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Duke Ferdinand: Patient or Possessed? The Reflection of Contemporary Medical Discourse in John Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi*.

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ABSTRACT

The Duchess of Malfi, a tragedy written by John Webster, makes frequent reference to contemporary Jacobean concerns about health and disease for dramatic effect. Most notably Webster chooses to highlight lycanthropy through the evolution of the condition in the character of Duke Ferdinand. This paper examines Webster’s knowledge of contemporary medical, religious and political texts and explores the reflection of both a natural humoral understanding of lycanthropy as a disease, and the concurrent importance of supernatural concerns prevalent at the time. Although Webster’s choice to associate Duke Ferdinand with lycanthropy primarily serves a dramatic purpose, it is proposed that fictional works such as The Duchess of Malfi can be considered as important sources for the history of medicine since authors often reflect the contemporary understanding of health and disease from the world around them.
MAIN TEXT

Health and disease, so central to the lives of human beings, are themes often explored by authors of novels and plays. Metaphors of disease and illness in particular are charged with meanings that an author might carefully employ to achieve a specific literary effect. Whilst these narratives concerning health and disease are often dismissed as fiction, to do so ignores the fact that contemporary social concerns about health and disease are often expressed in literary works. Moreover, authors engaging with such contemporary issues are likely to have turned to a wide range of sources to inform their work. Literature that involves the experience of health and disease in the form of a novel or play is thus never entirely divorced from the lives of real doctors and patients and may draw directly from genuine experience.[1] Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi*, written between 1612 and 1614, contains numerous references to health and disease, but most notably highlights an unusual condition – lycanthropy. This affliction, perhaps curious to a modern audience, was understood by an early seventeenth-century audience to mean the imagined or actual transformation of an individual into the form of a wolf. To a twenty-first century psychiatrist, an individual imagining himself a wolf would likely be diagnosed as suffering from a psychiatric illness characterised by symptoms of hallucination and delusion.[2] To an early seventeenth-century audience, however, such an affliction might have been understood very differently. Webster’s fictional representation is not intended to be an exact recreation of the reality of a disease; however, this paper proposes that Webster reflects a number of contemporary perspectives on lycanthropy. Accordingly, *The Duchess of Malfi* is presented by this paper as an example of fiction that might also be considered an important document in the history of medicine and psychiatry.
The Duchess of Malfi

Based originally on historical events, Webster’s play is a dramatization of a story originally written as an Italian novella concerning life at the court of the Duchess of Malfi, a widow, who secretly marries her steward.[3] Her clandestine relationship and the delivery of children infuriate her two brothers, the Cardinal and Duke Ferdinand, her twin. On the instruction of Ferdinand, the Duchess is imprisoned, tormented and executed before the play concludes with the eventual realisation of the tragic fate of the remaining characters that have thus far played a part in her life. It is during Act V that Duke Ferdinand’s lycanthropy emerges, just prior to his violent death. Whilst the Duchess is a complex protagonist, her interaction with the surrounding characters means that they emerge as intriguing in their own right. Ferdinand’s descent into madness, manifested as lycanthropy, should be examined in the light of the dramatic relationship with his sister.

Madness and Literature in the Seventeenth Century

From the beginning of the seventeenth century there was a notable increase in the appearance of “mad” characters on the Elizabethan and Jacobean stage.[4,5] Contemporary playwrights, including William Shakespeare, clearly demonstrated familiarity with the existing understanding of mental illness in his day.[6] Webster was another author noted to embrace the trend, creating a number of fictional characters that might have been considered as “mad”.[7] The affliction of “melancholy” in particular was frequently represented in Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre and certain dramatic conventions in the portrayal of melancholic characters were adopted.[8] It is well-recognised that Webster “borrowed” extensively from a wide range of sources,[9] and there are some striking similarities between his
portrayal of Ferdinand’s madness and contemporary medical and religious discourse concerning lycanthropy.

A Brief History of Lycanthropy

In order to investigate the Jacobean understanding of lycanthropy it is necessary to briefly examine the development of ideas leading up to the seventeenth century.[10] In the ancient world two separate traditions of “lycanthropy” existed. In Greek mythology authors recalled tales of the actual physical transformation of men into wolves. Herodotus, writing around the fifth century BC, describes the transformation of the Neuri thus:

[…] for the Scythians, and the Greeks settled in Scythia, say that once a year every one of the Neuri is turned into a wolf, and after a few days returns again to his former shape. For myself, I cannot believe this tale; but they tell it nevertheless, yea, and swear to its truth.[11]

Herodotus is sceptical about the possibility of physical transformation, but the belief in men able to change their shape persisted, as demonstrated by later writers such as Pausanias who reports the legend of Lycaon of Arcadia who was changed into a wolf. Pausanias is convinced of the truth of the story:

I for my part believe this story; it has been a legend among the Arcadians from of old, and it has the additional merit of probability.[12]

Such a transformation was seen as having been affected by the intervention of the Gods; it constituted a supernatural explanation of a physical metamorphosis. These supernatural beliefs must be distinguished from a second understanding: lycanthropy as medical disorder, where those afflicted imagined themselves as wolves. Simply stated, the natural explanation given by Greek physicians for the disorder was based on a disruption of the bodily humours, where an excess of black bile resulted in the manifestation of the disease of melancholy; lycanthropy was considered a particularly dreadful form.[13]
In contrast to the two distinct interpretations of lycanthropy in the ancient world, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century authors writing about lycanthropy assimilated a number of ideas, often combining beliefs in the natural humoral model of Greek and Arabic medicine with elements of supernatural beliefs in the power of the Devil. Despite the perceived importance of the role of humoral imbalance in the aetiology of melancholy, it was unusual for authors to entirely reject the role of the supernatural. In the case of lycanthropy, supernatural associations meant that the symptoms were sometimes interpreted as evidence of demonic possession and thus as a form of witchcraft.[14] As popular belief in witchcraft increased in the late sixteenth century, religious and legal authorities were likewise convinced of the reality of “werewolves” - individuals taking on the form of a wolf under the influence of the Devil.[15] The debate on lycanthropy as a form of mental illness or as evidence of witchcraft stimulated the production of a number of texts and treatises, not only written by physicians but also by theologians, demonologists and royalty.[16] Webster’s fictional portrayal of lycanthropy through the character of Ferdinand assimilated a number of ideas that arose from this debate, and thus *The Duchess of Malfi* contains a wealth of references to both the humours and the supernatural.

**The Aetiology of Ferdinand’s Lycanthropy**

In accordance with his use of humoral theory, Webster makes it clear to the audience that Ferdinand’s lycanthropy is a disease, caused by an excess of melancholy:

Pescara: Pray thee, what’s his disease?

Doctor: A very pestilent disease, my lord,

They call it lycanthropia.

Pescara: What’s that?

I need a dictionary to ’t.
Doctor: I’ll tell you.
   In those that are possessed with ‘t there o’erflows
   Such melancholy humour they imagine
   Themselves to be transformèd into wolves,

Act V, Scene ii, 6-10 [17]

From his emphasis on “disease” to his choice of the doctor as the one to explain this affliction, Webster here promotes a natural explanation of Ferdinand’s condition. In the development of Ferdinand’s disease there is a transition from villainous temperament to pathological madness, and his descent into chaos leads on from his turbulent relationship with the Duchess. Ferdinand’s relationship with the Duchess is complex and stimulates in him passionate feelings of anger, grief, jealousy and, as some critics have argued, lust. Ferdinand’s propensity for explosive reaction is demonstrated when he finds out from Bosola that his sister has secretly remarried and has had children; the very thought of his sister having sexual relations drives Ferdinand to a fury that is also explained in terms of humoral imbalance:

Ferdinand: Rhubarb, O, for rhubarb
   To purge this choler! Here’s the cursèd day
   To prompt my memory, and here ‘t shall stick
   Till of her bleeding heart I make a sponge
   To wipe it out.

Act II, Scene V, 12-17.

An excess of hot and dry choler (or yellow bile) was the humour most likely to be associated with angry outbursts, and rhubarb was a widely accepted purgative treatment.[8] As the scene continues, Ferdinand’s furious dialogue invoking increasingly violent imagery suggests that the news of his sister has stimulated just the type of hot-blooded emotions - anger, jealousy, lust - most likely to change physiological humours into a scorched and pathological form of melancholy.[10]
Act VI sees the Duchess’s imprisonment and Ferdinand’s deliberate attempts to “bring her to despair” (Act IV, scene ii, 116). As Ferdinand systematically torments his sister his passions reach their climax. The Duchess’s death stimulates in Ferdinand a confused torrent of emotion. He searches in vain to understand his own motives for ordering his sister’s death, but he has little insight as to the effect of his extreme emotions. It is at this point that the nature of his insipient madness is made explicit, as Ferdinand predicts of himself:

The wolf shall find her grave, and scrape it up,
Not to devour the corpse, but to discover
The horrid murder.
Act IV, Scene ii, 307-309

In accordance with the humoral model, the aetiology of Ferdinand’s lycanthropy can be interpreted as a disease that has come about as a result of his extreme emotions, provoking a simmering build-up of pathological melancholy.

**Ferdinand’s Symptoms**

The symptoms that Ferdinand exhibits in *The Duchess of Malfi* are remarkably similar to those described of lycanthropes in contemporary Jacobean medical discourse. The physician in the play explains to Pescara that lycanthropes:

Steal forth to churchyards in the dead of night,
And dig dead bodies up; as two nights since
One met the Duke, ‘bout midnight in a lane
Behind Saint Mark’s Church, with the leg of a man
Upon his shoulder; and he howled fearfully;
Said he was a wolf, only the difference
Was, a wolf’s skin was hairy on the outside,
His on the inside; bade them take their swords,
Rip up his flesh, and try.
Act V, scene ii, 11-19.
Ferdinand also states that he has “cruel sore eyes” (Act V, Scene ii, 64), and as another of his delusions perceives his own shadow as haunting him. The similarities between Ferdinand’s symptoms and those described by Simon Goulart in his *Admirable and Memorable Histories* has led critics to suggest that Webster’s description was directly borrowed from this text.[3,9-10] Certainly, to compare the passage above with Goulart’s text makes this clear. According to Goulart, lycanthropes:

[…] counterfeit Wolves in a manner in all things, and all night doe nothing but runne into Church-yardes, and all about graves, so as you shall presently discover them in a wonderfull alteration of the braine, especially in the imagination and thought, which is miserable corrupted, in such sort, as the memorie hath some force: as I have observed in one of these melancholike Licanthropes, whom we call Wolves: for he that knew mee well, being one day troubled with his disease, and meeting mee, I retired my selfe a part, fearing that he should hurt me. Having eyed me a little, hee passed on, being followed by a troupe of people. Hee carried then upon his shoulders the whole thigh and the legge of a dead man. [18]

And of another case:

[…] hee did constantly affirme that hee was a Wolfe, and that there was no difference, but that Wolves were commonlie hayrie without, and hee was betwixt the skinne and the flesh. […] Such as are afflicted with that disease, are pale, their eyes are hollow, and they see ill, their tongue is drye […] [18]

It appears that Webster reflects Goulart’s description of symptoms in his fictional character but has in parallel added features of his own. Ferdinand’s claim that he is being haunted by his own shadow, a feature not described by Goulart, can plausibly be seen to be merely an additional delusion. Thus whilst basing Ferdinand’s portrayal of madness on a medical description, Webster has freely adapted some features for dramatic purposes.[19]

Hitherto the highlighted features of Ferdinand’s lycanthropy suggest that Webster was familiar with the humoral model of disease. In this respect Ferdinand can be considered to be a “patient” and, indeed, a physician is summoned to alleviate his symptoms. However, as discussed, the contemporary Jacobean interpretation of
disease, based on the natural humoral model adopted from classical medicine, did not completely rule out the role of the supernatural. *The Duchess of Malfi* also contains numerous references to magic, witchcraft and the Devil.[20] Ferdinand in particular is linked with the diabolical.

**Demonology, Witchcraft and Magic in *The Duchess of Malfi***

In Act I, Ferdinand approaches Bosola and asks him to spy on the Duchess for payment. Bosola, initially indignant, reproaches Ferdinand and suggests that to do so would make him Ferdinand’s “familiar”:

Bosola: It seems you would create me
      One of your familiars.
Ferdinand: Familiar! What’s that?
Bosola: Why a very quaint invisible devil, in flesh:
      An intelligencer.
Act I, scene I, 258-261

In keeping with his lack of insight Ferdinand cannot recognise the demonic potential in himself. Instead he accuses others, most notably the Duchess, of possessing the powers of witchcraft. In Act I Ferdinand warns the Duchess that her reputation will be ruined if she remarries. He advises her not to hide her secrets:

Look to ‘t; be not cunning
For they whose faces do belie their hearts
Are witches, ere they arrive at twenty years –
Ay, and give the devil suck.
Act I, scene I, 309-311

Once he finds out about the Duchess’s secret marriage to Antonio, Ferdinand exclaims, “The witchcraft lies in her rank blood” (Act III, scene ii, 78). In addition to employing references to witchcraft and the demonic in the dialogue of his play, it has been suggested that Webster also borrowed directly from at least one contemporary
source on witchcraft to inform his play.[21] In Act IV, one of Ferdinand’s torments of the Duchess is to present her with a dead man’s hand. This is done in the dark, so at first she believes it to be his hand and kisses it. Ferdinand then lights the chamber, leaving the severed hand visible. The episode involving the severed hand may have been informed by Henri Boguet’s *Discourse Execrables des Sorciers*, a treatise which also refers to the use of a severed hand as evidence that a woman transformed into a wolf and was thus executed as a witch.[21]

The importance of the supernatural continues to be highlighted once Ferdinand’s lycanthropy is established. Despite the natural explanation given by the doctor, those around Ferdinand make their own assessment as to why he is afflicted by lycanthropy. Bosola exclaims:

Mercy upon me, what a fatal judgement
Hath fall’n upon this Ferdinand!
Act V, scene ii, 83-84

Bosola thinks that Ferdinand’s affliction is a judgement. Implicit in his suggestion is the belief that Ferdinand has sinned and his disease is a divine punishment. More explicitly, another character discussing the Cardinal’s care of the raving Ferdinand states:

’Twas nothing but pure kindness in the devil
To rock his own child.
In his madness, Ferdinand is seen by others as the Devil’s child. His evil actions have paved the way for his lycanthropy. Although some contemporary authors adhered to a belief in physical metamorphosis, there is no evidence in the play to suggest that Ferdinand is actually transformed into a wolf. Rather, it is perhaps more plausible to interpret Ferdinand in his deluded state as being actively “possessed” and tormented
by the Devil, a state often regarded by seventeenth-century audiences as a form of divine retribution. [22]

**Understanding Ferdinand’s Condition**

Given that Webster’s portrayal of lycanthropy correlates with a humoral understanding of the condition as a disease, perhaps Ferdinand should be afforded some sympathy as a patient. Certainly to some contemporary physicians, patients with a mental illness secondary to physical disruption of the humours were approached with kindness; they were victims, not considered as blameworthy in the development of their disease. However, in linking Ferdinand to the devil, Webster presents him as playing an active part in his demise with lycanthropy as his punishment. Such an interpretation of mental illness would also have been in keeping with the contemporary understanding of disease, with melancholic individuals in particular seen as susceptible to the temptations of the Devil. Although Ferdinand’s symptoms are explained according to a natural disruption, his deeds associate him with the supernatural and his lycanthropy can be interpreted as a form of moral justice.

Ferdinand’s lycanthropy, whilst reflecting a contemporary understanding of mental illness, is utilised and adapted by Webster for a dramatic purpose rather than acting solely as a medical case-study. Ferdinand, as the Duchess’s twin, serves to illuminate her character by comparison and contrast. His attempts to bring the Duchess to despair merely highlight her sanity and contribute to his own impending madness. Their respective deaths provide the most telling contrast; the Duchess dies calm and with humility whilst Ferdinand dies chaotic and raving in his madness. By the end of the play, the Duchess’s human and sympathetic character lies in stark contrast to Ferdinand’s dark and sinister person. The choice of lycanthropy as a disease serves to remind the audience of his bestial and diabolical nature.
Conclusion

Through the character of Ferdinand, John Webster creates a fictional representation of the disease of lycanthropy. In order to communicate successfully with his intended Jacobean audience Webster reflects contemporary beliefs and concerns in the construction of his dramatic narrative. His portrayal of lycanthropy does not adhere rigidly to one narrow understanding of the concept but borrows from a range of contemporary beliefs. Whilst reflecting the natural humoral model of classical medical teaching, Webster also acknowledges the supernatural association between madness and sin. He brings these ideas together to reflect the marriage of the natural and supernatural prevalent in seventeenth-century explanations of mental illness. Webster selects and adapts the features of this affliction to serve his own purposes, and thus Ferdinand should not be seen merely as a case-study in melancholy.[23] However, by comparing this fictional portrayal with contemporary medical and religious texts, it is clear that Webster’s drama does reflect the beliefs and concerns of an Elizabethan audience. The examination of an imaginary character such as Ferdinand, in parallel with other historical texts, illustrates the potential for such literary interpretations to aid our understanding of historical explanations of health and disease. It is likely that in time, our twenty-first-century fictional works, highlighting genetic engineering or the development of dementia rather than lycanthropy, will similarly allow medical historians in the future some insight into the way we regard health and disease today.
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