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I Was Crazy Once: An Examination of Elizabethan Insanity in Shakespeare's Work

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Introduction

For as long as theatre has existed, it has been used not only to tell stories but also to comment on the social and cultural standings of the times. William Shakespeare was one of the most notable playwrights and proponents of this technique. Born in a time that was riddled with a series of life-changing events, including various bans on unregistered performers and the discussion of religious or political theatrical performances, Shakespeare became accustomed to using his pen to tell more than just stories of hopeless romantics and highly ambitious archetypes. A common motif through the bard's oeuvre is the theme of madness. Often underplayed in his time, it is evident now that Shakespeare utilizes madness in his shows to recognize the flawed Elizabethan ideas of insanity in relation to gender status.

Early Elizabethan madness was understood as the Four Humors: Blood, Bile, Melancholy, and phlegm. It was believed that an imbalance of these chemicals in the body led to insanity, "According to humoralism, four bodily fluids—blood, yellow bile, black bile, and phlegm—determined a person's temperament and an imbalance led to certain illnesses dependent upon which humors were in excess or deficit."¹ A heating and cooling of the brain would lead to these temperaments. Sometimes, they could be cured through the use of medicinal herbs, but for many, madness was inescapable due to their age. The National Library of Medicine states, "Aging was a process of gradual drying of the flesh and cooling of bodily humors. The body's supply of blood diminished as individuals approached the final coldness and dryness of death."² However, these ideas were based on an early rendition of medical knowledge taken from Greek

¹ "And There's the Humor of It' Shakespeare and the Four Humors." U.S. National Library of Medicine. Accessed November 19, 2023. <https://www.nlm.nih.gov/exhibition/shakespeare-and-the-four-humors/index.html>.

² "And There's the Humor of It' Shakespeare and the Four Humors." U.S. National Library of Medicine.

literature. There wasn't a concept of psychology in the Bard's day, leading to a mixture of clashing concepts about the origins of madness throughout the public.

The Elizabethan comprehension of insanity was complicated. While some believed it to be the humors, for an upper-class person, insanity was typically brought on by current events. According to a study on the disease, Melancholy, "The frequency of the disease was a peculiarly English characteristic, reflected the 'general temper of the age,' and was caused by a variety of social factors including spiritual and intellectual malaise, economic depression, and the threat of Spanish invasion,"³. At the time of Hamlet's composition and publication, Queen Elizabeth I's reign was coming to an end, "The Virgin Queen, Elizabeth had no heir and as she grew ill there was great uneasiness in England over who the next monarch would be and what kind of religious atmosphere they would create."⁴. Long before Elizabeth I took the throne, England had been in a religious battle. Her father Henry VIII had separated from the Catholic church and then her sister Mary I, in a brutal fashion, worked to bring Catholicism back to England.⁵ There was a religious uproar between Protestants and Catholics, so with Elizabeth's end and no successor, the country was uncertain at what would become of them. In Hamlet, the play's plot surrounds a time of turmoil in the royal court, as the new King came to be through foul play, and the future King, or "Rose of the Fair State"⁶ was losing his sensibility reflecting the Elizabethan fears for their country and lifestyle.

³ Angus Gowland. "The Problem of Early Modern Melancholy." *Past & Present*, no. 191 (2006): 77–120. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4125190>.

⁴ Smith-Bernstein, Isabel. "Elizabethan Context for Hamlet." Utah Shakespeare Festival. Accessed November 6, 2023. <https://www.bard.org/study-guides/hamlet-elizabethan-context/>.

⁵ Keaton, Anna. Argues that Lollard evangelists - western Oregon University. Accessed November 19, 2023. <https://wou.edu/history/files/2015/08/Anna-Keaton-HST-499.pdf>.

⁶ William Shakespeare. *Hamlet*. Barbara Mowat, Paul Werstine, Michael Poston, Rebecca Niles, eds (Washington, DC: Folger Shakespeare Library, n.d.), accessed [11/19/2023]. <https://folger.edu/explore/shakespeares-works/hamlet/>

Shakespeare has thirty-eight published plays, of those, many include the theme of madness. However, in research, there are different forms of madness that the Bard utilizes. According to the dictionary, madness can be described as foolish behavior as well as being mentally ill. In his earlier shows, Shakespeare explores this “foolish” behavior, attributing it to a woman denying a suitor such as in *Taming of the Shrew*, or a love-madness where the characters do irrational actions for the sake of love, in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Katharine Minola, in *Taming of the Shrew*, is decidedly declared mad by the other characters in the show, due to her outspoken nature and lack of interest in marriage.⁷ Love sickness, or Hysteria was described, as “sexual related onsets such as lack of sexual activity, sexual repression, or even too much sexual desire.”⁸ *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* represents this irrational activity through the character’s actions when they are under the influence of the love potion. Chasing after each other and trying to make advances, love is portrayed in a senseless manner that spreads like an illness. For a noblewoman, the cure to lunacy was either an exorcism or a marriage, while a poor woman was simply crazy.⁹ But it makes sense in Shakespeare’s mad comedies that the love-sick characters end with a marriage, to continue with the expectations of society.

At the beginning of the seventeenth century, however, there was a sudden shift in Shakespeare’s works. His stories trailed away from the light-hearted comedies about love-madness and focused on direct insanity. Between 1600-1610, as supported by *The Royal Shakespeare Company*, there was a concentration on high-class society and its downfall in his writings. Starting with *Hamlet*, one of Shakespeare’s most notable characters is recognized as the

⁷ “‘And There’s the Humor of It’ Shakespeare and the Four Humors.” U.S. National Library of Medicine

⁸ Alexandria Zlata. “When the Body Is Ill, the Mind Suffers: Shakespeare’s Unravelling of Women’s Hysteria and Madness in the Elizabethan Era: Folger Shakespeare Library.” Folger Shakespeare Library When the Body is Ill The Mind Suffers Shakespeare’s Unravelling of Women’s Hysteria and Madness in the Elizabethan Era Comments. Accessed November 7, 2023. <https://www.folger.edu/blogs/collation/when-the-body-is-ill-the-mind-suffers/>.

⁹ Alexandria Zlata. “When the Body Is Ill, the Mind Suffers: Shakespeare’s Unravelling of Women’s Hysteria and Madness in the Elizabethan Era: Folger Shakespeare Library.”

‘mad prince’. The story is set up in a way, where the readers are forced to question whether or not Hamlet’s ‘madness’ is attributed to his cleverness or if it is authentic. A discussion of this character’s psychosis states, “If Hamlet really was mad, then his psychosis was that of an intellectual, hypertrophy of that inner eye whose function it is to perceive meanings, relations, and implications,”¹⁰ This article continued to claim that if Hamlet were mad, his madness would be a result of his hyper functionality whereas his counters fall victim to insanity due to more unsophisticated implications as the story unfolds.

Another work that was greatly dissected for its use of madness is *King Lear*. Following the mythological story of King Leir of Britain, the king, who is preparing his land for his absence, divides the kingdom into three to give to his daughters. Through the show, however, he slowly descends into madness and becomes very self-aware of his fraying sanity. Lear teeters on his madness, saying, “O, let me not be mad, not mad, sweet heaven!” (1.5.46). He warns Goneril, “I prithee, daughter, do not make me mad.” (2.4.218). In the same scene, as a storm sets on them, he exclaims, “O Fool, I shall go mad!” (2.4.285). Insanity, it seems, is a path he desperately seeks to avoid, saying in Act III, “O, that way madness lies; let me shun that.” (3.4.21).¹¹ With the King’s uncertainty in himself, he leads the country into ruin and falls into a war. This story was written a few years after Hamlet, but in the same time period when the country was worried about their stability. King Lear acts as yet another representation of the failings of royalty, but it is curious that Shakespeare chooses to use Kings in his examination of insanity, especially when Elizabethan audiences would have taken better to true madness in their own communities. While Shakespeare was a commendable writer, just like his peers, he was not exempt from the curiosities of the brain, and where one could learn about such ailments.

¹⁰ Davis, Tenney L. “The Sanity of Hamlet.” *The Journal of Philosophy* 18, no. 23 (1921): 629–34. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2939352>.

¹¹ Fulton, Matthew. *The Nature of Madness in King Lear*, 2019.

The leading mental hospital of its time in England was Bethlem Royal Hospital, established in 1247. However, it was not till a century before Shakespeare's time that the hospital started keeping records of its patients. At this point, it was discovered that a big portion of the hospital's population was made of lower-class citizens. Despite the efforts to lock away these people, Elizabethans had a surprising interest in the brain, "To the public, however, Bedlam was not just a place to stow away society's insane: it was, in fact, a tourist attraction where a paying visitor could see the "mad folk" of society, offering spectacle and curiosity as well as cautionary and moral lessons."¹² Upper-class individuals expected to see a stereotypical representation of the madness, including raving, strange speech, and delusional attitudes. It is even believed that patients acted this way when visitors came to get money or food but these acts couldn't hide the truth of the real illnesses.

Melancholia was the main mental disease of the Elizabethan times. Defined as mania and pertaining to acts of depression and apathy; the illness was recorded mainly among women. Symptoms included hallucinations, hostility, raving, and "emotional turmoil". In a study conducted to explain Elizabethan disease, it was discovered that "Women were supposedly more vulnerable to mental disorders, because they were weak and easily influenced and because they were somehow guilty."¹³ This belief was heavily spread around England at the time. Any emotions that a woman exhibits, especially in relation to menstruation, postpartum, and menopause, are all things that were incredibly misunderstood at the time. Melancholia was also believed to have religious origins, often convincing people that extremely emotional women

¹² Mazzaro, Jerome. "Madness and Memory: Shakespeare's 'Hamlet' and 'King Lear.'" *Comparative Drama* 19, no. 2 (1985): 97–116. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41153165>.

¹³ Alexandria Zlatar. "When the Body Is Ill, the Mind Suffers: Shakespeare's Unravelling of Women's Hysteria and Madness in the Elizabethan Era: Folger Shakespeare Library."

were possessed. Shakespeare manages to present this illness and its qualities in the same production that already explores extreme mental duress, *Hamlet*.

Hamlet's love interest, young Ophelia, comes to madness throughout the course of the plot. Her father, Polonius, and King Claudius use her to get intel on the prince and then she is manipulated through Hamlet's act. It is then presented that she blames herself for Hamlet's mental decline and therefore goes mad herself. Entering Act Four, Scene Five, Ophelia's insanity takes hold when she enters the room, singing. "Then up he rose and donned his clothes / And dugged the chamber door,/ Let in the maid, that out a maid / Never departed more.... / Young men will do't if they come to't, / By Cock, they are to blame"¹⁴ This unsettling presentation was widely connected to the erotic madness that was believed to attack younger, noble women of the time. Breaking down the song she sings, in front of her brother and the King and Queen, they rest that Ophelia is suffering from Hysteria, "The context of her disease, like that of hysteria later, is sexual frustration, social helplessness, and enforced control over women's bodies"¹⁵ As it was alluded to that she and Hamlet were involved in each other, this fit was brought on by his retreating from her and her lost chastity, a valued moral at the time.

Often argued as merely a plot device in modern times, Ophelia's character would not have been as broken down in the time she was written. An article breaking down Ophelia throughout the show describes, "The Elizabethans, further, would have been prepared to accept Ophelia as a girl suffering from the effects of love, erotic melancholy (erotomania), or a fit of the mother. They knew that "the passive condition of woman kind is subject unto more diseases and

¹⁴ William Shakespeare. *Hamlet*. Barbara Mowat, Paul Werstine, Michael Poston, Rebecca Niles, eds (Washington, DC: Folger Shakespeare Library, n.d.), accessed [Nov. 20,2023]. <https://folger.edu/explore/shakespeares-works/hamlet/>

¹⁵ Neely, Carol Thomas. "Documents in Madness': Reading Madness and Gender in Shakespeare's Tragedies and Early Modern Culture." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 42, no. 3 (1991): 315–38. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2870846>.

of other sortes and natures than men are"¹⁶ The young romantic then became a cautionary tale for the audiences of the Renaissance, while modern spectators gave Ophelia a greater purpose in the commentary of her madness. However, Shakespeare still works to create a distinct difference between the madness presented by the two characters. Hamlet's madness is a fringing one. He even introduces his plan to pretend to be mad, but as the show progresses, the audience has to wonder if he lost control in his act. Ophelia does not begin the show mad, but her illness presents itself unexpectedly.

Another female character riddled with insanity is Lady Macbeth, however, her situation is incredibly different compared to Ophelia's. Lady Macbeth was written as a driven and ambitious character, while Ophelia succumbed to the love or lack of love from Hamlet. It is believed, even by writers of the early nineteenth century, that Lady Macbeth's malaise was due to demonic possession.¹⁷ This is mainly because Lady Macbeth calls upon dark spirits to get rid of her womanhood, "Come, you spirits That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here, And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full Of direst cruelty. Come to my woman's breasts And take my milk for gall, you murd'ring ministers, Wherever in your sightless substances You wait on nature's mischief"¹⁸ In this section, Lady Macbeth is calling upon dark spirits to take away her womanhood so that she can do what her husband cannot. This is not only a pivotal point in the play, but very reminiscent of the time, as it was believed that any woman who acted on her emotions was most likely possessed by a spirit or demon. While she is presented as a malevolent force-driven mad, Shakespeare makes sure to show that she is powerful and ambitious. This

¹⁶ Camden, Carroll. "On Ophelia's Madness." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 15, no. 2 (1964): 247–55. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2867895>.

¹⁷ Alexandria Zlatar. "When the Body Is Ill, the Mind Suffers: Shakespeare's Unravelling of Women's Hysteria and Madness in the Elizabethan Era: Folger Shakespeare Library."

¹⁸ William Shakespeare. *Macbeth*. Barbara Mowat, Paul Werstine, Michael Poston, Rebecca Niles, eds (Washington, DC: Folger Shakespeare Library, n.d.), accessed [Nov. 19, 2023.] <https://folger.edu/explore/shakespeares-works/macbeth/>

could've been done to comment on gender roles in a positive way, but also to show that a woman's madness can be a dangerous thing.

Madness is an age-old concept that has been twisted and turned to reflect society's faults and fears. Whether rooted in a chemical imbalance in the brain or a result of something more ineffable; the illness has been dissected and utilized by people of influence, such as Shakespeare to spread a message to listeners. Through his flowery language, Shakespeare manages to bring new concepts of madness in each of the shows that he presents in a time when society had very conflicting views of the mental state. As Elizabethan audiences were more accustomed to viewing madness as a ploy for comedy, Shakespeare shifted this point of view to a more serious appeal, commenting on society's frivolous recognition of the mentally ill. There is a level of compliance that he adheres to when writing madness for his female characters. Shakespeare follows the general rules of the Elizabethan standards: that women were more likely to go mad and that their madness was the result of their uncanny emotions. While portrayed in different shows, it's evident by the numerous research conducted since his death, that Shakespeare's work acts as a device to acknowledge the flawed opinions of madness in Elizabethan society.

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