

UNDERGRADUATE PAPER

**Embodying Androgyne: Treatment of
the Male/Female Twin Relationship
in Shakespeare and Webster**

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As I am a twin, the people around me have always been fascinated by my relationship with my sister. All my life I have been confronted by ridiculous questions about my connection with my twin, specifically the potential for a psychic connection. Though I have always regarded these questions as silly, they stirred in me questions of my own about a different type of twin relationship, the relationship between male and female twins. How does the twin relationship change when the twins are of a different sex, and does it change the twins' perception of their individual gender? In studying William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* and John Webster's *Duchess of Malfi*, I could see this question being addressed through their respective twin pairings. Something is inherently unsettling about twins in general, but even more unsettling is the implied relationship between twins of different sexes. The male/female twinship is typically used to physically represent a carefully balanced relationship; one twin cannot be whole without the other half, and the imbalance often leads to a physical or metaphorical death of oneself. Renaissance playwrights were well schooled in Greek mythology and did not hesitate to utilize this well-known duality in their works in order to communicate their characters' dualities.

Other fascinations during the Renaissance were Androgyne and Hermaphroditus, both creatures originating in Ancient Greek myth. Hermaphroditus, the child of Hermes and Aphrodite, was the embodiment of both sexes; he was often considered one of the gods of marriage due to his bi-sexual appearance and demeanor.

Though already embodying both sexes, Hermaphroditus was transformed even further beyond the perfect balance of Androgyne. While bathing in a lake, a water nymph found Hermaphroditus bathing and was so enthralled by his figure that she grabbed him and asked the gods to fuse their bodies together so they might never be parted, thus upsetting the perfect balance and becoming a monster.¹ Plato, in order to explain homo and heterosexuality, similarly addressed the fusion of the male and female parts into one perfect being in his myth of Androgyne. He asserts that in the beginning there were three sexes, Androgyne, Male, and Female. They existed in halves connected by the belly button and cartwheeled around; unfortunately, they conspired against the gods and were struck in half down the middle, thus becoming the modern person. Due to this incident, each half-person continually strives to return to its former partner in order to replicate their former perfection, explaining why people are attracted to each other in hetero- and homosexual ways.² The androgynous union is considered the most ideal because it balances the two sexes in a perfect unity, much like the exalted and androgynous figure of Justice.

The Renaissance fascination with androgyny goes deeper than just the study of Greek myth. In every cross-dressing comedy of this time is at least one monologue discussing the matter of physical sex vs. mental sex. The playwrights explore the duality inside every person, the containment of both male and female parts inside of each person, and the natural androgyny of the species. Due to their natural duality, twins can often be considered two halves of the same person. In the case of male/female twins, they represent the two halves of Androgyne, the perfect being, each part incomplete without the other. William Slights said, "The hermaphrodite can represent for the Renaissance allegorizer a highly desirable confluence and balance of virtues."³

If the set of twins represents balance, then what happens when an author separates the twins and creates an imbalance? Inspired by Greek myth, William Shakespeare and John Webster use the male/female twinship as a physical representation of the delicate balance of the human condition in their plays *Twelfth Night* and *The Duchess of Malfi*. They use this androgynous twinship to illustrate the duality of the mind and the disastrous outcome when

the female and male become unbalanced and upset the balance between the sane and insane, and the human and monstrous sides of the human condition.

Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* is arguably the first Renaissance play that springs to mind when thinking about male/female twins. On the surface, it seems to be a light-hearted tale of cross-dressing, love, and mistaken identity, but scrape past that layer and there is a wealth of mental anguish over losing a sibling and three characters who deal with such a tragedy. After being separated from her brother, Sebastian, during a storm at sea, Viola assumes her brother is dead and resolves to masquerade as a page named Cesario. She finds employment in the service of Duke Orsino, embodying femininity and masculinity in this guise and surrounding herself with men in order to sooth the loss of male counterpart. In Illyria there is another woman suffering from the death of a brother: the Countess Olivia has sworn off men for seven years in mourning for her brother, a stark contrast to Viola's grief and transformation to Cesario. But Olivia allows Cesario into her presence and falls in love with "him" because of his feminine quality, without knowing that "he" is actually Viola.

Viola has become more than a cross-dresser in her desperation to fill the hole left by her brother. She has become a monster. Like the story of Hermaphroditus, Viola has become "of double shape. Ye could not say it was a perfect boy nor a perfect wench: it seemed both and none of both to beene."⁴ Viola's opinion of herself is made clear in her soliloquy after she first meets and accidentally woos Olivia:

My master loves her dearly
 And I, poor monster, fond as much on him,
 And she, mistaken, seems to dote on me:
 What will become of this? As I am a man,
 My state is desperate for my master's love,
 As I am a woman (now alas the day!)
 What thriftless sighs shall poor Olivia breathe? (2.2. 32-39)⁵

Viola realizes that due to her intention to become a man she has actually become a "poor hermaphroditical monster . . . who has stirred the homoerotic passion of Olivia by incorporating the polarities of sexual and gender difference into . . . her maddening disguise."⁶ Without her twin to balance the male and female

sides of herself, Viola spirals into a monstrous form till she can no longer bear the chaos she is creating. Unlike Rosalind's cross-dressing in *As You Like It*, Viola cannot separate her male appearance from her female mind. She is trying to force herself into a sex and gender that is not her own instead of blending her masculinity and femininity.

In her downward spiral to androgyny, the audience sees Viola struggle with her own sanity. She is deceiving everyone around her, so she has no respite from her masquerade. When we see Sebastian is still alive, his reaction to the loss of his sister is nowhere near as drastic, but is still somewhat disturbing. Although Sebastian seems to have dealt with his separation from his sister in a sane manner, he is enthralled with Olivia after she mistakes him for Cesario. Sebastian's insanity comes from his inability to balance himself without a female to counter his masculinity, while Viola's comes from trying to over-balance the loss of her male counterpart by becoming male herself. Once Viola and Sebastian are reunited, Viola is finally able to let go of her obsession with her brother and accept her love for Duke Orsino. Yet Viola and Sebastian are still unable to progress without a companion of the opposite sex to simulate the relationship they had with each other. Shakespeare is showing his audience through this comedy that masculinity cannot exist without femininity; if too much of either lives inside one person, the imbalance leads to madness and monstrosity. However, this does not mean Shakespeare is saying that only heterosexual relationships lead to happiness; he is merely using the twins to represent the balance that exists inside each person and the potential for monstrosity that such a balance creates.

Peter Zacher's essay on narcissism explains that the need to love someone else more than oneself is a key driving factor in humanity's existence. "Transcendence, psychologically understood, refers to being able to see the bigger picture by stepping outside the circle of egocentricity."⁷ Zacher points out that often this transcendence is narcissistically driven because it is in people's nature to pick a person they see characteristically similar to themselves. With this need for transcendence in conjunction with the similarities and the time that the twins share, it is probable that one twin may form a closer attachment to the sibling than

that sibling reciprocates. In the Sebastian/Viola relationship Viola is obviously more attached to her brother than he is to her, as the reader can see from the unequal reactions to their separation and supposed death. Though Shakespeare and Webster would not have been aware of the psychological reasoning behind the unequal attachment, they still have their characters participate in that path of unequal attachment. Much like Viola being more attached to Sebastian, Ferdinand is obsessed with and controlling his sister while she is able to function without him.

This unequal attachment is yet another physical representation of the unbalanced mind. When the relationship between the twins becomes uneven, that is when the dependent twin starts his or her descent into madness. For Viola, it is her attempt to physically embody the Androgyne she was with her brother by transforming herself into a “monstrous hermaphrodite” instead of finding a balance for herself without her brother. For Ferdinand it is a disturbing descent to lycanthropic madness and his unhealthy obsession with controlling his sister that is masking his feelings of rejection and despair as his sister moves on without him. The Duchess was born first and then married before her brother. Although Webster never specifically mentions Ferdinand’s marital status—but based on his obsessive need to manage his sister’s romantic affairs—it is safe to assume that he is single. Ferdinand’s imbalance is dark and tragic; contrasting Viola’s happy ending, life does not end well for Ferdinand.

Unlike in *Twelfth Night*, Ferdinand’s obsession with his sister starts to become more incestuous and disturbed as the play wears on. After finding out she is pregnant, he fantasizes about the kind of man who impregnated her,

some strong-thighed bargeman
or one o’th’woodyard, that can quoit the sledge
or toss the bar, or else some lovely squire
that carries coals up to her privy lodgings. (2.5.43-46)⁸

This sexual preoccupation with his sister can be attributed to what Gail Finney refers to as “alter-ego transference” in her article on self-reflexive siblings. She uses the myth of Narcissus to explain this transference: “Erotic energy is transferred from the narcissistic individual to the object most like himself, his sibling.”⁹ Such transference is the case with Ferdinand and the Duchess.

Since the Duchess holds all the real power, Ferdinand starts to transfer his self-love to sibling-love, idealizing his sister beyond what is appropriate in a healthy sibling relationship. Ferdinand cannot see redeeming qualities in himself to love, so as a substitute he finds those qualities in his sister and exalts her to a standard she cannot possibly uphold.

Contrasting Viola's unsuccessful attempt to embody Androgyne by herself, the Duchess manages to find inner balance quite easily without her twin. Whether it is because she had a previous marriage and had already detached from Ferdinand or because she is simply a stronger character, she has been able to balance her masculine attributes with her femininity. The Duchess does remarry—to Antonio—quite quickly after Antonio's return, which could easily have been a defensive move against reforming her attachment to her brother, or it could be for love. The reasons for her remarriage are not important because, either way, the Duchess is able to distance herself from Ferdinand and become powerful and independent. After finding that she had a son, Ferdinand refers to her as "excellent hyena" (2.5.39), in direct reference to Ferdinand's feelings of being mocked and laughed at by his successful and independent sister. However, it is no coincidence that hyenas are a matriarchal society, reemphasizing the Duchess's power over her brother. Ferdinand highlights his sister's androgyny while simultaneously accusing her of the same sort of monstrous being he sees himself becoming. While he accuses the Duchess of becoming a hermaphrodite, he himself is receding farther and farther away from the androgynous ideal and spiraling down into monstrous insanity.

Webster reinforces the theme of hermaphrodites for his audience by having a lowly officer offhandedly mention the Duchess's husband might be a hermaphrodite, "for he could not abide a woman" (3.2.225-226). By repeatedly bringing up hermaphrodites and hermaphroditic creatures, Webster is subtly directing his audience to think about hermaphrodites throughout the duration of the play, especially in regard to the sacred twin relationship. Then inspired by those thoughts, he shows how the Duchess successfully embodies both sexes without becoming overwhelmed by either, as poor monstrous Viola was. The Duchess is seen as a paragon of virtue and justice; before she even speaks,

Antonio has already introduced her as “the right noble Duchess” and continues to praise her looks, her temperance, and every aspect of her being. While comparing her to her brother, Antonio remarks, “Cast in one figure, of so different temper” (1.1.187-88). Webster immediately emphasizes the contrasting natures of Ferdinand and the Duchess.

Ferdinand’s sick obsession turns deadly by the second act. In act 2, scene 5, Ferdinand imagines all the ways he would make her pay for her promiscuity. He speaks of burning her in a coal pit, draining her blood, making her pay for betraying him; and yet when it comes down to the actual act of killing his sister, Ferdinand is nowhere to be seen. He cannot physically bring himself to dispose of his other half, making Bosola do the despicable deed for him. Mirroring Ferdinand’s inability to release his sister from his oppressive obsession, he cannot release her from her life or let go of her in his own life. When he sneaks into her room in act 3, scene 2, he pleads with her to kill herself, despite his opportunity to do so not minutes before. He cannot kill his sister any more than he can kill himself. To him, the Duchess represents all that is good in Ferdinand, and by killing her himself, he would be destroying that last bit of salvation in himself, the chance to become a perfect androgynous being. Not even until after he witnesses his dead sister’s body is he able to admit to Bosola that they were twins—the first time in the play this relationship is revealed. He admits that his sister was older than he, and now that she and her children have died, he stands to inherit her entire estate. Ferdinand assures Bosola his only jealousy of Antonio rested in the loss of his sister’s fortune, but it is clear that his affection towards his sister is more than that. After the Duchess’s death, Ferdinand resumes his monstrous spiral, unable to rebalance after the physical and emotional loss of his sister, which ultimately resolves with his own death.

Ferdinand’s spiral into monstrosity begins with his discovery of his sister’s child, when he starts to transform into a werewolf. Much to his brother’s surprise, he proclaims himself to be suffering from Lycanthropy in the very next scene. Werewolves are solitary creatures that live in the dark. He refers to his nieces and nephews as cubs and repeatedly refers to himself as a wolf and threatens what the wolf will do. Ferdinand’s madness could be either a

rationalization for himself and all the evil he is about to commit or the result of his inability to accept his sister's independence. Either way he claims madness. He tells his brother that he had heard a mandrake and it had driven him mad. A mad man does not know he is mad, and here Ferdinand admits that his monstrous side is slowly taking over. Following his sister's death Ferdinand turns to Bosola:

Oh, 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. (4.2.309-312)

By referring to the wolf as separate from himself, he is distancing himself from his own feelings to process the emotions he has repressed concerning the loss of his sister, both physically and emotionally.

The balance in the male/female twin relationship is as precarious as the balance that exists inside each person. Through Shakespeare's and Webster's crafty personifications of the potential each person holds inside, the audience is able to see the risks presented when a person cannot accept his own duality. If Androgyne is the golden standard and the perfect form of humanity, then Ferdinand without the Duchess and Viola without Sebastian are the monstrous forms that exist when Androgyne is destroyed. The male/female twinship is the perfect allegory for their natural dependence on each other, as well as the cultural fascination during the Renaissance. Shakespeare and Webster took advantage of the cultural atmosphere and a ready acceptance of the male/female twin dynamic in order to illustrate to their audiences what they could not have explained through a single character. By crafting situations in which the twin couples would be separated, the playwrights create an opportunity to experiment with the horror of the unbalanced mind.

Notes

1. William W.E. Slights, "Maid and Man in *Twelfth Night*," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 80, no. 3 (1981): 327-48, esp. 333.
2. *Ibid.* 331.
3. *Ibid.*, 332.
4. *Ibid.*, 334.

5. William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997). All line references to *Twelfth Night* are from this edition.

6. Charles Casey, "Gender Trouble in *Twelfth Night*," *Theatre Journal* 49, no. 2 (1997): 132.

7. Peter Zacher, "Pathological Narcissism and Its Relationship to Empathy and Transcendence," *The Pluralist* 1, no. 6 (2006): 89.

8. John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, in *The English Renaissance Drama*, ed. David Bevington (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002). All line references to *The Duchess of Malfi* are from this edition.

9. Gale Finney, "Self-Reflexive Siblings: Incest as Narcissism in Teick, Wagner, and Thomas Mann," *German Quarterly* 56, no. 2 (1983): 243-56.