

# MADNESS IN SHAKESPEARE\*

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For some time now I have waited for an 'excuse' to read all Shakespeare's plays, and my election to the office of Chairman of this Division and my duty to deliver a valedictory address provided me with the appropriate reason. I have attended the performance by very good companies of a number of Shakespeare's plays, but, as you know, certain of his plays are rarely performed and, as is the way of Shakespeare, he scatters his verbal gems. To appreciate their lustre fully it is therefore necessary to read all his plays and hear them in their contextual setting.

Another reason why I decided to read all Shakespeare's plays arose from my professional and academic curiosity about the number and range of Shakespeare's medical allusions. I did not realize that there was such a large number of allusions of a medical nature. After I had culled them all, however, I realized that there is much of

medicine in Shakespeare — so much indeed, that it is hardly possible to do justice to this subject in an address of this kind. I, therefore, decided to refer only to the allusions to madness.

In endeavouring to systematize Shakespeare's observations on madness, I have divided them into those having a bearing on aetiology, symptomatology, and treatment.

## AETIOLOGY

Shylock, in the courtroom, tells the Duke why he will insist upon the forfeit of flesh, and compares his humour with that of 'Some that are mad if they behold a cat' and

'As there is no firm reason to be render'd  
Why he cannot abide a gaping pig;  
Why he, a harmless necessary cat;'

Shylock therefore failed to give a reason.

The Abbess, in the *Comedy of Errors*, asks of Adriana,

'How long hath this possession held the man?'

and then,

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'Hath he not lost much wealth by wreck at sea?  
Buried some dear friend? Hath not else his eye  
Stray'd his affection in unlawful love? . . .

Which of these sorrows is he subject to?'

And when Adriana answers that she had taken her husband  
to task for allowing his eye to stray, the Abbess retorts,

'And thereof came it that the man was mad:  
The venom clamours of a jealous woman  
Poison more deadly than a mad dog's tooth.  
It seems his sleeps were hinder'd by thy railing:  
And therefore comes it that his head is light.  
Thou say'st his meat was sauc'd with thy upbraidings:  
Unquiet meals make ill digestions,  
Thereof the raging fire of fever bred;  
And what's a fever but a fit of madness?  
Thou say'st his sports were hinder'd by thy brawls:  
Sweet recreation barr'd, what doth ensue  
But moody and dull melancholy, —  
Kinsman to grim and comfortless despair, —  
And, at her heels, a huge infectious troop  
Of pale distemperatures and foes to life?  
In food, in sport, and life-preserving rest  
To be disturb'd would mad or man or beast:  
The consequence is, then, thy jealous fits  
Have scar'd thy husband from the use of's wits'.

And there you have the Abbess' reasoned cause and diagnosis.

In *The Life and Death of King Richard III*, the Marquis of Dorset commands 'Dispute not with her, — she is lunatic'. The word lunatic about that time implied an intermittent form of insanity occasioned by the changes of the moon.

Cardinal Campeius asks of Cardinal Wolsey, in *King Henry VIII*, whether a Doctor Pace has been replaced by the King's new favourite, and when he hears it has been so, says

'They will not stick to say you envied him;  
And fearing he would rise, he was so virtuous,  
Kept him a foreign man still; which so griev'd him  
That he ran mad and died'.

So there we have it that grief will drive a man mad.

Grief also plays its part where Cymbeline, in the play of that name, exclaims,

'Again; and bring me word how 'tis with her.  
A fever with the absence of her son;  
A madness, of which her life's in danger, — . . .'

Fear, too, may be a cause of madness. Tamora, the Queen of the Goths, in *Titus Andronicus*, when she gives her children the reason for her pale looks, describes her fearful surroundings in these words:

'A barren detested vale you see it is;  
The trees, though summer, yet forlorn and lean,  
O'ercome with moss and baleful mistletoe:  
Here never shines the sun; here nothing breeds,  
Unless the nightly owl or fatal raven:  
And when they show'd me this abhorred pit  
They told me, here at dead time of the night  
A thousand fiends, a thousand hissing snakes,  
Ten thousand swelling toads, as many urchins,

Would make such fearful and confused cries  
As any mortal body hearing it  
Should straight fall mad or else die suddenly'.

In *King Lear*, the Earl of Gloster, remarking upon the state of the King's mind, says

'Thou say'st the king grows mad; I'll tell thee,  
I am almost mad myself; I had a son,  
Now outlaw'd from my blood; he sought my life  
But lately, very late: I lov'd him, friend, —  
No father his son dearer: true to tell thee,  
The grief hath craz'd my wits. —'

You will also recall the fearful thoughts that come upon Juliet when she screws up courage to swallow the potent sleeping draught.

'Alack, alack, is it not like that I,  
So early waking, — what with loathsome smells,  
And shrieks like mandrakes' torn out of the earth,  
That living mortals, hearing them, run mad; —  
O, if I wake, shall I not be distraught,  
Environed with all these hideous fears?  
And madly play with my forefathers' joints?  
And pluck the mangled Tybalt from his shroud?  
And, in this rage, with some great kinsman's bone,  
As with a club, dash out my desperate brains? —'

Banquo in the tragedy of *Macbeth*, in his wonder at the unreal nature of things about him and Macbeth, asks

'Were such things here as we do speak about?  
Or have we eaten on the insane root  
That takes the reason prisoner?'

I have not yet been able to discover the exact botanical nature of the plant whose root had such repute.

The Lord Chamberlain Polonius in *Hamlet* thus describes the origin of the madness he attributes to Hamlet:

'And he, repulsed, — a short tale to make, —  
Fell into a sadness; then into a fast;  
Thence to a watch; thence into a weakness;  
Thence to a lightness; and by this declension,  
Into the madness wherein now he raves'.

Polonius is very sure of this cause for Hamlet's madness which he has diagnosed, for when the king asks his queen whether she thinks this could be so, and she replies it could be very likely, Polonius feeling his diagnosis called into question, blurts out

'Hath there been such a time, — I'd fain know that, —  
That I have positively said, 'Tis so,  
When it prov'd otherwise?'

And he offers his head if he proved wrong. But there is no need to accept that offer.

Lastly, we return to the culpable moon again. Othello, when advised by Emilia, Iago's wife, that a murder has been committed, declares;

'It is the very error of the moon;  
She comes more nearer earth than she was wont,  
And makes men mad'.

These, then, are the aetiological factors to which Shakespeare refers: love, grief, fear, jealousy, roots, the moon, and . . . cats.

## SYMPTOMATOLOGY

Running seems to be a common sign of madness, and I suppose the faster the afflicted person runs the madder he is. In *Much Ado About Nothing*, the niece of the Governor of Messina, Beatrice, exclaims: 'O Lord! he will hang upon him like a disease: he is sooner caught than the pestilence, and the taker runs presently mad'. Leonato, the Governor, a few seconds later, says: 'You will never run mad, niece', and she agrees, 'No, not till a hot January'. This was, or is, possibly another form of English madness, many of us here in the South get pretty mad in the month of January.

I have already quoted Juliet's words describing her fears of the tomb and the mandrake's cries that make mortals hearing them run mad. Thersites, that pandering rogue in *Troilus and Cressida*, says of the departing Achilles and Patroclus, 'With too much blood and too little brain these two may run mad; . . .'.

In *The Tempest*, Ariel, describing the wreck to his master Prospero, says,

'Not a soul,  
But felt a fever of the mad, . . .'

And Hamlet, expostulating with his mother, who alleges he is 'not all there', cries out:

'Ecstasy!  
My pulse, as yours, doth temperately keep time,  
And makes as healthful music: it is not madness  
That I have utter'd: bring me to the test,  
And I the matter will re-word; which madness  
Would gambol from'.

Was this an orthodox test for some kind of madness in those far-off days?

Freakish behaviour may be a manifestation of mere eccentricity, but it may be of a degree to warrant a diagnosis of lunacy and so, by this yardstick, eccentricity is closely related to lunacy. Pauline says to Emilia, a lady attending the queen in *The Winter's Tale*:

'I dare be sworn:—  
These dangerous unsafe lunes i' the king, beshrew  
[them!'

Saturninus, in *Titus Andronicus*, openly states that the behaviour of Titus is only feigned madness which he describes as follows:

'. . . And what an if  
His sorrows have so overwhelm'd his wits,  
Shall we be thus afflicted in his freaks,  
His fits, his frenzy, and his bitterness?  
And now he writes to heaven for his redress:  
See, here's to Jove, and this to Mercury;  
This to Apollo; this to the god of war;—  
Sweet scrolls to fly about the streets of Rome!'

Another pattern of insane behaviour is the one adopted by Edgar in *King Lear* to protect himself from his enemies.

'. . . : my face I'll grime with filth  
Blanket my loins; elf all my hair in knots;  
And with presented nakedness outface  
The winds and persecutions of the sky.

The country gives me proof and precedent  
Of Bedlam beggars, who, with roaring voices,  
Strike in their numb'd and mortified bare arms  
Pins, wooden pricks, nails, sprigs of rosemary;  
And with this horrible object, from low farms,  
Poor pelting villages, sheep-cotes, and mills,  
Sometime with lunatic bans, sometime with prayers,  
Enforce their charity'.

In much more jocular mood the Fool that Edgar meets gives some simple definitions for madman: 'He's mad that trusts in the tameness of a wolf, a horse's health, a boy's love, or a whore's oath'.

Ophelia's behaviour in *Hamlet* is described by Laertes, her brother, as 'A document in madness,— thoughts and remembrance fitted' when he observes Ophelia so strangely garbed and uttering strange thoughts:

'They bore him barefac'd on the bier;  
Hey no nonny, nonny, hey nonny;  
And on his grave rain'd many a tear,—  
Fare you well my dove!'

'You must sing *Down a-down, an you call him a-down-a*. O, how the wheel becomes it! It is the false steward, that stole his master's daughter.'

'There's rosemary, that's for remembrance; pray, love, remember: and there is pansies that's for thoughts'.

'There's fennel for you, and columbines:— there's rue for you; and here's some for me:— we may call it herb-grace o'Sundays:— O you must wear your rue with a difference.— There's a daisy:— I would give you some violets, but they withered all when my father died:— they say, he made a good end,—'

'For bonny sweet Robin is all my joy,—' she sings again and at the end of her song leaves with the words 'And of all Christian souls, I pray God,— God b' wi' ye'. That is a rather well-known picture of a deranged mind as Shakespeare saw or imagined it.

Polonius discussing the changed behaviour of Hamlet with the king and queen said:

'I will be brief:— your noble son is mad:  
Mad call I it; for to define true madness,  
What is't but to be nothing else but mad?'

Whereupon the queen reproves him by asking for 'more matter with less art'. Whereupon Polonius assures the queen that he uses 'no art at all' and goes on to show that it has been Hamlet's unrequited love that has made him so. Later Polonius comments to himself 'How pregnant sometimes his replies are! a happiness that often madness hits on, which reason and sanity could not so prosperously be delivered of'.

## TREATMENT

The treatment of madness in Shakespeare's day was a comparatively simple matter. Perhaps it was only the running type or frenzied type that was treated at all, for the safety of the public. In *Twelfth Night*, Sir Toby Belch, referring to Malvolio, says, 'Come, we'll have him in a dark room and bound'. Leonato, in *Much Ado About*

*Nothing*, deploras the habit of people so ready to give advice to those suffering under some load or other,

‘... for, brother, men

Can counsel and speak comfort to that grief  
Which they themselves not feel; but, tasting it,  
Their counsel turns to passion, which before  
Would give preceptual medicine to rage,  
Fetter strong madness in a silken thread,  
Charm ache with air and agony with words:’

In *As You Like It*, Rosalind in word-play with Orlando says, ‘Love is merely a madness; and, I tell you, deserves as well a dark house and a whip as madmen do:’

Again, when the Abbess, in the *Comedy of Errors*, asks Adriana what she has come for, Adriana replies,

‘To fetch my poor distracted husband hence:  
Let us come in, that we may bind him fast,  
And bear him home for his recovery.’

The Abbess later objects,

‘Be patient; for I will not let him stir  
Till I have used the approved means I have,  
With wholesome syrups, drugs, and holy prayers,  
To make him a formal man again’.

Benvolio, amazed at Romeo’s melancholy, exclaims ‘Why Romeo, art thou mad?’ to which Romeo retorts, ‘Not mad, but bound more than a madman is.’

However, there are two rather interesting passages in Shakespeare which are tantamount to hypnotherapy and psychotherapy for the unhinged mind. King Lear is asleep on a bed in the French camp. A physician is in attendance. He has prescribed the playing of soft music. Cordelia asks the physician, ‘—How does the king?’. He replies, ‘Madam, sleeps still’. . . .

‘So please your majesty  
That we may wake the king: he hath slept long’.

She:

‘Be govern’d by your knowledge, and proceed  
I’ the sway of your own will. Is he array’d?’

She is answered,

‘Ay, madam; in the heaviness of sleep  
We put fresh garments on him’.

The physician again says

‘Be by, good madam, when we do awake him;  
I doubt not of his temperance, . . .

Please you, draw near. — Louder the music there!’

Then a little later the physician thinks it fit that the first to speak to the waking king should be his daughter. But the king waking thinks himself dead whereupon the physician advises, ‘He’s scarce awake: let him alone awhile’. When question and answer follow quickly between father and daughter, the physician kindly, but firmly, advises once more,

‘Be comforted, good madam: the great rage,  
You see, is kill’d in him: and yet it is danger  
To make him even o’er the time which he has lost.  
Desire him to go in; trouble him no more  
Till further settling’.

The second passage is the one in which Macbeth, enquiring after Lady Macbeth, questions the doctor. ‘How does your patient, doctor?’ The doctor answers,

‘Not so sick, my lord,  
As she is troubled with thick-coming fancies,  
That keep her from her rest’.

Macbeth says

‘Cure her of that:  
Canst thou not minister to a mind diseas’d;  
Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow;  
Raze out the written troubles of the brain;  
And with some sweet oblivious antidote  
Cleanse the stuff’d bosom of that perilous stuff  
Which weighs upon the heart?’

To which question the doctor replies,

‘Therein the patient  
Must minister to himself,’

and Macbeth’s riposte, ‘Throw physic to the dogs, — I’ll none of it. —’.

And so I come to the end of this address. I have touched upon only some of the medical allusions which I have culled from the plays of Shakespeare and from these I have selected those which have some bearing upon the mental malady of madness with the connotations attributed to this word in those times.