

2019

Damn Spot: Navigating Emotional Trauma in the Body

Emma M. Elliott
Scripps College

Recommended Citation

Elliott, Emma M., "Damn Spot: Navigating Emotional Trauma in the Body" (2019). *Scripps Senior Theses*. 1252.
https://scholarship.claremont.edu/scripps_theses/1252

This Open Access Senior Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Scripps Student Scholarship at Scholarship @ Claremont. It has been accepted for inclusion in Scripps Senior Theses by an authorized administrator of Scholarship @ Claremont. For more information, please contact scholarship@cuc.claremont.edu.

Damn Spot: Navigating Emotional Trauma in the Body

by

Emma M. Elliott

**Submitted to Scripps College in Partial Fulfillment of
Bachelor of Arts in Media Studies**

**Professor Tran
Professor Hurtado-Pierson**

December 14, 2018

Setting, time, medium, and content all come together to create a specific story that the artist wants to share with their audience. Bringing traditional texts such as Shakespeare into a modern context alters the way in which we react to the characters: our contemporary mindsets play a role in our interpretation of the characters. Mental illnesses have always existed with humanity, but it wasn't until the last century that we really began to research and understand them, and take their diagnoses seriously. Oftentimes, characters from centuries ago actually reflect modern situations. Many of these historical bridges come from the understanding of modern diagnoses of mental illnesses. I will be focusing on traditional text in a modern context and medium to bridge the history and content of early plays and film recording to modern technologies.

During the early stages of cinema development, a movement began in prewar France known as the film d'art movement. This was established to bring stage plays with well-known actors to the screen. Rather than adapting plays to fit a film narrative, directors would simply film theatrical productions:¹ this expanded the audience by bringing these prestigious plays to a medium that more of the general population could access. These films brought elaborate theatrical productions with famous actors to the screen and set a pretext for creating longer feature films.¹ This practice is continued today with filming operas, shows, concerts, and musicals so that people who are unable to attend the live events can still engage with the material, both as filming live performances and creating film adaptations. Over the years there have been several films created from Shakespeare's plays, all with different adaptations and contexts depending on the director's design.

¹ Sklar, Robert, and David A. Cook. "History of the Motion Picture." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 11 Sept. 2018, www.britannica.com/art/history-of-the-motion-picture/The-silent-years-1910-27#ref507970

I will be utilizing traditional text in modern media to explore the idea of media naturalization and the symbolic power media carries through its distribution. Media naturalization, among other subjects, constructs an understanding in society of “what is” (Cauldry, pg. 85).² To go back to the Elizabethan era, the main form of media was plays performed for the public. Naturalization as media is a force that has significant effect on shaping a society and constructing the reality that people view. However, because there are other areas that influence naturalization in society, the power that media has is either contradicted or supported by the other societal influences at the time, such as politics and religion. In *Media, Society, World: Social Theory and Digital Media Practice*, Cauldry dissects media power as a symbolic power in its relation to the other institutions that construct the normality of a society.¹ He describes how the classical view of media claims that media “does not contribute anything to social ontology, but merely mediate all forces that do” (Cauldry, 85). For example, Shakespeare’s plays did not actually bring about any specific societal change, but instead were commentaries on societal forces such as politics, nobility, and religion that did shape society.

Couldry’s definition of symbolic power describes it as a pervasive impact on wider society because it affects both what we do and how we describe it.¹ The strong concentration of media is a dominant factor in our society and greatly impacts the social landscape in a way that surpasses the mere mediation of those greater forces. Nowadays, media is not merely a form of entertainment and information passing, but a vast network that informs countless people of ideas and knowledge around the world in a way that was near impossible in the Elizabethan era. I aim to translate Shakespeare’s traditional text into

² Cauldry, Nick. *Media, Society, World: Social Theory and Digital Media Practice*. Polity, 2013.

the modern medium of film in order to utilize its power in this new form of symbolic power that media holds today. His well-known characters will provide a new insight into the pervasiveness of mental health issues, and will be beneficial in reaching more audiences because Shakespeare's authority as a storyteller brings validity to these experiences. While media for Shakespeare was simply a mediation and reflection of greater forces such as religion and politics, his stories and characters can be given new dimension and strength with the symbolic power of media.

Voice over is the auditory narrative technique that I chose to use with this project because it provides an inner monologue and carries a sense of truth with the audience. The voice over is used to communicate directly with the audience and put us into the characters heads without the character onscreen having to break from their action.³ I want to create a potentially familiar experience that audience members may have gone through: the consuming inner monologue running through their mind while trying to maintain the visual front of normality. The voice over allows the audience an intimate look into the character's psyche while connecting that to the façade that she is trying to maintain. The combination of auditory and visual information provides the audience with more in depth information about the on screen events occurring at the moment. I chose to use voice over rather than dialogue because I am trying to portray the inner conflict that people working through emotional trauma may be experiencing, and oftentimes this experience is not physically voiced in conversations with others.

One of the most important distinctions to make when bringing Shakespeare's work into modern day context is the switch between presentational vs. psychological approaches

³ Laughman, Ethan. "The Voice Over and Its Use in Film." *NVGF*, ctlsites.uga.edu/nvgf/ethans-article/.

to acting. Shakespeare's work was written during a time when acting was purely presentational. He did not originally intend for his characters to be used as explorations into the human psyche, but rather as slightly over-dramatized beings who brought the audience along into their stories knowingly. Their gestures were stylized and exaggerated, and speech patterns were more set and heightened rather than following a natural flow of impulse and conversation. One of the reasons I was so drawn to these texts was because they were not originally meant to truthfully depict these mental and emotional journeys, yet they mirrored the experiences very closely.

David Garrick is an example of one of the first actors who began working with Shakespeare with the technique of naturalistic acting. His new approach brought him fame and respect almost immediately after his first Shakespeare play. Garrick re-vitalized Shakespearean performance by bringing these stories into the new naturalistic style of the time, and financially and artistically revived Drury Lane Theatre alongside partner James Lacy.⁴ Garrick exemplified the dynamic stories and characters that the playwrights intended. Interestingly, Garrick did not only revolutionize the character portrayal of Shakespeare's plays, but actually rewrote the endings to several of his plays to make them a bit lighter to suite the audience's taste at the time. For example, he cut the final act of *Hamlet* in 1772 and condensed the ending from Ophelia's farewell to Hamlet's death in 60 lines and re-instated Claudius' prayer scene.⁵ While I am not re-writing Shakespeare, I am re-contextualizing it in a modern setting and media to reflect current issues that were not as prevalent in Shakespeare's time. Garrick's influence led to the development of

⁴ "David Garrick, 1717–1779: A Theatrical Life." *Timeline of the Folger Shakespeare Library*, Folger Shakespeare Library, 27 Aug. 2018, folgerpedia.folger.edu/David_Garrick,_1717%E2%80%931779:_A_Theatrical_Life.

⁵ "David Garrick." *Shakespeare Birthplace Trust*, Arts Council England, www.shakespeare.org.uk/explore-shakespeare/shakespedia/david-garrick/.

naturalistic acting and bringing Shakespeare into different contexts and performance spaces other than just the Globe. Without Garrick, Shakespearean text may have remained in this stiffer presentational style of acting for far longer and lost the impact it had on audiences.

With naturalistic acting, we could begin to delve in to the emotional journeys that Shakespeare's characters take on, and discover that certain storylines reflected modern day issues. When analyzing Shakespeare's work, I found that some of his "mad" characters actually seemed to be more reflective of experiencing trauma. Psychological trauma can be defined as damage to one's psyche after experiencing a shocking event that affects one's ability to function normally in day-to-day life.⁶ Symptoms can include intrusive thoughts, loss of memory or ability to focus, mood swings, social isolation or withdrawal, and fatigue amongst other reactions depending on the individual.¹ Mental illness and trauma have existed long before we could properly diagnose them, and this is evident in the characters written at the time.

I started my research with the basis of female hysteria in the ancient civilizations of Rome, Greece, and Egypt. All three thought that female hysteria originated from the uterus. Ancient Egyptians believed that the uterus spontaneously moved throughout the body, and that this could cause depressive symptoms, seizures, and a sense of suffocation.⁷ Ancient Greeks believed that the uterus suffered from melancholy when it was unable to fulfill its purpose of reproduction as well as the uterus moving throughout the body, and ancient

⁶ "Signs & Symptoms of Psychological & Emotional Trauma | Cascade Behavioral Health." *Cascade*, www.cascadebh.com/behavioral/trauma/signs-symptoms-effects/.

⁷ Tasca, Cecilia, et al. "Women and Hysteria in the History of Mental Health." *Clinical Practice and Epidemiology in Mental Health : CP & EMH*, Bentham Open, 2012, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3480686/#R2.

Romans also believed that female hysteria manifested from the uterus and included symptoms such as deep sleep, hysteria, stupor, and anxiety attacks.³ During the Middle Ages with the Church as the main power and influencer, women suffering from mental illness or diseases that the doctor could not diagnose were thought to be under the influence of the Devil.³ Even during the Renaissance, physicians believed that the uterus caused women to be physiologically and psychologically weaker and more vulnerable than men. It was not until the 16th century that hysteria began to be studied as stemming from the brain and nervous system rather than the uterus. Of course, this theory of female hysteria has widely been disproven and we know that the uterus is not the mark of womanhood, but even today women's emotional and physical problems are not taken as seriously because they are thought to be on their period or overreacting. Throughout history, female health and emotional wellbeing did not merit the same seriousness of diagnoses of that of men, and I want to challenge that.

The idea of trauma began widely circulating in medical circles after the end of the First World War, when army medicals began diagnosing soldiers returning from battle (who we can assume suffered from PTSD) as "Not Yet Diagnosed, nervous" or neurasthenia, a medical term for "shell shock".⁸ In fact, that term was outlawed in 1939 as World War II broke out and it was declared that no war pensions would be distributed for psychiatric war injuries in an effort to decrease the large number of soldiers suffering from shell shock, implying this was not a serious medical condition that would require treatment.² PTSD was formally recognized as a mental illness in 1980 after many soldiers returned from the Vietnam War to civilian life and experienced delayed symptoms as a result of their time in

⁸ Jones, Edgar, and Simon Wessely. *Psychological Trauma: A Historical Perspective*. Elsevier Ltd. , <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/kcmhr/publications/assetfiles/historical/Jones2006-psychologicaltrauma.pdf>.

service.² This diagnostic revelation opened the door to studying the many events that could cause trauma: genocidal events such as the Holocaust, repeated trauma in childhood, and shocking events that severely affect mental and physical health.⁹

Emotional trauma (or psychological trauma) does not always come from an actual physical event but impacts the body as much as the mind. Physical symptoms can include fatigue, insomnia, sexual dysfunction, changes in sleeping and eating patterns, aches and pains, and more depending on the person who is affected. As someone who has personal experience with psychological trauma, I felt changes in my physical body for months before I finally connected them to the traumatic event had occurred. Realizing how much psychological events can affect the physical body made me start to look back on historical representations of characters and how I could see connections between my own experiences with emotional trauma and the portrayal of “madness” in their body and mind. In media, trauma is often focused on the pain and actual events rather than moving forward and dealing with the emotional healing. I want to focus on the internal emotional work that is navigated after the traumatic event and the personhood of the subject experiencing this: the traumatic event itself is not what defines them.

The two examples I will focus on are Lady Macbeth from *Macbeth* and Ophelia from *Hamlet*, both written by William Shakespeare. Lady Macbeth plays an integral role in the murder of both King Duncan and Banquo by masterminding the assassination plots and convincing her husband to do the deed.¹⁰ Her guilt and trauma from this shocking and

⁹ Micale, Mark S., and Paul Lerner, editors. *Traumatic Pasts: History, Psychiatry, and Trauma in the Modern Age, 1870-1930*. Cambridge University Press, 2001.

https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=G0du8X99oAYC&oi=fnd&pg=PP1&dq=history+of+trauma+psychiatry&ots=gCIXcnJ71q&sig=_X42-m0jYlz5NI37VxTFfKZvcJ4#v=onepage&q=history%20of%20trauma%20psychiatry&f=false

¹⁰ Shakespeare, William. “The Tragedy of Macbeth.” *Macbeth: Entire Play*, shakespeare.mit.edu/macbeth/full.html. <http://shakespeare.mit.edu/macbeth/full.html>

distressing event manifests itself into a physical burden that she carries with her, afraid that others will discover. This emotional reaction mirrors my own personal experience with trauma: there is an immense amount of shame, fear, and uncertainty in other people outside the event discovering what has happened. Despite the fact that Lady Macbeth did not undergo a physical trauma, she feels its effects in her physical body through sleepwalking, talking in her sleep, and her edginess and terror of others finding out about her guilt and trauma. Some of her symptoms presented in *Macbeth* mirror those of people dealing with emotional trauma, and her monologue “Damn Spot” really reflected my own internal struggle when working through my emotional trauma. The pervasiveness of this experience in every facet of her life to me read as a side effect of trauma: nightmares, withdrawal from others, and guilt.

Another reason I chose to examine Ophelia and Lady Macbeth was because of how they told their stories to others: one through monologue and the other through song. Ophelia’s songs of madness are representative of English culture at the time with its association with music, excess, and the feminine.¹¹ Madness was a literary trope that was used to subtly explore topics that would otherwise be taboo to question in the public, such as sexuality or political unrest.⁷ Ophelia is undergoing an implied sexual exploration in her relationship with Hamlet, and his rejection of their relationship and her sexuality along with the sudden death of her father devastates her. This supposedly triggers her madness because she is deviating from the acceptable behavior of a woman at the time and then forced to return to this more celibate state after Hamlet ends their relationship. Ophelia’s

¹¹ Leonard, Kendra Preston. *Shakespeare, Music, and Madness: Scoring Insanity in Cinematic Adaptations*. Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2009.

<https://mla.hcommons.org/deposits/objects/mla:720/datastreams/CONTENT/content>

madness especially demonstrated the contrast between the views on men and women's mental stamina at the time. Hamlet's madness is melancholy and implies an omniscient wisdom that raises him above the other characters, whereas Ophelia's madness isolates her and leads to her death. Ophelia's combination of song and speech in her mad scenes stems from the implication that her grasp on verbal communication is less than that of Hamlet's, which is why he is able to communicate his madness through monologues and dialogue. There have been endless scholarly debates about the depth and validity of Hamlet's madness; however, Ophelia's madness is much more of a niche focus when it comes to researching Shakespeare's characters. Her madness is not seen to be as substantial or nuanced and is caused in part by her female hysteria. By replicating Ophelia's songs in my own project, I aim to utilize her songs to be a personal reflection within herself rather than a spectacle of madness for audiences. The voice over redirects the focus to the subject and the coherence within her mind and body using her songs as the internal narrative, rather than the unstable madness that stems from the original external dialogue.

One of the most important features of my short film was the blending of the audio and visuals. I wanted the voice over monologue to run as an interior thought process, which required me to match up lines with certain actions or moments that I felt best exemplified the text in this context. I began the production process of my short film with storyboarding my ideas. I compiled a general list of shots that I wanted and created a layout that matched them with lines and moments from the monologue that best reflected the emotional intentions behind it. I wrote out the monologue and began detailing descriptions of shots that I wanted to include in the film so that I could match them to the proper lines. From there, I listed out the locations I wanted each shot to take place in.

Because the main intention and journey of the piece was internal, to me there was no need to have a large number of locations because we were focusing on the person as the subject and kind of obscuring her from the world around her. I chose to film both in my dorm at school and my aunt's house because I wanted to have options when constructing the visual narrative. This allowed me to find the color and lighting that I wanted for the piece and could continue throughout the entire film. I wanted to have a cool, neutral lighting that remained consistent throughout the entire piece, which required lots of editing due to filming in multiple places with different lighting.

Once I had the visual narrative of the film, I began to focus on recording the song and monologue for the voiceover section of the piece. I checked out a Blue Yeti USB microphone from the production center and taught myself how to record directly into Audio Premiere. I recorded several takes of both the songs and monologues, trying different emotional takes and placing emphasis on different phrases for each try. Because I was using voice over technique as the internal monologue, I had to align the text with the physical actions onstage to connect them and bring the audience into the subject's mind. I wanted to find a balance between the traditional "mad" readings of the songs and monologue that portray more of the emotional and mental state behind the text, such as Ophelia actually singing the song and focusing on the message and melody, or having lost her voice and singing brokenly while crying from the emotional impact on her mind and body. Because the voiceover was a key part of understanding the internal journey of the subject, it had to provide the emotional undertone that would compliment the visuals. To me, the finished product of having the subject herself narrate her own journey provided a sense of strength and authority in taking control of her own story. There was a sense of

ownership that enhanced the connection between the audio and the visuals and allowed the audience a deeper understanding to what they were experiencing.

Once I finished getting the shots and audio, my next challenge was color correction. I found that the variations of lighting were my biggest issue with the compilation of shots. For example, scenes I filmed in the bathroom were tinted orange from the florescent lights while the shots in my bedroom had more of a blue tone. I was able to work with Lumetri color in Adobe Premiere and alter the colors and shadows to create an even lighting scheme throughout the entire piece. This was a really valuable learning experience because I had had very limited experience with color correction before, and this taught me how to discern lighting and color highlights and how to fix these issues in post production.

One of the most surprising aspects of creating this was that I underestimated the emotional value I had placed in this project. This piece is a deeply personal and emotional project for me and required me to bring a lot of my internal battles out onto the screen, which was really difficult to have people watch. As I showed it more, the screening process got easier, but it required me to have a lot of confidence in my abilities and myself as a filmmaker that I had created something that was meaningful and well done. I think that this project helped me develop greatly as a filmmaker by having the strength to put my work out there and overcome my fears of displaying my emotional vulnerability.

The feedback I received from my professors and peer group were always incredibly helpful. At every revision stage I was able to narrow and refine my project from the class feedback. The work in progress screening was emotionally challenging, but really allowed me to step back and look at it critically. I had been able to separate myself from the subject matter of the film successfully up until that point, but when I presented the rough cut I was

overwhelmed by the vulnerability I had exposed myself to. I doubted that I had been able to capture the experience I felt, and that the audience would not be able to see what I saw. However, the feedback I received was extremely constructive and helpful to refining my piece. I agreed with the commentary: I wanted to adjust the technical elements such as audio and color issues, and perhaps add a few more visuals to further exemplify the physicality of what I was trying to express. It was reassuring to find that their feedback was along the lines of what I had already been planning for my edits and did not lead me to doubt the entire process that I had been going along and the piece I created.

Overall, I feel as though the process of creating my project went fairly as expected. The pre-production storyboarding was very helpful to create a shooting schedule and aiding in creating the visual narrative in post-production. One of the most important things I learned in this process was the importance of telling a short, clean, concise story in a small amount of time. My original rough cut was about 6:40, and for a bit I really struggled to cut it down. It wasn't until I saw it presented in the work in progress screening that I began to pick out bits that I wanted to keep and restructure for a more precise narrative rather than try to shorten all the clips and incorporate them all. It was more important to have fewer clips that really told the story rather than to try and jam all of my ideas into the piece. Refining my piece into a certain time constraint really helped me discipline my creative post-production process and helped me understand how to craft a strong story in a clean, concise manner.

Portraying people dealing with mental illness in media allows a breakdown of the stigma surrounding this issue, and refocuses the narrative on the coherent individuals themselves rather than the illness they are working through. Of course, it is important to

note that emotional trauma and mental illness affect people differently, and my project in no way claims that this is a comprehensive narrative that every person experiences. I took inspiration from my own journey with emotional trauma and put it in the context of Shakespearean text because I felt this older text closely represented my experience and demonstrated the pervasiveness of mental health, even before it was really understood. Trans historical storytelling demonstrates that mental illnesses and trauma have always been present in humanity, but we did not have the tools or knowledge to properly diagnose or treat them. Through the popular and accessible medium of film, I hope to promote the idea that mental health and emotional trauma are not something that should be stigmatized, but brought to light and discussed in order to allow people to navigate this difficult time without feeling the need to isolate themselves out of fear.

Bibliography

Couldry, Nick. *Media, Society, World: Social Theory and Digital Media Practice*. Polity, 2013.

“David Garrick.” *Shakespeare Birthplace Trust*, Arts Council England,
www.shakespeare.org.uk/explore-shakespeare/shakespedia/david-garrick/.

“David Garrick, 1717–1779: A Theatrical Life.” *Timeline of the Folger Shakespeare Library*, Folger Shakespeare Library, 27 Aug. 2018, folgerpedia.folger.edu/David_Garrick,_1717%E2%80%931779:_A_Theatrical_Life.

Jones, Edgar, and Simon Wessely. *Psychological Trauma: A Historical Perspective*. Elsevier Ltd. , <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/kcmhr/publications/assetfiles/historical/Jones2006-psychologicaltrauma.pdf>.

Laughman, Ethan. “The Voice Over and Its Use in Film.” *NVGF*, ctlsites.uga.edu/nvgf/ethans-article/.

Leonard, Kendra Preston. *Shakespeare, Music, and Madness: Scoring Insanity in Cinematic Adaptations*. Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2009. <https://mla.hcommons.org/deposits/objects/mla:720/datastreams/CONTENT/content>

Micale, Mark S., and Paul Lerner, editors. *Traumatic Pasts: History, Psychiatry, and Trauma in the Modern Age, 1870-1930*. Cambridge University Press, 2001. https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=GOdu8X99oAYC&oi=fnd&pg=PP1&dq=history+of+trauma+psychiatry&ots=gCIXcnJ7Iq&sig=_X42m0jYlz5Nl37VxTFfKZvcJ4#v=onepage&q=history%20of%20trauma%20psychiatry&f=false

“Signs & Symptoms of Psychological & Emotional Trauma | Cascade Behavioral Health.” *Cascade*, www.cascadebh.com/behavioral/trauma/signs-symptoms-effects/.

Shakespeare, William. “The Tragedy of Macbeth.” *Macbeth: Entire Play*, shakespeare.mit.edu/macbeth/full.html. <http://shakespeare.mit.edu/macbeth/full.html>

Sklar, Robert, and David A. Cook. “History of the Motion Picture.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 11 Sept. 2018, www.britannica.com/art/history-of-the-motion-picture.

Tasca, Cecilia, et al. “Women and Hysteria in the History of Mental Health.” *Clinical Practice and Epidemiology in Mental Health : CP & EMH*, Bentham Open, 2012, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3480686/#R2.