

The Duchess of Malfi, by John Webster

The Duchess of Malfi is a widow. The Duchess's brother (Duke Ferdinand) tells her that she must not remarry, as he considers it wrong for a woman to do so. The Duchess of Malfi is already in love with a man called Antonio and intends to marry him, but she pretends to agree with her brother, the Duke, and says she will not marry again. The Duke does not trust his sister, and so pays a man called Bosola to spy on her. The Duchess soon gets pregnant by Antonio and gives birth to a baby boy in secret. The Duchess's brother, Duke Ferdinand, is furious when he finds out. He wants to kill the Duchess, her lover and their baby. The Duchess tells Bosola that Antonio is her lover, and Bosola shares this information with the Duke. The Duke visits his sister with a knife and asks her to kill herself. Antonio is sent to Milan and the Duchess is sent to prison in the palace. Duke Ferdinand wants to punish his sister, so he tells her that her family have been killed. He then tries to drive his sister mad by bringing madmen to live in the palace with her, but this only makes the strong woman more calm and peaceful. Finally, Bosola strangles the Duchess, and she dies peacefully and quietly. However, afterwards, Bosola is sorry for what he has done. The rest of the characters all start arguing and kill each other. The Duchess's eldest son watches the terrible acts of violence. None of the main characters are alive by the end of the play, but the few remaining adult characters decide they will come together to help bring up the Duchess's son.

The Spanish Tragedy, by Thomas Kyd

The Spanish Tragedy is a revenge tragedy. It begins with the ghost of Don Andrea, who has been killed in battle by the Portuguese prince, Balthazar. Don Andrea comes back to the living world to get revenge on the man who killed him. Meanwhile Prince Balthazar has fallen in love with Bel-Imperia – the same woman who Don Andrea loved when he was alive. Bel-Imperia is a strong woman, and while she is unfortunate, she does not appear as a victim. Unfortunately, Bel-Imperia loves a man called Horatio (and he loves her). Balthazar kills Horatio in a jealous rage. Finding his son's dead body, Horatio's father promises to find and kill his son's murderer. Shortly after Horatio's murder, Balthazar and Bel-Imperia get married. Horatio's father comes to the wedding with a secret plan and his dead son's body in a suitcase. He promises to give the wedding guests some entertainment they won't ever forget. At the wedding he performs a very violent play to entertain the guests. The guests think that the violence looks very realistic. At the end of the play Horatio's father shows the guests his son's body and tells the audience that the violence has all been real. He has been using real knives and that quite a few 'actors' in the play are now really dead (including Bel-Imperia and Balthazar). As a grand finale, Horatio's father kills himself. Don Andrea appears in the final scene to send the wrongdoers to hell and the virtuous people to heaven.