



# The Duchess of Malfi: A Play in Five Acts

*John Webster*

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## **The Duchess of Malfi: A Play in Five Acts** John Webster

The Duchess of Malfi – A Play in Five Acts by John Webster. A Macabre, Tragic Play. The Duchess of Malfi (originally published as The Tragedy of the Dutchesse of Malfy) is a macabre, tragic play written by the English dramatist John Webster in 1612–13. It was first performed privately at the Blackfriars Theatre, then before a more general audience at The Globe, in 1613–14. Published in 1623, the play is loosely based on events that occurred between about 1508 and 1513, recounted in William Painter's *The Palace of Pleasure* (1567, which was a translation of the French adaptation, due to Pierre Boistau and François Belleforest, of Matteo Bandello's *Novelle*, 1554). The Duchess was Giovanna d'Aragona, whose father, Enrico d'Aragona (it), Marquis of Gerace, was an illegitimate son of Ferdinand I of Naples. Her husbands were Alfonso Piccolomini (it), Duke of Amalfi, and (as in the play) Antonio Beccadelli di Bologna (it). The play begins as a love story, with a Duchess who marries beneath her class, and ends as a nightmarish tragedy as her two brothers exact their revenge, destroying themselves in the process. Jacobean drama continued the trend of stage violence and horror set by Elizabethan tragedy, under the influence of Seneca. The complexity of some of its characters, particularly Bosola and the Duchess, plus Webster's poetic language, ensure the play is often considered among the greatest tragedies of English renaissance drama.

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