher Marlowe's Dr. Faustus, *and it's a somber omen that such devils are associated here with the wedding ring. It becomes explicit here that Antonio recognizes that the Duchess's intentions are to marry him, and it's also clear that he understands the danger inherent to a lower class person trying to move up in society.*

The Duchess makes a metaphor about breaking ground at a mine, where the discovery of the valuable underground resource represents her fortune that Antonio could have access to. He calls himself unworthy, but the Duchess says that he's selling himself short. She says that his darkening of his own character is not like salesmen who use poor lighting to sell faulty products. She assures him that she speaks without flattery, and that he is a "complete man." Antonio responds that if there weren't a heaven or hell, he'd be honest and say that he has served virtue for a long time without reaping any benefits.

Antonio reveals that his hesitancy to be ambitious and his claim that he deserves benefits for being virtuous is not just based on cultural norms. Referencing heaven and hell and spiritual consequences, he seems to believe that staying in his social status and accepting that virtue and merit do not guarantee benefits are religious obligations.

The Duchess responds that now Antonio *will* get the benefits of being virtuous. She then laments with frustration that those who are born great (noble) are forced to woo because no one dares to woo them, driving them to express their feelings in "riddles and in dreams" without being direct. Deciding to invert this frustration, she says pointedly that Antonio can go and brag that he has left her heartless, since her heart is in his chest, and that she hopes it will generate more love there. She notices him trembling and asks him to make his heart alive and not allow himself to fear more than he loves her. She tells him to be confident, and that she is "flesh and **blood**," not an alabaster statue kneeling at her dead husband's tomb. She cries out for him to wake up as a man, and without any ceremony she simply says that she's a young widow hoping to claim him for her husband.

The Duchess inverts both the tradition of men wooing women and the class hierarchy that says she must marry someone noble. Up until this point, she has courted Antonio through double meanings, but she seems to realize that while she is indirect he can only respond indirectly (like his comment about not having reaped benefits for his virtue, which seems to imply that he might deserve to marry the Duchess). For this reason, the Duchess states with beautiful simplicity that she wants to marry Antonio—she wants to liberate him to respond openly with his feelings.

Antonio agrees, and the Duchess pays him for his service as her steward with a kiss. Antonio is worried about how the Cardinal and Ferdinand will react, but the Duchess reassures him that he should not think of them, since everything and everyone outside of their relationship should be pitied, not feared. Even if they find out, she coaxes, the passing of time will eventually ease their tempestuous reaction. Antonio seems to accept this response, as he simply says that he should have been the one speaking, wooing, and reassuring.

The Duchess uses a kiss as both a romantic gesture and an erasure of the employer/employee relationship she previously had with Antonio. Though Antonio is rightly concerned about the reaction of the Duchess' brothers, the Duchess, caught up in her love, she seems to overestimate her brothers' powers of forgiveness.

After the Duchess instructs Antonio to kneel, Cariola enters and surprises Antonio, but the Duchess reassures him that Cariola is her trusted counsel. She goes on to say that legally, marriage by simple agreement of both parties is "absolute marriage" and legally binding. They both kneel, and the Duchess calls out for heaven to bless their union that violence can never untie, and Antonio calls for their affections to be constantly moving. They finish their vows and the Duchess asks how the church could possibly make a marriage more quickly or more secure. She then declares that she is blind, so that Antonio can lead her by the hand to their marriage bed, where they'll lie with a sword between them to stay chaste and share secrets. The newlyweds exit, and Cariola closes the scene by saying that she can't tell if it's the spirit of greatness or of woman that's leading the Duchesss to act this way, but either way it shows madness and deserves pity.

In another inversion of power structure, the Duchess opts for her marriage to be done outside of a church. She invokes a legal precedent by which she and Antonio can simply declare themselves wed, and she seems more concerned with the legal implications of the marriage than the religious ones. The notion that they'll stay chaste is a confusing one (as we'll soon have evidence that they do not), but the Duchess also indicates that they will have a true equal partnership in which they confide in each other, continuing to subvert the contemporary notion that women serve men in marriage.

ACT 2, SCENE 1

It is nine months after the events of Act 1. Bosola and Castruccio, an old Italian lord, enter in discussion about Castruccio's desire to be an "eminent courtier," meaning that he wants to become both a courtier of high rank and a lawyer or judge. Bosola makes fun of Castruccio's appearance, and he says that Castruccio would be a ridiculous and absurd judge. He gives Castruccio advice about what to do in this hypothetical role as a judge, and he tells him a trick to know if he is well liked or not: pretend that he's dying and see how the common people react.

Castruccio is the type of person Bosola must be careful not to seem like: he is ambitious to raise his social rank. That Bosola just makes fun of Castruccio by giving him terrible advice and ridiculing him could indicate a combination of jealousy for Castruccio's naked ambition and Bosola's desire to distance himself from gauche social positioning.

At this point in the conversation an Old Lady enters, and Bosola asks her if she has "come from painting" (painting her face by putting on makeup). He goes on to talk about a woman from France who tried the cosmetic technique of flaying her face to get rid of smallpox, which Bosola compares to scraping the side of a ship. The Old Lady jokes that it seems like Bosola is well acquainted with her closet (a private room), and he launches into a speech in which he says her closet must be filled with items used for witchcraft, and that he'd rather eat a **plague**-ridden pigeon than kiss a woman who was fasting.

In this era, Painting and sculpting were both commonly used as figurative representations of cosmetics, and cosmetics were akin to witchcraft, as they're used to try to improve on a face that God has already made. This type of "painting" is meant to cover up blemishes, and is therefore dishonest, which explains Bosola's dislike of cosmetics, since we know that he seems to hate lying more than murder.

Bosola continues on, saying that physicians grow wealthy by profiting on older people. He then begins speaking in verse, ruminating on the outward appearances of man. He says that we call it ominous when we see anything resembling humans in other animals, but in our own bodies we have **diseases** that are named for animals. Even though we are covered in a rotten and dead body, we try to hide it with medicine and cosmetics in fear of our doctors burying us. He closes the tirade with a joke about syphilis.

Bosola offers an interesting evaluation of human nature, saying that when we recognize human features in other animals we are disgusted, because it allows us to see just how disgusting humans are. This can be seen as a justification for class hierarchy, too. Bosola also notes that when we become diseased, we become animalized, since diseases are named for animals. This line of thinking could been seen to foreshadow Ferdinand's diagnosis of werewolf disease later in the play.

Castruccio and the Old Lady exit, and Bosola transitions to his other work. He notes that the Duchess has ben sick and she wears loose dresses that are out of fashion. He is suspicious, and has a trick to discover what is going on: he has brought apricots, which were believed to be labor inducing.

Here Bosola reminds himself (and the audience) that he is a spy and it is his job to know if the Duchess is pregnant. Bosola will administer apricots to force the Duchess into labor, a devious and physical assertion of male authority over the female body.

On the other side of the stage, Delio and Antonio enter into a discussion about the secret marriage, revealing that Antonio has confided in Delio. They meet Bosola and, since he's always melancholy and contemplative, they joke and ask him if he's trying to become wise. Bosola then compares wisdom to a skin **disease** running all over a body. Simplicity, he says makes happiness, and even the slightest wisdom produces folly, so he wants to remain simple. Antonio responds that he doesn't understand Bosola, since he always appears so melancholy.

It's unclear how much of Bosola's melancholy behavior is his true character and how much is his performance as a spy. He seems to suggest that knowing too much (being wise) can lead to folly and bad behavior. Accordingly, he hopes to remain ignorant. Such a position is ironic from Bosola, because he is employed as a spy, gathering information that will undoubtedly lead to chaos.

Bosola responds that he needs to remain in his station, since it is dangerous to reach higher. Antonio says that Bosola might look to heaven, but it seems like a devil is blocking his view. Bosola then talks about Antonio's rank, which seems on the rise since he is the Duchess's steward, and Bosola says that royal men are made of the same substance as regular people; they are moved by the same passions and think with the same reason.

Though Bosola notes that Antonio's status is rising, he does not at this point suspect that Antonio has married the Duchess. While the Duchess appealed to flesh and blood as evidence that she is equal to Antonio, Bosola here says that all humans are equal because they are moved by the same passions and governed by the same laws of reason.

At this point, the Duchess and her ladies enter. She asks for Antonio's arm and, since she is out of breath, she asks if she is growing fat. She then asks Bosola to provide her a horse like the one the Duchess of Florence had. Bosola notes that she used such a litter when she was pregnant, and the Duchess agrees, before complaining that she is suffering from "the mother," which means heartburn. In an aside, Bosola comments on the clear second meaning of the Duchess' complaint.

The Duchess thinks she's being subtle about her pregnancy, but since Bosola already suspects her, he catches her double meanings and only becomes more suspicious.

Antonio and the Duchess talk about traditions of wearing hats or not in court, comparing the Italian courts to the kingdom in France. Bosola then offers the Duchess the apricots. In another aside, he notes how greedily she eats them. She says that they are good, but soon after she comments that the fruit and the stomach are not her friends, as they are swelling her. Bosola gives a clever aside, saying she is too swelled already. She breaks into a cold sweat, and she heads for her chamber fearing that her pregnancy will be discovered. Everyone then exits in a scramble leaving only Antonio and Delio.

The conversation about the French court echoes Antonio's conversation with Delio in the play's opening. By this point, Bosola is very confident that the Duchess is pregnant, since the apricots he gives the Duchess have the immediate effect of inducing labor. Bosola's clever aside hinges on the fact that, since she is pregnant, her belly is already swollen.

Alone on stage with Delio, Antonio fears that the Duchess has fallen into labor with no time to get her out of Amalfi in order to keep the pregnancy a secret. Delio suggests a way to preserve the secret. He says that to keep people away, they can say that Bosola **poisoned** the apricots and caused the Duchess to fall ill, but Antonio responds that this will bring doctors around. Delio says that in that case, they can say that she used her own remedy. Lost in confusion, Antonio and Delio exit.

Since Bosola is a known criminal, Delio suggests a lie that trades on Bosola's bad reputation in order to draw attention away from the Duchess' pregnancy. Antonio apparently had a plan to get the Duchess out of Amalfi to have the child in secret, but thanks to Bosola, this plan has been thwarted.

ACT 2, SCENE 2

Bosola enters. He says that there is now no question that the Duchess is pregnant. The Old Lady enters, and Bosola starts making fun of her again, this time commenting on the stereotype that women are vain. She exits, and Antonio, Delio, Roderigo, and Grisolan enter.

Bosola makes fun of the Old Lady again, who seems to take abuse from Bosola every time she walks on stage. While Bosola is paid to be cruel to the Duchess, his comments to the Old Lady suggest that his nature might simply be sour.

Antonio instructs them to shut the gates and call all of the officers. Everyone is in such chaos that while Bosola privately wonders if the apricots were in fact somehow **poisoned** without his knowledge. A servant reveals that a Swiss guard had entered the Duchess's bedchamber and robbed her. In response to this robbery, Antonio says that the Duchess wants each officer to be locked in his chamber and have the keys to their chests given to her. He says that she is very sick.

Antonio responds to the situation with trickery of his own. In addition to claiming that the Duchess has been poisoned in order to cover for her reaction to the apricots, he uses a made-up robbery as an excuse to lock everyone in their rooms and thereby give the Duchess the privacy they need to hide the fact that she is giving birth. The trick is so convincing that Bosola himself even wonders if he might have actually accidentally poisoned the Duchess with the apricots rather than just caused her to go into labor.

After everyone else exits, Delio asks Antonio how the Duchess is doing. Antonio responds that she's experiencing pain and fear, and he sends Delio to Rome. Antonio says he fears he's in danger, but Delio reassures him that this perceived danger is just the shadow of his fear, not a true threat. Delio comments that humans are very superstitious, and he blesses Antonio as a father. Delio then exits as Cariola enters and informs Antonio that he has had a son. Antonio decides to cast his son's horoscope right away.

Far from a joyous occasion, the birth of Antonio and the Duchess's first child is marked by suffering and fear. Antonio is terrified that his life is in danger, but Delio reassures him, saying that inward fears seem to manifest as outward dangers. He attributes this phenomenon to human superstition. It's with some irony, then, that Antonio soon decides to cast his newborn son's horoscope.

ACT 2, SCENE 3

Bosola enters in the dark with a lantern, saying that he has heard a woman shrieking from what seemed like the Duchess's room. He notes that confining all of the courtiers to their separate rooms was most likely a strategy to stop them from figuring out what's going on, and he decides to spy to get more information to report.

Bosola has apparently heard the pained shouts of the Duchess in labor, and he recognizes Antonio's technique of confining the servants and courtiers to preserve the Duchess's privacy.

Just then, Antonio enters with a candle and a sword drawn. Having heard a noise, he asks "who's there?" Bosola responds that Antonio doesn't need to be afraid, and he reveals himself. In an aside, Antonio calls Bosola a mole undermining him. He then asks if Bosola has heard a noise, and Bosola pretends that he did not hear one. Antonio claims that he has been calculating the loss from the robbery, but he puns on what he has really been doing: casting the horoscope of his newborn son.

Antonio's "who's there?" echoes the opening line of Shakespeare's Hamlet. The drawn sword indicates the high stakes of the situation, and the confusion in the darkness also foreshadows the final confrontation between Antonio and Bosola. Like the Duchess, Antonio believes himself to be one step ahead of Bosola, so he is comfortable punning about his child.

Bosola asks if the loss was significant, but Antonio responds that it's none of his business and questions why he's out of his room when all men were ordered to their private lodgings. Bosola claims that he is out because he was praying. Antonio then questions whether the apricots Bosola gave the Duchess earlier in the day were **poisoned**. Bosola denies the accusation of poisoning, but Antonio says that some jewels were stolen and that Bosola is the number one suspect. The two men curse each other, but as they argue Antonio's nose starts bleeding. In an aside, he notes that superstitious people would think that was a bad omen, but he calls it mere chance that his handkerchief is now "drowned in **blood**." Antonio tells Bosola that he is forbidden to even go near the Duchess until Bosola is able to clear his name, and then Antonio exits.

Bosola uses religion as a pretense for being out of his room, but Antonio doesn't buy it. He accuses Bosola of poisoning and robbing the Duchess, in part to cast suspicion off of himself. In a strange moment, Antonio gets a nosebleed; he knows that superstitious people would identify this as a bad omen, especially given that the blood is on his handkerchief, which would probably be embroidered with his initials. That Antonio is "drowned in blood" foreshadows the copious amounts blood that will be spilled before the play's end.

Bosola then notices that Antonio dropped a piece of paper, on which he finds written the nativity horoscope that Antonio had just calculated. Bosola realizes he has the information he needs—he knows why the men have all been sent to their rooms. He suspects that he will be formally accused of **poisoning** the Duchess, but says he'll laugh at the charge. He remembers that Castruccio is heading to Rome the next day and he decides to have Castruccio carry the horoscope in a letter to Ferdinand and the Cardinal.

Though he didn't catch the horoscope pun when Antonio made it, Bosola discovers the paper containing the horoscope itself. He doesn't piece together that Antonio is the father of the child, but he now has concrete evidence of the Duchess's decision to disobey her brothers' orders. At this point he does not show hesitation about fulfilling his duty as a spy and passing on the information.

ACT 2, SCENE 4

This scene takes place in Rome and begins with the Cardinal and his mistress Julia entering. The Cardinal asks Julia what excuse she made up to come to Rome without her husband, Castruccio, and she says that she told him she was going to visit a hermit. She worries that the Cardinal will be false to her, but he tells her not to torture herself with such fears, which are generated by her own guilt at being inconstant to her husband. The Cardinal jokes that men are more constant than women, and says one would have to look at the moon through a telescope to find a constant woman.

The Cardinal's affair with Julia is another way in which the supposed religious figure shows himself to be a despicable sinner. His hypocrisy is also notable here in that Julia is of a lower class; the Cardinal won't allow the Duchess to be with someone below her station, but he himself can be with Julia. Because of the deception and hypocrisy of his behavior, it's ironic that he's berating Julia here for her inconstancy.

Julia begins to cry, but the Cardinal says she'll probably also cry to her husband that she loves only him. When she threatens to go home, the Cardinal says he has gotten rid of her melancholy, speaking figuratively of himself as a tamer and Julia as a falcon. Julia says that the Cardinal acted as if he was sick when he wooed her. Someone knocks at the door, and the Cardinal reassures her that his affections for her are strong. He then exits so as not to be found out in his affair.

The Cardinal reinforces common period imagery, like that found in Shakespeare's The Taming of the Shrew, in which the woman is a wild animal and the man is her tamer. Such a dynamic creates a stark contrast with the Duchess's independence and reversal of traditional gender roles. The Cardinal continues to conceal his true nature by exiting at the right moment.

A servant then enters to announce that someone has come to see Julia, and that Castruccio, her husband, is now in Rome. Delio then enters, and Julia notes in an aside that Delio was a former suitor of hers. He asks if she's been staying there, but she assures him that cardinals do not keep lodging for ladies. Delio says that he's not there on behalf of her husband and proceeds to make a joke about Castruccio. He then offers her money, and they begin flirting through Delio trying to convince Julia to accept money and Julia refusing it. Then the servant reenters and says that Castruccio has come with a letter to Ferdinand that put him out of his wits. Julia says that she'll go to see her husband, and she leaves. Alone on stage, Delio says that he fears that Antonio's secret has been found out, and he laments the unfortunate situation.

Julia's flirtations with Delio reinforce her image as the play's inconstant woman. Delio's disregard for Castruccio is not really explained, and it stands out from his otherwise trustworthy, honorable character. Upon learning that Ferdinand has been enraged by a letter from Amalfi, Delio rightly assumes that the Duchess has been found out, indicating to the audience that Bosola's letter has been delivered and the information has been passed on.

ACT 2, SCENE 5

Ferdinand and the Cardinal enter with the letter, and Ferdinand says he has dug up a mandrake, which is known as being both an aphrodisiac and a **poison**. Ferdinand says he is growing mad and he shows the Cardinal the letter, saying that their sister is damned, and that she has "grown a notorious strumpet." Ferdinand becomes increasingly enraged, threatening to make her bleeding heart a sponge. When the Cardinal asks why he's getting so upset, Ferdinand continues in his rage, saying he wishes he could be the one to "root up her goodly forests" and "lay her general territory as waste."

Ferdinand is completely enraged by the information that his sister is officially, in his opinion, a whore. His desire to "root up her goodly forests" and "lay her general territory as waste" are both violent threats and sexual innuendos, as forests and gardens are common images for the female body, and "lay her" has clear sexual implications. Ferdinand's incestuous desire is on display here, and jealousy therefore emerges as another possible motive for his rage.

The Cardinal asks if their royal **blood** will be tainted, wondering who the father of the Duchess's child might be, and Ferdinand says they must use drastic measures "to purge infected blood." He says that he'll have the Duchess cut to pieces, and the Cardinal curses nature for placing women's hearts on their left side (which supposedly made them sinister). Ferdinand curses men for being so foolish as to trust women and he describes the Duchess as a laughing hyena. Ferdinand asks his brother to talk to him before his imagination leads him to see her in the act of sin.

The Cardinal is worried that their royal bloodline will be tainted (or, as Ferdinand puts it, infected) by the introduction of lesser blood through a lower class father, but he is also worried that his own reputation and honor are threatened by the Duchess's actions. We can note that Ferdinand seems very aware that he is now liable to commit a serious sin.

Ferdinand starts imagining who the Duchess's lover might be. When the Cardinal tries to calm him, Ferdinand says that it's "not your whore's milk that shall quench my wild fire, / But your whore's **blood**!" The Cardinal says that this rage is much too loud, and that it is deforming Ferdinand and making him beastly.

Ferdinand proclaims that the only way to calm himself down is to spill the Duchess's blood—we see that anger has the power to deform humans and animalize them, foreshadowing Ferdinand's supposed werewolf condition later in the play.

Ferdinand then calms down and says he will study calmness and practice seeming calm even though he is still enraged. He says he could kill the Duchess now by killing himself or the Cardinal, since he thinks that the Duchess' disobedience is heaven's revenge on the brothers for their sins. Ferdinand, still overcome with rage, promises such a horrible and gruesome vengeance against the Duchess that the Cardinal threatens to leave. But Ferdinand says that he'll calm down, and that, until he knows who is sleeping with the Duchess, he'll do nothing.

Ferdinand continues to practice what seems to be the defining characteristic of corruption: cultivating an appearance that's at odds with reality. He also posits a theory that the Duchess' disobedience is actually a punishment to the brothers from heaven, not a legitimate choice. In this way he questions the righteousness of his own actions, but he also robs the Duchess of any agency.

ACT 3, SCENE 1

In Amalfi, some years later, Antonio greets Delio, who has been away from court for some time. He informs Delio that he and the Duchess have had two more children. Delio asks if this news has reached the Cardinal, and Antonio responds that he fears it has, as Ferdinand has been acting strangely. The common people say that the Duchess is a "strumpet," and they assume that Antonio has been getting rich dishonestly by stealing from the Duchess. They never even imagine that the two are married.

Antonio is afraid that Ferdinand knows about the births, because, despite Ferdinand's claims that he would learn to be calm and do nothing until he had solid evidence of who the father is, Ferdinand has apparently been unable to completely conceal his fury. It's also telling that the clues to Antonio being the father of the Duchess' children are under everyone's noses, but nobody suspects him—this points to the rigidity of the class structure.

Ferdinand, the Duchess, and Bosola then enter, and Ferdinand says that he's going to bed. He suggests to the Duchess that she marry Count Malateste, but she says that he's insufficient, and that if she marries again it will be for Ferdinand's honor. The Duke tries to talk to Antonio, but the Duchess cuts him off, telling him that she wants to talk about the rumors that have been circulating about her honor. Ferdinand says he doesn't want to hear it, but he assures her that even if the rumors were true, he would forgive her. She gives an aside of relief and then exits along with Antonio and Delio.

Here the Duchess pretends to take up the same argument that the Cardinal and Ferdinand made, namely that by marrying below her status she will bring dishonor to herself and to the family. She makes this argument in order to avoid having to marry, since obviously she has already married Antonio. Given Ferdinand's threats, it's also fairly obvious to the audience that his promise to forgive the Duchess if she has done anything against his wishes is preposterous.

Now alone, Ferdinand asks Bosola what new information he has. Bosola says that it's rumored that the Duchess has had three bastards, but it's unknown who the father is. Bosola suspects that someone has used sorcery to make the Duchess fall in love with them. Ferdinand asks if Bosola really believes in such potions, and Bosala says that he certainly does. Ferdinand dismisses these tricks as either lies or **poisons** that drive people insane. The only witchcraft, he says, is in the Duchess's "rank **blood**."

In another revelation about the play's most complex character, we learn that Bosola believes in love potions. It's unsurprising in light of his use of apricots to successfully induce the Duchess' labor. When Ferdinand refers to the witchcraft in the Duchess' "rank blood," he uses "rank" here to mean disgusting, but it also refers to status.

After dismissing Bosola's beliefs about potions, Ferdinand asks for a key to the Duchess's bedchamber. Bosola asks Ferdinand what he intends to do with the key and then attempts to guess, but unsuccessfully. Ferdinand tells Bosola not even to try to figure it out, and he declares himself impossible to understand.

Even without Ferdinand's sexual comments earlier in the play, his request for the key to the Duchess's bedchamber would have struck audiences as extremely inappropriate. In a very theatrical moment, Ferdinand tries to keep Bosola (and the audience) guessing; he declares himself to be a mystery.

ACT 3, SCENE 2

In the Duchess's bedchamber, the Duchess warns Antonio that he cannot stay with her tonight. He responds that he will try to persuade her. In a series of quick lines, he says that he must sleep there, but she denies him. She asks to what use he'll put her, and he says they'll sleep together. She responds by asking what pleasure lovers can find in sleep, and Cariola jokes that the Duchess tosses and turns in the night, but Antonio says that he'll like her better for it.

Before Ferdinand confronts the Duchess, we are given a glimpse into how her romance with Antonio has developed. The couple jokes with one another, and Antonio clearly wishes to stay in the same bed as the Duchess, even though Cariola jokes that she tosses and turns while sleeping.

Cariola then asks Antonio why he always rises so early when he sleeps with the Duchess, to which he responds that working men count the clock and are happy when the job's done, implying that sleeping with the Duchess is work. She shuts him up with a kiss, and then another, and Antonio asks if Cariola will ever marry. Cariola says that she will not, which launches Antonio into a speech in which he tells her to forego single life. He says that they can read how Daphne fled and was turned into a "fruitless bay-tree," Syrinx turned into a reed, and Anaxarete turned into marble. Women who married or were kind to their lovers, on the other hand, turned into olives, pomegranates, mulberry, flowers, precious stones, and stars.

Antonio's joke that sleeping with the Duchess is work recalls the fact that he was (and technically still is) her steward. Antonio's transformation imagery is essentially all from Ovid's Metamorphoses, *in which women like Daphne are transformed for denying their lovers. Those who denied their lovers were transformed into barren and negative objects and plants, while those who were kind to lovers turned into fruit bearing trees, beautiful flowers, and generally positive things. Antonio's allusion to Ovid is meant to convince Cariola to marry someone.*

Cariola dismisses Antonio's poetry, and then she asks him, between a wise man, a rich man, and a handsome one, which she should choose. Antonio says that it is a difficult question, referencing Paris's choice between goddesses that led to the Trojan War. He then asks the ladies why "hard-favored women" often keep "worse-favored" women as attendants and servants instead of pretty ones. The Duchess responds with a simple analogy, saying that bad painters never desire to have their shops next door to excellent painters. Antonio and Cariola then depart for a few moments.

Again, Antonio references classical literature in order to give insight into questions of love. While Antonio's question about unattractive women seems to call attention to the gendered importance of beauty, Cariola has just asked, essentially, whether looks, wisdom, or wealth is most important in a man. This gives the sense that attractiveness is considered important for both men and women.

As the Duchess talks to herself, Ferdinand enters behind her. She turns to see him and, terrified, wonders aloud if she will live or die. Ferdinand tells her to die and hands her a knife. He asks where her virtue has gone, and curses the imperfection of human reason, which frustratingly allows us to foresee bad things, but not prevent them. He tells her she is moving past all boundaries of shame, but she interrupts to deny any shame and explain that she is married. She asks if he'd like to see her husband, but Ferdinand says he would do so only if he could change eyes with a basilisk.

This interaction is inappropriate (given the location) and terrifying. When Ferdinand presents the Duchess with a knife, it's not unreasonable to think he might kill her on the spot. Note that a basilisk's eyes kill with a glance, so Ferdinand is suggesting he would kill the Duchess's husband.

Ferdinand then proceeds to curse the Duchess, calling her a screech owl, and he says that he doesn't want to know anything else because he's afraid it will cause him to act in extreme violence, thereby damning them both. He says that if she wants her husband to grow old, then she had better not let the sun shine on him.

Ferdinand again seems aware that he is on the verge of committing a sin so severe it will land him in hell, and he once again implies that he's ready to kill the Duchess's husband.

Ferdinand accuses the Duchess of disrespecting her dead first husband. The Duchess responds that Ferdinand is being too strict, since as a married woman her reputation is safe. He responds with an anecdote about reputation that implies that, once reputation is gone, it can never be regained. He says that her reputation is gone, and that he'll never see her again. She asks why she, alone out of all the princesses in the world, should be locked up and unable to marry, but he just reaffirms that he'll never see her again and exits.

The Duchess, we know, hoped that her reputation would not be lost by marrying Antonio, but Ferdinand is convinced that her reputation is gone and will never return. The Duchess continues to press Ferdinand, asking why they don't want her to remarry, since young widows often do, but Ferdinand here continues to obfuscate his reasons, possibly because he doesn't want to admit the incestuous ones.

Ferdinand leaves, and immediately afterwards Antonio reenters with a pistol and with Cariola. Antonio says that he saw Ferdinand (hence the pistol), and, wondering how Ferdinand got to the Duchess's chamber, he accuses Cariola of betraying them. Cariola, however, claims innocence. The Duchess shows them the knife given to her by Ferdinand, and they surmise that he wanted her to kill herself. At this point Bosola knocks, and Antonio leaves again so as not to be discovered as the Duchess's lover.

Ferdinand was apparently so disgusted and ashamed of the Duchess that he hoped she would kill herself—perhaps he gave her the knife as a way to spare himself from killing her, which he has admitted would condemn him to hell. Though the brothers are furious at the Duchess, they still don't know who the father is, so Antonio takes precautions to keep himself safe.

Bosola enters and says that Ferdinand has rushed off to Rome. But he also reveals that before Ferdinand left, he had said that the Duchess was "undone." Bosola asks what has happened. The Duchess makes up a lie: that Antonio has used his position to steal from her and in doing so has placed Ferdinand in a precarious position with Neapolitan moneylenders. Bosola exits. When Antonio re-enters, the Duchess tells him that he must leave and go to the town of Ancona, where she'll send her money and follow as soon as she's able. She also lets him know that she will accuse him of a fake crime.

The Duchess invents this crime story in order to secure a safe future for herself, Antonio, and their children. The convenience of this lie is that it trades on what the common people in Amalfi already suspect: that Antonio has been stealing. When Ferdinand says that the Duchess is "undone" he uses a double meaning: undone could refer to a state of undress, or to disgrace.

Bosola reenters with some officers and the Duchess pretends to accuse Antonio of losing her money and stealing from her. She tells the men to let Antonio go, since she wants to fire him but doesn't want the information to get out. He curses the inconstancy of service, and after the Duchess says she's confiscating the remainder of his accounts, he exits. The Duchess asks for opinions about Antonio, and the officers make some quips before she dismisses them.

The Duchess seems to say that she's firing Antonio, but she doesn't want him punished because she's embarrassed that he's been stealing from her. The moment is confusing, but the officers don't seem concerned. This moment has hints of meta-theatricality, as Antonio and the Duchess are putting on a little show to seem like they are not married.

The Duchess then asks Bosola for his opinion. He says that she'll probably never have a servant as good as Antonio, whom he pities. She responds in confusion, saying that Antonio stole from her, but Bosola says that Antonio was honest and faithful, and that he deserved a better fortune because he was so virtuous. After Bosola's lengthy praise of Antonio, the Duchess bursts out that it's like music to her, since Antonio is her husband.

Bosola isn't acting as a spy here; he is simply giving Antonio genuine praise, since the two seem to have mutual respect. He recognizes that Antonio is virtuous, and he wishes that the world worked in such a way that virtue was rewarded with good fortune.

Upon finding this out, Bosola questions aloud if he is dreaming, wondering if, in this time, someone could truly marry a man just for his merit. When he finds out that the Duchess has had three children by Antonio, he launches into a speech praising her for demonstrating that benefits can still fall on people based on merit. The Duchess then tells Bosola to take her money and follow Antonio to Ancona, where she hopes to follow in a few days by faking a pilgrimage. Cariola interjects that she'd prefer it if the Duchess didn't jest with religion, but the Duchess calls her a superstitious fool and moves forward with the plan.

Bosola is shocked, since for his entire life he has been told and shown that merit is meaningless; birth and class alone determine wealth and fortune. Bosola praises the Duchess for showing that even in a superficial world, good things can happen to people simply because they deserve it. Note that Cariola thinks faking a pilgrimage is sacrilegious, but the Duchess finds this to be mere superstition—throughout the play, superstitions tend to foreshadow tragic turns of events, like when Antonio drops the horoscope.

After the ladies exit, Bosola is left alone to lament that he is a spy. Every profession, he says, has its benefit—at least his status and income will be improved after he reports this information.

Bosola continues to be plagued by guilt for acting as a spy, especially since he pities and respects Antonio so much.

ACT 3, SCENE 3

In the Cardinal's residence in Rome, the Cardinal and a Roman courtier named Malateste discuss war and the French king. Meanwhile, on the other side of the stage, Ferdinand, Delio, Silvio, and Pescara, a soldier and courtier, discuss Malateste, who they say is a terrible soldier. Bosola then enters and whispers to the Cardinal and Ferdinand, while Pescara, Silvo, and Delio wonder what's happening. Delio notes that Bosola is a "fantastical scholar," meaning that he studies esoteric details like the symmetry of Caesar's nose. Pescara remarks on how furious Ferdinand looks and how he laughs like a deadly cannon.

Malateste is an example of someone who is a flatterer; he is clearly trying only to advance his social status. Bosola's character is further complicated by the knowledge that he is a fantastical scholar; he's at once scholarly and a murderer, honest and dishonest. Again we see Ferdinand's inability to conceal his inner fury and emotions, confirming what he told the Duchess earlier in the play (your face will betray your heart) to be true.

Focus shifts to the conversation between Ferdinand, the Cardinal, and Bosola. The Cardinal says that the Duchess is using religion as her cover to flee with her children and Antonio, which Ferdinand says damns her. Ferdinand notes that, since her intentions are not purely religious and are meant to cover up her dishonorable second marriage, the more pure she tries to seem the fouler she truly is. The Cardinal says he'll get the state of Ancona to banish the Duchess and her family, and Ferdinand says that he won't attend the banishment ceremony. He instructs Bosola to write to the Duchess's child from her first husband, and he curses Antonio before the scene ends.

In the same line of thinking Cariola had, Ferdinand notes that by using religion as a pretense for personal gain, the Duchess damns herself; the purer she tries to seem, the worse she is really being. This, of course, is ironic, as using religion as a tool for personal gain is essentially the Cardinal's means of power. The Duchess's child from her first marriage isn't otherwise mentioned in the play, perhaps due to an oversight from the playwright.

ACT 3, SCENE 4

This scene takes place at a shrine to which the Duchess fled under the pretense of a religious pilgrimage. Two Pilgrims comment that the Cardinal is apparently going to "resign his cardinal's hat" at the shrine. The Duchess, who is soon to arrive at the same shrine, is expected to pray publicly in fulfillment of her vowed pilgrimage. After the pilgrims say they expect the ceremony to be excellent, the play breaks into dumb show, meaning that the actors silently act out a scene while music plays in the background. During the dumb show, the Cardinal is dressed and presented as a soldier. Then Antonio, the Duchess, and their children all pray and present themselves at the shrine. The Cardinal removes the Duchess's wedding ring and formally banishes her and her entire family from Ancona.

Here the Cardinal does exactly what Ferdinand just criticized the Duchess for doing: he uses a religious show for personal reasons and abuses his power by having the Duchess and her family banished. The Cardinal seems to combine religious influence with a stately soldier's power to take this essentially unjustified legal action. This is the first time that the Duchess, Antonio, and their family are in public together, during which they are immediately shamed.

After the dumb show, the Pilgrims wonder why the Cardinal is being so cruel to the Duchess. They repeat the information that she has been banished, and wonder how the state has the right to do such a thing. They believe that the Pope has interceded at the behest of the Cardinal, which they think is unjust, and they note that the Cardinal went so far as to take the Duchess's wedding ring off her finger. The pilgrims use a metaphor about a man sinking in a well under his own weight, suggesting that the hardship and injustice that befalls a person is punishment for his or her own misdeeds.

The public response seems to be that the Cardinal is being unnecessarily cruel to the Duchess. At the same time, the pilgrims echo Ferdinand's sentiment that our hardships and problems are really punishments generated by our own sins and misdeeds. The banishment and the involvement of the Pope is a clear cut example of corruption and abuse of power, and it's visible to all; here the Cardinal breaks his pattern of dealing mostly in the shadows.

ACT 3, SCENE 5

Near the shrine, Antonio, the Duchess, their children, Cariola, and a few servants have been banished from Ancona. Antonio notes that their group has been vastly reduced in size, since most of the staff have found other opportunities since the banishment. The Duchess says that she had a strange dream that she wore her coronet of state, but the diamonds were changed to pearls. Antonio interprets the dream, saying that he believes the pearls signify tears, which suggests that the Duchess will soon be forced to weep.

Most of the servants and courtiers attending the Duchess have abandoned her, since what they really wanted from her was social and financial advancement. Since her banishment makes that impossible, they've found other jobs. Antonio rightly interprets the Duchess's dream, which foreshadows the misery and suffering that are about to unfold.

Bosola then enters with a letter from Ferdinand that is supposedly "all love and safety." But the Duchess immediately calls Bosola out for describing the letter in this way, saying that it's just a calm before the storm, and that false hearts speak kindly to those that they are about to hurt. Though the letter asks for a meeting with Antonio, both the Duchess and Antonio assume that Ferdinand actually wants Antonio dead. Antonio thus refuses the invitation; he will not see the Duke and the Cardinal until he's certain that they are placated and will not harm him.

Like Ferdinand's comment that the Duchess is most foul when seeming most pure, the Duchess believes that her brothers are merely attempting to seem nice before killing Antonio. The brothers have apparently become less and less skilled at concealing their true selves by this point in the play.

Bosola exits, and the Duchess says that she is afraid there will be an ambush. She tells Antonio to take their eldest son to Milan, using an expression equivalent to "let's not have all our eggs in one basket." She says that she isn't sure what's worse, seeing Antonio dead or parting with him, and she bids her son farewell, saying that he's happier for not understanding what's happening, since wit just brings a truer understanding of sorrow. Antonio tells her not to weep, as heaven fashioned them out of nothing, and they are moving towards an eventual reunion in heaven. The Duchess notes that his speech sounds like that of a father on his deathbed, and Antonio and their son exit.

Antonio and the Duchess split up the children in the hopes that some of them will survive. She plays on the trope that parting with the beloved is akin to death, and she essentially tells her son that ignorance is bliss, slightly echoing Bosola's comment that wisdom leads only to folly. Antonio uses an appeal to faith and the afterlife in order to calm the Duchess down and provide the family with hope. The Duchess, though, seems to know that she'll never see her husband again in this life.

As soon as Antonio leaves, the dejected Duchess finds herself facing a disguised Bosola and several troops. Bosola says that she is not to see her husband anymore, and she questions who he is to act like a god. He responds that he is taking her to her palace, not a prison. The Duchess says that Charon's boat brings the dead across the river Styx into Hades and brings no one back, which implies that she knows that she will never leave the palace again. Though Bosola claims that her brothers want to keep her safe, she does not trust them. Bosola asks about her children, to which the Duchess replies that if she were a man, she'd beat Bosola's mask into his face.

The Duchess's references the mythology of Hades suggest both that she knows she is about to suffer, and that she knows her she will soon be imprisoned, even if she is just being confined to her palace. She continues to express independence and frustration with social mores, saying that she'd strike Bosola if she were a man. While she is able to invert the courtship tradition, she's unable to fully subvert her role and physically overpower Bosola.

When Bosola tells the Duchess to forget Antonio because of his low birth, she responds by telling an story about a salmon that swims into the sea and meets a dogfish, who asks the salmon why it is so bold as to enter the esteemed waters of the ocean, since salmon only live in shallow rivers with shrimps. The salmon responds first with thanks that both of them have not been captured by fishermen, and says that their value cannot truly be known until they're caught and sold in the market; the salmon's price might be higher than the dogfish's, even though that just makes the salmon closer to being eaten. The moral of the story, the Duchesss says, is that men are often valued when they are most wretched. After her speech, she agrees to go with Bosola (though she doesn't really have a choice).

The Duchess's story about the salmon is an allegory about social class. The salmon appears to be lowly when going from a river to the ocean, but in the fish market, it might be valued more than an ocean fish. The story has two implications. First, that it's not always obvious what kind of fish (or person) is most valuable. Second, a good value might not always be what it seems, as the higher value in the fish market just means the fish is more likely to be eaten. All of this is to say that society makes the mistake of placing emphasis on class and valuing despicable people like her brothers.

ACT 4, SCENE 1

In Amalfi, Ferdinand asks Bosola how the Duchess is bearing herself during her imprisonment. Bosola responds that she is doing it so nobly as to give majesty to adversity. Bosola seems to pity her. Ferdinand expresses frustration with himself since he is not making her more miserable, and he instructs Bosola to tell the Duchess his message. Ferdinand then exits.

Ever noble, the Duchess is taking her punishment and imprisonment well, which infuriates Ferdinand, who wants to make her miserable. Bosola begins expressing more pity for the Duchess, not just for Antonio as he did in previous scenes.

The Duchess enters, and Bosola greets her kindly, to which she responds that he is wrapping **poison** in gold and sugar. Bosola relays Ferdinand's message: Ferdinand is going to visit her, but since Ferdinand vowed never to see her again, he'll come at night. She is therefore not to use any candles or torches in her chamber so that he won't be able to see her. When he visits, he'll kiss her hand and they will reconcile.

To the Duchess, Bosola's kind greeting is just another false face hiding bad intentions. Ferdinand has sworn never to see the Duchess again; therefore, in another creepy moment, he has decided to reconcile with her in her chamber in complete darkness.

The two of them put out the lights, and Ferdinand enters. He comments that the darkness suits her well. The Duchess asks for his pardon, and he says that he grants it, since it is the most honorable revenge to pardon when he could kill. Then he calls her children bastards and her a slut, and puts a hand into hers. She kisses it, thinking the hand is Ferdinand's, but soon comments that his hand seems very cold and unhealthy. Ferdinand then asks for the lights to come on, but quickly exits before they come on. In the light, the Duchess sees that she has been holding a dead man's hand.

Ferdinand begins by making a rude remark about his sister's appearance, continuing to exhibit strange sexual feelings. He then plays the horrifying trick of getting her to kiss a dead man's hand in the hopes of convincing her that her husband has been murdered. By keeping her alive when he could kill her, Ferdinand says he seeks honorable revenge. In reality, he simply wants her alive so that she can suffer greater hardships before death.

Suddenly a curtain is illuminated, upon which appear the silhouettes of Antonio and their children, looking as if they were dead. Bosola states that the hand came from Antonio, that her family members are all dead, and that she should stop grieving for that which she can never recover. The Duchess replies that this knowledge consumes her like a **disease**, and she asks to be tied to the dead body so she can freeze to death. Bosola says she must live, to which the Duchess replies that living when you want to die is the greatest torture souls feel in hell. He reminds her that she is a Christian, which prompts her to say that she'll starve herself to death.

Bosola once compared wisdom to a disease, and similarly, the Duchess compares the news that her family is dead to a disease. Living when she wants to die, she says, is the greatest torture in all of hell, thereby showing that for a moment Ferdinand achieved his goal of a torturous "honorable revenge." The Duchess can't kill herself, however, as the Christian consequence of suicide is eternal damnation.

Bosola tries to comfort her, saying that things get better when they are at their worst, but she equates this to a kind of torture and says again that she wants to die, calling the world a "tedious theater" in which she plays a part against her will. A servant enters and wishes her long life. She curses him for it, before going on to curse the stars, the seasons, and the whole world. She calls for plague and **disease** to consume families, and for those families to be remembered only for the bad things they have done while heaven punishes them. She concludes by saying that she longs to bleed, and it would be a mercy to die quickly.

In a meta-theatrical moment, the Duchess refers to the entire world as a theatre, and she says that in this theater she is forced to play a part (i.e., live) against her will. Her suffering is such that what would once be a blessing (a wish for long life) is transformed into a horrible curse, echoing the inversion of sacred and profane that Bosola earlier attributed to the devil.

The Duchess then leaves the room (though probably not the palace, as she's imprisoned), and Ferdinand reenters, excited that she finally seems to be experiencing despair. Bosola urges Ferdinand to cease his cruelty, but Ferdinand yells "Damn her!" and says that her body was once worth more than her soul, back when her **blood** was pure. He then outlines a plan to relocate a group of madmen from the asylum and lodge them next-door to the Duchess. The plan is that their mad howling will torture her by preventing her from sleeping. Bosola tries to refuse to see the Duchess again, but Ferdinand says that Bosola must. Bosola replies that he will only ever visit her when in disguise. Ferdinand responds that Bosola's pity doesn't suit him well, and then begins to plan his revenge on Antonio, who he knows is in Milan.

Though Bosola pities the Duchess and urges Ferdinand to be kind to her, Ferdinand is still not satisfied with her torture. He even goes as far to suggest that, when her blood was pure, her body was worth more than her soul—this is an inversion of traditional church doctrine, which elevates soul above the body. Bosola feels so guilty about his involvement in these tortures that he elects never to see the Duchess without a disguise again to prevent him from feeling as ashamed. Ferdinand characterizes this pity as weak and moves on in plotting his revenge

ACT 4, SCENE 2

In the Amalfi palace, the Duchess and Cariola hear a horrible noise offstage. Cariola says that it's the cohort of madmen that Ferdinand relocated from the asylum to torture the Duchess and keep her sleepless. The Duchess replies that the madmen's noise and nonsense actually keep her distracted, while silence and reason drive her insane. She then asks Cariola to tell her a tragic tale to make her own grief seem smaller. She comments that, like a bird in a cage, she will not live long. The Duchess says she wishes it were possible to commune with the dead so that she could learn from them. She says it's a miracle that she hasn't gone insane yet, but she acknowledges that she is becoming more comfortable with her suffering.

While the madmen are intended to keep the Duchess up at night as a torture, they have the opposite affect, as having silence and time to think upset her. Even in imprisonment, the Duchess subverts her brother's authority. As she becomes accustomed to her pain and suffering, the Duchess acknowledges that she isn't likely to live much longer. Her own resistance to going insane will later be contrasted with Ferdinand's insanity.

A servant then enters and informs them that Ferdinand is sending in the madmen as a sort of cure to treat her melancholy. The servant describes some of the madmen who will enter, including a mad lawyer, a secular priest, a doctor, an astrologer and a crazed English tailor. The madmen enter, sing a song, take turns speaking nonsense, and do a dance. Then Bosola enters, disguised as an old man, and the madmen and the servant exit.

This parade of madmen seems almost humorous and light hearted compared to the actions that follow. The Duchess, we know, does not respond to the madmen torture as Ferdinand expected, and they inadvertently act as a momentary cure for her misery.

Bosola says that he has come to make the Duchess's tomb. She asks if he thinks that she is sick, and he responds that he does, and that it's all the more dangerous since the **disease** is unfelt and therefore undetectable to her. She asks if he knows her, and he responds that she is a mummy. He launches into a speech about the fragility of flesh and he likens the body to a prison of the soul. She asks if she is his duchess, and he responds that she's a great woman and that her hairs are going gray early. He tells her that she loses sleep because of her debauchery.

Unlike Ferdinand, who said the body was worth more than the soul, Bosola calls the body the soul's prison. He also says that the Duchess's body is sick with some undetectable disease, and that she is losing sleep because of the way she has been acting. Such a diagnosis recalls Antonio's comment at the beginning of the play that Bosola's melancholy, like sleeplessness, would lead to physical consequences.

At this point, the Duchess proclaims that she is still the Duchess of Malfi. She calls Bosola plain (though she doesn't know his identity), and he responds that he's simply a tomb maker there to flatter the dead. She asks what the tomb will be made of and how the dead are prepared in the tombs before asking him why he has really come. He says that he'll explain, and as he says it Executioners enter with a coffin, cords, and a bell. Bosola tells the Duchess that the executioners are a present from her brothers, and that she is going to die.

Even in the face of torture and death, the Duchess remains proud and confident in her identity. Part of what makes her character so dignified is her ability to keep composure, virtue, and dignity even in moments of distress and utter despair. She even keeps up her sharp wit in discussion with the man she knows is about to have her killed.

In the face of this horror, she says that she has obedience in her **blood** and explains that death does not frighten her. Bosola rings the bell, and then gives a rhyming speech to prepare the Duchess for death. Cariola starts yelling for help, but the Duchess knows that it is hopeless and, as executioners force Cariola out, the Duchess asks Cariola to look after her children. The Duchess says she's not afraid of death since she'll meet such good company in the next world. Bosola replies that the cord should terrify her, but she says that it doesn't matter how she dies, since there are thousands of ways to die. She asks her killers to tell her brothers that death is the best gift that they can give her, and she asks them to give her body to her women once she is dead. Once one executioner agrees, she tells him to pull strongly. The Duchess kneels and calls out for violent death to serve as a stupefying drug and put her to sleep. The executioners then strangle her.

Continuing to maintain fearlessness and pride, the Duchess says she's unafraid of death. She remains calm while Cariola panics, in part because she has faith that she'll meet good people in heaven. We can note that while she was dismissive of religion earlier in the play, at death's door she seems to embrace it as a comforting factor. She's also comforted by the fact that everyone dies, and that there are thousands of ways for a person to die. Finally, since she thinks that her family is dead, she considers existence to be simply pain and suffering. In a final subversion of her brothers' will, she treats the death as the best gift they could give her.

Bosola instructs some of the executioners to go and strangle the children. Cariola is brought by other executioners back into the room, and she begins begging for her life. She says that she can't die yet, since she hasn't had a judicial hearing, but Bosola ignores this. She pleads that she is engaged, but an executioner says that the noose will be her wedding ring. She tells them that if she dies now she'll be damned since she hasn't been to confession for two years, and she even says that she's pregnant, but they strangle her anyway and exit with her body.

The onstage death of the children is possibly the most brutal moment in the play. Cariola begging for her life is also gruesome. Interestingly, while she was careful about religion earlier in the play and advised against the pilgrimage ruse, here she says (possibly just to save herself) that she'll go to hell for skipping confession for two years. This might be a lie, however, as we have no indication that she's been engaged or pregnant before now.

Ferdinand enters and asks if the Duchess is dead, to which Bosola responds that she is. Bosola asks what the children have done to deserve this fate, but Ferdinand says the death of young wolves is not to be pitied. He stares at the Duchess's body, and Bosola asks if this causes him to weep, since, while other sins speak, "murder shrieks out" and "**blood** flies upwards" to heaven. Ferdinand says that she died young, but Bosola says he thinks she suffered for too long and covers her face.

Bosola seems immediately disgusted with what he feels he has been forced to do. Murder, he says, is the loudest (implying the worst) sin, a turning point from his position that dishonesty was worse than murder. Bosola seems to understand that, by the end, the Duchess's life was pure suffering.

Ferdinand then reveals that he and the Duchess were twins, and he asks Bosola to uncover her face. He asks why Bosola didn't pity the Duchess and disobey him, saying that if Bosola had disobeyed he might have prevented this revenge from happening. Ferdinand confesses that he had hoped that the Duchess wouldn't marry so that he could inherit her wealth, and he adds that Bosola is like a good actor cursed to play a villain in a tragedy. Bosola asks for payment, and Ferdinand says that he'll pay him with a pardon, since technically the death was ordered extra-judicially and is therefore a murder. Ferdinand threateningly tells Bosola that Bosola will die for this crime, and when Bosola asks who will reveal it, Ferdinand responds that wolves will find the Duchess's grave and dig her up to reveal the murder.

Though he doesn't pity the children, upon seeing the Duchess's body Ferdinand immediately begins to show remorse. He begins back tracking, wishing that Bosola, who felt obligated to obey, had done something to prevent the Duchess from dying. Here he reveals the reason for wanting the Duchess not to marry, though he does not mention his incestuous desire. In another meta-theatrical moment, he calls Bosola a good actor forced to play a villain in a tragedy, a perfect metaphor for Bosola being a good person forced to be a killer.

Bosola demands his payment, but Ferdinand rebuffs Bosola's request and tells him to get out of his sight. Bosola says that Ferdinand and his brother have rotten hearts, and that they are truly brothers since treason, like the plague, runs in the **blood**. Bosola says that he feels like he has woken up from a dream and is now angry at himself for serving the Duke even though he hated what he was doing. Bosola says he only obeyed because he believed his duty to the Duke was greater than his guilt and his desire not to do the evil acts. The Duke admits it was an act of darkness, and exits.

Though he feels guilty, Bosola wants his payment and increased social status. Bosola seems shocked and becomes even more disillusioned with the actions he's been forced into, and he begins to reassess whether his moral duty or duty to the Duke is greater. Ferdinand's admission that it was a dark mistake to kill the Duchess is the first indication that he is beginning to unravel.

Bosola reflects that if he had the opportunity to do everything again, he wouldn't trade peace of conscience for all of the wealth in Europe. He then notices that the Duchess is stirring, and he calls on her soul to return and lead his to hell. For a moment, she wakes up and says "Antonio?" Bosola tells her that her husband is in fact alive, explaining briefly that the dead bodies she saw were tricks. The Duchess cries "mercy" and then dies for real.

Bosola regrets compromising his morals for the promise of wealth and an improved social status. The Duchess comes back to life only long enough for audiences to think she might live, only to be crushed when she dies for real a moment later. It's ironic that, after the merciless violence she has experienced, her final word is "mercy."

Bosola cries over her death, exhibiting what he calls "manly sorrow," and he notes that he wishes that he had allowed these emotions to sway him when she was still alive. He decides to carry out her last will by bringing her body to the women like she requested. Afterwards, he says, he'll head to Milan.

Crying manly tears, Bosola exhibits a small reversal of gender roles. This is apparent, too, in his wish that he had allowed his moral duty and his emotions to overpower his sense of duty to the murderous Ferdinand.

ACT 5, SCENE 1

In Milan, Antonio asks Delio what his chances of reconciling with the brothers are. Delio says it's unlikely, as the brothers' kind letters promising safe passage seem likely to be nothing more than traps. Delio notes that The Marquis of Pescara has been prompted to seize much of Antonio's lands, and he argues that if the Cardinal and Ferdinand are depriving Antonio of his means of life – his property and wealth – they probably don't have good intentions for his actual life either. Pescara approaches, and Antonio hides so that Delio can confirm that Antonio's land is up for grabs.

Antonio and Delio use the Cardinal and Ferdinand's immoral, corrupt seizure of Antonio's lands as a measure of the brothers' feelings toward him. They are rightly suspicious that the letters promising safety are more attempts to conceal bad intentions with kindness.

Once Pescara enters, Delio asks for one of Antonio's citadels, but Pescara says no. Then Julia enters with a letter from the Cardinal asking Pescara to give the same citadel to Julia. Pescara gives it to her and she exits, prompting Delio to ask why he was denied. Pescara responds that Antonio's land was taken illegally by the Cardinal's force. He says he didn't want to give property so unjustly obtained to a friend, and that he's glad that this tainted land is going to such a bad person. Pescara tells Delio that if he asks for noble things, Pescara will be happy to oblige him. Ferdinand is apparently sick with a frenzy, Pescara notes as he departs.

Pescara reveals himself to be a man of virtue and principle, as he recognizes that the Cardinal's theft of Antonio's lands is unjust. Even possessing something gained by unjust means, he says, is dishonorable. Pescara reveals, too, that Ferdinand has continued to visibly unravel, and is now completely unable to conceal his internal turmoil.

Antonio comes out from hiding and calls Pescara noble. Then he says that he plans to "venture all my fortune," (which, in fact, is now nothing more than his life) that very night. He has gained access to the Cardinal's private chamber (just as Ferdinand did earlier to the Duchess), and he will go undisguised and with love, and in doing so try to draw "the **poison** out of" the Cardinal and reconcile with the brothers. If he fails, he says, it's better to fall once than to always be falling.

Antonio hopes to reconcile with the Cardinal by drawing the hate out of him, which he compares to poison. Since Antonio has lost essentially everything, he decides to risk what he has. He'd rather die with one great fall than continue to fail and fall perpetually, marking a change from his early hesitancy to take dramatic or extreme action.

ACT 5, SCENE 2

In the Cardinal and Ferdinand's palace in Milan Pescara and a Doctor discuss the condition of the Duke. The doctor says that Ferdinand has the **disease** lycanthropia, which causes people to imagine that they are transformed into wolves and to dig up dead bodies at night. Ferdinand has apparently been seen with a dead man's leg over his shoulder, howling and saying he was a wolf. Ferdinand apparently also said that the only difference between himself and a wolf was that his hair was on the inside instead of the outside, and that the people who spotted him should cut him up to see that he was telling the truth. Despite this, the doctor claims that the Duke seems to have recovered.

Ferdinand's supposed lycanthropia echoes his comment that wolves would discover the Duchess's grave; the condition is clearly driven by his maddening guilt. The image of him digging up actual dead bodies is another one of the play's most gruesome moments. Ferdinand's comment that the only difference between him and a wolf is fur on the inside seems to suggest he's aware of the inversion of internal and external he's been experiencing, and his inability to control what he outwardly projects.

However, the Doctor says that there is reason to anticipate a relapse. Therefore, he wants to try to cure Ferdinand of his madness altogether. Ferdinand, Malateste, the Cardinal, and Bosola then enter. Ferdinand begins acting insane, asking to be left alone and attacking his own shadow, which he says he hopes to carry to hell as a bribe. The Doctor confronts Ferdinand and asks him if he's insane. The doctor says he will try "mad tricks" to heal Ferdinand, by which the doctor means he'll act insane, too. Ferdinand says he's afraid of the doctor and starts undressing, at which point the Cardinal restrains him. The doctor then instructs the Cardinal to let the Duke go, since he believes the Duke is afraid of him and will now act calmly. However, once the Cardinal lets Ferdinand go, Ferdinand attacks the doctor and leaves the room. The doctor then concedes that the cures weren't exactly working.

It's difficult to discern how much of Ferdinand's madness is legitimate, how much of it is feigned, what is to be taken as horrifying, and what is just silly. After claims that he digs up dead bodies, he attacks his own shadow and starts getting naked on stage. The doctor, too, seems to encourage him with strange talk about nonsensical cures. All the while, in his madness, Ferdinand continues to express guilt and subtle hints towards what he's done, causing the Cardinal to fear that Ferdinand will reveal the secret murder.

Standing aside from this spectacle, Bosola comments that a fatal judgment has fallen on Ferdinand. Meanwhile, Pescara asks the Cardinal if he knows what has caused Ferdinand's outburst. The Cardinal lies and tells a story that an old woman who was murdered by her nephews haunted the Duke and sent him into this frenzy. Bosola then steps forward and says that he wants to talk to the Cardinal; everyone else exits.

Bosola reinforces the idea that in this life we experience judgment and punishment for our sins. It's telling that the Cardinal's fabricated story is one of familial betrayal, suggesting that his own guilt is growing—it's just not yet consuming him as Ferdinand's is.

The Cardinal says in an aside that he doesn't want Bosola to know that he was an accessory to the Duchess's murder. The Cardinal then asks Bosola how the Duchess is doing, pretending not to know that she is already dead. He tells Bosola not to worry about Ferdinand's behavior. Julia briefly enters and asks the Cardinal if he is coming to supper. When he says that he's busy, she departs, while remarking to herself how handsome Bosola is.

The Cardinal continues to be careful and calculating, hiding what he knows about the Duchess's death and assuring Bosola that Ferdinand's madness is nothing to worry about. Julia's little aside proclaiming infatuation with Bosola continues to solidify her characterization as an inconstant, promiscuous woman.

The Cardinal then says that he has found the perfect man for the Duchess to marry, but he says that in order to make the match Bosola must first find Antonio and kill him. Bosola asks how he will find Antonio, to which the Cardinal responds that Bosola should follow Delio and possibly bribe him if necessary. After Bosola agrees, the Cardinal exits. Bosola then comments to himself that the Cardinal has nothing but murder in his eyes. Bosola notes that the Cardinal is pretending not to know about the Duchess's death and he says he'll have to be similarly cunning

The Cardinal continues in his lie and shows himself a corrupt mastermind. He is easily able to provide instructions for Bosola to find Antonio, and we can note that by this point in the play the Cardinal has completely abandoned his pretense of ignoring Bosola. Bosola notes that the Cardinal is also losing his ability to conceal his inner thoughts, as he sees nothing but murder in his eyes.

Just then, Julia reenters holding a pistol. She threatens Bosola and accuses him of giving her a love potion, as this is the only explanation she can think of for falling in love with him so quickly. He disarms her by embracing her and taking her gun, and she begins flattering him. Bosola says that he doesn't have the skills to flatter women, but she says that ignorance in courtship (i.e., the inability to smooth-talk) won't be a problem if his affections are genuine. He tells Julia that she is beautiful, and then realizes in an aside that he can use her against the Cardinal. He asks her if the Cardinal would be angry if he saw them together. She replies that the Cardinal would call her a wanton but would not get angry with Bosola. She tells Bosola to ask her to do something right away so that she can show him that she loves him, and he takes this opportunity to ask her to find out why the Cardinal has been melancholy lately. She agrees to be his spy, and has him hide inside a wardrobe.

This courtship scene is at once high-intensity and comedic. Bosola has thus far been uninterested in women, but here he seems taken with Julia, especially when he realizes that he can use her to get information out of the Cardinal. In another inversion of traditional courtship, she educates him on proper flirtation and flattery before he's able to praise her. Given her stereotypical character, it's unsurprising that Bosola doesn't need to work hard to turn this new infatuation to his advantage; Julia almost immediately asks for some task to prove her love to Bosola, and the self-loathing spy recruits her as his own spy against the Cardinal.

The Cardinal then reenters the room, worrying to himself that Ferdinand in his insane state might talk about the murder. Julia asks the Cardinal what's wrong, and he says nothing, but she continues to press. She asks why she can't know his secrets, saying that she's different than all of his flatterers. He tries to explain by having her imagine that he has committed some secret deed that he didn't want anyone to know about, but she replies that the two of them have committed and concealed their adultery. He says that learning the secret will bring about her ruin and will act like a **poison** in her, but she continues to press until he tells her that the Duchess and two of her children have been strangled.

The Cardinal, too, seems to be unraveling, but when Julia presses he declines, at first, to confide in her. He echoes a sentiment expressed earlier in the play, that secrets are like dangerous poisons. It's difficult for the Cardinal to justify keeping the new sin from Julia, though, because the two of them have already committed the secret sin of adultery together. He eventually tells her the truth, and he includes the vivid detail that they were strangled (when he could have just said killed), which possibly indicates a hidden desire to talk about the killing.

The Cardinal asks if Julia can keep this dark secret, but she says that he is in trouble, because she actually cannot keep it. He asks her to swear upon and kiss a book to show she will keep the secret. Once she does it, he announces that her curiosity has killed her, as he **poisoned** the book because he knew she couldn't keep the secret. Bosola hastily emerges from the wardrobe in an attempt to stop the Cardinal, but too late. Julia says that she forgives the Cardinal for the "justice" he has done to her, because even as he did it she was betraying him to Bosola. She then dies.

Upon hearing the truth, Julia immediately knows she is incapable of keeping the secret, a final reinforcement of her inconstant character. After calling the secret a figurative poison, the Cardinal uses literal poison to kill Julia, which he apparently prepared because he knew that she would be unable to handle his secret. Julia reinforces the idea that punishments are generated by sins, as she admits to betraying the Cardinal to Bosola in her dying breath.

Bosola jumps out of the wardrobe and says that he has come to the Cardinal to try to collect payment for his service, since Ferdinand in his crazed state will not pay. The Cardinal threatens to hack Bosola to pieces and demands to know how Bosola got into the wardrobe. Bosola responds that it was all because of Julia's lust. The Cardinal then confesses that he is Bosola's fellow murderer, and says that he has wealth and other honors in store for Bosola. Bosola responds that there are many ways to get what seems like honor and some of them are horrible. The Cardinal tells Bosola to give up his melancholy air, and asks if Bosola will kill Antonio. Bosola says he will. The Cardinal then gives Bosola the master key to his lodgings and tells him to come that night to help remove Julia's body.

Since he's been unable to get the benefits he was promised from Ferdinand, Bosola tries to collect from the Cardinal. The Cardinal, though, is stunned and furious that Bosola has been hiding in his wardrobe, and he makes a violent threat reminiscent of Ferdinand's. After confessing, the Cardinal promises Bosola he will finally get what he wants (wealth, honor, and status) if he agrees to kill Antonio. Bosola is weary of the actions that some take to gain honor, so the audience is not sure if Bosola agreeing to kill Antonio is genuine.

After the Cardinal exits, Bosola cries out that he pities Antonio. He ultimately decides to seek Antonio out and try to get him away from the brothers who have already spilled some of Antonio's **blood** (in the form of Antonion's family); Bosola even says that he might join Antonio in seeking revenge. Bosola comments that he thinks the Duchess is still haunting him, but quickly decides that in fact it is just his remorse.

Here Bosola's pity and guilt overcome all obligation to the Cardinal and Ferdinand. His comment that the Duchess is haunting him foreshadows the appearance of her echo in the following scene.

ACT 5, SCENE 3

Antonio and Delio are outside of the Cardinal's window at his palace in Milan. Unbeknownst to Antonio and Delio, they are very nearby the Duchess's grave, which is evidently right outside the palace. Delio notes that the location has an echo; throughout the scene, the "echoes" are words coming from the Duchess's grave (probably an actor offstage or beneath a trap door). Antonio says that he loves the ancient ruins. He is reflecting on the history and the bodies that lie there when some of his words begin to echo, particularly his words about death.

Antonio is ready to confront the Cardinal in his chamber just like Ferdinand first confronted the Duchess. The eerie echoes of the Duchess add a sort of supernatural element to the play. They are all written such that they sound very similar to the final words of Antonio's phrases, but there are some slight modifications to suggest that perhaps something supernatural is going on.

Antonio notes that the echo sounds like his wife's voice, to which the echo says "aye, wife's voice." The echo seems to discourage him from going to see the Cardinal and tells him to be mindful of his safety, and it goes as far as predicting that Antonio will die. The echo also says that Antonio will never see the Duchess again, since he's risking his life by going to see the Cardinal. Though Antonio doesn't know it yet, here the echo is also implying that the Duchess is dead. Antonito resolves to take the risk of death and meet with the Cardinal. Delio says that he'll take care of Antonio's eldest son and come in as backup if needed.

The echo slightly modifies Antonio's words to add a sense of dread and suspense to the play. It at once suggests that Antonio will soon die, and seems to signal to him that his wife is already dead. The echo is not as intense a theatrical device as a ghost, but it would have been extremely unnerving, especially since it would most likely have been voiced by the actor playing the Duchess.

ACT 5, SCENE 4

In the Cardinal's palace, the Cardinal tells Pescara, Malateste, Roderigo, and Grisolan to leave the sick Ferdinand alone that night. The Cardinal emphasizes that they must promise not to come into the Cardinal's room, even if someone calls for them, and he says that he might even test them and pretend to be in danger. They swear they will not come. After they exit, the Cardinal says to himself that he was taking precautions to ensure privacy to deal with Julia's body. He reveals that his conscience is plaguing him, and that he would pray if the devil weren't stopping him. Meanwhile, Bosola enters, unseen by the Cardinal. Bosola then overhears the Cardinal say that when Bosola has fulfilled his service, he will be killed.

In order to prevent his courtiers from finding out about the murders, the Cardinal orders them not to come to his room no matter what. Later, this will prove a fatal mistake. More and more we see that the Cardinal, too, is being plagued by guilt, to the point where, even though he is a Cardinal, he feels like the devil is preventing him from praying. The Cardinal makes the other key mistake in revealing to Bosola that he plans to have Bosola killed. This is another break from the usually calculating, careful political mastermind presented at the play's start, which shows the extent to which the Cardinal is unraveling.

Ferdinand then enters, saying that "strangling is a very quiet death." Ferdinand continues talking to himself as Bosola hides. Now Antonio and a servant enter, and Antonio says that he hopes to find "him" at his prayers; Antonio is saying that he hopes he can find the Cardinal while he's praying because that will be the best time to make peace with him. In the darkness, however, Bosola thinks that Antonio *is* the Cardinal and Bosola stabs him. Antonio cries that the long plea he had planned to reconcile with the Cardinal has been ended in a minute. When the servant returns with a lantern, Bosola realizes his mistake. Bosola, distraught, says that he would have sacrificed his own life for Antonio's if he could have. He says that he wants to tell Antonio about the Duchess and their children before Antonio dies, and Antonio cuts him off to say that their names are kindling life in him. But Bosola continues on to say that they have been murdered.

The accidental stabbing of Antonio might be comedic if it weren't so tragic. Due to mistaken identity, his whole plan to plead and reconcile with the Cardinal is prematurely ended. Upon realizing his mistake, Bosola reveals just how far he has turned: he was willing to sacrifice his own life for Antonio's to make up for his role in the destruction of the Duchess's family. Similar to the brief moment of hope provided before the Duchess dies, Bosola mentions the Duchess and her children. This mention fills Antonio with life and hope, but, tragically, Bosola immediately sinks that hope by telling Antonio that his family is dead.

This horrible news prompts Antonio to say that he's glad he's dying, since he no longer has any use for his life. He reflects on the pleasures of life, which he says have only prepared him for rest and death. Antonio doesn't try to unravel the mistake and confusion that lead to his death. He simply asks for Bosola to give his regards to Delio, and to tell his oldest son to "fly the courts of princes," which either means that he should escape the Duke and Cardinal, or leave the Italian court and courtly life in general. Antonio dies, and Bosola asks the servant to take Antonio's body to Julia's lodging. He curses the tragic misunderstanding.

By telling Antonio that his family is dead, you could argue that Bosola does him a favor, since it makes it easier for Antonio to accept his death. Like the Duchess does when she thinks Antonio and the children are dead, Antonio completely loses all will to live. His only hope is for his eldest son to escape with his life and to live outside of a corrupt government. We can note that Antonio doesn't even call for revenge against the Cardinal and Ferdinand.

ACT 5, SCENE 5

The Cardinal is in his chambers, holding a book and questioning what hell is like from a scholarly perspective. As he laments the pains of a guilty conscience, Bosola and the Servant enter with Antonio's body. The Cardinal comments that Bosola looks terrible, somehow both determined and fearful. Bosola responds that he has come to kill the Cardinal and draws his sword. The Cardinal begins to howl and yell, and he offers to pay Bosola, but Bosola refuses. Then the Cardinal tries to call the courtiers again; upstairs in the palace, the courtiers hear the Cardinal's cries. Most of the courtiers decide to follow the Cardinal's orders and not intervene, but Pescara finally decides that the Cardinal doesn't sound like he's joking, and goes to investigate.

The Cardinal is now so consumed with guilt that he is checking his scholarly books to better understand what his future in hell will be like. Bosola proudly (and somewhat foolishly) announces that he's there to kill the Cardinal, but the courtiers are so afraid of disobeying the order to stay away that they do not come to the Cardinal's aid when called. Only Pescara, who has been shown as truly honorable and noble, is willing to risk disobeying to see what's truly happening.

Bosola kills the servant to make sure no one will unlock the door to the Cardinal's room. He then admits to the Cardinal that he slayed Antonio by mistake. Bosola stabs the Cardinal twice, at which point Ferdinand enters after hearing the commotion. The Cardinal asks his brother for help, but Ferdinand mistakes him for the devil, and he stabs both the Cardinal and Bosola. The Cardinal cries out that sorrow is "the eldest child of sin." Ferdinand says that Caesar had a better fortune then Pompey, since Caesar died in prosperity while Pompey died in disgrace. He says that the Cardinal and Bosola are now splendid men since they're and dying in the field of battle. He concludes by saying that pain is nothing, and that often one small pain is taken away by the apprehension of a greater one. After Ferdinand states this philosophy on pain, Bosola takes the opportunity for revenge and fatally stabs Ferdinand.

Bosola's murder of the servant seems excessive, but, given the servant's low class, the play pretty much skips over that death. When Ferdinand enters to help, he is by now so insane that he (somewhat ironically) mistakes the Cardinal for the devil. The Cardinal's exclamation continues to echo the sentiment that sorrow and misery are bred by our own sins. Ferdinand seems at once lucid and insane. His lines about Caesar and Pompey seem to suggest he feels some glory in dying in battle, and his philosophy on pain might suggest that his apprehension of dying and going to hell is enough to take away his pain from guilt, thereby figuring death once more as an escape from a life of pain.

Ferdinand, gravely wounded, says that the world is a no better than a dog kennel, and he says that he'll ignore his reputation and hope for "high pleasures beyond death" (i.e. that he will go to heaven). He then cries out for the Duchess, and says "whether we fall by ambition, **blood**, or lust, / Like diamonds we are cut with our own dust," and dies. Bosola says that he is himself on the verge of death just as Pescara, Malateste, Roderigo, and Grisolan enter and ask what's going on. Bosola explains that he has taken revenge for the Duchess of Malfi, who was murdered by the brothers, as well as revenge for Antonio (who was murdered by mistake) and Julia (who was **poisoned** by the Cardinal). Finally, he says, he has taken revenge for himself, who was an actor involved with everything, but against his better nature. The Cardinal explains that Ferdinand wounded them, then prays that they never think of him (the Cardinal) again, and dies.

After his half insane ramblings, Ferdinand turns to religion, cursing the painful earth and hoping to go to heaven despite his bad actions. His fate, though, he says with his final words, is undoubtedly caused by his own actions and sins. We can note that Bosola claims revenge for murders he committed himself at the behest of the Cardinal and Ferdinand. He justifies this seeming hypocrisy by saying that he wanted revenge since he was forced into his role despite his good nature, once more using a meta-theatrical notion that he is an actor in a play. At the end of his life the Cardinal is able to pray again, but only to be forgotten, not forgiven, which does not bode well for his salvation.

Pescara comments on how the Cardinal prevented his own rescue, and Malateste calls Bosola a "wretched thing of **blood**" and asks how Antonio died. Bosola says Antonio died "in a mist," as a way of describing the confusion of that moment, then says he has often seen mistakes such as Antonio's death in plays. Bosola cries out that he is dying, and laments the state of the world he will leave behind. Before dying, he says, "let worthy minds ne'er stagger in distrust / To suffer death or shame for what is just: / Mine is another voyage."

Pescara notes the unfortunate irony of the Cardinal's death, and Malateste's comment recalls Shakespeare's Coriolanus. Bosola's explanation of Antonio's death is a final, overt meta-theatrical moment; he says that the mistake was something only seen in plays. With his final lines he emphasizes the importance of honesty and acting in accordance with one's moral values.

Delio then enters, too late, with Antonio's eldest son and heir. Delio says that he was prepared beforehand for what happened, and he hopes to get the young boy his inheritance. He hopes, too, that the famous, powerful brothers and their horrible deeds are forgotten like footprints in melting snow. Delio ends the play by remarking that he has always believed that nature best serves great men only when it makes them "lords of truth." He then says that integrity is the best friend of reputation, as it has the noble power to outlast even death.

While plays of this era often end with a speech from the highest-ranking character, the deaths in this play are so prolific that they leave a power vacuum; the entire ruling class has perished. Delio closes by giving value to the one virtue that seemingly everyone in the play lacked: integrity and honesty. While some merits might not always lead to tangible benefits, the play seems to suggest that truth and integrity will be rewarded after death.

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