

## Abstracts – Seminar 41, “Shakespeare and Mental Illness”

### Yael Bassan

#### **Out of balance- Hysteria in the Shakespearean Corpus**

One of the central motifs in the Shakespearean canon, as well as in early modern English drama, is the utilization of illness—whether physical or mental—to propel the plot and guide it toward its conclusion. When a cure for the malady is discovered, the story culminates in a happy ending and is classified as a comedy. Conversely, when the illness proves fatal, the narrative inevitably takes on a tragic tone.

The primary assertion of this paper is that hysteria can—and should—be regarded as an illness, playing a pivotal role in determining the outcome of love stories in Shakespeare’s plays. When hysteria is balanced or under control, the play is interpreted as comic, as illustrated in *Twelfth Night*. However, once this equilibrium is disrupted, the plays are classified as tragic, with hysteria acting as the underlying driving force, as evident in *Romeo and Juliet*.

I aim to demonstrate that Shakespearean lovers—both male and female—can be interpreted as afflicted by hysteria, as they exhibit symptoms consistent with the disease as defined by psychoanalytic theories from the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

### Alani Hicks-Bartlett

#### **Violence, “Madness,” and Corporeal Variance: for a Disability-Informed Approach to *Titus Andronicus***

Disability, as we might presently term it, is anticipated in *Titus Andronicus* from the play’s opening lines. Indeed, against the seemingly larger backdrop of political and familial violence, the play centers discussions of aging, fatigue, injury, and bodily harm, entwining them with the imperial and identitary concerns of many characters who are preoccupied with national vigor, valiance, and health. Along with challenging premodern notions of free will, volitional action, the sense of the weight that Titus must laboriously carry, discharge, and move around, as well as the play’s repeated references to “yoking” and to bodies that are under control, out of another’s control, or out of one’s own control, also anticipate the play’s more nuanced staging of disability and the performance of disability. As explicit threats to the “body politic,” the malleability and variance of various characters’ bodies, said bodies’ visibility (Hobgood; Garland Thomson), and Titus’s unreliable melancholy and madness, can be productively interpreted through disability- informed approaches that consider the trope of “madness,” performative disability, and “disability dissemblance” as evidence of a body, mind, and “bodymind” (M. Price 269; Schalk; Row-Heyveld) that are all potentially “out of control.”

## Arnie Perlstein

### **“Who’s There?” Hamlet’s Nightmares, Hallucinations, & Guilty Conscience**

Was the Ghost real or Hamlet’s hallucination? Was Hamlet mad or pretend-mad? Why his perseveration on sleep, dreams, guilt, and suicide? Providing a fresh combination of non-Freudian answers to the core questions which fueled the Greg-Wilson debate, I argue that Shakespeare deliberately constructed *Hamlet* with *two* parallel fictional universes: one, overt, with sane Hamlet and real Ghost; another, veiled, with mad Hamlet and hallucinated Ghost. In a nutshell: *Hamlet* as mega-meta-hendiadys and double play.

Surprisingly, the mad-Hamlet version strongly coheres, resolving cruxes that sank Greg’s argument: the three guards who see the Ghost are unreal, as the early Ghost scenes enact Hamlet’s “bad dreams”; Horatio, who also sees the Ghost, is Hamlet’s *waking-life*, imaginary yes-man — hence Horatio’s inconsistencies; and Hamlet (and audience/reader trapped inside Hamlet’s “melancholic” subjectivity) confuses nightmares and hallucinations with reality.

The Ghost’s murder account is thus *metaphorical*: Iago-like Claudius “abused” Hamlet’s “ear”, inciting the impaired, suggestible, Othello-like Hamlet to *actually* murder the King, by hinting the King seduced Desdemona-like Ophelia, then promptly usurping Hamlet’s ambition for royal “advancement”.

What tortures Hamlet about Gertrude precipitously marrying Claudius is fear he may be biological son of “Moor” Claudius — hence inheriting two perceived primal defects/ curses: biracial, illegitimate murderer.

Hamlet’s partially repressed guilt leaks (like Richard III’s guilty nightmares; and, Oedipus-like, Hamlet’s investigation catches his *own* conscience) and paralyzes him, until the Ghost’s invisibility to Gertrude provides waking-world verification: Hamlet *remembers*: No more Ghost ...or hesitation. Thereafter decisive, Hamlet takes revenge on Claudius, and accepts death as just punishment. Above all, mad Hamlet’s trajectory comprehensively echoes mad Brutus’s vis-à-vis guilty nightmares, ambition, illegitimacy, “strucken-deer” regicide, and doomed love. A tragedy eerily unlike sane Hamlet’s—but perhaps less tragic via veiled “nods” at morally reawakened Gertrude assisting desperate, pregnant Ophelia to feign madness and suicide, and thereby escape Elsinore’s final carnage.

## Kelsey Ridge

### **“Divided from herself and her fair judgment”: Ophelia, Madness, and Traumatic Dissociation**

Hamlet is not the only mad one in *Hamlet*. After the death of her father, Ophelia goes generically mad. The nature of her madness is nonspecific. Any ‘diagnosis’ of that madness is, at best, speculative – though a defining of the madness may be useful for performance purposes. This madness can be read as rooted in her trauma, especially the murder of her father by her ex-boyfriend. Trauma-focused readings often take the form of people saying Ophelia has PTSD. She does not, though, meet the diagnostic criteria for that condition. My paper looks at Ophelia’s madness through the lens of traumatic dissociation. That provides an interpretive

frame for Ophelia's altered mental state. This reading draws on psychiatric research on trauma's impact on long-term mental health to facilitate an analysis of the character.

### James N. Ortego II

#### **Madness and Lycanthropy in John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi***

This essay will examine Early Modern depictions of madness and lycanthropy reflected in the character of Ferdinand as he appears in Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*. Ferdinand's descent into madness (and later lycanthropy) features moments where he rants and raves at the duchess, tries to scare her with distorted facial expressions, threatens her with violence and promises of death, sends a group of madmen into her prison cell to torment her with emblems of death, then later terrifies all those around him by howling among the graves at night and digging up corpses. His behavior expresses not only a form of insanity but also lycanthropy, a consequence that some Jacobean thinkers such as Robert Burton believed was closely linked to insanity. Further complicating matters is Webster's dramatization of Ferdinand and his sister the Duchess of Malfi, for these twin siblings make numerous theatrical references to both the folklore and conventional wisdom regarding early 17<sup>th</sup> century madness. Since Webster mingles the fact and fiction of his day when presenting his theatrical emphasis on madness most frequently in the character of Ferdinand, this essay will examine his interactions with the other characters in the play to better understand the author's thematic concerns with madness and its consequences, such as lycanthropy.

### Emanuel Stelzer

#### **The Uses of Ophelia in the History of Medicine, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Century**

Virtually since the very moment of its conception, Ophelia has become the projection of cultural and social values on female sexuality and subjectivity, both socially acceptable and transgressive. As Kaara L. Peterson and Deanne Williams argue in their introduction to *The Afterlife of Ophelia* (2012, 5): "Ophelia's importance as a cultural and critical body of texts lies not solely in her being a 'symptom' or *effect* of the culture that represents her according to its own logic, ideology, and concerns, but also in how she is the *generator* or *site* of meaning or cultural shift". Ophelia's character has been diagnosed almost since the time of its creation but, starting from the late eighteenth century and especially in the nineteenth century, the relation between the representations of Ophelia and psychiatric theory operated on "a two-way transaction" (1985, 80), as Elaine Showalter has brilliantly observed in her landmark study on Ophelia and hysteria. On the European continent and in the US, Ophelia was variously diagnosed as a nymphomaniac, a hysterical woman, someone living with acute *amentia*, *dementia praecox*, simple mental confusion, erotic and suicidal mania, and so forth. At the same time, many critics attacked these attempts at pathologising Ophelia. So far, studies have privileged an Anglophone perspective, but important and influential documents were produced in countries including France, Germany, and Italy. Such documents range from scientific articles and monographs to critical essays written by asylum superintendents and published in popular magazines. The vast majority of such

documents were written by men dictating how women's bodies and minds should work: by engaging with the often disturbing elements which emerge from such texts (including sexist and racist content), one can better understand the deeply problematic repercussions of Shakespeare's penetration into the psychiatric hospitals.

### Molly Ziegler

#### **'Do hiss me into madness': Madness and Race in Shakespeare's *The Tempest***

In Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Prospero surfaces as a central figure in the play's meditations on power. While much scholarship focuses on how education and language function as tools of enslavement, what has yet to be explored is how Prospero uses madness as a means of control. Madness is a frequent presence throughout the play, from the shipwreck that leaves the mariners in a 'fever of the mad', to Caliban being 'hissed' into madness, to Ariel maddening Alonso, Sebastian and Antonio (1.2.209; 2.2.14). Orchestrating these punishments enables Prospero to establish himself as the head of the island's domain. As he notes, 'They now are in my power' (3.3.90). Yet, Prospero's method does more than merely injure his targets. Robert Burton speaks to the transformative potential of madness in his 1623 *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, claiming that '*a little sickness [...] will correct and amend us*'. Such 'correction' certainly takes place in *The Tempest*, with Alonso, Sebastian and Antonio's madness leading to the restoration of Prospero's dukedom and the general pardoning of their prior conspiracy. However, while these characters are granted empowerment through their transformations, Caliban's maddening renders him entirely disenfranchised, without ambition or hope to improve his circumstance. In the end, he does not gain freedom, but rather 'seek[s] for grace' from his enslaver (5.1.296).

This paper examines the consequences of the characters' madness and how their madness catalyses significant changes in the play's social world. Just as their bouts of insanity affect their individual welfare, so too do they operate as part of a broader apparatus of world- and race-making. Accordingly, this paper interrogates how Prospero's deployment of madness services the play's racist agenda, ultimately arguing that madness is not a neutral concept, but one easily moulded to suit political and social aims.