
Ferdinand's Growing Mental Disturbance

Webster's Machiavellian antagonist Ferdinand demonstrates a decline into insanity in 'The Duchess of Malfi' through displaying signs of uncontrollable emotions, fixations on his sister and incestuous desires, and the development of lycanthropy.

Ferdinand's explosive fits of rage and his passionate plotting against the Duchess when he discovers her secret marriage reflect a man without control over his own behavior. One example of this can be found when he plans to dip her children in 'sulphur/ and 'light them like a match'. In this scene Ferdinand delivers numerous lengthy monologues in which he describes murdering the Duchess and her children, whereas the Cardinal speaks only one or two lines at a time; the contrast between the two of them highlights Ferdinand's uncontrollable passion and anger, whereas the Cardinal is shown to be much more in control of his emotions despite holding the same anger at the Duchess' betrayal of the brothers. Later in this scene Ferdinand addresses his incestuous desires for his twin sister; he displays a literal loss of control of his thoughts when he asks the Cardinal to distract him or his 'imagination will carry (him) to see her in the shameful act of sin'. By asking the Cardinal to do this Ferdinand displays how his subconscious is angry with his sister being intimate with another man rather than the revelation of her pregnancy and bastard children, as he cannot help but imagine his sister in a sexual light.

In the 2016 Cambridge interpretation of the play, the actor who played Ferdinand displayed numerous physical losses of control regarding the Duchess, such as flinching to touch her and even kissing her corpse, which could tell the audience that his mental state is now controlling him and he in fact has no control over his actions. Ferdinand's anger in this conversation is directed at the Duchess' sexual activity, which insinuates that he is jealous of her lover rather than angry at her betrayal. This is further demonstrated when he imagines who she has slept with physically as a 'strong-thighed bargeman', Ferdinand's fixation on who her lover is physically rather than socially or emotionally reflects how he is fixated on the physical element of his sister's relationship. Ferdinand's inability to accept that his incestuous desires are his own flaw rather than the Duchess' is shown through his decision to murder her and her children, rather than face his own personal and mental issues with incest. By blaming the Duchess for his own issues Ferdinand displays arrogance and a lack of personal awareness, this could also have been influenced by the patriarchy that 'The Duchess of Malfi' was written during, which could lead to women being blamed for men's wrongs.

In Renaissance England when 'The Duchess of Malfi' was written, werewolves held connotations of an unbalanced relationship between a human's body and mind. Contemporary audiences of the play during the Jacobean era were more likely to have believed lycanthropy to

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be a real illness and have more belief in the supernatural, however modern audiences are more likely to see Ferdinand's 'transformation' into a wolf as a more comical element in the play. Although lycanthropy was sometimes believed to be a literal transformation from man into wolf, it was also commonly referring to someone who was deluded enough to believe that they were capable of such transformations. Although Ferdinand is related to wolves and animal imagery frequently throughout the narrative, such as when he calls the Duchess' children 'cubs' and the Cardinal refers to his anger at the Duchess as 'beastly', he is not diagnosed with 'A very pestilent disease, my lord... The call it lycanthropia' until the final act.

However, if we assume that Ferdinand's lycanthropy is induced by 'melancholy', otherwise known as depression, as was said to be it's cause at the time, it can be argued that his illness began after the Duchess' murder in Act Four, when he says, 'I bade thee, when i was distracted of my wits... Go kill my dearest friend'. Although he ordered Bosola to murder his sister, he gets angry after, claiming that he was out of his mind when he ordered Bosola to do so; his language here suggests that his madness has already begun prior to her death.

Ferdinand's delusions reach a climax in Act Five before his death; the doctor mentions seeing 'the duke, 'bout midnight...with a leg of a man upon his shoulder; and he howl'd fearfully; said he was a wolf; only the difference was, a wolf's skin was hairy on the outside, his on the inside'. The doctor's description of Ferdinand here not only demonstrates the height of his delusions; claiming he is literally a wolf and digging up corpses from graveyards, but also reiterates Ferdinand's foul character by calling him 'hairy' on the inside. The description of Ferdinand's insides being 'hairy' suggests to the audience that his mind and inner personality was always corrupt, possibly insinuating that his insanity was present from the start of the narrative, but has only grown with the development of the narrative.

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