

Madness in Shakespeare Tragedies

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Abstract

In Shakespeare's tragedies, madness is always related to death and murder. The playwright's treatment of the theme, however, applies more to the dark and tragic experience of madness of the fifteenth century than to the critical and moral approach to unreason which was soon to abolish the previous views and which developed in his own epoch. For instance, in the latter years of the sixteenth century, "the social madness of demonology began to wane and was replaced by a different perception of the disturbed".⁴ In King Lear, however, Edgar's use of the medieval friends still testifies to that tragic experience of unreason of the fifteenth and previous centuries.

Foucault very well remarks that the experience of madness in literature and art seems to have been extremely coherent, but that there was no continuity in such themes. Indeed, in the early years of the Renaissance, word and image begin to dissociate in their treatment of insanity, and the Gothic symbols of the Middle Ages, once so rich in spiritual significance, now become images of madness. In the fantastic figures of nightmare, the concepts of animality, long established in the medieval mind, are now reversed. The beast is set free from the moral and mystic world of legend that it had inhabited in the Middle Ages. It becomes the secret nature of man. "Animality has escaped domestication by human symbols and values; and it is animality that reveals the dark rage, the sterile madness that lie in men's hearts".

Keywords—Madness, Shakespeare, King Lear, Macbeth

Introduction

"In the middle Ages and until the Renaissance, man's dispute with madness was a dramatic debate in which he confronted the secret powers of the world; the experience of madness was clouded by images of the Fall and the Will of God, of the Beast and the Metamorphosis, and of all the marvelous secrets of knowledge."¹

This is how Michel Foucault summarizes the medieval and Renaissance experiences of madness in the preface to his book *Madness and Civilization* (1973). During the Middle Ages, madness had been seen as the manifestation either of God or of the Devil in the body of man. The Bible itself was filled with instances of possession by evil. People thus afflicted were supposed to have been seized by the Devil after a deliberate pact with him. The "witch-hunt" became a well-known by-product of this attitude in the Middle Ages. The cure of madness was a religious ritual with gesturing, incantation, prayer, exorcism and even

scourging, which were used to relieve man from his sufferings. This belief still persisted in the Renaissance, though it was beginning to wane a little.

On the other hand, as an expression of the power of God, madness was also associated with inspiration. It has been said in the introduction of this dissertation that madness, poetry and love were all linked in the minds of Renaissance men. Poets and lovers were privileged people, and the madman enjoyed an association with them because of the divine quality of madness, inspired from a love. Here also lies its relationship with Folly, for both madman and fool share that same kind of insight which accounts for their “inspiration”.

Towards the end of the medieval period, another method of treating madmen began to develop: exclusion. This custom had already been used during the Middle Ages as an effective way of dealing with lepers and others sick people. They were expelled from the cities and forbidden any social contact. As the dawn of the Renaissance approached, however, this kind of treatment was also assigned to poor vagabonds, criminals and madmen.

Exclusion took many different forms which had the practical purpose of rendering the cities free from the inconvenient presence of their mad citizens. (Lear abandoned on the heath as a poor wretch is one of the many instances of exclusion that we find in Shakespeare).

A delightful and yet horrible way of effecting exclusion was “embarkation”. Madmen were put on a ship and entrusted to sailors, who were supposed to take them away. These were the famous Ships of Fools, a very common presence in the landscape of the Renaissance. One of the reasons for this practice was the belief, long established in the European mind, that water and madness had an affinity for each other; the sea was restless like the madman’s mind, and its mysteries were compared to the deep labyrinths of his mad knowledge. Once put on a ship, the madman was not likely to return, but the embarkation presumably befitted him, because it was believed that water could cure and purify him.

Some people thought, on the other hand, that an aquatic element was also present in madness, which caused the dark chaos of the madman’s brain. Hence, the relationship between water and madness.

Shakespeare was certainly acquainted with such ideas, and there are clear references to them, for instance in Hamlet, when we hear Gertrude’s account of Ophelia’s drowning. It is as if that “aquatic element” in the girl’s madness sought for its like and thus drove her steps to the brook. The queen says that the girl sang

As one incapable of her own distress, Or like a creature native and induced Unto that element. (IV. iii)

Some of the sailors in those ships of fools disembarked their “cargo” and “lost” them in great cities of commerce and travel, where the madmen would wander and beg for their lives. Others were sent to places of pilgrimage, thus uniting exclusion and interest in cure. As

Foucault says, “madmen were confined in the holy locus of a miracle”.² There was also the custom of whipping the demented publicly and chasing them out of town in a grotesque race.

The practical, social importance of exclusion was obvious, but there was another reason for it which was highly symbolical and bore a more ritualistic significance. The madman, like the leper centuries before, was abandoned to be saved. The rites and formulas were still the same, implying social division but spiritual reintegration. However true and sincere this belief might be, it was certainly born as an excuse for the expulsion of the demented.

But it must not be believed that exclusion was the general rule concerning madmen. In some places they were admitted into hospitals and taken care of; but these were not, in general, special hospitals for the insane. The “madhouses” were not to become common till the beginning of the “age of reason”. There were also, throughout Europe, gathering places reserved for the mentally ill. These were no more than prisons where they were lodged and fed, but which they were not allowed to leave. The madmen did not receive any kind of medical treatment in these places, and their maintenance was financed by the city funds.

During the medieval and mid of the fifteenth century, the theme of death had haunted the imagination of the Western man. In the early Renaissance madness replaces death and comes to the fore. It presents itself as a new, great spectacle to be watched on board the “ships of fools”, in the public whipping sessions at market places, in prisons, hospitals, etc.

Madness becomes a symbol of menace and mockery, as can be seen through Foucault’s words :

“The end of man, the end of time, bear the face of pestilence and war. What overhangs human existence is this conclusion and this order from which nothing escapes. ... Then, in the last years of the (fifteenth) century, this enormous uneasiness turns on itself; the mockery of madness replaces death and its solemnity.”³

In its lunatic displays, madness expresses the nothingness of existence, and it must be shown and heralded to teach men that they are already dead, that madness is death in life.

How characteristic it is that the mad Hamlet should come upon dead Yorick’s skull in the graveyard scene. Even in death the court-fool keeps his job as a reminder of the ambiguity latent in the madness-folly relationship.

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Thus, sanity was associated with the proper balance of the humours in a person’s body, whereas insanity meant either imbalance of the humours, or the abnormal and sudden change of one of them. This can be seen as providing the Renaissance with a primitive psychological and chemical explanation of madness, besides the supernatural one inherited from the Middle Ages.

Thus we can see that the link between madness and folly was a strong one in the Renaissance. Either because of their neighboring positions in the chain of being, or because they played similar functions in society (or may be both), the madman and the fool had always been seen as kinsmen, two cousins, so to speak, of the old medieval vices.

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