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UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA

GRADUATE COLLEGE

RESISTING MADNESS:

WOMEN'S NEGOTIATION OF SOCIAL CONTROL

IN EARLY MODERN ENGLISH LITERATURE

A Dissertation

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

By

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Norman, Oklahoma

2000

UMI Number: 9962958

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DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

BY

Acknowledgements

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Chapter One:

Contextualizing Madness in Early Modern England

> Late Elizabethan and Jacobean writers do seem to have been uncommonly preoccupied by themes of female independence and revolt . . . . Did this anxiety about patriarchal order have any solid basis or was it a merely literary phenomenon, a matter of perception, not reality? . . . . Between about 1560 and 1640--precisely the period of greatest concern about other kinds of disorder--[court] records disclose an intense preoccupation with women who are a visible threat to the patriarchal system.[1]

Women have always been disruptive, by definition. From biblical tales of the transgressive Eve to the witch-hunts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, women have been viewed as unruly temptresses, wreaking havoc on orderly and rational men. Women's potential for disrupting social order was a source of extreme anxiety for England's establishment between 1560 and 1640. Their association with disorder and irrationality made them potential enemies of the state simply because of their gender.

Aside from witch-hunts, the anxiety about disruptive women can be seen most prominently in public representations of mad women, a distinctive site for power negotiations over social control, gender and class issues, and self-expression. Maria Caminero-Santangelo has suggested that the madwoman continues to be an intriguing figure to scholars because "she offers the

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[1] D.E. Underdown, "The Taming of the Scold: the Enforcement of Patriarchal Authority in Early Modern England" in *Order and Disorder in Early Modern England,* ed. Anthony Fletcher and John Stevenson (Cambridge: CUP, 1985) 117-119.

illusion of power, although she in fact provides a symbolic resolution whose only outcome must be greater powerlessness".[2] In fact, an accusation of madness was leveled at potentially disruptive or unruly women in order to silence them. If not silenced, their ideas were more easily dismissed or they were confined, locked away from their intended audience. While notions of what constituted madness shifted, labeling women as mad was an effective means to control them. However, some women writers appropriated various forms of madness as a means of negotiating a place from which to speak.

Madness provides a valuable topic for writing about women and control, especially in late sixteenth and early seventeenth century England. In this study, I explore how male writers portrayed women's madness as distinct from men's, using the cultural stigma of madness to contain disruptive women but my primary concern is how female authors adapted the association of women with madness to create a space from which to speak. In my examination of these issues, I trace the development of the madwoman in English Renaissance literature beginning with plays by male authors and culminating in one woman's prophetic pamphlets. My study reveals that three aspects are especially

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[2]*The Madwoman Cannot Speak or Why Insanity is Not Subversive* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1998) 3.

important in relation to issues of gender and madness: self-control,

public displays, and alienation. To understand the critical role

these three elements inhabit, we must first examine the definition

of the concept "madness" during the early modern period in

England.

The word "mad" was used as an umbrella term during the

Middle Ages and even into the early modern period. It covered all

types of behavior, from female promiscuity to spiritual prophecy.

Erik Midelfort asserts that those scholars who study it do so in

order

> . . . to emphasize an elusive but wide-ranging set of mental
>
> and emotional disorders, or mental transgressions, and of
>
> aberrant mental behavior, without prejudging the issue of
>
> whether a given condition or behavior was diseased,
>
> immoral, or beyond the bounds of personal responsibility.[3]

Defending his use of the word "mad", Midelfort claims that it "has

a useful, untechnical vagueness".[4] Indeed its usefulness for

examining any irregular behavior during this period, whether it be

mental illness, rebellion, challenging gender or class roles, visions

from God, or melancholy, is immediately apparent. Even the

terminology employed to refer to the mad varied greatly: a person

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[3] *Mad Princes of Renaissance Germany* (Charlottesville & London: UP of Virginia, 1994) 3.

could be described as distracted, melancholic, frenzied, mopish, or
frantic, to list just a few. Michael MacDonald notes that "the
language of popular psychology in the seventeenth century was
rich and complex, but it was not very precise".[5] Since 'madness'
was such an elastic term, covering a broad range of behaviors, it
could easily be used to label non-conformists and to keep them
under surveillance or even restraint. Sane behavior supported and
upheld the natural order of the genders, the class system, and the
monarchy.

> Ideas about insanity were shaped in particular by the high
> value the English people placed on the nuclear family and
> by traditional beliefs about the supernatural . . .
> Contemporaries regarded deviations from the norms of
> family life to be signs of alienation from the fundamental
> values of their society. The examples of antisocial behavior
> included in the descriptions of the insane very often
> described actions that menaced the survival or harmony of
> the family.[6]

Any behavior that failed to reinforce the established hierarchy was
viewed as irrational and unnatural.

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[4] Midelfort, *Mad* 3.
[5] *Mystical Bedlam: Madness and Anxiety in Seventeenth Century England*
(London: CUP, 1981) xii.
[6] MacDonald, *Mystical* 165.

Recent challenges to traditional notions of madness have come from two sources: factions within the field of psychiatry, most notably Thomas Szasz and R.D. Laing, who question the development of the psychoanalytic tradition and feminist scholars, including Phyllis Chesler, Elaine Showalter, and Carol Thomas Neely, who challenge male misdiagnosis or misinterpretation, whether deliberate or incidental. The issues these scholars raise about social control and mental illness are crucial to the understanding of perceptions of mental illness in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. During this period the first extensive representations of mad characters appear in a variety of genres. On a scientific level, it is also the first era in which people try to examine body/mind processes from an empirical perspective. The early modern period is the first age of explanation and exploration of the psychological state.

Critics of modern psychiatry observe that while it purports to treat the patient in an attempt to cure his or her illness, in actuality it serves as a means of social control. As such, it seeks to preserve the existing social order by silencing those who challenge it through stigmatizing or confining them. R.D. Laing "argued that madness was not the result of an inherited weakness or of incomplete development, but rather ' a special strategy that a

person invents in order to live in an unlivable situation'".[7] For

Laing, "what counts as sanity and insanity is largely a question of

adjustment and conformity to social norms".[8] Those who deviate

from societal or cultural expectations may be labeled "mad" in

order to dismiss them or to silence them, maintaining the status

quo.

> Thomas Szasz claims that psychiatry protects the rich and
>
> well-educated and sets out to expose the psychiatric
>
> malpractices which oppress the poor and socially
>
> disadvantaged ... The role of the psychiatrist is that of a
>
> 'social tranquilizer' and psychiatric commitment is 'in part a
>
> symptom of class struggle'.[9]

Szasz , like R.D. Laing, exposes psychiatry as a means of social

control. The ideas of both of these anti-psychiatrists developed in

the 1960's during a time of rebellion against tradition and the

established social hierarchy.

Feminist critics have explored the associations between

women and madness in culture and in literary representations of

culture. Phyllis Chesler bases her study on the theories of Szasz

and Laing, extending their ideas of psychiatry as social control to

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[7] Marta Caminero-Santangelo 8.

[8] *Men, Women, and Madness: Understanding Gender and Mental Disorder.* Eds. Joan Busfield and Jo Campling. (Washington Square NY: NYUP, 1996) 66.

[9] Quoted in Vieda Skultans, *English Madness: Ideas on Insanity 1580-1890* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, Ltd., 1979) 5.

gender issues. She notes that women are diagnosed as mad regardless of the roles they choose; should they conform to the conditioned female role, they "are clinically viewed as 'neurotic' or 'psychotic'".[10] However, women who rebel against this role are also condemned; Chesler states that "women who reject or are ambivalent about the female role frighten both themselves and society so much that their ostracism and self-destructiveness probably begin very early".[11] Elaine Showalter stresses that a serious study of the "female malady" of madness must examine "how, in a particular cultural context, notions of gender influence the definition and, consequently, the treatment of mental disorder".[12] Her focus on nineteenth century literary representations of mad women challenges the interpretation of the hysterical woman as rebelling against gender expectations through her illness; Showalter counters "that such a protest was fundamentally ineffective and cost the protester much more than she gained".[13]

These anti-psychiatrists' theories and the feminist critics' ideas are applicable to the early modern period, when order was emphasized and a fear of impending chaos lay just underneath the

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[10] Phyllis Chesler, *Women and Madness* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989, 1972) 56.

[11] Chesler 56.

[12] *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830-1980* (New York: Penguin Books, 1987) 5.

[13] Caminero-Santangelo 3.

surface of the golden age of England. Laing and Szasz establish the

concept of diagnosis and treatment of madness as a form of social

control employed by those with power against those who pose a

threat to social order; they are primarily interested in class conflicts

and how the ruling classes contain or prevent uprisings from the

lower classes. Chesler and Showalter specifically examine the use

of ideas about madness as a means of controlling deviant women

who threaten the patriarchal structure. Both revisionist views focus

on issues of social control.

Carol Thomas Neely's scholarship focuses on issues of

gender, madness, and power in Renaissance drama, specifically

Shakespeare. Neely claims that the "topic of madness is potentially

intertwined with many aspects of Renaissance culture."[14] She also

explores how the linguistic constructions, gender-encoding, and

dramatic functions of madness participate in cultural needs,

practices, and attitudes, extending her study from the stage into the

audience and beyond in an attempt to identify the way literary

representations influenced common ideas of madness.[15] She asserts

that the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries mark the first

time we begin to see gender-biased forms of madness in dramatic

representations and then in the culture itself.

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[14] "Did Madness Have a Renaissance?" *Renaissance Quarterly* xliv (1991): 789.
[15] "'Documents in Madness': Reading Madness and Gender in Shakespeare's Tragedies and Early Modern Culture" *Shakespeare Quarterly* 42 (1991): 323.

Most of the other scholarship in the area of women,

madness, and literary representation has been done on Renaissance

plays by male authors and nineteenth century novels by women.

Robert Reed's *Bedlam on the Jacobean Stage* and Duncan

Salkeld's *Madness and Drama* study the late sixteenth and early

seventeenth century's fascination with portrayals of the mad. Reed

skims the issue of gender while Salkeld claims that dramatic

madness gave women license to speak freely. Susan Gubar and

Sandra Gilbert's *The Madwoman in the Attic* and Elaine

Showalter's *The Female Malady* examine nineteenth century

women's fictional representations of madness, revealing that

madwomen were often hidden away by husbands or families as

objects of shame. Gilbert and Gubar also explore how nineteenth

century women writers such as Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte, and

George Eliot use mad women to symbolize the desire for escape

from traditional female roles. They emphasize the writers'

recognition of the necessity for women to apologize for their

literary efforts or risk being defined as mad.[16] They also show

these writers' understanding that if women do not behave as angels,

they must be monsters.[17] Showalter also examines the development

of nineteenth century dramatic portrayals of Ophelia, as well as

how early photography was used to record staged images of mad

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[16] Gilbert and Gubar 63.
[17] Gilbert and Gubar 53.

women. Laurinda S. Dixon's *Perilous Chastity* traces the
relationship between women and illness in pre-enlightenment art
and medicine. She suggests that the social construction of women's
physical and mental frailty is revealed in developing medical texts
and practices as well as in paintings of this period. Michael
MacDonald's *Mystical Bedlam* presents a detailed historical
context for seventeenth century England's treatment of mad
persons in his examination of the medical records of a
cleric/physic/astrologer, Richard Napier. Phyllis Mack's *Visionary
Women* discusses women prophets as influential and therefore
potentially threatening individuals in seventeenth century England.
She is primarily concerned with Quaker women's presentation of
themselves as prophets and how their communities responded
between 1650 and 1700.

Finally, Michel Foucault's scholarship on madness and early
modern Europe, *Madness and Civilization,* continues to exert an
influence despite its lack of adequate historical basis. He
articulates the association of madness with wisdom, excess of
knowledge or passion, and spectacle. Foucault notes how "the
scandal of Madness showed men how close to animality their Fall
could bring them; and at the same time how far divine mercy could
extend when it consented to save man".[18] He also explores the

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[18] Foucault, *Madness* 81.

relationship of madness to power in the age of reason; his theories

on the social construction of madness, as well as its repression,

describe the complexity of the place of madness in rapidly

developing European communities. Unfortunately, as Michael

MacDonald has noted, Foucault's "description of how real men and

women thought and acted is often vague or fanciful".[19] Erik

Midelfort criticizes Foucault for deliberately disregarding "the way

in which madhouses developed from medieval hospitals and

especially from monasteries".[20] Vieda Skultans suggests that his

lack of historical accuracy is a result of Foucault imposing "his

own schematic arguments deriving from his particular

preconceptions" onto the period.[21]

All of these critics deal with ideas of madness that came into

being in the early modern period, the first era to offer an extended

taxonomy of madness. The early modern age began to explore

causes of madness, to distinguish between types of insanity and to

see that some forms of difference might be marks of special talent

or grace. The issue was not simply conformity; it distinguished

between threatening and beneficial eccentricity. A more complex

view of a range of types of madness also lead to more calibrated

notions of cause. Debilitating insanity might be cured; inspirational

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[19] MacDonald *Mystical* xi.
[20] "Madness" 252-3.

madness could be nurtured. This provided a space for women to work with women's association with madness, relating it to the developing concepts of beneficial madness.

The Renaissance revives some medieval notions of madness but alters them to correspond with changing ideas about the capacity of humans. Between about 1580 and 1640 in England, people began to describe and reconsider madness. As they placed a greater emphasis on the individual and pursued the recovery of classical material, they became interested in studying the human body's functioning and began to see illness as a malfunction of it rather than a curse from God. The scientific-medical practitioners thought that, if they could ascertain the cause of each individual case of madness, it would be feasible to cure at least some conditions. The emphasis on internal causes of the condition rather than external sources made this theory possible.

Concepts of madness, what causes it and how it should be treated, differ in the early modern period from the medieval. Madness in the medieval period was more often than not thought to have a supernatural source. There was an association between disease and sin, fostering the belief that the afflicted person had angered God or committed some particular transgression, thus the

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[21] Skultans 14.

madness was caused by divine intervention, for revenge or as

punishment.[22] Deuteronomy 28:15 and 28 make a clear warning:

> But it shall come to pass, if thou wilt not hearken unto the
>
> voice of the Lord thy God, to observe to do all his
>
> commandments and his statutes . . . the Lord shall smite
>
> thee with madness and blindness and astonishment of
>
> heart.

For medieval people, it could be avoided or prevented by living an

honest life and by respecting God. A second form of madness also

existed, whereby the individual affected was touched by God as a

blessing. This person became mentally disordered temporarily by

close contact with God.

Treatment for cases of madness was haphazard at best,

since in the medieval period "the mentally ill or emotionally

disturbed members of a community were left at liberty as long as

they caused no public disturbance".[23] This sort of neglect is

reflected in literary works set in the Middle Ages; in Shakespeare's

King Lear, for example, despite public acknowledgment of Lear's

unsteady state of mind and Edgar's Tom O'Bedlam disguise, both

are left to roam on their own. There were a few hospitals, mainly

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[22] Penelope Doob, *Nebuchadnezzar's Children: Conventions of Madness in Middle English Literature* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1974) 3.

[23] George Rosen, *Madness in Society: Chapters in the Historical Sociology of Mental Illness* (Chicago: UCP, 1968) 139.

ecclesiastical facilities, which took in the mentally disturbed.[24] If, for medieval communities, madness was a disease brought about by sin, then treatment should have sought to cure the illness by encouraging the mad to repent and ask forgiveness for their sins. In most cases, though, it was believed that no treatment could be devised since an understanding of madness was in the hands of God, beyond limited human capacity. In such a view, madness was a permanent condition, beyond comprehension and beyond cure: "Harmless lunatics were permitted to roam the streets and roads; others were whipped out of town".[25] Banishment was a form of social control, ridding the community of disruptive individuals. Both approaches, placing the harmless insane under surveillance to determine danger to the community, or driving out the afflicted person, began to change in the early modern period.

Concepts of madness in the early modern period were derived from the ideas of classical antiquity and the modifications made during the Middle Ages. To these must be added two other forms of disorder, demonic possession and witchcraft, which were not true madness; rather they were the products of alliances with the devil, but they were treated similarly to madness.[26] After the Reformation, witchcraft persecutions intensified as conflicting religious parties leveled accusations of devil worship at their

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[24] Rosen 159.
[25] Rosen 152.

enemies.[27] Christina Larson argues that the persecution of witches

was a form of social control and an attempt to eliminate any form

of social deviance; a high percentage of the accused were women

who failed to conform to traditional stereotypes of feminine

behavior.[28] Keith Thomas points out that "the evidence of the

statute-book, taken as a whole, suggests that in England witchcraft

was prosecuted primarily as an anti-social crime, rather than as

heresy".[29] Conditions brought on by demonic possession were

similar to witchcraft and madness, in that the accused exhibited

anti-social behavior. The possessed were described as having

hysterical fits, wild convulsions and contortions, and blasphemous

ravings or sudden verbal outbursts.[30] The possessed and the mad

were pitied and cared for, unless they turned violent. Witches were

persecuted, tested, imprisoned, and even executed for their affect

on a community. In part, the association or overlapping of these

three types of disruption came from the Renaissance belief that

magic, religion, and science could all be reconciled. With a new

faith in human intellectual and spiritual capacity to understand and

master the world came a desire to probe the causes of these

conditions.

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[26] Rosen 145.
[27] John S. Mebane, *Renaissance Magic and the Return of the Golden Age: The Occult Tradition and Marlowe, Jonson, and Shakespeare* (Lincoln: U Neb. P, 1989) 96.
[28] Quoted in Mebane 98.
[29] *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971) 443.
[30] Thomas 478, 489.

By the early sixteenth century, the cause of madness was

most commonly believed to be either an excess of emotion or an

imbalance in the humours, although the concept of divinely

inspired madness also remained. Slowly but increasingly madness

was seen as biologically based rather than caused by seasonal

changes or supernatural elements. The origins of madness varied

and included serious physical illness or injury as well as sudden

emotional shocks, all resulting in an imbalance in the humours,

particularly the black humour or bile.[31] Once the cause of the

imbalance was ascertained, the cure usually involved some activity

or practice that would return the humours to a healthy balance.

This scientific, biological theory made recovery seem more within

human control rather than simply in the hands of God. The shift

from external causes to internal ones resulted from the Renaissance

faith in man's ability to understand the world rationally in contrast

to the medieval superstition that viewed madness as a punishment

from God. Those who were deemed mad by virtue of divine

intervention were believed to have been made so by direct contact

with God for purposes of enlightening others, rather than for

punishment. The contact, albeit briefly maddening, was seen as a

reward of sorts for the penitent and devout. This belief remained

the same from the medieval period. Both ideas, madness as disease

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[31] Richard Neugebauer, "Medieval and Early Modern Theories of Mental Illness" *Archives of General Psychiatry* 36 (19719): 481.

and madness as divine blessing, were based on re-reading of the classics.

When the Renaissance re-interpreted classical ideas, it focused on the physical causes of disorders, an aspect especially important to melancholy. This shift created the possibility of cure while opening a way to distinguish between types of madness. Madness was, for Plato and Aristotle, a curse of the gods and a means of divine inspiration. Plato distinguishes between two types of madness: one results from human ailments, the other from divine disturbance of the accepted norms of social behavior.[32]

In his medical treatise, the physician Galen adapted Hippocrates' theories on the four humours, blood, phlegm, black bile, and choler, which correspond to certain human dispositions. This notion, similar to Plato's idea of human ailments, was popular in the early part of the English Renaissance as the dramatic increase in the common use of the term "melancholy" shows. A humoral imbalance, especially an excess of black bile, could result in madness or melancholy, although the two terms are often used interchangeably in the early years of this period.

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[32] In "Phaedrus", Plato writes that "they held madness to be a valuable gift, when due to divine dispensation" (491); he later comments that the Muses stimulate selective souls to "rapt passionate expression, especially in lyric poetry" (492). In "Timaeus", Plato describes another form of madness as a disease of the mind (1206). *The Collected Dialogues of Plato, Including the Letters.* Edited by Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns. New York: Pantheon Books, 1961.

Galen's and Aristotle's descriptions of melancholic behavior

differed. Galen's use of the term and his descriptions of its

symptoms relate more closely to modern day ideas of "depression",

a dark, sad, "low" state of mind, which could result in suicide.

Aristotle, however, associates melancholy with poetic inspiration

and wit, which could result in a sonnet.[33] From Aristotle came the

idea of the madman possessed by a creative frenzy, giving him the

ability to achieve greatness, usually in art. Aristotle posed the

question:

> Why is it that all men who have become outstanding in
>
> philosophy, statesmanship, poetry or the arts are
>
> melancholic and some to such an extent that they are
>
> infected by the disease arising from black bile as the story
>
> of Heracles among the heroes tells?[34]

Although this idea was lost for a time, the Florentine philosopher

Marsilio Ficino, a self-described melancholic, revived Aristotle's

positive interpretation of this state of mind, and he is said to have

introduced it to the rest of Europe.[35] The melancholic man

fluctuated between states of exultation and despair, a trait that set

him apart from the common crowd and in its perilous potential

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[33] Skultans 20.

[34] *Problems*, translated by W.S. Hett (Cambridge: HUP/London: Heinemann, 1953-57) 2 vols., 2: 155.

[35] Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky, and Fritz Saxl, from *Saturn and Melancholy* (New York: Basic Books, 1964) as quoted in Juliana Schiesari's *The Gendering of Melancholia: Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and the Symbolics of Loss in Renaissance Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1992) 113.

revealed him to be a superior being, able to sustain himself between the two states without slipping into madness.[36] "Elizabethan ideas followed Aristotelian traditions which associated melancholy with wit and inspiration," and identified a wide range of behaviors with it.[37]

> As a disorder, melancholy resulted in a wide range of mental abnormality from whimsy and pensive sadness through raving fury and deranged insanity, with an occasional hint, especially among poets and painters, of genius, creativity, and greatness.[38]

The concepts of madness, melancholy, and mysticism were strongly interconnected, often even overlapping, in early modern English literature. Popular perceptions of melancholy and mysticism were similar: both were desirable conditions in men-- as divinely ordained, they elevated or affirmed one's social status, required a certain amount of distancing of the self from society, and revolved around control of the self. Madness was the converse of almost all of these elements. It was undesirable because it devalued one's status, alienated the sufferer from society, and meant a total, unwilling loss of self-governance. Sufferers were often incoherent, possibly dangerous to themselves or others and

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[36] Schiesari 7.
[37] Skultans 79.
[38] Midelfort, Mad 3-4.

there was no comprehensible purpose or reason to the behavior of the individual. Its source was often an excess of painful emotion, intense grief or lost love. The mad person often behaved as a "senseless" beast, rather than a human being. Such cases elicited fear and/or sympathy for the sufferer, and the sufferer was often female. Obviously the importance of self-governance produces a rather complicated relationship for women to madness, melancholy, or mysticism. Women's lack of legal or social control over their own lives placed them in a unique position.

Melancholy and mysticism were states of mental or spiritual being sought by noblemen, scholars, and religious pilgrims. Divine madness meant that the sufferer was probably closer to the angels than to humankind. Often extremely talented in some artistic capacity, such as writing, composing music or painting, melancholics were usually aware of their condition and able to control it to some extent. Mystics offered up control of themselves to God, seeking the gift of divine union with God. They were considered blessed if others believed that they had achieved this state of being; they were also considered by many to be serious messengers of God's word following their mystical experience. Melancholy and mysticism were also both connected to a willing separation of the self from society to reflect, to meditate, and to achieve a higher state of being, whether intellectual or spiritual.

Scholars were known to be particularly susceptible to melancholy because of long hours spent in isolated study. For noblemen, melancholy affirmed their social status and was indicative of creative genius. Both melancholics and mystics sought a certain degree of distance between themselves and society to achieve their full intellectual or spiritual potential. Indeed that distance was necessary in both cases. Countless religious devotees sought intimate, mystical encounters with God. Both states of being were considered to be a gift of God, affirming God's power or mercy over his creation. Both of these kinds of madness provided potential avenues for women's expression and creativity.

What is known about diagnosis and treatment of madness in the early modern age reveals a connection between behavior and social control. While there seems to be a great deal of information on insanity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the age of asylums, details about the sixteenth and seventeenth century mad person are scant and have been strung together rather loosely by sociologists or historians. Because there were no specific institutions or organizations to deal with the mad, there are few if any records of cases of madness. The main sources have been court records, parish records, or the private journals of clergymen or healers. These by no means offer a coherent picture of the history of madness in England.

During the early modern period in England, madness was seen as a fearsome condition that could strike almost anyone without warning. Despite the imaginative potential of inspiration, most of those who were considered mad were viewed as potentially quite dangerous. Unlike melancholy and mysticism, madness was never a condition that was sought. It meant a total loss of control over one's self with no specific purpose guiding the individual suffering from it. The fragility of mankind seemed particularly apparent in cases of madness. For visionaries, to surrender one's identity in order to serve God better was noble. To lose one's identity without purpose or without control simply indicated madness. Those closest to individuals suffering from madness were typically the first to offer a tentative diagnosis for their condition or to seek assistance for them from clergy or healers. "Sociologists point out that laymen [were] the first to recognize mental disorder . . .".[39] Many kinds of madness were recognizable through certain common patterns of behavior or appearance.

The mad wandered aimlessly, left home and family, failed to know family and friends, tore at their own clothing and hair, and laughed or sang "nonsense". Because of the emphasis in early modern England on clothing as a marker of social class, the mad

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[39] MacDonald, *Mystical* 70.

person who destroyed his own clothing "repudiated the

hierarchical order of his society and declared himself a mental

vagrant; by casting away all artificial coverings, he shed all trace

of human society ".[40] In addition, the sheer monetary value of

clothing was important; to shred one's clothing was seen as

"irrationally wasteful and socially self-defacing".[41] Nakedness was

also common for mad persons. It signified a departure from reason,

since clothing provided protection from the elements, a lack of

moral judgement, since appropriate clothing indicated a modest

nature, and the distance between the primitive, animalistic nature

of the mad and the refined, cultured civilization of the rest of

humanity. Other symptoms might include "frantic energy, fits of

wildly inappropriate laughter or rage, restless wandering or aimless

running, and titanic physical strength"; "to anxious observers, such

behavior was an outward manifestation of the chaotic power of a

mind in which the rule of reason had been overthrown by the

anarchic force of the passions".[42] There were some cases of

insanity that resulted in "verbal pandemonium"; broken speech,

sentence fragments, and repetition were all common elements of

mad speech, however, frequently a coherent message in the

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[40] MacDonald, *Mystical* 131.
[41] MacDonald, *Mystical* 130.
[42] MacDonald, *Mystical* 139.

sufferer's speech could be found.[43] Even if the speech were anarchical, the speaker was not punished for it since any authority he or she might have possessed was negated by public recognition of his or her insanity. The mad were often "permitted freely to express normally unacceptable ideas, and they became the center of solicitous attention".[44]

Terminology regarding madness was extensive, and it was commonly known as interest in man's mental state grew.

By the early seventeenth century the language of madness had become rich and pervasive; words and phrases about insanity were part of the common coinage of everyday speech and thought, negotiable everywhere in England and not restricted to a small circle of medical and legal experts.[45]

Part of the interest in madness and the widespread knowledge of its conditions came from the publication of texts examining it, such as Timothie Bright's *Treatise of Melancholy* in 1586 and Robert Burton's popular *Anatomy of Melancholy* published first in 1621, with six editions appearing from 1621 to 1650. These authors attempted to articulate the many forms of madness and melancholy as well as their causes and treatments.

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[43] MacDonald, *Mystical* 142,143.
[44] MacDonald, *Mystical* 143.
[45] MacDonald, *Mystical* 122-3.

Because the symptoms of the mad had become so well known across Western Europe and England in particular, some people feared that others might feign madness to gain attention, freedom, or a certain sense of power. While madness was not desirable, except to the religious who sought the divine madness of mysticism, feigning madness could allow one access to a certain amount of verbal and physical freedom or liberty. "Abraham men," beggars who pretended to be Bedlamites, roamed about soliciting food or money to aid in their keep. Others were also undoubtedly tempted to use mad behavior to their own advantage, for example, Hamlet, who acts mad in order to conduct surveillance of his uncle Claudius.

A variety of tests existed to determine whether an individual was truly mad. Most of these were administered by laypersons and aimed at questioning the individual's ability to recognize existing social structures or hierarchies. Two of the main determining factors involved whether the person recognized family and friends, which included taking pleasure in one's spouse or children, and if the person acknowledged superiors as such.[46] Other recognized symptoms of madness centered on inappropriate public displays of some sort, in behavior, speech, or appearance.

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[46] MacDonald, *Mystical* 125-131.

The determination of who was mad, however, also reveals the subjective nature of the diagnosis.

> . . . . whether a feeling is described as a 'mood', or an action as 'impulsive', depends in part on the status of the agent: less status means that less validity is credited to the agent's point of view. In light of this, it is inevitable that acts by women which create problems for others are *a priori* more likely to be regarded as unintelligible ones.[47]

Michael MacDonald, in his study of madness and anxiety in seventeenth century England, states that " . . .the types of insanity people recognize and the significance they attach to them reflect the prevailing values of their society".[48] If one behaved in a manner incongruent with the culture, especially with regard to class status or gender role, that person was likely to be labeled insane, to be acting outside of the guides of reason established as acceptable in that particular community. Therefore what was identified as "mad" behavior might have meant that person was mentally ill, or that she or he was simply acting in a fashion deemed unacceptable or unusual by members of that community. To be stricken with madness or even be described with the label of madness was a fearful occurrence, for it placed one at odds with

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[47] David Ingelby, "The Social Construct of Mental Illness" *The Problem of Medcial Knowledge: Examining the Social Construction of Medicine*, ed. P. Wright and A. Treacher, (Edinburgh: EUP, 1982) 139.

one's family and community at a time when these two social groups were vital to survival.

Given the importance of community during this period, being an outcast was tragic. Being apart from the sense of belonging or of shared responsibility that a communal setting could offer meant isolation. For the mad, being surrounded by other people could not ensure inclusion, even when they were allowed to remain physically within society. It is therefore fitting that the earliest physicians or clergy who dealt with the mentally ill were referred to as "alienists".[49] As MacDonald notes, "every mental disorder alienates its victims from the conventions of action, thought, and emotion that bind us together with the other members of our society".[50] Without that connection securing one's place in society, one might as well have been physically driven outside the limits of civilization. Alienation plays a key role in the symptoms of both melancholy and madness. For the fashionably melancholic aristocracy, a certain degree of intellectual alienation was considered desirable. Often this meant being preoccupied with a particular idea, human mortality or material beauty, to the point of neglecting the self, skipping a meal or losing track of time. It indicated that the sufferer had transcended material, transitory cares or worries of daily life in favor of a higher plane of thought.

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[48] MacDonald, *Mystical* 1.
[49] Rosen ix.

In moderation, such alienation was a favorable condition, however, in excess it could be detrimental. The individual who suffered from extreme melancholy could succumb easily to madness and self-destructive behavior, even attempting suicide. Because of this danger, the need to alter traditional means of caring for the mad arose.

In addition, legal practices regarding the mad began to be established. The first recorded legal acquittal on the grounds of insanity dates from 1505 and states: "the felon was of unsound mind (*de non saine memoire*). Wherefore it was decided that he should go free (*qu'il ira quite*)".[51] "Some men worried that the gestures of insanity were known too widely and that the unscrupulous could mimic them precisely when they wanted to avoid prosecution".[52] The legal definition of madness turned on the intent of the accused, and intent concerned his control of events. In this sense, control signified the person's "capacity to make choices based on an understanding of the circumstances surrounding his actions"; without intent, the actor was not legally culpable.[53] One legal opinion articulated in the twelfth century remained unchanged through the eighteenth century, that criminal law should only recognize a very limited definition of madness as

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[50] *Mystical* 1.
[51] Joel Peter Eigen, "Intentionality and insanity: what the eighteenth-century juror heard" *The Anatomy of Madness: Essays in the History of Psychiatry*, ed. 2: 35.
[52] MacDonald, *Mystical* 125.

"a total lack of discretion and understanding"; in the sixteenth

century, this concept was refined "to include an evolving standard

of juvenile culpability: the inability to distinguish good from

evil."[54] This definition could be applied not only to children, but to

women as well.

In addition to the development of legal definitions

regarding the culpability of the mad, the beginnings of the asylum

for care and containment of the mad are located here. George

Rosen states that "during the sixteenth century, there appears a

slowly growing tendency to place the mentally ill in special

institutions" through the influences of social policies of Protestant

reformers.[55] In the sixteenth century, the mad were often confined

in some manner, locked up at home or in a hospital or religious

institution, more to maintain public order and protect the social

status of the mad person's family than to cure the condition. The

best known facilities were St. Mary of Bethlehem's Hospital and

Bridewell Hospital. Bethlehem Hospital, established in the

thirteenth century, had by the mid-fifteenth century gained a

reputation as a facility for the confinement and treatment of the

insane.[56] Despite its fame, it was in actuality a small structure,

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[53] Eigen 34-35.
[54] Eigen 36.
[55] Rosen 142.
[56] Patricia Allderidge, "Bedlam: fact or fantasy?" in *The Anatomy of Madness*, 19.

housing fewer than thirty patients.[57] As confinement of the mad became increasingly popular and as the population multiplied, the need for madhouses grew rapidly in England, beyond that which had been predicted.[58] As Patricia Allderidge points out, by the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Bethlehem accepted only patients who were thought to be curable and all were discharged after twelve months if they had not been cured.[59] Although treatment and cure had become a possibility, early modern England continued to contain or banish what it could not alter. "The hospital from the sixteenth into the nineteenth century was intended chiefly to help maintain social order while providing for the sick and the needy . . .".[60] It served to isolate mad persons not necessarily to treat or cure them, but to remove them from the public eye in an effort to decrease their ability to disrupt society or the daily routines of their families.

> All individuals who were defined as asocial or socially deviant were segregated by internment . . . by separating such individuals from society . . . they were consigned to a social and psychological situation of which the dominant character is alienation. A separate socio-psychological lifespace was created for those who removed themselves

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[57] MacDonald, *Mystical* 4.

[58] Midelfort 257.

[59] Allderidge 19.

from or transgressed the moral order considered appropriate for their social position, occupation, or family relationship.[61]

Such a definition of "madness" suggests that any challenge to imposed gender roles, such as a woman not finding marriage or childbirth and child-rearing desirable or a man lacking ambition to work and support his family, would be grounds for confining a family member. Laurinda S. Dixon notes that "physicians easily found justification in two thousand years of medical tradition for claiming that the attributes that made women dangerous to society also threatened their health and well-being."[62] Upholding the patriarchal hierarchy led to health and happiness for all concerned, according to contemporary medical practitioners. Again, the manipulative relationship between cultural ideas and medical conditions is clearly revealed. The mad woman is the woman who disrupts the existing social structure in any way. Isolation and segregation served to control potentially disruptive women, decreasing their influence on others.

The feminine and the disorderly become identified with one another as the lower terms of the oppositions masculine/feminine and order/disorder; "All lower terms constitute the conceptual

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[60] Rosen 159.
[61] Rosen 163.
[62] Dixon 220.

other and form a 'structure' through which it may be contained."[63]

Therefore it was not unusual for all women to be viewed as inherently disordered, or irrational, at least to some degree and in need of masculine order to keep them within the acceptable boundaries of behavior. As Szasz and Laing's ideas of psychiatry see it as a means for the ruling classes to keep the lower classes in their place, Dymphna Callaghan adds that ". . . in conceptual terms, the lower term of an opposition poses a constant threat to the upper one, and in social terms there is always the possibility of disruption of the hierarchy."[64] This masculine anxiety in a patriarchal culture can be seen in the literature, where the need or desire to contain women's bodies or behavior is frequently a point of conflict. Disruptive women are often introduced in order to show how their behavior might be corrected or at least confined by male authority figures. Disruptive behavior may be anything that does not conform to standard acceptable social activities and may include mad behavior, rebellious behavior, sexually explicit behavior, or even simply eccentric behavior. All four may be labeled as symptoms of madness in an attempt to silence the accused. The imputation of madness, like the accusation of witchcraft, serves as a device for confining unwanted conduct.

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[63] Dympna Callaghan, *Woman and Gender in Renaissance Tragedy: A Study of King Lear, Othello, The Duchess of Malfi, and The White Devil.* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989) 11.

Those accused are ostracized or disciplined in some way to cure their unruly comportment. Such labeling is a traditional strategy used throughout history to confine the most difficult offenders. The most difficult remained confined indefinitely; those who altered their behavior to conform to the preferred "chaste, silent, and obedient" qualities of womanhood were pronounced cured and released to their families. "'Madness' acts as a signifier which positions women as ill, as outside, as pathological, as somehow second-rate--the second sex".[65]

Three aspects are especially important when it comes to issues of gender and madness: loss of self-control, public displays, and alienation. In the early modern period, women were assumed to possess little self-governance and were therefore allowed to make few choices about their own lives. Madness manifests in antisocial or inappropriate behavior due to either illness of the body/brain or as a result of giving oneself over to God for higher purposes. Women were not allowed expression in a public forum, so no public display was initially possible for a respectable lady. The sole exception to barring women from public display came through cases of holy madness. Visionary experiences occur as God's way of making his presence known, heard, or felt; although

[64] Callaghan 13.
[65] Jane M. Ussher, *Women's Madness: Misogyny or Mental Illness?* (Amherst: U Mass.P, 1991) 11.

his message may be acknowledged by the individual who received it directly, it must also be witnessed by others. Women already occupy a permanent position of alienation in Western culture; because of this, woman has always occupied a unique position in relation to madness.

While the definitions of sanity and insanity change over time, the strong component of social control involved in the "cure" of the mad persists, especially in the case of women. David Ingleby examines the long-standing association of women with madness, claiming that:

> there is in fact a close *conceptual* link between 'femininity' and 'mental illness'. Many of the dimensions which enter into the definition of gender identity are also involved in the discrimination of mental illness--autonomy, emotional stability, aggressivity, and eroticism.[66]

The unique position for women in this equation is that they are *expected* to be "irrational" to a given degree in the early modern period, that is to say that "'moodiness' and 'irrationality' belong to the stereotype of *normal* womanhood"; women only "become liable to diagnosis when they display the wrong kind of irrationality or irrationality in the wrong context".[67] Women who are labeled as "mad" are those who act in ways deemed

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[66] Ingleby 139.
[67] Ingleby 140.

inappropriate by their culture and therefore those who pose a challenge or threat to the structure of the existing hierarchy.

Defining madness as irrational and unnatural behavior produced a double standard for women, who were already viewed as inherently irrational in comparison to the assumed superior rationality of men. It was therefore "natural" for women to be irrational, at least to a degree that did not threaten the family or societal structure.

> Tudor and Stuart medical wisdom held that gender was a main determinant of bodily health. Because women were supposedly dominated by cold and moist humors and men by hot and dry ones, women were thought to be naturally less vigorous and more prone to certain bodily afflictions, including attacks of irrationality . . .[68]

The idea of the balance of humors in each person contributed to the association between women and madness. Physically women were expected to be weaker, more prone to illness. Mentally, they were also considered weaker than men; it was even believed that for women studying inappropriate subjects could lead to insanity. Medical treatises of the early modern period clearly indicate how the socially accepted model of the healthy woman reflected the need for controlling women's behavior.

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[68] Lori Schroeder Haslem, "Troubled with the Mother", 441.

These treatises described all women as endangered, though

certain types were held to be more susceptible than others.

These included women who were unmarried, celibate, or

unwilling to limit their activities to the home . . . .[69]

Repeatedly, the treatment or cure for women's mental ailments is

that "women should marry young, remain sexually active, engage

in physical labor, deny themselves the comforts of the good life,

and take care not to 'overburden' their minds".[70] Robert Burton

advises that to remedy women's varied illnesses is to "see them

well placed, and married to good husbands in due time" and offers

a set of ideal circumstances to treat females: "alternatively,

religion, work, and a disciplined life are the remedies that cure

most feminine ills".[71] Physical restrictions on women's behavior

were not enough to insure adequate control of them; their thoughts

also had to be controlled as much as they could be through

directing women's mental activities.

The idea of the woman driven to distraction because of

unnatural celibacy or 'much thinking' reinforced the

Christian demand for female conformity to patriarchal

ideals. . . Physicians who warned that a woman's body

must be idle did not apply the same directive to her mind.

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[69] Dixon 8.
[70] Dixon 206.

> Even though the primary cause of uterine furies was
> prolonged celibacy, continual reading and intense study,
> especially on mathematical and philosophical subjects,
> could worsen the condition or even instigate it . . . The
> inherent feebleness of the female mind, the result of natural
> coldness, was often cited as justification for barring the
> entire sex from serious intellectual activities.[72]

It was also believed that women's inherently weaker nature made them easy subjects for manipulation by others and for demonic possession. In some ways this is still true today; women's inherent weak constitution is assumed until proven otherwise. Women who accuse men of rape or sexual harassment find their own lives and reputations put on trial just as much if not more than their attackers are. They must prove their own worth and stability before their claims are fully credited.

In a patriarchal culture, women are inherently isolated/alienated/aliens. If we examine the definition of the term "alienation", the connection between women and madness at this time is more apparent. Alienation meant:

> 1) the action of estranging, or state of estrangement in
> feeling or affection; 2) the action of transferring ownership
> of anything to another; 3) the state of being alienated or

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[71] Burton quoted in Skultans 80.

held by other than the proper owner; 4) mental alienation:

withdrawal, loss, or derangement of mental faculties;

insanity; 5) alteration, change.[73]

For women, marrying and leaving home made them aliens in

several senses of the word. They had been transferred from one

male authority (father or brother) to another (their husband) and

they were strangers in a foreign environment. Alienation was a

normal state for most women.

Madness provides a valuable topic for writing about

women and control, especially in England in the late sixteenth and

early seventeenth centuries. During this time the concept of public

and private space began to emerge, as well as debates over the

power of the state versus the power of the individual. In this study,

I consider the marginalization of mad persons and women in

literary representations, a double disadvantage for female

characters that are labeled as mad. Male authors approached

women's madness differently from men's. I demonstrate how male

writers used the cultural stigma of madness to contain unruly

women, but my central concern is how female authors adapted the

association of women with madness to create a space from which

to speak or locate female voices. In the exploration of these issues,

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[72] Skultans 38, 205.
[73] *Oxford English Dictionary* I, 55.

I trace the varied development of the madwoman in English Renaissance literature.

First, in order to establish both the fascination of the time with madness and the assumed conventions of mad behavior, I look at the way women were represented in drama. I explore early theories of madness and show how the theater, an important vehicle for dissemination and confirmation of popular notions of madness, presents madwomen in a fairly consistent manner. Male writers in the early modern period in England used mad women characters to motivate male characters to heroic action, bringing out their protectiveness, or to elicit an emotional reaction, sympathy, from the audience. In Shakespeare's plays characters who speak the truth are always the court fools; his madwomen speak only intense pain. Such presentations of mad women reinforce the necessity for social control of undesirable behavior for women. The final section of this chapter presents a close reading of Webster's two plays, *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*, arguing that although the heroines are exceptional, Webster's understanding is faithful to dramatic convention that severely restricts possibilities for mad female characters.

Second, I examine the way women writers of prose fiction negotiate the position of women, modifying and undermining the conventional portraits of madwomen. They subvert social control

to find in imagination a place to express themselves. Mary Wroth's awareness of the danger in doing so causes her to present an ambivalent portrait of women's madness in *Urania*. Margaret Cavendish makes peace with charges of eccentricity against her, but consistently insists on public expression. Cavendish's *New Blazing World* subverts prevailing ideas about gender roles, melancholy, and madness. Both of these writers emphasize the complexity of women's intellectual abilities and women's ability to fashion public selves. As women writers, these authors drew from their own life experiences in composing their fiction so that often in their works, the line between their lives and their creativity is not distinct. Wroth and Cavendish use madness to negotiate the silence imposed on them by society and as a means of expressing powerful, anarchic feelings.

Finally, two women fit the exceptional form of holy madness. Unlike Cavendish, whose agendas were social, scientific, and political, Elizabeth Barton and Eleanor Davies are spiritual visionaries, yet like her they were alternatively reviled or confined and admired or treated with awe. The effects of social control to contain women can be seen most clearly in the case of visionaries. The performative nature of these women's public speaking or publication of their prophesies contributed to the anxiety their influence created. This final chapter focuses on the prophecies and

lives of mystics Elizabeth Barton, "the nun of Kent," who was executed for her prophecies against Henry VIII's involvement with Anne Boleyn and Lady Eleanor Davies, eventually confined to Bethlehem Hospital, the composer of over 50 religious tracts concerning her visions. By the authority of God, these visionaries openly and publicly challenge the forces of oppression in their speeches. Barton's and Davies's lives and spiritual autobiographies suggest that the concept of "divine madness" could be used to give women access to a public voice.

Melancholy, mysticism, and madness bear an interesting relationship to gender. Since the issue of self-control plays a vital part of the concepts involved in these terms, women's lack of control over themselves suggests the unusual relationship of women to all three of these conditions. Women had little or no control legally over their own lives, placing them in a unique position with regard to melancholy, mysticism, and madness. The cultural ideas behind each of these terms were used against women to silence them, but later women used those same ideas to gain a voice. As such, weapons or tools, madness, melancholy, and mysticism offer unique and varied insight into gender expectations/roles in the early modern period.

Chapter Two:

'Fie, fie, the woman's mad!': Gendered Madness in Drama

The popularity of stage lunatics and real madmen and the proliferation of words and phrases describing or invoking insanity are important because these phenomena reflect the diffusion of generally understood types of insanity. Literary madmen embodied medical and legal ideas about how insane people talked and acted, as well as popular notions of abnormal behavior.[1]

Drama serves as an especially meaningful starting point for an examination of madness in literature. It reflects the growing knowledge of madness commonly shared by its audience and it confirms certain traditional ideas regarding the mad, their symptoms, diagnosis, ability to be healed, and medical treatment, and their effects on observers. In doing so, drama offers the most stylized set of conventions for portraying madness. The performative nature of madness lends itself to dramatic representation; since madness is often a spectacle in the real world, exaggerated forms of it readily enhance audience interest in a play. As a result of this unusual association between this genre and madness, drama has been the primary focus for academic discussions of madness and gender in literature. Yet, as the genre during the Jacobean era was predominantly male authored, it offers a biased perspective, especially in relation to representations of mad women. Even in the works that emphasize women's roles, presenting exceptional women as central characters, the cultural belief in men's superiority and a consistent anxiety about disruptive women result in

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[1] MacDonald, *Mystical* 122.

confinement of such women. Women must be kept under surveillance in order to

control them. Labeling them as mad is one way to insure their containment.

The decidedly masculine perspective on the conditions of madness in

English drama of the late Elizabethan and the Jacobean period is apparent in the

descriptions of the mad, their diagnosis, their treatment, and their outcome in the

drama For example, mad male characters either die from their condition, a natural

death resulting from their mental illness, or are cured of it by the play's end. Mad

female characters either die by their own hands or continue mad. Recovery or

natural death is denied them. The question remains, were these authors merely

offering a reflection or distortion of the real status of the mad men and women or

were they presenting something novel? It seems the late Elizabethan and some

early Jacobean dramatists presented a theatrical distortion of madness, especially

in relation to madwomen. Duncan Salkeld observes

> What is striking about these [Bedlam] scenes is their preoccupation with
>
> women's sexuality as an issue connected with madness. The interrelations
>
> between madness, confinement and gender . . .in Kyd, Dekker, Webster,
>
> Fletcher, and Middleton and Rowley [contain elements of madness] which
>
> enables, despite a pervasive misogyny, the exposure of contemporary
>
> power relations, particularly as they applied *against* women.[2]

Acknowledging limitations in the drama, Salkeld asserts that "madness offers a

social position from which women resist a masculine authority . . . In madness,

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[2] Duncan Salkeld, *Madness and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1993) 118.

women find they are able to stake their claim to discourse."[3] What this theory

fails to take into account are the male playwrights behind the female characters

and the outcome for these characters--death or permanent insanity, which in either

case meant no power. There seems little evidence to substantiate this claim that

female characters in dramatic works intentionally manipulated the conventions of

madness in order to have their voices heard. Rather, their condition serves to

further marginalize them, suggesting that resistance via manipulation of the

conventions of madness is indeed futile for women. What Kathleen McLuskie has

noted of Shakespeare's drama holds true for any of the plays produced in the

Jacobean period:

> For Shakespeare's plays are not primarily explorations of 'the real nature
>
> of women' or even 'the hidden feelings of the human heart'. They were the
>
> products of an entertainment industry that, as far as we know, had no
>
> women shareholders, actors, writers, or stage hands. His women
>
> characters were played by boys and, far from his plays being an
>
> expression of his idiosyncratic views, they all built on and adapted earlier
>
> stories.[4]

In addition, the eroticized nature of madwomen's speech is not, as some critics

have argued, a "liberty" for the women, but rather an exploitation of the dramatic

spectacle of women's sexuality.[5] Being sexualized makes one an object for

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[3] Salkeld, *Madness* 118.

[4] "The patriarchal bard: feminist criticism and Shakespeare: *King Lear* and *Measure for Measure*" 92. See also Dympna Callaghan's *Woman and Gender in Renaissance Tragedy* 38 for similar ideas.

[5] Douglas Bruster "The Jailer's Daughter and the Politics of Madwomen's Language." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 46.3 (Fall 1995) 281.

someone else's fantasies or view, decreasing any power one might possess. It also shows the belief in the barely concealed animality of women, who were believed to possess very little self-control. Bluntly, it is simply not empowering to be sexualized as those labeled madwomen were in the drama.

Female characters occupy an unusual place in the drama, given that they represent male ideas of womanhood. Masculine anxiety in a patriarchal culture can be seen in the drama, where the need or desire to contain women's bodies or behavior is frequently a point of conflict. Disruptive women are often introduced in order to show how their behavior might be corrected or at least confined by male authority figures. Disruptive behavior may be anything that does not conform to standard acceptable social activities; this may include mad behavior, rebellious behavior, sexually explicit behavior, or even simply eccentric behavior. All four may be labeled as symptoms of madness in an attempt to silence the accused. The imputation of madness, like the accusation of witchcraft, serves as a device for confining unwanted conduct. Those accused are often ostracized or disciplined in some way to cure their unruly comportment. The most difficult often remained confined indefinitely; those who altered their behavior to conform to the preferred "chaste, silent, and obedient" qualities of womanhood were pronounced cured and released to their families.

As the discussion that follows shows, the conventions of dramatic madness were fairly well established by the time of Webster's early plays. In two of his works, *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*, the use of these conventions culminates in its highest form. The former exemplifies the more

conventional aspects of madness while the later drama challenges those conventions. Both works contain a range of mad portrayals: the genuinely mad, the feigning mad, falsely accused madness, a group of mad folk, and examples of the gendering of madness. Both works contain strong complex female characters that resist labels of madness. Quite simply, Webster's work covers the spectrum of madness in drama for the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods.

Renaissance drama seemingly overflows with mad characters or characters who feign the conventions of madness to achieve some specific goal. Because the signs of madness were easily identifiable to a Renaissance audience, such portrayals initially served as props to the main plot, usually drawing an emotional reaction from the audience from either end of the extreme--laughter, as the portrayal could be exceedingly comic; or tears, at the more realistic tragedy of the condition. The spectacle of madness undoubtedly was a major reason why mad characters existed in so many plays of the period. It enthralled the audience. The public's fascination with the mysterious nature of madness is reflected in the many Renaissance plays in which there are mad characters, characters that feign madness, and characters falsely accused of madness. However, the sum of mad characters easily outnumbers any that counterfeit the condition or are falsely accused.

A distinction must be made between melancholy, a popular condition cultivated in Elizabethan aristocratic circles, and actual madness, a fearful out-of-one's control mental illness, as elements of both were often portrayed in the drama. To complicate the definition is the fact that these terms were often used

interchangeably even in the same play. To be dramatically melancholic, as many studious or lovelorn noblemen were, meant to convey a distracted air, a certain sadness or lowliness of spirit, often evoked by dwelling philosophically on human mortality. The melancholic image included wearing dark clothing, sighing often, and composing poetry. In dramatic adaptation, it usually resulted from heavy thoughts of an academic, abstract nature or from unrequited love and it generally affected only men of the upper order. Women's melancholy did exist, usually in the form of grief over unrequited love or death of a male loved one. Noblemen were considered more susceptible to madness because of their heightened or advanced sensitivity and intellect. Perhaps because of their superiority over males of lower standing and of all women, they were considered capable of controlling their condition, keeping it at a low level of mere sadness or thoughtfulness, i.e., melancholy. For male characters, melancholy is a desirable trait especially for noblemen or those aspiring to be accepted by noblemen. It also implies cultivating a certain intellectual alienation or actual physical retreat from society, a setting apart of oneself for the air of mystery or intensity it suggested. Although there are a few melancholy women in the drama, their melancholy appears to be caused by sadness, an intense grieving. While men's melancholy might also be caused by grief, men could develop melancholy through too much thinking, or learning, which seems not to have been considered a possible cause for women's melancholy. In the drama "we find both the acceptable face of melancholy readily espoused by refined and sensitive individuals, and the more sinister, unacceptable face of melancholy bordering on madness".[6] Although most noble male characters

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[6] Skultans 22.

could control their melancholy, some failed to do so; such an excess of melancholy could lead to madness.

Most commonly, mad characters were tragic or comic; only in the instance of Webster's Ferdinand do we have a fearsome madman graphically threatening violence and torture to others. The mad in drama are usually quite obviously mentally ill; their odd behavior or appearance provides a spectacle within the drama, both for other characters and for the audience. Dramatic madness was usually brought on by a shock of some sort, a death of or rejection from a loved one. Such a shock often resulted in the loss of identity for the sufferer, a lack of decorum or control over his or her actions or words. It meant extreme alienation, leaving the individual completely removed from the reality of his or her present situation or place. To lose a sense of one's identity or one's place in the natural order so vital to Elizabethans was a threat to the culture. It inherently meant a failure to recognize authority in that culture as well. Karen S. Coddon notes that:

> madness dis-integrates the identity so precariously fashioned by notions of inward control and self-vigilance, notions whose contradictions become increasingly critical toward the end of Elizabeth's rule. Madness renders the subject not more but less himself; it becomes the internalization of disobedience, prerequisite and portent of the external violation of order.[7]

Dramatic madness created an ignorance of social proprieties and sometimes an obsession with death, often one's own death.

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[7] "'Suche Strange Desygns': Madness, Subjectivity, and Treason in *Hamlet* and Elizabethan Culture." *Renaissance Drama* 20 (1989) 53.

For women, the condition of madness occupies an unusual position. If woman is seen to exist primarily as Other to man, and man is admired for his power of rationality, then woman is already associated with a certain lack of reason. Madness for woman then becomes a state even beyond irrationality, a flaw which she is already expected to possess. As Michael MacDonald notes, the madness of women on the Renaissance stage "is interpreted as something specifically feminine, whereas the madness of men is not specifically male".[8] Sexualizing the madwoman's condition only serves to enhance the spectacle for the audience. "In Renaissance drama, the link between women and madness is repeatedly made in characters who are either dramatised as seriously (tragically) insane, as with Ophelia, or presented for ridicule as stock examples of female irrationality, as in the shrewish Kate".[9] For women, there is no middle ground between these dichotomous portrayals. The differences between tragic or comic madness are often enhanced by knowledge of the source of the condition, whether it is grief induced excessive mourning or simple unreasonable rebelliousness. The gendered aspects of dramatic madness remain consistent, despite later shifts in the use of dramatic madness which drifted away from the simply comic or tragic into much more complex portrayals of human nature.

The purpose of using madness in drama seems to change from the late Elizabethan period through the Jacobean. The early representations of madness on the English stage, such as Ophelia in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, served as part of the

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[8] Qtd. In Bruster 280-81.
[9] Salkeld 116.

subplot, emphasizing the disorder at Denmark's court and further enhancing the tragic aspects of the play. Later presentations of madness, such as the madhouse scene in Fletcher's *The Pilgrim*, are obviously meant to entertain, to provide comic relief. As Robert Reed has noted, the Jacobean madman

> expressed the frustrations, not the potentialities, of mankind. Instead of aspiring to the superhuman, he almost always testified to the folly and impotency of human effort. Moreover, unlike the Elizabethan madman, he rarely, if ever, went mad without exhibiting a humor first, usually melancholy or choler; and once mad, he rarely recovered his wits.[10]

This change from madmen recovering from their condition to being incurable reflects the growing cynicism of the later Jacobean era. Ambiguity or even a certain sense of hopelessness begins to permeate the drama during this time, as evidenced in Webster's later work.

The use of false accusations of madness also changes. In Elizabethan comedies such as *Twelfth Night or The Honest Whore* Part I, male characters are wrongfully accused of madness by characters that seek to push them to their limits. In *Twelfth Night*, Maria, Toby, and Andrew's shenanigans lead Olivia to believe Malvolio mad; they encourage her accusations as they seek to punish Malvolio for his excessive self-righteousness. The effect is meant to be comic, but it retains a sour note as the play ends without a reconciliation between Malvolio and his tormentors. In *The Honest Whore*, Candido's shrewish wife knowingly accuses her husband falsely of madness to elicit some passionate reaction from

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[10] Reed 5.

him, challenging his easygoing nature. Again, this accusation is meant to have a comic effect, creating suspense as the audience anticipates how long Candido's good nature will last and what retaliation he will visit upon his wife. By the Jacobean period, false accusations of madness are much more sinister. In *The White Devil*, Vittoria is labeled as mad by a male judge-prosecutor in response to her protests regarding the unfairness of her trial. From his powerful position, he uses false accusations of madness to silence his victim and enforce her confinement for her immoral actions.

All three of these characters who are falsely accused of madness are silenced, their voices ignored despite the truth they speak, and they are also confined physically by their accusers or agents of their accusers. Malvolio is locked into a solitary hovel, Candido taken to Bedlam, and Vittoria sent to a house of nuns converted from prostitution. All are taken against their will and despite their protests of innocence. Only Candido's situation maintains a comedic air; Malvolio's experience transgresses the bounds of cruelty and Vittoria's treatment is simply malicious, recognized by observers of the trial as unfair, yet they do nothing to stop it. For an audience familiar with the conventions of madness, it would be easy to see that Malvolio and Candido have been manipulated into situations where their behavior, appearance, and language contribute to the charge of madness against them, to at least initial comic effect. However, Vittoria exhibits nothing like symptoms of madness whatsoever. Audiences who were bound to recognize some aspects of the behavior, treatment,

and outcome for the mad characters from their own environment would understand that.

References to Bedlam or similar institutions seem to proliferate on the Elizabethan and especially the Jacobean stage. They suggest a certain familiarity with the pastime of visiting Bethlehem Hospital to be entertained by the odd behavior of the mad inmates, as well as a growing awareness of the condition of madness and its recognizable symptoms. Therefore I'll only mention a couple of the plays with actual mad characters or a developing theme of madness in them in regard to Bedlam references.

In Thomas Dekker's *The Honest Whore*, Part I, Candido's wife falsely accuses him of madness, asking an officer to take him away. Candido asks, "And whither now, to Bethlem Monastery, Ha?" The Officer replies, "Faith, e'en to the madmen's pound."[11] Later references to madhouses indicate that more than one such institution exists in London. Middleton and Rowley's *The Changeling* offers Alibius, who keeps madmen and fools in a section of his house, attempting to cure them. He warns his servant, Lollio, to keep the visitors to the house, "gallants . . .rich in habits, of stature and proportion very comely" away from his young wife in his absence; as Lollio notes, "they come to see the fools and madmen . . ." so the purpose of their visit is clear.[12]

In several plays a group of mad folk appear--Dekker's *The Honest Whore* Part I, Dekker and Webster's *Northward Hoe!*, Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*,

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[11] 4.3
[12] 1.2

Middleton and Rowley's *The Changeling*, Fletcher's *The Pilgrim*, and Ford's *The Lover's Melancholy*. The appearances of groups of mad people in drama reflects the popularity of going to Bedlam to view the inmates for entertainment, which according to Bedlam records was a common pastime. Even if many people never actually went, the practice was well known. Numerous plays contain references to Bedlam or other houses of confinement for the mad. Also, by presenting groups of mad folks, dramatists exploited the spectacle of madness further, creating a play within the play as the mad interacted with one another or the sane characters, sang or performed a morris dance.

The purpose of the madhouse scenes in several of the dramas seems to be comic relief, entertainment, and reassurance of the established social hierarchy for the audience. Dekker's *The Honest Whore* (1604) has the first scene in a madhouse with only male inmates, which serves as entertainment for the aristocratic characters in the play. The same may be said for Dekker and Webster's *Northward Hoe!* (1607) which differs in that it contains madwomen as well. These numerous references to Bedlam indicate a growing sense of familiarity with known "mad" behavior or symptoms; they led audiences to certain expectations about how mad characters should appear, behave, speak, be treated, and what the outcome of their condition should be. Duncan Salkeld states that what audiences saw was "not madness, *itself.* What they witnessed was rather a particular ensemble of symbols which represented madness; a code, both historically specific and politically resonant, that signified unreason. The site of this semiotic code was the body, the space or text wherein the madness was

inscribed and represented".[13] The performance of madness was to provide

something of a spectacle, which required appropriate costuming, behavior, and

language. Given the popularity of Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, the audience

would be familiar with some of the more standard notions of madness. A stock

mad character would be identifiable immediately from his/her appearance and

his/her condition confirmed by the character's language and actions. An actor

portraying a character who first appeared as sane and later became mad (or who

feigned madness) would strive to clarify the contrast in the character's early

appearance, language, and actions in the early and later appearances.

Likewise actors portraying characters who at some point in the drama

feign madness would also employ these same conventions. All male feigning

characters announce their intentions of counterfeiting madness and their purpose

behind it in an aside to which the audience is privy. Bellafront, the sole woman

who successfully feigns madness, does not make her counterfeit known to the

audience. In accordance with the idea of women lacking a rational capacity

similar to men's, this woman remains a mystery, viewed from the outside by male

observers, and therefore ultimately unknowable to them or to the audience. Since

deception depends upon acting ability and cleverness of the deceiver, and since

women were often perceived as "unknowable" entities, perhaps the male

observers could not tell if she was truly mad or feigning. It therefore remains

ambiguous as to whether or not she is pretending until she chooses to reveal the

answer to the observers both on stage and in the audience. The 'feigning' mad

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[13] *Madness*, 3.

characters and truly mad characters all exhibit the same "symptoms" of madness in their appearance, behavior, language, and/or the source of their condition.

The mad are easily identifiable in drama. They possess disheveled hair, clothing torn or in general disarray, wild flowers gathered or strewn in hair, and/or straw clinging to hair and/or clothing. The mere physical appearance of the mad reveals the complications of gender and the condition. In Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Lear tears off his clothes, as noted in both the stage directions and his speech. He says "Off, off you lendings! Come unbutton here" as he imitates Edgar's bare state. Later, Cordelia searches for her father, noting ". . .why, he was met even now As mad as the vex'd sea; singing aloud; Crown'd with rank fumiter and furrow-weeds, With bur-docks, hemlock, nettles, cuckoo-flowers, darnel, and all the idle weeds that grow in our sustaining corn. . ." Indeed in Act IV, sc. vi the stage directions indicate "Enter Lear, fantastically dressed with wild flowers". All observers, both in the play and in the audience, are aware of his mad condition immediately by his wearing of wildflowers in his hair and his lack of clothing. He is "unnatural" in appearance, feminized by the flowers woven into his hair and lacking his usual dignified decorum. His appearance clearly reveals him to be mad; the cross gendering of his appearance also reflects the disorder in his family relations, where his daughters have turned ambitiously cold-hearted against his generosity towards them. Likewise, when Edgar appears as a Tom O'Bedlam, he

has straw in his hair[14], suggesting that he has come from a madhouse where the inmates sleep on beds of straw.

While a male appearing in torn or rumpled clothing with flowers in his hair, such as Lear, is easily recognized as simply mad, a woman similarly dressed conveys quite inappropriate sexual availability. Mad men are not sexualized. Mad women cannot avoid being so. While it was tragic for anyone to become mad, it was actually dangerous for women to be in such a condition or to be accused of it. In *Hamlet*, Ophelia's death in Act IV, sc. vii is reported by the Queen, who notes ". . .with fantastic garlands did she come, Of crow-flowers, nettles, daises, and long purples . . .". Again, the mad person is seen wearing wild flowers in her hair, indicative of her condition, but also suggestive of one who has just come from a sexual liaison out-of-doors.

In Thomas Dekker's *The Honest Whore*, Part I, Matheo describes a madwoman's appearance to Bellafront, telling her "Y'are best come like a madwoman, without a band, in your waistcoat[15], and the linings of your kirtle outward, like every common hackney that steals out at the back gate of her sweet knight's lodging"[16]. This reinforces the connection between sexual availability/accessibility and women's madness. The danger for a madwoman was twofold. First she appeared sexually accessible and willing by her torn clothing and tousled hair with flowers or straw in it. Second, if mad, she may be wandering about alone, easy prey for sexual predators; in her wanderings she may lack

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[14] 3.4
[15] A sleeveless garment worn by women under the over-dress. The omission of the latter was a mark of the prostitute.
[16] 2.1

protectors and, in her disordered state of mind, be unable to defend herself against attackers.

Mad behavior was often similar for both men and women. Actions or gestures of the mad included: wild eyes, wandering about, often getting lost, speaking of or to hallucinations, or any actions conveying a sense of disorientation--not knowing where one is or not recognizing loved ones. It might also involve an unwarranted solemnity or inappropriate frivolity, extreme sadness, and/or a focus on one's own death in an obsessed manner. Various rumors about mad behavior also circulated, leading some to believe that the mad slept with their eyes open. In John Ford's *The Lover's Melancholy*, Trollio speaks of Meleander, who has been confined for his condition, as follows: " . . . but he sleeps like a hare, with his eyes open . . ."[17].

Again, however, the sexual aspect of madwomen's condition cannot be overlooked. In the same play, during the Masque of Melancholy that is performed, we have a Sea-Nymph, described as "big-bellied, singing and dancing," who exhibits signs of "wanton melancholy" by inviting observers to "come, sport me! Come, court me!" and "let us conclude our delights in a dance."[18] The male characters observing her note that this condition is particular to pregnant women, causing them to dance for as long as three days on end without ceasing. This is undoubtedly a variant of St. Vitus' Dance, which seemed to affect primarily women, usually unmarried or widowed, causing them to dance

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[17] 2.2
[18] 3.3

uncontrollably until exhausted. In *Two Noble Kinsmen* when a doctor is brought in by the Jailer to check on his daughter's condition, he advises the Wooer to pretend to be Palamon, and to lie with her if the Jailer's Daughter so asks. To the Jailer's protests regarding his daughter's chastity, the doctor claims that the wooer's sleeping with her will cure her.[19] Although her father reports to Palamon that she is cured by the play's end, we do not see proof of it. In all of these cases, the women's sexual activity or rather, lack thereof, is considered unnatural and even a source of madness for them. In fact, the medically prescribed cure for them is regular sexual activity.

In John Fletcher's *The Nice Valor; or, The Passionate Madman* (1616), La Nove describes the passionate madman's behavior:

> He runs through all the passions of mankind, And shifts 'em strangely too:
> One while in love; And that so violent, that, for want of business, He'll
> court the very 'prentice of a laundress, Though she have kib'd heels; and,
> in his melancholy again, He will not brook an empress, though thrice
> fairer Than ever Maud was, or higher-spirited Than Cleopatra, or your
> English Countess. Then, on a sudden, he's so merry again, Out-laughs a
> waiting-woman before her first child; And, turning of hand, so angry—He
> has almost beat the Northern fellow blind, that is for that use only . . .[20]

In Shakespeare and/or Fletcher's *Two Noble Kinsmen*, the Wooer describes his discovery of the Jailer's Daughter sitting knee deep in a river to her father: "her careless tresses a wreake of bull-rush rounded; about her stucke

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[19] 4.3
[20] 1.1

thousande fresh water flowers of several colors. . .Rings she made of rushes that

grew by, and to 'em spoke the prettiest posies".[21] She is unaware of her

surroundings, the inappropriateness of her behavior, or of any duty she owes her

father. She is, as many mad persons in drama are, lost in her own world, oblivious

to those around her until they challenge her perspective. Her brother warns, "By

no means cross her, she is then distempered far worse then now she shows."[22]

The Jailer himself describes her behavior as: "She is continually in a harmless

distemper, sleepes little, altogether without appetite, save often drinking,

Dreaming of another world, and a better; and what broken peece of matter so'ere

she's about, the name Palamon lardes it, that she farces ev'ry business".[23] She

remains enamored of Palamon and refuses to acknowledge his lack of response to

her. By denying his rejection of her, she shows a distinct lack of awareness of

others; beyond arrogance or egocentricity, she is obsessed with the idea of a

romance with Palamon to the point that the reality of her situation is not

something she can even recognize, much less admit to herself. She is excessively

self-deluded. Joost Daalder states that one commonly accepted cause of madness

is "a serious loss, with which the victims cannot come to terms, and which leads

them to become obsessed with their deprivation to such an extent that they can

think only about it. It is not a reality which exists outside their imagination."[24]

Josephine Waters Bennett notes that "in the opening scene [of King Lear] we are

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[21] 4.1
[22] 4.1
[23] 4.2
[24] Joost Daalder, "Madness in Parts 1 and 2 of *The Honest Whore*: A Case for Close Reading" *AUMLA* 86.4 (Nov. 1996): 77-78.

shown not only that Lear does not know his children, but that he does not know himself, his responsibilities and his own best interests."[25]

Josephine Waters Bennett notes that "in the opening scene [of King Lear] we are shown, not only that Lear does not know his children, but that he does not know himself, his responsibilities and his own best interests."[26] This lack of knowledge about his own identity and responsibility or duty is exactly what made the mad dangerous to the state and to the culture in which they lived. Their madness challenged the carefully constructed and observed order of the economic, social, political, and gendered hierarchy.

It may also be noted that a lack of conformity to social standards could result in a label of madness. This label could be used to dismiss the words or actions of non-conformists, thereby sustaining the status quo of the 'sane' conformists. Some critics have argued that Dekker's primary intention in *The Honest Whore* Part I is "to show how certain people who are usually disapproved of by society, or held in contempt, are worthy of serious sympathy," speaking in reference not only to the madhouse inmates but also of the title character, a reformed prostitute.[27]

The language used by the mad might express an obsession with death or dying, and might indicate leaps in reasoning from one idea or topic to another without transition. It lacks a focus or purpose. Sometimes it dissolves into

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[25] Josephine Waters Bennett, "The Storm Within: The Madness of King Lear" *Shakespeare Quarterly* 13 (1962): 151.
[26] Bennett 151.
[27] Daalder 68.

nonsense speak, although for the purposes of drama it remains understandable as language and often reveals the emotional or mental turmoil assumed within.

Even the form of the speech could be suggestive, as in *Lear* when the king's sanity slips away as he confuses Edgar, disguised as a Tom O'Bedlam, for himself. He speaks in prose, as Josephine Waters Bennett notes, "suited to one whose wits are jangled, or fallen out of tune".[28] In his speech he also obsessively returns again and again to the theme of betrayal by daughters. In his meeting with Gloucester, he "exhibits alienation from all humanity, refuses help, and distrusts the whole world".[29] Repetition of words, ideas or themes is common in the speech of the mad.

After Ophelia's father is murdered, the Gentleman observing her says she " . . .speaks things in doubt, That carry but half sense: her speech is nothing, yet the unshaped use of it doth move The hearers to collection"; he also notes her "winks, and nods, and gestures".[30] Her manner of communicating, both in words and in gestures, has altered drastically. While using a variety of means of communication, she has lost the ability to convey meaning. She resorts to singing lyrics that focus on true love and death, but her songs become increasingly bawdy: "Let in the maid, that out a maid Never departed more" and "Young men will do't, if they come to't".[31] The initial themes of the songs are appropriate given Hamlet's recent rough rejection of her and his murder of her father. The later sexual themes are indicative of her condition as a mad woman. She has lost her

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[28] Daalder 140.
[29] Daalder 151.
[30] 4.5
[31] 4.5

self-restraint, speaking with little or no control over the appropriateness of the content of her speech. Bruster argues that "Ophelia's bawdy has formed the basis for the speech of the Jailer's Daughter. Linked by an intertextual relation with Ophelia, the Jailer's Daughter nonetheless asserts sexual desire more directly than her predecessor, whose statements are often enigmatic and riddling."[32] He calls the acceptance of sexually explicit language of mad female characters a growing convention of the Jacobean period.[33]

Duncan Salkeld refers to "word salads" of the mad in drama, meaning their speech is often terms tossed together revealing the speaker's inability to structure language into meaning.[34] Signifiers shift outside their normal realms and the sane can no longer comprehend the sufferer's speech. More often than not, the sentence structure of the mad makes perfect sense, but the content of their sentences does not. They often talk of nonexistent objects or people, using illogic in their arguments, which are often governed by an excess of emotion or passion. For example, in Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*, Hieronimo talks to Horatio at length after Horatio's murder, appearing to his servants to hear responses from his late son.

There is often repetition in the speech of the mad and a great deal of interjected laughter, as well as an attitude of suspicion and either great merriment or excessive hostility, challenging other speakers or attempting to "catch" other speakers in a game of wits. In *Two Noble Kinsmen*, the Jailer's Daughter sings songs of death and love, makes references to the future loss of her maidenhead

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[32] Bruster 281.
[33] Bruster 281.
[34] Salkeld *Madness* 34.

and of pregnancies. Douglas Bruster, in "The Politics of Madwomen's Language",

observes that

> Her speech has the following characteristics: sentences ending with *else*;
>
> the *phrase like a top*, used idiosyncratically in various scenes and
>
> contexts; sporadic but concentrated alliteration; and frequent use of *all*, a
>
> word that occurs nineteen times in her speech, often in clusters.[35]

Her speech patterns are quite marked after the onset of her madness. The

repetition and the musicality of her speech indicate her childlike manner in

madness. The Wooer describes her speech in the following: " . . . . then she sung /

Nothing but 'Willow, willow, willow', and between / Ever was 'Palamon, fair

Palamon'".[36] As another example, Antonio in *The Changeling* pretends to be an

idiot, brought to the madhouse for a cure. When asked for his name by Lollio, he

replies,"He, he, he! Well, I thank you, cousin; he, he, he!"[37] Similarly, in an

encounter with Polonius, Hamlet repeats himself. When asked what he is reading,

he answers, "Words, words, words" and when Polonius asks to take his leave of

the Prince, Hamlet responds, "You cannot, sir, take from me any thing that I will

more willingly part withal: except my life, except my life, except my life".[38] This

repetition has a lyric quality to it, but madmen never sing, as madwomen do.[39] It

may be that the mad men remain somewhat aware of their plight, while

madwomen are beyond self-awareness. If music is considered to represent or

symbolize divine order, perhaps the fragments of songs reinforce the idea of mad

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[35] 279.
[36] 4.1.79-81.
[37] 1.2
[38] 2.2.189 and 2.2.216.

women being disordered in the world. The singing may also serve as a reminder of the more primitive, emotional nature of women and the sheer beauty of the singer's voice may, in fact, enhance the tragedy of her condition. Usually the singing contains only fragments of songs, often bawdy or mournful, conveying the competing themes of sex and death. In any case, the songs of mad women are inappropriate speech, not only in content but in form, for the scenes in which they appear.

The speech of both male and female mad characters is often focused on an object of obsession, whether it be a daughter's betrayal as it is for Lear, a mother's betrayal as it is for Hamlet, or the death of a loved one as it is for Ophelia. Madwomen's speech is sorrowful, focused on death, interrupted by moments of sudden joviality and sexual ribaldry. Madmen's speech is sorrowful, fearful, and often angry. The gendering of speech occurs in part because women could only be acted upon while men could enact; if wronged, women could mourn the betrayal but do little about it themselves. If men were wronged, they could seek their own revenge. In addition patriarchal culture dictated that female anger be repressed. An unacceptable emotion for women, anger in the form of righteous indignation was reserved for patriarchal figures. With few exceptions, women whose behavior was extreme were kept off the stage altogether. In fact women are not at the core of any plays other than John Webster's.

Carol Thomas Neely claims that "Shakespeare's language of madness is characterized by fragmentation, obsession, and repetition . . ." and something she

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[39] Bruster 281.

refers to as "quotation" or "bracketing" and "italicization", meaning "the mad are 'beside themselves'; their discourse is not their own".[40] Again, the language of madwomen often is highly sexual, corroborating that their condition is sexualized in a way that men's madness is not. According to Neely's idea about the language of the mad not being their own, the mad woman is reciting what she has been told about women or what has been warned about her own inherent proclivities. But are the mad women in male penned drama ever truly their own? It is doubtful; the easiest or most effective way to sketch their madness would be to fulfill cultural expectations of the madwoman. The tragedy lies in her beauty lost to the inherent weakness or instability of her sex.

All of these plays place an emphasis on how the condition of madness came to be. Characters observing the behavior or appearance of the mad are always asking "why fell he mad?" to which there always seems to be a ready answer of some sort--"too much pride", "grief over a loved one lost", "unrequited love", "wronged woman", or even "frightened by fire". These causes are accepted without question. Mad characters' actions and/or appearances usually elicit sympathy or amusement from the sane observers. Usually the sympathy exists only if the mad character is a beautiful young woman or is suffering intense grief over the loss of a loved one; if the madness comes from some other source, the character is often considered evil. This seems to be a holdover from medieval superstitions regarding mental illness as a form of demonic possession. Lay diagnosis is commonly practiced.

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[40] Neely, "Documents " 323.

Other characters in the plays exhibit a certain fascination with the origin of a given character's madness, as if knowing the cause could help define the necessary treatment, allow a cure of some sort. Often the only escape from madness lies in death, sometimes even suicide. Madness is usually the result of an excess of passion or emotion of some sort, such as anger, grief, fear, or even love. All madness in Elizabethan and Jacobean England could be read as politically challenging because of the emphasis on structure and maintaining order; therefore disorder must represent rebellion in some respects, a dis-ordering of the self.

Mad male and female characters are represented differently in drama. Male madness may frequently be real or feigned for a specific purpose. Madmen may be cured of their condition. Female madness is usually real, only rarely feigned. Madwomen are never cured and are most likely to end up dead. They usually kill themselves but occasionally serve as murder victims for male villains.

Perhaps in accordance with the Renaissance view of women as inherently irrational, women are viewed as incapable of faking the condition of mental illness. Attempting to feign it would prove too much for women and they would undoubtedly succumb to it. The paired cases of madness in many dramas emphasize this concept. In Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*, Hieronimo, affected by grief over his son's murder, fluctuates between assumed madness and real insanity. Isabella, his wife, cannot stop blaming herself for Horatio's murder, despite her innocence. She finally commits suicide as penance for her sins, overwhelmed by her grief. In Shakespeare, Hamlet's melancholy, considered normal for a noble man, is a condition he exaggerates to carry out his plan of revenge. Ophelia is

maddened by grief over Hamlet's condition and the loss of her father at her ex-lover's hands; she, too, commits suicide. "Hamlet is presented as fashionably introspective and melancholy while Ophelia becomes alienated, acting out the madness Hamlet only plays at."[41] It would appear that man's superior strength over emotion enables him to walk the line between real and assumed madness, while woman's inherent irrationality makes her a ready victim for real madness, and she is wholly incapable of recognizing her condition or resisting it whatsoever. Once she has succumbed to it, there is no recovery. She will remain mad or die.

In fact, for the named madwomen in these plays, there is no way out but continued madness or death. Isabella and Ophelia commit suicide; so, too, does Aspatia in Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Maid's Tragedy*. She has been wronged by her lover, suffers intensely of what modern audiences would call depression throughout the drama, and finally kills herself. Although she speaks of her sorrow and wish for death throughout the play, she does not seem aware of her condition; she does not name it nor does she resist it in any way. She never questions her mental state.

Male characters who suffer from madness are often aware of their condition, sometimes even before its initial onset. They fear it and resist it. They often question their own sanity in lengthy asides or soliloquies. Their awareness of the fragility of their mental positions leads them to fight to retain their sanity, unlike the female characters that seem to have no choice but to accept their condition. The virtue of male strength is exhibited in this 'internal' struggle to

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[41] Neely, " Documents" 326

which the audience is privy. Lear fears madness and seems to be somewhat aware

of his condition. He later bemoans, "O, how this mother swells up toward my

heart! Hysteria passio, down, thou climbing sorrow . . .".[42] Karen Coddon claims

that in Elizabethan and Jacobean theater the mad hero never occupies the status of

"an absolute exile":

> his threat transgressive more than nihilistic, the mad tragic hero,
>
> unlike the fully demonized savage or "ungovernable man," violates
>
> and recognizes social boundaries simultaneously. In his tragedy he
>
> lingers in the dangerous, equivocal space of "reason in madness,"
>
> but he is never completely marginalized.[43]

His awareness of his condition enables him to remain within the order even as he

transgresses certain social boundaries. It is also this awareness that may allow his

eventual recovery from the illness. This awareness is lacking in the female

characters, perhaps an indication of their inability to recover from the disease

once they have succumbed to it.

More men than women feigned madness in the drama, possibly because

there was less sexual danger for madmen than for madwomen. Being female

seems to equal possessing sexuality with a thin veneer of self-control. Kathleen

McLuskie notes that in Lear's mad fantasies "about the collapse of law and the

destruction of ordered social control, women's lust is vividly represented as the

centre and source of the ensuing corruption".[44] Therefore it follows that women

who were "unprotected" or "ungoverned", two very different statuses, were more

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[42] 4.4
[43] "Suche" 60.

susceptible to madness. A woman's excessive grief over loss of a male loved one might also indicate loss of control through losing the one who controls. Those women who are older or who occupy a higher social status appear to go mad decorously, as Ophelia and Isabella do. The chaste woman ensures order; the unchaste brings chaos. Sexualizing madwomen's appearance or speech reinforces the idea of disorder and the danger it can bring, not only to the individual woman but also to the society of which she is a part.

Often plays containing mad characters have at least two characters portraying elements of mad behavior or appearance. One person in this pairing is truly afflicted with a mental disturbance while the other is feigning a similar condition to achieve some ends, whether it is to enact revenge, to survive or even to meet a lover on the sly. In these plays, both cases of madness are necessary to aid the audience in defining what true madness is via its recognizable conventions such as appearance, behavior, or language. These two portrayals are meant as a comparison and contrast for one another. "Edgar's acting counterpoints and heightens the picture of Lear's madness."[45] For example, the audience for *King Lear* is made aware that Lear is truly mad not only by his spoken fears of the condition, but also by Edgar's announcement of his disguise as a madman. We recognize from Edgar's assumed behavior what is happening to Lear as the play progresses. In most plays with characters feigning madness, the characters announce their intent in an aside shared with the audience, making their intent known. Edgar says

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[44] McLuskie 99.
[45] Bennett 149.

Whilst I may 'scape, I will preserve myself: and am bethought to take the

basest and most poorest shape that ever penury, in contempt of man,

brought near to beast: my face I'll grime with filth; blanket my loins: elfe

all my hair in knots; and with presented nakedness out-face the winds and

persecutions of the sky. The country gives me proof and precedent of

Badlam beggars, who, with roaring voices, stike in their numb'd and

mortified bare arms pins, wooden pricks, nails, springs of rosemary; and

with this horrible object, from low farms, poor pelting villages, sheep-

cotes, and mills sometime with lunatic bans, sometimes with prayers,

enforce their charity. Poor Turleygod! Poor Tom! That's something yet:

Edgar I nothing am.[46]

He is not pretending to be Edgar gone mad, but an anonymous madman. In a

sense, willful relinquishment of one's identity could also be considered madness.

However, Edgar's relinquishment of his identity is forced; due to Edmund's

treachery, their father disowns Edgar, casting him 'fatherless' into the world. In

general, it went against reason to surrender one's place in the 'natural order' of the

world.

Hamlet, on the other hand, pretends to be himself maddened by grief over

his father's death, his mother's too hasty marriage to his uncle, and his uncle's

usurpation of the throne from the rightful heir, the Prince of Denmark. He warns

Horatio, "How strange or odd soe'er I bear myself, As I perchance hereafter shall

think meet To put an antic disposition on, that you, at such times seeing me, never

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[46] 2.3

shall . . .note that you know aught of me . . .".[47] To seek revenge for his father's

murder, he chooses to shift his behavior from mere melancholy to madness.

Of those who feign madness, there are two types of deceit. One may

assume the disguise of a generic mad person, as Edgar does in *King Lear*. No one

realizes who he really is and therefore he is able to move about at will, as a simple

"Tom O'Bedlam". He pretends a fiend is haunting him from place to place in

order to escape his murderous brother's assassination attempts. No one recognizes

him as Edgar throughout the play. He reveals himself, easily shedding his

disguise, only when he knows it is safe to do so and he is reconciled with his

father. In *The Changeling*, three characters pretend to be anonymous mad folk.

They don these disguises for different reasons. Franciscus and Antonio feign

madness, coming to dwell at the madhouse to hide. One female character also

impersonates a generic madwoman; Isabella, wife to the madhouse keeper,

Albinius, disguises herself as an anonymous madwoman

As *The Changeling*, Antonio enters "disguised like an idiot", seeking

refuge in the madhouse. He reveals his disguise to Isabella as he professes his

love for her. He warns her, "Take no acquaintance Of these outward follies, there

is within A gentleman that loves you".[48] Another fraudulent madman, Franciscus,

reveals his disguise through a love letter he sends Isabella, which reads, "Sweet

lady, having now cast off this counterfeit cover of a madman, I appear to your

best judgment a true and faithful lover of your beauty." He warns that he remains

mad, unless she "cure" him, and signs his letter "Yours all, or one beside

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[47] 2.1
[48] 3.3

himself".[49] There is a third "feigner" in this madhouse. With Lollio's help, Isabella later disguises herself as a generic madwoman to see about "curing" or exposing Franciscus' fraudulent condition. She enters "dressed as a madwoman" and reveals herself to Antonio as well as her reason for the disguise once he has admitted to her that "I am no fool, you bedlam!". Isabella replies, "But you are, as sure as I am, mad. Have I put on this habit of a frantic, With love as full of fury, to beguile The nimble eye of watchful jealousy, And am I thus rewarded?"[50] She adds, "I came a feigner, to return stark mad".[51] Her intent is to discover one fraud and instead she finds two, wondering at her husband's inability to run his madhouse effectively. This sort of generic impersonation appears to have been less fraught with danger of truly becoming mad than the other kind, which entailed pretending to be mad as oneself.

While male characters such as Hamlet, and Flamineo in *The White Devil* undertake feigning madness as themselves, women generally do not. It is assumed that they were not considered capable of such a masquerade without succumbing to the real thing. The sole exception to this rule is Bellafront, the title character of *The Honest Whore*, Part I. After her conversion, she successfully pretends to be maddened by Matheo's use and rejection of her, since her hopelessness supplies a reasonable source of madness. As the honest whore, she is already exceptional among women for her devotional return to chastity. She is the reverse of the St. Vitus dancers or the pregnant wanton melancholic, yet her conversion confirms similar ideas about women, sexuality, and mental health. Excess in either

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[49] 4.3
[50] 4.3

direction seems to be viewed as potentially dangerous for women. The unmarried, widowed, or largely pregnant may be viewed as abstaining from sexual activity to their detriment while the prostitute may be seen as practicing excessive sexual activity through her trade. Bellafront's reform from prostitution and her subsequent acquisition of a husband show her to be returning to mental health. Her counterfeit of madness provides a believable means of acquiring Matheo as husband, although initially no clear purpose is made known to the audience for her feigning madness. Unlike the male characters that feign the condition of madness, she offers no statement of intent to the audience to reveal her counterfeit. Her former lovers and acquaintances recognize her at the madhouse and believe her to be mad herself. Upon questioning her, the Duke concludes that she lost her wits when she was wronged by Matheo, causing her to turn to a life of prostitution. Bellafront is, however, now seen as a chaste woman, driven into sexually inappropriate behavior, or madness, by the wrong done her. However, she is rewarded with marriage to Matheo when she reveals that she is not mad after all. She has, apparently, cleverly used the disguise of madness to gain a husband and respectable status, making her a unique character. Even this exceptional woman, however, confirms the rules of chastity. The ending places her under male authority once again, returning her to a respectable position in society.

Among others more clearly feigning madness are the players in the Masque of Melancholy performed in Ford's *The Lover's Melancholy*. They act out their parts according to Burton's classification of the mad to entertain the Prince

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[51] 4.3

and to show him his own melancholy's cure. In addition to their presence, and the audience within the play's quick recognition of them, attests to a common familiarity with the melancholic stereotypes of the day.

Together these dramatic conventions of madness—appearance, behavior, language, source of the condition, and the inherent gendering of the condition—provided a standard stereotypic mad character easily recognized as such by the audience. The careful combination of these conventions determined whether the portrayal was meant to evoke laughter or pity.

John Webster

John Webster's drama exemplifies the fullest development of these conventions of madness. In his works, we find mad characters with disheveled appearances, disorderly conduct, inappropriate speech, traditional and nontraditional sources of madness, aristocratic melancholy and excessive melancholy bordering on madness, and of course, gendered representations. 'Both of his works discussed here contain portrayals of actual madness, feigned madness, madness falsely accused, and melancholy in its two extremes. He employs those familiar melancholic and mad stereotypes in his adaptation of *The White Devil*. In this work, we have 'true' madmen and madwomen, a male 'feigner' of madness for personal gain, melancholy men, and women falsely accused by men of madness. His later work, *The Duchess of Malfi*, reflects a more complex and often ambiguous portrait of madness, challenging the usual dramatic conventions for the condition. While Webster uses madness differently than

earlier playwrights, the gendered element of madness remains consistent. Webster's female protagonists in both works are strong, independent women who resist the false label of madness, even when under the control of mad and/or corrupt men. Yet look what happens to them—death by murder, ultimately. In both of these plays, "the female hero moves in an exclusively masculine stage-world, in which it is the task of the male characters to 'read' her".[52] Yet despite the title of both works, the heroines are not so much the focus of the action; the effort by male characters to successfully contain them is. They are guilty of being earthy women and of resisting when they are treated wrongfully. Both are killed as a punishment for their sensuality and their resistance to patriarchal systems of authority. Elizabethan and earlier Jacobean drama incorporating insane characters or characters who try to use the label of insanity culminates in Webster's skillful employment of gender and madness. As Laura L. Behling observes:

> With figures of women whose behavior is politically and sexually masculine, incestuous relations, corrupt men of God, cold-blooded murders, and the blurring of reality and fiction, the ambiguities of the Duchess's matrilineal authority seem to be a logically illogical conclusion to two extremely complex and dis-ordered plays. But what causes the most anxious moments in Webster's stagecraft are challenges to sexual authority, and the dis-ordering of traditional sex and gender relations and hence, political power bases.[53]

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[52] Lisa Jardine, "The Duchess of Malfi: A Case Study in the Literary Representation of Women." *John Webster's Duchess of Malfi.* Ed. Harold Bloom. (NY: Chelsea House, 1987) 117.
[53] "S/he scandles our proceedings": the anxiety of alternative sexualities in 'The White Devil' and 'The Duchess of Malfi.'" *English Language Notes* 33.4 (June 1996) 25.

She also notes that "in the textual portrayals of sexual characteristics, Vittoria and the Duchess are powerful sexual women infused with political, hence masculine authority . . ."[54]; in addition, "the women's assumption of masculine behavior and the men's submission disrupt the homosocial bonds of male order".[55] Such disruption cannot be tolerated; it must be corrected or at the very least confined, as both these women are. Indeed as Dympna Callaghan has stated, "the foundations of order are crucially dependent on gender categories".[56] If gender categories are transgressed, the order is threatened and often those who threaten the social order are further marginalized by being labeled "mad", as Vittoria and the Duchess are.

In *The White Devil*, John Webster employs several different uses of the terminology and conventions of madness. These references to madness differ markedly in terms of gender. Men accuse women of madness, one woman "turns" mad from grief and shock, one man becomes mad by a poison, and another man feigns madness as a means of self-protection. All of these situations reveal something about how madness was most commonly used on the Stuart stage, and they offer insight into popular ideas of madness, as well as suggest ways in which madness in the drama is highly gendered.

Two "genuine" cases of madness occur in Brachiano and Cornelia. A poisoned helmet maddens Brachiano; his madness and consequent death serve punishment for his moral transgressions, adultery with Vittoria and the murders of Isabella and Camillo to allow consummation of his lust for Vittoria. Brachiano's

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[54] Behling 31.
[55] Behling 33.

inability to control this lust for her is a sign of weakness on his part; his sexual

identity as a man is, as some have argued, challenged by the degree of his desire

and his willingness to surrender to it.[57] His death helps to restore order. Cornelia,

however, remains an innocent victim. Her madness is tragic; it ensues from the

transgressions of her highly moral nature by the actions of her children, Vittoria

and Flamineo, who commit adultery and murder. At the play's end she continues

mad, acting like a child, innocent of any wrongdoing in the world around her.

In his jealousy, Brachiano claims, "Oh, I could be mad . . .And tear my

hair off!", showing his familiarity with at least one convention of madness. When

he meets with Vittoria and she defends herself, he observes how unstable his own

thoughts are. He is aware of his own mental distress and the possibility of it

exceeding his reason. Lodovico soon poisons the Duke and it affects his brain,

leaving him speaking distractedly. The cause of his condition is clear. Ultimately

he is punished for his moral transgression in pursuing Vittoria and seeking the

murders of his wife and Vittoria's husband.

Flamineo stabs his own brother, Marcello, right in front of Cornelia, their

mother. Witnessing this violence causes Cornelia to deny what she has seen,

placing the blame for Marcello's death on lack of proper medical attention. In

recounting the event she witnessed, she admits to Brachiano, "I know not how,

For I was out of my wits . . " and yet what she is relating is not true, as attested to

by a page standing nearby who gently corrects her. She appears to exhibit an

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[56] *Woman* 1.

[57] Stephen Orgel notes that "lust effeminates, makes men incapable of manly pursuits . . .Women are dangerous to men because sexual passion for women renders men effeminate: this is an age in

awareness of her condition, yet she actually remains in denial in this scene as to

the cause of Marcello's death, choosing to blame it on lack of care after the

stabbing than to the actual stabbing committed by her other son. The death of the

most moral of her children at the hands of the most immoral one is more than she

can bear.

As Cornelia is preparing Marcello for burial, she remains childlike,

overwhelmed by her grief, as her ladies-in-waiting recognize. Zanche says, "Her

ladyship's foolish." Another lady clarifies, "Alas, her grief hath turned her child

again!" The cause of her condition is clear and without question. When Flamineo

enters, she does not recognize him, calling him a "grave-maker" instead. Yet the

truth in her words to him reveals a certain recognition of his role in the death of

Marcello. Her response to him is also ironic, reflecting the fact that he has not

behaved as a true son to her. Her inability to identify her own son is a further

indication of her madness. She has lost the memory of her own past, thereby

losing her sense of identity as an adult and a mother. Her condition is truly tragic;

it conveys a sense of the damage to innocents that others' moral transgressions can

inflict.

Three times in this work male characters attempt to dismiss the claims or

actions of female characters by referring to them as "mad". Unlike interactions

with male characters, who *are* either mad, feigning madness, or who are *asked* if

they're "out of [their] wits", female characters are simply *told* that they are mad.

Twice it is spoken as diagnosis by male characters occupying positions of power

which sexuality itself is misogynistic, as the love of women threatens the integrity of the
perilously achieved male identity" (qtd. in Behling 32).

in order to silence women who speak the truth. Once it is spoken by a male in a position of power over a woman, attempting to deny the shock of her words and to nullify her actions so that he may keep the peace.

When Cornelia interrupts the liaison between her married daughter, Vittoria, and the married Brachiano, arranged by her son, Flamineo, who is watching it, she curses her daughter. Brachiano's response to this is "fie, fie, the woman's mad." His attempt to ignore her curses or dismiss them is to label her unstable. He retires to his bed alone and ill soon after, calling Cornelia an "Uncharitable woman" and blaming all ensuing harm upon her words, rather than his adulterous actions. He attempts to shift all blame to her by labeling her as mad. The gross immorality of Vittoria's, Flamineo's, and Brachiano's actions result in Cornelia's cursing them. She speaks righteously, from a grounded moral position.

When Isabella argues with her husband, Brachiano, in front of her brother, Francisco, and vows never to sleep with him again because of his infidelities, Francisco calls her a "foolish, mad, and jealous woman" in an attempt to break through her resolve and make peace between Brachiano and Isabella. Her actions are, unbeknownst to Francisco, noble and self-sacrificing. She volunteers to appear shrewish to keep peace between her brother and Brachiano, so she repeats the vow just uttered by Brachiano as though it were her own.

Laura Bromley states that "what it means to be a woman is a central issue in the play, highlighted by the extreme examples of Isabella and Zamele, the fulminations of Flamineo on the subject, the subtler assertions of Brachiano,

Francisco, and Monticelso, and the counter assertions of Vittoria".[58] Conflict

arises from the disagreements over this definition, and the "resolution" is that all

the women in this play are punished through madness or death. Behling also notes

that differences in the women presented in *The White Devil* lie in their

expressions of sexuality, which reveal "their gradations of gender"; referring to

Linda Woodbridge's phrasing, she asserts that Vittoria especially "combines

masculine traits and feminine in a way which blatantly violates the distinctions

demanded between the sexes".[59] Vittoria asserts her own sexual desire in pursuing

an adulterous relationship with Bracciano; in her speech she plants the idea of

murdering their spouses so that they may be together, and, far from showing any

remorse at her unseemly actions, she articulately defends herself in the hearing

against her. As admirable as twentieth century audiences may find her latter

'transgression', it is a serious fault. As Catherine Belsey notes, "domestic

absolutism requires that women be able to speak in order to acquiesce, but it

withholds the right to use that ability to protest or make demands".[60] Vittoria

clearly exercises her ability to protest, and for women to speak in such a way

"threaten(s) the system of differences which gives meaning to patriarchy".[61]

In the court case against Vittoria, prosecuted by Monticelso and presided

over by Monticelso, she eloquently protests the unfairness of the proceedings, and

the ambassadors observing seem to feel she is in the right. Monticelso ignores her

protest and sentences her to a house of convertites. She calls rape, saying that

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[58] qtd. in Behling 38.
[59] 39-40.
[60] *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama.* (London: Methuen, 1985) 181.

justice has been forced to do his pleasure, to which he replies "Fie, she's mad!"

She then curses him, and again he responds with "She's turned Fury." He has no

logic or law upon which to stand, so he dismisses her protest as a nonsensical one,

refusing even to consider it or to acknowledge that it deserves consideration or

that it is the truth. His hatred of her is evident in the manner in which he speaks of

her and how he ignores her articulate defense.

As Theodora A. Jankwoski observes "one way to contain women who

acted in ways contrary to accepted female patterns of behavior was to label them

'whores' or 'witches'"[62]; the label of "madness" is used in the same capacity, to

contain or literally confine women's behavior that male authority deemed

disruptive or even simply unsuitable.

In this play, women suffer most under imputations of madness. They are

silenced or their words are dismissed by powerful male figures, a reflection of the

anxiety of the patriarchal power structures when confronted by assertive, truthful

challenges to the existing system. Female characters also bear the frustration of

not being able to act out their revenge, but having to occupy passive positions,

waiting to be acted upon rather than taking action. Isabella, earlier in the play,

states, "Oh, that I were a man, or that I had power To execute my apprehended

wishes!"[63] She is frustrated by her limited access to take revenge for the wrong

committed against her; as a woman, she is not free to act, but must be acted upon

by men. Undoubtedly her brother would readily take on the role of her avenger,

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[61] Belsey, *Subject* 191.

[62] "The Female Body in *The Duchess of Malfi." John Webster's Duchess of Malfi*. Ed. Harold Bloom. (NY: Chelsea House, 1987) 236.

[63] 2.1. 243-44

but she wants to avoid this, fearing for his life. Rather she makes herself the cause of the trouble between herself and Brachiano.

In Flamineo we have a sane character who feigns madness for his own benefit. To hide his lack of remorse for the murder of the mistress he served and to disassociate himself from Vittoria's disgrace, Flamineo counterfeits madness over his sister's punishment for her adulterous behavior. Flamineo feigns madness after Vittoria's sentencing. He says, "I will feign a mad humor for the disgrace of my sister, and that will keep off the idle questions. I will talk to any man, hear no man, and for a time appear a politic madman." He uses the conventions of madness to sound out others about his sister's sentencing and the Duke's reactions. It is a temporary safety net for him. Lodovico and Marcello both notice his "strange" behavior and comment on it. His mad behavior includes talking to himself and ranting over the injustice served his sister. Despite his acting, those around him see no cause for his odd behavior, which calls them to question it. Later, Brachiano's ghost appears to Flamineo and portends his death, which seems to turn Flamineo desperate. He goes to Vittoria for money, but she recognizes his condition, calling him "distracted" as well as melancholic and despairing. She warns him of the sin of self-murder. This is ironic since he attempted to make the conventions of madness work for himself. He is punished for his actions through his desperation, loss of his sister's trust, his mother's madness, and finally, his own murder at the hands of the avenging Lodovico.

One melancholic figure in this drama, Francisco, sorrowful after Isabella's murder, dwells at length upon his grief. As a result, his melancholic meditation

brings him a vision of his sister's ghost, almost as if he conjured it himself.

Thinking about revenge, planning it, he opts to recall his dead sister's face for

inspiration. He says, "No, I'll close my eyes, / And in a melancholic thought I'll

frame / Her figure 'fore me". As he does so, her ghost appears. He sees it, as does

the audience, but attributes its presence to his melancholy. He observes,

"Thought, as a subtle juggler, makes us deem / Things supernatural, which yet

have cause / Common as sickness. 'Tis my melancholy." Although he recognizes

his condition, he questions the apparition, "How cam'st thou by thy death?"

Realizing the danger of his state of mind, he banishes the ghost. "Remove this

object; /Out of my brain with't. What have I to do / With tombs, or death-beds,

funerals, or tears, / That have to meditate upon revenge." In the midst of his

speech, as he order the ghost out, it vanishes. It is not a figment of his

imagination, as the audience sees it, too. The audience can accept the ambiguity

of it because it makes sense.

The scene recalls Hamlet's perception of his murdered father's ghost after

a period of brooding, melancholic behavior on his part; likewise there is just

reason for Isabella's ghost to walk in view of the one who could avenge her

betrayal and murder. MacBeth also sees the ghost of Banquo after his murder and,

like Francisco, he manages to banish the spirit. As with the phantom appearance

in *MacBeth*, the one in *The White Devil* figures as an analogy for the viewer's

state of mind. Melancholia may make one more receptive to other kinds of

knowledge, other kinds of communication. Yet Francisco distrusts this

experience, desiring to control it rather than be controlled by it. Here we see the

effects of real melancholy, brought about by the classic trigger of grief at the death of a loved one and showing he is not mad; he exerts his will over the melancholy, exhibiting his inherent nobility. Acknowledging this aspect of madness, which could be brought on by excessive melancholy, seems to allow Francisco to commit himself to taking action, maintaining control over himself and his melancholic tendencies.

Madness is dangerous; it proves remarkably deadly in this play for almost all involved. The only main characters who escape the curse of it are Lodovico and Francisco. Brachiano is made mad by a poison and dies. Flamineo tries to use madness as a protection but succumbs to despair and is murdered by Lodovico. All the women falsely accused of madness have tragic endings caused by men. Vittoria's "assumption of masculine sexual behavior--in a patriarchal culture that was having its masculine identity and lineage severely tested and attacked--was too much to bear, even in fictional space".[64] Cornelia is driven mad and Vittoria and Isabella are murdered. In the drama of male playwrights, women are never cured of their madness.

In his later tragedy, *The Duchess of Malfi* (1614), Webster again presents audiences with a remarkably strong female character who refuses to deny her status, her identity, and her power even in the face of captivity and torture by her brother. His use of madness here challenges the conventions he employed in his earlier work in various ways. While he uses many of the same elements, he orders them differently. Madness is portrayed as a spectacle, a threat, a torture device, an actual illness, and a fatal danger. The play itself is far crueler and more

devastating than his earlier work. The Duchess is a more admirable character than Vittoria, exhibiting her nobility in her dignified and often selfless behavior, especially on her deathbed. IN addition she honorably weds her lover, is a dutiful loving mother to her children, and reacts with reason than with emotion to events. She may appear corrupt but she is ultimately proven not to be. Vittoria's beauty masks her corrupt nature that led her into an adulterous affair with Brachanio and made her suggest the murder of their spouses to liberate their lust. In *The White Devil*, characters act out of lust and greed, which motivates them to commit murder. The most villainous character is Flamineo who arranges liaisons between Vittoria and Brachanio and who aids in the murders of Camillo and Isabella; he is motivated solely by greed. The two villains in *The Duchess of Malfi*, Ferdinand and Bosola, are exceptionally cruel, plotting, enacting, and enjoying the torture and murder of the Duchess. Ferdinand is driven by madness, in which his sexual jealousy is given full reign. He seeks to make the Duchess deny or forget her identity through his parade of madmen, his separation of her from her husband and children, his use of wax figures to confuse her, and his confinement of her. His attempts to drive her mad ultimately fail. Bosola seems to be acting out of greed, although he apparently *enjoys* the role of torturer and murderer. The murder of children also enhances the horrific tragedy of this play. In addition, we have a true and rather elaborate case of male madness in Ferdinand, an unconventional melancholic/mad man, and a group of madmen used as "treatment" for melancholy. References to melancholy proliferate in this drama. At various times, it is used to describe Antonio, the Cardinal, Bosola, the

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[64] Behling 42.

Duchess, and Julia. This excessive use of the term decreases its ability to accurately convey meaning; it also reflects the widespread popularity of the new psychological terminology and of aristocratic cultivation of the condition.

In this work, we are offered a counter melancholic for Francisco. The earlier presentation of true melancholy was a refined, controlled, respectable one; in Webster's later work, the truly melancholic figure ceases to control his condition, perhaps even to the point of true madness. The male character who most fully embodies melancholy in this drama is Bosola, the former scholar-convict who acts as hired spy for Ferdinand. Antonio marks his melancholy, worrying that it "will poison all his goodness".[65] Bosola is known as a studious individual, one who has perhaps a reputation for melancholy in the socially desirable form of an intellectually "world weary" attitude. Ferdinand encourages Bosola to foster this image because "'t will express You envy those that stand above your reach yet strive not to come near 'em . . ".[66] In encouraging others to think of him this way, Bosola would seem cynical about his status yet lacking the ambition to alter it. Antonio's anxiety is fulfilled as Ferdinand makes Bosola his paid accomplice, one who enacts Ferdinand's evil bidding with scant ethical consideration. Yet, Bosola is not simply a mindless strong arm, or hired thug. An intelligent, educated man, he struggles with and ultimately succumbs to his brooding, melancholic nature. He embodies the idea of a psychomachia throughout the drama, torn between his seemingly honest admiration for the Duchess and his desire for personal gain. The final game of wits he plays with the

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[65] 2.1
[66] 2.2

Duchess appears to be as much for his sadistic enjoyment as for fulfillment of Ferdinand's orders, indicating that his struggle has been lost. Once he realizes that any monetary or social gain is lost to him, he seeks revenge for the Duchess' betrayal and death, despite his status as her assassin.

This vicious melancholy seems to be something Bosola never recognizes in himself, therefore leaving him unable to control it. Bosola is no longer a scholar and has never ranked as nobility; in addition, the audience is never shown a particular cause or reason for Bosola's often contradictory behavior, revealing a shift from the earlier portrayals of madness and melancholy. Excessive melancholy can lead to madness, which it seems to do in his case although it is never labeled as such. Other than a brooding, solitary nature, he exhibits no symptoms of either condition throughout the play. His condition is altogether something new, a melding of the two in the most dangerous combination possible. It does not fit the pre-existing conventions.

In the atmosphere of this play, the person given the most reason to succumb to madness is the Duchess. Cariola, servant to the Duchess, expresses concern about the Duchess' state of mind in Act II, scene iii: "Whether the spirit of greatness or of woman Reign most in her, I know not: but it shows A fearful madness . . .". She is speaking of the Duchess' decision to go against her brother's wishes and class boundaries to secretly wed Antonio, a member of her household staff. Her statement can be interpreted in more than one way. If she views the Duchess negatively, her description could be taken to mean that the Duchess is either motivated by arrogance from her status and title or by emotional or lustful

weakness from her gender. Conversely, if she admires the Duchess, as it seems she does, her speculation could mean that she believes the Duchess to be ruled either by her noble blood or by trust in her own perceptions rather than her brothers' wishes. Like Vittoria, the Duchess asserts herself sexually in taking this inappropriate husband. Such sexual assertiveness is viewed as a threat to the existing patriarchal order. Women who acknowledge, much less act upon, their sexual desire are seen as "repositories of the dark mystery of female sexuality," who are capable of destroying "the fundamental institutions of society. Beyond the control of law, they are outlawed by the social body, pushed to the margins of speech, and yet spoken of more volubly than their patient sisters".[67] Catherine Belsey notes "presented as transgressing the system of differences which gives meaning to social relations, these dramatic heroines are defined as extra-human, demonic".[68] They become outcasts, labeled as possessed by demons or figures of madness. Belsey adds

> In this sense these figures are placed outside and beyond the system of
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> differences which defines and delimits men and women. The
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> demonization of women who subvert the meaning of femininity is
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> contradictory in its implications. It places them beyond meaning, beyond
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> the limits of what is intelligible. At the same time it endows them with a
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> (supernatural) power which it is precisely the project of patriarchy to deny.
>
> On the stage such figures are seen as simultaneously dazzling and

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[67] Belsey, *Subject* 183.
[68] *Subject* 184.

dangerous; off the stage their less dazzling but equally dangerous sisters were systematically eliminated.[69]

This power could exist, it seems, only with the understanding that it was short term, easily correctable through physical confinement or death. Audiences are allowed to see the strength of will in both the Duchess and Vittoria only because it will be punished through labels of madness and ultimately death, restoring order and a return to patriarchal control.

Throughout the play, Jaqueline Pearson argues, "the Duchess has appeared as spokesman for fruitful disorder by rejecting 'vain ceremony', the traditional role of the nobility, and the traditionally passive role of woman"[70]. Her association with disorder and madness is linked to her secret marriage, an event "mad only in the terms of the world she lives in"[71]; she has broken the accepted code of social order by wedding against her brothers' wishes and by wedding her attendant. Theodora A. Jankwoski states that "In challenging marriage in any way . . . the Duchess challenges the very essence of gender relations within patriarchal early modern society".[72] Her brothers, especially Ferdinand, view her behavior as "mad". Her sense of her own desires and priorities causes others to manifest their underlying madness.

When Ferdinand begins to show signs of his mental decline in his speech, it takes a rather unusual form. He projects a highly sexualized image of his sister.

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[69] Belsey, *Subject* 185.
[70] "Tragedy and Anti-tragedy in *The Duchess of Malfi*." *John Webster's Duchess of Malfi*. Ed. Harold Bloom. (NY: Chelsea House, 1987) 77.
[71] Belsey, "Emblem and Antithesis in *The Duchess of Malfi*." *John Webster's Duchess of Malfi*. Ed. Harold Bloom. (NY: Chelsea House, 1987) 98.
[72] "Female " 234.

There is some truth in what he says regarding her lustful nature, but the pictures he paints verbally are extremely graphic and inappropriate given their sibling relationship. She has not behaved in a whorish fashion as he imagines. Ferdinand speaks from the incestuous viewpoint of a lover. His visions of revenge for the betrayal he imagines also take a graphic, violent form. He swiftly becomes the dangerous, raving madman, the kind often confined to prevent harm to himself or others by fearful family or community. The Cardinal is well aware of his brother's unstable mental condition, yet continues to allow him liberty and seems to agree with him about the necessity of confining their sister in order to ensure preservation of her chastity[73].

Ferdinand announces his intent to madden his sister in Act III, scene i. He says:

> ... I will send her masques of common courtesans, have her meat serv'd up by bawds and ruffians, and 'cause she'll needs be mad, I am resolv'd to remove forth the common hospital all the mad-folk, and place them near her lodging: there let them practise together, sing and dance, and act their gambols to the full o'th' moon: if she can sleep the better for it, let her.

He appears to want to keep her up all night, driving her mad from the noise and lack of sleep. An absence of sane and civilized company will push her over the edge of sanity, or so he believes. But Ferdinand is himself already maddened, a condition he fails to recognize through much of the drama, an unconventional characteristic for a mad nobleman; this lack of awareness suggests that his

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[73] Jankwoski "Female" 228.

condition will not be curable. He grants full reign to his emotional outbursts of anger and sexual jealousy/ownership of his sister. If madwomen are considered sexually vulnerable, perhaps this is his objective: to make his sister sexually available to him as she has not been before. His frustrated anger stems from his inability to control her behavior.

Too late Ferdinand is at least briefly aware of his condition. Once Bosola has murdered the Duchess on his orders, Ferdinand berates him:

> ... An excellent honest man mightst thou have been, if thou hadst borne her to some sanctuary! Or bold in good cause, oppos'd thyself, With thy advanced sword above thy head, Between her innocence and my revenge! I bade thee, when I was distracted of my wits, Go kill my dearest friend, and thou hast done 't.[74]

Bosola's only reply is "He's much distracted ...".[75] "Distracted" is one of many common terms use in the seventeenth century to describe the behavior of the mad. Once more we have a character being labeled mad so that his intended audience more easily dismisses the truth in his statement. Bosola shirks moral responsibility for his actions by denying the truth in Ferdinand's speech, just as Ferdinand tries to shift the blame to Bosola. In the end, Bosola accepts a certain responsibility by enacting revenge in the name of the Duchess, although he is actually carrying out his own revenge for being neglected. Bosola is a complex and often contradictory character, at times seeming to be within reach of salvation and yet other times appearing utterly soul-less. If Bosola seems subhuman in his

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[74] 3.2
[75] 3.2

emotionless acts of carefully planned violence, then his counterpart would be the Duchess, who at all times appears fully human, sensual and sacred at once. She is spiritually and mentally stable, wholly without the psychomachia that defines Bosola's position in the drama. It is her consistent stability in the midst of chaos that makes her character so difficult to interpret.

Feminist critics are divided on the subject of the Duchess: is she an admirable figure or is it simply wishful twentieth century thinking to view her as such? Some critics find her admirable due to her preferment of personal merit over hereditary worth in choosing Antonio for her husband[76]. Others find strength in her assertions of identity in the face of extreme adversity. As Christy Desmet has observed, "In *The Duchess of Malfi*, potential paradoxes--the female ruler, the widowed bride, and the princely mother--dissolve into incoherence. The Duchess, in the end, has not many identities, but none . . .".[77] The Duchess's crisis is ultimately one of identity stripped away. In the face of crazed adversity in the form of her mad brother, she attempts to maintain her political identity and therefore her power by her assertion "I am Duchess of Malfi still", as though she seeks to comfort or reassure herself of her status despite her imprisonment. Laura S. Behling claims "her magnificent assertions . . . imply a masculine strength like Vittoria's and a conception of selfhood which is autonomous rather than relational".[78] It is also indicative of the contradictory aspects of the Duchess' identity; we are never made aware of her name, outside of her title, yet her

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[76] John L. Selzer, "Merit and Degree in Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*" in *John Webster's The Duchess of Malfi*. Ed. Harold Bloom. (NY: Chelsea House, 1987) 87-96.
[77] qtd. in Behling 47.
[78] Behling 54.

disruptive actions have taken place on a personal, private level. Her identity as a

political figure brooks no room for such actions. There can be no separation of

private and public for her, a restriction that she attempts to resist, unsuccessfully.

Behling also notes that the Duchess' death is inevitable, because "she has defied

the Renaissance ideal of the feminine and disrupted the patriarchal traffic of

women . . .".[79]

Still, others in the scholarly debate perceive the Duchess as a pathetic

figure, a punished transgressor whose submission brings her back into the

patriarchal fold. Lisa Jardine notes that the Duchess' treatment overall shows us

"headstrong, emancipated female love . . . chastened into figurative

submission".[80] She is returned to the status of admirable character at the play's

end by virtue of her acceptance of punishment for her transgressions against the

prevailing social order. Without her martyr-like submission, she would remain a

dangerous, transgressive figure.

Similarly, without the parade of madmen scene in *The Duchess of Malfi*,

the Duchess' incredible dignity could not have been exhibited so clearly. Some

critics have called her response to this scene, as to others in the play, evidence of

her "unnaturalness" in her self-possession. They argue that her behavior would be

suitable for a nobleman, but that it is inappropriate for a noblewoman. It has also

been argued that this scene reveals her strong sense of identity, her adherence to

the true values of womanhood in a decidedly disordered world. Through her calm

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[79] Behling 54.
[80] "Duchess" 127.

behavior and responses, she provides an island of sanity in an ocean of chaos. Lisa Jardine reminds us though, that

> however much of an inspiration the Duchess may appear to us--the strong
>
> woman challenging conventional attitudes--she is not a "real" woman,
>
> neither is she a direct reflection of individual women of her time. She is a
>
> transposition of a complex of attitudes toward women into a "travesty"
>
> (literally a man in woman's clothes) of seventeenth century womanhood.
>
> The strength we enjoy in a performance is her actual weakness . . .[81]

Her very stoicism, a trait so admirable in male characters, serves to enhance the image of her as "unfeminine" and seems somewhat "otherwordly" or even supernatural. She is the product of a masculine discourse. Even within the play, she is immersed in it, surrounded by her brothers, her husband, her assassin, and a masque of mad men. Perhaps Jardine's point here is that Webster is *not* attempting a realistic portrayal of womanhood, as many twentieth century admirers would like to think but rather projecting prevailing male anxiety in a female form, showing her to be unstable, contradictory, and untrustworthy as a ruler as well as a woman, at least for her male relatives. While Jardine acknowledges the Duchess's admirable characteristics, she claims the ultimate interpretation of the character must be one of pity, submission in the form of acceptance, and failure. Pressing for a more positive interpretation of the Duchess' responses, Jaqueline Pearson argues that "the masque not only attacks the Duchess: it also detaches us from the play-world by presenting a distorted version of it. The discordant music, dialogue in which no communication is made, and the ever more extreme vision

of physical and spiritual degeneration reflect and comment on the play itself".[82]

The Duchess' assertion of her identity in response to the madness around her

Pearson calls "a defiant sanity".[83]

> And yet, Catherine Belsey states:
>
> As Marilyn French points out, female sexuality, kept under male control,
>
> guarantees masculine supremacy over nature and over time, ensuring the
>
> stability of the family and the legitimacy of heirs. Women's sexuality
>
> unleashed is seen as able to destroy all control, undermining the
>
> institutions of society by threatening their continuity. Stereotypes define
>
> what the social body endorses and what it wants to exclude.[84]

The threat the Duchess' actions pose is perceived as a very real and dangerous one

by the male characters involved. In her actions she embodies two extremes in

female stereotypic behavior: the lustful whore and the penitent, long-suffering

maternal martyr. According to Belsey, by embodying these stereotypes, the

Duchess is rejected, punished, and finally redeemed, thus strictly reinforcing the

patriarchal status quo for female behavior.

The question remains: is the Duchess an admirable character or one to be

pitied? Many readers or audience members enjoy the play because they perceive

the Duchess as realistic. A lusty widow, secretly following her heart and wedding

a servant whom she obviously beds often given the rapidity of their family

development, she is strong, smart, and stoic. She stands up to her ambitious,

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[81] "Duchess " 127.
[82] "Tragedy" 77.
[83] Pearson 20.
[84] *Subject* 165.

corrupt, and even mad brothers. The Duchess retains her self-respect and integrity right up to her death. She appears highly admirable and one of the first female characters in drama of the Jacobean period who develops beyond a stereotypic virgin or whore. She embodies aspects of both: a devoted mother, strictly private about her personal affairs for their self-preservation, and a sexual being, willing and able to act on her own desires, but within the bounds of a monogamous relationship. This woman is complex and contradictory, like real women today. Subsequent readings or performances may lessen one's view of the Duchess in a technical sense, however she still sustains the power to arrest admirable attention. Her presence is commanding, her lines forceful. She dies not as a sad, powerless being, but as a noble, determined, assertive figure committed to her family and her own dignity. The question: is she the chastened, submissive (and really pathetic) creature that critics such as Lisa Jardine paint her to be? No. An examination of her final scene clarifies my interpretation.

Disguised as he is, Bosola is mistaken by the Duchess for one of the madmen. He identifies himself as her tomb-maker and she laughs, asking if she's ill. His response: "Yes, and the more dangerously, since thy sickness is insensible."[85] The danger lies in her lack of awareness of her illness; her illness may be interpreted to be her transgressions of acceptable behavior. She realizes he may not be mad, but still she tests him by asking him to identify her, a common enough test for determining madness. He describes her fragile mortal existence and then her troubled intellect, but refuses to name her at all. By presenting the coffin and cords to her, Bosola attempts to frighten her. She refuses, even in the

face of Cariola's emotional outburst "O my sweet lady!", telling her "Peace; it affrights not me." She realizes he is toying with her in spite of his deadly intentions and she intends to face death squarely. She does so, asserting herself to the very moment of strangulation, giving out orders as to the care of her children and even what is to be done with her body. Her last words invoke judgment upon her executioner and her brothers. She says, "Pull, and pull strongly, for your able strength / Must pull down heaven upon me" and she invites death to herself, "Come, violent death, / Serve for mandragora to make me sleep; / Go tell my brothers, when I am laid out, / They then may feed in quiet."[86] The Duchess is well aware of the reality of her situation and the inevitability of what awaits her at Bosola's hands. She never acquiesces nor begs for mercy. She retains her self in the end and therefore remains an admirable figure by resisting the madness and corruption that has enveloped her brothers and Bosola. She presents an enormous threat to Ferdinand and to Bosola because of her certainty of who she is and her place in the world. Both male characters are insecure about their identities and their social status. She refuses to be alienated by refusing to relinquish her identity. Even in her confinement she is never isolated from others in the way that the mad, such as Ferdinand, are. She remains in community with Cariola and Bosola, among others. Grief does not make her mad, as it has her dramatic sisters Cornelia, Ophelia, Aspatia, or Isabella. Her resistance defies the convention as established in earlier plays; she does not mentally weaken in response to adversity as others have done. The play retains the spirit of the convention, however,

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[85] 4.2.118-121
[86] 4.2.230-237

because she is ultimately confined to her tomb. Strict adherence to convention means she should have become mad early into the play from terror and grief. Madness and moral corruption are companions in this drama, leaving the Duchess the only sane (female) character.

In some ways this play provides a portrait of the transition from the Elizabethan world into the Jacobean, a movement from a highly ordered, structured world into a world of shifting uncertainty where order is ambiguous. It is therefore appropriate that the strongest figure be that of a woman who exemplifies the stringent order inherent in Elizabethan culture. However, a female character as the locus of order is an inversion of patriarchal structures where women symbolize disorder. The two male figures, Ferdinand and Bosola, struggling to sustain or establish their place in the rapidly changing society do so without faith in any pre-existing order. The ambiguity of their social or economic options confounds them and heightens their anxiety about the world to which they so tenuously belong. To such individuals, the certainty of a figure like the Duchess arouses admiration, envy, and contempt. Her transgressions include rebelling against her brothers' wishes and remarrying, marrying someone whose station in life is below hers, and asserting her own power to control her life. She can not be allowed to continue to exist.

However, in successfully resisting Ferdinand's attempts to madden her and both brothers' attempts to control her behavior, she triumphs over them and Bosola. Her triumph reflects the cynicism of the late Jacobean period in its suggestion that order no longer resides necessarily with the enforcer of it. Order is

found in the disorder since in patriarchal culture women are commonly associated with disorder. The Duchess is not wholly innocent, but she is presented as the best of what is offered among the nobility. It implies a cynical acceptance of the flawed nature of humanity. Madness is used not only as a form of torture, but it is completely destructive of all that is good in this play. Those with more serious flaws eradicate the less flawed, and themselves, leaving only the young; humanity must start over again without a sense of wisdom or history, except for warnings of what could happen again--murder, betrayal, madness--and that these dangers are inherent within us. Indeed they are almost inevitable. There is a certain hopelessness about the play's ending that undoubtedly leaves viewers unsettled. Overall the play's tone is cynical, even bleak.

Webster's skillful manipulation of the conventions of dramatic madness reveal shifts in the perception of the condition while emphasizing the role gender plays in diagnosis and treatment. Behling adds, "the tragedy of *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi* is that the social patrilineal order is disrupted, and masculine women and feminine men rule the courts".[87] In both of these plays, the issue of gender ideology is raised. Both are concerned with "socially-constructed ideas of 'woman' and present interpretive problems for deciding which is the privileged discourse".[88] Woman's chastity remains the guarantor of order and therefore women provide the touchstone for social structure. False accusations of madness, along with confinement and murder, serve to reinforce the privileged discourse. *The White Devil* provides a more traditional use of the conventions of

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[87] 54.
[88] Jankowski 224.

madness through an immoral but wronged female protagonist, hinting at the potential complexity of more developed characters. *The Duchess of Malfi* defies those conventions by offering contradictory portraits of melancholy and madness. In some ways the world portrayed in *The Duchess of Malfi* is an inversion of what order ought to be, a world in which only women are sane. Both of these plays reveal a tenacious belief in the innate strength and superior rationality of men while exhibiting a consistent anxiety about "disorderly" women, who must be contained even if only through death. So long as madness is understood in a patriarchal society and by a male author, women are always under surveillance and/or control. Only when women writers undertake the subject of madness and begin to subvert its conventions is it altered.

Chapter Three:

'Extravagancy is madness': Women Writers' Adaptation

of Melancholy and Madness

While the works of male playwrights such as John Webster reveal how women were figured in popular culture, women writers themselves undercut these images in diverse ways. The new genre of prose fiction emerging in the seventeenth century provided a forum for women's creative expression, a location where fiction could be interwoven with autobiographical details. Through the act of writing itself, by presenting versions of themselves as characters in the text, by centering texts on women characters, and by creating female characters as fully developed, multi-dimensional beings, women writers such as Mary Wroth and Margaret Cavendish subvert traditional ideas about women's capabilities and roles. Adapting popular perceptions of madness for their own purpose, they support their belief in women as thinkers, writers, and the source of social order.

One of the challenges for women writing and publishing lay in the perception of the woman writer. So long as women were viewed as men's intellectual inferiors, their ability to compose original work was regarded with suspicion and publication of such work was seen as indicative of their immorality. As Mary Ellen Lamb notes,

> perhaps the most debilitating limitations placed upon potential
>
> women authors of the Renaissance proceeded from the

sexualization of women's speech, even more than of their written

word. . .the attributes recommended to women in the injunction

to be "chaste, silent, and obedient" were collapsed into each

other, so that a fall from one implied a fall from another.[1]

An absence of silence equals an absence of virtue. To speak in public,

through publishing her words, a woman was in a sense seen to be

offering herself to (male) readers.

Most of the women who did write and circulate their work were

aristocrats, whose rank made such a pastime more acceptable. Several

women even published their work; however, only certain types of

literature were deemed appropriate: devotional writings or translations

of male-authored texts, such as the work of Mary Sidney Herbert. Ladies

in particular, did not write fiction, much less publish any such works

under their own names. The female author who published her fiction

was immodest at best, immoral at the worst.

Until the Restoration, publication of women's fiction seemed

transgressive; it became more possible and acceptable during the

Restoration, although a bit declassé. Women's publication in the early

seventeenth century meant that in some sense they were capable, and the

writing provided evidence of this, of self-fashioning by presenting

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[1] Mary Ellen Lamb, *Gender and Authorship in the Sidney Circle*, (Madison:University of Wisconsin Press, 1990) 4-5.

stories of their own experiences intermingled with fiction. This marked a new era in women's literary development.

Many female authored prose fiction works, such as Mary Wroth's *The Countess of Montgomery's Urania* (1621) and Margaret Cavendish's *The New Blazing World* (1660), are informed by autobiography. The only authority a woman could have was over her own experience, making it natural for women writers to blend personal writing with fiction. Female authors would also have been aware of a precedent for romance writers in the tradition of *roman a clef* that combined fact and fiction to tell an interesting tale. For members of the court to write about noble, aristocratic characters, vaguely fictionalized, for an audience of peers served as a layered form of entertainment. Readers enjoyed the adventurous tales in themselves, but part of the intrigue also lay in identifying non-fictional counterparts for characters and events presented in the text; most obvious would be Britomart as a "shadowing" of Queen Elizabeth in Spenser's *Faerie Queene* or Sidney's self-portrait as Astrophel in "Astrophel and Stella". For the coterie, practicing self-fashioning in their interactions with one another was a vital skill; extending the idea of shaping and exerting control over the presentation of the "self" to literary forms was almost expected.[2]

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[2] Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning from More to Shakespeare*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980) 3.

The pioneers who published fiction under their own names were aristocratic, educated women such as Lady Mary Wroth and Margaret Cavendish, the Duchess of Newcastle. Such women, given a little education and having the advantage of male "protection" through literary lineage or husband's support, were in a position to realize what freedoms they lacked, despite economic or class privilege. Their simultaneous acceptance of the limitations placed upon them because of their gender and their resistance to such limitations are evident throughout their prose fiction. To discourage other women from publishing their writing, critics described these writers as sexually accessible or "unnatural", in the case of Mary Wroth, or mad, in that of Margaret Cavendish. Either label dismisses the writer as immoral or unstable, suggesting that her work will be "common" or incoherent and therefore unworthy of perusal, especially by men. In addition, class distinctions limited writing opportunities for aristocratic women authors even as their economic status enabled them to print their texts. Many people criticized Margaret Cavendish's publication of her poems and fiction because of "the decorum of her class and the requirements of her position"; they claimed she had flouted these responsibilities "by exposing her lucubrations under her own name to the curiosity of the profane public".[3]

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[3] Germain Greer in her Introduction to *Kissing the Rod: An Anthology of Seventeenth-Century Women's Verse.* (New York: Noonday Press, 1988) 5. See also Wendy Wall's "Our Bodies/Our Texts?: Renaissance Women and the Trials of Authorship" in *Anxious Power: Reading, Writing and Ambivalence in Narrative by Women.* Ed. Carol J. Singley and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney. (New York: SUNYP, 1993) 51.

Wroth and Cavendish present differing perspectives of madness and gender in their prose fiction. For both writers, however, women represent order and control in an otherwise chaotic world. This overturns dramatic convention, where only masculine authority conveys or restores order and in which women are more readily associated with disorder. As Wroth and Cavendish present women as the keepers of reason and common sense, it is particularly disturbing when female characters become disordered. Both authors use female characters who are either in danger of becoming mad or who are mad to illustrate women's intellectual strength in overcoming such a danger. Wroth and Cavendish use the ideas of order and disorder to highlight a variety of intellectual and social differences in gender.

In the works discussed here, Mary Wroth and Margaret Cavendish incorporate traditional ideas about the origins and symptoms of madness to depict conventional treatment of mad individuals. Nonetheless they adapt those concepts to support their perspective on the advanced capabilities of women. Wroth and Cavendish portray their female characters as complex, intelligent, and articulate human beings. Mad women on the Jacobean stage merely served as devices to convey emotional content, enhancing the tragedy or romance of a play; the male characters carried the argument and/or political context, the more weighty aspects of the performance. Wroth and Cavendish invert this, giving women a more complicated and complex role that allows female

characters to do more than supply pathos; they also initiate and actively participate in the argument of the works.

Both Mary Wroth and Margaret Cavendish present themselves as characters in their fictions. In various forms and disguises, they present alter egos to make particular points clear to readers about the condition of women's lives in the society in which they live. In doing so, they show a range of behaviors for aristocratic women characters. Another advantage to presenting one or more characters as facets of themselves is that it allowed them to speak or act as they wished regardless of social convention. As characters in the text, they were granted liberties forbidden women in their real lives. They make these fictional liberties seem the natural and reasonable property of women.

Mary Wroth

Mary Wroth is a transitional figure that identifies with the patriarchal ethos in earlier works by male writers yet presents strong female characters. Adapting traditional ideas about women's behavior, for example the encouragement for women to be "chaste, silent, and obedient", to support the "naturalness" of women writing in private, she presents herself as a literary heir of her uncle, Sir Philip Sidney, and her aunt, Mary Sidney Herbert. Her prose romance, *Urania*, published in 1621 only a few years after John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, is modeled on Philip Sidney's *Arcadia*. Following Sidney's example in the

sonnet sequence "From Astrophel to Stella" and his prose fiction, she

interweaves personal experience with creative fiction.

Autobiography plays an important role in her text as she relates

court matters as well as her own love affair throughout the romance.

Lord Edward Denny protested at Wroth's literary interpretation of his

abusive treatment of his daughter. This episode is represented in the

story of "Sirelius (Sir James Hay), whose violent jealousy of his wife

(Denny's daughter Honoria) led him to torment her but then to rescue her

when her own father (Denny) attempted to kill her".[4] Denny even

composed a scathing poem entitled "To Pamphilia from the father-in-

law of Seralius". Wroth's romantic relationship with her married cousin,

William Herbert, which eventually led to the birth of two children, was

rather well known. Although she had been well received at court as a

young woman, she was ostracized for her involvement with her cousin, a

liaison that was not only adulterous but verging on incestuous. This

scandal and Lord Denny's protests at having been misrepresented in her

text forced her to withdraw her romance from circulation. Lord Denny

challenged Wroth's authority to publish her prose fiction, calling her a

"hermaphrodite" for her literary endeavors and declaring that she had

shamed her honorable family through her subject matter and its

publication. She defended herself against his charges, claiming that both

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[4] Barbara Keifer Lewalski, *Writing Women in Jacobean England*, (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993) 249.

she and her family would defend her writing and her lack of intentional malice.

Some critics suggest that she wrote *Urania* as a defensive act in response to this public disapproval. Although women speaking in a public forum were viewed as scandalous, Wroth publishing in her own defense is quite plausible; her own behavior, similar to Aemilia Lanyer's, was deemed scandalous. In addition, the death of her husband left her in financial straits, which may have also led her to publish *Urania* shortly thereafter. Wroth lacked the social status of her aunt or the mythological status of her uncle. In this sense, Wroth foreshadows independent women writers attempting to earn a living through their craft; however, she is in no way a "feminist" advocate. In regard to her life and its representation in the text, it is obvious that she feels her own behavior has been discretely appropriate to her station.

By circulating the manuscript under her own name, Wroth draws upon her literary inheritance from her uncle and her aunt. Through her claim to this legacy, she seeks to recapture for herself some of the prestige her relatives enjoyed and perhaps also to escape some of the censure that would surely accompany publication of her romance. Claiming to be an establishment literary figure through her family, she presents in her work a nostalgic, pastoral story that challenges certain aspects of traditional notions of woman while upholding others.

Urania presents over 300 characters, connected in some way through the two main protagonists, Urania and Pamphilia. Urania, a noblewoman raised as a shepherdess who only recently has discovered her dilemma and set out to seek her family and her true identity, befriends Pamphilia, a noblewoman attempting to reconcile her love for the worthy Amphilanthus with his inconstancy. Interwoven with their stories are the tales of numerous knights and ladies who pass through Pamphilia's court.[5] The romance is broken into two parts with each part divided into books. The first part, divided into four books, primarily centers on Urania's and Pamphilia's stories while the second part, although unfinished, follows them into marriages and the stories of their children's adult lives. Much of the first part clearly reflects events and persons in Wroth's own life. Obviously Pamphilia is a representation of the author in a variety of ways, including her steadfast devotion to a worthy but unfaithful lover and her solace in writing of her love in private.

In many ways, *Urania* sustains a close relationship to the conventions of traditional medieval and Elizabethan romance, and, in particular, to Sidney's *Arcadia*. Wroth's work contains "a multitude of characters; interwoven and interpolated tales; knights fighting giants,

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[5] Naomi J. Miller writes "for a woman to lack knowledge of her family origins in a patriarchal society is to lack a social identity" *Changing the Subject: Mary Wroth and Figurations of Gender in Early Modern England* (Lexington: the UP of Kentucky, 1996) 55.

pirates, monsters, and usurping Kings; Spenserian symbolic places".[6]

Both parts of the romance end in mid-sentence, imitating *Arcadia* in the suggestion of their unfinished state. Many other structural, thematic, and verbal aspects also offer parallels to Sidney's work.[7]

One major departure from traditional romance in Wroth's prose fiction is her focus on multiple female characters, their responses to men's inconstancy, and the strict social controls placed upon them.[8] Order is found and maintained by women in the absence of male constancy.[9] This does not, however, indicate that all female characters are inherently or equally "good". Although certain characters are not "feminists", the romance may be viewed as a "feminist" work because of the range of female behavior it contains as well as its chafing awareness of restrictions placed on women's behavior. As the main character in the work, Urania, seeks her identity, she learns about the boundaries for women's appropriate behavior and self-discipline. Wroth's central female characters, Pamphilia and Urania, are above all reasonable creatures, through whom order is maintained despite men's inconstancy and the disorder it threatens. Her romance focuses on women's exterior struggles by examining how they obey or defy social convention and at what price. It hints at the existence of women's interior life without revealing much about it.

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[6] Lewalski, 263.
[7] Lewalski 264.
[8] Lewalski 243-44.
[9] Lewalski 311.

Caroline Ruth Swift offers that Wroth "changes the romance's stereotype of female passivity since her women characters sometimes venture forth alone", yet the two examples she lists of this, Antissia and Nereana, are problematic since they both temporarily become mad women.[10] They may dare to venture as male characters do, but they are punished for their transgression of gender boundaries. The unique aspect of their condition is that they have the capacity to be healed, unlike earlier dramatic representations of mad women such as Cornelia, Isabella, Ophelia, and Aspatia, all of whom either remain mad or commit suicide.

When Wroth's texts are viewed in relation to both female-and male-authored figurations of gender, her participation in what Catherine Belsey sees as the 'instability' evident in the utterances attributed to women because they seemingly 'speak with equal conviction from incompatible subject-positions' can be understood not as confusion or inconsistency, but as on ongoing attempt to represent female subjectivity in multiple terms.[11]

Wroth's range of aristocratic female characters exhibit differing degrees of self-awareness and equally varying ability in self-fashioning. Pamphilia and Urania are the exemplary characters in both of these areas, but even their antitheses, Antissia and Nereana, manage to change

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[10] Caroline Ruth Swift, "Feminine Identity in Lady Mary Wroth's Romance *Urania*," *English Literary Renaissance* 14 (1984) 333.

and develop these aspects. At varying points early in the romance, Antissia and Nereana lack self-awareness, discretion, or self-control and both are clearly punished for this weakness. As the tale progresses, both women show their ability to learn from their mistakes and to recover from accusations of madness to become good governors or appropriately modest wives. Because earlier dramatic representations of female characters depended on a more clearly opposable virgin/whore dichotomy in women's character traits, Wroth's creations may initially be viewed as contradictory.

As a woman writer of texts that were neither translations nor sacred, Wroth challenges acceptable literary roles for women. She also incorporates into *Urania* numerous women who express themselves through sonnets. Throughout the romance, "women appear as speaking subjects with emerging capacity, if not always sufficient assurance, to fashion selves through discourse."[12] In presenting women as such, Wroth "explores the difficult question of women's social position" in the Jacobean era.[13] Interestingly enough, it is clear in this work that "good" writers, both male and female, "experience deep emotions but manage to control them in their lives and in their verse ...".[14] For Wroth, to be a woman writer does not preclude sanity, despite cultural ideas to the

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[11] Miller, *Changing* 4.

[12] Miller, *Changing* 62.

[13] Nona Feinberg, *Contextual Materials for "The Countess of Montgomery's Urania"* by *Lady Mary Wroth*, September 1999, online text available at the Brown Women Writers Project web site.

[14] Lewalski 280.

contrary; however, knowing where and when a woman may write or claim authorship does. Women who publicly display their fiction, or even seek to do so, are mad creatures; women who write appropriately, in seclusion without seeking a broad audience for their work, are reasonable individuals. In this later example, writing is presented as a "natural" pastime for women.

The depiction of women as writers also provides novelty in Wroth's romance. The examples offered in the romance range from Pamphilia, who writes in seclusion, composing songs and poetry about her love for Amphilanthus, to Antissia, who presents her writing publicly seeking acclaim for her skills and daring. These two characters in particular are set up to contrast with each other on a variety of levels. At one point each professes love for Amphilanthus and is betrayed by him. Both women express their feelings through writing, yet they represent opposite ends of a spectrum of female behavior.

Kim Walker notes that Pamphilia "writes because she must not speak" of the relationship and says that Pamphilia's writing

> Acts as a coded articulation of desire that allows the release of
> suppressed passion in the most controlled and concealed way.
> Writing, then, becomes a practice supremely suited to women,
> rather than a transgressive act that trespasses on male territory. It

is a thread that paradoxically both articulates and withholds desire and meaning.[15]

From this perspective, it is clearly the act of publication, of seeking a public audience for the writing that remains a strictly male prerogative. Women who obviously seek publication for fictional works or fame violate appropriate gender behavior. Pamphilia's writing of sonnets is done in private and even then she either destroys them or leaves them unsigned, with no identifying details whatsoever, just as Mary Sidney Herbert did. Wroth's own writing was privately done and she protested that her romance was never meant for public consumption, but was intended for her private circle of friends. Transgressive women do not remain anonymous, but assertively claim a public voice, seeking praise and notoriety as Antissia does. A woman's silence signified her modest, chaste nature, therefore a woman who made her words available to a common audience, as one who published her writing does, provided evidence of her unchaste nature. For women to write and publish fiction at this time suggested they were sexually unchaste.[16] If her words were available for purchase, then perhaps she was as well. For a woman to be unchaste also meant that she kept secrets of her own, that she had a private life of her own wholly apart from her relationships to any male. The publication of autobiographical writings provided evidence of

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[15] Kim Walker, *Women Writers of the English Renaissance*, (NY: Twayne Publishers, 1996) 174.

women's private lives, private feelings; even the suggestion of women's autonomy in this area provoked anxiety in this patriarchal culture, hence the extensive restrictions on women's literary activities. Walker observes the boundaries established for women writers in *Urania*: "she must at all cost refrain from engaging in writing as public display, since that will gain her a reputation for pride, madness, and immodesty."[17] Women's sexual availability and madness are related ideas in dramatic convention. Here, the association between the two is extended to include women publishing their writing. What is also interesting is that Wroth explores this connection between women's sexuality and their publishing, through her own exchanges with Lord Denny and through the female authors in *Urania*, most notably Antissia and Pamphilia.

Mary Wroth uses the terminology/ideas of madness in traditionally gendered ways. Her point is that "madness" could enable male characters to gain access to their desires, while at the same time madness served to punish female characters for not adequately controlling their desires. This is comparable to the dramatic convention of male characters, such as Franciscus and Antonio in *The Changeling*, successfully feigning madness for self-gain. Wroth's characters, both female and male, exhibit symptoms of madness in their reactions to

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[16] Walker 175. Walker writes, "Wroth, like other women writers of the period, does not escape a gendered discourse that represents female authorship as a sexual act, and an act that transgresses gender boundaries."

overwhelming emotion. At least three characters embody signs of madness in the romance, Antissia, Nereana, and Leonius. Wroth appears to support traditional ideas about madness and women's roles while nonetheless chafing at their constraints. She treats the madness of a male character, Leonius, who disguises himself as a woman in order to win another woman's love, in a comic way. Leonius serves as a foil for Nereana, who pursues the man who has rejected her. Both characters initially appear as versions of stock romance figures through their transgressions of gender roles and each suffers from a form of madness. Madness allows Leonius to break down his self- imposed constraints and win his love, while Nereana degrades herself through excessive pride, and is punished for her behavior. Similarly, the other mad woman, Antissia is punished for her literary ambitions. Wroth presents these three cases of madness differently based on the gender of the sufferer and the cause of the condition.

Wroth employs madness to satirize Antissia and Nereana for overstepping their bounds and to punish them for an excess in pride and ambition. As these two characters are counter-types to Pamphilia and Urania, their lapse into madness enhances the strengths of the heroines. Unlike dramatic madwomen, though, Nereana and Antissia recover from their condition by attaining self-awareness and exercising self-discipline, the qualities Wroth celebrates in her two heroines. Wroth deliberately

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[17] Walker 174. It is interesting to note that this description could have been written

uses the rhetoric of madness both to describe the limitations placed on women's power and to articulate their strength. By offering Antissia and Nereana as counterparts to Pamphilia and Urania, she suggests that women who are self-aware are capable of self-control. Pamphilia does have certain limitations in her seemingly passive retirement, but her steadfast self-governance is her main strength and source of authority as a woman and as a ruler. It is a quality that Antissia, Nereana, and even Amphilanthus lack. In *Urania*'s world, this ability for self-governance is found *only* in women, inverting traditional qualities held solely by men. The men are inconstant, even devious, while the exemplary women exhibit rational, orderly behavior.

To emphasize this, Wroth has Antissia and Nereana function as counter-types for the heroines, Pamphilia and Urania. While Pamphilia suggests that Antissia should know herself better, Urania is on a sanctioned quest to discover her identity, or to know herself. Nereana's unsanctioned quest for love goes awry because of her narcissism. Both Antissia and Nereana take active, vocal, attention seeking positions in the romance; in contrast, Pamphilia and Urania passively seek answers to their questions, often in seclusion. Antissia's main function in the romance is to provide a foil for Pamphilia, as an initially worthy adversary for Amphilanthus' love and later an example of a "bad" woman writer. Although scholars have noted that Pamphilia serves as a

specifically about the reception of Margaret Cavendish's work.

representation of Wroth, Antissia and Nereana also reflect certain aspects of Wroth's life. Both practice self-promotion, seeking the praise of others, which Wroth also seems to have done in circulating her manuscript among court members who would surely recognize themselves or their peers in the characters. These two characters are punished for publicly expressing their desire for others' praise, foreshadowing Wroth's banishment from court for circulating her manuscript despite protests by people like Lord Denny, on whom one of the unflattering characters had been based. Both Antissia and Nereana express their anger and frustration publicly, something Pamphilia and Urania allow themselves to reveal only in seclusion and even then only in moderation. The two heroines' constancy and appropriate behavior provide order and stability in an otherwise chaotic environment where men's passions regularly lead them astray.

The first of the mad women, Antissia, loses her wits through the study of poetry with a mad male tutor in Part Two of the romance. As Rosindy, a traveling knight, recounts Antissia's distraction to Pamphilia, Amphilanthus, and members of the court, he describes the tutor's desire to write verses that would make him more admirable than Ovid. Antissia soon exhibits the same outrageous ambition; she composes and recites poetry deemed nonsensical or sexually inappropriate by her husband, who is obviously embarrassed by her behavior. Her poetry is presented as symptomatic of her illness, judged as incoherent and sexually explicit

by her male audience, as is the language of mad female characters in the drama, such as Ophelia's or the Jailer's Daughter's. Antissia sings, "Venus, my dear sea born Queen, Give me pleasures still unseen," adding that Venus commands her "that by no means love should grow cold But blow the fire brands".[18] In singing aloud in the public setting of the ship on which they are sailing to seek her cure, Antissia is making her sexual desire for her husband known to all crew or passengers within hearing, to her husband's mortification. This is inappropriate behavior for an aristocratic woman and it inverts courtly love convention by showing a woman speaking her desire. Woman is traditionally the passive object of the male speaker's desire, never the assertive author of desire. Josephine Roberts has suggested that Wroth based Antissia on the negative version of Sappho from Ovid, the "uncontrolled, passionate, self-destructive figure."[19] Antissia's open expression of desire also mirrors dramatic portrayals of the heightened sexualization of mad women.

Also in accordance with dramatic conventions, her clothing conveys her disordered mental condition; Rosindy describes it as exceedingly eccentric in design, implying that it is one of her own creations.[20] Once she is cured of her condition, she picks up her own

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[18] *Urania*, Part II, Book 1.26

[19] Roberts, Introduction to *Urania*, xxxiv.

[20] There are several odd parallels between Wroth's Antissia and Margaret Cavendish, among them self-designed eccentric dress, pride in literary compositions, the label of madness due to ambition, pride, and self-promotion, and a supportive husband. See also, Gregor Reisch's *Margarita Philosophica*, published in 1503, where Lady

gown and is repulsed and embarrassed by it, suggesting that it is

inappropriate for one of her station. Perhaps, like Cavendish's self-

designed clothing later, it is deemed too revealing for a lady to wear.

Rosindy comments on its design meant "to show the smalls of her

legs".[21]

Antissia shows no awareness of her condition until after

Dolorindus, her husband, takes her to the sage Melissea for a cure. The

concept of the woman healer, heiress to Merlin's magic powers, could

have been taken directly from Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, which features

such a figure, Melissa.[22] In greeting the healer, Antissia exhibits an

excessive amount of pride about her writing. She goes beyond self-

promotion, as Melissea notes. Antissia recites an extensive elaborate

greeting for Melissea, who protests that the praise Antissia heaps upon

her is too much. Melissea says, "I fear you will spend your opinions too

much in your high expressions, which indeed are not usually found in

ladies, especially of your fashion." Antissia cannot stop from seeking

praise, suggesting, "And therefore, the more admirable, I hope."

Melissea acknowledges this but chides Antissia's need for others'

Rhetoric's illustration shows as follows: "her hair is waved and flowing loose over her shoulders, her low-necked gown is made of extravagant patterned brocade, and the circle of famous rhetors surrounding her openly admire her theatricality; she is anything but modest." (desciption by Jane Donawerth, "The Politics of Renaissance Rhetorical Theory by Women" in *Political Rhetoric, Power, and Renaissance Women.* Ed. By Carol Levin and Sullivan., 266.)

[21] Cavendish 22.

[22] Josephine Roberts notes that Wroth's Melissea is probably based on Montemayer's Felicia, but is also influenced by Melyssa in Ariosto's work (xxvi-xxvii Introduction to *The Countess of Montgomerie's Urania*).

approval: "Yes indeed . . .and so the more pity asking."[23] In her

excessive self-pride and her need for others' approval, Antissia is similar

to Nereana.

The wise woman isolates Antissia, prepares a warm bath for her,

and persuades both Antissia and Dolorindus to drink the same medicinal

beverage, which encourages them to forget Antissa's recent public

displays of poetry and passion. The treatment works, healing Antissia's

frenzy, and leaving her embarrassed by her attention-seeking behavior.

She appears to "awake" or come to her senses in the bath Melissea has

prepared for her. Traditionally bathing may be viewed as an act of

baptism or rebirth, or a ritual of purification; in either case, the person's

body and soul are cleansed and freed from past impurities affecting her.

After her cure, she acknowledges that her literary ambition was

indicative of her insanity, as she states, "I was possest with poettical

raptures, and fixions able to turn a world of such like woemens heads

into the mist of noe sense".[24]

Her condition draws some amusement from the audience of

Rosindy's storytelling, but ultimately elicits pity from them. Pamphilia

tells Rosindy she feels sorry for Antissia's misery in such a state and she

suggests that Antissia needs "to be better friends with her self" so that

she might regain control over her actions and words. Pamphilia's

prescription for Antissia's recovery is that she might know herself better,

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[23] 26.

or in other words, be more self-aware. Her suggestion also indicates that Antissia's need for the approval or praise of others reveals her lack of self-worth. Antissia must build her self-awareness, becoming more self-reliant in order to be healed.

In her madness, Antissia is propelled forth, acting and speaking without considering the appropriateness of her behavior. Leonius' case presents a reversal of this. He is frozen, unable to speak or act in his desire for Veralinda. Although Antissia's madness *enables* her to speak in ways usually denied a woman, it is ultimately to her detriment. She becomes a figure of mockery. Leonius' madness *disables* him from speaking or acting on his feelings, inverting typical masculine behavior. Their madness is distinctly gendered.

In Part I, Book Three, Leonius exhibits symptoms of madness in the form of lovesickness. Overwhelmed by his passion for the nymph Veralinda, he cannot speak or move when near her. His "senses ravished," "at best but a sportfull madnesse possessing"[25], he asks himself "what rareness was ever thus, as love keepes her and mee from asking pity?"[26] Even in their second encounter, he finds that he cannot answer her "but with sighs".[27] Unlike Antissia and Nereana, Leonius is painfully aware of his condition. He still suffers from a form of madness, but one that differs drastically from theirs. His challenge is to

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[24] II.31, as quoted in Paul Salzman 1985 144.
[25] 325.
[26] 328.
[27] 329.

"venture and ask it".[28] Simply being able to speak to Veralinda of his love becomes an adventure, filled with danger. He attempts to speak with her repeatedly and fails each time, as "passions were as full in him, as motes in the ayre".[29] He is described as being in "distempers" for an extended period of time as he tries to prepare himself to meet with her and when he does encounter her, he merely stands silent, sighing and weeping, apparently in sorrow.[30] A shepherd observing him stops to ask about his "fits".[31] The language Wroth employs to describe Leonius' condition, "fits" and "distempers", as well as phrases indicating reason overwhelmed by emotion publicly displayed, are all associated with madness, particularly the madness of lovesickness. In Jacques Ferrand's *Treatise on Lovesickness*, published in 1610, he identifies it as a form of dangerous melancholy, categorizing it as a "form of desire that eroticizes the mind, perverts the judgement, and afflicts the body with all the symptoms of disease".[32]

Leonius' mental state is precarious at this time, and ultimately he is driven to masquerade as a woman, in order to be close to his love. He creates this disguise to enable himself to interact without anxiety around Veralinda. Shoshana Felman notes that "what we consider 'madness' whether it appears in women or in men, is either the acting out of the devalued female role or the total or partial rejection of one's sex-role

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[28] 328.
[29] 327.
[30] 329.
[31] 329.

stereotype".[33] Indeed, such madness is exactly what Leonius enacts. Once he chooses to dress as the nymph Leonia, he has no problems speaking to Veralinda or being in close physical proximity to her. His words spill forth for a full page, almost non-stop. It is as if the spell has suddenly lifted and his ability to communicate with the object of his affection has been restored, but only if he continues to wear the dress. Agency is returned to him only if he inhabits a feminine disguise. Prior to donning this disguise, his reactions to love or to the nearness of his love were traditionally feminine ones, silence and humility. However, in the guise of a woman, his behavior is restored to that of a more traditionally masculine nature; he is able to regain control over his emotional state and act upon his feelings, talking, cavorting, and even living with Veralinda at length. Wroth subtly critiques the patriarchal perception of the appropriately silent woman as overwhelmed by her emotions, lacking judgement or ability to control her emotions; it is only when Leonius masquerades as a woman that he actually is able to exercise judgment and exert control over his feelings. He regains his sense of agency within the safety of a feminine space. Again, order is restored through femininity, reinforcing the idea of feminine stability over masculine instability.

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[33] "Women and Madness: The Critical Phallacy" in *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism*. Ed. Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore. (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1989) 134.

At long last he reveals his true identity to her, saying "I am the man, who for feare you lov'd me not, to move your love made my selfe a woman".[34] Veralinda readily forgives his deception and happily commits herself to him. When he is unveiled, he is not chastised by anyone for his actions, which are attributed to lovesickness, cured by the requital of his love. Michael MacDonald notes that unrequited love was commonly thought to be a cause of mental illness during the seventeenth century.[35] Had Veralinda not loved him in return, Leonius could have been labeled 'mad' by his peers and cast aside for a time to 'recover'. Since his love was requited, however, his brother "but could have hid him els for disguising himself, had not Love, and as hee saw Destiny appointed it so".[36] He is thus forgiven his social transgressions much more quickly and easily than either Nereana or Antissia are for theirs.

Wroth's use of stock figures to contrast male and female madness once again shows the value for women of self-governance. Leonius's adoption of a female disguise is a stock feature in romance; in Sidney's *Arcadia*, Pyrocles masquerades as the Amazon, Zelmane, in order to court Philoclea. Nereana as a lady knight might fit romance convention were she on a sanctioned quest. Lady knights such as Britomart and Bradamante are associated with virtue as they seek their true loves.

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[34] 349.
[35] MacDonald 4.
[36] 349.

Nereana has no such association with any virtue although other characters initially mistake her arrogant obsession with Steriamus for constancy. Her story parodies Pamphilia's in some ways, enhancing Pamphilia as the ideal woman capable of true constancy. Initially, Urania aspires to emulate Pamphilia, prior to finding her own place in the world. Nereana, as Urania's counter-type, represents a seemingly admirable alternative to Pamphilia.

Nereana has the potential to be a strong character, through her knight-like quest for love, and both men and women express admiration for her boldness. However, that admiration cannot be sustained because of her excessive arrogance and her persistence despite the unrequited nature of her love. These two elements alone, according to dramatic convention with which Wroth was surely familiar, would constitute indications of Nereana's madness. Other characteristics of mad women that Nereana exhibits include: a disheveled appearance after her encounter with Allanus in the woods, which makes her appear sexually available; odd behavior such as wandering about and getting lost in the woods; speech governed by excess of emotion or passion as well as extreme hostility. Her proclivity to speak up often and at length in her own defense is another example of a woman's lack of sexual chastity; and the source of her mental condition is unrequited love and excessive pride.

In addition, Nereana proves her mental instability with her public displays of emotion in declaring her love for Steriamus despite his dismissal of her, and with her lack of self-control, as she often becomes overwrought with anger when others fail to recognize her worth. In the drama, such women must either die or be confined. Nereana is for a while indeed mad yet unlike her sisters in the drama, she does have self-awareness and she is ultimately "cured" of her madness. She is no longer arrogant or obsessed with unrequited love. Through Nereana, Wroth alters dramatic convention, adding a new criterion for women. Her female characters that possess the capacity for self control need no male figures of authority--such as fathers, brothers, husbands, or lovers to contain them.

In Book Two of *Urania*, Nereana is directly associated with madness. Some scholars state that it remains unclear whether she is ever truly mad or merely guilty of breaking too many social conventions by her abrupt, arrogant, masculine behavior.[37] According to dramatic conventions for diagnosing madness, she is unquestionably mad. In the historical context of ideas about madness in seventeenth century England, a woman acting as a man by setting out on an adventure, and an unsanctioned one at that, would not be considered anything but mad. Foucault observes that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, "the

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[37] Roberts notes that "Wroth makes clear that this [madness] is a label imposed by others . . ." (lxii Introduction to *Urania*).

madman ... is not so much a victim of an illusion, of a hallucination of his senses, or of a movement of his mind. He is not *abused*; he *deceives himself*."[38] Indeed, Nereana is a self-deceiver. In addition to delusional tendencies, she is described with the terminology of madness repeatedly, such as "mad", "distracted", "distempered", and uttering "curst words" throughout this scene. These instances indicate mental imbalance for Nereana. She is repeatedly labeled mad by others and she does exhibit dramatic conventions for mad behavior.

. Gary Waller comments that "judging from Wroth's writings, a recurring fantasy for women in the period is that they might emulate the autonomy and mobility of the courtly-chivalric heroes".[39] Pamphilia appears to praise Nereana for her brave devotion as the "first [Lady] that ever ... took so Knight-like a search in hand ...".[40] Nereana's persistence initially seems admirable, "since for a woman it is unusuall to love much, but more strange to be constant".[41] Yet she has already expressed her love to Steriamus and he had flatly rejected her. Her perseverance in the face of this unrequited love is grounded in her disbelief that Steriamus could find another woman more worthy than her, a disbelief she voices often through her assertions of her noble

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[38] Foucault, *Madness* 104.

[39] "Mary Wroth and the Sidney Family Romance: Gender Construction in Early Modern England." *Reading Mary Wroth: Representing Alternatives in Early Modern England.* Eds. Naomi J. Miller and Gary Waller. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991) 39.

[40] 152. See also *Women, Texts, Histories* for discussion of the debate over whether Pamphilia's statement is actually praise or veiled criticism .

status as Princess. Repulsed by her, Steriamus replies that he is "truly ashamed to see such impudent pride in that sexe most to be reverenced".[42] Her inability to understand why Steriamus would not return her love once he knows who is she results in her frustration and anger, which she expresses intemperately, leading her to be labeled as "mad". Nereana is constantly ruled by her passions and is usually quite arrogant, which results in her downfall. These are also the identifying traits of her character. Throughout her story, as a punishment for speaking and enacting her own desires, she is abused and imprisoned. Female order is strikingly absent from Nereana's story, a fitting element since it serves as parody of Pamphilia's story, as well as the antithesis of Urania. Her conceit counters Urania's cautious search for identity. In addition, Urania conveys a sense of her nobility within; she inherently knows, by virtue of her "goodness" and her aristocratic station, how to present herself publicly. By her own noble status, Nereana should know this as well, but she does not. She is "the lady that must tell herselfe to be one", a task that she fails repeatedly in the romance.[43] Without self-governance, there can be no order found in women. Male characters seem to react to female order, and with Nereana's actions indicating an absence of such order in her, the men she encounters seek only to remove themselves from her presence as quickly as possible.

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[41] 152.
[42] 151.
[43] 257.

In order to "recreate herself after her own liking", Nereana enters the forest, a symbolic act in itself, and rapidly becomes "quite lost in her self . . . in a desperate state," as she alternately curses, rails, chafes, and cries, lost both in the woods and in her own emotions.[44] The woods perhaps symbolize her mental state, a primitive, potentially dangerous environment, uncharted and untamed, far removed from the order of civilization. Wroth shows Nereana roaming in the "thickness and likeness of the paths, and crossings as she wandered in a maze and at last quite lost herself, straying up and down . . . a thousand thoughts possessing her, and yet all those as on a wheel turned".[45] She has lost control of her actions and thoughts, which keep her roaming, physically through the wooded maze and mentally through the maze of ideas in her mind.

Although her assertions of her nobility and worth are frequent, Nereana constantly seeks recognition from others and is angry and confused when she is denied that affirmation. Nereana prizes public acceptance and support more than she does discretion. Steriamus' rejection of her love is almost an obsession to her, and she appears determined to prove him wrong and to gain the admiration she thinks he ought to give her. Alone in the woods, Nereana initially has no audience, which seems only to worsen her condition, adding to her confusion. She enters the woods for answers, or to find supporters, but she does not

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[44] 153-54.

necessarily look within herself in her solitude there as Pamphilia would. When she emerges from the woods, her need for this affirmation from others appears even greater than before.

If we compare Nereana's retreat to Pamphilia's we find a vast difference. Pamphilia repairs to the solitude of her bedroom and eventually to her bed, "not with hope of rest, but to get more libertie to express her woe".[46] Only after her servants have gone to bed and the house is quiet does she rise to write about her conflicted feelings for Amphilanthus. Even then she immediately destroys her work, recognizing the foolishness of her passion. She is the epitome of discretion, avoiding the public spectacle Nereana has made of herself. The contrast between the two women's self-governance/self-awareness and use of solitude is more clearly marked when Pamphilia also retreats to her garden, then a "fine wood . . . delicately contriv'd into strange, and delightful walks; for altogether they were framed by Art, nevertheless they were so curiously counterfeited, as they appeard naturall".[47] She is surrounded by natural beauty as controlled, as much a product of art as is her self-control. She remains troubled and preoccupied; her focus is internal and remains so, unlike Nereana's wild adventure in the wooded labyrinth.

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[45] 153.
[46] 62, I, 3-6.
[47] 90, I, 30-33.

Awakening in the mental/physical forest, Nereana encounters a

"madman", Allanus, whom she identifies as such by the condition of his

clothing. Her first egocentric impression is that he dresses in torn and

tattered clothing to annoy others, especially herself. In her struggle to

escape the madman's clutches, she "grew the more distemper'd, at last

with rage growing almost as madd as he".[48] Here again, the cause of

madness is an excess of emotion, this time rage. This inability to control

one's emotions makes the mad person's behavior appear more

animalistic than human. According to Michel Foucault, ". . . it is

animality that reveals the dark rage, the sterile madness that lies in men's

hearts".[49] Indeed the image of the mad person is that of a distracted

nature, to which both behavior and physical attire contribute. Nereana

mentally interprets people's reactions to her as she thinks they should be

and she altogether revises Allanus' reaction to her later in the story to

support her delusions. Just as Antissia's madness becomes obvious after

her contact with the mad tutor, Nereana's madness manifests itself more

clearly after her contact with the madman. She re-imagines the scene in

the woods with him to be respectfully flattering to her, rather than the

potentially dangerous assault it was. It then appears that both she and

Allanus, in their madness, see only what they want to see. Antissia is

clearly mad only after her contact with the mad tutor, whose literary

ambitions were contagious. For these women, contact with mad men's

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[48] 154.

delusions prove harmful to the women's reputations, exploiting their sexuality in ways inappropriate to their aristocratic status as well as gender.

By tying Nereana to a tree, stripping her down to her petticoats, and disheveling her hair, Allanus creates a state of dress for her as bizarre as his own, thus pulling her further into the world of the insane. She succumbs to a mentally disturbed state, "sense having out-gone her, or at least (in great weaknes ready to depart)".[50] When Philarchos, a traveling knight, comes upon her, he views her "strange odd attire" which he refers to as "Phatasticall," and assumes she is mad.[51] He tries to flatter her as a mad woman, saying "if my service . . . were allotted to madness, I cannot find where better to bestow it, than on you".[52] He refuses to accept her claim to nobility when he adds "nor can I think you are a Princess, since so unprincely terms come from you".[53] Each time she meets someone new, Nereana is quick to identify herself as a Princess, reinforcing the idea that her main source of pride is in her title. By refusing to accept her declarations of identity, both Allanus and Philarchos deny her this source of conceit. She attempts to refute Philarchos' assumptions by stating that any Prince would be happy to do her bidding. Oblivious to his error, Philarchos persists with "If

[49] *Madness* 21.
[50] 155.
[51] 155.
[52] 155.
[53] 156.

distraction rule them, I believe they cannot find a fitter mistress".[54] He continues to deny Nereana the ability to identify herself.

Wroth, thus, employs the rhetoric of madness to satirize and punish Nereana for her egotism. Critics differ on interpretations of the scene in which Nereana angrily asserts her identity to a disbelieving Philarchos. Carolyn Ruth Swift claims that Wroth views Nereana's reactions as reasonable in an unreasonable situation; the world is mad, not Nereana.[55] However, Helen Hackett argues that Swift's interpretation misses Wroth's sense of humor; Hackett asserts that "this is presented as a highly comic scene . . . . It's clear that Nereana is being satirized for her pride and lack of emotional control and is shown as receiving poetic justice".[56] And yet it seems that Nereana is being punished for her gender as well, asserting herself in ways that are considered inappropriate for a woman. Wroth's ambiguity toward the female representations of madness remains, revealing conflict regarding her perception of the transgressive woman.

In Book Three, King Perissus discovers Nereana in a cave, where she has spent time in self-reflection, after having escaped Allanus. Her description of herself to him clearly indicates her own awareness of her disturbed mental state in the woods when, in relating her story to him

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[54] 155.
[55] 345.
[56] "'Yet tell me some suche fiction': Lady Mary Wroth's *Urania* and the 'Femininity' of Romance." In *Women, Texts, and Histories 1575-1760*. Ed. Clare Brant and Diane Purkiss. (London: Routledge, 1992) 54.

she states, "My spleen then swell'd against [Steriamus' true love,

Pamphilia], and I was sick with anger".[57] Her diction is particularly

telling in that the afflictions of the spleen during this time meant mental

disorders or affectations of mental disorder. She is also identifying

herself as a person of quality, since "only persons of quality were

afflicted with the spleen".[58] Nereana's self-awareness in this scene

indicates her capacity for recovering from her madness. Nereana is

admitting her precarious mental condition at the time of entering the

woods. She is still a proud figure, but recognizes her anger was out of

control. Her sense of identity and status are still intact and her emotions

seem at least temporarily controlled. The female mad character who

comes closest to showing such self-awareness in the drama is *The White

Devil*'s Cornelia, who briefly seems aware of her lost wits, but remains

mad after all. Wroth, too, allows Nereana a moment of self-discovery,

then retracts it immediately. Although here it appears possible for

Nereana to recover herself without social intervention, she is denied it.

She begins to delude herself again when King Perissus leaves her

briefly. Asking herself "[marke] the madman, were his fits other than

worshiping me, as Sheephardesse Nimph, or any thing? Did he not

humble himself most respectively unto me?", she conveniently forgets

that the madman vexed, embarrassed, and harassed her.[59] When King

[57] 258.
[58] Skultans 28.
[59] 258.

Perissus returns to her, he finds that she "with good feeding [had] growne into her fury again, and fullnesse had renewed her madness".[60] Nereana begins cursing again "in such a tempest of rage" at being left with a smaller train than she had desired of the King.[61] Her reaction is disproportionate to the slight she believes has been inflicted upon her. Once again, Nereana is viewed as mentally disturbed by those around her because her words and actions are ruled by her excessive emotions. Naomi J. Miller suggests that "the disintegration of Nereana's discourse parallels the deconstruction of her subjectivity through her subjection to desire, leaving her only with the role of 'madde woman'".[62] Governed by her anger, she speaks without control over herself. Much of Nereana's self expression takes the form of venting her intense anger over others' lack of recognition of her worth and what she perceives to be unjust treatment she receives as a result of this. Wroth seems to fluctuate between sympathizing with Nereana and condemning her for her lack of restraint, probably a reaction to the constraints placed upon women's speech and expression. Women's expression of anger has not been encouraged or even acceptable in Western culture. Much of Nereana's behavior stems from her great anger at being treated unjustly. She is undeniably a "mad" woman. Finally, Nereana is punished for her behavior but the punishment provides a cure for her madness/anger.

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[60] 259.
[61] 259.
[62] *Changing* 137.

When she returns home, Nereana is imprisoned by her sister and "told still shee was mad," while the people over whom she should have been ruler found her actions "lunatick". Near the end of her story in Book Three, Nereana has been "locked up in a conceit of madnesse, and made a poore, imagined distracted creature", while her sister, appropriately modest and retiring, rules over their kingdom. This "enforced passivity", a direct contrast to Pamphilia's chosen withdrawal", serves as a means of curing Nereana of her "madness". At the close of Book Three, she is returning to her rightful state of ruler over her people once her behavior has been modified to suit the monarch's Advisory Council. They fetch Nereana and restore her as sovereign, acceptable because "shee by her poore living, and neglected being now invested in so staid an habitation of gravity, as she was fit for the honor they called her to . . ." especially since she is now "able to overrule her old passions, and by them to judge how to favor, licence and curb others". Therefore, she has learned to censor her desire and assertiveness. Miller asserts that "Nereana's exclusion from political subjecthood fosters the reconstitution of her subjectivity", that "only after she learns to claim an identity for herself in isolation, then, is Nereana able to reclaim her authority over her subjects at large".[63] Despite her return to a position of power and her obvious control over her passions, Nereana's "cure" seems false, perhaps because the "new"

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[63] *Changing* 137.

Nereana can only be an insignificant character who quickly vanishes into normalcy. The uniqueness of her bold venturing forth to seek out Pamphilia, her competition for Steriamus, is replaced by the typical lady grounded at home. She learns discretion, keeping her thoughts to herself and thereby curtailing readers' understanding of what motivates her after her cure.

Wroth draws deliberate parallels between Nereana and Leonius. Of noble birth, both characters are found admirable for daring to enact their passion through gender reversal. Despite these strikingly similar portraits of male and female madness, each results in very different treatment. Nereana is severely punished ostensibly for insanity, but really for her excessive pride, her rampant egocentricism--just as Antissia was. Her madness allows her power to be stripped from her. The danger inherent in Nereana's quest is greater than that in Leonius'. By taking on the role of female knight seeking the object of her affections, she places herself in a vulnerable position. Much like the medieval madwoman, she wanders alone without male protection, making her easy prey for unscrupulous men she encounters. Her sexual vulnerability is most clearly drawn in the scene with the madman, who could have easily raped her, and who does indeed strip her of much of her clothing. Part of the cure for Antissia's madness was the removal of her eccentric clothing; however, the partial removal of Nereana's dress

does not indicate a healing or a curing of her alleged condition, rather it serves only to make her disheveled, contributing to her identification as a mad woman. In not recognizing the danger of her position, she exhibits a further lack of self-awareness, another condition of the mad woman. She is never frightened by his actions, but in the grip of her excessive pride, she is outraged, failing to recognize her lack of safety.

The portrait of Leonius is more traditionally drawn. We realize that Leonius is not mad, but on the verge of a mental imbalance, from which he is saved by Veralinda's return of his affection. Part of the requirements for his recovery from the condition of lovesickness is removal of his own clothing *and* the donning of female garments. Through this he learns what is woman's knowledge and strength. In addition, his undertaking of the female disguise in order to win her love is viewed as an adventure, fraught with the danger of rejection, public humiliation, and even madness, and it is daring, therefore perfectly appropriate for a male character. Despite the unusual circumstances, he is clearly within his bounds, in contrast to both Antissia's and Nereana's assertiveness and arrogant public displays, which are just as clearly out of bounds for their gender. Both of the mad male characters, Leonius and Allanus, are free to act as they please without fear of repercussion; indeed, Leonius is even rewarded for his unorthodox behavior.

Despite this very traditional portrait of gendered madness, Wroth still manages to subvert dramatic convention in centering her romance

on strong, self-aware female characters who maintain order in the world they inhabit. She associates chaos in that world with men's inability to appropriately govern their desires. Surprisingly, her male characters are the source of disorder. The single male character who exhibits madness in the form of lovesickness occupies a very predictable, traditional role; however the female characters who are labeled as mad do not succumb to it or die from it. Even these characters are capable of developing or recovering their self-awareness and self-control sufficiently to return them to their appropriate status in the world. For women such as Antissia and Nereana, sanity comes through understanding how to effectively negotiate restricted roles, carrying out their social duty and finding ways to express emotions society doesn't permit them. In its exploration of the parameters of this negotiation, Wroth's work has a tinge of sadness, a sense of resignation to it. Her solution is a compromise, showing that while it is not necessarily advantageous for women to conform strictly to societal restrictions, neither is resisting those boundaries with abandon effective for them.

Margaret Cavendish

Approximately forty years after *Urania*, Margaret Cavendish, in her utopian work, *New Blazing World*, writes from the position of outcast in her own world, both as a Royalist and as a woman shut out of the male debate over scientific and philosophic discoveries that intrigued

her. Her approach is also modeled after that of male authors but with a drastic difference. She clearly presents a carefully articulated challenge to the male establishment of authority through the nature of her work and its publication under her own name. Margaret Cavendish explores mental disturbance in many forms, ranging from melancholy to madness, in *The World's Olio* and *The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing World*. She deliberately employs the rhetoric of madness to challenge ideas regarding the limitations of women's power in her culture. In both of these works, she explores avenues of study traditionally denied women.

Madness has been more closely associated with the author herself than it has been with her writing. Virginia Woolf wrote of the eccentric Cavendish: "there is something noble and Quixotic and high-spirited, as well as crack-brained and birdwitted" in her works.[64] In her introduction to Cavendish's *The Blazing World*, Kate Lilley states that Cavendish's "singularity" has commonly "been interpreted as monstrous, and her texts similarly characterized as deformed in various ways: chaotic, old-fashioned, uneven, contradictory, and insane".[65] Many critics seem determined to intertwine the author's life with her work and indeed, by placing herself in various forms as characters in her works, she invites this interpretation. Kinder critics have said that Cavendish's writing

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[64] 111.
[65] viii.

"conveys the fertility of a mind, whizzing from idea to idea, excited, determined, willing to use any means to make the point", even when those means seem unusual at times.[66] While her approach may be deemed eccentric, it does not indicate "madness" on her part. Her prose writing does not utilize one single standard format generally. Her subject matter was hardly deemed appropriate for women at that time, nor was she trained in the rhetoric and logic men commonly used. In addressing avenues of study traditionally denied women, she may be simultaneously satirizing masculine discourse and attempting to chart feminine alternatives.

The *World's Olio* is essentially a listing of the author's thoughts in prose on various topics, including an anatomy of differing types and degrees of madness. She discusses fools, madmen, and melancholics as well as gender differences in madness, especially in relation to the role of ambition. In her address to the reader of her prose fiction, Cavendish breaks *The Blazing World* down into three parts: romance, philosophy, and fancy. These three areas are customarily viewed as incompatible genres, yet Cavendish fearlessly sets out to combine them in one work. She was not afraid to experiment with form. In defense of Cavendish's contradictory writing, Moira Ferguson says that "what we do know is that the Duchess of Newcastle was a woman trying to chart intellectual and feminist depths, hunting for new ways to talk about the world, for

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[66] Beilin 251.

acceptable ways to be herself and publicize her thoughts".[67] One of these

ways was to create characters similar to herself and give them all

manner of noble characteristics, including symptoms of melancholy.

Through these alter egos, she begins the appropriation of an exclusively

masculine mental condition. If women were capable of 'suffering' from

this condition as men did, in a sense they must be men's intellectual

equals.

The World's Olio (1655) contains six separate entries regarding

madness or melancholy. In his popular Renaissance study of

melancholy, Robert Burton notes that "melancholy and madness are so

closely aligned as to be not clearly distinguishable" from one another.[68]

Cavendish writes of madmen, fools, and melancholics, attempting to

describe and thereby categorize the differences among these three

similar types of man. She anatomizes the condition, degree, and

treatment of madness, in the manner of Burton's work. She states that a

fool "neither knows nor beleeves in the likeliest way to good nor to

avoid ill," and a madman, while he may still appear to the world to be

witty or intelligent, is mad because he "cares not which is the way to

good or ill but follows his own disordered passions where reason hath

left to be their guide".[69] A fool is ignorant of wrongdoing, but a madman

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[67] 317.
[68] Qtd. In Babb 36.
[69] 27.

is aware of the error of his ways and simply doesn't care. She may be slyly suggesting that what others deem madness may simply be nonconformity. She defines in one section a mad man or fool as one who "leaves all to chances disposing" and exhibits a "want of judgment".[70] Melancholy, according to Cavendish, is always extreme, whether it be its biological cause (excess of humors) or its ensuing effects on the individual suffering from it (extreme reactions) and the melancholic individuals "know not why, and yet [they be] Rational Persons". Her early descriptions indicate that most people who are afflicted with melancholy merely act out the symptoms but are not aware of them, nor do they understand them. Later in *The World's Olio*, melancholy is described again, as a humour, and it creates the following responses:

> shuffling the thoughts, cutting the Passions, cozening
>
> themselves, and losing the Judgment; this Humour proceeds from
>
> the ill-affected Body, rather than from an ill-affected Mind but
>
> Grief, Sorrow, and Sadness are bred in the Mind . . . so
>
> melancholy men may be said to be Idle, or Musing, but not
>
> Sorrowful or Sad for they take more pleasure in their
>
> melancholy, than other in their mirth.

In this section, she is repeating the traditional concepts of melancholy.

Cavendish also states that "there are more that run Mad for the Loss of Hope". Disillusionment brought about by over-reaching one's

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[70] 27.

mental capabilities or by extreme grief, as in the case of a parent losing a child, are two primary causes of the onset of madness. She also adds that a lack of hope where there still exists desire leads to impatience, which in turn leads to extravagance, and "Extravagancy is madness". Frustrated desire leads to boredom and then extravagance in other areas under the sufferer's control. This logic is rather stilted and ends cryptically--this woman known for her extravagancy in clothing does not explain her statement. She could be described as a frustrated scholar herself, denied avenues of study because of her gender, but her interest could not be entirely dismissed because of her social or economic status. She is, perhaps, chastising her critics who dubbed her "Mad Madge" for her elaborate self-styled clothing, a more traditional feminine interest, as well as for her pursuit of scientific studies, a far more serious, exclusively masculine pursuit. Regardless, this definition still draws upon the notion of severe disillusionment.

Cavendish creates a list of criteria for who may become mad and why: musicians from music playing faster than the brain can function, women who seek that which is beyond their reach, men who leave all to chance, men who follow their own disordered passion, men who are disillusioned, and men and women given too much knowledge at once. Overly ambitious women, like Wroth's Antissia, Cavendish labels mad. *Urania*'s inconstant men, who randomly follow their passions despite promises to the contrary, Cavendish would also consider mad.

According to Cavendish, too much ambition in a woman may lead to madness while lack of ambition in a man may also be indicative of a disturbed mental state. Men who leave all to chance surrender their roles as active agents in society. Women who actively seek to improve their status resist the passive roles assigned them in their culture. Gender roles are sharply distinguished here. During the seventeenth century it was considered natural for men of high social standing to possess lofty ambitions for themselves; not to do was indicative of mental illness. However, women were expected to locate their expectations within the domestic sphere, in housework or child-rearing or, for women of high social status, the practice of "artistic or musical talent for the amusement of lovers, husbands or fathers".[71] For a woman's ambitions to extend beyond the sphere allotted her was considered wholly unnatural.

The definitions she offers in *The World's Olio* are noteworthy because she later applies those same characteristics carefully in *The Blazing World*, in the most flattering light possible to her female protagonists. The resulting characters are brilliant and noble enough to suffer from melancholy but they always retain their reason and to maintain self-control at all times. As Kate Lilley notes of seventeenth-century utopian writing by women, it "focuses questions of control, knowledge, opportunity and freedom, through an attention to sociality

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[71] Dixon 205.

and culture . . .".[72] Cavendish's protagonists in *The Blazing World* seek

knowledge and understanding of the new world they have encountered.

Just as Wroth's heroines must do, they negotiate their place in the worlds

they occupy. Much of the novel centers on discussions of abstract

knowledge and a critique of how such knowledge has been conveyed.

The New Blazing World is what Cavendish, in her introduction,

calls a three part prose fiction piece, although the text itself is only

technically broken into two parts, labeled "Part One" and "Part Two",

followed by a brief epilogue. Cavendish describes the three parts that

comprise this work as "romancical", philosophical, and "merely fancy"

or "fantastical".[73] She spends a good deal of time in the introduction

defining fancy and its end result, which she claims is fiction; it would

appear that by "fancy" she means imagination and she places it at the

opposite end of the spectrum from reason. A lack of reason, therefore, is

no longer to be understood as madness, but rather as an excess of

imagination or creativity. Given this introductory lesson, it is apparent

that Margaret Cavendish writes not only for pleasure, but also out of

autobiographical defense.

The New Blazing World has one central character, the young lady

who becomes Empress of the alternate civilization into which she

stumbles. She struggles to understand and effectively govern her new

realm, even seeking advice from the Duchess of Newcastle. Both of

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[72] 104.

these female characters are representations of their author, Margaret Cavendish. The Empress represents her romantic form, how she would act and be admired in an idealistic situation, while the Duchess is a version of her self removed to another plane of existence where she may openly complain of her husband's treatment at court. Through these characters Cavendish is allowed to think and speak in ways otherwise denied her. Once the Empress has created a world of her own, she realizes its perfection,

> for it was governed without secret and deceiving policy; neither was there any ambition, factions, malicious detractions, civil dissensions, or home-bred quarrels, divisions in religion, foreign wars, etc. but all the people lived in a peaceful society, united tranquility, and religious conformity.[74]

Then Empress expresses her desire to learn of the world from which the Duchess has come, but the Duchess discourages her, "telling her, that the world she came from, was very much disturbed with factions, divisions and wars".[75] When they do travel together, spiritually, into the Duchess' native world, the Empress's soul observes that

> for all there were so many several nations, governments, laws, religions, opinions, etc. they should all yet so generally agree in being ambitious, proud, self-conceited, vain, prodigal, deceitful,

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[73] Cavendish 124.
[74] Cavendish 189.
[75] Cavendish 189.

envious, malicious, unjust, revengeful, irreligious, factious, etc. She did also admire, that not any particular state, kingdom or commonwealth, was contented with their own shares, but endeavored to encroach upon their neighbors, and that their greatest glory was in plunder and slaughter, and yet their victories less than their expenses, and their losses more than their gains, but their being overcome in a manner their utter ruin. But that she wondered most at, was, that they should prize or value dirt more than men's lives, and vanity more than tranquility . . .[76]

Cavendish here is allowed, through fictional characters, to critique the ambitions that govern her world and, in particular, her own country. She also complains of the treatment her husband has received and the financial losses he has incurred as a result of his royalist loyalties. Through the character of the Duchess, she says

. . .there had been a long Civil War in that kingdom, in which most of the best timber-trees and principal palaces were ruined and destroyed; and my dear lord and husband, said she, has lost by it half his woods, besides many houses, land, and movable goods; so that all the loss out of his particular estate, did amount to above half a million pounds.[77]

Later, when the Empress seeks the Duchess' advice on how best to order her world, since it has begun to experience "contentions and divisions"

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[76] Cavendish 190.

and she fears "an open rebellion" resulting in "great disorder and the ruin of the government".[78] Given that Cavendish is writing this following the English Civil War, the fictitious aspect of her work is very thinly veiled here. The Duchess advises a return to the original government of the world, with "one sovereign, one religion, one law, and one language" to eliminate any divisions in it.[79] Otherwise, she warns, it may prove

> as unhappy, nay, as miserable a world as that is from which I
>
> came, wherein are more sovereigns than worlds, and more
>
> pretended governors than governments, more religions than gods,
>
> and more opinions in those religions than truths; more laws than
>
> rights, and more bribes than justices, more policies than
>
> necessities, and more fears than dangers, more covetousness than
>
> riches, more ambitions than merits, more services than rewards,
>
> more languages than wit, more controversy than knowledge,
>
> more reports than noble actions, and more gifts by partiality, than
>
> according to merit . . . .[80]

Clearly here, she is upbraiding the current government for slighting and abusing her husband's deserving actions. The very length of this complaint turns it into a rant against the injustices against the Duke of Newcastle, a speech she would not be allowed to present in any other public forum.

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[77] Cavendish 193.
[78] Cavendish 201.
[79] Cavendish 201.
[80] Cavendish 201.

In *The Blazing World* (1666), the narrator says of the young lady newly arrived, "novelty discomposes the mind".[81] Too much newness overwhelms the senses without giving her time to reflect upon the novelty. This scene also reflects the early modern period's anxiety about maintaining order in the face of change. Laurinda S. Dixon notes that in the seventeenth century the most common mental disturbance diagnosed in women, hysteria, had many assumed sources, including "continual reading and intense study, especially on thorny mathematical and philosophical subjects, [which] could worsen the condition or even instigate it"; instead "physicians warned their female patients not to muse on the 'abstract sciences', for these belonged properly to the male intellectual realm".[82] Cavendish's fiction seeks to explore women's internal life through satirizing intellectual conventions regarding gender differences.

When the lady becomes the Empress and the spider-men try to teach her mathematics, she finds that "the more she endeavored to learn, the more she was confounded" and the lines her teachers drew seemed "next to imaginary".[83] Too much knowledge at one time confuses the Empress. Her brain is too full and in danger of overloading. However, a similar occurrence affects one of the parrot-men as he attempts to make

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[81] 130.
[82] 205.
[83] 159.

a speech. "His arguments and divisions being so many, that they caused a great confusion in his brain"; he is then described as being "confounded".[84] So it appears that men and women react similarly in such similar situations, but men are able to confound themselves whereas, thus far in this work, the Empress has only been "confounded" by male characters, never by her own ideas or those of another woman. While men's complex ideas could be considered too difficult for women to understand, if a woman tried to express her ideas in a manner difficult to understand by her male audience, they could easily dismiss her words as nonsense, rather than the product of complex reasoning. Women were viewed as incapable of such abstract thinking, and indeed, such mental attempts were considered dangerously unhealthy for women.

After questioning her logicians, the Empress is moved to state: "I have enough . . . of your chopped logic, and will hear no more of your syllogisms; for it disorders my reason, and puts my brain on the rack".[85] She chides the logicians for their elaborate speech, claiming that "art does not make reason, but reason makes art, which disorders men's understandings . . . leads them in to a labyrinth whence they'll never get out, and makes them dull and unfit for useful employments".[86] Philosophy disorders the wits, but fancy doesn't. The heart of the satire is that women have a sort of common sense that the men lack. Because

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[84] 160.
[85] 161.
[86] 161.

of this, men lose the ability to govern or order their thoughts. By placing

so much emphasis on the presentation, or the elaborate, impressive

wording of their argument, the men become lost in the artifice, losing

the core logic of the argument itself; so disconcerting is their confusion

that they lose their ambition and are pronounced unable to work. During

the early seventeenth century madness was identified "as the inability to

perform the necessary economical chores to preserve the family

property".[87] Thus one indication of men's madness is their inability or

lack of desire to work and provide for the maintenance of their families

or properties. For both Wroth and Cavendish, women excel at self-

governance where men often fail. Too much artifice or emphasis on

artifice may "disorder" a man's mind, leading him to confusion and

disturbing his mental balance. If he is thus "confused", his priorities may

not be the same as those society deems worthy, therefore, he will be

labeled "mad" for lack of judgment, which in actuality is a lack of

conformity. This exchange also serves as a critique of linear patriarchal

methods of knowing or of the emphasis on reason that was to become

increasingly prevalent as the eighteenth century approached. Overt

adherence to the traditional forms of knowing or presenting knowledge

obliterate the knowledge itself. And while male scholars were known for

their melancholy, even women's means of acquiring knowledge here

carries the burden/honor of melancholy. The ability for introspection

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[87] MacDonald 5.

makes one melancholy, regardless of gender. Cavendish's Empress and

Wroth's Pamphilia both exhibit symptoms of melancholy and are

identified as being melancholy.

Once the Empress calls up spirits and questions them they

suddenly vanish for no reason. She is described as growing "studious" at

their disappearance, a significant word choice since scholars were noted

for suffering from a form of melancholy as a result of their solitary,

thoughtful occupations and as a condition of their genius.[88] This idea of

"scholarly melancholy" originated with Aristotle. "Those [who are]

melancholy . . . are more rational and less eccentric and in many

respects superior to others in culture"; this postulation became the basis

for the theory of heroic melancholy in the Renaissance.[89] It is easy to see

why Cavendish would approve of and desire that this description be

applied to her creations, and by extension thus to herself. Through her

female protagonists she begins to claim these admirable traits for

women.

By concluding the spirits answered her falsely, the Empress blames

herself for their disappearance; "this belief was so fixed in her mind, that

it put her into a very melancholy humour".[90] She is obsessed with this

idea, right or wrong, and pursues it. According to this reasoning, the

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[88] Lyons, *Voices of Melancholy: Studies in Literary Treatments of Melancholy in Renaissance England*. (NY: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1971) 5.
[89] Lyons 4.
[90] 179.

mind creates melancholy by "thinking too much on one subject," one more indication of melancholy or madness during the early modern period.[91]

The Duchess of Newcastle, another character based on Cavendish in *The Blazing World*, is also described as sad and melancholy.[92] She is clearly allowed to exhibit both of these distinct qualities. Such a distinction implies that while the Duchess may indeed be melancholy, she takes no pleasure in it. Both aspects of this description contradict the definition offered in *The World's Olio* for male melancholics, who were not sad, but took pleasure in their condition. Apparently what is denied men in *The World's Olio* is granted women in her later work, or perhaps the author changed her mind on this topic later in life. When the Empress asks her why she is both sad and melancholy, the Duchess reasons that "my melancholy proceeds from an extreme ambition", so that she says "neither she herself, nor no creature in the world was able to know the height, depth or breadth of her ambition"; she acknowledges though that "my present desire is that I would be a great princess".[93] She admits her grand ambition, knowing some readers might take it as an indication of madness. The Duchess is saved from madness, however, by employing her creativity in ways over which she has complete control. Instead of comparing her world to that of others, she creates her own

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[91] Babb 123.
[92] 183.
[93] 183.

unique world, paralleling the manner in which Cavendish herself has put

her talents to use in writing prose fiction, creating worlds of her own and

herself as a worthy character or two who have freedoms and power

denied their author. Wroth's Pamphilia is likewise saved from her

melancholy developing into madness by writing sonnets and recording

her thoughts. Perhaps both of these maneuvers provide a specific space

for women's speech. Rather than attempting to master men's strategies

for living life to its fullest, the heroines must learn to step outside of the

masculine system to critique it and suggest their own unique

alternatives. Female characters in Wroth and Cavendish must remove

themselves from the social world they occupy occasionally in order to

reflect upon their experiences and make assessments as to the best

means of negotiating their place in the world. Their retreats, both

physical and mental, allow them perspective and indicate the existence

of their own individual and rich interior lives. Self-control for Wroth's

heroines and common sense for Cavendish's heroines are similar

intellectual means that women must master in order to successfully

navigate in the patriarchal and elitist worlds which they encounter.

In his 1683 manifesto on madness, Thomas Willis reaches the

conclusion that "Ambition, Pride, and Emulation have made some

mad".[94] The Duchess is nearly driven mad by her desire to be equal in

power or status to the Empress. In her attempts to create a world of her

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[94] Qtd. In Feder 149.

own modeled after those proposed by male philosophers, she

accidentally made "such strange and monstrous figures as did more

affright than delight her, and caused such a chaos in her mind, as had

almost dissolved it".[95] Her mind is almost dissolved by the sheer force of

her ambition and her initial failure to achieve her desired goal.

It would appear that the Duchess is progressing from mere

affliction of the spleen into melancholy. The episodes are the result of

the Duchess' attempts to create different worlds. During one such

attempt, her mind became so dizzy with the ethereal "globules" her

imagination had set in motion that it almost put her in a swoon, and then

"her mind was so squeezed together, that her thoughts could neither

move forward nor backward which cause[d] a horrible pain in her

head".[96] The description of her inability to move her thoughts forward or

backward is reminiscent of the parrot-man's inability to move forward or

backward in his speech when he becomes confounded with his own

argument. This suggests that the Duchess' thought processes have caught

up with those of the male subjects; she is finally able to confound

herself, albeit with her attempts to create worlds based on the men's

discourse, she also appears to recognize the futility it involves. She

comes to view the masculine modes of seeking knowledge as self-

limiting, prohibiting progress. Kate Lilley observes that Cavendish

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[95] 187.
[96] 188.

attempts a "tricky balance" between the "rational basis of the female critique of male superiority, and the claims for the inherent rational capacity of women", a balance that Lilley calls "crucial".[97] Through the Duchess and the Empress, simulacrums of herself, Cavendish has revealed female characters who are perfectly capable of practicing masculine abstract thought, but who realize that there is no real point to it. The Duchess ultimately abandons the masculine models to create a world of her own fashioning. However, the culture in which Cavendish was writing does not allow for women to experience or express such analytic insights, especially in regard to masculine authority. Therefore the "fancy" part of the work allows for the Duchess of Newcastle as a character to experience and express these critical insights, cleverly allowing Cavendish the author to subvert the social/intellectual mores of her time.

In *The World's Olio*, Margaret Cavendish refers to men's melancholy or madness and what occurrences contribute to that questionable yet popular malady. In her fiction *The Blazing World*, however, only the two heroines are viewed as exhibiting and declaring they are melancholy--the noble, intellectual condition for aristocratic men. It is the men who are distortions of rationality. Both the Duchess and the Empress suffer from recurring bouts with what they term

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[97] "Blazing Worlds: Seventeenth Century Women's Utopian Writing" in *Women, Texts & Histories 1575-1760*. Ed. Clare Bratn & Diane Purkiss (London: Routledge, 1992) 127.

"melancholy". Cavendish employs melancholy to balance the female Faustus she creates in the Empress, the woman ever seeking more knowledge, more control over her world(s). These highly appropriate onsets of melancholy keep the Empress, and later the Duchess, down to earth, away from a Faustian downfall of excessive pride. Because of their introspection and their common sense in combination, these characters are able to acknowledge their mental status, their potential melancholy and yet assert control over it. They are not arrogant because of their intellectual abilities, nor do they become so wrapped up in intellectualizing that they lose perspective on themselves or the world around them. They seem to accept that their intelligence and common sense are simply necessary qualities for exceptional women. In applying these talents, they end up rescuing the men's worlds, just as Wroth's heroines ultimately maintain order in the society in which they live.

Michel Foucault refers to a theme in popular satire of madness taking the form of knowledge; he claims that therefore madness is linked to man's weaknesses, dreams and illusions. Foucault adds "Madness deals not so much with truth and the world, as with man and whatever truth about himself he is able to perceive".[98] While Cavendish certainly provides for the inclusion of men to experience melancholy by defining it in relation to them in her earlier work, her focus in the later work shifts to her heroines. Thus, they are the only characters allowed to

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[98] *Madness* 27.

exhibit full-fledged recurring bouts of melancholy, probably as a symbol of their capacity for knowledge. They are also the only characters who realize and acknowledge their condition, showing their capacity for self-awareness and control despite their disturbed state of mind. In doing so, she suggests women's strength and ability in dealing with such conditions, a protest of popular notions to the contrary.

Mary Wroth and Margaret Cavendish write from two greatly different perspectives, forty years apart. Using her literary heritage, Wroth presents the rather radical idea of women writing as a perfectly natural pastime. She makes traditional arguments for women's roles to support her claims. The result is quietly remarkable. She is not purporting to have done anything outrageous or inappropriate, yet this is exactly what she has done as the first woman to compose a romance in English and one of the first to publish fiction under her own name. Cavendish claims fancy or imagination as women's realm, announcing it the opposite of rationality, the territory of men. In doing so she rather savagely satirizes traditional masculinist methods of acquiring and presenting knowledge, as well as critiquing the exclusion of women from certain intellectual areas, such as math, science, and philosophy.

For Wroth, women's key strength is their ability for self-governance or self-control. Cavendish emphasizes what she refers to as women's common sense, an asset that male characters in her world(s)

seem to lack. These two concepts, self-governance and common sense, are ultimately related; both indicate women's intellectual and analytical capacities are far more advanced than has been previously acknowledged.

While both pieces are prose fiction, they differ markedly in context, style, and approach. Yet both present transitional perspectives vital to women's literary history. One uses traditional prescriptions of women's acceptable roles to claim and support the idea of women's writing as a natural activity while the other critiques patriarchal methods of acquiring truth. Both offer support for women as thinkers and writers. Both also employ traditional ideas of madness to support these claims. Wroth alters the dramatic convention, putting forth the idea that women are capable of recovering from madness. Women learn and grow from their mistakes; they are intelligent, complex creatures. Cavendish critiques the traditional concept of "reason" as superior to "fancy" by showing women's intellectual abilities as based in "fancy" to be at the least equal to men's intellectual abilities based in reason. Both writers subversively assert that order is found and maintained by women, despite the inconstancy or intellectual chaos brought about by men. However, they do so in wholly different ways.

Chapter Four:

'They will say that the spirit of madness and distraction

is upon her': Women Prophets

"The implication that only madmen and angels can speak the truth is related to the idea of holy madness, the idea that the ultimate of Christian truth is revealed to Christ's fools, to those who throw themselves utterly on God (Actually this view is very old, based on New Testament I Corinthians I:18ff)".[1]

"Thus have I declared some of the female academies," wrote the anonymous author of *A Discoverie of Six Women Preachers in 1641*, "but where their university is I cannot tell, but I supposed that Bedlam or Bridewell would be two convenient places for them."[2]

In addition to the scholarly or intellectual melancholy that Cavendish

claims for women, the other form of madness that may be perceived as beneficial

or advantageous is that of divine inspiration, as claimed in the cases of Elizabeth

Barton and Lady Eleanor Davies. Intimate communication from God was viewed

as a "gift", bringing with it public acclaim, honor, and respect; being a vessel for

God's messages meant spiritual alienation and it liberated the chosen one in

certain areas, allowing as it did for transcendence of economic or social class

status and gender restrictions. Barton and Davies enjoyed these liberties through

their self-declared and publicly recognized status as women visionaries. However,

both women were also labeled insane and punished for their transgressions as

political and religious climates shifted around them. Divine or holy madness

carries with it the potential for influence over others; to understand how it

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[1] Rosen 154.
[2] Quoted in Mack, *Visionary Women: Ecstatic Prophecy in Seventeenth-Century England.* (Berkeley: UCP, 1992) 56.

conveyed power and why such anxiety arose from it in the cases of these two

women, we must first understand how it was considered a positive form of

madness and the place of visionaries in early modern England.

For religious individuals, intimate contact with the deity could be

overwhelming, resulting in an "amazement" or disordering of the senses or mental

capabilities. Such contact was thought to remove the individual's soul from the

imprisonment of the body, bringing it closer to the deity or other divine beings,

such as angels. M.A. Screech states that "the frenzies of both medically and

charismatically insane people arise from the soul's quest for freedom" and that

holy madness results from enthusiasm, or amazement "caused when the soul

glimpses, even indirectly, divine truth or beauty".[3] Exposure to such spiritual

perfection is overwhelming for most people.

A fine line separated those suffering from a physical or diseased form of

madness from those whose madness was spiritual. It was common for mad

persons also to claim divine contact. Many records exist of mad men declaring

themselves angels or apostles or even God. Few people seem to have taken these

individuals seriously. They were obviously what Screech refers to as "organically

mad" and treated with pity. However, when a new claim of mysticism was made

by one who had had an unusual experience and a following of believers began to

build around that person, church authorities had an obligation to test the claimant.

The test was meant to either prove the experience a truly divine one, or to

determine the alleged visionary false, in which case the claimant could be

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[3] "Good Madness in Christendom" in *The Anatomy of Madness* 29.

considered either as under the power of Satan or as a mad person. The

relationship between religious epiphanies and madness is a strong one. "Even in

the Middle Ages some sophisticated observers had regarded the activities of so-

called religious prophets as a form of mental illness. In the seventeenth century

this attitude became increasingly common"; "many would-be religious enthusiasts

were locked up as insane".[4] At first it seems "mad" for one to have claimed to

have spoken with God; however, in the early modern period, people still wavered

between belief in the supernatural and scientific doubt. A recovery of man's pre-

fallen state, direct communication with the divine, was believed possible, albeit

extremely rare. Tom Hayes notes that "like mystic discourse, the discourse of

madness maintains a vital link between the self and the sacred . . .".[5] Screech also

describes similarities between mental illness and divine madness, one of which is

the ability to foretell the future.[6] Such associations originated in antiquity with

Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero, who "had all commented on the term *mani*, which

was connected with *mantikos*, 'prophetic, oracular,' thus establishing a link

between madness and divination".[7]

The concept of the "fool for Christ" or the "Holy Fool" is grounded in the

scripture of the New Testament, according to the translations of the Christian

humanist Erasmus. The Christian belief in selfless acts of charity, the idea Greek

Christians held of the resurrection of the body, and the ecstasies and raptures of

Christian visionaries all contributed to the idea that to be a Christian was to be

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[4] Thomas 145.
[5] Hayes "Diggers, Ranters, and Women Prophets: The Discourse of Madness and the Cartesian 'Cogito' in Seventeenth Century England." *Clio* 26.1 (Fall 1996) 31.
[6] 34.

"mad" in a sense; when they were called mad in a contemptuous sense by the philosophical Gentiles, early Christians revelled in the accusations, claiming it was "good to be condemned by the hostile standards of this transitory life."[8] Erasmus is also drawing upon the Franciscan tradition, which emphasized a rejection of material wealth to better serve God.[9] In his *Praise of Folly* (1511), Erasmus expresses his belief "that Christianity at its best is 'nothing other' than 'a kind of madness (*insanium quandam*)", asking "are not enraptured Christians 'demented'--deprived of their *mens*, their mind? Do they not enjoy an experience 'very like dementedness' (*dementiae simillimum*)?"[10] Erasmus writes,

> As long as the soul uses its bodily organs aright a man is called sane; but, truly, when it bursts its chains and tries to be free, practising running away from its prison, then one calls it insanity. If this happens through disease or a defect of the organs, then by common consent it is, plainly, insanity. And yet men of this kind, too, we find foretelling things to come, knowing tongues and writings which they had never studied beforehand--altogether showing forth something divine. There is no doubt that this happens because the mind, a little freer from polluting contact with the body, begins to use its native powers.[11]

Freed from the constraints both of the physical body and the imposed order of the society in which one existed, the "fool for Christ" could offer himself or herself to God, allowing God to exert control over the individual's physical or verbal

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[7] Midelfort, *Mad* 4.

[8] Screech 27.

[9] See Malcolm D. Lambert, *Franciscan Poverty: The Doctrine of the Absolute Poverty of Christ and the Apostles in the Franciscan Order, 1210-1323*. (London: SPCK, 1961).

behavior to show the power of the deity. Being a Holy Fool, one could briefly transcend the cares of this temporary world; such a position was highly honorable and therefore highly desirable. Often the individuals who were touched by God in this manner were clerics who cultivated a devotional, penitent life in community with one another and apart from society.

Both the mentally diseased and the divinely touched were considered "mad"; the former, however, was considered an illness, something in need of curing. It was a state that evoked both pity and amusement. Stories abound of the elite traveling to Bedlam to view the inmates for an evening's entertainment. Unlike the organically mad, those suffering from Holy madness were held in high esteem, visited by the devout on pilgrimages. They developed a following of disciples, preached publicly, recorded and published their spiritual autobiographies. People from all levels of society were equally susceptible to either form of madness, which alienated the sufferer, through pity or fear for his/her "otherworldliness", mental, physical, or spiritual. Both kinds of madness faced tests of authentication by lay persons and clergy or physicians. Both conditions were suspected of being feigned either for public attention or as a way to escape from limitations and domestic or employment responsibilities. For mad women and female visionaries, a certain degree of physical vulnerability was also characteristic; both conditions were sexualized in particular ways. A chief symptom of madness for women was sexual inappropriateness, in behavior, appearance, or language. A primary tenet of authenticity for women visionaries

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[10] Screech 26.
[11] Quoted in Screech 26.

was their sexual chastity or purity; casting aspersion upon a woman visionary's sexual behavior was one way of discrediting her as a messenger of the divine.

The female visionary, as sexually vulnerable as the mad woman, was usually placed under the guidance of a spiritual advisor, an older male cleric. Often these relationships became sexual ones, enough so that accusations of sexual misconduct were a standard means of discrediting some female visionaries. Even the description of women mystics' expressions while in a trance or experiencing a vision are orgasmic, eyes closed, heads thrown back, body arched, etc. They are obviously in the throes of some force beyond verbal expression and beyond their own control. Phyllis Mack observes that "... if respectable women were constrained by convention to behave with humility and modesty, the female visionary was constrained to behave as though she were literally out of her mind".[12] Whether consigned to Bedlam or placed under the control of a spiritual advisor, women who experienced holy madness required extraordinary surveillance. As Hayes observes, "in a society whose economic and political system simultaneously produced and sought to contain feminine sexuality, the conjunction--and attraction--between women and a discourse of madness posed a threat to social stability".[13] Mad women and female visionaries failed to recognize (earthly) patriarchal authority.

There were two common types of visionaries, mystics and prophets, in both medieval and early modern Christianity. Both were held in high esteem for

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[12] Mack, *Visionary* 106.
[13] Hayes 39. He also notes that "... what passes for rational or normative discourse is susceptible to challenges from oppositional and subcultural ideas, images, and themes, which are, according to the standards of normative discourse, perverse or simply 'mad'". (32-33).

their intimate communication with the divine, whether it be a deity, angels, or past prophets. Their status was elevated after news of their visionary experience had spread, and they were sought out by believers for their wisdom and by non-believers, who wished to test them and determine their spiritual validity. Some differences exist between the terms mystic and prophet within Western Christian communities. Mystics usually retired from public, seeking to reflect upon their intense communion with God and learn from it, or to record such experiences in private. They did not seek attention or fame, although it often found them through pilgrimages of believers who had heard their story. Their experiences centered on intense overwhelming feelings of divine presence, which have been referred to as an "experiential awareness".[14] Often the mystic's senses were stimulated or muted, allowing her to smell particular odors or to block out pain, for example. The communication the mystic received from the divine was extremely primitive in nature; it was so transcendent that it proved difficult to recount to others in ordinary language or even in metaphor. In 1373 Dame Julian of Norwich's mysticism began in her near-death experience of a visitation from Jesus, who she felt nurtured and comforted her as a mother would. Dame Julian states that "a mother's is the most intimate, most spontaneous, and most faithful work because it is the most genuine" and that "Mother Jesus feeds us with himself. . . A mother holds her child tenderly to her breast, but our tender Mother Jesus takes us right inside his blessed breast . . .".[15] During this time she experienced 16 visions of Christ. Her forty years after this experience were spent in relative seclusion,

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[14] Intro. To *Mystics, Visionaries, & Prophets: A Historical Anthology of Women's Spiritual Writings*, ed. Shawn Madigan. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998)3.

exploring the meaning of the gifts she had been given. The emphasis in Dame

Julian's descriptions of her encounter with the divine is joyful reunion,

overwhelming bliss in the presence of the deity. Such an emphasis is typical of

mystical experience.

Prophets, on the other hand, may experience a vision or message from

God, but more frequently they commune with a historical or mythological

prophet, such as Bede, Merlin, or Daniel. They assert that they have actually

"seen" or heard the spiritual visitor, as opposed to merely sensing a divine

presence. Their purpose is not to seek seclusion, but to preach publicly and

deliver the message they have been given. The variety of visions included

"visions of devotion, of doctrine, or of prophecy".[16] Often these messages served

to interpret recent events in the nation's history or to predict future ones. Unlike

the mad or the mystical, the prophet was not indifferent to public opinion; instead

s/he sought to move the public audience. As with mystical revelation, people were

suspicious of claims of prophetic experience because it could be faked so easily,

and the political nature of prophecy made it particularly suspect. Prophecy takes

the form of performance, or public spectacle. Just as players in a stage production

seek to move their audience to react to the scenes portrayed, prophets seek to

motivate their listeners to heed their warnings or even to take certain actions in

favor of political or social change.

The distinction between mysticism and prophecy can be seen in the 1394

case of Margery Kempe. A fourteenth-century married businesswoman who

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[15] *Revelations of Divine Love*, 210-211.
[16] Madigan 4-5.

claimed to have had a mystical experience of Christ following the traumatic birth

of her first child, Kempe traveled throughout England telling her story. She was

best known for her weeping, which apparently was quite a spectacle. Although

her spiritual experience may well have been true, she was never given the respect

granted Dame Julian, probably because of her actions of traveling and public

"performance", which were not necessarily characteristic of Christian mystics at

the time. However, weeping did possess "a sacramental significance as a tangible

sign of inward repentant grace" and Kempe's weeping served to enhance her

message for Christians to remember Christ's sacrifice and be compassionate as

this messenger obviously was.[17] Her performance was so powerful one had to err

on the side of belief in her message. The Archbishop of York called in a panel of

clerks and a physician to test Kempe's faith and her worthiness as a mystic.[18]

While they could not disprove her worthiness, her defense of herself seemed to

irritate them further, causing them to release her on the condition that she leave

the area. In fact, the response of local authorities was usually to send her on her

way to seek approval from another authority, anything to get her out of their

jurisdiction. Her message was solely spiritual, not political, therefore the public

spectacle she created was not seen as a threat or challenge to authority but simply

as a nuisance. The examination she underwent was common for those claiming

visionary experiences; a panel of male authorities gathered to question the

individual's worthiness as messenger of God by testing her character, her physical

[17] Mack, *Visionary* 26.
[18] Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*.Ch. 52, (161-167). Translated by B.A. Windeatt.

and moral virtue, as well as her faith and her mental status. Just as clergy,

physicians, and laypersons examined those accused of organic madness as to their

condition, so a test was necessary for determining if the individual was feigning

the condition, possessed by demons, or maddened by contact with the divine.

Kempe was a mystic in that her visions could only be expressed through her

weeping and a prophet in her assumption of a public role.

The term *prophet* is derived from the Greek *prophetes*; "it can mean both

'one who speaks forth' and 'one who speaks beforehand'".[19] Old Testament

prophets spoke "for" God, "declaring his divine will and displeasure; however,

their inspired prophecies inevitably entailed predictions, typically in the form of

warnings, of the tests and punishments God would impose on his chosen

people."[20] Since prophets issued warnings of God's displeasure with the people

and the threats of punishment that would follow if they refused to acknowledge

his message, a more sophisticated form of communication than that involved in

mysticism was necessary. Understandable language, often the vernacular, was

required in prophetic trances or utterances to convey the particular information

given by the deity. If the language was not understandable, an interpreter, as in

the Delphic Oracle, was necessary. A shift in the meaning of the term "prophesy"

after the Reformation changed the nature of the actions of those called by God in

this capacity. "Puritans used the verb *prophesy* to mean 'interpret scripture'"; this

"distinction between prophecy as divinely inspired utterance and prophecy as

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[19] Howard Dobin *Merlin's Disciples: Prophecy, Poetry and Power in Renaissance England.*
(Stanford: SUP, 1990) 27.
[20] Dobin 27.

exegesis of scripture disappeared as the Reformation redefined the prophetic enterprise".[21] Scripture could be interpreted to reflect current events or warn what the future might hold if the monarch did not heed the prophet's message.

Two of the most intriguing cases of English women visionaries occurred exactly one hundred years apart. Elizabeth Barton, a young peasant girl, experienced a vision on her sickbed in 1525; she accurately predicted her own cure as well as the death of a child. Her clairvoyance continued after her illness, giving her access to bishops, kings and queens. In 1625, Lady Eleanor Touchet Davies awoke in her own home to the voice of the biblical prophet Daniel, declaring that the day of judgement approached and that she was to be the new prophet. Her accuracy at predicting death made her famous. Both women were accused of madness and even imprisoned for their prophetic activities, especially publication of their visions. Both also attempted to use the label of "madness" in defending their actions when they were prosecuted by the authorities.

Lady Eleanor Davies's prophesies both predicted individual events and reinterpreted scripture to forecast England's future. Elizabeth Barton's initial vision was similar to Dame Julian's; however, under the guidance of Edward Bocking, she became a prophet rather than a mystic. Lady Eleanor Davies was never considered a mystic by herself or any one else. She was clearly a prophet. Both of these women's status as visionaries changed other's perceptions of them, gave them a public voice, allowed them influence over others, and placed them in direct opposition to the monarchy. Despite this dangerous position, neither

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[21] Dobin 29.

shirked the responsibility of the prophet to deliver the word of God. Yet both women attempted to claim madness at one stage of their ministry as a means of diverting blame from themselves. In addition, debate continues today among scholars as to whether either woman's condition was divine or holy madness, with the gift of visions, or if it was organic madness, a simple disease of the mind.

Both prophecy and mysticism, in providing for an individual's contact with God, make it possible for women to attain the highest forms of spiritual distinction. "Religious melancholy differed from artistic affectation by providing ample opportunity for women's participation in religious genius . . .".[22] In fact, part of women's suitability for these roles lay in the proof of God's mercy and power. Fifteenth century Dutch theologian Jean Gerson commented that mystical theology is a knowledge in which even "young girls and simpletons can excel".[23] Even the most lowly members of society could be chosen by God to exemplify his great power. Given traditional beliefs about their weaknesses, passivity, irrationality, and passion, women were uniquely suited to visionary experiences. "It was felt that women's irrational and emotional essence and lack of strong personal will could make them especially receptive to the external Voice of God."[24] This malleability also made women targets for accusations of demonic possession; in addition, clever women might feign a visionary experience for the attention and liberty such a claim brought. To declare oneself a visionary was a

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[22] Julius H. Rubin. *Religious Melancholy and Protestant Experience in America.* (New York: Oxford UP, 1994) 4.
[23] From Gerson's *De mystica theologica speculativa* written in 1402. Qtd. In Steven E. Ozment *Mysticism and Dissent: Religious Ideology and Social Protest in the Sixteenth Century.* (New Haven: YUP, 1973) 8-9.
[24] Elaine Hobby, *Virtue of Necessity: English Women's Writing 1646-1688,* (London: Virago Press, 1988) 26.

dangerous statement, and in some ways a direct challenge to established authority.

The social or spiritual liberation it conveyed "sanctioned a fluidity of self-

perception that, if allowed to interfere with the ordered functioning of the

hierarchies of state, church, and family, might render those hierarchies effectively

null and void."[25]

Through prophetic or mystic experiences, women could claim a public

voice, despite prohibitions against women preaching in public. Elaine C. Huber

develops the idea of "authority of inspiration", describing the potential for

women's empowerment through their claims to authority based upon their belief

in having experienced direct contact with God.[26] Steven E. Ozment asks, "Is there

a natural alliance between the values of the mystical experience and the concerns

of those who feel estranged and persecuted?"[27] Mystical or prophetic experiences,

by their very nature, occur outside of regular systems of operation or authority,

making it possible to reject or simply ignore one set of rules while claiming still

to be subservient to another, higher set of commands.

> In the most literal sense of the words, the mystical enterprise is
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> transrational and transinstitutional. And because it is such, it bears a
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> potential *anti*-intellectual and *anti*-institutional stance, which can be
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> adopted for the critical purposes of dissent, reform, and even revolution.[28]

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[25] Mack, *Visionary* 50.

[26] *Women and the Authority of Inspiration: A Re-examination of Two Prophetic Movements From a Contemporary Feminist Perspective.* (Lanham: UP of America, 1985) 3.

[27] X.

[28] Ozment 8.

Assessment by others, usually male, determined a woman's visionary status and mental condition as well. Although, as we have seen in the drama, it was deemed rare for a woman to feign madness successfully, women were often accused of feigning visionary experiences, mainly to gain attention and influence over listeners. While "divine madness" could be claimed as a means of empowerment for women, they were required to pass certain subjective tests to authenticate their condition. "Women who were prophets could venture into such realms as preaching, writing, and discussing public affairs that otherwise belonged exclusively to men. Proof of the authenticity of their inspiration was essential."[29] If they passed the examinations of clerics, they were placed under the spiritual guidance of one particular priest who acted as a confessor and supervisor for them. Women claiming mystical experiences were rarely considered a threat; however, women who prophesied were frequently considered dangerous to the existing government or church authority.

"Prophecy . . . posed special problems in an age when freedom of expression was strictly limited, dissenters were suspected of fomenting sedition if not treason, and those who stubbornly clung to aberrant views were deemed mad".[30] A person who believed herself to be in touch with God, such as Margery Kempe, could be called mad and easily dismissed, unless she developed a large or powerful following of believers. Then she possessed the potential to be dangerous and must be dealt with as a serious threat to the existing order. So we see in the cases of Elizabeth Barton, or Lady Eleanor Davies. As mad women were allowed

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[29] Cope 38.
[30] Cope 38.

freedom unless they were deemed a danger to themselves or others, so the same

policy existed for those who claimed to be mystics or prophets. Phyllis Mack

speculates that "women were perceived as prophets when they reinforced

challenges to authority which had already been made by others, and dismissed as

insane or accused of witchcraft when their statements went too far according to

the political preconceptions of their audience".[31] This makes sense in the case of

Lady Eleanor in particular.

Prophecy is traditionally closely connected to political events. "The claim

to be God's special emissary and mouthpiece evoked fear, reverence, and

obedience."[32] Prophecy has always been perceived as a potential threat to

institutionalized authority, which has often attempted to contain it through

silencing it. Howard Dobin's *Merlin's Disciples* describes prophecy in Tudor

England as a "slippery and polysemic language" that represented "the voice--not

of God--but of the dissident, the rebel, and the devil".[33]

This chapter is not so much about actual mystics, prophets, or visionaries

as it is about their image in the public eye and the authority such claims gave

women's voices. It has not and cannot be proven that Elizabeth Barton or Eleanor

Davies were mystics or prophets, that their visionary experiences were truly

divinely inspired. But the simple fact that their pronouncements created such

anxiety that they were seized, confined, and, in the case of Barton, executed

attests to the power they were able to achieve through such claims. The prophetic

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[31] Mack "Women as Prophets During the English Civil War." *Feminist Studies* 8.1 (Spring 1982) 32.
[32] Dobin 20.

public speeches of Barton, "the Nun of Kent", were copied down and circulated,

and she traveled about England to deliver her message. Davies published over

sixty tracts of her prophecies, often with her own money, and royalty and

members of the aristocracy sought her expertise on issues of childbirth and life

expectancy.

Elizabeth Barton, The Nun of Kent or The Holy Maid of Kent (Prophet: 1525-34)

Elizabeth Barton's career as a prophet bears a complicated relationship to

madness for several reasons. Her situation reveals how a young serving girl can

be empowered by prophetic claims; her social status was elevated by this claim,

transforming her from a member of the household staff of a bailiff to a convent to

a public figure who had audiences with church leaders, aristocrats, and even kings

and queens. Despite prohibitions against women preaching in public, she was

allowed to do so through the authority given her by God. Barton, who had become

a Benedictine nun, was arrested for treason in September 1533. As Sharon Jansen

notes, "her words and deeds were systematically and rigorously investigated, yet

she was never to be tried and convicted for that crime. Instead, Parliament passed

a special act of attainder against her, condemning her to death."[34] As her

predictions could not be disproven, she had to be discredited or appear to discredit

herself. The common people's faith in her had to be shaken. Henry VIII and

Thomas Cranmer almost entirely succeeded in this endeavor.

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[33] 22.

[34] Sharon L. Jansen *Dangerous Talk and Strange Behavior: Women and Popular Resistance to the Reforms of Henry VIII.* (NY: St. Martin's Press, 1996) 42.

Barton's prophecies were published in multiple forms by several

individuals. They produced such anxiety that all copies of them were destroyed.

None remain today; instead we have a volume of others' writings, both official

records and private papers, about the Nun of Kent and her prophecies. Authorities

initially attempted to dismiss her as a harmless lunatic, then labeled her a traitor

when she built a following. Official records indicate that she confessed herself

mad in an attempt to assert her innocence of any malicious intent toward the king,

and, after her death, she was referred to as a "hysteric girl". Obviously the label of

"madness" was easily and readily manipulated by both her opponents and Barton

herself throughout her prophetic career.

As Jansen notes, "of all the women involved in political resistance during

Henry's reign, Elizabeth Barton's story is uniquely well documented".[35] What is

unusual about such a well-documented case as Barton's is that, despite having

allegedly over 700 copies of her prophecies in circulation in her lifetime, none of

the prophet's own writings survive. Instead we must rely on the multitude of

men's writings about her and the prophecies she spoke. Only three major studies

focus on Barton's life. Sharon Jansen's *Dangerous Talk and Strange Behavior:*

Rebellious Women Under Henry VIII includes two chapters on Barton, asserting

her agency in prophesying against the king. Father Robert McKee's *Dame*

Elizabeth Barton presents a compilation of information from state records and

letters in an attempt to undo the damaging official accounts of her life; in his

introduction, he makes a case for the Catholic church recognizing her as a saint,

martyred on its behalf. Alan Neames' *The Holy Maid of Kent* defensively offers

an in-depth and often creatively whimsical account of any records dealing with

Barton. To date, there is no biography on Barton that attempts to offer an

objective portrait of her; however, interest in her life continues, as shown by the

cable channel A&E's current production of a biography of Elizabeth Barton.

At fifteen, Elizabeth Barton experienced her first vision of the Blessed

Virgin who came to her in her illness at Easter 1525 to assure her that she would

be cured in August. After this prophecy had been fulfilled, William Warham, the

Archbishop of Canterbury, had Barton's experience reviewed by Dr. Edward

Bocking, a monk at Canterbury, "who was so favorably impressed by her

essential honesty and innocence that he became her spiritual advisor".[36] Other

accounts of this mentorship relate that it began when Barton, in a trance, stated it

was God's will that Bocking act as a spiritual father to her.[37] This girl who had

previously worked as a servant in a bailiff's house entered the convent and

established a surrogate family in the Mother Superior and Dr. Bocking as well as

the other women there.[38]

It is apparently no coincidence that after Bocking was named her spiritual

advisor, Barton began to have visions about Sir Thomas More, Cardinal Wolsey,

and King Henry VIII. "Her recurring seizures led her to believe that she had been

entrusted with divine messages for society".[39] The Church examiners who came

to test Barton's trances in August of 1525 found a crowd of roughly 2,000 had

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[35] Jansen 41.
[36] Retha M. Warnicke *Women of the English Renaissance and Reformation.* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1983) 68.
[37] John Reginald McKee, *Dame Elizabeth Barton, O.S.B., The Holy Maid of Kent,* (1925) 8.
[38] Jansen 73.
[39] Warnicke 68.

gathered to see the young woman.[40] What the examiners witnessed that day was impressive: "There fell she eftsoons into a marvelous passion before the image of Our Lady, much like a body diseased of the falling evil, in the which she uttered sundry metrical and rhyming speeches."[41] According to dramatic convention, Barton's out-of-control public speech, which is described as falling into meter and rhyme, easily could have been taken for the language of a mad woman. Yet "when her visions were complete, [Thomas] Cranmer reported, 'she came to herself again, and was perfectly whole'".[42] Her trances seem to come in "fits", and many historians agree that at the least, Barton suffered from epilepsy.

> Cranmer confirmed the nun's continuing visions; Elizabeth Barton experienced, he wrote, 'almost every week or, at the furthest every fortnight,' New visions and revelations, and she hath had oftentimes trances and raptures, by reason whereof, and also of the great perfectness that was thought to be in her, diverse and many as well great men of the realm as mean men, and many learned men, but especially diverse and many religious men, had great confidence in her, and often resorted unto her and communed with her, to the intent they might by her know the will of God.[43]

This "great perfectness" to which Cranmer refers suggests her physical as well as spiritual purity, making her a worthy recipient of messages from God. An

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[40] Jansen 44.
[41] Edward Thwaites Qtd. In Jansen 44. Thwaites' *Marvelous Work of Late Done at Court-of-Street*, a booklet containing a brief life of Barton.
[42] Jansen 44.
[43] Qtd. In Jansen 45.

unchaste woman would not be judged by her audience as an appropriate vessel for God's word.

She attracted many followers, among them a wide variety of men, religious, educated, opinionated, and politically motivated. Acting on her visions and under the guidance of Bocking, she rebuked More and Wolsey for neglecting the spiritual needs of the church, an extraordinary act for a girl of fifteen. These visions and/or Bocking also led her to preach against Henry VIII's marriage to Anne Boleyn publicly as well as to his face.

According to Allison Weir, in the summer of 1528, the Nun of Kent prophesied that if the King put away Catherine, his lawful wife, God would ensure that he should no longer be King in England and he would die a villain's death; since it was not yet treason to foretell the King's death, Elizabeth Barton was dismissed by the authorities as a harmless lunatic.[44] On October 1, 1528, Archbishop William Warham wrote to Cardinal Thomas Wolsey on Elizabeth Barton's behalf, praising her virtue and seeking to introduce her to Wolsey.[45] Her visions had begun to shift, from her own healing and the death or recovery of children to prophecies regarding Wolsey, Warham, and the King; she began having visions primarily concerning political events. Jansen notes,

> Before 1528, with religious reform becoming more widespread and
>
> controversial on the Continent, Elizabeth Barton's prophecies had been
>
> primarily religious: her voices had spoken of heaven and hell, but they had
>
> also addressed more specifically theological issues, confirming

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[44] Allison Weir. *The Six Wives of Henry VIII.* (NY: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991) 181.
[45] Jansen 45.

pilgrimages and the practice of Mass and confession, as Cranmer had noted, for example, all practices then being attacked by reformers such as Luther and Tyndale. While some care had been taken to check into her professed visions, such prophecies had confirmed orthodox Catholic teaching and practice. But by 1527 the king's "Great Matter" had become a public matter, and by 1528 Elizabeth Barton's prophecies had began to focus on the king's marriage and the question of divorce.[46]

Barton met not only with Wolsey, but also with Henry himself, Sir Thomas More, and John Fisher, bishop of Rochester. She revealed to Rochester that a vision from God indicated that "if the king went forward with his plans to marry Anne Boleyn, he 'should not be king of England seven months after'".[47] By the winter of 1531, however, the government had begun to view her as a threat to national security since she was inciting disaffection among the King's subjects and was secretly believed by Cromwell to be in league with the Bishop of Rochester.[48] In addition, she had a rather large following in Kent, "a shire notoriously volatile," and the government could no longer ignore her.[49] She continued her prophecies against Anne at Canterbury and in public "large crowds came to hear her".[50] She also met on separate occasions with two Italian representatives, sending messages through them to Pope Clement VII urging him to refuse Henry's requests. Many people had believed Barton to be a true prophet,

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[46] Jansen 46.

[47] Jansen 47; McKee points out that this prediction technically was fulfilled as Henry was excommunicated at that time, see p. 19.

[48] Weir 231.

[49] G.R. Elton *England Under the Tudors*. 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 1991) 138.

[50] Weir 240.

to have a particular access to God, and among these was Bishop Fisher, who allegedly "listened to her with reverence".[51] As a further indication of how seriously her predictions were taken, she met with Henry on three separate occasions. He once offered to make her an abbess and Anne invited her to remain at court as a lady in waiting, attempts to silence her prophecies regarding them; Barton refused all such offers.

Reports of her meetings with Henry vary. Their last meeting took place in October 1532, prior to his trip to Calais. According to the act of attainder against her, she made a direct threat to the king:

> She had knowledge by revelation from God that God was highly
> displeased with our said Sovereign Lord . . . and in case he desisted not
> from his proceedings in the said divorce and separation but pursued the
> same and married again, that then within one month after such marriage he
> should no longer be king of this realm, and in the reputation of Almighty
> God should not be king one day nor one hour, and that he should die a
> villain's death.[52]

Later reports state that Barton claimed Henry had intended to marry Anne Boleyn in Calais, and that only her intervention prevented it.

Many groups, such as the Observant Franciscans, the Carthusians of London and Sheen, and the Bridgettines of Syon, who were opposed to the king's

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[51] Elton 138.
[52] Qtd. in Jansen 49.

divorce lent their support to Barton's prophecies.[53] But her many and varied personal contacts seem to have caused the least concern; the most dangerous element of her prophecies were the published accounts of her visions.[54] "By September 1533 Cromwell was pursuing a book of her prophecies referred to as 'the Nun's book,' which had been printed by the London printer John Scott"; at that time Scott still had 200 copies of this book, claiming that the other 500 copies had been given to Edward Bocking, whom Scott claimed was the author.[55] Another book of Barton's prophecies was rumored to have been made by a monk, John Dering, whom Cranmer also questioned. Dering acknowledged the text, *de Duplice Spiritu*, but claimed to have destroyed it.[56] The sermon against Elizabeth Barton and the act of attainder both "indicate that several books had been produced".[57]

The king ordered Cranmer to question Barton and in his report on this interrogation, Cranmer said that with his encouragement Barton had "confessed many mad follies".[58] Barton was imprisoned in the Tower of London, along with many of her more powerful followers, such as Edward Bocking. She claimed one final vision, "in which God willed her, by his heavenly messenger, that she should say that she never had a vision of God" after which she made just this confession.[59] According to Cranmer, she later stated that she had never had a vision in her life and had simply made up the ones she professed to satisfy her

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[53] Jansen 51.
[54] Jansen 51.
[55] Jansen 51.
[56] Jansen 52.
[57] Jansen 52.
[58] Qtd. In Jansen 53.
[59] Jansen 53.

audience and to "obtain worldly praise".[60] Depending on which record of her

confession is consulted, she claims madness, declares her strict adherence to

God's commands, or she accepts full responsibility through her own vanity and

need to please others. The attempt to deflect responsibility from herself does not

correspond with Barton's previous behavior. Earlier in her prophetic career, she

warned a young woman named Helen who claimed to have had a mystical

experience against the dangers of false prophesy; Barton said her visions were

"plain illusions of the devil and advised her to cast them out of her mind".[61] The

conflicting accounts of her confession(s) are not the only aspect of her story that

prove troublesome. Scholars are divided on whether she read her own confession

or handed it to the priest to read, whether she was actually found guilty and

condemned by the Star Chamber, and if the principal charges against her dealt

with her influence over clergy, including the Pope, in refusing to grant Henry's

divorce or with her skillfully planned treasonous plot against Henry. Such

discrepancies combined with the silence enforced on her mean that we simply

cannot be certain about her situation or response to the charges at all. Any

information regarding her case must be treated cautiously and comparatively.

Most records indicate that the king failed to win an indictment against

Barton, based on the fact that she had revealed her prophecies to the king himself

only the year before, leaving his only option for silencing her a bill of attainder in

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[60] Jansen 53.
[61] Jansen 63.

Parliament.[62] The infamous Star Chamber apparently could not find her guilty of treason and actually refused to do so, despite Henry's wishes otherwise. Perhaps, too, some of the chamber were fearful of her; many of her predictions had come true. To discount a proven prophet was to discount God, a position potentially more dangerous than disregarding a monarch's wishes.

A sermon preached against Barton November 23, 1533 on the platform at St. Paul's Cross in front of a crowd of 2,000 by John (Salcot) Capon has been preserved; it runs to approximately 5,000 words.[63] The Spanish ambassador, Eustache Chapuys, was present for this, and wrote in a letter to the Emperor describing the conditions of the public punishment: "the preacher appointed to vilify them was a monk lately made bishop to lend support to the Lady's [Anne Boleyn's] party."[64] It was here that Barton handed a parchment of her confession of issuing false prophecies to the preacher to be read aloud in her presence. As Howard Dobin notes, the state's prosecution and punishment of prophetic figures who threatened the reigning hierarchy was seldom done "without first extracting a confession that reasserted the crown's right and truth."[65] Both the sermon and her confession were repeated December 7, 1533 in Canterbury. The sermon declared her prophesies false and implied an inappropriate sexual relationship had existed between Barton and Bocking.[66] Sexualization of her, a standard means of silencing women prophets, contributed to the diminishment of her status. It may be compared to the sexualization of mad women in the drama, where the

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[62] Jansen 54.
[63] Jansen 54.
[64] Quoted in Alan Neames *The Holy Maid of Kent: The Life of Elizabeth Barton, 1506-1534.* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1971) 267.

inappropriately bawdy behavior of mad women makes them objects of pity as well as desire. The performative nature of the public punishment Barton received is obvious to even her contemporaries. Chapuys, the Spanish ambassador, referred to it in his letters as the "comedy" enacted at Paul's Cross and at Canterbury.[67]

The sermon also assigned the blame for the fraud squarely on Barton, who, with some assistance from Bocking, had attempted to circulate it in two published forms. The sermon states, "all her revelations contained in the said great book be falsely imagined, feigned, and contrived without any ground of truth" which the sermon said she had freely confessed.[68] These varied terms referring to her lying behavior are repeated again and again throughout the sermon. Several of her prophecies included in the two books were also quoted and disparaged before the preacher clearly warned of the danger involved in defending the maid or either book:

> But what should I long tarry in this point? Shewing unto you a false counterfeited lie of hers, where all the whole book containeth no other things but imaginations and lies, void of all truth and full of contradictions ... And the said great book is so full of malicious and spiteful terms of dishonour, reproach, and slander against our most noble sovereign, that *there is no good and faithful subject* of the king within this realm but that, hearing or reading those same, will greatly abhor and detest the devisers, the writers and setters forth of those shameful terms; and must needs think

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[65] Dobin 37.

[66] Jansen 75; they were accused of having spent an unchaperoned night together.

[67] Quoted in Neames 271.

that the said horrible terms issue from a corrupt, malicious, and

mischievous mind, void of all sincerity and truth.

I have read unto your divers of her falsely imagined visions and

revelations. And also some of the heresies and errors contained in the

printed book of her trances, and in the great written book of her

revelations. *Which, if any man will maintain or defend, he shall be heard*

according to the law! [69] (italics mine)

Clearly, then, to defend the maid or her prophecies was to commit treason. For the

authorities, the danger lay not only in Barton's person, but also in circulation of

her prophecies in print. Sending her back to her convent or locking her away

indefinitely would not suffice; she and her prophecies would remain a rallying

point for rebellions. Instead, she must be discredited; not only that, but she must

be made to at least appear to discredit herself. Only then could she be executed

and her influence effectively negated. Here, to restore order to established

authority, Barton must appear to be self-*censuring* in a manner which reinforces

the existing power structure. Her alleged confession provides just that. It states:

I, Dame Elizabeth Barton, do confess that I, most miserable and wretched

person, have been the original of all this mischief, and by my falsehood

have grievously deceived all these persons here and many more, whereby I

have most grievously offended Almighty God and my most noble

sovereign, the King's Grace.[70]

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[68] "Sermon Against the Holy Maid of Kent and Her Adherents", ed. L.E. Whatmore *English Historical Review* 58 (1943) 469.
[69] "Sermon" 471, 473.
[70] Neames 270.

The confession concludes with a plea for prayers for her forgiveness and pardon, not only from God but from the king as well.

On April 20, 1534, Elizabeth Barton was dragged on a hurdle from the Tower to Tyburn. In her last words to the assembled crowd, she asks for their forgiveness and prayers. "There, after the speech she addressed to the crowd gathered to witness her execution, she was hanged, a punishment appropriate to those of the lower classes. After she was dead, she was beheaded."[71] Her public humiliation and execution served as a warning to traitors and false prophets. Richard Rex notes that "the execution of the Holy Maid was planned and timed to encourage acquiescence in the oath to the succession" and that some sources even indicate "the oath was administered to the citizens of London on the very day of the Holy Maid's execution."[72] If this is true, her execution served as a powerful motivator for the people to acquiesce to the King's wishes. As Michel Foucault observes, the public ceremony of execution allowed the monarchy to "demonstrate not why it enforced its laws, but who were its enemies, and what unleashing of force threatened them"; it did not "re-establish justice", rather "it reactivated power".[73] Through this performance, Barton's power as a renowned prophet was effectively negated. Henry VIII's authority was reinforced.

Jansen claims that the men who supported Barton, both those followers who believed her as well as men opposed to the king's divorce, "found in her a charismatic focus for their opposition" and "they certainly stood to gain from her

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[71] Jansen 56.
[72] "The Execution of the Holy Maid of Kent" *Historical Research* 64 (1991): 218-19.

influence"; she suggests that Barton was a powerful manipulative agent in this situation and not necessarily the victim history has portrayed her to be.[74] It is true that through public speaking of her visions, she gained fame and influence over others. She spoke her prophecies herself, with no need of an interpreter

> By means of her singular reputation, Elizabeth Barton had attained some measure of social and religious prominence for herself; when she turned her attention to the king's marriage and divorce, she gained a political voice, and she could use her reputation as a prophet to give authority to the opinions she expressed.[75]

Jansen suggests that Barton manipulated the situation to express her own opinions as well as to get attention. The political prophecy she proclaimed made her a rallying figure for the numerous factions opposing the king's divorce. Her status as a visionary authorized these factions in rebelling against the king.

After Barton's execution, many expressed the conclusion that she had been a "hysterical girl", manipulated easily by opponents of the divorce.[76] Many historians repeat this perspective as factual. A.D. Cheney states that "Elizabeth Barton was an epileptic patient, subject to hysteria".[77] J.A. Froude warns that "we cannot easily make too great allowance for the moral derangement likely to follow, when a weak girl suddenly found herself possessed of power which she was unable to understand."[78] This interpretation of her role in the publication of

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[73] *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison.* (Trans. Alan Sheridan. NY: Vintage Books, 1979) 57; 49.
[74] Jansen 72.
[75] Jansen 74.
[76] Jansen 61.
[77] 115.
[78] 314.

her prophesying denies her any real agency in the events, as Sharon Jansen and

J.J. Scarisbrick observe. Jansen states, "Attempts to decide whether the nun was a

true mystic or a deranged pawn are at once futile and misdirected. Amid all such

arguments we lose sight of the woman herself, and either way she is assumed to

have no independence of thought or action".[79] Yet some of those same scholars

who assume Barton's ignorance and inability to comprehend her own condition

contradict themselves by asserting her remarkable skill and audacity at plotting

treason:

> Burdened with the message, she forced herself into the presence of Henry
>
> himself; and when she failed to produce an effect upon Henry's obdurate
>
> scepticism, she turned to the hesitating ecclesiastics, and roused their
>
> flagging spirits. The Archbishop bent under her denunciations, and at her
>
> earnest request introduced her to Wolsey . . . She made herself known to
>
> the Papal ambassadors, and through them she took upon herself to threaten
>
> Clement, assuming in virtue of her divine commission, an authority above
>
> all principalities and powers.[80]

According to some scholars, when her demands to the monarch and to the clergy

failed to have the result she desired, she resorted to specifically planning an

insurrection. J.A. Froude offers details in full:

> For this purpose [insurrection], she [the Nun] had organized, with
>
> considerable skill, a corps of fanatical friars, who, when the signal was
>
> given, were simultaneously to throw themselves into the midst of the

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[79] 61.

people, and call upon them to rise in the name of God. . . .'if the Nun had

so sent them word, they would have preached to the King's subjects that

the pleasure of God was that they should take him no longer for their King

. . .,81

The woman he previously described as "wholly ignorant, and unprovided with

any stick of mental or imaginative furniture"[82], Froude now sees her as a harpy,

under Bocking's tutelage, of course. Where does the truth lie? Undoubtedly

somewhere in between the vilification and the sainthood bestowed upon her by

critics. Even in the descriptions of her "audacious" behavior by some historians,

she is clearly acting in strict accordance with traditional prophetic characteristics.

She remains determined to deliver the message she has been given to the

person(s) whom it concerns, initially the clergy and the king, and ultimately the

people, regardless of the personal danger involved.

The history of Elizabeth Barton remains a puzzle. Froude's and Knowles's

presentations and interpretations of her life are based on many of the same official

documents, but each reveals the prejudices of the historian about gender. Each

expresses the two very common stereotypes of women: Barton is either an

innocent, chaste, ignorant, and malleable girl led astray by the ambitions of her

male supervisors, or she is a sexually available, conniving, ambitious woman. In

either case, she is presented as a symbol of what male observers have believed

women to be, not as an individual. Even those who have attempted to resurrect

her reputation, such as Reverend J.R. McKee or Alan Neames, have done so with

[80] Froude 323-325.
[81] 58; his source is the official state reports against Barton.

their own biases. McKee indicates in his introduction that it may not be too late to see Barton elevated to the same status as Joan of Arc. Neames writes from the unusual position of a "descendent of the house that first sheltered the Maid"; his claim to fame rests on her restoration of her status as prophet.

Just as the state sought to control, so historians have sought to categorize her life easily and simply. In doing so, they have either contributed to the efforts to dismiss her or they have re-created her life, modeling it, as she was accused of, after the lives of other female saints. Barton conformed in some ways to the stereotype of the madwoman and male silencing of her was so complete that historians support it. Her trance-induced public prophecies were often in rhyming verse, similar to the speech of madwomen in drama. Both appear to be functioning in an alternate reality to that of observers. Another similarity to literary mad characters such as Ophelia was the alleged loose sexuality of Barton, which her accusers insinuated to discredit her and to encourage others to dismiss her public speaking as that of a lunatic. The church's requirement that a female visionary be under the supervision of a male cleric left her vulnerable to these charges. Her place as a woman who underwent physical trances that left her immobile also made her vulnerable, just as the wandering mad women in drama, such as the Jailer's daughter, were portrayed to be. The final similarity lay in the necessity of Barton passing an examination by several male authorities to validate her condition and prescribe the appropriate "treatment" to be given the woman. In the prose fiction, women who represented order, such as Pamphilia, were required to be self-controlled, to the point of being self-censoring. Women such as Antissia

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[12] Froude 317.

and Nereana, who were not appropriately self-controlled in their public speech or publication of their writing, were labeled insane; their cure involved exhibiting self-control over their public behavior, speech, and writing. Yet, self-control in the case of an alleged visionary could be used either as proof of her claim or as proof of her feigning. If the condemned person exhibited signs of repentance on the scaffold, if she accepted the verdict and asked God and mankind for forgiveness, "it was as if [she] had come through some process of purification: [she] died, in [her] own way, like a saint. But indomitability was an alternative claim to greatness . . .".[83] By not giving in, even if torture were applied, the condemned person offered "proof of a strength that no power had succeeded in bending . . .".[84] Unlike, say Joan of Arc, Barton did participate in her own condemnation in handing the preacher her "confession" and in asking forgiveness of the people and God prior to her execution; for most historians this has greatly diminished her claims as a real visionary. David Knowles blames Edward Bocking for the entire situation, stating "it should have been clear to him that she was nearer of kin to Margery Kempe than to Joan of Arc or Catherine of Sienna."[85] In Knowles' interpretation, *even if* she is given credence for being a visionary, she is not as worthy a vessel as these official saints. Unlike Joan of Arc's messages, Barton's prophecies did not finally incite rebellion, or win large numbers of converts primarily because the authorities of her own day and since successfully silenced her.

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[83] Foucault, *Discipline* 67.
[84] Foucault, *Discipline* 67.

Lady Eleanor Touchet Davies Douglas (Prophet: 1625-52)

Approximately a century later, in a vastly different political and religious

climate, Lady Eleanor Davies presents some of the same issues as Elizabeth

Barton. Both women transcended traditional social boundaries for women by

preaching and publishing their prophecies. When their visions supported

established authority in the church or the government, they were ignored; when

those visions challenged that authority, they were imprisoned and their accusers

attempted to silence their preaching and publications by destroying their books or

by denying them access to writing implements. Each woman was empowered to

speak in public and deliver the message given them by God; Barton and Davies

were sought by others for their advice or visions regarding life or death situations.

Until accused of treasonous actions, both women were treated with respect and

honor, given their status as visionaries.

Their differences are reflected in their class, how their prophecies were

received, their relationship to the established church, and how authorities treated

them. As a member of the aristocracy, Davies possessed the status and economic

resources to finance her own publication. She was highly educated, which is

exhibited in her writings; she often uses Latin phrases, although her prophecies

are always in English. Never attracting a large or powerful following, Davis

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[85] David Knowles, *The Religious Orders in England, III: The Tudor Age.* (Cambridge: CUP, 1959) 190.

obviously worked alone on her prophetic publications. Another reason for Davies's solo efforts with her prophecies has to do with the dissolution of the monasteries and convents under Henry VIII. There was no place for Davies to go to explore the meanings of her visions, no system in place to assist or guide her through her religious experiences. Church leaders such as Archbishop Laud had no use for her. There was also no longer a test for her to pass to prove herself an authentic messenger of God's word. For Barton, an entire process was in place for potential visionaries, in the convent and the worthiness of her claim was tested in the examination by a panel of clergy. A spiritual advisor was assigned to her almost immediately. Through her visions and prophecies, Barton defended the established Roman Catholic Church; in some ways she became a spokesperson for it, much like Thomas More. Davies clearly attacked the hierarchy and established authority in both the government and the Anglican Church. Barton was imprisoned, forced to discredit herself, and ultimately publicly executed. Davies was imprisoned on several occasions but ultimately enjoyed a resurgence in popularity prior to her death. Barton defended what was at the time, the one established church, the Roman Catholic Church. In Davies' time, numerous factions existed within and outside the Anglican Church, attempting to win influence with church leaders. Many of these factions were led by prophets; however, Lady Eleanor was never associated with any radical sect. When Lady Eleanor was forbidden to publish her prophecies, she traveled to Holland, the refuge of many dissenters, where she paid for their publication. The anxiety produced by her prophetic career comes not from any sort of following but rather

from her *accuracy*. Many of her predictions, especially those involving death, came true.

Davies has been most often compared with Margaret Cavendish, because of their aristocratic status, intelligence, and prolific publication. "Prophecy gave her an escape much as the Duchess of Newcastle's literary life provided some compensation for a family history that was stained with indiscretion and embarrassment"; "as a prophet, she could surmount, too, the constraints that her society imposed upon women".[86] Both women desired to be heard and respected; both were forced to acknowledge that the world in which they lived wouldn't recognize their gifts. In a sense, both women formed their own reality, Cavendish through her prose fiction and Davies through her prophetic visions and biblical exegesis. Margaret Cavendish and Lady Eleanor Davies are comparable, however, Cavendish was ridiculed for her eccentricities, while Davies was considered a threat and imprisoned as a result.

Most, if not all, of Davies' published prophecies survive today. A newly edited collection of them was published just a few years ago by Esther S. Cope, who has also written a detailed study of Davies. This availability of Davies' writings has created a renewed interest in her work, evidenced by an increasing number of scholars presenting conference papers examining her prophecies and her life. In addition, scholars such as Phyllis Mack have been studying the disruptive role of seventeenth century women prophets in England.

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[86] Cope 9.

The Stuart age saw an increase in female prophets, who, like Lady Eleanor Davies, expressed a fundamental truth of Protestantism in stressing the "importance of individual religious experience rather than an authoritative church".[87] In such a religious practice, the church no longer exerted such complete control over the spiritual growth of experiences of its people, especially its women. This led women to a stronger sense of spiritual freedom and the potential for positive spiritual experiences of their own. In 1625, Lady Eleanor Davies claimed that she had been visited by the spirit of Daniel, the Old Testament prophet, and she began to write and speak prophecies, many of which were fulfilled. "The act which won her the most notoriety occurred in 1638 when, after declaring that she was the Bishop of Lichfield, she sprinkled the hangings at the Cathedral altar with her own special holy water made of a tar mixture:" for this and other offenses, she was imprisoned in places such as Bethlehem Hospital and the Tower of London.[88] These two places of confinement reveal the Privy Council's uncertainty as to how best to define and/or restrain her effectively. Perhaps most telling in their imprisonment of her is the specific order that she be denied paper and ink. Her private visions gave her the authority to act as a religious official, freeing her from the confines of woman's passive roles, if only momentarily.

In 1625, Lady Eleanor experienced her first prophetic vision when the Davies took in a thirteen year old Scot, George Carr, who was known as "the

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[87] Karen Armstrong, *The Gospel According to Woman: Christianity's Creation of the Sex War in the West.* (NY: Anchor Books, 1987) 252.
[88] Warnicke 198.

dumb Boy or Fortuneteller" in London.[89] Under their care, he began to speak. She

chose to take him in against popular opinion, perhaps, as Cope suggests, seeing

similarities between his silent condition and that of her son Jack, who seems to

have suffered from autism prior to his death by drowning. Her initial prophetic

vision seems to have come as both a shock and a comfort to Davies. Through it,

she overcame her intense grief for her young son. In her first published tract, she

asserts her new role, "Former things are come to passe, and new things I declare

unto you; no age so weake, nor sex excusing; when the Lord shall send and will

put his words in their mouth. He powreth out his Spirit upon his handmaidens . .

.".[90] She has become the handmaiden of God. She signs this first tract "O A Sure

Daniel", an anagram for "Eleanor Davies". She is clear from the beginning about

her responsibilities as a prophet and its importance in her life. She describes the

first vision and her response, "immediately upon this, the spirit of prophecy

falling likewise upon me, then were all vexed worse than ever, ready to turn the

house upside down . . .when laying aside household cares all, and having no

conversation with any but the word of God . . .".[91] Davies eagerly and readily laid

aside her domestic responsibilities in order to focus on God's message for her.

In her prophesy, Lady Eleanor "foretold specific events regarding

individuals" as well as "the explication of divine intentions within history", which

meant "interpreting the Bible as it applied to England's experience".[92] Similar to

many prophets of her day, she focused on Revelations and Daniel for her

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[89] Cope 29.

[90] *A Warning to the Dragon* (1625) 5.

[91] Quoted in Mack 120.

exegesis. " . . . the truth of her prophecies did not protect her from the anger of those who did not want to hear and who sought to silence her".[93] She learned this after attempting to prove herself to Archbishop Laud the first time, with a prediction that the plague in London would be soon abating. It did. She delivered to Archbishop Abbot her first book of prophecy in July of 1625; despite the accuracy of her prediction about the plague, her book was ignored. Others who denied the validity of her prophecy soon heard predictions of their own demise.

Her husband, John Davies, immediately burned her book when he learned of it, probably in early August 1625. In response, Lady Eleanor predicted that Davies "would die within three years and [she] immediately began wearing mourning".[94] Cope notes that Lady Eleanor and Sir John Davies

> Were at a dinner together with friends early in December 1626 when Lady Eleanor started weeping. Davies did not recognize the significance of her tears. . .Davies told his wife, 'I pray weep not while I am alive, and I will give you leave to laugh when I am dead.' Three days later, on 7 December, he was dead.[95]

In general, although people had known of her prophecy regarding her husband's death, few seemed to have believed it. After this incident, her reputation as an authentic prophet spread.

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[92] Cope 34.
[93] Cope 41.
[94] Cope 42.
[95] Cope 43.

"Since she frequently predicted death, her news was not welcome."[96] She

predicted that the queen's son in March 1629 "should go to Christning and

Burying in a day", that the Earl of Pembroke would not live past 49 years of age,

that Lady Berkshire's infant son would die, and that the Duke of Buckingham

"should not outlive August 1628".[97] All of these were accurate predictions. Her

prediction of the Duke of Buckingham's death came at least a full year prior to his

assassination. She identified Buckingham with "666", not because of his "failure

to lead an effective war against Spain", but because that incident paralleled

wrongs he had done her by "using his power as a patron to obstruct rather than

assist" her husbands[98]. Her second husband, Archibald Douglas, also burned her

writings. She predicted great punishment, although not death, from God upon him

for his actions; he later lost "both Reason and Speech" while taking communion

and had to be cared for by his family for the rest of his days, never recovering

from his illness.[99] He later began prophesying and developed an obsession with

anagrams.

Davies was arrested in 1633 for unauthorized publication of her

prophecies, part of which predicted the executions of Archbishop Laud and

Charles I. Beyond the fact that her books were not licensed, her prophecies

produced anxiety about women's roles. Phyllis Mack writes of Davies's initial

arrest:

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[96] Cope 51.
[97] Cope 51.
[98] Cope 51-52.
[99] Cope 53.

The magistrates also burned her books, judging that she was dangerous because she had presumed to penetrate arcane biblical texts, 'which much unbeseemed her sex,' and because she had acquired the reputation of a 'cunning woman' among the common people.[100]

Mack suggests that "perhaps it was the volatility and supposed instrumental power of women's speech that induced such profound mistrust of women's cleverness".[101] Davies herself also notes that, in the later prophecy that the above quotations were taken from, the magistrates accused her of false prophesying.[102] She remained imprisoned in the Gatehouse for two and a half years. During her time at the Gatehouse, she related another mystical experience. Davies described an angel who came to visit her in her confinement; he rested upon her bed for an hour and left a scent from his glove, "all oiled with ambergreece".[103] For Lady Eleanor, her imprisonment and the visit from the angel served to confirm her calling and upon her release, she resumed her prophetic publishing.

Just prior to her vandalism at Lichfield in 1636, she wrote "Spiritualle Antheme", in which she clearly takes issue with changes being made in the churches of England per Archbishop Laud. She writes:

Soe howese of god poluted smell and veiw

A fayre of Fatherless; weepe Thames and Trent.

Theifes theire correction howese fitter for you.

Heere Marrage. Lawe. Bonds. All assunder rent.

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[100] Mack 16; Davies , *The Blasphemous Charge Against Her*, 253.
[101] Mack 31.
[102] Davies, *The Blasphemous*, 253.

It seems clear she is accusing Laud of defiling the sacraments and betraying God and the church through the changes he has wrought. Her actions at Lichfield should have come as no surprise, given her criticisms of Laud here. She adds at the close of this tract "A Touche. To you bee wise" and "You Ducking Lowe. Rooteing. Yee that Beraye your rayement white, fryers . . .".[104] Here it seems she is playing on her maiden name, "Touchet", suggesting that she is aware of the Archbishop's corruption and his selfish ambitions. The language she employs here is typical of apocalyptic prophetic writing. Her problems with Laud appear to stem not so much from his public office, church policy, or his relationship with the king, but rather "on his individual response to her writings and his specific treatment of them".[105] She states that Laud "ravished her childe," referring to his burning one of her prophesies. Megan Matchinske refers to the tone of this kind of writing as "holy hatred" and says that "Davies's marked aggression toward a perceived enemy and her insistence in making her audience share that aggression" is a common trait in apocalyptic writing of the 1640s.[106] Her writings, however, do not call for any specific action to be taken by her audience, save that they acknowledge the truth of her prophesy.

Her actions at Lichfield Cathedral, where she met with a group of townswomen regularly--the closest thing she ever experienced to a "following"-- and declared herself the Bishop of Lichfield and sprinkled the altar with a mixture of tar and wheat flour, seem less an act of madness than a desperate anti-papist

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[103] Mack, *Visionary* 16.
[104] *Spiritual Antheme* 73.
[105] Matchinske, *Writing* 144.
[106] Matchinske 127.

attempt to have the altar removed. She had written the Bishop several times requesting its removal because of its offensiveness, referring to "Altars decked as a shop, shining with the light of so many Tapers and Candles".[107] In addition, she and several local women had been staging a very particular form of protest at the cathedral prior to the act of vandalism.

> They went daily to the cathedral, where they employed a tactic that
>
> contemporaries used in quarrels and citizens often utilized in disputes with
>
> cathedral clergy. They defied the established seating arrangements that
>
> gave priority in the church to those of social rank and ecclesiastical office.
>
> First they occupied the places in the choir for gentlewomen and then those
>
> next to the bishop's throne reserved for wives of the bishop, dean, and
>
> canons. Neither Lady Eleanor or her companions have left evidence about
>
> what specifically prompted their protest, but it seems likely that they, like
>
> laity elsewhere at the time, wanted to express their discontent with the
>
> clergy's innovations, such as the removal of the communion table from the
>
> nave of the church to the east end where, in accord with Catholic tradition,
>
> it became an altar, separated from the congregation by a rail.[108]

General accounts of this event simplify her behavior, briefly stating that she claimed to be bishop and she sprinkled the altar with her own holy water mixture of tar[109]. Such oversimplification of her most renowned action without adequate context implies that Lady Eleanor was plainly mad rather than performing

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[107] *Warning to the Dragon* 1625.
[108] Cope, *Handmaid* 83-84.
[109] Keith Thomas describes the incident thus, "she went berserk in Lichfield Cathedral" 137.

purposeful anti-papal vandalism. Just as historians have sought to classify

Elizabeth Barton and in doing so have dismissed her, so too have they readily

relegated Davies to the margins of history as either a mad woman or simply an

eccentric aristocrat.

This vandalism led to her committal to Bethlehem Hospital by the Privy

Council in December 1636. "In ordering her to be sent to Bedlam, the council

declared Lady Eleanor's actions 'being of soe fowle and strange a nature that we

cannot conceive them to passe from any person but one wholey distracted of

understanding'".[110] Her punishment was not for her prophecy but for her singular

vandalism of church property. In her final publication she recounts her

sentencing, quoting Archbishop Laud's appeal for keeping her confined as "Who

knows what she may do in other Mother churches?"[111] She may not have had

much of a following but there were plenty of iconoclasts around; Laud was their

chief opponent and their great target. Welshman Arise Evans also declared

himself a prophet and delivered messages to Charles from God regarding

Henrietta Maria's popery and his predictions of death for the king; while Evans

did spend some time as a prisoner of the Gatehouse, he was actually released from

there on the grounds of insanity.[112] He was never held in Bedlam due to his

illness. Other men who attacked Laud and the church hierarchy in print were not

labeled mad, as Davies was, instead they were imprisoned or fined.[113]

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[110] Cope 86.
[111] Davies, *Bethlehem, Signifying the House of Bread, Or War* 371.
[112] Cope 89.
[113] Cope refers to John Lilburne, John Ashe, Enoch ap Evan, and Henry Burton, 90.

Lady Eleanor Davies appears to have received special accommodations while at Bedlam, staying first in the steward's house by request of the Privy Council, and then in a private room, to which she was moved after a disagreement with the steward. A week later, the Court of Governors heard Lady Eleanor's complaints about the steward's drunkenness, loudness, and late hours, which led to his suspension from office.[114] Apparently she was only considered mad in relation to her visions. Otherwise she was considered reliable and deserved to be treated as a "normal" member of the aristocracy. In April 1638, she was transferred to the Tower of London, but "we have no evidence for the council's reasons for moving her and thus cannot determine whether they abandoned efforts to claim that she was mad since they had neither subdued her nor eradicated the threat she posed".[115] They disagreed on how to define her, as a madwoman or a criminal,[116] and their treatment of her reflects this disagreement. Some found labeling her a criminal difficult because they could not discredit her alarmingly accurate predictions; they opted to refer to her as a "madwoman", which left room for her visionary status to remain intact. If she was confined in Bedlam, the implication was that she was a false prophet, since such figures were often held there; to be sent to the Gatehouse or the Tower, however, implied that she was a secular criminal, acting on her own ideas and a threat to the monarch and the state. As a secular criminal, she would lose her status as prophet; however, as an inmate of Bedlam, she was declared "mad", a charge she welcomed. Her "holy madness" was confirmed by this confinement, which she took to be a test for her

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[114] Cope 93-94.
[115] Cope 95.

faith, proving her worthiness as God's messenger. She remained in the Tower until September 1640. Laud was executed in January 1645, to which she applied her initial vision; it had been exactly nineteen and a half years since her first vision had predicted the day of judgement. "When she petitioned the Commons in 1647, she claimed that those responsible had presumed that, by [committing her], 'to make her ever incapable of anie complaint but ever held or taken to be person *non Compos mentis* to the perpetuall blott and infame of her familie and posteritie'".[117] She obviously had a clear understanding of the effect of her confinement in Bedlam and the motives behind the judgment against her. Tom Hayes suggests that Davies compares herself to other aristocratic prisoners/patients in Bedlam in such a way that implies "they were incarcerated under the charge of madness so that their ideas did not have to be--or at least made it difficult for them to be taken seriously".[118]

Lady Eleanor never expresses any doubt as to the validity of her visions. She clearly and consistently articulates her belief in messages from God being delivered to her personally for conveyance to her nation and its rulers. Her prophecies, like Barton's, combine religious and political messages from God, revealing his displeasure with church officials, the monarchy, or her husbands. Clearly, Lady Eleanor's enemies are God's enemies. Like Barton, Lady Eleanor had the label of "mad woman" used to dismiss her prophecies; it was also used to confine her in Bedlam as punishment for her anti-papal destruction at Lichfield Cathedral. After this episode, she used the concept of "mad woman" to defend

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[116] Mack, *Visionary* 79.

[117] Cope 94-95.

herself against her detractors. Writing "The Star to the Wise" in 1643, she refers to the star that guided the three wise men to Christ's birthplace; it was a symbol recognizable only to believers seeking the savior. She makes the correlation that her writings are a star for believers. Davies also implies her writing is not what it at first seems, using the metaphor of a fruit tree and another play on her maiden name:

> And thus, as the way shewed where kept now the Tree of Life; so farthermore of what nature it is; a Tree hard and stony, the Fruit not to be medled with, or toucht at first; though non more mellow and soft then it afterward; and because of a restraining vertue, its good Name taken away; like the Medlars crowned fruit miscalled.[119]

She suggests that she has been misrepresented and treated unjustly. The passage following this one names Bethlehem Hospital where the "witless" are sent; she compares it to Bethlehem, birthplace of the Christ child. A few pages later she calls herself the "Celestiall woman", the "woman clothed with the Sun", adding that "*they that turn many to* Righteousnesse *shall sine as the Stars in the Firmament*".[120] Clearly she presents herself as one such star. Although her word may appear incoherent ramblings to her accusers, she remains confident that true believers will understand them. Her use of the concept of mad woman is drastically different than that of Barton's, who used it to deflect blame by proclaiming her lack of malicious intent. Davies said that her accusers had declared "the invincible truth . . . madness"; "in 1649 she made the point with an

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[118] "Diggers" 42.
[119] *A Star to the Wise*, 106-107, lns. 131-135.

anagram. The Archbishop's 'House at *Lambeth* with its scituation not onely

pointed to, but of its denomination borrow'd from the house of *Bethlam*, otherwise

called *Bedlam*.'"[121] Lady Eleanor did not see herself as mad or claim to be mad;

she maintained that those who could not see the holy truth in her prophecies, non-

believers, would be unable to understand her writings, seeing in them only the

ramblings of a mad woman. Thus she turns the tables on her accusers, using their

own label of madness. She is clearly a powerful, intelligent figure well-versed in

the tradition of prophecy. Howard Dobin, in *Merlin's Disciples*, observes that

> To misinterpret divinely inspired utterances ... was the fate of the
>
> unfaithful, the treasonous, and the reprobate. Prophetic discourse
>
> practiced, in Michael Murrin's phrase, an 'exclusive rhetoric' that served to
>
> divide the faithful from the sinful and the loyal from the traitorous. The
>
> concealed meanings and ambiguous language shift the burden of
>
> understanding to the individual who must first construe, and then accept,
>
> the divine truth promised by the texts. Thus the process of interpretation is
>
> transformed into a test of faith; God's obscure word itself is exculpated
>
> while the misinterpreter is condemned.[122]

This perfectly describes Davies' response to her critics as well as to those who

condemned her to St. Mary's Hospital of Bethlehem.

In 1652, near the end of her life, she published "Bethlehem", tract

including details about the actions that led the Privy Council to confine her to

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[120] *A Star to the Wise*, 110.
[121] Cope 95.

Bedlam. Her defense is consistent with her criticisms of Laud at the time of the event. She writes, "[Goliah] Had contrived under colour of an Altar Hanging, fastened down to the wall of course purple Woollen, even to Ecclipse that Light of Lights: whereby to cover the Ten Commandments no obscure business as befel."; she refers to herself as "the Lord Major of Lichfield" who "resolved to set some mark upon their purple covering, whereon she cast a Confection made but of Tar, mixt with wheat starch, with fair Water heated".[123] She seems to mock her accusers, saying "them possessing such outrage flocking about it, some Gunpowder Treason as though"[124]. Her consistency indicates that she was not mad at all but simply protesting in frustration, since her complaints and other prophecies had been ignored repeatedly. Her frustration with her audience is clear at the end of this tract. Combining scripture, autobiographical detail, and exeges, Davies expresses her trust in:

> a *Deliverance* time, whose word a *Law*: stoops to no *Bulls* or other like
>
> actings: *Prophets* howsoever buried in the *Land of Oblivion*: which
>
> *Nations*, as much to say, avenge her shall of her Adversary thus supported:
>
> *My hand shall hold him fast and my arm shall strengthen him, nor gates of*
>
> *Hell shall not prevail against her: O Hell or Fleet-Prison* (to wit) *where is*
>
> *thy Victory* now.[125]

She seems to feel validated by outliving most of her enemies, and to be enjoying a resurgence in popularity especially since Charles' execution in 1649, which she

[122] Dobin 77.
[123] *Bethlehem* 370.
[124] *Bethlehem* 371.
[125] *Bethlehem* 374.

had predicted in 1633. She continued to publish her tracts throughout her life, despite frequent financial difficulties. Davies was imprisoned in Fleet Street, among other prisons, later in life for inability to pay her bills She died penniless in 1652, about one month after the publication of her last tract. Her daughter, Lucy Huntingdon, worked after Lady Eleanor's death to preserve her mother's memory after the Restoration. She challenged historians', such as Thomas Dugdale and Sir William Sanderson, representations of her mother as "generally reputed little better than a mad woman".[126]

All of her writings contain an assertion of her identity as a member of the aristocracy and her identity as prophet, a connection between herself as prophet and Daniel or Joseph which reasserts her authority, criticism of church leadership or practices, themes of unjust persecution, and the possibility for redemption through recognizing the error of one's ways and acknowledging the truth in her visions. She consistently interweaves her personal experience with biblical scripture and national history or current affairs. Her assurance of her position as a handmaid of God is unshakable, even if she is locked up and entirely without followers. In fact, she is assured *because* of these events. Davies' writings become less clearly, directly, immediately coherent or accessible over time, as she is challenged, denied, or ignored.

The fascinating aspect of Lady Eleanor Davies' case is that she never built a large following, and never identified her prophecies with any particular sect or religious faction. Germaine Greer states that Lady Eleanor was unique in that "she

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[126] Antonia Frasier, *The Weaker Vessel* (NY: Vintage Books, 1984) 251.

was too grand to be manipulated by sectarian interests"[127]. Perhaps Greer is

referring to Lady Eleanor's egocentricism, her confidence in her own absolute

authority, which surely would have to have been somewhat subject to the needs or

desires of a sectarian group had she become involved with one of them. Greer

undoubtedly also means Lady Eleanor's class; Davies never relinquished her

aristocratic identity in her prophecies, like other prophets did[128]. Instead she made

her identity, her status, a part of her prophecy. She did not claim to speak for the

old prophet Daniel; she *was* the new prophet Daniel. Yet no one in a position of

power ever offered her support. When the High Commission sent Davies to

Bedlam, two members abstained from condemning her; Sir Edward Dering and

Anglican divine Peter Du Moulin believed in her prophetic abilities.[129] A general

and seemingly widespread anxiety grew about her when, over the course of her

prophetic career, she successfully predicted the deaths of many notable

individuals.

Davies' prophecies are extremely difficult to decipher and they become

more so after her imprisonment in Bethlehem Hospital. Recent scholars have

noted the complexity of her work and the extreme difficulty in understanding her

text. "Substitutions, naming one thing for another, interruptions, skipping from

argument to argument, and omissions, leaving out words, actions, and context,

complicate any initial confrontation with her texts."[130] Yet it is obvious that her

writings have a specific structure to them, whether they be in verse form or prose,

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[127] Intro. To *Kissing the Rod* 14.
[128] Cope, intro. 2.
[129] Thomas 137.
[130] Matchinske 149.

and the inclusion of autobiographical details is apparent in each text. They appear as if in scriptural, personal code and they convey strong emotion. Her personal experience serves as a microcosm for the nation at large, reflecting both its past and its future.

Esther Cope writes, "her claim to be a prophet and her candor in questioning established authority make her contact with reality appear tenuous, but, in recognizing inconsistencies and irrationalities in the world in which she lived, she sometimes saw what many of her contemporaries refused to see".[131] Allegedly the plans to assassinate the Duke of Buckingham were known at the time of Lady Eleanor's prediction. Critics question whether her skill at predicting the future came from a divine gift or through astute observation of others.

According to the traditional "test" of whether a prophet was a true or false one, if a prediction came true, the prophet's powers were real. If this were the sole measurement, Davies must have been a true prophet. However, this test was not the only one applied, especially for women who were accused of being manipulated by Satan, who possessed the power to enact "false" prophesy to lead some people astray. "Whereas men did not need to prove themselves prophets in order to preach, women had to, since they were not ordinarily permitted to preach. Hierarchical structures placed them at a distinct disadvantage, and women who challenged conventions found themselves judged by superiors who were male".[132] Scholars have noted that " . . .in her complaints about her experiences, she raised fundamental questions about the position of women in early Stuart Britain . .

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[131] Intro. 1.
[132] Cope 88.

.Lady Eleanor identified a host of irrationalities in English law and society with regard to women".[133] She raised questions about insanity and marital rights as well as property rights. For example, could a wife have her husband declared insane? She also sued to retain her property after her husband's death; she fought the courts and her step-children for rights to her husband's estate. She irritated the authorities who feared she might attract followers or inspire others to deface church property, but her real crime seems to have been feminism.

"Lady Eleanor confronted her contemporaries with questions about her conduct as a woman, her legitimacy as a prophet, and her defiance of the authorities of church and crown".[134] Using violence against the altars was not an act unique to her, however seating herself on the Bishop's throne was, and a definite public challenge to patriarchal authority. Cope notes that the radical nature of Lady Eleanor's act "meant that declaring her mad defended authority in religion, monarchy, and the family".[135] Other male prophets of the time who also attacked orally and in print Queen Henrietta Maria's popery were not sent to Bedlam, but imprisoned briefly or simply ignored.[136] "While Lady Eleanor's status may have given the authorities added cause for wanting to label her distracted and to confine her to Bedlam, gender gave her deeds a meaning distinct from that of most other dissidents during the 1630s".[137] She challenged patriarchal authority in defying her husbands by continuing to prophecy and through declaring herself bishop.

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[133] Cope, intro. 3.
[134] Cope 88-89.
[135] Cope 89.
[136] Cope refers to Arise Evans and John Lilburne 89.

"By focusing repeatedly on the vindication of her *own position* as prophet and visionary, Davies deflects the national aspects of apocalyptic or millennial writing into a reaffirmation of *her* personal authority. To avoid the repercussions of their aberrant ways, Davies's readers need only recognize her status as prophet and honor it."[138] When this recognition was not forthcoming, she prophesied death for the non-believers. In doing so, she has appropriated the position of the prophet described by Moses in Acts 3:22-23, a verse she alludes to in her text:

> For Moses truly said unto the fathers, A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you of your brethren, like unto me; him shall ye hear in all things whatsoever he shall say unto you. And it shall come to pass, that every soul, which will not hear that prophet, shall be destroyed from among the people.

In addition, she continually alluded to her own prophecies as "the figurative second coming of Christ", thereby situating "herself *personally* as prophet, as symbolic virgin, and as British subject, within a social environment".[139] Her emphasis of self over national concern opened "her writings to greater ridicule-- they do not fulfill social obligations in a conventional and polemically unproblematic fashion," Megan Matchinske argues, but they also "insist on an alternative creation of subjectivity".[140] They could be described as an early form of feminist protest in their demand for recognition. While authors of prose fiction, such as Mary Wroth and Margaret Cavendish, asserted that female subjectivity

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[137] Cope 90.
[138] Matchinske 142.
[139] Matchinske 143.
[140] 147.

existed apart from male subjectivity through their presentation of female characters who exhibited a private, inner life; their characters negotiate acceptable ways to express themselves in public. Davies couches her subjectivity in masculine language, appropriate for a female prophet conveying the message of a masculine God. Yet, throughout her prophecies she refers to the fact that she, a woman, has been chosen as the messenger and elements from her personal life, such as her confinement in Bedlam, the Gatehouse, and Fleet Street as well as her concerns as a wife, mother and grandmother, are mentioned throughout. Hayes also recognizes a "split subjectivity," one that is actually androgynous in Davies's prophesies. Davies often refers to herself in third person in her prophecies. Lucy Davies Huntingdon adorned her mother's grave with the tribute, "In a woman's body, a man's spirit . . ."[141], highly appropriate praise for a female prophet *and* an strong willed woman.

Because of Davies's failure to adapt her prophecy to the conventions for such works, her "writings have been dismissed by contemporaries as well as by more recent critics".[142] Critics either declare her mad without hesitation or attempt to defend her writings, as Esther Cope does, wondering if she were actually mad or "whether she was merely emotionally disturbed, and/or engaging in forms of opposition that [were] regarded as unacceptable."[143] Keith Thomas suggests that "though undoubtedly linked to a hysterical temperament, her eccentricity is probably best regarded as a response to the social obstacles with which she had to

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[141] Quoted in Mack 120.
[142] Matchinske 147.
[143] Cope 111.

contend".[144] Her awareness of how the label of madness was used against her by her accusers and her own manipulation of the term indicate an intelligent, coherent, alert woman capable of her own defense. This contradicts the descriptions of her as a mad woman, whose writings were void of any real meaning. Her unusual situation as a woman who enjoyed a reputation as a prophet, then became labeled a mad woman and confined in Bedlam, only to resume her status as prophet after her incarceration reinforces the idea that madness is culturally and historically defined; even within a given society, the definition of madness shifts over one individual's lifetime.

Lady Eleanor Davies differed from Elizabeth Barton in a number of ways. As an aristocrat, she was an educated woman, capable of writing out her own prophecies and paying to have them published, despite lack of authorization. She received more lenient treatment at the hands of her accusers, who not only hear her defense, but also respond promptly to her complaints of ill living conditions. Despite her imprisonment, she was still treated as aristocracy. Convinced of the church leadership's betrayal of God and the sacraments, she did not seek approval there, instead criticizing the decisions of Laud and others. Davies lacked the extensive support systems that opposition to King Henry's divorce provided Barton. In fact, those who probably shared her views were middle class males. However, her belief in her role as prophet more than made up for this. Barton's prophecies were made at a time of potential schism in the church and the threat of overthrow of the existing monarch was beginning to be seen as a possibility. For

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[144] Thomas 138.

Davies, writing during and after the Civil War, rebellion and reform are not simply possibilities but reality and this is reflected in her prophecies.

Both women experienced the social control exerted by the patriarchal government, which allowed women only certain forms of expression and public behavior. Of particular issue with these authorities was the fact that these women were publishing their prophecies and distributing them. The anxiety which the circulation of these texts produced can be seen in the wording of the sermon against Elizabeth Barton and in the annihilation of her text; it can also be seen in the particulars of Lady Eleanor Davies's confinement, where she was finally expressly forbidden access to pen and ink to prevent her from continuing her mission. Confinement of these women's bodies was not enough; their ideas had to be controlled as well, by any means possible. The danger inherent in holy madness is that the only authority it acknowledges is the divinity. It therefore authorizes the prophet to speak and act in ways that violate existing social order or even law, negating government or church hierarchy as it empowers the prophet.

"Holy madness" could be claimed to allow women a public voice, grant them authority outside the existing patriarchal systems of government. However, labels of madness could still be used against them. In an attempt to silence their words and thereby contain their influence over others, they were imprisoned or even executed. Visionaries such as Elizabeth Barton and Lady Eleanor Davies attempted to tell their own spiritual stories, claiming holy madness empowered them to speak publicly about and publish their experiences. The influence of the

power these visionary women exerted cannot be underestimated; entire systems of government worked to silence their words.

Conclusion

Being labeled "mad" or claiming holy madness placed women in a dangerous position. Male authority figures used the label of madness to silence, confine, or dismiss them, but women writers and speakers of the early modern period began to manipulate their association with madness as a means of negotiating a place from which to speak. The emphasis on self-control, public displays, and alienation provided special challenges for women writers in this negotiation.

The masculine anxiety about women's potential for disrupting established authority can be seen in public representations of mad women, a distinctive site for power negotiations over social control, gender and class issues, and self-expression. Male dramatists showed that women's madness differed drastically from men's, primarily because of the prevailing ideas about women's inherent physical and mental weaknesses. Dramatic madwomen were incapable of recovery and often were victims of suicide or murder. Women could rarely feign the conventions of madness without succumbing to it. Male characters might suffer from the diseased form of madness that so affected women, but because of their superior mental and physical strength, they could recover or even feign the condition. They also suffered from the more sophisticated form of madness, melancholy, which marked their social status and intellectual advancement.

In the relatively new genre of prose fiction, women writers adapted prevailing ideas about madness, claiming melancholy for aristocratic female characters who exhibited complex intellectual capabilities. They also revealed a range of behavior in their upper class women characters, some of whom recovered from madness. Their women are quite capable of self-control and aware of self-presentation in public. Although these characters experience alienation, they find ways to function successfully in society. The authors of prose fiction speak truth to themselves, testing and learning the limits of their speaking; the need for self-control or even subterfuge is vital to their lessons. Mary Wroth's romance invites aristocratic women to go into seclusion to write, acknowledging that the reigning forces are too difficult to defy by speaking openly and that women who do so are severely punished. Acknowledging the same difficulties, Margaret Cavendish encourages women to create other worlds in which they have the power denied them in the one she occupies. Remarkably, women writers clearly indicate a shift in the association of women with disorder; they present women as the source of social order and the keepers of it, despite the chaos men make of it.

For women prophets, men's chaos can be corrected if only they acknowledge the truth of the message these women bring. Order comes through recognizing and reacting appropriately to God's instructions, as given to the women speaking or writing about their mystical experiences. Although their authority to speak and write publicly comes from a patriarchal figure, one who supercedes earthly patriarchy and therefore threatens it. Prophets speak divine

truth to those in power. They play upon the traditional ideas about women's innate weakness of will and physical weakness to suggest that women are more ideally suited as receptacles of God's word than men are.

Ideas about women's association with madness underwent dramatic alterations in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries in England. Women writers and prophets contributed to those shifts through their actions, writing, speaking, and publishing, and through their presentations of female characters who were intelligent, articulate, multi-dimensional beings. Initially women were only affiliated with the diseased notion of madness, however, women writers and prophets came to claim the beneficial forms of madness, melancholy and mysticism, as their own, as ones they were mentally capable of or even more suited for than men.

These instances serve as precursors to the work of women writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as well as to the development of the changing public perception of women. Public representations of mad women receded as the popularity of asylums and confinement of the mad increased. Changes in the portrayal of mad women reflected changes in the treatment of women. These attempts to confine women or restrict them in public life continued, but the rhetoric affiliated with restrictions altered; it became based less on women's lack of abilities and more on men's need to protect and honor women. The idea of placing woman on a pedestal experienced a revival of sorts, as she became known as the angel of the house, the keeper of morality for society. She deserved to be protected, i.e. confined. All women became more restricted to the domestic

sphere, confined within their homes. The mad woman was locked away so that her existence was often unknown to anyone other than her warden/caretaker, often a male relation or spouse. In the many nineteenth century novels containing madwomen, male protection of these figures enhances the romantic heroic images of male characters in the eyes of female protagonists, such as in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. It is not until the twentieth century that women writers examined in detail the idea of madness as a means of social control used by (male) authority against unruly or disruptive female characters. This conversation on women and madness in English literature began in the early modern period. Scholarship about its influence on the development of that conversation has only recently begun. This study contributes to the field by revealing shifts in the understanding of madness and gender ideology in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century literature.

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