

An Italian Werewolf in London: Lycanthropy and The Duchess of Malfi

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Abstract

In an England where wolves were effectively extinct - except for a few tired specimens kept for the occasional Royal viewing in the Tower Menagerie - and where reports of werewolves had to be imported from the Continent, John Webster penned the lycanthrope Ferdinand into *The Duchess of Malfi*. This article explores the theological, philosophical, and medical perceptions of lycanthropy in early modern European thought in an effort to reconcile Webster's unique choice with the wider concerns of his time, namely: the precarious boundaries between animal and human, male and female, body and soul, sanity and madness, good and evil. This paper suggests that by doing so we may shed some light on the reasons behind Webster's construction of the only werewolf realized on the Jacobean stage, as well as demonstrating how an understanding of the liminal figure of the werewolf enriches our appreciation of the play.

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Ferdinand in Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* is a character of contradictions and one with unsettling implications in regards to the human psyche. He is the primary antagonist in the play along with his devious brother the Cardinal; however he is also one of the most conflicted characters, second only to Bosola; he has debilitating feelings of both guilt and anxiety for what he has planned out and done, which are a factor in his descent to madness. Since he and the Duchess are later revealed to be twins, and since lycanthropy was often thought to be hereditary, Ferdinand is concerned about her tainted blood, because of its reflection and literal effect on him. This explains his later sadistic treatment of her, for he believes that his problems stem from herself and her relation to him.