Incestuous desire, Renaissance female sexuality, and lycanthropy all share the common bond of perversion from the natural order. In John Webster’s revenge tragedy, *The Duchess of Malfi*, Ferdinand’s ultimate perversion, when he suffers from lycanthropy, is caused by the combination of his sister’s strong sexuality and his incestuous desire for her. These three themes present themselves and intertwine to create a unique and insightful look into human psychology before psychology was even invented. Like many social sciences, psychology was studied long before it was considered psychology through less scientific means such as the rhetoric of Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy*. The tradition of utilizing and toying with the language to express concepts beyond the scope of scientific study was common throughout the tragedies of the Renaissance.

The sickness of lycanthropy reveals a great deal about the psychology of the time period. When Ferdinand loses his last thread of sanity in the play, he digs up graves and believes he is a wolf. The doctor discloses that Ferdinand “Said he was a wolf, only the difference/ Was, a wolf’s skin was hairy on the outside,/ His on the inside; bade them to take up their swords,/ Rip up his flesh, and try...” (5.2.16). This interaction and admission by Ferdinand shows that even he is aware his perversion is on the inside rather than the outside. He implies the internal mind is the cause of his perversion which is caused by his fear of female sexuality and his incestuous desire for his sexually strong sister, the Duchess of Malfi.

The Duchess’s strong sexuality in the tragedy plays a vital role in the lycanthropy of
Ferdinand. As both a widow and a ruler, the Duchess has great power that was traditionally unassociated with women during the Renaissance. The combination of both of these circumstances gives her almost masculine power which is only controlled and suppressed by her brothers, the Cardinal and Ferdinand. She says to her brothers “Diamonds are of most value,/ They say, that have passed through most jewellers’ hands...” which expresses her view on her own sexuality and how strong of a character she is, even though Webster did not give her a name (1.1.302). Her lack of a name seems to comment on how important the title she held was and how if she did not hold that title, the Duchess would be much less powerful, like the rest of the women during the Renaissance.

Widows in the Renaissance, however, were powerful. They were allowed privileges such as owning property in their own name and they were able to pass it on to whomever they chose. They were also allowed the freedom to choose their own husbands. As Brian Chalk remarks in his essay, "Webster's "Worthyest Monument ": The Problem of Posterity in The Duchess of Malfi", many women in the Jacobean time period were widows and, in fact, one third of the marriages were remarriages (9). When the Duchess intends to remarry, this is not a strange thing for her to do since she is a widow in the Renaissance, but her brothers (at least the Cardinal) do not want her to remarry because when she would die her land and wealth would no longer be bequeathed to them and it would instead go to her husband and children.

Ferdinand’s intentions are infinitely more sinister than his brothers’, which are expressed often in how he talks about his sister in a sexual manner. While the Cardinal is a more Machiavellian character, Ferdinand is psychotic. He does not have the same goals as his brother for spying on the Duchess. He is not attempting to get her land and wealth. The other characters,
such as Bosola and the Cardinal, also sense that his sexuality is perverse and they point it out to the audience, but Ferdinand cannot accept them pointing it out. He believes all of the other characters are all parts of himself and incorporated within his psyche, so he cannot bear to hear any criticism from the outside world. For instance, when Bosola asks Ferdinand his intentions for wanting a false key to the Duchess’s bed chamber, he replies, “...Do not ask....” (3.2.79-83). This line suggests the darker, more psychotic reason for wanting a key to his sister’s bed chamber, implying incest. Later, as pointed out by Chalk in his essay, when Ferdinand says, “I would not have her (the Duchess) marry again.” Bosola asks why and Ferdinand once again tells him not to ask (1.1.258-260).

Chalk argues that Renaissance society called for the “Virtuous Widow” and reflects on the differences between the “virtuous” widow and the “ordinary” one (9). The Duchess, as Chalk points out, really does not fit into either role but her rejection of the role of the “virtuous” widow is what incites her brothers to act. In being a “virtuous” widow, the Duchess would have taken on a role similar to that of a monument, Chalk argues. By not remarrying and staying chaste and faithful to her deceased husband, it is very likely the Duchess could have avoided her brothers’ wrath, but her choice not to accept that role shows her strong sense of her own sexuality and individuality. Her strong sexuality can be clearly seen in her seduction and courtship of Antonio in the very beginning of the play. Her sexuality is so strong that she takes on the traditional male role in the courtship and proposes to Antonio. Antonio is a very romantic, but weak figure in the play, which provides a good foil to display the Duchess’s strengths. The “ordinary” widow grieves little for the deceased husband and finds another husband before she is done mourning for the first. The Duchess also does not fit into the “ordinary” widow role because, as Chalk
George 4

points out, “...Webster imbues her character with a *gravitas* unsuitable to the vulgar figure that the ‘ordinary’ widow suggests” (392).

Despite her strengths as a sexual female character, in "Tragedy and the Female Body: A Materialist Approach to Heywood's A Woman Killed with Kindness and Webster's The Duchess of Malfi" Lori Haslem argues that a lot of the action in the play focuses in and around the female body of the Duchess, which brings “...attention to concerns of both gender and body” (Haslem 142). For example, when the Duchess eats the poisoned apricots, Bosola and Ferdinand find out the Duchess is pregnant. The ingestion of the apricots and her resulting sickness also focus attention on her body.

The Duchess’s pregnancies can also call attention to the Duchess’s gender as well as her body. Another example of how the play focuses on her female body is the overarching example about how her acceptance of her sexual nature defies the ownership Ferdinand and the Cardinal feel for her body, especially Ferdinand. Mary Beth Rose in her essay on “Heroics of Marriage in Renaissance Tragedy,” addresses this point by writing, “The Duchess repeatedly emphasizes her sexuality, indicating in precise and definite terms its centrality to her identity (“This is flesh, and blood, sir...”). Throughout the play Webster not only stresses the strength of her desire for Antonio, but also focuses on her pregnancies, her erotic playfulness, and her tender, nurturing motherhood.” (162).

Ferdinand’s incestuous feelings for the Duchess are hinted at throughout the play. They are symbolized in the very beginning with the tree dropping rotting fruit into a stagnant pool. Incest is the desire of the same for the same, and Ferdinand’s complicated psychological structure hints at more than just his sexual desire for his sister, but his mental one as well. He
needs her to feel mentally complete as well as sexually, which is part of his incestuous desire of the same for the same. While the Cardinal’s actions are for purely personal and political reasons, Ferdinand’s reasons are more psychotically subjective than political.

Ferdinand often has angry, wild outbursts which often focus on the Duchess’s body and sexuality, even enough to cause his brother, the Cardinal, to grow uncomfortable. For instance, when Ferdinand is yelling about his sister to the Cardinal when they find out she is pregnant, he begs the Cardinal to distract him before his “…imagination will carry (him)/ To see her in the shameful act of sin”. Then, when the Cardinal asks to know with whom, Ferdinand begins to imagine the Duchess with “…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 to her private lodgings…” to which the Cardinal responds with the question “Are you stark mad?” (2.5.43).

Proportion was a sacred concept to people in the time of the Renaissance because they believed it was a reflection of the perfect harmony in God’s celestial spheres. This concept stressed the importance of striving for balance, harmony, and symmetry in all things including art, music, and the soul. Ferdinand is called “disproportionate” by the Cardinal when he tells Ferdinand to “put (himself) in tune” when he starts raging about the Duchess, which meant a lot more than saying it to someone today because it implied that the person was in a monstrous state of madness. (2.5.62) His state of disproportion can also be viewed psychologically because his mental state is out of balance.

Along with this idea of being proportional, Ernest Jones in his chapter on “Hamlet’s Place in Mythology”, examines the concept of “decomposition”. Decomposition is considered the process by which a character is broken down into one or more characters that have the
different characteristics of the first. This idea applies well to the relationship Ferdinand has with the Duchess. He wishes to make her a part of himself to compensate for his incestuous desire for her, but the Duchess constantly rejects this role which can be seen when she questions her identity with Bosola, but then comes to the conclusion that “I am the Duchess of Malfi still” (4.2.138). The reason for decomposition is so that, as Jones argues, “one person of complex character is dissolved and replaced by several” (Jones 131). Jones also says that this fracturing is caused by repression. In Ferdinand’s case, this makes sense because he is repressing his sexual desire for his sister which, in turn, causes him to create her into a part of himself. When she refuses to accept this, he has to destroy her but he ends up destroying a part of himself in the process.

In Frank Whigham’s essay, “Incest and Ideology: The Duchess of Malfi,” he argues that incest as an “instinctive repulsion” does not exist (263). He writes with a sympathetic view on Ferdinand, casting him as a pitiful character who is merely a “…threatened aristocrat, frightened by the contamination of his ascriptive social rank, and obsessively preoccupied with its defense.” (Whigham 266) Whigham claims that Ferdinand cares so much about keeping his race pure that his wish for that racial purity is what causes him to want his sister. His anthropological argument seems to fall short because of Ferdinand’s violence and obsession with his sister. Ferdinand does not seem to be rational at any point in the play enough to decide he wants his sister to just keep the bloodline intact. His lust for his sister is madness in the play and Ferdinand, himself, should be the only one justifying his actions and drawing short conclusions from them rather than the audience. His entire role that he plays throughout the play contradicts Whigham’s essay.

Ferdinand is a paranoid psychotic and cannot acknowledge the separation between
himself and others, which he expresses in his incestuous sexuality. By desiring to control his
sister, the Duchess, sexually, he wants to incorporate her into his psyche. She resists this role by
marrying Antonio and having children with him which causes the psychotic break for Ferdinand.
While Antonio and the Duchess’s love is proportionate and they seem to balance each other,
Ferdinand, because of his state as a paranoid psychotic, has a disproportionate love for the
Duchess. He constantly denies others exist so he devours or incorporates the other, therefore
never being able to reach proportion.

Ferdinand’s incorporation of the Duchess as a part of himself is ultimately his downfall,
because when he murders her, he loses a part of himself. As Una Ellis-Fermor points out in her
section of Webster in her book called *The Jacobean Drama*, “...Ferdinand, looking on his dead
sister, perceives her truly for the first time since his rage possessed him...” (188). The Duchess
held the position of the ego, and when she dies in the play, his ego dies as well. After she dies,
his id, or his unconscious, is the only thing he has left, which turns him into an animal with no
law. Ferdinand, at the end of the play, is driven purely by the pleasure principle which feeds his
violent and incestuous nature. His transformation into an animal is symbolized by his mental
transformation into a werewolf, which is the classic belief that man can literally be turned into
beast. His transformation seems to be caused more by his psychotic illness than by his guilt over
killing his sister. This is another piece of evidence that contradicts Whigham’s argument.

At the play’s turning point in Act 4, when Ferdinand executes the Duchess, he is
essentially destroying himself, not only psychologically, but also physically. His mental collapse
leads to his death and the ultimate death of the symbolic order. Like the tree at the beginning of
the play that signifies the poor state of Italy, the corruption is irreversible and the only solution is
to start again. The flow of freshness into the stagnant pool is started by the birth of the Duchess’s children, a symbol of her strong sexuality, and the death of nearly all of the characters at the end of the play. When new blood flows into the system, the symbolic order has hope to be restored.

All these observations and examples return to the idea of psychosis. Incest, lycanthropy, and even female sexuality at the time were considered transgressions of nature and they are inextricably linked within *The Duchess of Malfi*. Both Ferdinand and the Duchess attempt to transgress the law, which for Ferdinand means he wants to violate the incest taboo, get away with murder, and/or steal his sister’s lands and money. For the Duchess, she wants to marry her love, Antonio, but her brothers represent the law of the family and blood ties. She gets married without permission and has children with Antonio, despite her brothers’ injunction. This makes Ferdinand irate, along with the obvious jealous rage he feels when he realizes her role as a part of himself has been separated and she is her own independent person. He cannot accept this separation as true and that inability ultimately leads to the end of the symbolic order and consequently also the end of most of the characters’ lives at the end of the play. The Duchess’s strong female sexuality causes Ferdinand to feel the incestuous lust that leads him to lycanthropy. All of this psychotic paranoia causes the final destruction of the symbolic order at the end of *The Duchess of Malfi*. 