Quiz: Act 1

The play opens with a conversation between Antonio and his friend Delio.

Antonio has just returned from France, and he describes to Delio how the king has rooted out corruption in his court / palace. As a result, the whole country is better off.

We are introduced to the malcontent in the play, Bosola. Antonio suggests that his 'foul melancholy will poison all his goodness'.

Antonio tells Delio of the Duchess, who, he says: 'stains the time past, lights the time to come'.

Ferdinand and the Cardinal threaten the Duchess, ordering her never to remarry. She agrees, but almost immediately after they have gone, she calls for Antonio, her steward, intending to marry him.

Antonio claims he is unworthy, but the Duchess assures him that she is: 'flesh and blood, sir, / 'Tis not the figure cut in alabaster / Kneels at my husband's tomb'.

But Cariola is concerned about her mistress's action. She closes the act with the words: 'Whether the spirit of greatness or of woman / Reign most in her, I know not, but it shows / A fearful madness. I owe her much of pity.'
Quiz: Act 2

Bosola tells the audience that he suspects the Duchess’s sudden sickness is due to pregnancy. He decides to offer her some apricots / apricocks.

He talks to Antonio, telling him he is not ambitious: ‘I look no higher than I can reach: they are the gods that must ride on winged horses, a lawyer’s mule of a slow pace will both suit my disposition and business, for, mark me, when a man’s mind rides faster than his horse can gallop, they quickly both tire.’

Bosola makes the Duchess a present of some apricots, in the hope that they might cause her to fall into labour.

By chance, Bosola meets Antonio that night and suddenly learns of the Duchess’s baby boy. He then schemes to send a letter to her brothers in Rome.

In Act 2 Scene 4, we are introduced to Julia, the Cardinal’s mistress. We learn that she feels deceived by him, since when they first met, he told her he was heartbroken and needed to be loved.

In Act 2 Scene 5, the full extent of Ferdinand’s anger is revealed. He calls his sister a notorious strumpet and wishes for rhubarb to cure his ‘disease’ of anger.

The Cardinal suggests that Ferdinand is acting like a madman: ‘you fly beyond your reason.’

Ferdinand is now intent on revenge. He mentions one horrific way of taking that revenge: ‘I would have their bodies / Burnt in a coal pit with the ventage stopped, / That their cursed smoke might not ascend to heaven.’ Or: ‘set light to them in their sheets’; or: ‘boil their bastard to a cullis’.

But decides to wait until he knows who the father of the Duchess’s child is.

When he knows this, he vows he will ‘find scorpions to string my whips, / And fix her in a general eclipse’.
Quiz: Act 3

Antonio meets Delio who has just returned with Ferdinand from Rome. Antonio tells him that the public now call the Duchess a strumpet, whilst the politicians have noticed that Antonio seems to be profiting in a corrupt manner ('grow to infinite purchase / The left-hand way').

Bosola and Ferdinand speak. Bosola refuses to flatter the Duke, saying that he is ‘his own chronicle too much, and grossly / Flatter yourself’.

Next, the Duchess, Cariola and Antonio meet in the bedchamber. Antonio and Cariola steal away to be replaced by Ferdinand. When the Duchess sees him, she claims: ‘ ’Tis welcome / For know, whether I am doomed to live, or die, / I can do both like a prince.’

Ferdinand tells her of Reputation, suggesting that she has shaken hands with Reputation and ‘made him invisible’.

Bosola pretends to commend Antonio and then be ‘stunned’ by her admission that they are married. He asks: ‘Did 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?’

Now the brothers learn of the Duchess’s children. The Cardinal plans to ask the state of Ancona to banish the family.

In Act 3 Scene 4, the pilgrim sums up the situation in the couplet: ‘Fortune makes this conclusion general, / All things to help th’unhappy man to fall.’

In Act 2 Scene 5, the Duchess uses an image of Fortune’s wheel being ‘overcharged with princes’? By this she means that she is shortly to fall from good fortune to disaster, just as others on the wheel will rise to better times.

Act 3 is drawn to a close by the Duchess as she defends her marriage to Antonio and his social status. At the very end of the scene she claims: ‘There’s no deep valley, but near some great hill.’
Quiz: Act 4

According to Bosola, the Duchess bears herself ‘nobly’ in her imprisonment. It is, he says, ‘a behaviour so noble / As gives majesty to adversity’.

Ferdinand visits his twin, with two surprises. Firstly he gives her a dead man’s hand, and then shows her wax figures of Antonio and their children.

The Duchess says she wants to die: ‘I do account this world a tedious theatre, / For I do play a part in’t ’gainst my will.’

Ferdinand tells Bosola the reason he is tormenting the Duchess is to ‘bring her to despair’.

In Scene 2 after the madmen leave, Bosola tells the Duchess she is nothing more than ‘a box of worm-seed, at best, but a salvatory of green mummy’, but the Duchess continues to claim she is ‘Duchess of Malfi still’.

The Duchess makes three last requests:

1. ‘giv’st my little boy / Some syrup for his cold, and let the girl / Say her prayers ere she sleep.’
2. ‘my body / Bestow upon my women: will you?’
3. ‘tell my brothers when I am laid out / They then may feed in quiet.’

Stunned, Ferdinand demands of Bosola: ‘why didst not thou pity her?’

Bosola’s reward for doing what was asked of him is: a pardon for the murder of the Duchess.

Ferdinand’s last words in the scene suggest the beginnings of madness: ‘I’ll go hunt the badger, by owl-light: / ’Tis a deed of darkness.’

The Duchess’s final word is ‘Mercy’.

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Quiz: Act 5

In Scene 1, Delio asks the Marquis of Pescara for some lands of Antonio’s that he is holding ‘in cheat’. The Marquis refuses, saying: ‘this is such a suit / Nor fit for me to give nor you to take.’

Antonio seems to express a death-wish when at the end of the scene he talks of his next move. He plans to visit the Cardinal and surprise him, in the hope that they might be able to reach an agreement.

The doctor tries to help Ferdinand in Scene 2, saying he will make him ‘as tame as a dormouse’.

Instead, Ferdinand shouts at him and the others, naming them ‘like beasts for sacrifice!’

The Cardinal feigns a reason for Ferdinand’s madness because to speak the real cause would give away Ferdinand (and himself) as murderers.

He orders Bosola to find Antonio and kill him.

Curiously, Julia enters for a second time, this time to challenge Bosola as to how he has bewitched her.

Bosola considers how he can use her and decides to ask her to find out why the Cardinal is so melancholic.

When the Cardinal returns he poisons Julia.

At the end of the scene, Bosola vows to help Antonio get his revenge upon the brothers.

In Scene 3, Delio and Antonio hear an echo in the churchyard. The echo which makes the greatest impact upon Antonio is ‘Never see her more’ because he thought he saw the Duchess’s face before him.

Bosola wounds Antonio, mistaking him for a murderer sent by Ferdinand and the Cardinal. Commenting upon fate, Bosola says: ‘We are merely the stars’ tennis balls, struck and banded / Which way please them.’

In Scene 5, after wounding the Cardinal and Ferdinand, Bosola utters his own epitaph: ‘The last part of my life / Hath done me best service.’