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"A Great Man's Madness": An Inquiry Into Sanity and Gender in Jacobean Tragedy

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**“A GREAT MAN’S MADNESS”: AN INQUIRY INTO SANITY AND
GENDER IN JACOBEAN TRAGEDY**

by

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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
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Introduction

In the 300s BCE Aristotle said: “There was never a genius without a tincture of madness.” And in the 1900s Marilyn Monroe claimed: “Imperfection in beauty, madness is genius and it’s better to be absolutely ridiculous than absolutely boring.” The issue of madness is a timeless one, so much has been said in the past and there is still so much more that has yet to be uncovered. Personally I have always been fascinated by the idea of madness, particularly how this concept is expressed and portrayed in seventeenth-century plays such as *Macbeth* and *The Duchess of Malfi*. I am drawn to how, at first glance, the nature of the main characters in these works has often times been categorized by the general public as violent and impulsive. Characters like Macbeth and Ferdinand are “written off” as evil-natured beings whose thirst for blood ultimately dominates their every thought and action. However, a closer look at said works allows us- the audience- to comprehend the many characteristics that make each persona truly fascinating and unique in their own right. Throughout my thesis I hope to aptly describe the multi-faceted nature that I have discovered to be a central characteristic of Shakespeare’s and Webster’s characters. Ultimately, I argue that an analysis of the progressive loss of sanity in *Macbeth* and *The Duchess of Malfi*, allows readers to gain a deep understanding of these personas. Madness is a window into the soul of the characters, one that allows us to see the inner workings of the mind when social conventions no longer influence the making of both moral and ethical decisions. The unraveling into a state of complete and utter madness allows for readers to see these characters for what they truly are. When these characters lose their sanity, they become less concerned with appearance thus

revealing themselves at their most genuine, raw, and vulnerable state. They offer insight into how far human beings will go in order to obtain an unlimited amount of power. Characters like Macbeth and Ferdinand challenge what we think we know, leading us to contemplate- and maybe even question- the limits that society and conventions impose on us.

The title of my thesis comes from Act II, Scene I of *The Duchess of Malfi*. Although I am only using one short line in the title itself, I wish to make reference to the entirety of this passage here, in order to provide context as to where this line comes from:

“Ambition, madam, is a great man’s madness,
That is not kept in chains and close-pent rooms,
But in fair lightsome lodgings, and is girt
With the wild noise of prattling visitants,
Which makes it lunatic beyond all cure.”¹

Here Antonio is talking to the Duchess and he references one of the main reasons behind the spiraling into madness of characters throughout this play: their audacity to aim higher than their current social rank. This is an issue that I will address later in this chapter. Also, seeing as this particular quote is crucial to the analysis of madness in Webster’s play- and it can be applied to *Macbeth* too- I will be breaking this quote down and delving into a deep literary analysis of these lines in the third chapter of my thesis.

¹ Webster, John. “Act I, Scene i.” *The Duchess of Malfi*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1999.

² Meyer Spacks, Patricia. *Visits to Bedlam: Madness and Literature in the Eighteenth Century* by Max

Throughout my thesis I will aim to perform a sort of psychoanalysis of said characters, in the attempt to determine what “makes them tick”. I will seek to uncover the reasons behind their loss of sanity, taking into consideration their relationship to the other characters, the conventions of the societies that these plays are set in, and in particular I will address the issue of gender. In fact, I argue that gender plays a crucial role in the way in which madness is presented in both documents. This is a claim that I will address later in the paper. It is, in fact, impossible to summarize all my findings in just a few lines. These plays reveal a connection between madness and gender that is complex, at times still confusing. In fact, this interrelation is not consistent throughout the plays: madness comes into contact with other social discourses that are just as equally fluid. Throughout my analysis I will be looking at this very intersection.

Two known scholars in the field of the evolution of madness throughout the ages: Max Byrd, author of *Visits to Bedlam: Madness and Literature in the Eighteenth Century*, and Michael V. DePorte, author of *Nightmares and Hobbyhorses: Swift, Sterne, and Augustan Ideas of Madness*, argue that there is “ambiguity and complexity [in] virtually all literary reference to madness.”² I agree with this, and this is the very problematic that I hope to tackle and eventually overcome throughout the course of my dissertation. I aim to provide readers with an analysis of madness in *Macbeth* and *The Duchess of Malfi* that is insightful, but also accessible and easily understood.

² Meyer Spacks, Patricia. *Visits to Bedlam: Madness and Literature in the Eighteenth Century* by Max Byrd; *Nightmares and Hobbyhorses*

Throughout this introductory section I will not provide much information regarding the actual history of madness, seeing as I chose to write one of my chapters on this very topic. The first Chapter of my thesis will in fact be aimed at directing the readers' attention to the most relevant moments in the ever-changing perception of mental illness throughout the ages. In order to successfully structure my chapter, I will be using Foucault's celebrated work *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* as a "map" of sorts. Just as Virgil guided Dante, I will rely on Foucault to help me move through the many ages that I must take into consideration. Throughout this first chapter, I will be paying close attention to the History of Bedlam Hospital in particular. I believe this institution is representative of what we might consider to be the first step towards a new-necessary- scientific approach to madness. As Michael MacDonald notes in his book *Mystical Bedlam: Madness, Anxiety and Healing in Seventeenth-Century England*: this institution embodies the transition from "magical and religious techniques of psychological healing"³ to proper establishments built and equipped to cure mental disorders. In this sub-section of my chapter I will also discuss the unorthodox methods initially employed at Bedlam, partially responsible for the widespread notoriety of the Hospital. The relevance of this institution in relation to Shakespeare is something that has been considered by scholars other than myself (note: Derek Peat's essay *Mad for Shakespeare: a Reconsideration of the Importance of Bedlam*). Throughout Chapter I, I also plan to address the role that gender has played in the diagnosis and subsequent treatment of lunacy, particularly during the sixteen-hundreds.

³ MacDonald, Michael. *Mystical Bedlam: Madness, Anxiety, and Healing in Seventeenth-century England*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981.

Again, I found myself in accordance with MacDonald as his study reveals that men and women in the seventeenth century were subject to different psychological problems, and he also discusses how often times treatment of a particular patient varied in accordance with their gender. Finally, I will direct my attention to masculinity and femininity as these would have appeared on seventeenth century theater stages. This will be followed an inquiry into the development of the portrayal of madness on the theater stage throughout time.

I will dedicate the second chapter of my thesis to an analysis of madness, gender, and the complex interconnection between the two in *Macbeth*. I have always enjoyed reading Shakespeare's plays. I believe that his abilities as a playwright are truly unique, unparalleled. These abilities include a basic understanding of the intricate process that allows for the translation of a play from text to stage performance. I argue that this is a result of his early involvement in the Lord Chamberlain's Men company of theatrical players. The director of the Folger Shakespeare Library, Michael Whittmore, wrote in his introduction to *Macbeth*: "Since their composition four hundred years ago, Shakespeare's plays and poems have traveled the globe, inviting those who see and read his works to make them their own."⁴ I agree with his point of view. In fact, one of the many reasons that first led me to want to work with *Macbeth* is the crucial role that we-the audience- play in the development of the play. Shakespeare's works as a whole deal with raw human emotion; thus lending themselves to the influence of each reader's personal vicissitudes. As a result, every reading of *Macbeth* will be different.

⁴ A. Mowat, Barbara, and Paul Werstine, eds. "The Tragedy of Macbeth." *Folger Shakespeare Library*. JSTOR. Web. Oct. 2014.

Throughout Chapter II, I hope to accurately re-trace and analyze the peculiar relationship that exists between power, ambition, and gender in *Macbeth*. I argue that these three “ingredients” make up the “recipe” for madness and the bloody events that ensue in the play. Upon discovering the extensive scholarly work that already exists in this field I was intrigued by the varying opinions that are already out there. I was particularly drawn to critics like Robert Reid, Kevin Curran and Victoria Time, mostly because their considerations vary greatly from my own personal opinion. All three scholars are preoccupied with criminal thought and behavior in this play. Time goes as far as suggesting that “Macbeth validates rational choice theories of criminology.”⁵ According to Professor Jeffrey Wilson, her argument “wildly overlooks the great lengths to which Shakespeare went to represent Macbeth’s compromised mental state.”⁶ I agree with him. I definitely think that it is important that we view Shakespeare’s character as irrational. It is his very lack of reason that allows Macbeth to possess a certain “innocence”. Although this is probably the last word many might use to describe this anti-hero, I view his loss of sanity as indicative of the spontaneity behind his every action during the course of the play. As such, this character will become a commentary on the limits or lack thereof of human nature.

I will also argue that the act of labeling Macbeth as “insane”, allows readers to build a disconnect between themselves and the main character. This will help prevent any chance that they might identify with the actions of a “loose cannon” such as Macbeth. On this point, I find myself in agreement with L.Lydon Shanley. In her

⁵ Wilson, Jeffrey R. "'A Daggar of the Mind': Mental Illness, Masculinity, and Murder in Macbeth." *Shakespeare and Criminology*. Harvard University. Web. Sept. 2014.

⁶ Ibid.

essay *Macbeth: The tragedy of Evil*, she argues that in the course of this play Shakespeare “shows that the darkest evil may well be human, and so, though horrible, understandable in terms of our own lives and therefore pitiable and terrible.”⁷

Throughout the course of this thesis I will seek to bridge the gap often-times formed between audience and character. I argue that understanding this play as, in a way, connected to our own lives is something that we should not fear. Although a character might appear out of control and irrational, this does not mean that we can’t learn from him.

I will incorporate into my study the importance of magic, particularly witches, throughout the play. As Jane A. Bernstein argues in *Bewitched, bothered, and bewildered: Lady Macbeth, sleepwalking, and the demonic in Verdi’s Scottish opera*, this play is filled with “ambiguous forces that violate life’s natural order.”⁸ I find myself wanting to expand upon her work as I think she makes a convincing argument in regards to the connection throughout this play between the supernatural- which I deem to be one of the main causes for madness in *Macbeth*- and gender. The instances in the play where gender and loss of sanity appear inextricable are truly countless. Throughout this thesis I will strive to highlight these moments, using Bernstein’s work to support my argument on the deep-rooted correlation between these two major tropes in Shakespeare’s work.

⁷ Shanley, J. Lyndon. "Macbeth: The Tragedy of Evil." *College English* 22.5 (1961): 305-11. *JSTOR*. Web. Oct. 2014.

⁸ Bernstein, Jane A. "'Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered': Lady Macbeth, Sleepwalking, and the Demonic in Verdi's Scottish Opera." *Cambridge Opera Journal* 14.1/2, Primal Scenes: Proceedings of a Conference Held at the University of California, Berkeley, 30 November-2 December, 2001 (2002): 31-46. *JSTOR*. Web. Sept. 2014.

The third and final chapter of my thesis will be dedicated entirely to John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*. Similarly to *Macbeth*, this document is also a tale of men consumed by their thirst for power. More so than many other seventeenth-century tragedies that I have read in the past, this text is set in a society where every member is expected to perform and live in accordance with the pre-determined position that they happened to have been born into. This inescapable destiny of each character will depend on two main factors: economic background and gender. Thus, I argue that the characters will go mad- consequently unleashing a veritable blood-bath- when the Duchess, Antonio and Bosola dare defy this set-in-stone patriarchal system. In the words of literary critic Frank Whigham, I will be delving deep into an analysis of "the friction between the dominant social order and the emergent pressures towards social change"⁹, arguing that these are inextricable from the question of gender.

I will be paying close attention to the figure of The Duchess, seeing as her faults not only lie in her decision to marry outside of her rank, but more importantly she does so in direct defiance of her brother's wishes. I found my own reasoning reflected in Sara Jayne Steen's argument when, in *The Crime of Marriage: Arabella Stuart and The Duchess of Malfi*, she states:

"In light of Renaissance social standards, we have been told, the Duchess flouted patriarchal authority by marrying without the approval of male members of her family, she violated decorum by remarrying and by choosing a mate below her in

⁹ Whigham, Frank. "Sexual and Social Mobility in The Duchess of Malfi." *PMLA* 100.2 (1985): 167-86. *JSTOR*. Web. 28 Sept. 2014.

station, and she revealed an overt and dangerous female sexuality, all of which threatened the social order.”¹⁰

As Theodora Jankowski claims in her research: “The presence of Mary Tudor and Mary Stuart on British thrones served to point out-to political theorists especially- that no language existed for describing the nature of female rule.”¹¹ This isn’t altogether surprising as, in 1558, clergymen like John Knox were claiming that “the nature of female rule was “unnatural”.”¹² In the course of the chapter I will attempt to determine whether or not Webster is actually breaking this silence. I will ask myself whether the ability on behalf of the Duchess to “keep her cool” and not go mad amidst all of the drama, is the author’s attempt at creating a female figure that is capable of leading her people by successfully exempting herself from the rules dictated by the- mostly male- domineering characters of the play.

Joan M. Lord notes in his essay *The Duchess of Malfi: ‘the Spirit of Greatness’ and ‘of Woman’* that:

“Critics have been divided in their interpretation of her [the Duchess]. Several have chosen to discuss her as a naturalistically presented character stressing, for instance, her womanly defiance in a crisis... Others have reacted against this, and argued that she is conceived in a more conventional, Senecan mode.”¹³

¹⁰ Steen, Sara Jayne. "The Crime of Marriage: Arbellia Stuart and The Duchess of Malfi." *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 22.1 (1991): 61-76. *JSTOR*. Web. 12 Nov. 2014.

¹¹ Jankowski, Theodora A. "Defining/Confining the Duchess: Negotiating the Female Body in John Webster's "The Duchess of Malfi"" *Studies in Philology* 87.2 (1990): 221-45. *JSTOR*. Web. Summer 2014.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Lord, Joan M. "The Duchess of Malfi: "The Spirit of Greatness" and "Of Woman"" *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*. Vol. 16, No. 2, Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama (1976): 305-17. *JSTOR*. Web. Oct. 2014.

These somewhat polar interpretations of the Duchess are not altogether rare, and I argue that this reflection on the one character can be extended as a commentary on the play as a whole. Turns out, scholarly reactions are extremely diverse when it comes to Webster's work. This is due to a voluntary ambiguity on behalf of the author, who aims to allow readers the freedom to interpret the text in their own way. Throughout Chapter III I hope to expand on Lord's claim that "to concentrate on one of these dramatic modes- the naturalistic or the conventional- is surely to miss the point about the character of the Duchess: that she is presented through a unique synthesis of the two modes."¹⁴ The entire play is, in my opinion, meant to break away from such confinement; Webster's work is revolutionary in that it presents a society that is unconventional, thus unclassifiable.

Throughout this chapter, I will also dedicate some time to an analysis of the role of ambition. I argue that this is one of the main causes for the characters' progressive loss of sanity. I will take a closer look at specific individuals, Bosola in particular: he hopes his treachery and spying for Ferdinand will aid him further himself in society. This desire to escape the social rank that he was born into leads his "mind [to] ride faster than his horse can gallop", and so "they quickly both tire."¹⁵ Ultimately I ask myself: what is Webster arguing? Does he believe women are capable of ruling, or should this play be seen as a "warning" of sorts, aimed at preventing women of the seventeenth century from seeking a better existence than the one "allowed" by English society in the sixteen-hundreds? I believe that an inquiry

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Webster, John. "Act II, Scene i." *The Duchess of Malfi*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1999.

into the loss of mental clarity of each character will provide answers to all of the above-stated questions.

As a concluding remark, I hope that my thesis will provide a well-rounded portrayal of the perception of madness throughout the ages, and particularly in seventeenth-century England. I am fascinated by the impossibility of truly finding a final answer to the question: “*what is madness?*” Rather than finding a “solution” to this issue, I hope that this thesis perpetuates interest in the topic. I don’t think this question is meant to have one concise answer; instead I believe that the process of discovery and analysis that comes along with the attempt to wrap our heads around such an elusive matter, will ultimately open our eyes to a multitude of hidden truths in relation to humanity.

Chapter I: The History of Madness (with particular focus on its correlation to gender), and some useful background on Theatre in the Seventeenth Century

1. Introduction

Madness is- to this day- a rather abstract concept. Questions surrounding this term have plagued the public for centuries. Throughout this Chapter, I will be addressing the different ways in which madness has been perceived throughout the centuries. In particular, I will analyze the seventeenth century: the years when Shakespeare and Webster wrote the two plays that I will be considering throughout the rest of my thesis. In this section I will often times make reference to Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*. I consider this document to be one of the most insightful and complete literary works dealing with varying perceptions of madness through time. Edgar Friedberg wrote in *The New York Times* that this work is "a tour well worth taking." Richard Howard, who translated this text from the French language, wrote in his introduction:

"too many historical books about psychic disorders look at the past in the light of the present; they single out only what has positive and direct relevance to present-day psychiatry. This book belongs to the few which demonstrate how skillful, sensitive scholarship uses history to enrich, deepen, and reveal new avenues for thought and investigation."¹⁶

This section of my thesis is relevant as throughout the rest of the dissertation I will delve deep into an analysis of madness in *Macbeth* and *The Duchess of Malfi*. In

¹⁶ Foucault, Michel. "Madness and Civilization." Trans. Richard Howard. Vintage Books, a Division of Random House New York. Web. 30 Sept. 2014.

order to do so I believe it is important to first gain a deeper understanding of the complex meaning behind a word as elusive as “madness”. Not only, but in the concluding portion of this chapter I will be bringing the readers attention to the particular relationship that exists between madness and gender. The interconnection between the two is something that I will be exploring further in the context of both plays. In this chapter I will also provide background on the popularity of “mad characters” on the stage and in the tragic genre.

2. “Language” of madness

I am particularly intrigued by Foucault’s concept of the “language” of madness, which he addresses in his book *Madness and Civilization*. The twentieth century French philosopher laments a lack of literary works that deal with issues of mental alienation. Later scholars such as Patricia Meyer Spacks would agree with him. In her book *Modern Philology*, published in 1976, Spacks analyzes “two critical studies of literary attitudes towards madness.”¹⁷ The two works she takes into consideration are: *Visits to Bedlam: Madness and Literature in the Eighteenth Century* by Max Byrd and *Nightmares and Hobbyhorses: Swift, Sterne, and Augustan Ideas of Madness* by Michael V. DePorte; both of which I already mentioned in the introductory portion of this thesis. Spacks notes that both Byrd and DePorte “emphasize the ambiguity and

¹⁷ Meyer Spacks, Patricia. *Visits to Bedlam: Madness and Literature in the Eighteenth Century* by Max Byrd; *Nightmares and Hobbyhorses: Swift, Sterne, and Augustan Ideas of Madness* by Michael V. DePorte. Vol. 73. U of Chicago, 1976.

complexity of virtually all literary reference to madness.”¹⁸ This observation stuck with me throughout my readings of both *Macbeth* and *The Duchess of Malfi*. In fact, although I certainly cannot presume to speak in regards to all of the existing literature that makes reference to madness; considering the documents that I will be working with throughout this thesis, I would have to agree with the above-stated claim. I argue that madness is never looked at as madness. Characters are described as having lost their way, at times they even seem to be lacking a moral compass; however both Shakespeare and Webster never truly make reference to the mental conditions of their characters from a scientifically accurate perspective. The word “mad” throughout these plays is employed to describe someone that lacks congruence with what society deems “proper”. Foucault’s book is amongst those works that present a concrete, analytical approach to the concept of madness. In his paper *Cognito and the History of Madness* Jacques Derrida notes:

“In writing a history of madness, Foucault has attempted to write a history of madness itself. Of madness itself. That is, by letting madness speak for itself.

Foucault wanted madness to be the subject of his book in every sense of the word: its theme and its first person narrator, its author, madness speaking about itself.”¹⁹

In her book *Madness in Seventeenth Century Autobiography*, Katharine Hodgkin also addresses this issue as she “shows awareness of the practical implications of seeking to give a voice to the mad... However, her analysis offers a nuanced picture of the fluidity of early modern conceptions of madness, and of mad people’s access to

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Blowers, Tonya. *Madness, Philosophy and Literature: A Reading of Janet Frame's "Faces in the Water"* Vol. 14. *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, 1996.

language.”²⁰ Ultimately, I believe that Foucault’s work helped generate conversation about a topic that was, and still is, often considered taboo.

Going back to the idea that “madness”- particularly in the seventeenth-century tragedies that I will be considering- is a term used loosely, without specific reference to a particular condition or problem; this will inevitably beg us to ask ourselves “*Then, what is madness truly?*” I believe there is more than one possible answer that might satisfy this inquiry. Foucault, however, proposes an interesting argument that might lead us in the right direction towards finding an answer to this question. In *Madness and Civilization*, he notes that society- be it the twentieth-century reality he was accustomed to living in or the ancient seventeenth century during which time Shakespeare and Webster wrote their plays- is an environment characterized by innumerable restrictions. As such, when doctors like the well known physician Philippe Pinel first came into contact with “mad men”, they were introduced to a new way of life, one lived without filter. This is an argument that will re-present itself throughout the course of my thesis. I will argue that madness allows characters in plays such as *Macbeth* and *The Duchess of Malfi* to escape societal restrictions. This particular argument will lead one to associate loss of sanity with a form of freedom: the possibility of leading a life free of the controlling presence of institutions.

Upon addressing this idea of freedom in relation to madness, Foucault states: “libéré, le fou est maintenant de plain-pied avec lui-même ; c’est à dire qu’il ne peut plus échapper à sa propre vérité ; il est jeté en elle et elle le confisque entièrement.”²¹

²⁰ Carrera Elena, review of *Madness in Seventeenth-Century Autobiography*, (review no. 671). Web. Sept. 2014.

Here, the French philosopher raises an interesting point: even if the mad man has successfully escaped the imposing presence of institutions, once left to himself he is now enslaved by his own condition, in the throes of his illness. This, I argue is only true to a certain extent. Times have changed, and a new approach to mental illness allows for such conditions to be more manageable nowadays. However, during the seventeenth century, with Hospitals like Bedlam being the primary institution “welcoming” the mentally ill, one could argue that this was not the kind of environment that truly favored a quick recovery.

3. Bedlam hospital for lunatics

If we seek to truly understand the manner in which madness was perceived during Shakespeare’s and Webster’s time it might be useful to go back and consider the impact of some of the most widely recognized mental institutions of his time. Upon researching the topic of “the history of madness” we will without doubt encounter names such as Bicêtre and Bedlam. The first is an eighteenth century lunatic asylum located in the Southern suburbs of Paris, France; and the latter dates as far back as 1247, when it was founded at Bishopsgate just outside the London wall. Betlam was the first asylum for the mentally ill in England. The institution is so widely recognized that “the word bedlam came to be used generically for all psychiatric hospitals and sometimes is used colloquially for an uproar.”²² Behind this establishment was Simon FitzMary, who used to be the sheriff on London. Its doors

²¹ Foucault, Michel. *Folie Et Dérison: Histoire De La Folie À L'âge Classique*. Paris: Union Générale D'Éditions, 1961.

²² "Bedlam." *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Web. 30 Sept. 2014.

were first opened to patients requiring psychiatric help in 1329, and in 1403 permanent patients were also accommodated.

This establishment is mostly widely recognized for the unorthodox methods it employed for treatment in the sixteen-hundreds. Not only were these practices brutal, violent, and degrading, but “in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries Bedlam was open to fee-paying spectators.”²³ This is not all-together surprising given the great pleasure that audience members seemed to feel when witnessing the brutal, bloody installations brought to life on theater stages. As Derek Peat notes in his essay *Mad for Shakespeare: a Reconsideration of the Importance of Bedlam*, not only has Robert Rentoul Reed’s book *Bedlam on the Jacobean Stage* “had an enormous influence on our thinking about both the hospital and its influence on the drama”, but Reed “is also responsible for the idea that Bedlam was visited as a place of “extraordinary amusement” because it offered “spectacular entertainment”²⁴ .”²⁵ In *Mystical Bedlam: Madness, Anxiety and Healing in Seventeenth Century England*, Michael MacDonald reports the statistic that 96,000 people visited the hospital each year.²⁶ This kind of statistical information- together with other details regarding Bedlam Hospital- have been questioned and put up for debate by numerous scholars throughout the ages. For instance, in *The Anatomy of Madness: Essays in the History of Psychiatry*, Patricia Allderidge asks “Is it likely?, “Bedlam: fact or fantasy?”²⁷ Although much of this is

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Reed, Robert Rentoul. *Bedlam on the Jacobean Stage*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1952..

²⁵ Peat, Derek. "Mad for Shakespeare: A Reconsideration of the Importance of Bedlam." *JSTOR*. Jan. 2004. Web. Sept. 2014.

²⁶ MacDonald, Michael. *Mystical Bedlam: Madness, Anxiety, and Healing in Seventeenth-century England*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981.

²⁷ Bynum, W. F., Roy Porter, and Michael Shepherd. *The Anatomy of Madness: Essays in the History of Psychiatry*. London: Tavistock Publications, 1985.

up for debate, I argue that the sole fact that we do not find it hard to accept that people would have gone to see the institutionalized from a separate viewing room is extremely telling in terms of the “reputation” of mental health care in the sixteen-hundreds.

In his book, Foucault states: ‘À l’époque des visites à Bicêtre ou à Bedlam, en regardant le fou, on mesurait, de l’extérieur toute la distance qui sépare la vérité de l’homme de son animalité.’²⁸ This quote aptly summarizes the role of madness in the sixteen-hundreds: the insane were but a case-study, a way for scientists and the public to explore a new, darker side to human nature without having to call into question their own mental health. People that were institutionalized at hospitals like Bedlam were often used to study the relationship between human nature and the inhibition-free existence generally associated to animals. Taking a closer look at Foucault’s particular choice of words, we may note his use of the word *extérieur*. This is important in that it reflects Foucault’s desire to emphasize the previously mentioned detachment that existed between doctor-patient and public-madman.

Ultimately, on one hand act of building an institution like Bedlam during the seventeenth century was a step in the right direction; mental illness was finally viewed as necessitating a scientific, medical approach. As Michael MacDonald notes in his book:

“During the century and a half following the great upheaval of the English Revolution, the governing classes embraced secular interpretations of the signs of insanity and championed medical methods of curing mental disorders. They shunned

²⁸ Foucault, Michel. *Folie Et Dérison: Histoire De La Folie À L’âge Classique*. Paris: Union Générale D’Éditions, 1961.

magical and religious techniques of psychological healing. Private entrepreneurs founded specialized institutions to manage mad people, and municipal officials established public madhouses.”²⁹

However, as the information provided in this sub-section proves, one could also that on the other hand this new approach to mental illness was not for the best: mentally ill patients became the subjects of a scientific study used and abused in doctors’ both brutal and what appeared to be endless search for answers.

4. Gendered madness

In the upcoming chapters of my thesis I will be drawing connections between madness and gender in *Macbeth* and *The Duchess of Malfi*. These two seemingly separate concepts have always been inextricable, particularly in seventeenth-century England. In his book *Mystical Bedlam: Madness, Anxiety and Healing in Seventeenth-Century England*, Michael MacDonald claims that:

“The likelihood that a man or a woman would succumb to madness or melancholy depended upon both physiological predisposition or environmental stress. Contemporaries also recognized that the physical differences between the sexes and the bodily changes effected by aging caused men and women to be vulnerable to different afflictions at various stages in their life...

The most careful works show that demographic attributes and social environment do affect the rates of disorder, and that sex, age, marital status, social status, and

²⁹ MacDonald, Michael. *Mystical Bedlam: Madness, Anxiety, and Healing in Seventeenth-century England*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981.

community solidarity all seem to play an important role in disposing people to some kinds of mental illnesses.”³⁰

Thus, he argues that during the sixteen-hundreds mental illness would have been caused on one hand by genetic predisposition- a concept that is all but foreign to modern twenty-first century readers- and on the other hand it would also have been a bi-product of the particular social conditions of the time. Although the discrepancies between the lifestyle of men and women nowadays are still prominent, during the seventeenth century these differences were even more evident. Thomas Fosset's tract on *The Servant's Duty* (1613) spells out the assumption that every relationship in society was founded on hierarchy. Similarly *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* reports that in Early Modern England the man clearly occupied a patriarchal role as governor of both his family and his home. “The family was seen as the secure foundation of society and the patriarch’s role as analogous to that of God in the universe and the King in the state.”³¹ On one hand it is perfectly possible that this kind of pressure could have taken its toll on the men of the time; and on the other hand it is hard to even imagine the difficulties encountered by seventeenth-century women in England who “were to maintain silence in the public sphere and give unstinting obedience to father and husband.”³² Repercussions appear to be an inevitable result of the repeated emotional abuse that women at the time were forced to endure.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ "Gender, Family, Household-17th Century Norms and Controversies: Overview." *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: Home*. Web. Sept. 2014.

³² Ibid.

Further examples of women oppression include a variety of literary works that presumed to inform females on how they should be living their lives. These works include: the *Book of Common Prayer* (1559) and *The Law's Resolutions of Women's Rights* (1632), both of which presented religious and legal definitions of gender roles and norms. These norms were, in a way, forced upon readers and at times even extended into further, longer descriptions geared at convincing women of their inferior position in society. John Dod and Robert Cleaver (1598) wrote a treatise on household government that places the duties of a husband in contrast with those of his wife; they do so by “setting up explicit parallels between the household and the commonwealth.”³³ Gervase Markham's book, *The English Hus-Wife* (1615), outlines the woman's responsibility to master perfect skill in cookery. In 1631, Richard Brathwaite wrote a book entitled *English Gentlewoman*, this document focuses on virtues and activities pertaining to women of the higher class, with particular attention to widows' chastity.

5. Women and theatre

In order to successfully analyze madness, gender, and the portrayal of both on the theatre stage in seventeenth-century England, it might be useful to first consider the strong impact that gender had on theatrical performances in the sixteen-hundreds, and then I will analyze the role of madness in drama. Female actresses first appeared on the English stage in 1629. Up until this time “feminine parts in the native drama had been enacted invariably by boys or youths... Thus the employment of women

³³ "Gender, Family, Household-17th Century Norms and Controversies: Overview." *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: Home*. Web. Sept. 2014.

was a striking innovation, and [it was] not surprising that it was resented by playgoers of the day.”³⁴ According to a letter written by Thomas Brand and addressed to Laud, the Bishop of London; the actresses were “hissed, hooted, and pippin-pelted from the stage.”³⁵ Following this unfortunate first appearance, they tried again a few weeks later at the Fortune and Red Bull theatres, but such endeavors proved without success. The Master of Revels went as far as reimbursing part of the fees that these ladies had paid for their acting license, in respect of their ill luck. “In 1633 Prynne brought out his *Histrio-Mastix*, in which he stigmatized all “woman-actors” as “monsters”, and applied to their performances such adjectives as "impudent," “shameful”, and “unwomanish”.³⁶ A widely recognized date when considering the début of female actresses on the seventeenth-century Century English stage, is December 6, 1660, when a woman first performed the role of Desdemona in a representation of *Othello* at the theatre in Vere Street. This special occasion was even addressed in the following prologue penned by Thomas Jordan:

“I come, unknown to any of the rest.
To tell the news; I saw the lady drest--
The woman plays to-day; mistake me not,
No man in gown or page in petticoat.”³⁷

Following this event, the public became increasingly comfortable with the concept of women actresses. These ‘were accepted almost immediately into the life of the

³⁴ "The Appearance of Women on the English Stage." *Theatre Database*. 1904. Web. Sept. 2014.

³⁵ Eisaman Maus, Katherine. *"Playhouse Flesh and Blood": Sexual Ideology and the Restoration Actress*. 4th ed. Vol. 46. John Hopkins UP, 1979.

³⁶ "The Appearance of Women on the English Stage." *Theatre Database*. 1904. Web. Sept. 2014.

³⁷ "Ibid.

theatre, and there was surprisingly little controversy over their sustainability for the stage³⁸; and thus plays were enjoyed by all and everything appeared to be going well for the theatre... until September 2, 1642.

With the rise of the Puritan movement, the attitude towards theatre became increasingly hostile, entertainment was considered to be sinful. Though many believe that in 1642 the Parliament ordered the closure and subsequent destruction of theatres, what they actually did was simply ban the staging of plays in London theatres. The text of this act reads as follows:

“It is therefore thought fit, and Ordained, by the Lords and Commons in this Parliament assembled, That, while these sad causes and set Times of Humiliation do continue, Public Stage Plays shall cease, and be forborn, instead of which are recommended to the People of this Land the profitable and seasonable considerations of Repentance, Reconciliation, and Peace with God, which probably may produce outward Peace and Prosperity, and bring again Times of Joy and Gladness to these Nations.”³⁹

We, as a twenty-first-century audience, have been so lucky that such restrictions imposed on theatre in the past have not hindered plays such as *Macbeth* and *The Duchess of Malfi* from standing the test of time.

³⁸ Eisaman Maus, Katherine. *"Playhouse Flesh and Blood": Sexual Ideology and the Restoration Actress*. 4th ed. Vol. 46. John Hopkins UP, 1979.

³⁹ "Order for Stage-plays to Cease." British History Online, Sept. 1642. Web. Sept. 2014.

6. Mad men in drama

In his essay *Individuality and Inwardness in the Literary Character Sketches of the Seventeenth Century* Jacques Bos brings the readers' attention to the fact that in the sixteen-hundreds "the conception of personality was not always as dominant as it is nowadays." He argues that "the seventeenth century is often seen as the period in which the notions of individuality and inwardness started to gain influence."⁴⁰ In particular, I found myself drawn to his own definition of "personality and character". It reads as follows: "the qualities that distinguish a particular person from other human beings. These are mental attributes that other people cannot discover at a glance."⁴¹ Before this new wave of influence that led playwrights to create characters that would set themselves apart from the mass; the role of personas in theatre was rather different. As John Earle aptly summarizes in *Microcosmography*: before this change that occurred during the course of the seventeenth century, characters represented a larger category of human beings and authors "focused on the type, not on the individual."⁴² Personally, I argue that Shakespeare's and Webster's characters fall somewhere in between these two different types of character representation. The characters in *Macbeth* and *The Duchess of Malfi* are memorable as singular personas, however they also stand for something larger, appealing to the greater public. I argue that the individual qualities that each of these characters possess do not hinder them

⁴⁰ Bos, Jacques. "Individuality and Inwardness in the Literary Character Sketches of the Seventeenth Century." *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 61 (1998): 142-57. *JSTOR*. Web. Oct. 2014.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

from being the means by which the authors make a commentary on something as abstract as human nature.

The loss of mental sanity is like a window into the soul of the character. The inhibition free existence particular to these personas allows readers to gain insight into the psyche of each particular character. However, to defend my claim that these are both individuals and also representative of a larger category of humans, I would like to bring into question the “relatable” aspect of the characters in both plays. In fact, these characters will become symbolic of human existence in the moment when we-the audience- will identify with them. Foucault addresses this very issue in *The History of Madness*:

“Maintenant, on le regard avec, tout à la fois, plus de neutralité et plus de passion. Plus de neutralité, puisqu’en lui on va découvrir les vérités profondes de l’homme, ces formes en sommeil en qui naît ce qu’il est. Et plus de passion aussi, puisqu’on ne pourra pas le reconnaître sans se reconnaître, sans entendre monter en soi les même voix et les même forces, les mêmes étranges lumières.”⁴³

Here, the twentieth-century philosopher notes that we might view the inhibition-free existence of lunatics as the incarnation of the true nature of man kind, rather than a manifestation of “inferiority”. According to Foucault, the public’s fear of relating to and building an intimate connection with an individual considered mentally imbalanced stems from the fear of ultimately finding a part of themselves reflected in the condition of someone that has been deemed an outcast for so long. However, if we apply what scholars like Jacques Bos and John Earle teach us about the ever-

⁴³ Foucault, Michel. *Folie Et Dérison: Histoire De La Folie À L'âge Classique*. Paris: Union Générale D'Éditions, 1961.

evolving nature of seventeenth-century theatre to our reading of *Macbeth* and *The Duchess of Malfi*, we will inevitably come to the conclusion that allowing ourselves to follow Foucault's advice- thus bridging that gap between reader and madman- will eventually lead us to make the most of the text before us. As a result, we will learn something new from the words of Shakespeare and Webster.

Chapter II: William Shakespeare's Macbeth: an analysis of the main characters' progressive loss of sanity and an inquiry into the gendering of madness

1. Introduction

William Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth* between 1599 and 1606. This tragedy is not only one of his most well known plays, but it is considered to be one of his most dark and tragic works. Set in Scotland, it dramatizes the corrosive psychological and political effects produced when evil is chosen as a way to fulfill the ambition for power. In the beginning of the play, Macbeth is a somewhat simple man, he is known for his distinct abilities on the battlefield and many admire him for his presumed loyalty to the king. However, following a dramatic encounter with three witches that reveal that he will one day be king, both the main character and his wife-Lady Macbeth- become progressively more consumed by their thirst for power. The once rational, courageous man becomes a bloodthirsty tyrant that is not afraid to kill anyone who gets in his way; and Lady Macbeth's authoritarian nature fades as she slips into a fear-filled state of oblivion that will lead to her eventual death. Throughout this chapter I will discuss the concept of madness in the attempt to decipher and come to terms with what this allows us to learn about the true nature of human beings. Ultimately, I plan to take this analysis one step further by focusing on Macbeth's unique relationship with his wife. Lady Macbeth's personality and subsequent choices offer useful insight into both the traditional and what were viewed as the not-so-traditional gender roles of the sixteenth and seventeenth century. Whilst breaking down the different aspects and characteristics particular to this text, I will

seek to determine whether madness in this play is actually gender-specific. When Shakespeare portrays a character going mad, does it matter if this person is a man or a woman? I believe this is an important question to ask.

Current scholarly literature on the topic at hand reveals a very interesting conversation amongst critics, one that has been going on for some time now. However, it is also true that the existing discourse allows for “new” enthusiasts to find their place and even contribute to the on-going conversation. When I first began my inquiry into the topic of “madness in *Macbeth*” I was thrilled to discover the variety of different interpretations of this play. On one hand, critics such as Victoria Time, Kevin Curran, and Robert Reid have looked at madness through the lens of criminal thought and behavior. I argue that this interpretation of the document can be considered as a more “modern” analysis. Time goes as far as claiming that “Macbeth validates rational choice theories of criminology.”⁴⁴ Although I am fascinated by her interpretation of this seventeenth-century text, I personally believe that it is truly important to see *Macbeth* as an individual lacking mental clarity. As noted in the Introduction, throughout the course of my thesis I hope to build upon Professor Jeffrey Wilson’s claim that- although a valid argument- Time’s thought “wildly overlooks the great lengths to which Shakespeare went to represent *Macbeth*’s compromised mental state.”⁴⁵

Throughout this chapter I hope to not only re-trace and analyze the peculiar relationship that exists between power, ambition, and subsequent madness in

⁴⁴ Wilson, Jeffrey R. "A Dagger of the Mind": Mental Illness, Masculinity, and Murder in *Macbeth*." *Shakespeare and Criminology*. Harvard University. Web. Sept. 2014.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

Macbeth; but I argue that gender plays a significant role in the development of these three themes, all of which are dominant throughout the entirety of the play. In the course of my analysis I hope to successfully use the knowledge that I acquired upon reading *The Woman's part- Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare*, a book written by Carolyn Ruth Lenz, Gayle Greene, and Carol Thomas Neely. In their work, these well-known Shakespeare scholars stress the importance of considering the role of women in the play, not only as they relate to the men, but also as individuals.

2. Killing vs. murder

“For brave Macbeth- well he deserves that name-

Disdaining fortune, with his brandished steel,

Which smoked with bloody execution,

Like valour's minion carved out his passage.”⁴⁶

These lines in the very first Act of the play prove that Macbeth is not affected by the act of taking lives itself, just as long as it occurs on the battlefield. Not only, but killing in battle goes as far as being a reason for personal pride in this particular setting. In the remainder of this passage, which does not appear in the quotation above, a gruesome description portrays the young war hero killing somebody and placing the victims' head on a stick, as a warning sign to his enemies. Throughout this chapter, when I will be analyzing the reasons behind his downward spiral into madness and more specifically the different steps that constitute this process, it will

⁴⁶Shakespeare, William. *The Tragedy of Macbeth*. "Act I, Scene ii,16-19." Ed. Eugene M. Waith. New Haven: Yale UP, 1954.

be important to keep in mind this distinct difference between killing (which is almost second nature for Macbeth when on the battlefield) and murder: a more personal, intimate act, one that will ultimately cost Macbeth his sanity.

Three witches tell Macbeth that first he will be proclaimed Thane of Cawdor and then he will officially be crowned King of Scotland. Shortly after this revelation, the first part of the prophecy comes true; so Macbeth decides- with some convincing and manipulation on behalf of his wife- that he will not sit back and patiently wait for the rest of the fortunate premonition to come to life; instead he takes matters in his own hands and plans to murder Duncan, the current King of Scotland. Although his intentions are clearly far from good, in the beginning of the play Macbeth is not the dark, twisted character that he will become later on. In order to prove this, we might direct our attention to the following lines in Act I, Scene VII:

“But in these cases

We still have judgment here- that we but teach

Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return

To plague the inventor. This even-handed justice

Commends the ingredience of our poisoned chalice

To our own lips”⁴⁷.

Macbeth’s words reveal an initial acute awareness of the consequence of committing violent actions. As Herbert R. Coursen Jr. notes in his essay *In Deepest Consequence: Macbeth*, this scene points to “Macbeth’s anguish before the murder, and the impact

⁴⁷Ibid (I, vii, 7-12.)

of nature's retribution after the murder.”⁴⁸ The character knows that the crime he is about to commit is completely unnatural, he recognizes that he will forever feel guilt for taking an innocent man's life. This begs readers to ponder why he ends up going through with something that he knows is so wrong. The answer to this question lies in the fact that the pull of prospective unlimited power is too strong for Macbeth to resist. Ultimately, as we near the final acts of this play, moments of self reflection like this will be progressively more scarce; until finally Macbeth will feel no guilt whatsoever, turning into a truly terrifying tyrant that is not only willing to kill, but at certain times he even appears to go as far as finding pleasure in this act.

Upon considering the moments when Macbeth's conscience leads him to develop a deep-rooted fear of future repercussions, one of the most interesting moments in the play is the “floating dagger scene”. Before Macbeth will even have the chance to draw a knife into his King's beating heart, he is haunted by a dagger floating in the air. The anxiety and the general preoccupation that emerge from this particular moment, are aptly summarized by the following lines in Act II, Scene I:

“Is this a dagger which I see before me,
 The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee-
 I have thee not and yet I see thee still!
 Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible
 To feeling as to sight? Or art thou but
 A dagger of the mind, a false creation,

⁴⁸ Coursen, Jr. Herbert R. "In Deepest Consequence: Macbeth." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 18.4 (1967): 375-88. *JSTOR*. Web. 05 Sept. 2014.

Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain?...

I see thee still;

And, on thy blade and dudgeon, gouts of blood,

Which was not so before. There's no such thing".⁴⁹

This is the first moment when Macbeth's guilty conscience releases its deep-rooted frustrations through full-blown hallucinations. It is, however, also significant to note that at this point in time he is still lucid enough to recognize that what he is seeing is not in any way, shape or form real. The dagger, and particularly Macbeth's impulse to reach out and grab it, represent his temptation to go through with the murderous act, especially given the unlimited power that will result from taking Duncan out of the picture. The blood splattered across its blade, however, implies that Macbeth is aware of the consequences of his brutal actions. Although he is used to killing on the battlefield, driving a knife into the heart of an innocent man causes him to feel anxiety and guilt, even before committing the act itself. In his essay entitled *Spectral Readings*, Andrew Sofer addresses the importance of the fact that "Macbeth's dagger is visible to him, but invisible to the audience."⁵⁰ This detail, might favor that separation between actor and audience that I mentioned in my introduction. We understand the way he feels, but it is hard to truly identify with a character when he is seeing something that we are not. Sofer addresses the fact that Macbeth is alone in his visions, he argues that: "It [the dagger] tugs the doomed couple even further apart and

⁴⁹Shakespeare, William. *The Tragedy of Macbeth*. "Act II, Scene i, 33-47" Ed. Eugene M. Waith. New Haven: Yale UP, 1954.

⁵⁰ Sofer, Andrew. "Spectral Readings." *Theatre Journal* 64.3, Theatre and Material Culture (2012): 323-36. *JSTOR*. Web. 05 Sept. 2014.

intensifies Macbeth's isolation, which in turn fuels his homicidal paranoia."⁵¹ I agree, Macbeth- at this point- is alone, lost in the initial stages of his madness.

3. "Ambiguous forces that violate life's natural order"⁵²

Macbeth fights most of the visions that plague him, recognizing that these must be a figment of his imagination. However, when it comes to the witches he does not spend much time questioning their supernatural presence. Instead, he blindly follows everything they tell him to do. On one hand we could agree with journalist and editor Henry Melvil Doak when he claims that this is an example of "merely a superstitious belief acting upon a weak."⁵³ On the other hand, I believe one could also argue that it is ultimately in Macbeth's own interest to believe that the witches speak the truth. If this were the case, these figures might be viewed as an "excuse", one that allows him to act upon his desires to kill for power.

If we pay close attention to the language that Shakespeare uses to describe these three somewhat aesthetically displeasing and sinister characters, we will see that the vocabulary he employs and the scenes he builds around these three women are extremely dramatic and over the top. We discover that these women's pastimes include killing swines, and each time they enter the stage the weather is out of

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Bernstein, Jane A. "'Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered': Lady Macbeth, Sleepwalking, and the Demonic in Verdi's Scottish Opera." *Cambridge Opera Journal* 14.1/2, Primal Scenes: Proceedings of a Conference Held at the University of California, Berkeley, 30 November-2 December, 2001 (2002): 31-46. *JSTOR*. Web. Sept. 2014.

⁵³ Doak, H. M. "'Supernatural Soliciting" in Shakespeare." *The Sewanee Review* 15.3 (1907): 321-31. *JSTOR*. Web. Sept. 2014.

control: darkness is interrupted by recurring lightning and sounds of thunder fill the night's air. Even when Banquo first lays eyes on these creatures he claims:

“You should be women;

and yet your beards forbid me to interpret

That you are so.”⁵⁴

I argue that the fact that these characters are so ridiculous might lead readers to view Macbeth as even more of a fool for hanging on to their every word, and ultimately ruining his life because of the ramblings of these three very odd strangers. Although the witches are certainly at least partially responsible for the terrible events that follow their encounters with Macbeth, it is worthy to point out that they never actually tell the main character to carry out any of the awful deeds that we read about as the story unravels; they simply tell him what lies in his future and he is responsible for everything that happens next. In his previously mentioned essay, Doak draws an interesting parallel between the weird sisters' temptation of Macbeth and that of Eve by the serpent in Genesis. This word “temptation” caught my attention because it aptly summarizes the role of these three women throughout the play.

These particular characters also lend themselves to my initial inquiry regarding gender and its impact on both the play as a whole and more specifically on the portrayal of madness. In her essay *‘Bewitched bothered and bewildered’: Lady Macbeth, sleepwalking, and the demonic in Verdi’s Scottish opera*, Jane A. Bernstein also addresses the sexual ambiguity of the bearded sisters, identifying these figures as

⁵⁴Shakespeare, William. *The Tragedy of Macbeth*. "Act I, Scene iii, 44-46." Ed. Eugene M. Waith. New Haven: Yale UP, 1954.

“ambiguous forces that violate life’s natural order.”⁵⁵ Author and Harvard professor Marjorie Garber argues that Shakespeare constructs a world of binary opposites where boundaries are “continually transgressed, and marked by a series of taboo border crossings.”⁵⁶ I think it is interesting to note that in order for these three women to display the true extent of their powers, they must take on a series of masculine qualities. Later in this chapter I will analyze how Lady Macbeth will similarly have to renounce her womanhood in order to gather the strength to kill somebody. It is worthy to note that men, on the other hand, do not have to alter their physical appearance in accordance with their actions.

4. The importance of being a Man...or a Woman

The instance when it becomes undeniable that Macbeth has lost his mind to the point of no return is the famous banquet scene, where he finds himself haunted by Banquo’s ghost. Having suffered greatly after personally carrying out the first murder and stabbing Duncan, Macbeth assumed that if he hired others to do his dirty work the second time around, then he would be let off the hook easy. However, the banquet scene proves that one’s conscience will act independently from what we will

⁵⁵ Bernstein, Jane A. "Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered': Lady Macbeth, Sleepwalking, and the Demonic in Verdi's Scottish Opera." *Cambridge Opera Journal* 14.1/2, Primal Scenes: Proceedings of a Conference Held at the University of California, Berkeley, 30 November-2 December, 2001 (2002): 31-46. *JSTOR*. Web. Sept. 2014.

⁵⁶ Bernstein, Jane A. "Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered': Lady Macbeth, Sleepwalking, and the Demonic in Verdi's Scottish Opera." *Cambridge Opera Journal* 14.1/2, Primal Scenes: Proceedings of a Conference Held at the University of California, Berkeley, 30 November-2 December, 2001 (2002): 31-46. *JSTOR*. Web. Nov. 2014.

ourselves to think and feel. Macbeth cannot trick himself into believing that he played no part in the abrupt end to Banquo's life.

When Macbeth wavers in his conviction to do whatever is necessary to ultimately secure his place on the throne of Scotland, his wife attempts to bring him back to his senses by calling into question what was most valued by soldiers and house-leaders of the time: manhood. I agree with Jarold Ramsey when, in his essay *The Perversion of Manliness in Macbeth*, he argues that Shakespeare "exposes the ambiguities and the perils in a career premised upon "manliness"."⁵⁷ William T. Liston is another scholar that brings his readers' attention to this aspect of the play. In his essay *Male and Female created He Them: Sex and Gender in Macbeth*, he offers some interesting statistics:

"*Man* (including the plural and such obvious derivatives as *manly*, *manhood*, and *unmanned*) appears more than 40 times almost always with a conscious sense of defining the term- or rather of defining a person by the term. *Woman* (including similar formations) appears about a third as frequently, with a similar sense of precise definition."⁵⁸

In Act III, Scene IV- after reassuring the banquet guests that her husband's madness is but a momentary result of an unfortunate condition that plagues him from birth- Lady Macbeth turns to her husband and- in a hushed tone- asks him: "Are you

⁵⁷ Ramsey, Jarold. "The Perversion of Manliness in Macbeth." *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*. Vol. 13, No. 2, Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama (1973): 285-300. *JSTOR*. Web. Oct. 2014.

⁵⁸ Liston, William T. "'Male and Female Created He Them': Sex and Gender in 'Macbeth'" *College Literature* 16.3 (1989): 232-39. *JSTOR*. Web. Sept. 2014.

a man?"⁵⁹ Her remark implies that a man, particularly during those times, was expected to have the inner strength necessary to prevent him from acting out like this and putting his emotions on display for the world to see. These set in stone gender roles are even more evident in the beginning of the play, when Lady Macbeth first realizes what needs to be done in order to ensure her husband's place on the throne of Scotland. In fact, after receiving her husband's letter that informs her of the witches' prophecy she reacts as follows:

"Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here...
That no compunctious visitings of nature
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
The effect and it. Come to my woman's breasts
And take my milk for gall, you murdering ministers." ⁶⁰

This particular instance in the tragedy is one of the most widely recognized scenes penned by Shakespeare. In this moment Lady Macbeth not only renounces her womanhood, and all the qualities that stereotypically come along with it; but she seeks to transcend all boundaries imposed by gender, thus expressing her desire to be "unsexed". Ultimately, Lady Macbeth's goal is that of keeping her sanity through these terrible, violent times; and she goes by this impossible task by attempting to somewhat remove her humanity from the equation. The first step is the above-analyzed attempt to rid herself of her sex, and then she calls on the spirits to

⁵⁹ Shakespeare, William. *The Tragedy of Macbeth*. "Act III, Scene iv, 56." Ed. Eugene M. Waith. New Haven: Yale UP, 1954.

⁶⁰ *Ibid* (I, iv, 39-47).

“fill [her] from crown to toe top-full
 Of direst cruelty. Make thick [her] blood;
 Stop up the access and passage to remorse.”⁶¹

As Jenijoy La Belle notes in her essay “*A Strange Infirmity*”: *Lady Macbeth’s Amenorrhea*, “the language in this soliloquy clearly has a psychological dimension: it deals with Lady Macbeth’s mind and will as she devises to become a murderer.”⁶² She continues to propose an interesting argument in relation to three apparently very different realms: language, biology and madness. La Belle claims: “This intertwining of the diction of spirit and body has its intellectual context in Elizabethan psychological psychology, in which functions and processes of the body were believed to have mental consequences.”⁶³

As it turns out the newly crowned queen is not as insensitive as she wishes she could be. Just like Macbeth, willing herself to feel nothing and trying to control the situation around her is not going to prevent her from ultimately having that human, normal reaction to the terrible events that occur. The main question that comes to mind upon encountering the above-stated passage is: *What does ridding oneself of our sex really mean? Is it more important to see Lady Macbeth as sex-less or as no-longer-a-woman? Why is it that only the women in the play are forced to renounce their femininity?* In times of need the men, on the other hand, seek to

⁶¹ Ibid (I,iv,41-43).

⁶² Belle, Jenijoy La. ""A Strange Infirmity": Lady Macbeth's Amenorrhea." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 31.3 (1980): 381-86. *JSTOR*. Web. Oct. 2014.

⁶³ Ibid.

emphasize rather than annul their masculinity to successfully endure the hardships that they might encounter.

5. “Liquid” boundaries between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth

Throughout the play, Macbeth appears to be progressively less worried about the potentially terrible consequences of the murders he orchestrates; until he ultimately becomes alarmingly comfortable with the idea of taking an innocent life for the sake of unlimited power. He increasingly becomes “impelled by an infantile combination of helplessness and rage.”⁶⁴ By the time we reach Act III he is willing to do just about anything if this will result in his own personal gain. On the other hand, just like Robert Murno notes in his essay *Lady Macbeth: A Psychological Sketch*, when we first make the acquaintance of Lady Macbeth she is described as “fair, feminine, nay, perhaps, even fragile.”⁶⁵ However, she surprises readers when she initially contemplates murder and is unwavering in her decision to go through with it. Nevertheless, when she actually sets out to kill Duncan, she is unable to do so. Suddenly, the man she wishes to harm resembles her father and she cannot bring herself to go through with such an evil plan. At this moment, we learn that Lady Macbeth does not have it in her to actually kill for the sake of power. I argue that Lady Macbeth will ultimately have a more “human”, expected reaction after taking part in these gruesome deeds. When Macbeth comes to the rescue of his scared wife and thus ends the King’s life himself, he is initially very flustered; then he begins

⁶⁴ Kirsch, Arthur. "Macbeth's Suicide." *ELH* 51.2 (1984): 269-96. *JSTOR*. Web. Dec. 2014.

⁶⁵ Munro, Robert. "LADY MACBETH: A PSYCHOLOGICAL SKETCH." *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 21.1 (1887): 30-36. *JSTOR*. Web. Aug. 2014.

seeing things that are not really there. His delusions are so extreme that Lady Macbeth must keep her cool and ensure that everything will go as planned. Throughout the first half of the play neither character is weaker than the other; instead they are each strong in their own way, and their bond allows them to reciprocally support one another in times of need.

Following Duncan's murder, Macbeth's progressive descent into oblivion is rapid. The following passage in Act II, Scene II describes a tormented and deeply perturbed Macbeth wandering aimlessly through the castle, talking to himself:

“Methought I heard a voice cry, “Sleep no more!
 Macbeth does murder sleep”- the innocent sleep,
 Sleep that knits up the ravelled sleeve of care,
 The death of each day's life, sore labour's bath,
 Balm of hurt minds, great nature's second course,
 Chief nourisher in life's feast.”⁶⁶

When Lady Macbeth hears what her husband is saying she does not appear to fully understand the reason behind his relentless worrying. In fact, she brushes his concern under the rug, telling him: “A little water clears us of the deed.”⁶⁷ This would be yet another example of the previously mentioned Shakespearian humor. The irony here lies in the fact that when we reach the final acts of the play, the roles of these two characters will have been virtually reversed. Ultimately, Macbeth will have absolutely no trouble sleeping; his wife on the other hand acts out all of her

⁶⁶ Shakespeare, William, and Eugene M. Waith. "Act II, Scene ii, 36-39." *The Tragedy of Macbeth*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1954.

⁶⁷ *Ibid* (II, ii, 66).

frustrations in her slumber, walking aimlessly around the castle as if awake, talking to herself. Furthermore, we might note that Lady Macbeth's suggestion that her husband might try to "wash away" the terrible deeds with water, will re-emerge as she attempts to cleanse herself of her own guilt. This scene takes place in Act V, Scene I: "DOCTOR What is it she does now? Look how she rubs her hands.

GENTLEWOMAN It is an accustomed action with her to seem thus washing her hands. I have known her continue in this a quarter of an hour...

LADY Out, damned spot! Out, I say!"⁶⁸

In his essay *Lady Macbeth and the Doctor*, Paul H. Kocher analyzes the diagnosis of Lady Macbeth, pointing to the fact that "her ailment... is not physical but spiritual, calling for the guidance of religion and the mercy of God"⁶⁹ more so than any kind of medical treatment.

I argue that Lady Macbeth's descent into madness is significantly less documented than her husband's. One moment she is rational and she is helping Macbeth work through his anxieties, the next we discover she has been confined to her quarters and is victim of inescapable night terrors. I was left wondering if this fate of hers has anything- or maybe everything- to do with the fact that she is a woman. I ask myself this question simply because when Lady Macbeth starts to unravel it appears as if the reasons behind her descent into complete and utter oblivion are not important. She is emotional by nature and the lack of detail suggests that readers should simply chalk her fate up to the fact that she has succumbed to her womanly

⁶⁸ Ibid (V, i, 27-36.)

⁶⁹ Kocher, Paul H. "Lady Macbeth and the Doctor." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 5.4 (1954): 341-49. JSTOR. Web. Sept. 2014.

weaknesses. In Macbeth's case, on the other hand, Shakespeare provides us with further details regarding his loss of sanity. I argue that this is because he assumes his readers will require further explanation if they are to understand the reasons why a man should suddenly become so weak.

6. “Great Birnan Wood to high Dunsinane Hill Shall come against him”

In Act IV, Scene I the witches inform Macbeth that “none of woman born shall harm [him]”⁷⁰, and that “Macbeth shall never vanquished be, until great Birnan Wood to high Dunsinane Hill Shall come against him”⁷¹. Personally, I view this as one of the moments when Macbeth is pushed towards irrevocable madness. Up until this very moment, although his humanity has been progressively fading and there is little if nothing left in him that still feels empathy for his victims, fear of losing all that he has fought for has allowed Macbeth to remain somewhat in touch with his emotions. However when the witches reveal their latest prophecy, his complete and utter confidence and subsequent realization that he is in fact invincible lead him to shut off that part of him that still feels. In his essay entitled *Macbeth: The Pattern of Idea and Action*, Irving Ribner describes this play as “Shakespeare's maturest and most daring experiment in tragedy, for in this play he set himself to describe the operation of evil in all its manifestations: to define its very nature, to depict its

⁷⁰ Shakespeare, William. *The Tragedy of Macbeth*. "Act IV, Scene i, 79-80." Ed. Eugene M. Waith. New Haven: Yale UP, 1954.

⁷¹ *Ibid* (IV, i, 91-92).

seduction of man.”⁷² I argue that following this last encounter with the witches Macbeth is seduced, prey to an overpowering lust for power.

Throughout this particular scene we might also note a significant shift in the main characters’ approach to the supernatural. The first time Macbeth saw the floating dagger, he reacted by acknowledging that this could not be real. However, in Act IV, Scene I, upon coming face to face with the three spirits conjured by the witches, he does not even consider the possibility that these could be but a figment of his imagination. Instead, he looks to them for further validation of his invincibility. At this point in the play, supernatural apparitions are no longer something that Macbeth fears; instead he welcomes them with open arms and he embraces the words of encouragement that they provide. In the first Act of the play Banquo refers to the witches as the devil⁷³; we can confidently say that Macbeth joins the cult himself as he willfully places his fate in the hands of the witches. As previously addressed, throughout the play Macbeth needs, at times, someone to convince him to tap into his “evil side”. In the very beginning this role is fulfilled by Lady Macbeth; but once she falls irrevocably ill, the witches step up and fulfill the role of instigator.

In Act IV, Scene I it appears as though Macbeth has truly lost all inhibition. In fact, he claims:

“From this moment

The very firstlings of my heart shall be

⁷² Ribner, Irving. "Macbeth: The Pattern of Idea and Action." *JSTOR*. Web. Aug. 2014.

⁷³ Shakespeare, William. *The Tragedy of Macbeth* "Act I, Scene ii, 105." Ed. Eugene M. Waith. New Haven: Yale UP, 1954.

The firstlings of my hand”.⁷⁴

Macbeth swears that he will no longer listen to reason and that his every action moving forward will be dictated by pure instinct. Given the fact that he is already responsible for the death of countless innocents, this new promise is horrifying to say the least. Macbeth’s vow that the firstlings of his heart shall be the firstlings of his hand implies that his conscience- that previously led him to hesitate before acting- is no longer a factor in his decision-making. He is now an empty soul, driven by rage and greed. As Arthur Kirsch notes in his essay *Macbeth’s Suicide*: “At the end Malcolm calls him a “dead butcher” (V.ix.35). No other major Shakespearean hero has anything approaching such an epitaph.”⁷⁵ As was addressed throughout this chapter, this play presents no shortage of instances where Macbeth’s reasonable self gives way to an uncontrollably violent mad man. However, as we progressively come closer to the ending of the play, there seem to be no signs of an internal struggle; Macbeth does not seek to fight the darkness that pervades him, he embraces it and actually wishes he could lose himself in a state of all-encompassing frenzy.

7. Tragic ending to a tragic play, concluding remarks

Many are drawn to the closing scenes of *Macbeth* because of the ruthlessness and violence that characterize these final moments. Personally, I have always interpreted these last pages as a temporary reversal of Macbeth’s seemingly

⁷⁴ Ibid (IV, i, 145-147)
New Haven: Yale UP, 1954.

⁷⁵ Kirsch, Arthur. "Macbeth's Suicide." *ELH* 51.2 (1984): 269-96. *JSTOR*. Web. Dec. 2014.

irreversible madness. As the British Army approaches the castle, its as if the gut-wrenching fear that takes over Macbeth's entire being brings back the warrior, passionate, but also human nature of the main character. As the forest approaches Macbeth's new home, and when he discovers that Macduff was not born of a woman but that he was in fact "from his mother's womb untimely ripped"⁷⁶, he is suddenly brought back to reality and for the first time in a while he feels emotions other than lust for power. In particular he feels fear, fear that everything he has fought for might be taken away from him.

Ultimately, this brings us to the conclusion that one of, if not the main cause for Macbeth's spiral into insanity is that throughout most of the play he possesses too much power. The irony lies in the fact that this very power is but an illusion created by the supernatural world. Macbeth is not really as invincible as he believes. However, because of the witches' premonitions he feels safe, untouchable in his position as King. Going back to Professor Jeffrey Wilson's argument when he claims that Macbeth's madness is crucial to the play: according to him Shakespeare's intention was precisely that of developing a character that lacks mental clarity. I agree. An analysis of Macbeth's unraveling into madness is important as it reveals that this character might very well be classified as "mad", but this cannot be the sole interpretation that we attribute to this tragic hero. Often times, when we hear the word "mad" we believe that through the process of classification we have thoroughly understood the person before us. However, I argue that Macbeth embodies the impossibility of truly ever defining madness in such general terms. In a way,

⁷⁶ Shakespeare, William. *The Tragedy of Macbeth*. "Act V, Scene vii, 45-46." Ed. Eugene M. Waith. New Haven: Yale UP, 1954.

Macbeth's unraveling is a window into the soul of humanity. Although his actions are undeniably questionable, it is also true that his behavior is spontaneous, he does what he wants and never fears the judgment of others. It is up to the readers to decide what they make of this, but one thing is for sure: Macbeth offers some kind of insight into the true nature of mankind. Interestingly enough, every reader will have a different answer when it comes to determining what this is. This in of itself is revelatory.

Chapter III: John Webster's The Duchess of Malfi: an analysis of the main characters' progressive loss of sanity and an inquiry into the gendering of madness

1. Introduction

The Duchess of Malfi is a macabre, tragic play written by the English dramatist John Webster between the years 1612 and 1613. Like many of Shakespeare's plays, it was performed on more than one occasion by The King's Men at the Globe Theater in London. The events that unravel throughout this text are set earlier in time, between the years 1508 and 1513 to be precise. Personally, I consider this document to be the epitome of the many fascinating tragedies published in seventeenth-century England; all of which are typically filled with gruesome murder scenes, blood, lust and betrayal. As Clayton M. Hamilton explains in his essay *The Duchess of Malfi Considered as a Tragedy-of-Blood*:

“The pre-Shakespearean audiences in England were accustomed, on alternate days, to attend bear-baiting, a play, and a cockfight; and it was but natural, therefore, that they should crave strong sensation in tragedy, and should demand an enormity of bloodshed on the mimic arena of the stage.”⁷⁷

The violence that pervades most scenes is- to a certain extent- entertaining but what really makes this particular play stand out in my eyes is the fact that Webster always keeps us guessing. Just when we think we've figured out a character's motive or if we believe we know where their loyalties lie, we are surprised by a new twist in the plot. Madness is commonly recognized as one of the dominating themes throughout the

⁷⁷ Hamilton, Clayton M. "The "Duchess of Malfi" Considered as a Tragedy-of-Blood." *The Sewanee Review* 9.4 (1901): 410-34. *JSTOR*. Web. 12 Nov. 2014.

play, however- as previously mentioned- nothing in regards to this play is obvious. As readers, we are left wondering if the characters before us can truly be defined as mad, or if they are in fact simply ruthless and willing to do just about anything if this will ultimately result in their own personal gain.

Throughout this chapter I will seek to determine the reasons behind the spiraling into madness of the characters. Not only, but I will be approaching this analysis by taking into account the strong impact of gender roles in the play as a whole. As I addressed in the introduction to this thesis, *The Duchess of Malfi* is a play set in a society where every member is expected to live in accordance with the pre-determined position that they happened to have been born into. The life of each character is determined by the following two factors: economic background and gender. As such, I will argue that madness ensues following the Duchess', Antonio's and Bosola's defiance of this set-in-stone patriarchal system. In the words of literary critic Frank Whigham, I will be delving deep into an analysis of "the friction between the dominant social order and the emergent pressures towards social change."⁷⁸ Or as Jane Marie Luecke also notes in her essay *The Duchess of Malfi: Comic and Satiric Confusion in Tragedy*: "the relationship between the individual impulse and societal norms."⁷⁹

In regards to the current scholarly discourse surrounding Webster's play, I found myself disagreeing with Clayton M. Hamilton's argument that "the story of the

⁷⁸ Whigham, Frank. "Sexual and Social Mobility in The Duchess of Malfi." *PMLA* 100.2 (1985): 167-86. *JSTOR*. Web. 28 Sept. 2014.

⁷⁹ Luecke, Jane Marie. "The Duchess of Malfi: Comic and Satiric Confusion in a Tragedy." *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*. Vol. 4, No. 2, Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama (1964): 275-90. *JSTOR*. Web. Oct. 2014.

drama is exceedingly simple.”⁸⁰ Instead, I was drawn to, and ultimately in agreement with, Martha Ronk Lifson’s claim in her essay *Embodied Morality in the Duchess of Malfi*: “[the play] does not provide easy answers, nor does it end with the sort of transcendent order of many of Shakespeare’s plays; rather it forces the audience into a painful arena in which items appear both similar and different.”⁸¹ Although whether or not her observation on Shakespeare is entirely applicable to *Macbeth* is up for debate, I do completely agree with her when it comes to the somewhat uncertain, unclassifiable nature of this play. I also think that this play might be viewed as revolutionary in its representation of women, particularly women possessing power. As Theodora Jankowski notes: “The presence of Mary Tudor and Mary Stuart on British thrones served to point out-to political theorists especially- that no language existed for describing the nature of female rule.”⁸² In the course of writing this chapter I will try to determine if Webster is breaking this silence. Scholars such as Hamilton have argued that:

“The Duchess of Malfi [is] a woman gifted with all of the vivacity, the tenderness, and the long-suffering patience of beautiful femininity, but lacking that commanding force of personality which is indispensable to one who, like her, is forced to wage a war against conventional prejudices.”⁸³

⁸⁰ Hamilton, Clayton M. "The "Duchess of Malfi" Considered as a Tragedy-of-Blood." *The Sewanee Review* 9.4 (1901): 410-34. *JSTOR*. Web. May 2014.

⁸¹ Lifson, Martha Ronk. "Embodied Morality in "The Duchess of Malfi"" *Pacific Coast Philology* 23.1/2 (1988): 47-59. *JSTOR*. Web. Oct. 2014.

⁸² Jankowski, Theodora A. "Defining/Confining the Duchess: Negotiating the Female Body in John Webster's "The Duchess of Malfi"" *Studies in Philology* 87.2 (1990): 221-45. *JSTOR*. Web. Summer 2014.

⁸³ Hamilton, Clayton M. "The "Duchess of Malfi" Considered as a Tragedy-of-Blood." *The Sewanee Review* 9.4 (1901): 410-34. *JSTOR*. Web. May 2014.

I wish to challenge this view, supporting my claim that The Duchess' ability to maintain her sanity throughout the play is what ultimately makes her a female figure that is capable of leading her people, successfully exempting herself from the rules dictated by the- mostly male- domineering characters of the play. I argue that The Duchess' strength of character proves someone like clergyman John Knox wrong when in 1558 he claimed that "the nature of female rule was 'unnatural'."⁸⁴

2. Minds rising and horses galloping

One of the many details that contribute to the intriguing nature of this play is the previously mentioned societal context that the story is set in. The society described in *The Duchess of Malfi* is so distant from the world we live in today, that this makes the act of reading this play a truly fascinating experience: eye-opening and full of surprises. As previously mentioned, the inescapability of social class and the desire of certain characters to defy this norm, is what causes at least part of the madness that characterizes the play. The 'Note' that opens up the Dover Thrift Edition of *The Duchess of Malfi*, defines this document as "a harrowing portrait of debased human beings torturing the innocent in return for gain."⁸⁵ It is important to note that this is not meant to summarize the entirety of the play, instead this sentence points to the violent, one might argue even sadist nature of several characters. For characters such as Bosola or Antonio, their lower social standing prevents them from having the necessary agency to determine what will be of their own life. It is

⁸⁴ Jankowski, Theodora A. "Defining/Confining the Duchess: Negotiating the Female Body in John Webster's "The Duchess of Malfi"" *Studies in Philology* 87.2 (1990): 221-45. *JSTOR*. Web. Summer 2014.

⁸⁵ Webster, John. "Note." *The Duchess of Malfi*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1999.

hard to imagine the feeling of impotence that might result from knowing one's fate before it even comes to pass; however it is clear that this would be enough to drive just about anyone mad. This particular characteristic of the play is reminiscent of one of the causes for the madness unleashed in *Macbeth*. Shakespeare's character finds himself drowning in a state of mental confusion after three witches tell him what lies ahead in his life. Macbeth is unable to sit back and let these things happen as they should, so he goes out and tries to force his future to take the shape that he desires. This will result in bloodshed and suffering. Similarly, Bosola is nothing but a pawn in the plan that is devised by Ferdinand and the Cardinal in order to bring grief to their sister and punish her for daring to disobey them. As Sarah Jayne Steen notes in her article *The Crime of Marriage: Arabella Stuart and The Duchess of Malfi*:

‘In John Webster’s *Duchess of Malfi*, the young, widowed Duchess defies her brothers’ orders to shun matrimony and instead woos and secretly weds her steward, Antonio. From the late nineteenth century through the 1980s, historical critics have argued that such an alliance was a crime by Renaissance standards.’⁸⁶

Bosola is but the middle man, who's desire to escape a less-than-fortunate social condition is used against him in the brothers' quest to punish The Duchess for her crime.

In her essay, Steen references the moment when the Duchess herself claims Antonio as her husband. Following this unexpected turn of events in Act I, Scene I, the new husband speaks some rather insightful lines regarding ambition and madness:

“Ambition, madam, is a great man’s madness,

⁸⁶ Steen, Sara Jayne. "The Crime of Marriage: Arbella Stuart and The Duchess of Malfi." *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 22.1 (1991): 61-76. *JSTOR*. Web. 12 Nov. 2014.

That is not kept in chains and close-pent rooms,
 But in fair lightsome lodgings, and is girt
 With the wild noise of prattling visitants,
 Which makes it lunatic beyond all cure.”⁸⁷

I argue that this moment allows readers to see why ambition is ultimately at the root of so much suffering throughout the play. As the first line states, it is mainly great men that will recognize an opportunity for change; unfortunately all of the men in this story are “great”, in that they are smart, cunning, devious at times, and ultimately after the same thing: power. As Antonio notes, the opportunity to make a change in one’s life can be found anywhere and at any time. What many characters in the play do not stop and consider are: the consequences, and the price that one must pay in order to rise in this kind of society. The “wild noise of prattling visitants” is a reference to the worst, deadliest aspect that comes hand in hand with ambition: competition.

Bosola- although he clearly chooses not to follow his own advice- offers insight into what might be the only way to avoid going mad in this society. He exclaims: “Shall I confess myself to you? I look no higher than I can reach: they are the gods that must ride on winged horses... mark me, when a man’s mind rides faster than his horse can gallop, they quickly both tire.”⁸⁸ In this quote he is merely trying to cover his tracks in the attempt to hide the fact that he is Antonio’s unofficial informant. However, I believe this quote to be crucial in the understanding of the play. In order to be happy in this society, one must know his or her place in the predetermined hierarchy and accept this as the undisputed truth. The horse described

⁸⁷ Webster, John. “Act I, Scene i. ” *The Duchess of Malfi*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1999.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

in these lines represents one's means, it ultimately stands for what one can get away with. If the "rider" pushes too far or aims too high then there is no positive outcome that can result from this. Martha Ronk Lifson's essay *Embodied Morality in The Duchess of Malfi* argues that "In John's Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* obvious duplications appear on stage or in the language of the play in forms of shadows, familiars...mirrored images and parallel worlds."⁸⁹ In particular, she references Bosola's attempt to mirror The Cardinal and Ferdinand. Her considerations led me to wonder if Bosola tries to embody other characters because he knows that if he were to simply be himself he will be constrained by social limitations. Thus, is duplicating someone outside of his social rank Bosola's attempt at "tricking the system"?

3. The Duchess of Malfi

I argue that all of the characters throughout the play that end up losing their mental clarity are male. The few women that actually play an important role in the play are: The Duchess, her trusted servant Cariola, and Julia (Castruccio's wife and The Cardinal's mistress). The Duchess is victim of the twisted games played by her siblings, particularly Ferdinand, as they attempt to establish their position of power in her regards. Ferdinand presents the Duchess with a dead man's hand, and he even has "curious master"⁹⁰ Vincentio Lauriola create life-like wax figures of her family in order to convince her that they have suffered a violent death at his hand. On more than one occasion, scholars have discussed the nature of these odd wax figures. Some

⁸⁹ Lifson, Martha Ronk. "Embodied Morality in "The Duchess of Malfi"" *Pacific Coast Philology* 23.1/2 (1988): 47-59. *JSTOR*. Web. Oct. 2014.

⁹⁰ Webster, John. "Act IV, Scene i." *The Duchess of Malfi*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1999.

critics- like Inga-Stina Ekeblad- have dismissed the significance of these figures, claiming that “Webster’s wax figures seem to have no other function than Madame Tussaud’s.”⁹¹ Yet, others like Ralph Berry have responded to her claim by arguing that “we have to penetrate “the Tussaud barrier” in order to see “that a waxwork body is merely a *simulacrum* of death and violence.”⁹²

Upon seeing these figures, the Duchess finds herself in an initial state of sheer panic and desperation. She reacts to this monstrosity, claiming she wishes she could die, too. Upon conversing with Bosola she goes as far as calling out:

“If they would bind me to that lifeless trunk, and let me freeze to death...

The church enjoins fasting:

I’ll starve myself to death.”⁹³

This instance in the play might initially appear to validate Hamilton’s previously addressed claim that “The Duchess lack[s] that commanding force of personality indispensable to one who, like her, is forced to wage a war against conventional prejudices.”⁹⁴ Instead, I argue that this instance in the play does not show weakness on the Duchess’ part, her reaction is but the result of her sensitive, human nature. The other- by now completely mad- male characters of the play have lost their ability to feel. For this very reason, The Duchess’ display of emotion is proof of her strength of character, her resilience, and her ability to not fall pray to loss of mental clarity.

⁹¹Inga-Stina Ekeblad, “The ‘Impure Art’ of John Webster,” RES, NS 9 (1958), 254.

⁹² Berry, Ralph. *The Art of John Webster*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1972. Print.

⁹³ Webster, John. “Act IV, Scene i.” *The Duchess of Malfi*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1999.

⁹⁴ Hamilton, Clayton M. "The "Duchess of Malfi" Considered as a Tragedy-of-Blood." *The Sewanee Review* 9.4 (1901): 410-34. JSTOR. Web. May 2014.

Being so in touch with her feelings is what allows her to remain sane in the frenzy that pervades the events that unravel throughout the play.

Upon taking a closer look at The Duchess' particular choice of words, I believe it is worthy to point to her decision to fast. She takes something that is viewed by the Church as a religious, sacred practice, and she manipulates this custom in the hopes that it will lead to her eventual demise. I interpret this action as a representation of the Duchess' well-founded, understandable hatred of institutions. The entirety of her problems have been caused by societal norms; in turn she reacts to this by subtly rebelling against one of the most important, dominating institutions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: the Church.

As the Duchess' display of emotion continues, she goes on to claim:

“Portia, I'll new kindle thy coals again,
And revive the rare and almost dead example
Of a loving wife.”⁹⁵

Historical fact tells us that Portia “committed suicide by casting burning coals into her mouth and choking herself with them after the death of Brutus at Philippi.”⁹⁶

When the Duchess states her wish to mold her own death based off this historically recognized example of self-destruction, I discovered just how far she would go to demonstrate devotion to her husband. This moment in the play is crucial as, in my opinion, it represents the fact that although the women in the play never go completely mad, this does not take away from the fact that they are also never truly

⁹⁵ Webster, John. “Act IV, Scene i.” *The Duchess of Malfi*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1999.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

free from the control of men. Generally speaking, The Duchess might be viewed as a symbol of strength and will-power as she successfully breaks free of her brothers' domineering presence; however this moment in the play proves that all she's really done is trade one controlling male figure in for another. As Judith Haber addresses in her essay "*My Body Bestow upon My Women*": *The Space of the Feminine in The Duchess of Malfi*; this particular play is not Webster's only work that presents this kind of image of a woman. In *The White Devil*, in fact, "Isabella, can express her unconscious rage only in the process of repeating her husband's words and sacrificing herself for him."⁹⁷

I also believe it might be worthy to consider that the over-the-top nature of these scenes might have less to do with The Duchess' mental sanity, and it might in fact be the result of the dramatic flare often expected of Elizabethan tragedies. These were the kinds of plays that people wanted to see. The success of this play was largely due to its morbid, and at times deeply emotional nature. *The Duchess of Malfi* was written in a time when "the puritans were excoriating dramatic representations and the courtiers of James I preferred insubstantial romantic plays."⁹⁸ This play is amongst the last of its kind. As a result, when The Duchess' behavior appears over-the-top and somewhat lunatic, we must take into consideration that this could just be Webster giving the seventeenth-century audience what they wanted.

⁹⁷ Haber, Judith. "'My Body Bestow upon My Women': The Space of the Feminine in 'The Duchess of Malfi'" *Renaissance Drama* 28. *The Space of the Stage* (1997): 133-59. *JSTOR*. Web. Apr. 2014.

⁹⁸ Webster, John. "Note." *The Duchess of Malfi*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1999.

4. The varying interpretations of Julia

Julia, just like many of the other characters in this text, is far from what one might initially expect. In the beginning of the play we discover she is The Cardinal's mistress. Her intimate relationship with such a powerful, at times aggressive and controlling man led me to believe that she would be a submissive figure. In a way I expected her to embody the woman that The Cardinal and Ferdinand wished their sister would be. Instead, we discover that she is self-assured, she looks out for herself, and she uses her seductive nature to control the men around her. In this sub-section of my thesis I wish to counteract the condemnatory view of this character that appears to be shared by numerous modern critics (see Normand Berline's *The Duchess of Malfi: Act V and Genre*, and Lee Bliss' *The World's Perspective: John Webster and the Jacobean Drama*, for instance). As Christina Luckyj notes in her essay "*Great Women of Pleasure*": *Main Plot and Subplot in The Duchess of Malfi*, "In describing the Duchess in contrast to Julia, many critics use language which tends to misrepresent her."⁹⁹ Luckyj argues that "Julia is designed to set-off the Duchess; as an instance of unholy love in contrast to the chaste love of the Duchess."¹⁰⁰ I see Julia as, not only one of the few characters in the play that successfully defies some of the constraints of a patriarchal society, but she manages to do this without partaking in the general madness that pervades the plot of the text. Note: this does not mean that her transgressions are without consequence.

⁹⁹ Luckyj, Christina. "'Great Women of Pleasure': Main Plot and Subplot in *The Duchess of Malfi*." *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*. Vol. 27, No. 2, Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama (1987): 267-83. *JSTOR*. Web. Oct. 2014.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

In Act II, Scene III, Julia proves that she is stronger than several of the men in the play. On numerous occasions, characters like Bosola are willing to do just about anything if this could lead them to potentially subvert the social order and rise on the so-called “social ladder”. On the other hand, when Delio tries to lure Julia in with the promise of monetary recompense, she is not so easily swayed. It is clear that Julia knows too well that if she accepts the money then something will be expected of her in return. Although it might appear as if Julia has successfully temporarily outsmarted the men in the play, she soon finds herself having to pay the price for her two major transgressions: sexual freedom and her refusal to render herself economically dependent on a man. Her punishment, however, is different from that of the men; all of whom are driven mad by the feeling that their power might be taken away from them at any moment. Instead, her retribution resembles that of The Duchess: death. After revealing some of his secrets- such as his involvement in the strangling of The Duchess and her children- the Cardinal asks Julia to swear to secrecy by kissing upon a book. When she does this, she is affected by the poison-laced cover and she dies soon thereafter. I think this scene proves that just like The Duchess, Julia possessed the qualities necessary to temporarily break free from the constrictions imposed by the male-dominated society she is trying to survive in. However, ultimately her efforts prove to be too weak for her to truly take control of her destiny.

In the previously mentioned essay “*Great Women of Pleasure*”: *Main Plot and Subplot in The Duchess of Malfi*, upon discussing the final moments of Julia’s life Christina Luckyj observes: “Julia is caged and finally killed by the predatory

Arragonian brothers.”¹⁰¹ This quote absolutely stuck with me, deeply affecting my later re-readings of the play. I believe this is an insightful statement in that it points to the true nature of the society that this play is set in: the patriarchal system is like a cage. The women throughout the play are temporarily set free of these constraints- be it via marrying outside of their rank or through an expression of sexual freedom- thus unleashing a mayhem that ends in the death of most of the main characters. I believe the word “predator” reveals the veritable effect that madness has on the male characters of *The Duchess of Malfi*. As I previously argued for Macbeth, the loss of sanity throughout these plays reverts the characters to a more primal state, where their every action is dictated by pure rage-infused instinct.

5. Ferdinand: the mad Prince

I think it is safe to say that the one character that undeniably goes off the deep end throughout the course of this play is Ferdinand. Throughout the entirety of this document his presence is somewhat elusive, he is present but there is also a phantasmagoric quality attributed to him. As Martha Ronk Lifson notes in her essay *Embodied Morality in "The Duchess of Malfi"*, “Ferdinand reveals himself as such a destroyer by means of his basilisk eyes, which he uses throughout to spy on the Duchess.”¹⁰² This reference to a slithering snake looming in the shadows is an accurate one. In the first part of the play Ferdinand’s attacks on the other characters

¹⁰¹ Luckyj, Christina. "'Great Women of Pleasure': Main Plot and Subplot in *The Duchess of Malfi*." *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*. Vol. 27, No. 2, Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama (1987): 267-83. *JSTOR*. Web. Sept. 2014.

¹⁰² Lifson, Martha Ronk. "Embodied Morality in *"The Duchess of Malfi"*" *Pacific Coast Philology* 23.1/2 (1988): 47-59. *JSTOR*. Web. Oct. 2014.

are vicious but also subtle. Lifson addresses his tendency to torture his sister, witnessing her horror and taking his time “before beginning the actual slaughter.”¹⁰³ Interestingly, this “lying in wait” quality that we might attribute to Ferdinand is in sharp contrast with his brothers’ perception of him. The Cardinal is constantly afraid that his brothers’ impulsive nature might pose a problem in his plan to maintain their status of unlimited power.

This rash, violent nature that The Cardinal attributes to Ferdinand on more than one occasion, can be understood if, for instance, we direct our attention to Act II, Scene IV. This is when both brothers discover that not only has The Duchess re-married, but that she has also given birth to three children. Upon hearing the news Ferdinand exclaims:

“Rhubarb, O, for rhubarb
 To purge this choler! Here’s the cursed day
 To prompt my memory; and here’t shall stick
 Till of her bleeding heart I make a sponge
 To wipe it out.”¹⁰⁴

Here, the Duchess’ attempt at making her own decisions in life is not only identified as an illness, but particularly cholera: a sickness often associated with women during the years that this play was set- and first performed- in. I argue that Ferdinand’s vendetta is mostly due to the fact that his sister dared taint the family honor by procreating with someone below her rank. This, associated with her decision to disobey him, is what spurs the violent reactions. Literary critics such as Frank

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Webster, John. “Act II, Scene iv.” *The Duchess of Malfi*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1999.

Wingham suggest that Ferdinand goes as far as “exhibit[ing] incestuous longing out of desperate desire to avoid degrading association with inferiors.”¹⁰⁵

However, I think it is also important to note that, at least initially, Ferdinand likes to talk a big game, threatening his enemies with the prospect of the most gruesome, violent death. However, he does not actually do any of those deeds himself, he hires professional killers to do his bidding. An example of his passive approach to threatening others is the widely-recognized scene in Act III, Scene II where Ferdinand hands the Duchess a poniard, in the hopes that she will go as far as using it on herself. At the end of the play, however, madness will take over and there will be nothing stopping his true nature from emerging. We might argue that this kind of character transformation is mirrored in Ferdinand’s literal metamorphosis into a wolf. Clearly, this is nothing more than the hallucination of a mad man; however I believe this detail is significant as it supports the claim I have made numerous times throughout this thesis: madness allows for the true, a times even animalistic, inhibition-free nature of man to emerge.

6. Concluding remarks

In his essay entitled *Ethical Themes in The Duchess of Malfi*, Alexander W. Allison argues that both Webster and Shakespeare possess “instinctive righteousness.”¹⁰⁶ This observation is, in a way, closely related to the argument on madness that I have made throughout both Chapter II and Chapter III. The quality

¹⁰⁵ Whigham, Frank. "Sexual and Social Mobility in The Duchess of Malfi." *PMLA* 100.2 (1985): 167-86. *JSTOR*. Web. 28 Sept. 2014.

that Allison attributes to these seventeenth century playwrights can also be attributed to the characters that they created. I argue that loss of sanity allows readers to gain insight into the true nature of man: particularly the lack of inhibitions that might result from mental alienation. The new side to the characters that will emerge, is one that has been repressed as a result of societal norms and expectations. In *The Duchess of Malfi*, the instinct of women is to break free of the constrictions that the patriarchal society imposes on them. In reaction to this temporary reversal of roles, the men's actions will be dictated by their desperate attempt at imposing their "masculine right to unlimited power" on the women, thus seeking to re-gain control over their surroundings.

It is important to note that at the end of the play, Antonio and the Duchess' son will be declared the new ruler. As readers, we are left wondering if this might be Webster's own way of hinting at a possible future change in the ways and traditions of the society. The fact that someone belonging to neither the higher nor the lower social class is finally in power, implies that maybe all of this madness, violence, and subsequent deaths were not for nothing. Therefore, on one hand this play can leave us hopeful that change is in the cards for these characters. However, on the other hand it is just as true that this document might be perceived as a warning. Webster wrote this play during a time of intense political instability in England. King James I came to power in 1603, and he marked the beginning of the Stuart Dynasty. Webster might not have known what to expect, and this could easily have been one of the driving forces behind the penning of this play. In fact, if we are to learn anything from the

¹⁰⁶ Allison, Alexander W. "Ethical Themes in *The Duchess of Malfi*." *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*. Vol. 4, No. 2, Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama (1964): 263-73. *JSTOR*. Web. May 2014.

events that unravel throughout the five acts that make up this document, it is that if people in power are evil and unwilling to keep an open mind, then this could result in the most horrible of outcomes.

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