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Madness and Viciousness: The Example of Webster's Ferdinand

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The subject of *The Duchess of Malfi* (written by John Webster in 1616) is the fierce opposition of two brothers, the Duke of Calabria and the Cardinal, to the remarriage of their sister, a young widow, and the disobedience of that sister, who chooses to marry her steward in secret. The main reason given for this opposition is familial honour, as was the case in the former versions of the story (the first one written by Mattheo Bandello in 1554 and its adaption by François de Belleforest in 1566, itself translated by William Painter in 1575). However, from the first scenes of Webster's drama, we understand that, for him, this opposition based on supposed honour is too thin to transform a tragic story based on real facts into a tragedy, moreover a tragedy of blood in agreement with the tastes of the time.

In the first version of the story, the Duchess and her husband Antonio are shown as victims of the two brothers' tyranny. Webster's adaptation is not different in this respect, but to convert this pathetic story into a horrifying spectacle, Webster needed an extra ingredient: a villain based on the Senecan type.[1] The two brothers share this function, although they have different character traits: the Cardinal is cold, merciless and

1 For further information about Seneca's influence on English drama, see Charleton, Cunliffe, and Jacquot and Oddon, eds.

Machiavellian; the Duke is tyrannical, choleric and lustful. The latter is a character of excess, and this excess, which throughout the drama flirts with madness, is finally transformed into real insanity. I would like to demonstrate that most of the elements that make the work a tragedy of blood are linked to Ferdinand's folly. This is the keystone holding in place the motifs of lust, cruelty and bloodshed that produce the impact of Webster's play.

It is first necessary to analyse the notion of madness itself, which is represented in several forms, progressing from excess to insanity as Ferdinand's character develops. Ferdinand is, from the start, a villain, who is not devoid of reason but refuses to respect its dictates. He is a tyrant, conscious of his power and of the fact that this power allows him to override reason). His viciousness helps him go against reason and, by going against it and committing abnormal acts, he finally loses it completely and becomes insane. Besides, he is a character who at first simulates madness, who uses it as a mechanism for purging his perverted mind of all his noxious and lustful thoughts and visions, but who is finally infected by the madness that he himself, to some extent, has created.

This development allows us to study different types of misbehaviour linked to the notion of madness: lack of reason associated with excess, unhealthy imaginings and insanity. It will be clear from what follows that those perspectives create, in various ways, the set of sensations and impressions characteristic of the Tragedy of Blood.

The different aspects of Ferdinand's madness will be analysed through his language and the comments made about him by other characters. It is important to examine signs of madness in Ferdinand's speeches before he becomes truly insane, and to study the impact of this underlying madness on the sense of tragic doom.

I shall therefore focus initially on Act One, where Ferdinand appears as a moody tyrant. Next to be considered will be Act Two, Scene Five, in which, after the discovery of his sister's marriage, Ferdinand pretends to be mad in order to give vent to his perverted language. Finally, I will discuss Ferdinand's changing attitude in Act Four, just prior to his total insanity.

Ferdinand as a Moody Tyrant

Although the first act of the play does not present the duke as a mad character when he first appears, we can already see signs of his future derangement. Just

after the Duke's appearance on stage, the dramatist draws his portrait in a kind of diptych: he is first presented in his "natural environment", in his role as ruler, surrounded by his courtiers. In this way, he is shown as a man of power, but the way he uses it almost immediately seems strange. He says to one of his courtiers, who is laughing at another's joke, "Why do you laugh? Methinks you that are courtiers should be my touch-wood, taken fire, when I given fire; that is, laugh when I laugh, were the subject never so witty" (I.i.121-24). This could be considered a jest, but it shows that, as a ruler, Ferdinand thinks he can demand whatever he wants of his court even if it is foolish. Power seems like a game for him in which other people are the pawns.

The second part of the diptych is the description of the Duke given by Antonio, one of the few virtuous characters in the play. This presentation confirms what we have already gathered. Besides the fact that the Duke is said to be "perverse, and turbulent" (I.i.168), the portrait shows Ferdinand's predilection for arbitrary actions: "Dooms men to death by information, / Rewards by hearsay" (176-77). Even when his acts are motivated by cupidity or viciousness, it seems that he uses power less to gain personal advantage than to ruin others, apparently for his own distraction. Even if this is not really a sign of madness, the duke already embodies the principle of perversity. The fact that the appearance of the duke precedes the portrait given by Antonio reinforces the value of the description.

The representation of Ferdinand naturally influences the way we perceive his opposition to his sister. The first indication of Ferdinand's opposition to his sister's possible remarriage echoes what we have previously seen. He does not try to justify himself. Speaking to Bosola (his henchman), he says,

> *Ferdinand.* … she's a young widow —
> I would not have her marry again.
> *Bosola.* No sir?
> *Ferdinand.* Do not you ask the reason: but be satisfied,
> I say I would not. (I.i.255-58)

The fact that he asks Bosola to spy on his sister adds a noxious dimension to his demand; we already understand that he is obsessed with her.

In view of this, the argument he uses when he forbids the Duchess to remarry seems to be spurious. The idea that a second marriage is "luxurious" (I.i.297) because a widow who "know[s] already what man is" (294) is bound to be addicted to sex befits an uncompromising Catholic church, such as is

embodied by the Cardinal. The latter agrees with this discourse but does not say much during the confrontation with the Duchess. As for Ferdinand, we can see that his motives are different. The ambivalence of his discourse on marriage lies in the way he fantasises the image of woman as an evil and lustful creature:

> For they whose faces do belie their hearts
> Are witches, ere they arrive at twenty years—
> Ay: and give the devil suck. (I.i.309-11)
>
> And women like that part which, like the lamprey,
> Hath ne'er a bone in't. (336-37)

This mixing of infernal vocabulary and sexual metaphor shows fear regarding feminine sexuality and, at the same time, a certain delectation in talking about it. This particularity of character will be more fully displayed in the second act, where the notion of incest appears, but we can already see Ferdinand's unhealthy imagination at work. This gap between Ferdinand's arguments and what the audience perceives about his thoughts, in combination with the fact that he always does whatever he wants even if it is unreasonable, sets the tragic plot in motion. Thanks to his excessive behaviour, which is tinged with madness, we already know that the Duchess's disobedience cannot escape punishment.

At this point in the analysis, we can see that Webster changed many things in his sources in order to transform the story into a real tragedy. In the different *nouvelles*, the Duchess's marriage is the initial situation. She knows when marrying her steward that her brothers will not accept it, and she succeeds in hiding it for a while. The story becomes tragic when the marriage and the birth of the children are discovered. In the play, the opposition is introduced before the marriage, so we know that the Duchess's choice will have consequences, and the character of Ferdinand reinforces this knowledge. As Ferdinand's madness develops, its impact on the tragedy becomes all-important.

Feigned Madness

The first words of Ferdinand at the beginning of Act Two, Scene Five, are: "I have this night digg'd up a mandrake / … / And I am grown mad with't" (II.v.1-2). It would be strange for a real madman to be conscious of his state and to announce it in this way. And in fact, this declaration is a way of justifying the flood of rage

that follows. With respect to the representation of madness, this scene progresses in two stages. The first is merely grotesque; the second is more disturbing, in that the false mad man starts to become a real one.

The first part of the scene is composed of his declaration of madness, which is too artificial to seem genuine. Ferdinand keeps describing his symptoms and the way to treat them, using a series of extravagant images, while the Cardinal, who wants to know what is wrong, is not given a clear answer. The dysfunctional dialogue lends a grotesque dimension to the scene. In this context, the claim of Ferdinand to be concerned with lost honour (II.v.20-21, 33-36) resounds with a hollow emphasis.

Yet Ferdinand does not manage to be the revenger he wants to be, the defender of honour: he is like a false Hamlet. It is as if the author wants to show that honour is not a sufficient motive for the tragedy, that the drama needs something more, and that this pattern of revenge for honour is as artificial as Ferdinand's appropriation of mental distraction. Nevertheless, in the subsequent part of the scene, the real preoccupation of Ferdinand emerges, and so does his madness.

As was the case during the confrontation with the Duchess, Ferdinand, carried away with his own language, cannot help focusing on his sister's sexuality. The Cardinal encourages this obsession by talking about women's inconstancy, and, in doing so, he opens the door to Ferdinand's lustful fantasies. When the Duke says,

> … talk to me somewhat, quickly,
> Or my imagination will carry me
> To see her, in the shameful act of sin. (II.v.39-41),

we can see, despite the denial, that his imagination is already concentrated on his sister's sexuality. This is confirmed by the words which follow:

> Happily with some strong thigh'd bargeman;
> Or one o'th' wood-yard, that can quoit the sledge,
> Or toss the bar, or else some lovely squire
> That carries coals up to her privy lodgings. (43-45)

In this passage, which juxtaposes sexual metaphors and clichés, we can detect a kind of perverse pleasure in the way Ferdinand pictures his sister sexually. After that, he calls her "whore" twice in the same sentence (47-48).

The Cardinal's reaction to Ferdinand's change of behaviour is revealing and incremental. He first says, "you fly beyond your reason" (46), then compares him to a beast (57), and finally asks, "Are you stark mad?" (66). Thus, when Ferdinand's madness loses its artificial quality and asserts itself as incestuous desire, this madness is perceived and recognised for what it is by his interlocutor.[2]

Finally, as madness starts to become a major motif, the central idea of the tragedy is put in place: the Duchess will not be free because of her brother's incestuous desires. This is quite an unusual theme but much more suitable for this kind of tragedy than the question of honour. In a way, the motif of madness, linked with incest, allows the tragedy to fulfil itself and allows Ferdinand to be the villain he has to be. The evocation of Seneca's Atreus in *Thyestes*—"Or else to boil their bastard to a cullis" (II.v.71)—is an effective means of indicating the degree of evil Ferdinand is going to attain.

Ferdinand concludes the scene by saying:

> Till I know who leaps my sister, I'll not stir:
> That known, I'll find scorpions to string my whips,
> And fix her in a general eclipse. (77-79)

"Who leaps [his] sister" is the only real preoccupation. By using this expression, Ferdinand shows that the true problem for him lies in the sexual act: his sister's body must not be touched, and the thought that it is provokes the jealous fury that will carry the play to its tragic end.

2 In "*The Duchess of Malfi*: Comic and Satiric Confusion in a Tragedy", Jane Marie Luecke says:

> Ferdinand is a more complex creation. Given only his stated motive for his frenzy at his sister's marriage—family honour or inheritance—his madness is more properly a fitting device for tragi-comedy. But this conception is almost an insult to Webster's tragic sense. For this reason, I cannot believe that Ferdinand's madness is anything less than incest-driven. Given this motive we have indeed the subject matter and characters befitting tragedy. (p. 279)

This statement confirms that the play needs a motive as strong as incest to become a thorough tragedy. However, for Luecke, Ferdinand's folly makes him a weaker character than the Duchess and Bosola:

> Unhappily, however, the Duke does not have the dimension, does not come alive as a character, to the same degree as do the Duchess and Bosola. . . . Ferdinand is a revenge villain for whom the spectator has no sympathy; consequently he exhibits the rage of a madman rather than the torment of a man caught in the whirlpool of a fatal passion, and his death evokes only the emotion of happy relief. (pp. 279-80)

In my view, Ferdinand's madness is rather a keystone of the tragic construction of the play.

The Way to Insanity

Through the third and fourth acts of the play, Ferdinand does not really show any signs of madness; he is deliberately closing his trap around the Duchess. Antonio's words aptly sum up the situation:

> He is so quiet, that he seems to sleep
> The tempest out, as dormice do in winter:
> Those houses that are haunted are most still,
> Till the devil be up. (III.i.21-24)

These last words are also prophetic.

The way Ferdinand mentally tortures the Duchess, with the severed hand, the wax figures and the madmen, reveals his extreme perversity and the fertility of his imagination in a macabre way. Ferdinand, in trying to drive his sister mad, gives the impression of wanting her to be more like him. We see at several points how he considers his sister to be a part of himself; this is reinforced by the fact that they are twins, as he will tell Bosola later. He appears to want to merge their two personalities; he considers that his sister should be like him and belong to him. The scene of the madmen furnishes a contrast between Ferdinand's kind of folly and real insanity; it is also a prelude to what is going to happen to Ferdinand in the last act of the play. This scene deserves detailed analysis, but since the focus here is on Ferdinand's behaviour, I will move foreward to what happens to him after his sister's death.

At the end of the fourth act, Webster provides a striking twist in the unfolding situation: Ferdinand accuses Bosola of his sister's death and denies his own responsibility. It seems at first that he is finally recovering his reason: he describes the way things should have been if he had not been "distracted of [his] wits" (IV.ii.277). This confirms the point made earlier, that, were it not for Ferdinand's behaviour, the Duchess's marriage would not have been brought about the tragedy. However, the way Ferdinand returns to reason paradoxically proves that he is moving forward into madness, because a sane man would recognize his own culpability. Here he seems rational but his rationality is based on false premises.

Ferdinand is, in fact, a character who constantly acts beyond the bounds of reason because of vicious drives, madness, or both. Even when he acts or speaks with all his faculties, he is still moved by unhealthy impulses. In this scene, we might think that cupidity moves him, that he is trying to find a way not to pay Bosola for his services, that he has been planning for a long time to put the blame upon him. But what we have seen in the previous scenes suggests that the real aim is to convince himself of his innocence of his sister's death, which he cannot accept. His very sincerity indicates the aggravation of his madness.

It is striking to see how some of Webster's scenes can be read in different ways; concerning Ferdinand, they often have two sides: Ferdinand may seem to be the embodiment of absolute evil, but the subtext shows that there is something deeper and darker in his character which is harder to define. Webster seems to be presenting the stock character of the villain in a novel light: he shows Ferdinand's conformity to this type, and at the same time, by highlighting the mechanisms of madness, he transforms him into something far more complex and individualised.

Ultimately, thanks to this combination of a typical villain on the Senecan model with a highly psychological treatment of madness (not as sheer insanity but as chronic mental disturbance), Webster creates a consummate villain with multiple facets. His underlying madness prevents him from being reasonable and pitiful, but he is capable of executing his plans until the Duchess's death. Things change after that. The last words of Ferdinand in Act Four, Scene Two, are: "I'll go hunt the badger; by owl-light: / 'Tis a deed of darkness" (IV.ii.332-33). This statement, which is senseless in the context, confirms his growing insanity. As in other cases, Ferdinand's last words in a scene shed light on the meaning of what he said just before and foreshadow what will happen to him afterwards.

As we have seen, Ferdinand's madness is linked to the principal developments in the plot. It impels the real tragic conflict; it justifies the most horrible scenes (such as the mental torture and murder of the Duchess); and it places the end of the play in the mode of Revenge Tragedy, because, thanks to Ferdinand's change of mind, Bosola becomes Antonio's partner in revenge.

Thus, as soon as Webster does not need Ferdinand as a vector for the plot anymore, his madness is transformed into genuine insanity and becomes an aesthetic feature. Ferdinand's divagations, which feed the last scenes, together with the theme of lycanthropy and all the medical folklore that is bound to it, complete and perfect the baroque atmosphere that characterises the play. Lycan-

thropy is added to the curiosity cabinet which already contains the cut hand, the wax figures and the madmen.

Conclusion

Ferdinand's madness is not of a simple nature; constantly evolving, it appears to be a combination of a lustful, cruel and macabre temperament, which hides an incestuous desire, and a mental disturbance connected to his status as a twin. He cannot accept that the Other which he considers as a part of himself could have a separate life. His last words, "My sister! O! my sister! there's the cause on't" (V.v.71), show that the complex knot that binds these two characters is the cause of all the tragic action.

Madness in this complex form is an element that allows Webster to give more depth to his play, to justify the action and horrors that are staged in it and to give it a baroque aura. Thanks to the motif of madness and Webster's psychological approach to it, the character of the villain is, to some extent, detached from its formal origins. He is still violent and excessive, but his underlying mental disease makes him more complex and more individual, in a way, more modern.

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