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Scorpions Spots and Green-Eyed Monsters - Madness in Macbeth and Othello

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What is the role of madness in the plays we have read in this unit (*Othello*, *Macbeth*, *Coriolanus*, *The Duchess of Malfi*)? Choose at least two.

Madness vehemently resists definition and is rather inscribed with meaning in each of its different cultural and historical contexts. Attempts to understand madness have been made by clerics, physicians, psychologists, and laypeople alike, but still the condition refuses to be explicitly determined. The ambiguity of madness plays an important role in Shakespearean tragedy, as his mad characters reveal their mental state in differing physiological and psychological expressions. Not only have critics and readers of these plays been invited to interpret the madness of Shakespeare's characters, but agents within the play are also set as interpreters. Those who attempt to 'read' madness in *Macbeth* are Lady Macbeth's waiting-gentlewoman and her doctor, and Macbeth's noblemen, whose thoughts are voiced by Menteith.¹ In *Othello*, Iago establishes Othello's condition of excessive jealousy as mental insanity, so he is both a catalyst to the latter's madness and an interpreter; Desdemona, Cassio, and Emilia are other, passive interpreters of madness in the play.² Using the *Lexicon of Early Modern English*, this essay will explore the etymology and lexicology of language used by non-mad agents to describe or diagnose madness in *Macbeth* and *Othello*. Reading words in their Early Modern usage reveals rich nuances in meaning, thereby inscribing new meaning onto the condition of madness and how it functions within the plays. In *Macbeth* and *Othello*, the language of interpreting madness is necessarily ambiguous and varying, enforcing wider themes of uncertainty and disorder within the texts.

Early modern England was a transitional time in which madness was central to changing ideas in medical, political, and theological spheres of what it meant to be human. Scholars attempted to secularise the condition to detach from the Middle Ages' notion that the intersection of the supernatural, demonic and human caused madness.³ Dr. Richard Napier was one of the

¹ All quotations from *Macbeth* in this essay are taken from *Macbeth* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), ed. A.R. Braunmuller.

² All quotations from *Othello* in this essay are taken from *Othello, the Moor of Venice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), ed. Michael Neill.

³ Carol Thomas Neely, "'Documents in Madness': Reading Madness and Gender in Shakespeare's Tragedies and Early Modern Culture." *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 42: 3 (1991): 315-338. 317.

most significant figures of reinterpreting madness in the Renaissance; he treated roughly 60,000 patients between 1597 and 1634, 2039 of which sought advice on mental disorders.⁴ Napier was interested in—though often failed to identify—the differences between possession and mental or physical debilitations, since they had nearly identical symptoms. Consequently, his treatments varied widely between the spiritual, medical, and magical.⁵ Like Napier, Renaissance drama provides madness, however ambiguously, with form, identification, and even medicalisation. However, Shakespeare’s language of madness indicates that he himself was unable, or perhaps unwilling, to create definitive borders around the condition.

The words used to describe Lady Macbeth’s madness can be separated into two categories: firstly, that it is a disease; secondly, it is an unknowable, mysterious force. She is uniquely attended by a professional who resides with her alongside her gentlewoman. He believes that her condition is the result of a spiritual failure rather than a physiological or psychological ailment, claiming:

Foul whisperings are abroad; unnatural deeds;
Do breed unnatural troubles; infected minds
[...]
More needs she the divine than the physician. (5.1.61-62, 64)

Claude Hollyband’s Dictionary (1593) states that ‘Desnaturé, or an unnatural condition, is defined by the following terms: ‘vnnaturall, which hath changed his own nature, a weake person through the diminishing of his nature.’⁶ The linguistic association of madness with unnaturalness, or the degradation of one’s nature, is extended further with Lady Macbeth, who undergoes a linguistic fracturing. Her speech deteriorates into a clipped, fragmented form, as she recites proverbial lines such as ‘Hell is murky’ (5.1.31), and quotes unsettling nursery rhymes, as ‘the thane of fife had a wife. Where is she/ now?’ (5.2.36-37).⁷ This unnaturalness converges with the doctor’s further description of her condition as a ‘disease’ (5.1.49). The term ‘disease’ associates her madness with infection or illness, but even the medical professional is unable to cure her.

⁴ Neely, “Documents in Madness,” 329.

⁵ Ibid., 330.

⁶ Claude Hollyband, “Desnaturé: A Dictionary of French and English,” *The Lexicon of Early Modern English (LEME)*, ed. Ian Lancashire.

⁷ Neely, “Documents in Madness,” 327.

Lady Macbeth's madness confounds her interpreters. Her doctor proclaims, 'My mind she has mated, and amazed my sight' (5.1.68). The word 'mated' implies that the doctor is in a 'mental labyrinth' as he attempts to understand her behaviour.⁸ This term also emerges in John Florio's *A World of Words* (1598), with 'amazed, affrighted, astonished, terrified, danted, mated'.⁹ Lady Macbeth's stimulates shock and fear in the doctor, attesting to the ways in which her madness is transgressive and threatening as a symbol of political disorder. After explaining her state to Macbeth, the latter responds with nonchalance, asking, 'Canst thou not minister to a mind diseased' (5.3.42). His inability to conceptualize the severity of her condition is indicative of his role as a disabled interpreter. As he too is in a state of madness, he cannot see her from the Othered or objective position of the doctor.

While Lady Macbeth's madness is characterised by infection and disease, Macbeth's madness resounds a deeper corruption. Macbeth articulates his growing mental deterioration as 'Rancours in the vessel of my peace' (3.1.68). Thomas Elyot's *Dictionary* (1538) associates 'raucours' with 'filth',¹⁰ and John Baret's *Dictionary* (1574) connects it to 'scab or byle'.¹¹ In Early Modern England, an excess of bile was associated with melancholy and depression, suggesting that imbalanced humours were the predecessor to his frenzied delirium. Macbeth's 'vessel of peace' echoes scriptural language which uses the vessel as a word for the body or embodiment.¹² Macbeth's vessel, or body, is tainted, foreshadowing Lady Macbeth's later exclamations of madness: 'Out, damned spot!' (5.1.29). Madness therefore not only infects the mind of its host but leaves a stain on their corporeal being. This 'vessel of peace' also responds to the 'poisoned chalice' Macbeth imagines prior to Duncan's murder (1.7.11). As he imagines this first chalice, Macbeth is caught between his desire for kingship and his reluctance to kill, thus the cup symbolizes the poison he imagines will be turned on him if he commits this unforgivable act. The 'vessel of peace' is the linguistic continuation of this earlier prediction as he feels his conscience tainted. Macbeth further associates his mental state as having been poisoned: 'Oh, full of scorpions is my mind' (3.2.36). Scorpions attack unexpectedly, and through this metaphor, Macbeth's madness might rupture at any moment; this is a source of great

⁸ ed. A.R. Braunmuller, footnote 5.1.69, to *Macbeth*, p. 236.

⁹ John Florio, "A World of Words," *LEME*, ed. Ian Lancashire.

¹⁰ Thomas Elyot, "The Dictionary of Sir Thomas Elyot," *LEME*, ed. Ian Lancashire.

¹¹ John Baret, "An Alveary or Triple Dictionary, in English, Latin, and French," *LEME*, ed. Ian Lancashire.

¹² Thessalonians 4:4-5.

fear that Macbeth knows not when. Macbeth's madness is not only a poison, but an ingestion in which he seems to be self-consciously complicit.

Macbeth's madness is interpreted by a wide range of subjects, whose differing loyalties produce various interpretations, vocalised primarily by Menteith:

Some say he's mad; others that lesser hate him
Do call it a valiant fury, but for certain
He cannot buckle his distempered cause
Within the belt of rub. (5.2)

Thomas Elyot's Dictionary interprets 'fury' as a form of madness, so 'valiant fury' still indicates the condition, despite being framed positively through courage or heroism.¹³ Due to Macbeth's 'distempered cause'—his destabilized mental and emotional state—he is unable to 'buckle'—or keep together—the 'belt' of his mental state to rule with proper authority. The words 'some say' and 'others .../ Do call it' indicate that Macbeth's madness has entered into public discourse, dramatizing the parallel discussions occurring in England about madness in the Renaissance. Despite different linguistic conceptualisations of his condition, Macbeth's madness is nonetheless symbolic of broader themes of disruption and failing power structures within the play. In Levinus Leminius' *The Touchstone of Complexions* (1561), the 'mad enterprises' of the medical world and 'mutuall sedition' of the political domain aligned to produce cultural metaphors in which madness symbolised insurrection or political rebellion.¹⁴ When the ruler's corporate authority is threatened or even annihilated—as with the regicide of Duncan—the metaphor emerges of madness embodying irrationality, disorder, and disruption of power. In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare explicitly represents 'madness as produced by a failure in the ideology of sovereignty to sustain the myth of its own integrity, and [...] exemplifies a dramatic structure which was to become typical of later drama in which reason and madness are more explicitly allied to themes of power and subversion'.¹⁵ It quickly becomes clear that when Macbeth overturns the monarchy, he not only kills Duncan, but violates the State as a whole.¹⁶

Menteith's language establishes Macbeth's madness 'When all that is within him does condemn/ Itself for being there' (5.2.24-25). Madness is characterized in *Macbeth* by an inability

¹³ Thomas Elyot, "Bibliotheca Eliotae," *LEME*, ed. Ian Lancashire.

¹⁴ Duncan Salkeld, "Dangerous Conjectures: Madness in Shakespearean Tragedy," in *Madness and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare*, (New York: Manchester University Press, 1993), 80-115. 81.

¹⁵ Duncan Salkeld, "Dangerous Conjectures," 82.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 89.

to know oneself, as Macbeth's mind exists in a cycle of self-rebellion. The corrupted self in a state of madness is propelled by a corruption of self-knowledge. Menteith's remark echoes a line in act two, as Macbeth begins his descent into madness; he claims that committing the murder has necessitated the creation of a new self as his identity prior to the regicide is eradicated:¹⁷ 'To know my deed, 'twere best not to know myself' (2.2.76). Macbeth predicts the alienation from his own consciousness, and perhaps even hastens his descent into madness by desiring a loss of consciousness to assuage his guilt. In spite of this foreshadowing, his madness still overwhelms his 'distempered cause'. Menteith notes the impact this has on Macbeth's capacity for ruling: 'His pestered sense to recoil and start' (5.2.23). 'Pestered' originates in the Latin 'pestis', meaning, 'A person that is a fiend and deadly plague to his countrie'.¹⁸ Macbeth is not ridden with disease; rather he himself is the contagion that infects those around him. This definition is particularly relevant to *Macbeth* because usurpation to the throne symbolically plagues the entire nation. While Menteith's observations are poignant, the ambiguity of these varying interpretations of Macbeth's condition is pervasive. Understanding Macbeth's mental state is rendered obscure to interpreters, because those who are mad cannot even know themselves.

In *Othello*, madness further resists definition as it is framed as monstrosity. In this drama, Othello's excessive jealousy and paranoia is equated to madness; while his primary interpreter is the deeply untrustworthy Iago, Othello's degenerating language and psychological state attests to a condition indicative of madness. Iago explicitly connects jealousy, madness, and monstrosity:

O, beware my lord, of jealousy!
It is the green-eyed monster which doth mock
The meat it feeds on. (3.3.168-70)

The etymology of 'monstrosity' imposes a two-pronged approach to how the term is applied in *Othello*. 'Monster' is primarily read as a bestial or demonic figure, and while this definition certainly engages with the play's usage, a secondary definition offers an important nuance to understanding its role in *Othello*. 'Monster' has origins in different Latin variants, but the three most prominent are 'monstrum', 'monstras', and 'monstrare'. Thomas Cooper (1578) defines 'monstrare' as 'To shew that is hid and vnknowne,' and 'to declare: to tell: to teach.'¹⁹ Monstrosity functions to warn, reveal, and teach, and in this play, madness and monstrosity

¹⁷ ed. A.R. Braunmuller, footnote 2.2.76, to *Macbeth*, p. 163.

¹⁸ Thomas Cooper, "Thesaurus Linguae Romanae et Britannicae (1578)," *LEME*, ed. Ian Lancashire.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

reveal Othello's vulnerabilities and the consequences of leaving one's Achilles' heel exposed to the reprehensible.

Jealousy manifests in the human body by unbalancing the humours and turning the complexion green.²⁰ However, Iago alters this idea with a focus on eyes in response to Othello's obsessiveness in looking for proof of Desdemona's adultery.²¹ When the eyes are green, the warning becomes unseeable, and the call to 'beware' the 'green-eyed monster' is rendered useless because it is impossible to see a tint in one's own eyes. Iago's 'green-eyed monster' pre-emptively Emilia's 'It is a monster/ Begot upon itself, born on itself' (3.4.156-7). Emilia tells Desdemona that jealousy is an overwhelming bestial force, rather than a rational experience. In saying the condition is 'born on itself', she suggests that monstrosity can only beget the monstrous. This contrasts to the representation of madness in *Macbeth*, in which the condition is the product of an illness or disease, which can invade anyone's psyche, thereby reducing some agency in the mad character's behaviour. While the illness might have been brought on by spiritual corruption—as the doctor recognises in Lady Macbeth—it is largely uncontrollable by the subject once their mind has been contaminated. Othello is not granted this same small mercy; his madness is framed as a monstrosity contained within him, rather than an infection of some external entity. Othello's madness is an undeniably racialised diagnosis, as monstrosity is inseparable from 'the "monstrosity" of Othello's African alterity'.²² Iago bestialises Othello at the onset of the text, particularly in his verbal representation of the elopement: 'an old black ram/ Is tupping your white ewe. Arise, arise!' (1.1.88-89). Racialised attitudes are fundamentally aligned with Othello's madness, as his behaviours are primarily processed and articulated through Iago.

Othello is not constructed as a cautionary tale, but rather an exposition of madness' fatalities. In refusing to clearly articulate Othello's madness, and by extension what exactly should be learned from it, his madness is essentially rendered meaningless. It is doubly tragic that Othello begs Lodovico to tell his story but gives an entirely untrue representation of himself as 'one not easily jealous' (5.2.344). Just as Desdemona does not know who he is ('My lord is not my lord; nor should I know him,/ Were he in favour as humour altered' [3.4.120-121].),

²⁰ ed. Michael Neil, footnote 3.3.169, to *Othello*, p. 292.

²¹ ed. Michael Neil, footnote 2.2.169, to *Othello*, p. 292.

²² Mark Thornton Burnett, "'As it is credibly thought': Conceiving 'Monsters' in *Othello*," in *Constructing 'Monsters' in Shakespearean Drama and Early Modern Culture*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 95-124. 107.

Othello too has lost all sense of his own identity, with no return to clarity even in the moments preceding death. This reveals the only conclusive, universal product of madness provided by Shakespeare: the loss of self, or some essential factor that makes a person knowable to others and themselves.

Madness is left resoundingly impossible to clearly determine despite continual linguistic attempts to do so. Lady Macbeth's madness is characterized as an infection or disease, and by its resistance to cure, even by a medical professional. Macbeth's self-awareness provides insight into the descent into madness, but the condition still resists clear self-definition as he frames his mental deterioration as a poison. Othello's madness is reconceptualized as a kind of monstrosity, rather than the invasion of an external force. These different characterizations and interpretations of the 'mad' character's identity attests to the challenges in drawing conclusions about the role of madness. Nonetheless, the ambiguity of madness responds to and reinforces larger themes of disorder and destabilization in these plays. Madness' resistance to interpretation is best symbolically demonstrated in Lady Macbeth's compulsive writing in her final scenes. Shakespeare does not reveal what Lady Macbeth writes, only that it is essential for Lady Macbeth's madness. In the same way that she obsessively writes, both internal and external agents to the play perpetually search for meaning and definition in madness. Just as Lady Macbeth's writing is unknowable and unutterable, so too is madness in *Macbeth* and *Othello*.

Word Count: 2613

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