

Troubled Eyes

Reading Madness in The Duchess of Malfi

By Laura Strout



Madness has always fascinated audiences; this is one of the few facts about madness upon which literary critics agree. From the wild speeches of King Lear and the guilt-sickened cries of Lady MacBeth, to the hordes of Londoners who visited Bedlam each year to see its inhabitants, madness's allure has been enduring. Even today, such as "A Beautiful Mind" use a romanticized combination of genius and insanity to draw crowds. However, while madness remains consistently intriguing throughout the centuries, the reason why it is fascinating changes, as do the ways in which it is perceived and understood. In his influential work, *A History of Madness in Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, Michel Foucault describes the transition from an early modern perception of madness to a new understanding of madness emerging in the seventeenth-century with the Age of Reason. He argues that madness is a familiar figure on the early modern landscape; it is present on the stage and in the world. Madness was a voice through which early modern writers described imbalances of anger, ambition, jealousy, and lust, as well as the anxiety that such imbalances could arise in anyone. Madness is a part of everyone's inner world in the early modern period. However, Foucault suggests that in the mid-seventeenth century there is a decisive transition in the conceptualization of madness: the mad figure is confined and distanced from the viewer, becoming a spectacle that is placed outside of the self.

At the very moment of this transition that Foucault suggests enters *The Duchess of Malfi*, rife with images and language of madness. This play by John Webster was penned in the year 1613, a late moment in the early modern period. It is therefore an important artifact in the transition between an early modern concept of madness and the way it was imagined in the Age of Reason. By examining two aspects of madness in *The Duchess of Malfi*, that of faulty sight and that of humoral imbalance, it becomes apparent that this play is a collision of competing understandings of madness. Is madness something that reveals truth and dwells within, or is it something that is the equivalent of unreason in the Age of Reason-nothingness? Operating largely within an early modern mindset, madness (specifically as delusion and as theater) repeatedly offers insight and even prophecy in this play. The volatile and erroneous subjectivity of the madman is of value, containing truth and a form of knowledge for all people. Even as it is unreasonable, it creates a collective subjectivity amongst early modern individuals. Webster also presents the emerging image of madness as unreason

and blankness, again through imagery of the eyes and of sight; this time, the eyes are either inoperative or utterly overwhelmed. The madman, a symbol of rampant subjectivity unguided by reason, must be placed outside the self. It cannot be understood or made useful in this social climate of rationality of the seventeenth-century and therefore becomes a meaningless chasm against which the sane self is defined.

In Foucault's mind, the early modern period allowed madness to roam unconfined, visible to the social eye. This public's openness to seeing and experiencing madness, whether it be a madman who lived in town or on the stage, was a result of a specific outlook on madness and the self. The prevailing medical thought of the day was that madness, or any pain, came from an imbalance of the four humors: blood, black bile, yellow bile, and phlegm. Intimately connected with the humors were the passions, which "Arose from combinations of humoral substance and quality" (Paster 65). In *Madness and Drama in the age of Shakespeare*, Duncan Salkeld lists six passions: love, hatred, desire, aversion, joy, and sorrow, each of which is connected to certain functions and humors in the body. Madness was described as an excess of one of these passions or humors. Susan James writes that the passions, and by extension the humors, were "Forces that are at once extremely powerful and actually or potentially beyond our control" (Paster 11). This appreciation of madness as an imbalance in the body not fully under a person's command suggests that it could potentially happen to anyone. Madness was, to some extent, already a part of the early modern person. Here Foucault details the transition from a pervasive, omnipresent view of madness to an isolated, confined one:

In the Renaissance, madness was present everywhere and mingled with every experience by its images or its dangers. During the classical period, madness was shown, but on the other side of bars; if present, it was at a distance, under the eyes of a reason that no longer felt any relation to it and that would not compromise itself by too close a resemblance. Madness had become a thing to look at: no longer a monster inside oneself. (70)

Social space and architecture become important in Foucault's narrative of madness's re-conceptualization in the social eye. The madman as a character who speaks truth is pulled

down from the stage and set up in a mental institution with windows through which spectators can gawk. Foucault's description of such hospitals, like Bethlehem in England, is a horrifying image of naked men and women chained to cold stone walls. The attitudes of the caretakers are monstrous in his account, as the explanation for such treatment was often that the state of madness was akin to bestiality: because the body was like that of an animal, it did not want the same warmth and comfort that a sane body would. In *Distracted Subjects: Madness and Gender in Shakespeare and Early Modern Culture*, Carol Neely recoils from what she describes as an overly dismal image of confinement, arguing instead that the mad were treated far better than Foucault describes, except in a few specific instances. Wherever the truth lies in this battle of historical narratives, it is clear nonetheless that confinement of the insane became much more common as the seventeenth century progressed and contributed to the move from the madman's visibility in one period to the expectation for confinement implicit in this quote from Jeremy Collier, a man of the late seventeenth century: "Such people [the mad] ought to be kept in dark rooms and without company. To shew them, or let them loose, is somewhat unreasonable" (Salkeld 11).

In order to read the word madness in *The Duchess of Malfi* we must first come to terms with the dizzying variety of meanings that haunt the word "madness" in the early modern period. Duncan Salkeld points out that the words, "Folly," "frenzy," "fury," "imagination," "fancy," "frantic," and "fantasy" are all included under the overarching word "madness," and each of these words has specific connotations that drive its meaning in a hundred different directions. It is possible, however, to trace the threads of specific aspects of madness throughout *The Duchess of Malfi* to see how they are operating in response to Foucault's narrative of madness. One such strand is that of madness as delusion, as believing in and accepting what is false for what is true. This is one of the ways that Foucault describes madness: "Madness is the purest, most total form of quid pro quo; it takes the false for the true, death for life, man for woman" (33). This description of madness correlates to the Oxford English Dictionary's first definition of the word: "Imprudence, delusion, or (wild) foolishness resembling insanity." Delusion seems an apt descriptor of this sort of madness, where the madman believes with certainty the opposite or something other than what is actually the case. Webster works out this concept of madness as delusion

through the faulty mechanism of sight.

The link between madness and sight is established early on in the play. After the Duchess offers Antonio, her steward and future husband, a ring to help his eyesight, he responds, "You have made me stark blind" (1.1.402). "Stark" blindness suggests that the couple is so consumed by their love that they cannot see the pain and the horror that will come as a result of their marriage. The pairing of words here is especially interesting as "stark" is more often associated with madness than blindness. The phrase "Stark mad" appears twice in the play. By linking it here with "blind" instead, Webster sets up a parallel between madness and blindness that permeates the entirety of this work. Writing of madness in the Age of Reason, Foucault asserts that blindness is "One of the words which comes closest to the essence of classical [seventeenth-century] madness" (105). Webster creates a distinction, however, between a blindness that is seeing incorrectly and apart from what is "true," and a blindness that sees nothing at all. In this play we see that while delusion sees something, dazzlement sees nothing, and it is in this distinction that Webster explores the competing early modern and seventeenth-century models of madness.

The eyes may be, as K. H. Ansari points out in his work, John Webster: Image Patterns and Canon, "A symbol of understanding and insight" (173) and "An index of the state of the heart," (172) in the Duchess of Malfi, but in this case such metaphors are only set up in order to be undermined. Deception through sight is the Lord of Misrule in this play, where believing one's eyes is madness. The Duchess, imprisoned by her brothers, is tricked into thinking that her family is dead by a dead hand and a false image. Bosola commands her, "Look you, here's the piece from which 'twas ta'en" and points to a tableau of figures constructed out of wax to look like Antonio and the children lying dead (4.1.55). In another instance of faulty sight, Bosola, thinking that Antonio is someone else, accidentally slays "The man I would have saved 'bove mine own life" (5.4.53). Later, trying to explain this mistake, he says he was "In a mist: I know not how; / Such a mistake as I have often seen / In a play" (5.5.3-5). Yet another example of sight's duplicity is Ferdinand's exclamation at seeing the Duchess's "dead" body: "Cover her face. Mine eyes dazzle. She died young" (4.2.254). These words fall like lead, so solemn and final a moment of narration that they ring off the page like a death knell. But, as Bosola finds out only lines later, the Duchess is

not quite dead yet. She awakens for a moment to ask about her husband and children before sinking permanently into death. Ferdinand is not present for this part, so he is never aware that when he thought she was dead she was actually alive. This deception may seem unimportant in the play as Ferdinand's belief that she is dead eventually coincides with reality, and yet it is truly the difference between life and death. He believes the same thing whether she is alive or dead. Sight fails again and again. A mist deceives Bosola. The Duchess is tricked by her brothers through an image. It would be most accurate to say that Ferdinand is deceived by Webster himself in his construction of the Duchess's death. Repeatedly Webster forces the audience to confront the inherently deceptive nature of theater and more generally, the problem with a posteriori knowledge itself-it is circumstantial and reliant upon faulty perception. This questioning of what a person can truly know through experience reveals the influence that Renaissance thinker Michel Eyquem de Montaigne had on Webster's work. Montaigne is associated with Pyrrhonism, a set of philosophical beliefs that denied that man could know "Absolute truths of the universe or his own existence, through the use of either his reason or his senses" (Whitman 173). It is obvious from the deception inherent in *The Duchess of Malfi* that Webster shared Montaigne's suspicion that nothing learned through experience can be trusted to reveal truth.

It is important to notice, however, that a pattern develops throughout this play in relation to madness and the deception it works upon the viewer. In two of the moments of deception already described, characters are deluded into thinking the opposite of what is true only for the play to fulfill the falsehood later on, turning it into a truth. The Duchess sees the bodies of Antonio and her children that have been created to fool her, to lead her into a form of madness where the opposite of what is perceived is true, and she believes they are dead. At this moment she is mad. She takes, to echo Foucault, death for life. And yet as the play progresses this madness becomes truth: Antonio and her children are killed before the curtains fall. The same thing happens in the case of Ferdinand's mistaken belief that his sister is dead. Ferdinand is mad, believing what is alive to be dead. The Duchess, after rallying our hopes that she will live, does in fact die. This construction of deception followed by an undoing of that deception in terms of the plot makes madness akin to prophecy. Madness becomes a glimpse of distant truth for the audience and for the

character, even if they do not understand it as such at the time. This appreciation for madness as a vision of falsehood that becomes truth describes what Foucault categorizes as an early modern appreciation of madness. Madness has the power of revelation. At the same time, these reversals also point out the circumstantial nature of believing what is true; unnervingly, believing the truth has nothing to do with human perception, which consistently fails, and everything to do with coincidence and the author's whim.

Madness as sight, as deception, and ultimately as truth is not the only form of madness as blindness that is present in the play. Cariola's dialogue with the Duchess exposes another possible understanding of the blindness that is madness. She asks "What think you of, madam? The Duchess replies, "Of nothing: / When I muse thus, I sleep." Cariola responds, "Like a madman, with your eyes open" (4.2.14-17)? Madmen, then, are people whose eyes are open, but who do not see. Again madness is a failure of sight, but this time rather than being simply deception where sight works against the spectator and suggests to them the wrong idea, sight is utterly inoperative. The eyes are open, things should be seen, and yet the open eyes belong to one who sleeps and therefore is incognizant of the incoming stimuli. The eyes are like the "Dead walls" that "yield no echo" Bosola describes at the end of the play (5.5.96, 97). We gain a specific understanding of how madness is perceived by Cariola in these words, as she suggests that the mad, while awake and looking about, are actually still sleeping. With their open eyes they are unable to see truth and reason as the sane do. To adopt the language of Foucault, this is the Age of Reason's discourse about madness.

This incognizant gaze is similar to the Duke's dazzlement at the sight of his "dead" sister ("Mine eyes dazzle"), as both are forms of un-sight rather than delusion. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the word "dazzle" as both "To overpower, confuse, or dim (the vision), esp. with excess of brightness," and, "To overpower or confound (the mental faculties)." Both of these definitions were used during the period in which this play was penned, so in the word "dazzle" madness and blindness are again united. The Duke's eyes are open, but, like the Duchess's sleeping gaze, see nothing. In this case too much light effectually blinds them. This is different from the deception described previously. There the madman sees something, even if that something is not what is correct. Here the madman opens his eyes and is

overwhelmed. He sees nothing. The image of madness as sightless eyes and nothingness points strongly toward the new perspective of madness emerging with the Age of Reason. Foucault, speaking of dazzlement as madness, writes, "Dazzled reason opens its eyes upon the sun and sees nothing, that is, does not see" (108). Where madness once had a million faces of falseness in deception, now, placed in a system dominated by reason, it cannot function or even exist in a way that is understandable. The Duchess says that she is thinking "Of nothing," and nothing is one of the words that best describes the blank un-reason madness evolves into as the seventeenth century progresses.

But is the Duchess really thinking/seeing nothing in this moment? The presence of tears in her eyes does not sit comfortably with the idea of total emptiness of mind. That the Duchess is seeing nothing is questioned by a de-contextualized reading of Cariola's line "Like a madman, with your eyes open?" This line is isolated on the page, suggesting coyly yet another reading of madness in this moment. Read in isolation, the line, "Like a madman, with your eyes open?" suggests that madness is the purest form of sight. To be a madman is to have one's eyes open and to see truth more clearly than the sane. To return to the concept of dazzlement, the madman is flooded with otherworldly insight and revelation. Where the sane call madness a failure of sight (as I have described above) madness itself can be imagined here as the opening of ones eyes where the sane person has closed them.

Theater itself has often been described as madness, a deception that ultimately reveals truth, and The Duchess of Malfi offers no shortage of moments that self-consciously reflect on the stage. One of the most profound moments in which Webster comments upon the purpose and role of theater is in the scene of the Duchess's death. Ferdinand and Bosola are not the only ones fooled by the Duchess's fake demise. The audience too has been lead into the madness of believing the reverse of the truth. We cannot trust our own eyes as we watch the play. The Duchess looks dead. She acts dead. Ferdinand pronounces her dead. And yet, after all of these confirmations from the play itself, she is really not dead. In watching the play, the audience succumbs to the same madness that afflicts the characters. The audience must admit the possibility of its own madness, which allows for a communal sense of selfhood. All audience members must share this collective experience of madness. In a beautiful

circle, theater suggests to the audience through delusion, or madness, that they could themselves be mad. In this way theater is shown as both a form of madness and a tool of self-revelation-in Foucault's narrative of madness, this is definitively an early modern perspective.

But this is not the only instance of madness and theater being understood through each other in this play. I now turn to the parliament of fools, the performance of madmen that is meant to drive the Duchess to madness herself, but that is also described as a cure. Ferdinand, plotting to torture his sister, intends to make her mad and miserable through the madmen he will send to her: "I am resolved / To remove forth the common hospital / All the mad-folk and place them near her lodging" (4.2.124). Here is the hospital, an image so important in Foucault's history of madness as a space that separates the madman from the rest of the world. Ferdinand has the power to "remove" and "place" the madmen wherever and whenever he wishes, suggesting that they have very little agency to move themselves. Confinement is a word that could also describe the performance within a performance of the madmen's skit. The structure of the madmen's performance does not afford them an opportunity to interact with the principal characters the audience has been watching all along. They are literally confined to one short moment in the play. Madness is a spectacle, as the emphasis is repeatedly put on the madmen's "Gambols to the full o'th'moon" (4.1.126), their singing and dancing, and their "Being full of change and sport" (4.2.41-42). Madmen are funny, entertaining, and not to be taken seriously. The Duchess is the spectator who watches but who does not interact in any way with the madmen. Her first reaction after their performance is to distinguish the sane from the mad, asking as Bosola enters, "Is he mad too?" and then proceeding to question him to find out (4.2.109). This placement of madness outside of and apart from the self and watching it as a spectator suggests madness has become psychologically "other," an image against which the sane mind defines itself. This is distinctly the Age of Reason's imagining of madness.

As Carol Neely points out the metatheatricality of such scenes of madmen performing within plays, it is important to examine how these madmen are received in the play itself. Meant only for ghoulish terror or ridiculing laughter, the madmen are ultimately dismissed by their audience, the Duchess, without thought. As a reflection on theater itself,

Webster presents what could be understood as the Age of Reason's conception of madness to describe one reaction to theater. The viewer can disregard it as anything other than mindless entertainment. However, although the Duchess as audience does not seem to absorb any lesson from the madmen, we the actual audience do. A specific critique appears to arise from their comments, especially toward the end of their performance. Madman 4 says, "I have pared the devil's nails forty times, roasted them in raven's eggs, and cured agues with them" (4.2.103-104). Madman 3 follows him, saying, "Get me three hundred milch bats, to make possets to procure sleep" (4.2.105-106). Then Madman 4 says, "All the college may throw their caps at me, I have made a soap boiler costive. It was my masterpiece" (4.2.107-108). Even as a form of madness, theater offers the viewer insight. Here, early modern medicine is critiqued as foolish. The emphasis is upon the disparity present between the cure and the problem. Milch bats, while perhaps convincing as a cure coming from the lips of a physician or an old healing woman, is a ridiculous cure for sleeplessness when presented by a madman. In this way madness functions, as Neely points out, as a satire, drawing attention to what is ridiculous in society and exaggerating it. As the spectator of the madmen's play, the audience is clued in to a specific critique Webster is making about medicine. Reflecting self-consciously on theater through the madmen's performance, Webster suggests that theater is something to be learned from and appreciated beyond mere entertainment.

This discussion of cures for the body coming from madmen enters into a larger discourse in this text concerning the physical and the mental. Ferdinand says he has "Cruel sore eyes," bemoaning once again the madness constructed through blindness that drove him to have his sister killed, and yet the ridiculous physician suggests "The white of a cocatrice's egg is present remedy" (5.2.62,63). The audience knows what Ferdinand is really suffering from and no physical ointment can effectually deal with it. Ferdinand offers a telling line early on in the play when he says, "I have this night digged up a mandrake? And I am grown mad with't" (2.5.1,3). The mandrake was a plant that was thought to drive people insane if they unearthed it. Here Ferdinand is obviously employing it as a metaphor for his discovery of his sister's marriage, but such a reference creates a contrast between and a transition from physical causation of madness to mental causation. In context a mandrake itself causing insanity is ludicrous, as we know

that it is the Duchess's marriage that has actually upset Ferdinand. This play moves away from physical catalyst of madness and suggests a mental one. This is not a step outside of the humoral system, rather a sophistication of that system which puts the emphasis on emotional and psychological imbalance. Another such moment is when Bosola exclaims, "Still methinks the Duchess / Haunts me! There there, 'tis nothing but my melancholy" (5.3.337-338). His dismissal of the possibility of a haunting by explaining it away as melancholy seems like self-delusion, as he is the one who strangled the Duchess, and it is very likely that she is haunting him. Saying "There there" and explaining it away as an excess of melancholy in his body points to the manipulation of the humors and the body to mask the more likely solution—a disease of the mind brought on by guilt. This marks a transition from understanding madness as a physical ailment, an imbalance that could arise in anyone, to a psychological one, an irrationality and imbalance of the mind immensely threatening in the Age of Reason.

In a complicated conceit of faulty sight and the humors, Webster works out the meaning and face of madness. At various moments madness is dead eyes, deceived eyes, diseased eyes, open eyes, overwhelmed eyes, and eyes that watch the stage. It is impossible to place Webster's play on one side or the other of Foucault's great divide. Instead, *The Duchess of Malfi* is a freeze-frame in this significant transition in the collective psyche of society. It dissects madness in the year 1613 to reveal not one understanding of madness but many and suggests a movement from a collective sense of self and subjectivity found in the public mad figure, to a more individualistic and isolated sense of subjectivity emerging with the act of placing madness outside of one's self as something utterly alien. Ultimately this play supports Foucault's narrative of madness, revealing images that coincide with the two conceptions of madness he describes in his history of insanity. *The Duchess of Malfi* is literature that captures in one moment the complexity of thought about madness people in the late early modern period faced—entrenched in earlier discourses but gesturing toward and questioning the future.

REFERENCES

- Ansari, K. H. *John Webster: Image Patterns and Canon*. Delhi, Sterling Publishers: Julaluddin Rumi Publications, 1969. Print.
- "Dazzle, v." Def. 2, 3. *The Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford University Press. Web. 7 Dec. 2010. <http://www.oed.com.proxy.lib.clemson.edu/view/Entry/47588?rskey=gOGcJR&result=2&isAdvanced=false#>.
- Foucault, Michel. *Madness and Civilization: a History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*. New York: Vintage, 1988. Print.
- "Madness, N." Def. 1. *The Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford University Press. Web. 7 Dec. 2010. <http://www.oed.com.proxy.lib.clemson.edu/view/Entry/112066?redirectedFrom=madness#>.
- Neely, Carol Thomas. *Distracted Subjects: Madness and Gender in Shakespeare and Early Modern Culture*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2004. Print.
- Paster, Gail Kern. *Humoring the Body: Emotions and the Shakespearean Stage*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 2004. Print.
- Salkeld, Duncan. *Madness and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare*. Manchester, UK: Manchester UP, 1993. Print.
- Webster, John (Schriftsteller), and Brian Gibbons. *The Duchess of Malfi*. London: Methuen Drama, 2007. Print.
- Whitman, Robert F. *Beyond Melancholy. John Webster and the Tragedy of Darkness*. Salzburg: Inst. F. Engl. Sprache U. Literatur, Univ. Salzburg, 1973. Print.

WORKS CONSULTED

- Burnett, Mark Thornton. *Constructing 'monsters' in Shakespearean Drama and Early Modern Culture*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002. Print.
- Somerville, H., and Wyndham Lewis. *Madness in Shakespearean Tragedy*. London: Richards, 197-. Print.