STUDIA HISTORICA GEDANENSIA

VOL. XV (2024) 2

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Women and Insanity in English Renaissance Drama

Doi 10.4467/23916001HG.24.028.20456

Keywords: insanity, Renaissance drama, William Shakespeare, John Webster, women

By the sixteenth century English doctors were making substantial progress in the study of mental illnesses. All thanks to the theory, and corporeal discourse on madness that came to England through Arabic translations of Hippocrates and Galen. As soon as these translations reached the medical schools of Salerno in Italy, Toledo in Spain and Montpellier in France they were translated into Latin and widely dissaminated throughout Europe. The theory of four humours was almost entirely absorbed by the literature of the English Middle Ages. What is more, it was further codified and formalised in English medical and encyclopaedic texts such as: Timothy Bright's *Treatise on Melancholy* (1586); Thomas Walkington's *An Opticke Glass of Humours* (1598); Robert Burton *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621).

The general public was also more aware of the problems of mental disorders. In the sixteenth century, the authorities realized that there were too many people with mental illnesses in the city to be left in private homes, and the number of shelters for the mentally ill where they could receive care began to increase. The stories of madness, as they have a strange and enduring power to fascinate, soon permeated the world of literature and where present in the works of majority of Renaissance writers.

Drama, in particular, made a strong and frequently reoccurring link between women and madness in characters who are either dramatized as tragically insane or presented for ridicule as stock examples of female irrationality.

There is no doubt that Renaissance playwrights were fascinated by mental illness. In their plays we will find numerous characters who are affected by various mental disorders. It is amazing and interesting that in describing these problems, they paid attention to the smallest details. Every word and action of a sick person so meticulously describes a specific clinical condition that it might as well have been documented by the clinician himself. Indeed, their talent for acute observation and insight into human personality is nowhere displayed with greater power than in their depictions of mental disorder.

Some scholars believe that they may have acquired rudimentary knowledge of mental problems primarily by observing life in London. In the sixteenth century, when the authorities realized that there were too many mentally ill people in the city to be left in private homes, the number of mental asylums where they could receive care began to grow. Hospitals and monasteries were turned into asylums for the insane. Over time, as these places began to overflow, patients were treated more like animals than people. In 1547, Bethlem Hospital was opened in London, with the sole purpose of isolating people with mental disorders. The patients were chained, exposed to public view, and the sounds coming from there testified to the fact that they had been treated cruelly. The asylum became a tourist attraction, with visitors paying a penny to view the more violent patients.[1] Soon it was called by the local people "Bedlam" a term that today means "a state of agitation and confusion." Shakespeare certainly drew his medical knowledge from his son-in-law, the renowned physician John Hall. Some of his patients suffered from a type of mental illness he called "hypochondriac melancholy."[2]

Early modern English culture and literature made extensive attempts to understand and explain the causes of female melancholy or insanity making frequent references to "the Hippocratic texts oft-repeated statement about the root of all women's illness deriving in the womb" (Peterson 1).[3] However, the plays of the period seem to strongly suggest that insanity that affected women was frequently caused not so much by internal, bodily ailments but to a large degree by social constraints. Insanity in relation to female characters is commonly depicted in two ways. Oppressive, male dominant and chaotic society either pushes women into a state of complete madness, which subsequently results in death or it is the madness, confusion and chaos around them that is the cause of their death. This paper tries to prove the point focusing on Shakespeare's Hamlet and John Webster's The Duchess of Malfi.

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[1] David F. Hoeniger, *Medicine and Shakespeare in the English Renaissance* (Newark: University of Delaware Press; London–Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1992), 25, 205.

[2] *Ibidem*, 11.

[3] Kaara L. Peterson, "Performing Arts: Hysterical Disease, Exorcism, and Shakespeare's Theatre" in *Disease, Diagnosis, and Cure on the Early Modern Stage*, eds. Stephanie Moss, Kaara L. Peterson (Aldershot–Burlington: Ashgate, 2004), 1.

The Duchess of Malfi is regarded as the paramount seventeenth century English tragedy apart from those of Shakespeare. It was published in 1623, the year of the publication of Shakespeare's Folio, but John Webster wrote it as early as 1612–1613. It was first performed by the King's Men at the Blackfriars Theatre in 1614 and later to a larger audience at the Globe. It is based on the life of Giovanna d'Aragona, Duchess of Amalfi from 1493 until her disappearance in around 1511. She was of royal blood, a daughter of the Spanish House of Aragon so she received a good education since humanist learning was highly valued by that family. At the age of twelve, she was married to Alfonso Piccolomini, who in 1493 succeeded his father the Duke of Amalfi. The couple had two children, a girl who died at age of eight and a boy who eventually succeeded his father as Duke of Amalfi. Alfonso died in 1498, several months before the birth of his son and heir, presumably as a result of ill health that was brought about by the war wounds that he suffered during the French invasion. After her husband's death, Giovanna became regent of Amalfi and ruled for twelve years leading an exemplary life and avoiding sexual profligacy that was so characteristic to some of her close relatives.

However, in November 1510, she became big news in Italy and indeed around Europe when her scandalous secret marriage to Antonio Beccadelli, her household steward, had been revealed. The marriage was perceived by her family as a disgrace to their noble lineage. Giovanna and Antonio had two children. They were brought up in separation from their mother, who could see them only in secret. Pregnant with the third child, the Duchess realized that the secret could no longer be kept and left Amalfi, with a large retinue, spreading the news that she wished to make a pilgrimage to Santa Maria of Loreto. In fact, Loreto was only a stopover on her way to Ancona, where she expected to be safe as it was beyond the bounds of the Kingdom of Naples. Unfortunately, under the pressure and influence of her powerful family she was expelled from Ancona, captured by the agents sent by her family and brought back to Amalfi. The Duchess, her maid and her children were never seen again and were presumed murdered. The story permeated and inspired numerous Renaissance texts such as Matteo Bandello's *Novelle* (1554), William Painter's *The Palace of Pleasure* (1567) and Lope de Vega's *El mayordomo de la Duquesa de Amalfi* (1618).[4]

We find a parallel to the Duchess of Malfi at the Stuart court. Lady Arbella (1575–1615) as James I's cousin was a plausible claimant to the throne and one of the most intelligent and learned ladies of the Jacobean period. The ambiguity connected with the succession to the throne left her for years in a state of romantic suspense. She waited for James to find her a suitable match and finally, exasperated entered into a secret marriage with William Seymour, a man whom she loved but who was her social inferior. Lady Arbella and her husband were

[4] Leah Marcus, "Introduction" in *John Webster. The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. *idem* (London: Arden Early Modern Drama, 2009), 16–21.

imprisoned but managed to escape. James I had her recaptured and incarcerated in the Tower of London and in spite of the strong popular sentiment in her favour, he never released her. In 1614,when Webster's play was staged for the first time, Lady Arbella was reportedly going mad and she died in prison a year later.[5]

John Webster already in the first act of the play paints a powerful and vivid portrait of a woman strong enough to claim the right to love freely, to speak her wrongs loudly and to control her own destiny. The Duchess's brothers, both of them overly ambitious and greedy, desire her wealth, title and estates and because of that, they forbid the young widow to remarry. They view their sister as nothing but a family property to be disposed in marriage according to their wishes. Ferdinand, who assumed a parental role over his sister, gives clear orders to Bosola, his spy at the Duchess's court:

> …observe the Duchess,
> To note all the particulars of her behaviour:
> What suitors do solicit her for marriage,
> And whom she best affects. She is a young widow,
> I would not have her marry again[6]

However, the Duchess defies their claustrophobic possessiveness and marries in secret a man whom she loves but who is below her position and social standing. Bearing the circumstances, her pursuit of personal happiness and determination to have control over her own life is an act of great, almost heroic courage. The Duchess is aware of the risk that her decision entails. After the secret wedding ceremony she informs Antonio, her husband, that she is "blind" and then commands him "to lead your fortune by the hand/Unto your marriage-bed."[7] She gives herself in to fate hoping desperately that somehow she would be able to subvert the patriarchy. Cariola, her trusted servant and the witness at the wedding, has a more realistic understanding of the situation. The Duchess's decision is nothing but a "fearful madness" and she pities her.[8] This way, Cariola prepares the reader for the tragedy that will soon unfold.

Ferdinand, with the great help of his spy, finally finds out about his sister's relationship with Antonio and even though he is informed that they exchanged vows does not allow for a legal and public wedding. The Duchess's plan to escape with her family and find refuge in a place beyond control of her brothers is a failure and she is imprisoned, with two of her children, in her palace. Ferdinand has a fiendish plan to torture his sister by exposing her to madmen from the local asylum:

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[5] *Ibidem*, 37.

[6] John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. Leah Marcus (London: Arden Early Modern Drama, 2009), I.ii.173–177.

[7] *Ibidem*, I.ii.582–584.

[8] *Ibidem*, I.ii.595.

'cause she'll needs be mad, I am resolv'd
To remove forth the common hospital
All the madfolk, and place them near her
lodging.9

The Duchess is remarkably calm and composed in the face of this torture and even claims that she thanks her brother because "nothing but noise and folly / Can keep me in my right wits."[10] It is the silence that makes her "stark mad."[11] She exhibits nobel strength and perseverance in a traumatic situation and resists falling into a state of madness. Elizabeth Brennan claims that the scene of the Duchess's death is the ultimate indication of her sanity and endurance. She dies in a pose of Christian humility, kneeling and unafraid of what will follow. Her magnitude is further emphasised by the demise of her brothers who grow paranoid and lose grip on reality.[12] Christian character of the Duchesses death is further argued by Bettie-Anne Doebler who notices that Webster, to structure the final scene, makes use of elements from the old ars moriendi tradition.[13]

As Leah Marcus rightly observes the Duchess of Malfi is one of the most tragic and unforgettable characters that we can find in the Renaissance drama. This young, charming and so full of life and love woman has to face an unimaginable persecution imposed by her unscrupulous and corrupt brothers who are ready to go to any lengths "to break her spirit, reduce her to madness and depravity" only to satisfy their greed and ill-ambitions.[14]

In stark contrast to the Duchess of Malfi, Ophelia reveals herself at the very beginning of the play as a submissive and totally subjected to male power woman. In the 3 scene of Act I, we see her talking first to Laertes, her brother who is about to leave for France and then her father, Polonius. Both of them warn her that she should not trust Hamlet and be cautious of his pledges of love and devotion. In their opinion Hamlet's feelings towards her are nothing but "the trifling of his favour […] a fashion and a toy in blood."[15] Even if he was true in his affection, he is not in control of his own life because "he himself is the subject to his birth."[16] Polonius and Laertes are unanimous stating that it will be Ophelia

9 *Ibidem*, IV.i.124–126.

10 *Ibidem*, IV.ii.5–6.

11 *Ibidem*, IV.ii.7.

12 Elizabeth Brennan, "Introduction" in *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. *eadem* (London: Arden Early Modern Drama, 2009), xxiii.

13 Bettie-Anne Doebler, "Continuity in the Art of Dying: *The Duchess of Malfi*," *Comparative Drama* 14 (1980): 203.

14 Marcus, "Introduction," 1–2.

15 William Shakespeare, "Hamlet" in *The Oxford Shakespeare. The Complete Works*, eds. Stanley Wells, Gary Taylor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), I.iii.5–6.

16 Shakespeare, "Hamlet," I.iii.17–18.

only, who will pay the price for that relationship and advise her to "weigh what loss" her "honour may sustain."[17]

Initially, Ophelia makes tentative attempts to defend Hamlet claiming that he courted her "In honourable fashion"[18] but she gives up too soon and too readily accepts her brother's and father's opinion on Hamlet's character and agrees to have no further relat2ionship with him, despite having strong feelings for him. The scene ends with Ophelia's solemn and submissive declaration "I shall obey, my lord."[19] At that moment she loses whatever little judgment and decision-making power she had. Her silent submission to her father's wishes brings her nothing but shattering grief and madness. Later in the play, Hamlet rejects Ophelia commanding her to go to "a nunnery"[20], Claudius and her own father manipulate her into confronting the prince as they are desperate to learn about his plans. Depression sets in and Ophelia's condition deteriorates further when Hamlet unintentionally kills Polonius. At this stage her incoherent speech clearly indicates her distress and suffering. Ophelia's famous, oft-quoted words "They say that the owl was the baker's daughter" testify to her madness.[21]

Indeed, her dramatic fall into insanity is marked by a surge of allusions to "old lauds" and other religious folklore.[22] We learn from Gertrude that Ophelia drowns "chanting snatches of old lauds/As one incapable of her own distress."[23] Chapman explains that although the noun "laud" could denote any song or hymn of praise, it was typically used in a religious context and carried specifically Catholic associations. Lauds referred to the morning service at monasteries where participants sang praises to God. Gertrude specifies that Ophelia dies "chanting" these lauds and so religious and monastic connotation of the verb "raise a dark irony."[24] Hamlet, in the Act III commanded her to go to a convent and Ophelia dies intoning chants so characteristic for monastic life. The irony of the situation is that contrary to Pre-Reformation women who, when facing personal devastation may have taken refuge in the monastic life that option is not available for Ophelia. She cannot escape the oppressive environment of Elsinore and find comfort in a female community devoted to prayer and good deeds. She can only resort to some old forms of piety desperately seeking solace in her tragic situation.[25]

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17 *Ibidem*, I.iii.29.

18 *Ibidem*, I.iii.111.

19 *Ibidem*, I.iii.136.

20 *Ibidem*, III.i.123.

21 *Ibidem*, IV.v.41–42.

22 Alison Chapman, "Ophelia's «Old Lauds»: Madness and Hagiography in *Hamlet*," *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England* 20 (2007): 111.

23 Shakespeare, "Hamlet," IV.vii.149–150.

24 *Ibidem*, IV.vii.122.

25 Chapman, "Ophelia's «Old Lauds»": 122.

Ophelia, who appears in five out of twenty scenes in the play, may seem to be an insignificant minor character, just "a piece of bite" as Jacques Lacan famously referred to her in his psychoanalytical reading of the play. After all, it is perfectly possible to imagine Hamlet's story without Ophelia but she, literally, does not exist without Hamlet. Ophelia's story is the story of betrayal, rejection and marginalization.[26] Taking the perspective of French feminist theory, she "might confirm the impossibility of representing the feminine in the patriarchal discourse as other than madness, incoherence, fluidity, or silence."[27]

Both the Duchess and Ophelia are victims of the male dominated world. However, the Duchess is fully aware of the constraints imposed on her by the patriarchal society. Throughout the play, she frequently pictures herself as an caged bird. After the imprisonment, when Cariola tries to console her saying that she will "shake this durance off," the Duchess calls her servant a "fool" and concludes:

> The robin red-breast and the nightingale
> Never live long in cages.[28]

The Duchess makes an attempt to act independently and having once married for duty she wants to marry out of love and respect. That bold act of defiance against male dominance has its harsh consequences. Imprisoned, tormented by Ferdinand's sinister joke with the dead man's hand and surrounded by the cries and noises of the madmen, she is forced to submit physically but she never submits mentally and remains sane till the cruel end. As Spivack comments the Duchess holds to "her ducal and authoritative position" throughout the play and maintains it until death. Her greatness is far from superficial but definitely a matter of "an inward quality outwardly demonstrated […] in terms of supreme rational and conscious control."[29] Once the Duchess is gone, all that remains is "self-deception, despair and madness."[30]

Ophelia, even though, she is an embodiment of submissiveness and filial duty, does not escape personal devastation. She fully subjects herself to the rules of the patriarchal society only to be totally destroyed by it. Ophelia falls into insanity and dies because she cannot stand living in the world full of chaos and manipulation. Her madness, which stems from a situation that overwhelms her, is real and as readers we are deeply touched by her vulnerability and suffering. She is

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[26] Elaine Showalter, "Representing Ophelia: Women, Madness, and the Responsibilities of Feminist Criticism" in *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, eds. Patricia Parker, Geoffrey Hartman (New York: Methuen, 1985), 77–78.

[27] Showalter, "Representing Ophelia," 78.

[28] Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, IV.ii.12–13.

[29] Charlotte Spivack, "*The Duchess of Malfi*: A Fearful Madness," *Journal of Women's Studies in Literature* 2 (1979): 124–125.

[30] Jacqueline Pearson, *Tragedy and Tragicomedy in the Plays of John Webster* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980), 89.

crushed by the set of values and believes she trusted and followed. Thus, similarly to the Duchess she stands for the oppression of women in the society.

SUMMARY

The following article presents how in the sixteenth century England, thanks to the increased awarness of the problems with mental disorders, the stories of madness entered the world of Renaissance drama and appeared in the works of numerous writers. As early modern culture and literature made attempts to understand female melancholy or insanity, particular focus is given to the characters of Ophelia in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and the Duchess in John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*. The thorough analysis of the texts shows that contrary to the then common belief that all women's illness and irrationality derived from the womb, those were, too a great degree, social constraints which affected women and pushed them into insanity. Oppressive, male dominant and chaotic society either pushed women into a state of complete madness, which subsequently results in death or it is the madness, confusion and chaos around them that was the cause of their death.