

2023

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

Faith Caswell
Western University, fcaswell@uwo.ca

Follow this and additional works at: https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/undergradawards_2023



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Citation of this paper:

Caswell, Faith, "Scorpions Spots and Green-Eyed Monsters - Madness in Macbeth and Othello" (2023).
2023 Undergraduate Awards. 5.
https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/undergradawards_2023/5

Faith Caswell

Scorpions, Spots, and Green-Eyed Monsters: Madness in *Macbeth* and *Othello*

Attempts to define 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 mad characters reveal their mental state in various fluid physiological and psychological expressions. Not only are critics and readers invited to interpret the madness of Shakespeare's characters, but so too are agents within the play set in interpretive positions. Those who attempt to 'read' madness in *Macbeth* are Lady Macbeth's waiting-gentlewoman and her doctor, as well as Macbeth's noblemen, whose thoughts are voiced primarily by Menteth.¹ Othello's condition of excessive jealousy is framed as mental insanity by Iago, who acts both as catalyst to and interpreter of the former's madness; Desdemona, Cassio, and Emilia are other (rather passive) interpreters of madness in *Othello*.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, allowing for new readings of the condition of madness in Shakespeare, with particular focus on how it manifests and functions within the aforementioned tragedies. In *Macbeth* and *Othello*, the language of interpreting madness is necessarily ambiguous and varying, further enforcing textual themes of disorder and uncertainty.

Early modern England was in a constant state of transition, with theories of madness as the fulcrum of developing ideas in medical, political, and theological spheres. 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 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 he often failed to identify—the differences between possession and mental

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.

⁴ Neely, "Documents in Madness," 329.

or physical debilitations, since they had supposedly identical symptoms. His treatments consequently varied widely between the spiritual, medical, and magical.⁵ Like Napier's projects, Renaissance drama attempts to provide madness, however ambivalently, with form, identification, and even medicalisation. Shakespeare's ambiguous 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: disease and an unknowable, mysterious force. She is uniquely attended to 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: 'unnaturall, 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, though she is apparently beyond cure.

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 entrapped 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 a lexicon of 'amazed, affrighted,

⁵ Neely, "Documents in Madness," 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.

⁸ Footnote to *Macbeth*, ed. A.R. Braunmuller, 5.1.69.

astonished, terrified, danted, mated'.⁹ Lady Macbeth 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; the source of great fear that Macbeth knows not when. Macbeth's madness is not only a poison, but an ingestion of 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:

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.

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, but 'valiant fury' still indicates the condition despite being framed positively through its association with courage and 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 mind to rule with 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 authority is threatened or even annihilated—as with the earlier regicide of Duncan—a metaphor of madness embodying irrationality, disorder, and disruption of power emerges. 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 partly in *Macbeth* by a corrupted sense of identity and self-knowledge. Menteth's remark echoes a line in act two, as Macbeth begins his descent into madness; the latter claims that committing the murder has necessitated the creation of a new self as his identity prior to the regicide has been eradicated:¹⁷

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.

¹⁷ Footnote to *Macbeth*, ed. A.R. Braunmuller, 2.2.76.

‘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 as ‘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 pervades. Understanding Macbeth’s mental state is rendered obscure to interpreters, especially because those who are mad cannot even know themselves.

In *Othello*, madness further resists definition as it is framed as monstrosity in the form of Othello’s excessive jealousy and paranoia. While his primary interpreter is the deeply untrustworthy Iago, Othello’s degenerating language and psychological state attests to a certain condition indicative of madness. Iago explicitly links expressions of 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 may be 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 reveal Othello’s vulnerabilities and the consequences of leaving one’s Achilles’ heel exposed to the reprehensible.

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

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

Jealousy manifests in the human body by unbalancing the humours and giving the complexion a greenish hue.²⁰ Iago shifts this particular manifestation towards a focus on eyes in response to Othello's obsession with 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 such a tint in one's own eyes. Iago's 'green-eyed monster' pre-empts 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 in this context is inseparable from what Mark Thornton Burnett observes as '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 tuppung 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' resulting 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].), 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

²⁰ Footnote to *Othello*, ed. A.R. Braunmuller, 3.3.169.

²¹ Footnote to *Othello*, ed. A.R. Braunmuller, 2.2.169.

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.

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 an essential task. In the same way that she writes obsessively and compulsively, both internal and external agents to the play perpetually search for definition in madness. Just as Lady Macbeth's writing is unknowable and unutterable, so too is madness in *Macbeth* and *Othello*.

Word Count: 2602

Bibliography

Lexicon of Early Modern English. Edited by Ian Lancashire. Toronto: University of Toronto Libraries, <https://leme.library.utoronto.ca/>.

Neely, Carol Thomas, “‘Documents in Madness’: Reading Madness and Gender in Shakespeare's Tragedies and Early Modern Culture.” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 42, no. 3 (1991): 315-338.

Salkeld, Duncan. “Dangerous Conjectures: Madness in Shakespearean Tragedy.” In *Madness and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare*, 80-115. New York: Manchester University Press, 1993.

Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth*. Edited by A.R. Braunmuller. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Shakespeare, William. *Othello*. Edited by Michael Neill. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Thornton Burnett, Mark. “‘As it is credibly thought’: Conceiving ‘Monsters’ in *Othello*.” In *Constructing ‘Monsters’ in Shakespearean Drama and Early Modern Culture*, 95-124. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002.