

# GENDERED PERCEPTIONS OF MADNESS: FEMALE HYSTERIA AND MALE MELANCHOLY IN SHAKESPEARE'S *HAMLET*, *MACBETH* AND *KING LEAR*

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## Abstract

*Madness, as one of the most controversial and challenging Renaissance topics, was not only deeply influenced by its mediaeval heritage but also the mediaeval perceptions of dominating masculinity and subordinating, vulnerable femininity. Thus, the numerous Renaissance treatises feverishly tried to explain various and, often identical, mental disorders. However, this was done with difficulty. The aim of this paper is to analyze and discuss the gendered perception of two of these mental disorders, namely female hysteria and male melancholy. Hysteria was primarily aestheticized and eroticized, while melancholy was intellectualized. As a man of his time, Shakespeare had surely been familiar with the gendered perception of madness. His portrayal of women in tragedies abounds in varieties due to his direct questioning of these categories. His first hysterical character, Ophelia, is unquestionably conventional while lady Macbeth challenges the established gender roles. King Lear, on the other hand, is a peculiar case of a man suffering from a female disease.*

Keywords: *madness; hysteria; melancholy; Shakespeare; Ophelia; lady Macbeth; king Lear.*

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Madness was one of the most controversial and challenging topics in the Renaissance. Differentiating it from other mental disorders such as melancholy, hysteria, bewitchment, anger or rashness was

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difficult because they all shared numerous, but very often, identical symptoms and causes. Renaissance feverishly tried to distinguish between them, albeit with difficulty, a fact clearly evidenced in numerous Renaissance treatises. The understanding of madness was also influenced by the inherited medieval perceptions of dominating masculinity and subordinating, vulnerable femininity although there was an endeavor to reconsider these fixed categories. The aim of this paper is to analyze and discuss the gendered perception of two of these mental disorders, namely female hysteria and male melancholy. Hysteria was primarily aestheticized and eroticized, while melancholy was intellectualized. As such, madness and its gendered perception was no strange phenomenon in Shakespeare's plays. His portrayal of women in tragedies abounds in variety due to his direct questioning of the categories of femininity and masculinity. His first hysterical character, Ophelia, is unquestionably conventional while Lady Macbeth challenges the established gender roles by invoking and wishing to absorb masculine power. King Lear, on the other hand, is a peculiar case of a man suffering from a female disease.

Renaissance understanding of mental disorders in general was inherited from the Middle Ages and its theory of four humours. Originating in ancient Greece, this theory understood the human body as made out of four interrelated and interacting elements: blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile. These four humors corresponded to the four elements /air, water, fire and earth / as well as to the four seasons and the four ages of man. The perfection of the universe and a person's health were based on the balance of these humors. Its imbalance, in turn, created diseases and four temperaments: sanguine, phlegmatic, choleric and melancholic. The concept of humors was largely accepted in the medicine of the Middle Ages. Thus, the medieval perception of madness was an intersection of divine possession, god-like punishment for a sin and a medically untreatable disease. However, there were no gender-coded perceptions of madness so the diseased female body is never mentioned in the Middle Ages because the body was considered predominately masculine. The male body was considered to be active and superior while the female body was considered to be passive and inferior. Subsequently, the Renaissance took over the theory of the humors but also tried to eliminate or at least minimize these elusive elements. The gendered perception of mental disorders was more emphasized in the Renaissance differentiating between madness, melancholy (both natural and spiritual), hysteria, bewitchment, anger or rashness.

Female hysteria was first recorded in 1900 B. C. in an Egyptian papyrus. Hippocrates named it hysteria – the disease of the hyster or womb. The prevalent Renaissance belief also considered the disease the consequence of a “wandering womb,” connecting it exclusively to women. In contrast, melancholy or black bile was characterized as a masculine disease, and considered hormonal in origin. Due to its strong belief in reason and it being awarded to men more than to women, the Renaissance’s attitude toward women was rather paradoxical. This proves to be even more paradoxical considering that the monarch, Queen Elizabeth I, was a woman. In addition, contemporary Renaissance documents record the queen’s popularity while most recent scholarship “insists on the difficulties she encountered as a woman in a position of authority over men and emphasizes evidence that her male subjects experienced anxieties.”<sup>1</sup> The prevalent Renaissance literary form, that of Petrarchan lyrics, conventionally glorified women’s beauty, reducing them, so it seems, only to this outer physical characteristic. On the other hand, social politics and contemporary attitudes belittled their roles and significance in everyday life, reducing them to the fixed frames of obedient wives, mothers and daughters. It was, in this way, extremely difficult for women to revolt against these prescribed roles. Masculinity already had the advantage hierarchically. One of the biggest fears of Renaissance teleology was “the fantasy of its reversal, the conviction that men can turn into – or be turned into – women; or perhaps more exactly, can be turned back into women, losing the strength that enabled the male potential to be realized in the first place.”<sup>2</sup> Generally, women were perceived differently: the most desirable image was that of a chaste maid that could easily be transformed into a blasphemous whore or a witch. Hamlet imposes such a double standard upon Ophelia – that “of a saint at the beginning of the scene to a painted whore by the end.”<sup>3</sup> However, the Renaissance patriarchal world inevitably started to notice restrained feminine voices, with Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists starting to question the contemporary attitude towards women. Consequently, the idea of women

<sup>1</sup> Phyllis Rackin, *Shakespeare and Women*, Oxford UP, Oxford, 2005, p. 32.

<sup>2</sup> Maria L. Howell, *Manhood and Masculinity in William Shakespeare’s The Tragedy of Macbeth*, University Press of America, 2008, p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> Yi-Chi Chen, “Pregnant with Madness – Ophelia’s Struggle and Madness in Hamlet”, *Integrations*, 11 (2011) 2, p. 10.

being subdued was “in fact often criticized, ridiculed, and discredited in the dramatic actions witnessed by the theatre audience.”<sup>4</sup>

The Renaissance perception of women basically seems to be an amalgam of different influences: first, medieval and then Puritan and Jacobean influences. The Puritan ideal was that of chastity and virginity as “the drama from 1590 to 1625 was feminist in sympathy.”<sup>5</sup> The Jacobean period distinguished between the portrayal of women in literature and real life, marking the medieval concept of courtly love as illogical and unfounded. Thus, the explicitly feminine concepts of virginity and chastity were directly juxtaposed to masculine concepts of honor and dominance, although the period clearly differentiates alienation from the medieval concept of femininity. Like his fellow dramatists, Shakespeare also reflected on women’s role in society and the stereotypes attributed to them. However, he proved to be “the only dramatist of the period who writes with no explicit reforming purpose.”<sup>6</sup>

The categories of masculinity and femininity obviously created uncertainty for the Renaissance period. This uncertainty, in return, imbued all the pores of Renaissance society influencing the perception(s) of the then common mental disorders. The Middle Ages perceived madness as an amalgam of the divine, the demonic and the human. The period of the Renaissance, on the other hand, understood madness as a “confused, charged and contested topic,”<sup>7</sup> while at the same time using its inborn theatricality. The theatricality was especially noticeable in the description of a mental disorder typically connected to women. The disorder was hysteria and the reason why it was connected to women is perhaps best explained by Coppélia Kahn:

For hysteria is a vivid metaphor of woman in general, as she was regarded then and later, a creature destined for the strenuous bodily labors of childbearing and childrearing but nonetheless physically weaker than man. Moreover, she was, like Eve, temperamentally and morally infirm – skittish, prone to err in all senses. Woman’s womb, her justification and her glory, was also the sign and source of her weakness as a creature of the flesh rather than the mind or spirit. The very diversity of symptoms clustering under the name hysteria bespeaks the capricious nature of woman. And the remedy – a husband and

<sup>4</sup> Juliet Dusinberre, *Shakespeare and The Nature of Women*, St.Martin’s Press, New York, 1996, p. xiv.

<sup>5</sup> Ibidem, p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> Ibidem, p. 24.

<sup>7</sup> Carol Thomas Neely, “Documents in Madness: Reading Madness and Gender in Shakespeare’s Tragedies and Early Modern Culture”, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 42 (1991) 3, p. 316.

regular sexual intercourse – declares the necessity for male control of this volatile female element.<sup>8</sup>

However, madness and its distinctive disorders such as melancholy, hysteria or frenzy were widely debated and analyzed in numerous Renaissance treatises. These treatises aspired to differentiate men and women. Moreover, by striving to surpass the medieval perception of madness, the treatises also tried to differentiate between supernatural, spiritual, bewitchment and fraud. In our analysis of distinctively female hysteria and male melancholy, they prove to be of great importance. Samuel Harsnett's *A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures*, written in 1603, tried to differentiate between possession and exorcism, as well as natural and feigned melancholy which makes it convenient for the analysis of King Lear's male hysteria. Timothy Bright's *A Treatise of Melancholy* (1586) proves to be important in the analysis of Lady Macbeth's spiritual melancholy. Bright's treatise tries to differentiate between spiritual doubt or spiritual melancholy and natural melancholy. The former is caused by sin and is to be cured by "penitence, prayer and faith."<sup>9</sup> Natural melancholy, on the other hand, causes mostly sorrow and fear, among other symptoms. Edward Jorden's *A Briefe Discourse of a Disease Called the Suffocation of the Mother* and Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* strive to elaborately classify hysteria and melancholy as either female or male. Unlike other treatises, Jorden's treatise does not limit hysteria to being simply a feminine disease but also refers to men suffering from it. However, it classifies hysteria as primarily, although not exclusively, a feminine disease because it is caused by the "diseased and wandering womb."<sup>10</sup> Due to the fact that women were believed to retain menstrual blood or sperma because they were either sexually frustrated or experiencing the suppression of "the flowers," i.e., menstrual periods, Jorden claims that women were more prone to this disease. According to him, the usual symptoms were "swooning, paralysis, choking, convulsions, numbness, delirium, epilepsy, headaches."<sup>11</sup> The only recommended cure was marriage. The same cure was recommended by Robert Burton in his *Anatomy of Melancholy* although he was more prone to connect hysteria exclusively

<sup>8</sup> Coppélia Kahn, "Absent Mother in King Lear", in: Margaret W. Ferguson – Maureen Quilligan – Nancy J. Vickers (ed.) *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourse of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1986, p. 240.

<sup>9</sup> C. Th. Neely, op. cit., p. 319.

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem, p. 320.

<sup>11</sup> Ibidem.

with women of noble rank and melancholy with men. Those who suffer from melancholy were especially “male scholars, philosophers and geniuses like Democritus and himself, although its causes and symptoms are multitudinous and its sufferers are everywhere.”<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, his perception of hysteria was not different from Jordan’s. Burton believed it was caused by sexual frustration and cured by sexual satisfaction. Thus, it can be concluded that hysteria was unjustly reduced to sexuality while melancholy was unjustly and exclusively connected to intellect. However, the disorders were real and perceivable and, moreover, they demand adequate treatment. In her detailed work entitled *Documents in Madness*, Carol Thomas Neely offers a gendered introspection into the medical practice of Richard Napier, a doctor who treated many patients suffering from mental disorders. Although he tried to differentiate them on various bases, including gender, “his cures, designed to fit the disorder, were eclectically magical, medical, astrological, and spiritual; to some patients he gave advice, to most purges, to few amulets or prayers or exorcisms.”<sup>13</sup> Women consulted him more than men did, both for mental disorders, stress or other causes. Nevertheless, there was no difference in the percentages of men and women suffering from madness – the numbers were even. She also offers an overview of Bedlam censuses from 1598 and 1624 that, interestingly, despite the men’s serious condition, hesitate to term men as explicitly mad. They are rather classified as “fitt to bee kepte’, ‘not fit to be kepte’, sent ‘to some other hospitall’, ‘home to his wife’, ‘to Hull from whence hee came.’”<sup>14</sup> Women, on the other hand, were easily characterized as mad: “‘very ill’, ‘madd’, ‘very madd’, ‘a madd woman’, ‘something idle headed’, ‘fell mad.’”<sup>15</sup> These treatises, like contemporary medical practices, tried to gender the already gendered mental disorders endeavoring to explain them in a reasonable way. For the Renaissance only madwomen and melancholic men obviously existed.

Shakespeare must have been familiar with the Renaissance treatises and might have known that the average number of madmen and madwomen was even. However, he tended not to depart from the contemporary view of intellectualized male melancholy and aestheticized female hysteria. His

<sup>12</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem, p. 33.

<sup>14</sup> Ibidem, p. 332.

<sup>15</sup> Ibidem.

tragedies, like the already mentioned treatises and medical practices, permit “a restoration of normality, a restoration in which men and women participate differently.”<sup>16</sup> Thus, his portrayal of Hamlet and Ophelia is completely stereotypical. Sandra Clark terms *Hamlet*, among other plays, as a play in which “male and female madness are implicitly contrasted.”<sup>17</sup> This should not be surprising because Hamlet is not only “a hero who is confronted with a task beyond his powers and who comes away from the conflict haunted by a sense of corruption and guilt,”<sup>18</sup> but also a melancholic and a philosopher. Ophelia, on the other hand, might seem a far simpler character summing up all the Renaissance female values of obedience, chastity, patience, piety and humility and showing unambiguous symptoms of hysteria.

Undoubtedly, the world of Shakespeare’s tragedies is predominantly a masculine one. Even though female heroines intrude on the plays’ plots, they are involuntarily depicted as weaker, more fragile and more liable to diseases than men. Male supremacy is explicitly visible in the plays’ titles and in their overall atmosphere. All four of his tragedies are named after their male protagonists, even if they are not the main bearers of action in the play as is the case with *Macbeth*. *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear* and *Othello* are distinctively male and they make an unquestionable male authority which is characteristic of the contemporary Renaissance hierarchy. The Renaissance world view identified masculinity with intellect, nobility and common sense. On the other hand, femininity was identified with vulnerability, love-sickness and fragility. Thus, melancholy was understood as offering a highly speculative and philosophical insight into the diseased while hysteria, as the name itself implies, was understood as uncontrollable and passionate.

All the most explicit characteristics of this differentiation can be seen in Ophelia and Hamlet’s chaotic relationship. Ophelia’s madness is a beautified image of flowers, songs and awkwardly patched lyrics while Hamlet’s madness contrasts this image with his philosophical solemnity of a melancholic. Although both of them are fairly conventional, Hamlet and Ophelia show that the differences between them are graphical, linguistic and psychological. While Hamlet feigns madness, Ophelia experiences its full extent. Both of

<sup>16</sup> Ibidem, p. 336.

<sup>17</sup> Sandra Clark, “Women, class, and the language of madness in early modern English drama”, *Sederi*, 24 (2014), p. 10.

<sup>18</sup> Dieter Mehl, *Shakespeare’s Tragedies: An Introduction*, Cambridge UP, Cambridge, 1986, p. 32.

them are also visually easily discernable as mad: Ophelia entering with “her haire downe” (4.5.22) and Hamlet appearing in her closet “with his doublet all unbrac’d” (2.1.77), bareheaded, pale and with a piteous look. However, her madness is much more graphic than his. In her case, it is something recognizably feminine while in Hamlet’s case, it is a restrained male melancholy. Furthermore, Hamlet’s speech is metaphysical, metaphorical, abounding in puns while Ophelia’s is fragmented and inflamed with her mind’s decay. As Elaine Showalter points out, “Ophelia’s virginal and vacant white is contrasted with Hamlet’s scholar’s garb, his suit of solemn black.”<sup>19</sup> She further claims that “whereas for Hamlet madness is metaphysical, linked with culture, for Ophelia it is a product of the female body and female nature, perhaps that nature’s purest form.”<sup>20</sup> In this way, the differences in gendered comprehension of madness become clearest in Hamlet and Ophelia’s case. Hamlet, being a male, is indebted to restore the play’s lost order. With this aim in view, his madness is so well feigned it seems completely palpable and real. He was considered to be a noble-minded intellectual whose supposed disease was best expressed by Ophelia:

O, what a noble mind is here o’erthrown  
 The courtier’s, soldier’s, scholar’s eye, tongue, sword;  
 Th’ expectancy and rose of the fair state,  
 The glass of fashion and the mould of form,  
 Th’observ’d of all observers, - quite, quite down! (3.1.153-157)

Hamlet never stops being a pragmatic young man whether sane or feigning madness. However, we are confronted with his attempt to read female characters, most of all, Ophelia. Alexander Leggatt understands their relationship as follows: “Hamlet’s reading of Ophelia is an unstable mixture of idealism and disgust. The disgust is involved with his feelings about his mother, but his recoil from the female body is even sharper when he thinks of Ophelia, presumably because his sexual interest in her is more direct.”<sup>21</sup> At one point in the play, Hamlet’s feelings towards Ophelia become generalized, and his attitude

<sup>19</sup> Elaine Showalter, “Representing Ophelia: Women, Madness and the Responsibilities of Feminist Criticism”, in: Geoffrey H. Hartman – Patricia Parker (ed.) *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, Methuen, New York – London, 1985, p. 3.

<sup>20</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>21</sup> Alexander Leggatt, *Shakespeare’s Tragedies: Violation and Identity*, Cambridge UP, Cambridge, 2005, p. 72.



towards Ophelia represents his attitude to all women. It is unsurprisingly contemporary and best expressed in the “get thee to-a-nunnery” scene. He uses very violent and offensive language telling Ophelia first: “I did love you once” (*Ham.* 3.1.115) and then “I loved you not” (*Ham.* 3.1.119). However, his speech becomes even more violent:

If thou dost marry, I'll give you this plague for  
thy dowry, - be thou as chaste as ice, as pure as  
snow, thou shalt not escape calumny. Get thee to  
a nunnery, go: farewell. Or, if thou wilt needs  
marry, marry a fool; for wise men know well  
enough what monsters you make of them. To a  
nunnery, go; and quickly too. Farewell. (*Ham.* 3.1.136-142)

Hamlet's reply to Ophelia's remark in Scene 2 further reveals his opinion. Ophelia remarks that the actor's prologue is very brief: “'Tis brief, my lord” (*Ham.* 3.2.169), and he replies: “As a woman's love” (*Ham.* 3.2.170). As he is unable to put himself into the hypocritical world, he is thus unable to discern Ophelia's innocence from Gertrude's guilt and easily defines both of them with the same identification. What Hamlet is expressing here is coercive control over female bodies and minds.

Ophelia, on the other hand, proves to be a more palpable subject to our discussion because in a broader sense, she is the embodiment of the conventional Renaissance attitude towards femininity, female sexuality and finally, female hysteria. Undoubtedly, she was depicted as a victim of erotomania, i.e., unrequited love. Thus, it was no coincidence that both Desdemona and Ophelia sang the same willow song, as well as the fact that the willow was seen as a symbol of unrequited love. For Elizabethans, these women were direct victims of lost, unrequited love, erotomania or fit of the mother. Thus, the first symbol of Ophelia's madness is theatrical and visual, cited in a stage direction: “Enter Horatio, with Ophelia distracted” (*Ham.* 4.5.22). The symptoms are described by Horatio and represent a blend of the diseased woman's bodily and visual segments. According to him,

she speaks much of her father; says she hears  
There's tricks i'th'world; and hems, and beats her heart;  
Spurns enviously at straws; 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; they aim at it  
 And botch the words up to fit their own thoughts;  
 Which, as her winks and nods and gestures yield them,  
 Indeed would make one think there might be thought (*Ham.* 4.5.5-13)

Her symptoms correspond to the symptoms depicted in contemporary treatises such as Jorden's who claimed that they were natural and considered them to be "suffocation in the throate, convulsions, hickcoches, laughing, singing, crying, and weeping."<sup>22</sup> So, even before Ophelia starts talking in an incoherent manner, her disease is physically tangible both on stage and in the play. This image is further strengthened by her white dress, disheveled hair and the symbolical distribution of flowers so she truly embodies a madwoman. Moreover, she ends her life by suicide which itself was abhorrent for the Elizabethans.

Ophelia's death is reported by Gertrude. She reports that Ophelia fell into the water, while sitting next to a willow and making wreaths from flowers. Gertrude, now the remaining woman in the play, expresses her sorrow for Ophelia:

I hoped thou shouldst have been my Hamlet's wife.  
 I thought thy bride-bed to have decked, sweet maid,  
 And not have strewed thy grave. (*Ham.* 5.1.255-257)

After hearing of his sister's passing, Laertes exclaims:

Too much of water hast thou, poor Ophelia,  
 And therefore I forbid my tears. But yet  
 It is our trick. When these are gone,  
 The woman will be out. (*Ham.* 4.7.211-215)

Undoubtedly, it was quite unlikely for a man's death to be described in such an aestheticized way. The description itself represents one of the most conventional modes of a woman's death in the Renaissance and a fairly conventional symbol because "drowning was one of the most frequent causes of accidental death in Tudor and Stuart England, and it was obviously difficult in many cases to be sure that people found drowned in a pond or river had

<sup>22</sup> C. Th. Neely, op. cit., p. 255.

actually committed suicide.”<sup>23</sup> Showalter asserts, “drowning too was associated with the feminine, with female fluidity as opposed to masculine aridity.”<sup>24</sup> Thus, Ophelia’s depiction not only genders madness on stage as exclusively female but also represents the disease’s control over a fragile female body and its bodily, linguistic and psychological disintegration.

*Hamlet* thus offers a stereotypical understanding of madness: hysteria is understood as a predominantly feminine disease whereas melancholy is understood as a masculine one. In this way, femininity is aestheticized and eroticized whereas masculinity is intellectualized. *Macbeth*, on the other hand, dares the stereotypical gendered perception. In it, masculinity is accomplished through physical force and battlefield successes. Unsurprisingly so, because “the term ‘masculine’ in Shakespeare’s day signified martial qualities – physical strength, prowess in battle, and masculine honor – embodied in the heroic ideal.”<sup>25</sup> Thus the category of heroic masculinity was directly juxtaposed with fragile femininity. Lady Macbeth’s invocation speech focuses on the reversal of these categories albeit unsuccessfully because she ends her life as a victim of female hysteria. However, *Macbeth* proves to be Shakespeare’s play with the most puzzling gender differentiation. Macbeth’s male identity is surprisingly weak, Lady Macbeth’s wish to acquire masculinity is surprisingly strong and the witches float somewhere between the conventionally male and conventionally female. It is precisely their appearance at the very beginning of the play that puts this gender distinction into motion. The witches, although considered women by the noun, are described in a gender neutral manner by Banquo: “You should be women, / And yet your beards forbid me to interpret / That you are so” (*Mac.* 1.3.44-46). Lady Macbeth’s ambition was often understood as the continuation of the witches’ prophecy and their mutual intention of destabilizing patriarchy because as Dympna Callaghan suggests, “in *Macbeth*, the kingdom of darkness is unequivocally female, unequivocally matriarchal, and the fantasy of incipient rebellion of demonic forces is crucial to the maintenance of the godly rule it is supposed to overthrow.”<sup>26</sup> For that reason, the invocation speech is at the focus of our discussion although it has

<sup>23</sup> Michael MacDonald, “Ophelia’s Maimed Rites”, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 37 (1986) 3, p. 311.

<sup>24</sup> E. Showalter, op. cit., p. 4.

<sup>25</sup> M. L. Howell, op. cit., p. 2.

<sup>26</sup> Stephanie Chamberlain, “Fantasizing Infanticide: Lady Macbeth and the Murdering Mother in Early Modern England”, *College Literature*, 32 (2005) 3, p. 79.

traditionally been read “as an attempt by Lady Macbeth to seize a masculine authority perceived necessary to the achievement of her political goals.”<sup>27</sup>

Our first acquaintance with Lady Macbeth is in Act 1, Scene 5 in a room in Macbeth’s castle at Inverness when she enters reading Macbeth’s letter. The readers and viewers are deprived of knowing Lady Macbeth before. She was not given a chance to be perceived as the fragile wife of a soldier. Macbeth refers to her in the letter as his “partner of greatness” (*Mac.* 1.5.12). Thus, the first impression might be that of a “true Celtic type of a woman; she had a quick mind, a strong will, and a form beautiful as it was instinct with grace and animation.”<sup>28</sup> She believes the witches’ prophecy instantly but expresses her doubt in her husband’s nature: “Glamis thou art, and Cawdor; and shalt be / What thou art promised: yet do I fear thy nature; / It is too full o’th’ milk of human kindness” (*Mac.* 1.5.15-17). These lines show that Lady Macbeth perceived her husband as reluctant and not capable of committing the murder but so did he perceive himself. As early as 1887, Robert Munro depicted Macbeth as: “strong man, and full of courage as he was, he yet shudered when brought face to face with the ‘swelling act’ he knew must be done in order to the attainment of hopes; and it was to her, as a last stay, he looked for inspiration and a ‘spur to prick the sides of his intent’.”<sup>29</sup> Less indecisive than her husband though, Lady Macbeth “did not shrink from contemplating the way that ultimately must be travelled – the way of blood – that she might share with her lord the crown of Duncan.”<sup>30</sup> Thus, she attempts to acquire masculine traits and these lines skillfully reveal the idea that she has of masculinity and femininity. For her, masculinity excludes kindness and gentleness, and these two traits are even flaws in her eyes. After hearing about the King’s arrival, she decides it is the perfect time to seize the opportunity to make the prophecy come true. She exclaims:

Come, you spirits  
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,  
And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full  
Of direst cruelty. (*Mac.* 1.5.47-50).

<sup>27</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>28</sup> Robert Munro, “Lady Macbeth – A Psychological Sketch”, *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 21 (1887) 1, p. 30.

<sup>29</sup> Ibidem, p. 31.

<sup>30</sup> Ibidem.

It is clear that Lady Macbeth regrets her powerless position as a woman, and even attributes that to the physical and psychological nature brought by her gender. La Belle analyses this connection with the biological aspect of femininity:

When Lady Macbeth commands the spirits of darkness to “unsex” her, it is not just a wish for a psychological movement away from the feminine. To free herself of the basic psychological characteristics of femininity, she is asking the spirits to eliminate the basic biological characteristics of femininity.<sup>31</sup>

It is clear that Lady Macbeth sees her femininity as a weakness, not only in a political sense, but also biological and psychological. She reasons that if she were a man, she would be crueler and would not hesitate to kill King Duncan, which she thinks Macbeth will do. La Belle further elaborates: “For Lady Macbeth, then, this murder of her femininity is an essential preparation for the murder of the King.”<sup>32</sup>

Her monologue continues as she further elaborates on this idea to get rid of her (biologically) feminine traits. She says,

Make thick my blood.  
 Stop up the access and passage to remorse,  
 That no compunctious visitings of nature  
 Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between  
 The effect and it! Come to my woman’s breasts,  
 And take my milk for gall, you murd’ring ministers,  
 Wherever in your sightless substances  
 You wait on nature’s mischief. Come, thick night,  
 And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,  
 That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,  
 Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark  
 To cry “Hold, hold!” (*Mac.* 1.5.50-61)

It was believed that blood may cause sorrow, anxiety, desperation or agony. Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy*, for instance, adduces that this state may cause “an inability to sleep or else a kind of ‘troublesome sleep’ with ‘terrible

<sup>31</sup> Jenijoy LaBelle, “A Strange Infirmity: Lady Macbeth Amenorrhoea”, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 31 (1980) 3, p. 381.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 382.

dreams in the night, dejection of mind, much discontent.”<sup>33</sup> However, she does not think of the consequences of her invocation, so “if Lady Macbeth is asking for a cessation of her menstrual cycle, then we should expect later in the play to see symptoms of such a hysteria.”<sup>34</sup>

When Lady Macbeth asks to be exempt from all the conventional, characteristic symbols of femininity, she is actually asking for a questioning of Renaissance gender relations, of male and female distinctions. She believes that acquiring masculine traits will help her perform a traditionally perceived masculine role more successfully. Although the invocation speech proves to be futile as she succumbs to female hysteria in Act 5, Scene 1, Lady Macbeth believes in its success and becomes extremely cruel. Her infatuation is evident immediately upon Macbeth’s arrival:

Great Glamis! Worthy Cawdor!  
 Greater than both, by the ail-hail hereafter!  
 Thy letters have transported me beyond  
 This ignorant present, and I feel now  
 The future in the instant. (*Mac.* 1.5.58-62)

Already doubting his decisiveness, she takes the responsibility for future actions: “Only look up clear; / To alter favour ever is to fear; / Leave all the rest to me” (*Mac.* 1.5.75-77). In Macbeth’s moments of hesitation about killing Duncan (“We will proceed no further in this business:” [*Mac.* 1.5.29]), Lady Macbeth is, at first, irritated:

Was the hope drunk  
 Wherein you drest yourself? Hath it slept since?  
 And wakes it now, to look so green and pale  
 At what it did so freely? (...) Wouldst thou have that  
 Which thou esteem’st the ornament of life,  
 And live a coward in thine own esteem,  
 Letting ‘I dare not’ wait upon ‘I would’,  
 Like the poor cat i’t’h’adage?” (*Mac.* 1.7.35-38, 41-45)

This is further confirmed by her statement: “What beast was’t then, / That made you break this enterprise to me?” (*Mac.* 1.7.49-50). Then she questions

<sup>33</sup> Ibidem, p. 383.

<sup>34</sup> Ibidem.

Macbeth's manhood: "When you durst do it, then you were a man; / And, to be more than what you were, you would / Be so much more the man" (*Mac.* 1.7.51-53). By implying that masculinity should be powerful and demanding, she directly juxtaposes Macbeth's cowardice to her cruelty:

I have given suck, and know  
 How tender tis' to love the babe that milks me:  
 I would, while it was smiling in my face,  
 Have pluckt my nipple from his boneless gums,  
 And dasht the brains out, had I so sworn as you  
 Have done to this. (*Mac.* 1.7.56-61)

These lines express lady Macbeth's intention to commit infanticide which, in the Renaissance period, was not considered only a monstrous sin but also a criminal offence. Depicting herself as capable of committing it, she is diminishing her femininity and strengthening her male identity of a cruel ruler. She perceives herself and wishes for others to perceive her as motherless and "top-full of direst cruelty" (*Mac.* 1.5.44). However, her invocation speech simply remains an unsuccessful attempt at transcending gender relations. Although she is diametrically opposite to Ophelia, Lady Macbeth becomes, just like Ophelia, another typical case of hysteria. Unlike the heroine of Hamlet who is understood as a victim of erotomania, Lady Macbeth becomes ill due to her ambition.

In terms of hysteria's recognizable features, Ophelia is a far more conventional character. Lady Macbeth's hysteria was mostly discussed in terms of somnambulism. However, stage directions introducing these hysterical women are similar. Like Ophelia, Lady Macbeth is absent from the stage and then introduced as mad. In comparison to Ophelia's, her hysteria is "more personal and psychologized."<sup>35</sup> Her speech is as equally illogical as Ophelia's, only more intimate referring to blood stains on her hands: "Out, damned spot! Out, I say!" (*Mac.* 5.1.34). She refers to the smell of blood: "Here's the smell of blood still: all the perfumes / of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand" (*Mac.* 5.1.47-48). Then, she refers to Banquo's death: "Banquo's buried, he cannot come out on's grave" (*Mac.* 5.1.59-60). Finally, she wishes to go to sleep: "to bed, to bed; there's knocking at the gate: / come, come, come, come, give me your hand: / what's done cannot be undone: to bed, to bed, to bed"

<sup>35</sup> C. Th. Neely, op. cit., p. 327.

(*Mac.* 5.1.62-64). As such, it can be referred to in terms of Timothy Bright's *A Treatise of Melancholy* which differentiates between spiritual doubt, i.e., spiritual melancholy and psychological melancholy. Although Bright's treatise fails at clearly differentiating these two, it classifies spiritual melancholy as being "caused by the sense of sin and incomprehensible and inexpressible loss of God's favor, is to be cured by penitence, prayer and faith."<sup>36</sup> According to the doctor's remark, "More needs she the divine than the physician: - / God, God forgive us all!" (*Mac.* 5.1.74), Lady Macbeth might be seen not only as a victim of hysteria but also spiritual melancholy. Nevertheless, the most prominent characteristic of her hysteria is somnambulism. The sleep-walking scene is Shakespeare's addition to the original plot, and in this scene, he "reached the summit of his art in creating an abnormal mental state."<sup>37</sup> It can be said that even though she wished to be unsexed, Lady Macbeth was finally defeated by her femininity as she succumbed to female hysteria. It is true that "as long as she lives, Lady Macbeth is never unsexed in the only way she wanted to be unsexed – able to act with the cruelty she ignorantly and perversely identified with male strength."<sup>38</sup> Despite her verbal boastfulness, it becomes obvious that Lady Macbeth does not possess the traits the lack of which she criticizes in her husband. Both of them prove to be not cruel enough to accomplish their ambitions.

*King Lear* is, perhaps, one of Shakespeare's most antagonistic plays towards femininity. The fact that the play is based on polarizing forces of femininity and masculinity is affirmed by Lear's character. He succumbs to madness due to the filial ingratitude of his pelican daughters and "experiences a conflict between his desires to grow angry and to weep, which are coded respectively as masculine and feminine forms of protest."<sup>39</sup> Moreover, his case proves to be peculiar as he is "the only male Shakespearean character to mention *hysterica passio* explicitly."<sup>40</sup>

King Lear is not only Shakespeare's first male hysteric but also the first of his characters to define the disease himself. In Ophelia's case this was done by

<sup>36</sup> Ibidem, p. 319.

<sup>37</sup> Isador H. Coriat, *Hysteria of Lady Macbeth*, Moffart, Yard and Company, New York, 1921, p. 4.

<sup>38</sup> S. Chamberlain, op. cit., p. 79.

<sup>39</sup> Peter Rudyntsky, "The Darke and Vicious Place: The Dread of Vagina in King Lear", *Modern Philology*, 96 (1999) 3, p. 296.

<sup>40</sup> Kaara L. Peterson, "Historica Passio: Early Modern Medicine, King Lear and Editorial Practice", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 57 (2006) 1, p. 2.



Horatio, Gertrude, Claudius and her brother, Laertes. In Lady Macbeth's case this was done by the physician and the lady servant. Lear does it himself in Act 2, Scene 4 after seeing Kent placed in the stocks. He exclaims, "Oh how this Mother swells up towards my heart! / Histerica passio, downe thou climbing sorrow, / Thy element's below" (*KL* 2.4.55-57). Even though the cases of "female hysterical diseases are widely documented"<sup>41</sup> in the Renaissance, there was a general reluctance to term men as such. In his treatise *Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures* (1603), Samuel Harsnett cites the case of Richard Mainy's *hysterica passio*. However, Harsnett refers to Mainy's definition with skepticism and judgment. The same might be applied to Lear as his *hysterica passio* "pointedly suggests how much he is already deluded, drifting towards mental incompetence under the great strain of his essentially self-created disenfranchisement."<sup>42</sup> Unsurprisingly so because he had been exposed to cold and storm, banished Cordelia, was betrayed by Goneril and Reagan and finally met Poor Tom, a meeting that marked the onset of his delirium. Lear might have made a mistake while trying to define his disease. His precise definition of the disease as female hysteria is "defined, ingeniously, as his rising heart rather than his wandering womb."<sup>43</sup>

As a central character, Lear is a man afraid of being identified with femininity which he despises. In Act 1, Scene 4, Goneril demands he halves his train of hundred knights, and he answers:

Life and death, I am asham'd  
 That thou hast power to shake my manhood thus,  
 That these hot tears, which breake from me perforce,  
 Should make thee worth them. (...)  
 Old fond eyes,  
 Beweep this cause again. I'll pluck ye out,  
 And cast you, with the waters that you lose,  
 To temper clay. (*KL*. 1.4.304-307, 309-312)

Lear immediately juxtaposes manhood and tears saying that he would rather pluck his eyes out than cry. In Act 2, Scene 4 again, he repeats "and not let womens weapon, water drops, / Staine my mans cheeks" (*KL* 2.4.238-239).

<sup>41</sup> Ibidem, p. 16.

<sup>42</sup> Ibidem, p. 15.

<sup>43</sup> Ibidem, p. 334.

Crying in the Renaissance was considered to be extremely womanish and Lear is not the only male character who defines them as such. The same is done by Laertes in *Hamlet*:

Too much of water hast thou, poor Ophelia,  
And therefore I forbid my tears: but yet  
It is our trick; nature her custom holds,  
Let shame say what it will: when these are gone,  
The woman will be out (*Ham.* 4.7.184-188)

Tears are a threat to Lear's manhood, but according to the Fool, he had lost it the very moment he gave his crown to his daughters: "Ere since thou mad'st thy Daughters thy Mothers / and gav'st them the rod, and put'st downe thine owne breeches" (*KL* 1.4.174-176). Lear violently comes down on femininity in Act 4, Scene 6, blaming filial ingratitude for his madness at first: "for Gloster's bastard son / Was kinder to his father than my daughters / Got 'tween the lawful sheets" (*KL* 4.6.115-117). Finally, he defines his daughters and all women as:

Down from the waist they are Centaurs,  
Though women all above:  
But to the girdle do the gods inherit,  
Beneath is all the fiend's  
There's hell, there's darkness, there's the sulphurous pit,  
burning, scalding, stench, consumption; -fie, fie,  
fie, pah, pah! (*KL* 4.6.125-130)

His attitude towards women reflects the contemporary attitude of flimsy and perishable femininity. However, what the peculiar case of King Lear proves is that men restore their noble mind throughout the plays while women are thrust into the hysterical realm. This is supported by Neely's claim, who referring to Shakespeare's tragedies as well as the treatises and the then medical practices, claims that:

the representation of madness permits a restoration of normality, a restoration in which madmen and madwomen participate differently. The disguise of Poor Tom is abandoned, Gloucester eschews suicide, and Lear is returned to sanity. The mad women characters in tragedy, however, are not cured but eliminated. Ophelia is reabsorbed into cultural norms by her narrated drowning and her Christian burial. The report of Lady Macbeth's suicide, abruptly announced in

the play's final lines, reduces the supernatural to a simile to vilify and dismiss her as a 'fiendlike queen, / Who, as 'tis thought, by self and violent hands / Took off her life' (5.8.69-71).

The Renaissance period was deeply imbued with a dichotomy between masculinity and femininity, perceiving them as two clashing polarities opposing intellect to aesthetics, cruelty to vulnerability, and firmness to fragility. This distinction influenced the Renaissance understanding of mental disorders. In analyzing the deeply-rooted social and preordained gender perceptions of, namely melancholy and hysteria, this paper tried to effectively elaborate on the gender dichotomy of melancholy and hysteria. Melancholy was intellectualized and identified with masculinity while hysteria was aestheticized, eroticized and connected exclusively to femininity. In depicting the characters of madmen and madwomen, Shakespeare must have been familiar with both real-life experiences as well as numerous contemporary treatises which discussed various symptoms and causes. Thus, Shakespearean melancholics and hysterics not only closely resemble the characters depicted in the treatises, but they also challenge the established gender polarity. However, in his later plays, the romances, Shakespeare does not deal with the topic of mental disorders and its gendered differentiation as directly as in the aforementioned tragedies. Nevertheless, the topic of mental instability is present in the main protagonists' verging on insanity. Unlike in the tragedies, these characters are saved by their redeeming daughters and accomplish sanity at the plays' endings.

## **RODNO UVJETOVANA PERCEPCIJA LUDILA: ŽENSKA HISTERIJA I MUŠKA MELANKOLIJA U SHAKESPEAREOVU *HAMLETU*, *MACBETHU* I *KRALJU LEARU***

### **Sažetak**

*Na ludost, kao jednu od najkontroverznijih i najizazovnijih renesansnih tema, nije znatno utjecalo samo njezino srednjovjekovno naslijeđe, nego i srednjovjekovna shvaćanja dominantne muževnosti i podložne, ranjive ženstvenosti. Stoga su brojne renesansne rasprave žarko pokušavale objasniti brojne, ali često identične, mentalne poremećaje. No pri određivanju postojale su brojne poteškoće. Cilj je ovoga rada analizirati i objasniti rodnu percepciju dvaju mentalnih poremećaja, ponajprije „ženske“ histerije i „muške“ melankolije. Histerija se prvotno estetizirala i eroticizirala, dok se melankolija intelektualizirala. Kao čovjek svoga vremena Shakespeare je zasigurno bio upoznat s rodnim percepcijama ludosti. Njegov opis ženskih likova u tragedijama raznolik je upravo zbog njegova izravnoga preispitivanja tih kategorija. Njegov prvi ženski histerični lik, Ophelia, neupitno je konvencionalan, dok lady Macbeth preispituje ustaljene rodne uloge. Kralj Lear, s druge strane, poseban je slučaj čovjeka koji boluje od ženske bolesti.*

Ključne riječi: *ludost; histerija; melankolija; Shakespeare; Ophelia; lady Macbeth; kralj Lear.*