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Women in Madness: Ophelia and Lady Macbeth
by Melissa Bostrom, '96

The Renaissance marked a turning point in the popular perception of insanity. Some people adhered to a belief in supernatural causes of madness while others were beginning to think that it might have other origins (Neely 315). In the Elizabethan era, witchcraft or sin was still widely suspected to be at the root of madness (Vey-Miller and Miller 81). Carol Thomas Neely points out that some people, such as Edward Joden, were already trying to separate madness from a divine or supernatural cause. In *A Brief Discourse of a Disease Called the Suffocation of the Mother*, one of the first works to provide a rational explanation for madness, Joden attempts to sharpen the distinction between bewitchment and insanity. His theory, also held by many of his contemporaries, was that madness was the result of biological irregularities such as retention of menstrual blood or a "wandering womb" (although this theory was somehow supposed to apply to both sexes). The cure for this insanity, according to Joden, was marriage and the regular sexual activity that accompanied it, which would bring the woman's reproductive system under her husband's control (Neely 317-18). Although such a theory is somewhat physiological in nature, the power differential between the sexes is also an integral element. In analyzing the possible reasons behind the madness of Shakespeare's characters such as Ophelia in *Hamlet* and Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth*, such inter-gender power differentials take on great importance.

A variety of theories abound to explain Ophelia's madness. Marguerite Vey-Miller and Ronald Miller propose that Ophelia and Hamlet have, in anticipation of their marriage, already enjoyed each other sexually (82). Vey-Miller and Miller argue that the familiarity of the characters' language stems from a sexual familiarity. When Ophelia loses Hamlet despite her acquiescence to intimacy, she must face not only the emotional loss but also the continual praises of her purity. The hypocrisy of her situation and the secret which she must keep within her finally drive her to madness, according to Vey-Miller and Miller (82-83). Yet the text does not support their view of Ophelia's madness. Why should Hamlet ask Ophelia "Are you honest?" (3.1.103) if he already knows that he has compromised her chastity? Similarly, Ophelia's confusion at Hamlet's behavior in act three, scene two hardly paints her as a woman familiar with sexual matters. When Hamlet asks if he may lie in her lap, for example, her answer is not a teasing "Maybe later" or a concerned "Not here, my lord." Instead, she says "No, my lord" (108)--a response that indicates her bewilderment and sexual innocence in the situation. Hamlet's

insinuations finally build until she is entirely uncomfortable and can say nothing but "You are merry, my lord" (116). He is having fun at the expense of her confusion, it seems to her. She never realizes that Hamlet has projected his mother's perverted sexuality onto her and that this is the reason for his attack (Traub 219).

In fact, Valerie Traub has argued that the only expression of Ophelia's sexuality is in her death (225-27). Hamlet has told the audience earlier that death is "A consummation / Devoutly to be wished" (3.1.63-64). Traub argues that the same is true for Ophelia, for it is her only consummation in the course of the tragedy. It is only after her death that Hamlet can express his feelings for Ophelia: "I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers / Could not with all their quantity of love / Make up my sum" (5.1.256-58). Traub likens this consummation to the tomb scene of *Romeo and Juliet* in which the lovers die in an embrace of consummation. Yet Ophelia dies before she ever has the opportunity to enjoy the consummation of her love for Hamlet. At her grave, her brother cries: "From her fair and unpolluted flesh / May violets spring!" (5.1.26-27). With such textual emphasis on her chastity, the explanation of Ophelia's madness as the result of impurity can no longer hold true.

Elaine Showalter presents R.D. Laing's clinical view of Ophelia's madness as schizophrenia in response to her environment of conflict (77). David Leverenz supports this theory in pointing out that Ophelia is torn between conflicting voices: her desire to obey her father's wishes and her love for Hamlet (299-301). Polonius wants her to make a good match, yet he tells her to break off her interaction with the future king: "I would not, in plain terms, from this time forth / Have you so slander any moment leisure / As to give words or talk with the Lord Hamlet" (1.3.132-34). Just a few scenes later, though, Polonius has changed his mind again and orders Ophelia to meet with Hamlet to test the extent of Hamlet's love-melancholy. In addition to such conflicting messages from Polonius, Ophelia must also deal with Hamlet, who exhibits a destructive power in his very speech, according to Inga-Stina Eubank (87). The conversation between Ophelia and Hamlet in act three, scene one is a particularly powerful example of this type of speech. Hamlet at first tells Ophelia, "I did love you once" (115). Yet in his next speech he proclaims, "I loved you not" (119). The conflicting messages from Hamlet and Polonius seem a plausible explanation for Ophelia's madness.

It is important to note, however, that Polonius and Hamlet create her very identity. If Ophelia had a sense of self-worth not derived from these men, perhaps she would have not have been so vulnerable to the mental disturbance caused by Polonius and Hamlet. Showalter points out that it is impossible to construct a biography of Ophelia from the text of the tragedy alone--she has no history that is not connected with Hamlet (87). When compared to the characterization of Hamlet, Ophelia is a

“creature of lack” (78). This idea, Showalter says, is emphasized when Hamlet tells Ophelia that “nothing” is “a fair thought to lie between maids’ legs” (3.1.112-13). A few lines further into the scene, the image of nothingness is reinforced when Ophelia tells Hamlet, “You are naught, you are naught” (139). Ironically, it is Ophelia herself who is “naught.” A.C. Bradley describes her as beautiful, sweet, pathetic, and dismissable (Neely 316). To Bradley—and perhaps to the audience as well—she is not a fully characterized woman suffering from intense emotional conflict. She is merely a tragic element.

As a figure without an identity of her own, Ophelia is not a thinking being. Rather, as Samuel Taylor Coleridge proposes, she feels too much where Hamlet thinks too much (Showalter 80). In fact, Carol Thomas Neely and Margaret Ferguson both propose that Ophelia is a double to Hamlet. Neely points out that Ophelia becomes mad while Hamlet is absent, in England (325). Not only is her physical presence a parallel to Hamlet’s absence, but Shakespeare has set up a number of counterparts between the two characters. Ophelia’s true madness is the complement to Hamlet’s feigned insanity; Hamlet’s madness takes the form of political, thoughtful speech where hers is somatized and eroticized (325-26). The two characters even share associations of imagery, according to Ferguson (298). For example, Hamlet tells Claudius at the beginning of the tragedy that he is “too much in the sun” (1.2.67), and later warns Polonius regarding Ophelia, “Let her not walk I’ th’ sun” (2.3.184).

Karin Coddon alludes to the Renaissance view of madness as feminine in discussing Hamlet’s feigned insanity (52). Hamlet himself seems to share this view, Showalter asserts, in his disgust with his womanly feelings (90). According to her, Hamlet suppresses intense emotions of fear and betrayal. Yet these emotions must be expressed somehow, and Ophelia becomes the character who displays them (90-92). Shakespeare presents an image of madness as womanly in an Ophelia draped in garlands, singing and speaking in lyrics. Hamlet’s masculinity is thus preserved and Ophelia suffers the insanity that is the expected outcome of such powerful emotions (93). Ophelia even fulfills Hamlet’s wish for death. His “To be or not to be” soliloquy (3.1.56-88) reveals his inner turmoil concerning his situation and his thoughts of suicide. Yet it is Ophelia, who never delivers such an introspective speech, who kills herself, thus again carrying through Hamlet’s emotions where it would be womanly for him to do so.

Lady Macbeth is a natural counterpart to this characterization of Ophelia as a woman who possesses no integral identity without men. Writers even through the end of the nineteenth century adhered to an interpretation of Lady Macbeth’s madness as a progression through the stages of demonic possession (i.e., Corson 245-47). Other writers of that century disagreed with this conception of Lady Macbeth’s character, however. Johanne Luise Huberg, a Danish actress of the nineteenth century, proposed that Lady Macbeth suffered from a “demonic intoxication” of power rather than a full-fledged

possession (Krabbe 147). Her interpretation of the character envisioned Lady Macbeth as a young woman driven by passion and ambition rather than possessed by evil (Krabbe 147-48).

Although Henning Krabbe uses the character’s childlessness as support for Huberg’s youthful interpretation (145), other writers have construed the childlessness as a possible source of Lady Macbeth’s madness. Sigmund Freud proposes that she goes mad as a reaction to her childlessness (40). In her society, Lady Macbeth’s only means of gaining power is through childbearing. Because she either cannot bear children or has raised none to maturity (the text is not clear as to the precise reasons that she and her husband are childless), her only access to control is blocked (40-43). Marilyn French also envisions Lady Macbeth as thwarted in seeking the means to power, but she suggests that power itself is accessible only to males (17-18). As a woman and a wife, Lady Macbeth’s chief duty is to bring her errant husband to virtue, French decrees, and in failing that duty she violates her womanly identity as well as her duty to God (18). In seeking power, Lady Macbeth goes against her feminine nature; the natural outcome of such action is madness (18-19).

Other authors have focused on Lady Macbeth’s attempts to “unsex” herself as the reason behind her insanity. Robert Kimbrough argues that she knows that she cannot commit Duncan’s murder as a woman (178). Murder is an action of masculinity, and Lady Macbeth asks the gods to remove her womanly nature so that she may fulfill her purpose:

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 (1.5.38-41, 45-48).

Kimbrough further suggests that Lady Macbeth’s attempt to eliminate her femininity is unsuccessful; her cruelty cannot be maintained, and she goes mad (178-80). Helen Faucit’s interpretation of Lady Macbeth presents the character as possessing human affections but suppressing them, a pattern of behavior exemplified by the “Unsex me” speech (Carlisle 211-12). Such a suppression of emotions could lead to madness. Joan Larsen Klein’s argument follows a similar path in assessing Lady Macbeth as maintaining her femininity because she never realizes her murderous intent (246-47). Indeed, Lady Macbeth does make an attempt on the life of Duncan, but she reveals that a weakness stops her: “Had he not resembled

/ My father as he slept, I had done't" (2.2.12-13). This comment shows her weakness for the structures of patriarchal society and provides a glimpse into theories of madness through male constructions that will be presented later.

Still other writers have centered on the influence Lady Macbeth has on her husband in initiating the string of murders which occur in the course of the tragedy. French argues that Lady Macbeth has the opportunity to dissuade her husband from the initial murder, but she chooses to support Macbeth instead (20). Although she does encourage him into action before Duncan's murder ("But screw your courage to the sticking place / And we'll not fail" (1.7.60-61), she can hardly be held responsible for the later murders, as Klein asserts (249). In fact, it appears that the initial assassination (that of Duncan) is Macbeth's own idea. Shakespeare makes it clear in act one, scene three that Macbeth is startled by the weird sisters' proclamation of his impending Kingship in Banquo's question: "Good sir, why do you start and seem to fear / Things that do sound so fair?" (51-52). This visible start implies that Macbeth has already thought about taking the throne, even without the encouragement of his wife.

Klein states that Lady Macbeth cannot be held responsible for the subsequent murders of Banquo and Lady Macduff and her children because Macbeth decides on these murders by himself (249). Lady Macbeth is increasingly left out of the decision-making process. Before Banquo's murder, she is aware that her husband has plans to secure his throne, but he refuses to give her more precise information in the matter: "Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck, / Till thou applaud the deed" (3.2.45-46). Lady Macbeth seems to have even less information about the murders of Lady Macduff and her children; Lady Macduff is only mentioned for a moment in Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking: "The Thane of Fife had a wife. Where is she now?" (5.1.39). As Macbeth's "dearest partner of greatness" (1.5.10), she does not seem to be allowed to fulfill her role. Her other major role, according to Klein, is that of the hostess (252). When Duncan arrives at Inverness, Lady Macbeth busies herself with the entertainment of the guests as almost her sole occupation. By the coronation banquet, however, Macbeth has taken over her duties in inviting the guests and supervising the preparation of the feast (253). Without a role to play as either the wife-partner of great Macbeth or the proud hostess, Lady Macbeth's only power and identity in patriarchal society have been eliminated. Her sense of individuality has been stripped away, and she is left to madness and suicide.

Freud discusses this loss of individuality in a few fleeting comments concerning Ludwig Jekels's theory that Lady Macbeth and Macbeth are halves of one whole (45). Jekels's argument uses evidence from the text to reveal that the natural outcomes of Macbeth's thoughts appear in Lady Macbeth. For example, he points out that Macbeth proclaims that he "does murder sleep" (2.2.35), but it is Lady

Macbeth's sleep which is disturbed into sleepwalking. It is Macbeth who speaks of his fear that he will never be able to wash Duncan's blood from his hands: "Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood / Clean from my hand?" (2.2.59-60), but Lady Macbeth is the character who even in sleep cannot escape the bloodstains: "Out, damned spot! Out, I say!" (5.1.32). Finally, it is Lady Macbeth who must pay the price of madness for her husband's unnatural deeds. When she is no longer needed by him as either wife or hostess, when she no longer has an identity, she loses her sanity as well.

Ultimately these many theories of madness converge. Both Ophelia and Lady Macbeth's madness results from the construction of their identity by men. For Ophelia, it is the identity of the dutiful daughter and chaste lover that tears her apart. With her father dead and Hamlet shipped away to England, she no longer exists in relation to these men. In fact, she barely exists at all; she dies within a short time of her father's death and Hamlet's expulsion. Her madness is the logical result of the loss of her identity through the absence of the men who constructed it. Lady Macbeth suffers a similar fate. As a hostess and a wife, her identity has been constructed by men. Once she is no longer needed by her husband, she exists without a purpose. Her madness, like Ophelia's, is the logical result of losing her identity, constructed by men. These women are doomed to insanity and death because they subvert their individuality to become the male construction of themselves. When they are no longer defined by those men, the women lose themselves to madness.

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