In Act I, Antonio, steward to [**the Duchess**](https://www.supersummary.com/duchess-of-malfi/major-character-analysis/#380017) of Malfi, has just returned from France. He tells his best friend [**Delio**](https://www.supersummary.com/duchess-of-malfi/major-character-analysis/#380022) that France has eliminated corruption from their courts, unlike Italy. For instance, [**the Cardinal**](https://www.supersummary.com/duchess-of-malfi/major-character-analysis/#380019) frequently engages in bribes and deceit; he recently let a man named Bosola—who has also just returned to court—be imprisoned for a murder he ordered. There is also [**Ferdinand**](https://www.supersummary.com/duchess-of-malfi/major-character-analysis/#380018), the Cardinal’s brother, who is duplicitous and antagonistic. By comparison, Antonio expresses admiration for the Cardinal’s sister and Ferdinand’s twin, the Duchess, who he thinks is a model of virtue and nobility.

Ferdinand and the Cardinal do not want the recently-widowed Duchess to remarry because her money would go to her new husband. Ferdinand plants Bosola as a hostler in the Duchess’s household to spy on her. Even though Bosola dislikes the Cardinal for framing him, he agrees to work for Ferdinand. Despite her brothers’ threats and warnings, the Duchess wants to remarry for love. She proposes to Antonio, who is well beneath her social station. He loves her in return and accepts. The Duchess’s maid, Cariola, performs the ceremony.

In Act II, the Duchess and Antonio have been carrying on their marriage in secret, and she is now pregnant. Antonio is increasingly fearful for his family’s safety and sends Delio to Rome, to be closer to Ferdinand and the Cardinal. Bosola hears the Duchess in labor. Antonio tries to distract him, but unknowingly drops a horoscope he had made for his newborn. This confirms Bosola’s suspicions. He sends word to Ferdinand and the Cardinal, who is carrying on an affair with a courtier’s wife, Julia. Ferdinand is enraged by the Duchess’s secret marriage; likewise, the Cardinal is upset that the Duchess “attainted” their family line.

In Act III, years have passed, and the Duchess has two more children. Ferdinand tries to arrange a marriage for her, but she tells him she is already legally married. He breaks into her chambers at night, threatens her, and alerts court officers. The Duchess and Antonio quickly make up a lie about him stealing from her and being banished; she tells him to leave court with their children and she will follow, feigning a pilgrimage. When Antonio is gone, she confesses these plans to Bosola, who tells Ferdinand. The Cardinal intercepts the Duchess and Antonio at their meeting place and banishes them both. The couple split up for safety, Antonio taking one child and the Duchess taking two. The Duchess is quickly captured.

In Act IV, the Duchess is imprisoned but bears it with dignity. When Ferdinand shows her wax bodies that he pretends are the corpses of Antonio and her child, she decides she no longer wants to live. As such, when Ferdinand tries to torture her further, she is unruffled. He finally orders the strangulation of her, her children, and Cariola. Ferdinand and Bosola are both unsettled after her death. Ferdinand accuses Bosola, even though he ordered the death, and refuses to pay him. The Duchess revives for a moment but then passes; Bosola feels extremely guilty.

In Act V, Ferdinand has been diagnosed with lycanthropy. Julia falls in love with Bosola and spies on the Cardinal for him, but the Cardinal kills her after she finds out he helped kill the Duchess. The Cardinal employs Bosola to kill Antonio but Bosola secretly vows to save him. The Cardinal also asks Bosola to help him move Julia’s body. Meanwhile, Antonio sneaks into the Cardinal’s chambers at night, seeking reconciliation. In the darkness, he is stabbed by Bosola, who thinks he is the Cardinal. Bosola is distraught by the mistake and then stabs the Cardinal. Hearing the cries, Ferdinand enters. It is ambiguous whether he is lucid, and he stabs both Bosola and the Cardinal. He is stabbed by Bosola in turn and dies.

The courtiers and Delio enter as Bosola and the Cardinal are dying. Bosola is satisfied that he avenged the Duchess, Antonio, Julia, and himself. Delio is carrying Antonio and the Duchess’s child. He asks the courtiers to establish this new generation with honesty.