Young Historians Conference   Young Historians Conference 2019

May 1st, 10:30 AM - 11:45 AM

Depiction and Function of Madness in Elizabethan and Jacobean Literature

Yeiji Seo
Clackamas High School

Follow this and additional works at: https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/younghistorians

Part of the History of Science, Technology, and Medicine Commons, Psychiatric and Mental Health Commons, and the Social History Commons

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

DEPICTION AND FUNCTION OF MADNESS IN ELIZABETHAN
AND JACOBEAN LITERATURE

Yeiji Seo
PSU HST 101/102: Western Civilization
February 19, 2019

Abstract

Since the ancient times of Israel, Greece, and Rome, people with mental illnesses have been

regarded as different from others in society. This paper aims to analyze the motives of authors of

medical and dramatic texts of Elizabethan and Jacobean literature in regards to mental illness by

specifically observing William Shakespeare's *King Lear* and Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of

Melancholy*. This paper also considers the views of other scholars of the field to compose a

complete insight on Shakespeare and Burton's goals in depicting mental illness and finally

advocates further research and understanding to positively contribute towards disability reform

today.

"Thou art a soul in bliss; but I am bound / Upon a wheel of fire, that mine own tears / Do scald like molten lead."[1] In William Shakespeare's *King Lear*, the once sane and powerful King Lear experiences age-related mental conditions and sensorily expresses his great degree of suffering in contrast with the happy souls of the sane. Today and in the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras alike, mental illness is and was feared because of its resulting powerlessness; many people lived hoping never to experience mental illnesses throughout their lives.[2] In contrast with this uniform dismissal of mental illness, widely-known authors and playwrights of these eras used their influence to depict mental illnesses and present them to the general public. Some believe these medical and dramatic texts to be works of mockery, intended to use the mentally ill as sources of entertainment and to negatively affect perceptions of mental illness. However, a wide and detailed approach drawing from multiple disciplines reveals that during the English Elizabethan and Jacobean eras, the portrayal of madness in medical and dramatic texts conveyed its existence as an inevitable result of adverse life events and a grim society, illustrating madness as a universal condition to evoke empathy, understanding, and reform towards the mentally ill from their audiences.

Social perceptions of and responses to madness and mental illness have varied throughout time and across cultures. In ancient Israel, Greece, and Rome, the mentally ill and intellectually deficient were frequently mocked, ridiculed, and abused as they roamed through the countryside;

---

[1] William Shakespeare, *King Lear* (New York: J.B. Alden, 1887), 277. https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015082533277;view=2up;seq=2.

[2] Anne Harrington, "Psychiatry and Treatment of Mental Illness." In *Discoveries in Modern Science*: *Exploration, Invention, Technology*, ed. James Trefil, vol. 3 (Farmington Hills, MI: Macmillan Reference USA, 2015), 893.

many were also perceived as fools for the purpose of entertainment.[3] Similarly, the mentally

disordered in the Middle Ages lived excluded from community life and were treated harshly.[4]

With the Elizabethan era fortunately came the passage of the Elizabethan Poor Laws, which

shifted more responsibility to the government for the care of the poor and disabled.[5] However,

during this early-modern Europe, some viewed madness as God's way of punishing sinners or

testing people of faith.[6] Others traditionally believed madness to be attributed to females, but the

emergence of melancholy men altered these beliefs.[7]

 To continue this discussion of whether medical and dramatic literature portraying

madness had positive or negative intentions and effects on public perception, a clarification of

the relationship between the terms "mental illness" and "madness" is necessary. Because

scholars in the field have used the terms "mental illness," "madness," and "melancholy" almost

interchangeably in their analyses of mental illness during the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras,[8] the

terms will also be used interchangeably throughout this discussion. Seeing as Robert Burton in

his *The Anatomy of Melancholy* refers both to the terms "melancholy" and "madness" as diseases

---

[3] "Madness." In *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, 2nd ed., ed. by William A. Darity, Jr., vol. 4. (Detroit, MI: Macmillan Reference USA, 2008), 549. *Gale Virtual Reference Library*. http://link.galegroup.com.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/apps/doc/CX3045301417/ GVRL?u=s1185784&sid=GVRL&xid=7bcb6aa9.

[4] "Madness." 549

[5] Susan Doran and Norman L. Jones, *The Elizabethan World* (London: Routledge, 2014), 304.

[6] Harrington, "Psychiatry and Treatment of Mental Illness." 893.

[7] Harrington, 893.

[8] Judith Kegan Gardiner, "Elizabethan Psychology and Burton's Anatomy of Melancholy," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 38, no. 3 (1977): 381, doi:10.2307/2708670.

of the mind,[9] it can be reasonably assumed that they were similar and associated terms in the time period, if not the same. This paper attempts to best match the language of the respective authors of the medical and dramatic texts.

By the end of the sixteenth century, melancholy had become a household term. Robert Burton, an Oxford clergyman and scholar who lived from 1577 CE to 1640 CE, conducted a scientific study of the causes and effects of melancholy.[10] In his immensely successful medical text *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, Burton shares these causes and treatments for perceived mental illnesses, including melancholy and love. Admittedly, there is limited available specific knowledge on whether Burton's text was exactly immensely successful, but it is clear that enough people thought Burton's treatment of melancholy interesting to yield multiple editions of his text.[11] In his medical text, Burton identifies traumatic experiences as triggers for melancholy, but, having experienced depression himself, Burton also asserts that even just the forbidding condition of world affairs in general could force one to maddened despair. He claims, "I hear new news every day, and those ordinary rumours of war, plagues, fires,…murders, massacres, meteors, comets…battles fought, so many men slain…a vast confusion of vows, wishes…New

---

[9] Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (Philadelphia: E. Claxton & Company, 1883), 91. https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=loc.ark: 13960t4sj20m7r;view=2up;seq=26;size=125.

[10] Benjamin Roberts, "Humor." In *Encyclopedia of European Social History*, ed. by Peter N. Stearns, vol. 5, Culture & Popular Culture/Modern Recreation & Leisure/Religion/Education & Literacy/Everyday Life. (Detroit, MI: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2001), 134. http://link.galegroup.com.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/apps/doc/CX3460500233/GVRL?u=s1185784&sid=GVRL&xid=363327cb.

[11] Gardiner, "Elizabethan Psychology and Burton's Anatomy of Melancholy," 383.

books every day…now plenty, then again dearth and famine."[12] Through a prolonged series of

lists, Burton brings to light the hectic, changing, and grim state of the world, transferring fault

away from the mentally ill to the wretched worldly condition. He continues by contending that

"the most frequent maladies are such as proceed from themselves…all such impieties are freely

committed, that country cannot prosper."[13] Burton connects the presence of maladies as

stemming from the condition and misdeeds of the country, maintaining the need for both reform

in the treatment of mental illness and reform in the country for its well-being. Through his

discussion of mental illness in *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, Burton spreads to his widespread

audience the perception that the existence of mental illness is inevitable given the conditions of

the similarly sick and melancholy nations, strongly advocating social reform.

Burton also insists and stresses that madness is universal and that no one should believe

they are an exception or are immune to mental illness.

> Now go and brag of thy present happiness, whosoever thou art, brag of thy temperature,
> of thy good parts, insult, triumph, and boast; thou sets in what a brittle state thou art,
> how soon thou mayest be dejected, how many several ways, by bad diet, bad air, a small
> loss, a little sorrow or discontent, an ague, & e.; how many sudden accidents may
> procure thy ruin, what a small tenure of happiness thou hast in this life, how weak and
> silly a creature thou art…know thyself, acknowledge thy present misery, and make right
> use of it.[14]

Burton clearly displays through his text not only a knowledge of physical diseases but also of

their connection to the fallen moral condition of humans and the need for all people to clearly

examine themselves. He emphasizes the reality of the sudden nature of mental illnesses and in

---

[12] Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy,* 17.

[13] Burton, 52.

[14] Burton, 231.

this conveys that all are susceptible to madness and should think those already inflicted not much different from themselves. He also claims, "If it were possible, I would have such priest as should imitate Christ, charitable lawyers should love their neighbors as themselves…but this is impossible…I will therefore have of lawyers…a set number…,"[15] and sheds light on his belief that although it may be impossible for every person in power to act charitably, the actions and purposeful reform of even a select few have the potential to create positive change.

In "Elizabethan Psychology and Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*," Judith Kegan Gardiner attempts to use literature's portrayal of madness to understand Elizabethan psychology, intending to explore Elizabethan beliefs regarding mental functioning as well as the effect of these beliefs on authors and audiences. Within her discussion, Gardiner contends that "it is not… clear that Shakespearean characters…transcribe the personalities and motivations of Renaissance persons…Nor…that they usefully represent all other contemporary literary characters."[16] She chooses rather to also thoroughly analyze Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy*—which she advocates as the one comprehensive psychological text representative of the period and enormously popular in its time.[17] Gardiner, however, seems to contradict her opposition of Shakespeare by singularly relying on Burton. Thus, an interdisciplinary discussion of both Burton's medical text and Shakespeare's several dramatic works proves to reveal a deeper insight into the depiction and function of madness during the time.

---

[15] Burton, 65.

[16] Gardiner, 376.

[17] Gardiner, 383.

William Shakespeare, an English poet active around 1589 CE to 1610 CE,[18] explored and portrayed mental illnesses in several of his dramatic works, including the tragedy *King Lear*. As one of the leading dramatists of the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras, Shakespeare could profoundly influence a widespread audience through his visual and printed works. The audience for his dramatic performances generally comprised of the wealthy upper class, the upper middle class, and the lower middle class.[19] The messages his performances conveyed to these classes with wealth associated with political status and power most likely had great implications for society. Additionally, though most professional dramatists were reluctant to have their plays printed in the absence of copyright laws, several of Shakespeare's plays were compiled and published even after his death, reaching beyond those who could attend performances.[20] His influential plays often served political purposes to please his monarchs as well.[21] If Shakespeare explored mental illness in not one, but several, of his plays, then madness was most likely either a widely-known and prevalent issue during his time, an issue he personally felt strongly about and had a message to spread concerning, or both.

In *King Lear*, Shakespeare displays an aging king of Britain's gradual mental deterioration as he experiences the consequences of disposing of his kingdom to his daughters.

---

[18] "William Shakespeare." In *Hutchinson Encyclopedia of the Renaissance*, (Abingdon: Helicon Publishing, 2005), ProQuest Ebook Central.

[19] "Shakespeare, William." In *Gale Contextual Encyclopedia of World Literature*, *1407-1411*. vol. 4. (Detroit, MI: Gale, 2009), *Gale Virtual Reference Library*. http://link.galegroup.com.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/apps/doc/CX2507200424/GVRLu=s1185784&sid=GVRL&xid=a46fb121.

[20] "William Shakespeare." In *Hutchinson Encyclopedia of the Renaissance*.

[21] "Shakespeare, William." In *Gale Contextual Encyclopedia of World Literature*, *1407-1411*.

Though fictional, the dramatic play acknowledges and responds to the existence and mixed perception of mental illness during the time. Early on, the audience learns about Lear's age-related mental conditions, as his unsympathetic daughter Goneril brings attention to the "unruly waywardness that infirm and choleric years bring with them."[22] This resembles age-related dementia, and as the play was performed to large audiences consisting of the higher classes of society, this display of the mentally unstable condition of one holding a position of power may have not only invoked a subtle fear among viewers, but also an understanding that mental illnesses could occur to anyone in the process of living and aging. Furthermore, Lear even admits in a later scene that his old age is altering his state of mind. He confesses, "Pray do not mock me…I fear I am not in my perfect mind…I think this lady To be my child Cordelia."[23] Through depicting his once-powerful main character's vulnerability resulting from a mental illness, Shakespeare conveys a hope of sympathy from the audience towards the mentally ill. Additionally, by contrasting the behavior of Cordelia—who embodies goodness—and of Goneril —who represents evil—towards their mentally unstable father, Shakespeare reinforces to his audience a moral aspect in the treatment of the mentally disordered.

Additionally, Shakespeare includes in many of his plays scenes in 'Bedlam,' the London hospital for the mentally ill.[24] The degree of interaction and expressive quality of the dialogues in these Bedlam scenes as compared to the rest of action in plays suggests another function of

---

[22] Shakespeare, *King Lear,* 200.

[23] Shakespeare, 277.

[24] Sander L. Gilman, "Madness." In *Keywords for Disability Studies*, ed. Adams Rachel, Reiss Benjamin, and Serlin David (NYU Press, 2015), 116. http://www.jstor.org.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/stable/j.ctt15nmhws.40.

madness—to expose the hypocrisy of the sane by displaying the paradoxical freedom of the confined and chained mad to speak their minds and to disregard the customary conventions of language and conformity.[25] Other Jacobean comedies similarly consist of characters visiting Bedlam, and as the audience visually perceives these scenes, they are invited to recognize misery and feel pity, being casually reminded that in this place the mentally ill people can also see them. The audience is prompted to realize that the administrators of Bedlam use sight to rather arbitrarily corroborate what counts as madness. Just the inclusion of a Bedlam scene on the dramatic stage forms a powerful visual device causing realization about the immorality of the health institution and evoking questions about the methods and resolutions employed regarding social welfare.

Some scholars contend that the public theater staged, and therefore created, the actually false notion of the mentally ill as sources of entertainment similar to the theater.[26] These scholars argue that the treatment of madness as entertainment was observed through—and only through—theatrical performances and not in daily life. In *Distracted Subjects: Madness and Gender in Shakespeare and Early Modern Culture*, Carol Thomas Neely asserts that the plays' scenes did "not represent the compassionate attitudes toward the mad visible elsewhere."[27] However, in "Mad for Shakespeare: a Reconsideration of the Importance of Bedlam," Derek Peat uses the return from madness in *King Lear* and numerical reports to more effectively demonstrate that St

---

[25] Shakespeare, 257.

[26] Carol Thomas Neely, *Distracted Subjects: Madness and Gender in Shakespeare and Early Modern Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004).

[27] Neely, *Distracted Subjects: Madness and Gender in Shakespeare and Early Modern Culture*, 158.

Mary of Bethlehem, or Bedlam, profoundly impacted Shakespeare and produced his unique

portrayal of madness.[28] While Peat believes the treatment of madness displayed in Shakespeare's

plays to be a depiction of the reality of Bedlam, Neely asserts that this treatment was observed

only through theatrical performances and not in daily life.

Peat's thinking coincides with Neely's in that they both challenge the belief that the

mentally ill were initially viewed as entertainment in the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras. He

informs his readers that during these eras, the Bedlam hospital only housed twenty inmates—

eleven men and nine women, which also opposes the view of madness as a gender-specific

disease—and that there exists minimal evidence of it being a favored place of resort and

entertainment.[29] In contrast with Neely, however, Peat portrays the influence of Shakespeare's

depiction of madness positively, stating, "While Lear's journey ends in death and it is…possible

to argue that at the moment of death he is mad again, the comment ignores the reconciliation

scene, ignores the discoveries that Lear makes while mad, but most importantly it ignores the

fact that…there is a return from madness."[30] He maintains that this return from madness, as well

as the existence of 'Bedlam Beggars' who begged out in public, suggests to the audience the

possibility of patients returning to the community; Peat provides specific evidence to support that

Shakespeare truthfully portrayed madness based on the events and situations he saw in Bedlam

---

[28] Derek Peat, "Mad for Shakespeare: a Reconsideration of the Importance of Bedlam," *Parergon* 21, no. 1 (2004): 113-132. https://muse.jhu.edu/.

[29] Peat, "Mad for Shakespeare: a Reconsideration of the Importance of Bedlam," 116.

[30] Peat, 129.

in to show and stress the hope of transformation.[31] Neely uses case notes of Richard Napier's

distressed patients to convey that even "extreme cases of distraction are not represented as

medically or morally different from milder ones or as incurable. Nowhere in the records

available to [her] are there signs of moral condemnation or dehumanization…or the desire to

segregate [the mad] permanently from society."[32] Rather, Neely boldly concludes that dramatic

representations of madness were the first to create and promote the mentally ill as entertainment.

Neely commendably attempts to understand the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras through an

interdisciplinary approach not easily surpassed by other scholars, but her definite conclusion that

plays sparked and circulated dehumanizing attitudes is based merely on "five Jacobean plays"[33]

that seem unlikely to form the singular cause and catalyst of such attitudes.

Other scholars contend that Shakespeare utilized madness as a political metaphor. In

Madness and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare, Duncan Salkeld bases his study on the

contention that the "inner worlds of the mind of Shakespearean characterization are largely

represented by external appearance,…in language describing corporeal states"[34]; he stresses the

historical contexts of the conditions in which madness appears as having precedence over the

internal lives of characters, aiming to present madness—denoting unreason—as a political tool

for contemporary tensions. Salkeld utilizes discussions of several individual plays to display

their connection to the encompassing discourses of their time. His discussion of *King Lear*, in

---

[31] Peat, 129.

[32] Neely, 160.

[33] Neely, 167.

[34] Duncan Salkeld, *Madness and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 1.

particular, supports his main point but also appears to be a forced attempt to relate as many aspects of the play and its madness to politics as possible, without providing a specific historical or cultural context of the real moment. Regarding this demise of a king suffering senility, Salkeld boldly asserts that the speeches Lear gives while struggling to retain a sense of identity "do not represent a dawning inner perception of…psychological self-realization. They articulate policy for a corrupt world where all the myths of power and virtue have failed,"[35] highlighting Lear's specific words to support his claim: "'When I have stolen upon these sons-in law, then kill, kill, kill, kill…' (IV.vi.187-8)."[36] Certainly, the loss of distinction and reason in Lear's rule parallels a corrupt world; however, Salkeld's failure to integrate the historical context of this play leaves Shakespeare's purpose for using a political metaphor unclear.

By the nineteenth century, moral treatment aimed at the return of the mentally ill deemed as 'treatable' to their proper place in society and the world was commonplace. With a focus on the moral and secular corrections of their misunderstandings of the world and their inappropriate actions, weekly dances for inmates became a standard practice, and clinical facilities experienced a process of formal medicalization across Europe.[37] Though it is unclear to what extent the medical and dramatic literature of the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras had an effect on this positive reform, further research could reveal possible associations. This portrayal of mental illness by popular authors illustrates that prevalent works of literature can not only have functions in their respective fields but can also convey powerful perspectives on social issues to

---

[35] Salkeld, *Madness and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare*, 110.

[36] Salkeld, 110.

[37] Gilman, "Madness," 116.

the general public. Scholars of the past have analyzed the depiction of madness and mental illness in popular literature, but many simply present their own analyses of the text and do not consider their implications. The disparity in scholars' opinions demonstrates the necessity for further detailed research, which could extend to analyzing other types of literature including autobiographical writings of relatives to the mentally ill, governmental laws instituted regarding poor relief, and madness' place in the political backgrounds of the eras. Relating this topic to the progression of mental illness reform in both the past and present is crucial as disability reform today is still struggling to be brought to light. Analyzing and better understanding treatment of the mentally ill of the past could provide important direction for integrating people with disabilities in the present.

Bibliography

Burton, Robert. *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. Philadelphia: E. Claxton & Company, 1883. https://
    babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=loc.ark:/13960/t4sj20m7r;view=2up;seq=26;size=125.

Doran, Susan, and Norman L. Jones. *The Elizabethan World*. London: Routledge, 2014.

Gardiner, Judith Kegan. "Elizabethan Psychology and Burton's Anatomy of
    Melancholy." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 38, no. 3 (1977): 373-88. doi:
    10.2307/2708670.

Gilman, Sander L. "Madness." In *Keywords for Disability Studies*, edited by Rachel Adams,
    Benjamin Reiss, and David Serlin, 114-19. NYU Press, 2015. http://www.jstor.org.
    proxy.lib.pdx.edu/stable/j.ctt15nmhws.40.

Harrington, Anne. "Psychiatry and Treatment of Mental Illness." In *Discoveries in Modern
    Science*: *Exploration, Invention, Technology*, Edited by James Trefil, 891-896. Vol. 3.
    Farmington Hills, MI: Macmillan Reference USA, 2015. *Gale Virtual Reference Library*.
    http://link.galegroup.com.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/apps/doc/CX3601300227/GVRL?
    u=s1185784&sid=GVRL&xid=e1df1961.

"Madness." In *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, 2nd ed., edited by William A.
    Darity, Jr., 548-550. Vol. 4. Detroit, MI: Macmillan Reference USA, 2008. *Gale Virtual
    Reference Library*. http://link.galegroup.com.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/apps/doc/CX3045301417/
    GVRL?u=s1185784&sid=GVRL&xid=7bcb6aa9.

Neely, Carol Thomas. *Distracted Subjects: Madness and Gender in Shakespeare and Early
    Modern Culture*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004.

Peat, Derek. "Mad for Shakespeare: a Reconsideration of the Importance of
    Bedlam." *Parergon* 21, no. 1 (2004): 113-132. https://muse.jhu.edu/.

Roberts, Benjamin. "Humor." In *Encyclopedia of European Social History*, edited by Peter N.
    Stearns, 131-139. Vol. 5, Culture & Popular Culture/Modern Recreation & Leisure/
    Religion/Education & Literacy/Everyday Life. Detroit, MI: Charles Scribner's Sons,
    2001. *Gale Virtual Reference Library*. http://link.galegroup.com.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/apps/
    doc/CX3460500233/GVRL?u=s1185784&sid=GVRL&xid=363327cb.

Salkeld, Duncan. *Madness and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare*. Manchester: Manchester
    University Press, 1995.

"Shakespeare, William." In *Gale Contextual Encyclopedia of World Literature*, 1407-1411. Vol.

4. Detroit, MI: Gale, 2009. *Gale Virtual Reference Library*. http://
link.galegroup.com.proxy.lib.pdx.edu/apps/doc/CX2507200424/GVRL?
u=s1185784&sid=GVRL&xid=a46fb121.

Shakespeare, William. *King Lear*. New York: J.B. Alden, 1887. https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/
pt?id=mdp.39015082533277;view=2up;seq=2.

"William Shakespeare." In *Hutchinson Encyclopedia of the Renaissance*, Abingdon: Helicon
Publishing, 2005. ProQuest Ebook Central.