

Engl.312
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SHE WOLF

The Duchess of Malfi in relation to Romulus and Remus

The Duchess of Malfi by John Webster is a play driven by locomotive lunacy. While the play begins as a possible romance between the Duchess and Antonio, such a docile narration is soon turned on its head. While everyone in the play slowly becomes more suspicious and agitated, the stakes are raised and soon the Duchess is dead and buried and her brother imagines himself? a werewolf. Their fate, though tragic, was one that could not be avoided. Webster carefully crafts his characters with a specific intent in mind. In his numerous uses of wolf imagery throughout the play, Webster is drawing the audience's attention to a comparison between The Duchess and Ferdinand and Romulus and Remus of Roman mythology. This connection is important because it implies the tragedy could not be avoided, and that the Duchess and Ferdinand are fated to follow in the footsteps of fratricide and family discord. Nice, clear argument!

The Duchess and Ferdinand are related to Romulus and Remus in numerous ways. The most striking connection is that both siblings are twins born into noble families. Romulus and Remus were the grandchildren of Numitor, King of Alba Longa, who himself was a descendent of the Trojan prince Aeneas. He was murdered by his brother Amulius, who then claimed the throne and forced his niece, Rhea Silvia, to be a vestal virgin. However, Rhea Silvia was seduced by Mars, god of war, and subsequently gave birth to Romulus and Remus. Fearing for both herself and her children, Rhea Silvia abandoned her children in the forest where they were suckled by a she wolf and later raised by a Shepherd. The boys were natural leaders and

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eventually founded the city of Rome. In building the city, Romulus made a wall his brother Remus criticized and jumped over to prove a point. Having proved his point, he was then murdered by Romulus. [Need a source for this information \(because it includes details that may not be common knowledge\).](#)

If we use the mythology of Romulus and Remus as a template to reading the Duchess of Malfi we can begin to understand the significance of Webster's use of lupine allusions. In act four, after Ferdinand has imprisoned the Duchess he tries to "cheer her up" in a thinly veiled attempt to get under her skin. He sends her a group of mad men who babble at length about what seems to be nothing. Yet on closer examination, any one of the strange comments relate directly to the situation at hand. "O, let us howl some heavy note, Some deadly dogged howl, Sounding as from the threatening throat Of beasts and fatal fowl! As ravens, screech-owls, bulls, and bears, We 'll bell, and bawl our parts, Till irksome noise have cloy'd your ears And corrosiv'd your hearts. At last, whenas our choir wants breath, Our bodies being blest, We 'll sing, like swans, to welcome death, And die in love and rest" (IV. II 68-72). [Format as poetry/song.](#) The first madman to speak does so in song, an ominous bestial song at that. He speaks on behalf of madmen everywhere and aligns them with wild animals "Of beasts and fatal fowl". His comparison draws on the similarities of sound between animals and the insane "We'll bell, and bawl our parts; till irksome noise have clov'd your ears". They are crazy because they are as loud and unintelligible as creatures of the forest, and this in turn is unsettling to anyone "sane". While animals ranging from bulls to swans are mentioned, the madman's menagerie begins with a reference to wolves [\(perhaps, since it could be dogs, but if you show more of the other wolf references and howling, this could be more convincingly be argued as referring to the wolf howl\).](#) "O, let us howl some heavy note, some deadly dogged howl". This howling seems

forlorn. Not only are the notes “heavy” impaling both significance and sorrow, but the howl itself is “deadly” a precursor to the fate of the accursed. The foreboding first lines are directly applicable to the Duchess who will soon die, yet the last lines imply a sense of freedom in her demise. “We’ll sing like swans to welcome death. And die in love and rest.” While she cannot escape her death, her death is not one that she fears, it will liberate her. [Nice analytical reading.](#)

Once the Duchess has been “liberated,” her brother becomes further bound by his own madness. In speaking with [Bosola](#) after his sister’s death, Ferdinand denies any and all responsibility. He pins the blame on [Bosola](#) who he himself ordered to kill the Duchess. It is unclear what Ferdinand truly believes, perhaps [Bosola](#) is merely a scapegoat, or maybe Ferdinand has completely disassociated himself from the whole sordid affair. When [Bosola](#) remarks “Who shall dare reveal this?” Ferdinand has his answer ready: “O, I’ll tell thee; The wolf shall find her grave, and scrape it up, Not to devour the corpse, but to discover The horrid murder” (IV.II 279-282). Ferdinand acknowledges the Duchess’ death was a “horrid murder” yet shows little in the way of remorse. His lament does not seek to justify his actions or make excuses for what has been done, if anything it sounds like a threat directed at himself. Almost as if he was speaking about his situation as if it did not apply to him. He realizes the crime will be noticed, but not by any mortal means; he believes the ghost of the Duchess “shall find her grave, and scrape it up”. He isn’t concerned with human law, but is sensitive to the prospect of supernatural law. [Can you explain what you mean by supernatural law?](#)

By act five, this supernatural law has had Ferdinand tried and sentenced. He has given into his bestial nature, and in doing so has become a beast. His doctor diagnosis is as follows “I’ll tell you. In those that are possess’d with ’t there o’erflows Such melancholy humour they imagine Themselves to be transformed into wolves; Steal forth to church-yards in the dead of

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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 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; bade them take their swords, Rip up his flesh, and try. Straight I was sent for, And, having minister'd to him, found his grace Very well recover'd" (V.II 10-24).

Throughout, proper formatting of quotations would be helpful. For all the comparisons made between the royal family and wolves (quickly showing more of these would be helpful – perhaps before you get into that first one you analyze in detail.), it is no less surprising when Ferdinand believe himself to actually be a wolf. His condition is no doubt brought on by intense guilt at the death of his sister, "a wolf's skin was hairy on the outside, his on the inside"; this interior fur is a manifestation of the remorse he feels and proof of his "inhumanity". His shame is only intensified by the fact he cannot wear his heart, or fur, on his sleeve. Just like his fur is unseen, so is his crime. He must bear his shame in secrecy, like the dog he really is. Interesting!

When reading the Duchess of Malfi, it is easy to gloss over the many references to wolves as simply a metaphor for greed and destructiveness. While this is a valid interpretation there is more going on beneath the surface. Through persistent use of the wolf motif Webster is cueing us to think about Romulus and Remus. In doing so he isn't just offering a comparison between two sets of noble twins, he is giving us a context for how to understand the play. If we surmise the events as simply the result of madness, jealousy, or betrayal, we're not seeing the whole picture. While all those mechanisms are important in the plays function, when we see the connection to the classics it becomes readily apparent that there was no other way it could have ended. The characters were flawed from the beginning, their fate written in story before they could read it. Ultimately, this would be more effective if you could tie events of the play more

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specifically to events of the Romulus and Remus legend – more than just twins with wolf associations so that it is more fully developed. I wonder if you could push this so far as to suggest that Ferdinand sees himself as a sort of Romulus? And are there events that map onto the R&R story? And what does it mean that Ferdinand becomes not another Romulus, but a madman who thinks himself a werewolf?

Overall – this is an engagingly written essay, with detailed, original ideas. I would push you to fix infelicities like citations/quotations and press forward to make more developed ties between Romulus and Remus and the Duchess’s story. But for a short essay, this presents truly original, engaging ideas.

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