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


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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In the tradition of the Jacobean Gothic, John Webster's The Duchess of Malfi interweaves images of lycanthropy, madness, and incest to produce a play haunted by figures that could be potentially perceived as both monstrous and disabled. Telling the sensational story of a widowed Duchess who secretly re-marries beneath her station, the play follows the Duchess's two brothers, Ferdinand and the Cardinal, as they seek to discover the truth about what their sister has done and to punish her for her marriage with her servant Antonio. Throughout the play, Ferdinand's obsessive interest in his sister 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...  In one of the defining moments of John Webster's The Duchess of Malfi (1613), Bosola devises a pregnancy test. The Duchess of Malfi takes place in Roman Catholic Italy, which English audiences at the time when the play was written would have associated with corruption. It begins in the palace of the Duchess, a young widow and the ruler of the Italian town of Amalfi. Her steward, Antonio, has just returned from a visit to the French court, and Bosola, a murderer and former employee of her brother, the Cardinal, has just returned from his punishment. Soon Duke Ferdinand, the Duchess's other brother, enters with his whole retinue. Duchess of Malfi (1613) - Grace Windsor Patientia Regina: Patience as Character from the Morality Play to Jacobean Tragedy - Mark Sandona Arbella Stuart, Catherine of Valois, and The Duchess of Malfi: An Examination of Women, Marriage, and Widowhood in Jacobean England - Nanci Lamb Roider An Italian Werewolf in London: Lycanthropy and The Duchess of Malfi - Brett D. Hirsch Religion, Politics, Revenge: The Dead in. - Amanda Elizabeth Koh Reaffirming the Male Ambition in John Webster’s The Duchess of Malfi - Scott