

# EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



## **‘It Seems She Was Born First’: The Persistence of Twinship in *The Broken Heart* and *The Duchess of Malfi***

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Although the seventeenth-century physician and author Nicholas Culpeper is referring to classical medical practitioners when he comments that ‘Authors make some flutter about the Conception of Twins’, his observation can also be extended to his contemporaries.<sup>1</sup> A number of seventeenth-century midwifery manuals devoted chapters to how to detect and safely deliver unborn twins, but their attention on such figures ends at birth. Whilst the medical works imply that being a twin is only a mark of distinction at birth, however, some of the drama that was written and performed at this time suggests otherwise. Indeed, the fact that Penthea and Ithocles in John Ford’s *The Broken Heart* (1628-9), and the Duchess and Ferdinand in John Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi* (1614) once shared a womb with each other is suggested to be so influential that it affects them not only as adults, but also beyond death. For Penthea and Ithocles, their status as twins produces a constant reminder of the type of behaviour that they are unable to display, whilst the Duchess and Ferdinand suggest that twinship is such a key component of identity that there is no peace for either when one is alive and the other is dead. Whilst the strictly medical view of twins seemed to be that they were only different from the general populace at birth, then, Ford’s and Webster’s plays both present the idea that such difference persisted well into adult life, and could even exist beyond it.

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<sup>1</sup> Nicholas Culpeper, *A directory for midwives, or, a guide for women* (London: Peter Cole), sig. K2<sup>r</sup>.

## I. Twinship Before, During, and After Birth: Early Seventeenth-Century Medical Ideas

Considering the risks which a twin pregnancy and birth could pose at a time of high maternal and infant mortality, it is hardly surprising that seventeenth-century medical works would devote a number of chapters to the detection and delivery of two children. Such texts as Jacques Guillemeau's *Child-birth or, The happy deliuerie of vvomen* (1612) and Thomas Chamberlayne's *The compleat midwife's practice* (1656) outline the main physical symptoms which a woman carrying twins could expect to feel, and offer practical advice on how to ensure a safe birth for twins who occupy a number of uterine positions. The texts therefore suggest that there is a period of time during which twins are distinctive from other people, beginning from whenever they are first able to move about in the womb, and ending when they have been born.

One key indicator of the presence of unborn twins was held to be movement in the womb 'on the right and on the left side, at the same instant'.<sup>2</sup> Whilst a woman who was carrying a single child could still expect to feel movement, it is the synchronicity of the motions which made the presence of two children evident. As well as making their mother experience a distinctive inner sensation, twins were also thought to be able to cause her to exhibit external signs of their presence. Guillemeau explains how, on the mother's abdomen, 'from the navell downward there appeare [...] a line or separation betweene both sides', whilst Chamberlayne writes of 'a line of devisions from the navel to the groine'.<sup>3</sup> Once twins had developed sufficiently enough to move around in the womb, then, they were considered to be able to make their mother's body feel and look different from that of a woman who was carrying only one child.

Whilst unborn twins were considered able to reveal their difference from sole occupants of the womb from a very early point, this distinction became most evident at birth. Guillemeau's and Chamberlayne's midwifery manuals show an acute awareness of the fact that twins could occupy a number of uterine positions, for they both offer advice on how to deliver twins who came head-first, feet-first, or a mixture of the two. Physicians and midwives were advised to insert a hand into the womb, to distinguish the twins from each other, and to then decide which to guide first to the birth canal. In an age before ultrasound, however, there was the fear that the physician or midwife would

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<sup>2</sup> Jacques Guillemeau, *Child-birth or, The happy deliuerie of vvomen* (London: A. Hatfield, 1612), sig. B3<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> Guillemeau, sig. B3<sup>v</sup>-B3<sup>f</sup>; Thomas Chamberlayne, *The compleat midwifes practice* (London: Nathaniel Brooke, 1656), sig. E1<sup>v</sup>.

accidentally try to deliver both twins at once, and so ‘tear them both asunder’.<sup>4</sup> As well as the risks of death or distress which accompanied any delivery, a twin birth also therefore generated the potential perils of disfigurement, and perhaps even dismemberment.

In order to combat these dangers, physicians and midwives were advised to respond in two interconnected ways. They were expected to identify the stronger twin, who would usually be in the most convenient position in relation to the birth canal, and so would be born first. Once the ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ twins had been identified, the physician would fasten one end of a red ribbon around the ankles of the ‘weaker’ child, then trail the other end of the ribbon down the birth canal so that it would hang between the mother’s legs. These two practices were designed to ensure that the dangerous confusion of each twin’s limbs could be avoided, and also to provide the ‘weaker’ child with some much-needed assistance with their own birth. Chamberlayne explains the reason for this intervention when he writes, ‘knowing that, that which came first was the stronger, [...] assist the other in coming forth [...] the child would never be able to endure the pain of coming into the world, by reason of its extraordinary weakness’.<sup>5</sup> The delivery of twins therefore required physical intervention at a number of points throughout their mother’s labour.

The goal of such medical involvement was, of course, to deliver twin children safely whilst ensuring the wellbeing of their mother. Yet despite all of the scrutiny that they received in the womb, it is notable that twins were not afforded the same level of medical attention once they had left it. Despite the fact that the lives of newborn twins could be in danger, this situation did not seem to warrant any sort of intervention. In his influential work *Mikrokosmographia* (1615), Helkiah Crooke explains the idea that mixed-sex twins had a higher mortality rate than their single-sexed counterparts when he states that ‘Twinnes that are both Males or both Females do for the most part survive, but if they proove a male and a female, the female doeth scarce survive or at least is very weake’.<sup>6</sup> For all that Crooke’s use of ‘scarce’ suggests that he has repeatedly observed that mixed-sex twins have a greater tendency to die, however, he does not offer a remedy for it. He may suggest that the problem arises because the female twin has spent less time in the womb than her brother, but he does not show any indication that anything could – or should – be done to address it.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Guillemeau, sig. Y4<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> Chamberlayne, sig. H1<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> Helkiah Crooke, *Mikrokosmographia* (London: William Iaggard, 1615), sig. Ee1<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> For Crooke’s explanation behind the greater tendency of mixed-sex twins to die, see Crooke, sig. Ee1<sup>r</sup>.

The notion that twins of separate bodies cease to be medically important or distinctive at birth may make sense to a certain extent, but it does also run the risk of dismissing the fact that two siblings once shared the same womb. Before birth, twins were considered able to cause marks on their mother's abdomen, or to be so awkwardly positioned that the physician or midwife could find it difficult to distinguish their limbs. After birth, however, the twins' ability to create a number of unique scenarios seems to vanish, and so does the corresponding medical attention which they receive. An intensely personal and powerful uterine relationship is thus made to seem impersonal and powerless after birth; as separate-bodied twins look no different from those who were born alone, their shared birth is no longer held to be a noteworthy component of their identity.

Whilst the medical discussions of twins suggest that that relationship is only important for the physical symptoms and the threat that it can cause, this viewpoint is not evident in all seventeenth-century texts. As adult twins, John Ford's Penthea and Ithocles, and John Webster's Duchess and Ferdinand may appear to be a curious choice for an article which has so far focused mainly on obstetrical works. Yet it is precisely the fact that Ford's and Webster's twins *are* mature which suggests a link between the medical texts and the tragedies. The lack of medical interest in adult twins would suggest that Penthea and Ithocles, and the Duchess and Ferdinand, should be indifferent to the fact that they once occupied the same womb. Yet as *The Broken Heart* and *The Duchess of Malfi* both demonstrate, the twin characters are still highly affected by their status as such, and their bodies are too.

## **II. The Persistence of Twinship in Life: *The Broken Heart***

Whilst the midwifery manuals and medical works which were discussed in the previous section illustrate the belief that twins were distinctive only before and during birth, John Ford's *The Broken Heart* suggests that their difference from single-borns persists even in adult life. A number of critics have identified the presence of a strict code of behaviour in Ford's tragedy; Michael Neill, for example, declares that there is a 'pervasive split between inward desire and outward demeanour', with the former subordinated to the latter.<sup>8</sup> Rowland Wymer writes in a similar vein when he argues that 'Ford's play revolves around [...] extreme tragic passions and the conscious attempt to

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<sup>8</sup> Michael Neill, *Issues of Death: Mortality and Identity in English Renaissance Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 364.

suppress them'.<sup>9</sup> Both Neill and Wymer rightly locate this code of behaviour in the Spartan setting of the play, but I would like to suggest that the subordination of emotions to appearance must also occur in order to maintain the idea that Penthea and Ithocles differ from the other characters because they were born at the same time. As I now hope to demonstrate, twins and non-twins alike believe that those who shared the same birth should exhibit certain characteristics.

As Amyclas is King of Sparta for most of the play, and Nearchus is the figure who occupies that position at its end, they both inhabit authoritative roles. It is notable, then, that each of these characters employs the word 'twins' in order to achieve the same meaning. Amyclas calls Calantha and Ithocles 'sweet twins of my life's solace' (4.3.50), whilst Nearchus assures the princess that 'my tongue and heart are twins' (4.3.365).<sup>10</sup> In both of these instances, the word which describes two people who were born at the same time is used in order to suggest that two things are exactly the same. Amyclas and Nearchus both seek to stress the purity of their affections through the connotations of unity and togetherness that their uses of the word 'twin' create. Since the characters that Amyclas and Nearchus address also accept the meanings which they employ, there seems to be a broader acceptance of the idea that twins are distinctive from those who were born alone. Instead of being the end-point for their difference, as the medical works suggest, the shared birth of twins seems to be just another event which confirms it for the characters of Ford's tragedy. Since they arrived in the world together, the idea is that they will remain together in everything that they do.

As Ithocles forced Penthea to marry a man that she did not love, and that decision continues to cause her much suffering and despair, Ford's twins do not exactly fit the definition that was offered by Amyclas and Nearchus. Penthea and Ithocles are nevertheless aware that their shared birth marks them out as 'different' from other people, but since they fail to exhibit the emotional togetherness that should distinguish them, they try to focus on their corporeal similarity. Perhaps because of the distance between himself and Penthea, Ithocles first focuses upon the bodies of the parents who both produced them. He laments 'We had one father, in one womb took life, / Were brought up twins together, yet have lived / At distance like two strangers' (3.2.34-6). Ithocles gradually increases the closeness of his relation to Penthea by emphasising the

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<sup>9</sup> Rowland Wymer, *Webster and Ford* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1995) p. 103; see also Sasha Garwood, "'The Skull Beneath the Skin": Women and Self-Starvation on the Renaissance Stage', *Shakespeare Jahrbuch*, 145 (1995), 106-23 (p. 115); Marion Lomax (ed.), 'Introduction', in *'Tis Pity She's a Whore and Other Plays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. vii-xxiv (p. xiii).

<sup>10</sup> All quotations are taken from John Ford, *The Broken Heart*, in *'Tis Pity She's a Whore and Other Plays*, ed. by Marion Lomax (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995, repr. 2008), pp. 81-163.

similarity of their father's body, their mother's, and finally their own. He suggests that for all of their emotional estrangement, the fact that they both once occupied the same womb is more important than ever, because it allows them to maintain a connection in spite of their poor relationship.

After stressing their shared origins, Ithocles then hints further at their linked bodies by turning his attention to their interiors. He suggests an affinity between Penthea's 'loved heart' (3.2.44) and his own, 'For which mine's now a-breaking' (3.2.45); their shared birth is so important, he implies, that he is able to feel her pain at being forced away from Orgilus. Ithocles' correlation of his own remorse with Penthea's violation and despair is not wholly convincing, and as the scene progresses it becomes apparent that he actually empathises with Penthea because it seems unlikely that he could ever marry the woman he loves. Whilst Penthea has no way of knowing for certain that Ithocles is in love with Calantha at this point, she nevertheless rejects the idea that the interiors of their bodies are the same:

Not yet, heaven,  
I do beseech thee. First let some wild fires  
Scorch, not consume it; may the heat be cherished  
With desires infinite, but hopes impossible.  
(3.2.45-8)

Until Ithocles has experienced the hellish combination of desire and pain that resides inside her own heart, she cannot accept his claim that their interiors are the same.

Even when Penthea does realise that Ithocles is in love with Calantha, she still maintains that his emotional pain is not yet profound enough to match her own:

Suppose you were contracted to her, would it not  
Split even your very soul to see her father  
Snatch her out of your arms against her will,  
And force her on the Prince of Argos?  
(3.2.106-9).

In persisting with this line of argument, Penthea is not only emphasising the horror of her own experience: she is also challenging Ithocles to imagine the torturous prospect that she outlines, and to prove that his heart resembles hers by allowing himself to realise the anguish he would feel. Ithocles does seem to accept Penthea's challenge, for he admits that considering such a scenario makes him 'sweat in blood' (3.2.111)

because he now understands how much pain she feels. Penthea may not respond by referring to their hearts when she tells her twin ‘We are reconciled. / Alas, sir, being children, but two branches / Of one stock, ’tis not fit we should divide’ (3.2.111-13), but she does reinforce the broader idea of their corporeal similarity. She echoes Ithocles’ earlier reference to their shared origins, and suggests that their status as twins means that they should remain close to each other. Whilst Ithocles’ actions would have been enough to justifiably separate mere brother and sister, Penthea implies, they cannot be allowed to split up twins. Her use of the phrase ‘’tis not fit’ is nevertheless very revealing, for it demonstrates that she is not reconciling with Ithocles because of affection, but because there is a broader societal assumption that twins will act differently to those who were born alone.

There are two main critical viewpoints regarding Penthea’s attitude towards Ithocles following their reconciliation: some maintain that she has his best interests at heart, whilst some argue otherwise. Nancy A. Gutierrez, Rick Bowers, and Lisa Hopkins feature among the first group, with Gutierrez arguing that Penthea has ‘undiminished love for her brother’.<sup>11</sup> Bowers then suggests that ‘Penthea recommends her brother to Calantha as a final wearied act of generosity’,<sup>12</sup> whilst Hopkins maintains that she wishes to ‘produce a marriage between Calantha and Ithocles’.<sup>13</sup> Of the critics who view Penthea differently, Roland Wymer declares that she is ‘not altogether free from a suggestion of satisfaction that he [is] now equal with her in misery’, and Michael Neill finds her ‘ambiguously motivated [in her] intercession with Calantha’.<sup>14</sup> Both sets of scholars offer compelling readings, but instead of siding with one group, I believe that it is more useful to consider why Penthea’s attitude towards Ithocles can be interpreted in two ways. As I now hope to demonstrate, Penthea seems to want to help and to harm Ithocles because she struggles with the idea that she should be the same as him.

Penthea seems to fear that because she is Ithocles’ twin and is therefore supposed to totally resemble him, other people will fail to take her own attitudes and viewpoints into account. When Bassanes accuses her and Ithocles of incest, she halts her twin’s furious response by asking ‘By our bloods, / Will you quite undo us both, brother?’ (3.2.153-4); whilst she emphasises their similar interiors through the reference to ‘our bloods’, she also shows an awareness that their likeness can be misinterpreted. As Penthea is

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<sup>11</sup> Nancy A. Gutierrez, ‘Trafficking in John Ford’s *The Broken Heart*’, in *Privacy, Domesticity, and Women*, ed. by Corrine S. Abate (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), pp. 65-82 (p. 70).

<sup>12</sup> Bowers, p. 275.

<sup>13</sup> Lisa Hopkins, ‘Ladies’ Trials: Women and the Law in Three Plays of John Ford’, *Cahiers Élisabéthains: A Biannual Journal of English Renaissance Studies*, 56 (1999), 49-64 (p. 58).

<sup>14</sup> Wymer, p. 113; Neill, p. 366.

supposed to be the same as Ithocles, and Ithocles' fury could be understood as a sign of guilt, she fears that the impression which her twin gives will also come to define her too. She reacts by intervening in the argument and stressing her own marital faithfulness so as to clear herself and Ithocles of blame.

Whilst Penthea may be able to negotiate the impression which her likeness to Ithocles creates upon her husband, it is much more difficult for her to do so with Calantha. When she bequeaths Ithocles to the princess, she has to emphasise his goodness to increase his attractiveness. Yet Penthea is all too aware that Ithocles has not been good to her, so she does not feel entirely comfortable with the idea that her outer admiration of her twin means that she also feels this way inside. As she cannot bring herself to lie that their relationship is excellent, she returns to the very organ which Ithocles had earlier offered as evidence of their bodily togetherness: the heart. Whilst Ithocles had suggested that their hearts were the same, Penthea declares 'Tis long ago since I lost my heart / Long have I lived without it' (3.5.72). She is ostensibly referring to her doomed love for Orgilus, but at the same time she is also denying her connection to her twin, because he had specifically identified that organ as proof of their togetherness. She then substitutes Ithocles for her missing heart, commenting 'instead / Of it, [...] / I do bequeath in holiest rites of love, / Mine only brother, Ithocles' (3.5.74-8). Penthea may seem to suggest her affection for Ithocles and Calantha by offering him in place of her heart, but the substitution actually reveals her anguish and guilt. Ithocles is the reason why Penthea is now heart-less, and he is also one of the people to whom she should be closest. There is also a reprisal of the idea that Ithocles' heart cannot match her own until he has been denied his beloved, for Penthea suggests the possibility that 'his heart / Shall fall in cinders, scorched by your disdain' (3.5.85-6). Such a scenario would not only leave Ithocles bereft: it would also cause him to become as heart-less as her, and to finally understand just how distraught she is.

Having dismissed the idea that their bodies are the same on the inside, Penthea then focuses upon their outer likeness. Sasha Garwood identifies Penthea's decision to starve herself as a response to a society which demands self-control, and argues that she 'impresses upon her physical self its action on her emotional self'.<sup>15</sup> Whilst Garwood is referring to a Spartan code of behaviour, I believe that the sentiment of her reading can also be extended to suggest that Penthea is reacting to the notion that there must be complete similarity between twins. Penthea's fear that her likeness to Ithocles will cause people to believe that they have a perfect relationship thus seems to be one important reason behind her self-starvation. When Penthea asks Orgilus 'Like whom do I look,

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<sup>15</sup> Garwood, p. 115.



prithe?’ (4.2.114), she seems to be trying to find out whether she still has any strong physical resemblance to Ithocles; when Orgilus’ lack of response suggests that starvation has taken away her physical similarity, it is then that she is most critical of her twin. She repeatedly (and literally) points out that Ithocles is to blame for her situation, announcing ‘that is he’ (4.2.116) and ‘That’s he, and still ’tis he’ (4.2.122). She also stresses their interior difference once more when she returns to Ithocles’ heart, which is not the same as hers because it has ‘crept / Into the cabinet of the princess’ (4.2.117-18), and so will be filled with joy, rather than despair. Penthea’s self-starvation does not only mean that she is able to deny her outer similarity to Ithocles, then; it also allows her to emphasise their emotional distance, too.

This lack of togetherness does not only help to cause Penthea’s death by starvation, for it also leads to Ithocles’ murder. One of Orgilus’ main criticisms of the man who should have been his brother-in-law is his ability to delight in sensual and political pleasures whilst his twin was starving herself to death:

You dreamt of kings, did ’ee? How to bosom  
The delicacies of a youngling princess,  
How with this nod to grace that subtle courtier,  
How with that frown to make this noble tremble,  
And so forth, whilst Penthea’s groans, and tortures,  
Her agonies, miseries, afflictions,  
Ne’er touched upon your thought.  
(4.4.30-6).

Orgilus views Ithocles’ imaginings as a complete betrayal of Penthea, not least because he was the one responsible for her despair – and what is more, Ithocles himself seems to agree. When he instructs Orgilus ‘if the wound close up / Tent it with double force’ (4.4.41-2), he appears to accept and even welcome the idea that he is being punished because of Penthea’s sufferings. He also addresses his twin as he bleeds to death, and offers his body as evidence that he is ‘earnest of his wrongs to thy forced faith’ (4.4.66). By failing to act in a manner that reflected his twin’s pain, Ithocles demonstrated that there was a high level of difference between them; as he was of sound mind, both he and Orgilus understand this display of difference to be unforgivable for both Penthea and their society in general.

Yet despite the fact that Orgilus fully understands that Penthea and Ithocles were not like each other in life, he makes a concerted effort to stress their similarity in death. Leaving their bodies side by side, he remarks, ‘Sweet twins, shine stars forever’

(4.4.74). He does not only seek to create the impression of their bodily togetherness, but also its emotional counterpart. Given his earlier criticism of Ithocles, it is worth interrogating why Orgilus is suddenly so keen to stress the similarity of the twins. Although his admiration of Ithocles' manner of dying certainly seems to offer one reason for this shift in emphasis, Orgilus may also feel some form of pressure to emphasise their similarity. Given the societal belief that twins are distinct from other people because they are so similar to one another, Orgilus may be trying to atone for their lack of likeness in life. By posing them in a similar fashion and calling them both 'twins', Orgilus seems therefore to be trying to make Penthea and Ithocles represent the perfect relationship which they never experienced in life, but was expected by others.

Although Penthea and Ithocles may be adult twins, then, they are shown to attribute importance to the fact that they occupied the same womb at the same time. The way in which Amyclas and Nearchus use the word 'twins' reveals the idea that those who shared the same birth should resemble each other inside as well as outside. The strength of this belief is also indicated by Orgilus, who stresses the physical and emotional connectedness of Penthea and Ithocles in death even though he knows that they did not feel that way in life. In contrast to the medical idea that twins are only different up until the point of their shared birth, then, *The Broken Heart* suggests that they continue to be distinctive *because* of that shared birth well into their adult life. Through Orgilus' attempts to make Penthea and Ithocles appear united, Ford's play begins to hint that twins are still different from other people even in death. As I now hope to demonstrate, however, Webster's tragedy explores this idea at much greater length.

### **III. The Persistence of Twinship in Death: *The Duchess of Malfi***

Whereas *The Broken Heart* concentrates upon the influence which the fact of being a twin can exert during life, John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* focuses upon the power it can hold even after death. Like Penthea and Ithocles, the Duchess and Ferdinand are also adult twins, but their relationship as such is not actually revealed until one of them has died at the hands of the other. In spite of the fact that the Duchess was murdered by Ferdinand – or perhaps because of it – there are certain points at which he returns to their relationship, and she appears to 'live on' after her death. These events both imply that twins continue to be different from single-borns even when they have departed from life.

It has frequently been acknowledged that the twin relationship between Ferdinand and the Duchess is only made known after he arranged her murder and viewed her body, and

the effect of this revelation has been discussed by a number of critics. Richard A. McCabe, for example, argues that ‘Ferdinand’s claim [...] establishes an especially close bond [between himself and the Duchess] which tends to exclude the Cardinal’, whilst Judith Haber and Susan Wells maintain that the revelation makes Ferdinand seem more isolated because his twin is either now unable to participate in the ‘orgasmic union in death’ that he desired with her, or is faced with ‘an alienated image of himself’.<sup>16</sup> These critics all therefore suggest that Ferdinand’s relationship with the Duchess is renegotiated once it becomes clear that they are twins, with McCabe suggesting that it seems to become closer, and Haber and Wells arguing the opposite. Instead of seeing the revelation of their twinship as the only point of renegotiation, however, I now wish to demonstrate that a number of renegotiations take place, beginning with Ferdinand’s comment and ending with his death.

When he makes it clear that the Duchess was his twin, Ferdinand also offers another important bit of information about their relationship. His admission ‘She and I were twins; / And should I die this instant, I had lived / Her time to a minute’ (4.2.259-61) illustrates not only that he was the younger of the pair, but also the ‘weaker’ of them too, in accordance with medical ideas.<sup>17</sup> Given that Ferdinand has survived his twin at this point, it may seem curious for him to dwell upon a fact which suggests that he is weaker than her, but upon further inspection his choice of subject-matter actually seems to indicate one of the reasons for her murder. Ferdinand chose to have the Duchess, his ‘stronger’ twin, strangled with a cord; given their shared births, this cord could perhaps symbolise the umbilical cord, and so allow Ferdinand to play out a fantasy that the Duchess was asphyxiated in the womb. Had that scenario occurred, Ferdinand would then have been the ‘stronger’ twin, and he would have been free from any suggestion that he was somehow deficient in comparison to the Duchess.

This fantastical version of their twin relationship first surfaces after Ferdinand orders ‘Cover her face: mine eyes dazzle: she died young’ (4.2.256), because that instruction means that he can avoid looking at the part of her body which would show the most obvious signs of her age. Just when Ferdinand has tried to imagine a world in which he was the ‘stronger’ twin, however, Bosola reminds him of the reality of their birth order:

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<sup>16</sup> Richard A. McCabe, *Incest, Drama and Nature’s Law, 1550-1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 250; Judith Haber, ‘The Duchess of Malfi: Tragedy and Gender’, in *The Cambridge Companion to English Renaissance Tragedy*, ed. by Emma Smith and Garrett A. Sullivan, Jr (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 236-48 (p. 237); Susan Wells, ‘Dominance of the Typical and The Duchess of Malfi’, in *The Duchess of Malfi: Contemporary Critical Essays*, ed. by Dymphna Callaghan (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 2000) pp. 144-66 (p. 158).

<sup>17</sup> All quotations are taken from John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, in *The Duchess of Malfi and Other Plays*, ed. by René Weis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996, repr. 2009), pp. 103-200.

‘It seems she was born first’ (4.2. 261). It appears that Ferdinand interprets Bosola’s remark as a reminder of his status as the ‘weaker’ twin, for he then orders, ‘Let me see her face again’ (4.2.263).

This new sighting of the Duchess’ face then seems to cause Ferdinand to jump from one fantastical view of their relationship to another, equally delusory one. He berates Bosola for his part in the murder, declaring ‘I bade thee, when I was distracted of my wits, / Go kill my dearest friend, and thou hast done’t’ (4.2.270-71). Since the audience have never been offered any evidence that Ferdinand thought of the Duchess as his ‘friend’, let alone his ‘dearest’ one, his claim to closeness is hyperbolic. Yet the very fact that Ferdinand exaggerates the strength of the connection between himself and the Duchess demonstrates that he is once more trying to renegotiate his relationship with her. Instead of attempting to position himself as the ‘stronger’ twin, Ferdinand returns to the idea that he is the ‘weaker’ one, for he suggests that he depended upon inheriting her wealth: ‘I had a hope, / Had she continued widow, to have gained / An infinite mass of treasure by her death’ (4.2.278-80). Since the Duchess already has a son and heir from her first marriage, it seems that Ferdinand offers this excuse for her murder in order to create the impression that her wealth would have benefitted him greatly, and to support the idea that she is the stronger of the pair. The fact that his words are contradicted by the existence of the Duchess’ eldest son then undermines his claim to be dependent upon her, and so restores the distance between them.

In the immediate aftermath of the Duchess’ death, then, Ferdinand moves from trying to imagine that his twin died at birth to suggesting that he was extremely close to her in life. His inconsistency is clearly a consequence of his guilt at his involvement in the murder of his twin, but he does attempt to find fault with Bosola. Having already claimed to be ‘distracted of my wits’ (4.2.270) when he gave the order for his twin’s execution, Ferdinand then upbraids Bosola for thinking that his word was authoritative: ‘Mine? Was I her judge? / Did any ceremonial form of law doom her to not-being?’ (4.2.291-2). When Ferdinand asks ‘Where shalt thou find this judgement registered / Unless in hell?’ (4.2.295-6), it becomes apparent that he fears the consequences of ordering his twin’s execution. Just as Ferdinand’s criticism is designed to absolve him of responsibility for his twin’s murder and to allow him to escape the hellish punishment that his actions will create, so too were his attempts to imagine that his twin had died at birth and to suggest that they had a close relationship. All three of these strategies offer him a get-out clause: if the Duchess had never existed, she could not have died; if they were exceptionally close, he could never have meant to have her murdered; if Bosola took his orders too seriously, it was not his fault.

Ferdinand's three excuses are sharply contradicted by Bosola's defiant response. He does not only tell Ferdinand 'You, not I, shall quake for't' (4.2.303), but he also suggests that the Cardinal was actually more like his twin than the Duchess when he states 'You have a pair of hearts are hollow graves' (4.2.311), and likens their personalities to 'two chained bullets [...] arm in arm' (4.2.313). As if to further undermine Ferdinand's excuses, the Duchess revives almost as soon as he has left the stage, but Bosola admits that he 'dare not call' (4.2.338) for help because he knows that he would come running back, and the Duchess asks for 'Antonio' (4.2.342) rather than her twin. This omission of Ferdinand by Bosola and the Duchess demonstrates that for all of his attempts to renegotiate the relationship that he had with his twin and to avoid responsibility, he ultimately cannot escape the fact that he ordered her execution.

Whilst the Duchess may seem to die at the end of Act Four and leave Ferdinand to live on alone, critics have argued that the matter is not quite so simple. Lisa Hopkins, for example, maintains that 'the Duchess' consciousness does *not* disappear from the play [...] Her much fetishized and objectified body may have gone, but her voice and thoughts have not', and Brett D. Hirsch links Ferdinand's Act Five descent into lycanthropy to 'a range of anxieties about identity'.<sup>18</sup> Whilst I agree with both of these arguments, I also believe that they can be strengthened by considering why the Duchess returns in some form, and why Ferdinand's identity is unstable. As I now hope to demonstrate, both of these circumstances suggest that the twin relationship is powerful enough to continue to exert an influence even when one of them is dead.

The Duchess seems to reappear to Antonio, the Cardinal, and Ferdinand during the last act. When she is likened to the Echo by Antonio, her messages centre around his safety, but her appearance to the Cardinal in the fishpond seems more threatening, and when Ferdinand associates her with a shadow, he is by turns terrified and furious. These periodic reappearances create the sense that the Duchess' murder was not only unjust, but also unnatural, because she was killed on the orders of her twin. For all that Ferdinand may attempt to secure a singular existence when ordering Malateste to 'Leave me' (5.2.28) because 'Eagles commonly fly alone' (5.2.30), however, he cannot forget that he remains attached to someone – who is now *something* – else. He uses verbs to align the shadow with the Duchess when he declares that it 'haunt[s]' him (5.2.36), and elects to 'throttle' (5.2.38) it. When he eventually acknowledges his

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<sup>18</sup> Lisa Hopkins, 'With the Skin Side Inside: The Interiors of *The Duchess of Malfi*', in *Privacy, Domesticity, and Women in Early Modern England*, ed. by Corrine S. Abate (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), pp. 21-30 (p. 29), italics in original; Brett D. Hirsch, 'An Italian Werewolf in London: Lycanthropy and *The Duchess of Malfi*', 11.2 (2005), 43 paras, last accessed 2 September 2014 <<http://extra.shu.ac.uk/emls/11-2/hirswere.htm>> (para. 28).

connection to the Duchess by falling onto the shadow and making it almost indistinguishable from his own body, he admits 'When I go to hell, I mean to carry a bribe' (5.2.40-1). The reference to 'hell' indicates his awareness that he acted wrongly by ordering the murder of his twin, but his discussion of a 'bribe' suggests that he is still trying to excuse himself in some way.

Having tried to avoid blame and punishment for the murder of his twin in a number of ways, Ferdinand's final strategy is to suggest that it was actually her fault. When he is fatally wounded by Bosola, Ferdinand realises that he has very little time to atone for his crime, and so he focuses his last words on the Duchess: 'My sister, O my sister! There's the cause on't: / Whether we fall by ambition, blood, or lust, / Like diamonds, we are cut with our own dust' (5.5.70-2). As Martha Ronk Lifson has noted, Ferdinand's use of the word 'diamonds' recalls those which the Duchess uttered to himself and the Cardinal in the very first act, when she remarked 'Diamonds are of most value, / They say, that have passed through most jewellers' hands' (1.1.290-91).<sup>19</sup> Ferdinand thus associates both the Duchess and himself with the jewel, and suggests that it was her initial offence of 'lust' towards Antonio which hurt or 'cut' him, and made him have to retaliate. He implies that because the Duchess was his twin, he felt so strongly towards her that any untoward action on her part felt like an insult towards him, and caused him to react more harshly than others might have done. Whilst he may finally be aware that ordering the Duchess' death was an unnatural, horrific event, Ferdinand ultimately tries to explain it as a consequence of being a twin, and so being subject to an 'unnatural' level of attachment and emotion towards the woman who shared his birth.

In contrast to the medical works, which suggested that twins were only distinctive from other people before and during birth, *The Broken Heart* and *The Duchess of Malfi* both represent adult twins who continue to be affected by their identity as such. For the society of *The Broken Heart* as well as for Penthea and Ithocles themselves, there is the belief that twins should be the same in body as well as in attitude. This idea places considerable pressure on both Penthea and Ithocles, and ultimately leads to their deaths. In *The Duchess of Malfi*, meanwhile, the fact of being a twin is repeatedly shown to exert an influence upon identity even when one of them is dead. Ferdinand reacts to the realisation that he committed an unnatural act when he ordered the Duchess' murder by repeatedly trying to renegotiate the relationship he had with her. Through their representations of twins, *The Broken Heart* and *The Duchess of Malfi* also seem to

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<sup>19</sup> Martha Ronk Lifson, 'Embodied Morality in *The Duchess of Malfi*', *Pacific Coast Philology*, 23.1/2 (1988), 47-59 (p. 56).

suggest something about the relationship which medical ideas had in relation to identity at the time of writing. Whilst they may have exerted some influence, as Ferdinand's engagement with the idea of 'strong' or 'weak' twins would imply, the very fact that Ford's and Webster's plays represent adult twins at all suggests that medical assertions surrounding identity were more fluid and open to debate than the physicians who wrote about them might have liked to admit.