

# “Mad Shakespeare”: An Analysis of Madness in the English Renaissance and Shakespeare’s Plays

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Preddiplomski sveučilišni studij engleskog jezika i književnosti (dvopredmetni)

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**“Mad Shakespeare”: An Analysis of Madness in the English Renaissance and Shakespeare’s Plays**

Završni rad

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Zadar, 2019.





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## 1 Introduction

During the Renaissance, which followed the Middle Ages, there was a great interest in the idea of madness. At the time of the first Christian philosophers, in the period of the third century, there was a popular belief that every illness, including madness, was a consequence of the Fall, that is, the first sin of the first people, Adam and Eve, which caused them to be banished from the heavenly garden, Eden. In the following centuries, the concept of madness was altered by adding other explanations to it, relying predominately on the Greek culture. Hippocrates, a Greek physician, developed the theory of four humours. Later, Galen, a Greco-Roman physician and philosopher, expanded the humoral theory to describe the four main temperaments – the sanguine, the melancholic, the phlegmatic and the choleric. In the Renaissance, the religious and scientific views began to overlap, which resulted in a mixture of medical and religious interpretations of madness. Another concept relevant for the perception of madness in the Renaissance was the idea of the Great Chain of Being. This chain would link every being with God's realm. As Earth was connected with the universe, anything unnatural happening on earth would disturb the harmony of the universe and result in chaos.

In this paper, I will focus on madness in William Shakespeare's plays *Hamlet*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth*. I will analyse the behaviour of the characters for which they would be regarded as mad, according to the standards of the time. Hamlet, for example, is exhibiting symptoms of melancholy, as well as being melancholic in temperament, which was a product of humoral theory. Ophelia is susceptible to developing hysteria just by having a uterus. This happens under the pressure of patriarchal society and unrequited love. In the case of Lady Macbeth, one way of interpreting her madness is through the system of religious beliefs and Renaissance ideas on witchcraft. Lastly, in *Lear*, insanity was a result of universal chaos



brought about by human mistakes, and Edgar shows that the madmen of the time were compared to beasts, the lowest form of human life, according to the philosophy behind the Great Chain of Being.

## 2 Madness according to medicine

### 2.1 Humoral theory

The period of the Renaissance and the following eighteenth century is also known as the “Age of Melancholy“. Melancholy, which was a synonym for madness at the time, along with hysteria, madness, insanity and lunacy acquired a new interest after the revival of the Greek works on melancholy (Schmidt 1). The first mentions of madness occurred in the time of Hippocrates and his medical studies in the fifth and fourth century BC. The central idea of Hippocratic medicine was the theory of four humours or four main bodily fluids. The Greeks believed that the entire world was composed of four basic elements – water, fire, air and earth. These elements entered into the human body through food. Following the process of metabolism, food that cannot be digested turns into one of the four humours, that is, liquids – *melan chole* (or also known as black bile), *chole* (yellow bile), *phlegma* (phlegm) and *haima* (blood). Each of these four liquids was connected to one of the organs – spleen, liver, brain and heart. Person’s physical and mental health depended on the balance of these humours.

Excess of a certain humour, that is, an imbalance of the fluids resulted in illness. Specifically, an excess of yellow bile caused pneumonia or diarrhoea, a surplus of phlegm resulted with vertigos, epilepsy and diabetes. When it came to an abundance of blood, a person would throw up blood, and finally, tetanus, headaches and melancholy was a consequence of too much black bile (Pietikäinen 19-20). Therefore, excess of one of the humours showed which organ was ill. To restore the balance, one of the humours would have to be let out. This is why blood-letting or vomiting, along with some herbs which would induce sweating or diarrhoea, were often prescribed as a medicine (Benson 151) (Pietikäinen 20). The predominance of one of the humours was not only responsible for the occurrence of an illness but also one's temperament. This was due to Galen, a Greek physician living in Rome in the second century. By translating and reinterpreting the texts from Hippocrates, Galen expanded Hippocratic medicine. His teachings on the humoral and temperamental theory dominated European medicine for fifteen centuries. He charted the theory of four temperaments which corresponded to the humoral theory. To this, Galen added the four qualities (hot, cold, dry and wet), for which he believed belong to the fluids. As a rule, the four temperaments – sanguine, choleric, melancholic and phlegmatic correspond to blood, yellow bile, black bile and phlegm. A sanguine person, who shared hot and wet qualities, was described as dynamic, friendly, tireless but short-tempered, and have a rose-like skin, while choleric character (hot and dry) would be bitter, sarcastic and had a greenish skin. A phlegmatic temperament (cold and wet) made someone forgetful, discouraged and they had white hair. Finally, a melancholic (cold and dry) was someone who was cowardly, sickly, lazy or hesitant. Concerning their physique, melancholics had dark skin, eyes and hair (Jouanna 342; Pietikäinen 21). The temperaments were also showing what illness might befall a person. Specifically, when it came to madness or its manifestations, there were two causes – a

choleric was predisposed for mania, and a melancholic was inclined to suffer from melancholia or depression (Pietikäinen 21). Mania manifested itself through irrational thoughts, anger and delirium, while melancholy was more passive, showing symptoms such as sadness, depression, fear and hopelessness. But sometimes melancholy was more than just a lethargic state, it was hardly different from mania – it included retraction into oneself, or a disconnection from the real world, often interchanging with the periods of severe paranoia, fits and rage (Pietikäinen 24). In some cases, mania and melancholia were synonyms for the same illness during the Renaissance.

## 2.2 Hysteria

Some scholars, like Edward Jorden (an English physician from the sixteenth century), considered the melancholy to be a male disease, originating in the spleen. Women, on the other hand, were bearers of hysteria, an illness that developed from the corrupted uterus, thus making it a specifically female disease (“Documents in Madness” 320). This was a result of an ancient Greek thought that lady's sickness is a result of her wandering uterus to other parts of the body (*hystera* is a Greek term for the uterus) (O'Brien 7-8). MacDonald reports that the female troubles were interpreted from a psychological point of view, and then „blamed on the uterus' becoming detached from the womb and wandering upwards toward the passionate heart“ (39). The cause of the disease was assigned to the accumulation of the blood in the uterus, irregular menstruation and sexual frustration.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the uterus, with its accumulated humour (blood), would travel toward the heart and cause distress in women's body, as the heart was considered to be the centre of emotional behaviour. This resulted in a

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<sup>1</sup> A scholar named Robert Burton, thus, believed that women who were more inclined to hysteria were virgins, gentlewomen, ladies who were unemployed and stayed at home and refrained from social gatherings (Distracted Subjects 320).

range of symptoms, such as headache, paralysis, delirium, convulsions, choking, numbness, epilepsy, and they were explained by a detached and uncontrollable uterus „and its capacity to corrupt all the parts of the body“ („Documents in Madness” 320). Women were treated differently than men because the origin of their illness was different. To cure the women of hysteria, they were often prescribed marriage, in order to have regular sexual intercourse to keep the womb active, therefore preventing the accumulation of the blood which caused the trouble (“Documents in Madness” 320).

### 2.3 The Great Chain of Being

Closely related to the humoral theory, which was dominating medicine throughout the period of Renaissance, is also the philosophy behind the concept of the Great Chain of Being. The humoral theory was connected to cosmological theory (Thienen 9). Since it was believed that the universe was a macrocosm of which the humans were a microcosm, everything that builds a bigger picture was also contained in a smaller one. As it was already mentioned, the four basic elements of which the world is made is reflected in the human body through the four humours (Benson 132). Microcosm is, hence, a reflection of macrocosm – human anatomy mirrors the order of the universe. The way the universe operates was explained through the concept of the Great Chain of Being.

The Chain of Being stretched from God's throne down to the smallest of creatures or things. Every little or big, living or unliving creation was a part of this chain. All the pieces of the chain grew gradually, besides the first and the last, that is, the ending links (Tillyard 55-57). The lowest link was reserved for the most basic class – the unliving, inanimate objects such as metal, stones, four elements, etc. Although they are all the same in nature, there are still some differences. For example, water is more valuable than earth and gold than metal. Higher from them was the vegetative class. The next class included creatures with sense,

graded into three subclasses. The first is composed of those that have a sense of touch, but cannot move, hear, nor remember things (like shells). The second one is made of creatures that have a sense of touch, can move and remember, but are unable to hear (like ants). And the last subcategory consists of the animals which possess all of these abilities (dogs, bulls, etc.). The next higher class belongs to human beings, which are different from the previous one by being creatures of intellect, possessing a reason. Human beings have all the capabilities of this world and that is the reason they are referred to as a microcosm (Tillyard 57). They are the most important of all creation. However, it has to be mentioned that the lowest subclass in the category of human beings belonged to madmen and beasts as the lowest forms of human life. Ultimately, as beasts and madmen were often compared, there was little to no difference between their categories (Rocha 30). The mad scream, behave, bite, fight, and are usually suicidal, just like the beasts<sup>2</sup>. The mad are the beast's partners (Thiher 74). Interestingly, the Fool was above the madmen in the Chain of Being, but they shared a special knowledge through their innate characteristics (Rocha 30).

As a counterbalance to the completely material unliving world, there had to be a purely non-material, living world – angles. This is where macrocosm began. It consisted of angelic and divine beings. They are the next higher order who have reason but are not bound to lower creatures. Angels serve as messengers between the angels and humans and perform God's work (Tillyard 57.75). Ultimately, they represent the last link before God, the creator of all the universe.

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<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault in *Madness and Civilization* says that the Renaissance was a period where the beast reflected the nature of fallen, sinful, mad men. Equating beasts with men, lowering them into the animalistic realm, shows how madness was seen as a beast that lies in and corrupts the hearts of men, making them more animalistic than human in nature (20).

Even though every being had its place set in the Great Chain, there was still a possibility of progress towards the higher levels. That was a reflection of man's striving towards God (Tillyard 58). Moreover, the Chain represents harmony and unity. If something were to happen to disrupt this, to break the link of the Chain, chaos would erupt (Rocha 31).

### 3 Madness according to Christianity

Greek philosophers thought that both body and soul can suffer from illness. Doctors were responsible for the problems of the body, and for the soul, there was philosophy. This Greek notion was later modified by the early Christian writers who accepted the idea that the soul, too, can be diseased, but the only true aid came from God (Schmidt 19.22). As a consequence of the first sin, all humans were born into sin, which resulted in their later madness. A change came with Thomas Aquinas, a Christian theologian in the fourteenth century, who wrote that the Fall was not a direct cause of madness because humans possess a rational soul. Instead, he argued that madness was a result of bodily dysfunctions which disabled them to use their reason appropriately (Eghigian 65). Here, he got close to the Greek humoral theory, where the imbalance of one of the four humours resulted in illness. Later in the medieval period, madness, as one of the diseases of a soul, was interpreted as being a result of either divine will or demonic possession (Thiher 40). Madness was disguised in a wide spectrum of ails, from epilepsy, demonic possession, mental instability, to mania and depression (Pietikäinen 29).

The human soul, which is not infallible, could be corrupted through the bodily passions or demonic intervention. Be it one or the other, madness was considered to be a test for the affected person if that person was just. The test was here to prove the person's perseverance in their sufferings and faith in God. If the person was a non-believer, wicked or conceited, that madness was a sort of punishment bestowed on by God. One way or another,

the mad were consoled by being told that their illness had a place in God's divine plan. So, the mad accepted the fact that their state was under the influence and will of God, and regarded insanity as a test or punishment (Thiher 46-48). Readings from the Gospel, prayer and repentance were offered to alleviate the patient from sadness and despair. Spiritual physicians consoled the sick, assuring them that their disease is part of their purification from sin. The sick were to repent, and accept their dependence on God through hope and faith (Schmidt 62-63).

When it came to madness as a result of demonic possession, the Christian Church explained symptoms such as contortions, visions, speaking in a deep voice (like the devil would), and fear of sacred objects as signs of possession (Midelfort 9). The dominant idea was that the madness of this sort was a result of external powers (that is, demons) which an individual could not control (Dhue 4). Even though the possessed person displayed an array of physical symptoms, it was generally accepted that the mind was more susceptible to the disabilities, as the devil would cause more harm to the mind than to the soul (MacDonald 200). To heal the affected mind, the Church proposed a ritual consisting of daily prayers and exorcism to banish the demon from the body (Scull 77).

The period between 1570 and 1630 is the time when witch trials and prosecutions were at their highest. During this time, roughly four out of five accused of witchcraft were women. They were usually poor, old, widows or unmarried, and wandering through the village or town. Their social and economic status made them more susceptible to be accused of witchcraft. They were easy targets and deemed as allies of the devil, his human accomplices (Hoak 1271.1273). Reginald Scot in his *Discoverie of Witchcraft* writes that these women were not, in fact, witches, but melancholics who suffered from illusions. He claimed that melancholic men imagined that they were ghosts, kings or someone/something



else and that the same was happening to women who claim to be witches – they are delusional<sup>3</sup>. He then continues to describe the image of an alleged witch – she is old, wrinkled, pale, lame, sullen, superstitious, deformed, insomniac (this persisted to be the image of witches as we know today), but stating that these are also the symptoms of male melancholia. Here, Scot connects melancholia with women, claiming that women too can suffer from madness, with the only difference being that the source of their disease is the uterus (qtd. in Thienen 16). Nevertheless, people still largely believed in the existence of witches. The supernatural symptoms, such as visions, ghost appearances, maddened mind and confessions of witchcraft were all attributed to either supernatural causes, excess of black bile, or both (“Documents in Madness” 321). The black bile is said to have been increased due to some other primary condition and while travelling toward the brain, it would cause visions, hallucinations and sights of ghosts (Campbell 84).

The doctors’ task was to determine whether a witch was an actual witch or a delusional patient. If the cause of madness happened to be natural (that is, the humoral imbalance on which the patient had no influence), the “witch” was released, that is, the patient was treated accordingly. If the examination would prove otherwise (that the cause of this mad mind was a pact with the devil, a possession of sort), witches would then be condemned and further prosecuted (“Documents in Madness” 321). Further investigations would include physical torture and suggestive questions, which would elicit confessions of heresy and devil-worshipping (Hoak 1273). Once that was accomplished, they would usually be either stoned to death, drowned, hanged or burned alive (Scull 86).

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<sup>3</sup> Up to that point, melancholy was a disease which affected mostly men, and its source was an ill spleen. Madness in women was described by the wandering uterus resulting in hysteria.

Returning to the problem of diagnosing madness, this was more complicated, as it was already mentioned that the symptoms of witchcraft overlapped with the symptoms of melancholy (“Documents in Madness” 321). Therefore, the physicians often combined both scientific and religious methods in their treatment (Thienen 22). To demonstrate, there is a case of doctor Richard Napier, the doctor in a hospital in Buckinghamshire in the seventeenth century, who treated patients „for disorders of mind“ (*Distracted Subjects* 74). They reported symptoms such as dizziness, hallucinations, vocal or motor tics, suicidal thoughts and similar. Doctor Napier would inspect each patient to decide whether the cause is natural or supernatural in origin and prescribed adequate treatment. In cases where the cause was of natural origin, the treatment consisted of blood-letting, vomiting and purging. In other cases, the doctor would give away amulets, ordered prayers, or even perform exorcisms. With patients who were diagnosed as suffering from a more complex case of madness, Napier would use both physical and spiritual methods of treatment (for example, purging and exorcism) (*Distracted Subjects* 74-75).

#### 4 Care for the mad

##### 4.1 Non-hospitalised madmen

Up to the mid-sixteenth century, most mad people were left to the care of their families or closest friends, following the instructions of King James (MacDonald 5). Families that had the obligation to care for their ill could usually rent a cage in which the mad would be placed, as they sometimes would become enraged and dangerous. At times when families could or did not want to pay for this rent, and they thought that this obligation was a burden, they would leave the diseased members to be on their own. This would ultimately result in them either wandering through the streets of the town, being confined in jails or dungeons, or admitted to hospitals (Midelfort 7-8). Those who were excluded from their families and left

on their own were living on the borders of the town accompanied by other ill people, barely having enough to eat. It was even worse during the winter months when they would lack proper food and shelter (Scull 70).

Another way of dealing with the mad that is worth mentioning is embarkation (Rocha 24). In the works of literature, there are many references to the so-called Ships of Fools, the notion which originated from Plato's *Republic*. This ship would embark on its journey with, usually, dubious crew. Their little expedition would result in them finding either fortune or truth. Among these fictitious ships, there were, nevertheless, very real ones. These real Ships of Fools were responsible to rid the city of madmen. They would carry their „insane cargo“, as Foucault calls it, from one town to another. Eventually, the mad would be left behind to wander outside the city walls, in the countryside, if merchants or pilgrims would not take them as their responsibility (*Madness and Civilization* 6-7).<sup>4</sup>

Be it that the families cared for the mad or they were “cleaned” out of the town on a ship, one thing was certain. Those deemed as mad were alone, isolated from society and ridiculed, they were social outcasts (Rocha 24). Following the rise in the number of those

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<sup>4</sup> Apart from the fact that the ships were useful as clearing the cities from the insane, there is an important connotation that water, specifically its role, evokes. Not only that it meant carrying something away, but it was a symbol of purifying („Madness and Civilization“ 10). There is a strong connection between water and madness, as people in the Renaissance believed. Similarly, the sea was seen as mysterious and uneasy, as was a mind of a madman. The sea, powerful as it is, was able to cleanse the insane of their illness. Shakespeare was familiar with the idea of Ships of Fools and the interpretation of water. He uses the metaphor of water in some of his plays. For instance, in *Hamlet* when there is talk about Ophelia's drowning. A reader gets the impression that the madness in her head, as disturbed as the sea, had a desire to go to the water, thus killing the girl. Hamlet's mother, Gertrude, recounts that Ophelia was „...incapable of her own distress,/ Or like a creature native and indu'd/ Unto that element...“ (*Hamlet* 4.7.179-181) (Rocha 24-25). Also, when Gertrude is asked how Hamlet is doing, she responds to the king and her husband that he is as mad as the sea and the wind (4.1.7).

diagnosed with madness, which was a result of population growth and economic circumstances, both private and public institutions were funded and built. From that point onwards, the burden of caring for the mad was shifted from the families to the asylums (MacDonald 3).

#### 4.2 Bedlam and other hospitals

When talking about madness in the context of British history, Michel Foucault in his *History of Madness* talks about the importance of a London hospital called Bethlem Royal Hospital, more famously known as Bedlam. This hospital started with its work in the thirteenth century and according to the records, at the beginning of the fifteenth century it was a home of six madmen. They were bound in chains and locked. Over the years the number kept growing and the hospital kept expanding. In the late 1600s, this hospital was rearranged and used exclusively as an institution for the mad, and the number of patients rose to twenty (*History of Madness* 110). Bedlam and similar hospitals, did not function as hospitals in the beginning. They are described as more of a nursing home for the disabled, where the practice of prayer, eating and working was applied. Some records show that these hospitals were run without a proper physician. They were introduced a couple of centuries after the hospitals started their work. Nevertheless, these types of institutions, even though they lacked professional care, were surely popular, as the number of patients kept rising, year to year (Midelfort 8). There is some insight into the treatment of the hospitalised people. A physician T. Munro notes that the patients were bled and submitted to vomiting, followed by other purging processes. In some hospitals, the mad were treated almost as equal to other patients, but the truth is that the majority of hospital staff treated them as prisoners and confined them (*History of Madness* 111). MacDonald reports that the patients were abused, harmed or shut away, just so they would not have to be dealt with (43). What is more, the hospital offered

one-penny tours where the mad and diseased would be exhibited and ridiculed by the public. It is estimated that more than 90,000 people annually paid to see the ill, and this practice continued up to the beginning of the nineteenth century (O'Reilly-Fleming 181). Generally speaking, the asylums were not a place of care and comfort, but on the contrary, a place where the ill would be chained to the walls, neglected and inadequately treated. The admittance and isolation of the mad benefitted the families who had trouble dealing with them, and to the public who were secure of stumbling upon the madmen on the streets (Scull 157-158).

## 5 Madness in Shakespeare's plays

### 5.1 Hamlet and melancholy

The tragic play *Hamlet* introduces us to the young prince of Denmark, Hamlet, who returns home after the death of his father. When he arrives at Elsinore, he notices that the throne has already been succeeded by his uncle Claudius, who also married Hamlet's mother Gertrude. The fact that his father is dead and that his mother is seemingly moving on is the beginning of Hamlet's melancholy. As already explained, melancholy was seen as a disease caused by the excess of black bile, one of the four bodily fluids. It also has to be mentioned that the surplus of this humour was responsible for one's temperament. Therefore, black bile would cause not only melancholy as an illness, but also a melancholic character. From the beginning of the play, Hamlet is described as being introspective, lethargic, devoted to reading - traits of a melancholic temperament. Further events (regarding the death of his father, mother's marriage, ghost apparition) make him develop melancholy, symptoms of which he displays throughout the play.

One sign of his melancholy was his excessive mourning and grief. Gertrude and Claudius report that he was wearing black clothes, and they begged him not to appear so sad:

“Cast thy knighted color off/... Do not forever with thy veiled lids/ Seek for thy noble father in the dust” (1.2.68-71). His mother responds that his father is dead and cannot be brought back to life, and that the time of mourning has passed. To this Hamlet responds that his “inky cloak”, “windy suspiration of forced breath” and “river in the eye” (1.2.77-80) are only a shadow of his true feelings. His sadness goes beyond his outer appearance. He grieves and mourns and admits he would rather be dead, if it were not forbidden by divine law:

“O! that this too too solid flesh would melt,

Thaw and resolve itself into a dew;

Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd

His canon ‘gainst self-slaughter!” (1.2.129-132).

He believes that only death can relieve him of the misery he is feeling. His suicidal thoughts are a byproduct of his grief, and will be present throughout the play. As mentioned previously, it was normal for melancholic patients to express hopelessness, as they believed that circumstances cannot improve due to their illness. Hamlet, too, does not feel that his mood might change and that the grief will decrease with time.

As a result, Hamlet will continue to contemplate suicide in his soliloquies. As it was mentioned, melancholy was characterised by a withdrawal into oneself. This can be noticed in Hamlet’s behaviour when he speaks to himself about the meaning of life, and whether or not he should kill himself. In one of his soliloquies, he ponders “To be or not to be” (3.1.56), that is, to stay alive or to attempt suicide. He continues to say that it would be easier “To die; to sleep ... [to] end/ The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks...” (3.1.60-2). Again, his melancholy is so strong that the only relief he sees is death. In the end, his morale does not

permit him to sin against the divine law. Both suicidal thought and introspection are typical symptoms of melancholy. The black bile would cause dark thoughts and impede the clear judgement in a person.

Moreover, his grief makes him question and doubt everything. When Hamlet is visited by his father's ghost, he cannot discern whether the ghost was real, or a product of his madness and melancholy. He even suspects that the ghost may be the devil forcing him to murder his uncle. Hamlet is aware that the excess of black bile, which is said to travel upward towards the brain and cause changes in the mind (makes him insecure and question everything, among other things) is weakening his senses, thus he cannot discern what is real and what is not. What is more, he is aware that his melancholic state leaves him susceptible to evil forces: "Out of my weakness and my melancholy -/ As he is very potent with such spirits -/ Abuses me to damn me." (2.2.638-640). Now when his mind is fallible and his thinking unclear due to the accumulation of the black bile, Hamlet notices that it would be easier for the devil to trick him, when in this state.

Mostly, Hamlet remains depressed, but there are moments where he exhibits bitterness and anger. Along with melancholia, mania was another disorder which would affect the mind, as a consequence of humoral imbalance, as described above. While melancholy was thought to be more passive, mania was revealed through anger, delirium and irrational thoughts. Sometimes, the two would overlap. That is why Hamlet's melancholy was interrupted by acrimony and anger. One example of this is when he encounters Polonius, whom he disrespects for being the king's friend. Hamlet says to Polonius that he is a "fishmonger" for using his daughter Ophelia to seduce Hamlet. And when he accidentally kills him, Hamlet shows no regret: "Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell!" (3.4.31). This quote also shows how significant his "transformation" was, as Claudius puts it (2.2.5), which means that

he does not exhibit normal behaviour. Even his mother barely recognizes him when she concludes that he is now her “too much changed son” (2.2.36). Even though he is considered a melancholic by temperament, it is evident that black bile emphasised this temperament, along with causing a significant change in his attitude.

Hamlet was melancholic in temperament, which made him more receptive towards developing melancholia. Combination of his character, mother’s “o’erhastly marriage” (2.2.57) to his uncle, his uncle killing his father and the burden of revenge had an impact on Hamlet’s mind. During the play, he also feigns madness, but that madness only serves as a tool for his revenge. His strange behaviour, “transformation”, is not only as much a result of his feigned madness but more of the circumstances which made him exhibit a spectre of melancholic symptoms.

## 5.2 Hysterical Ophelia

The character of Ophelia, Polonius’ daughter, did not receive as much attention as other major characters of the play until recently. More recent interpretations discuss her hysteria as a consequence of „either her liberation from silence, obedience, and constraint or her absolute victimization by patriarchal oppression“, as Neely describes („Documents in Madness“ 322).<sup>5</sup> As it was explained, madness in women was diagnosed as hysteria due to the accumulation of the blood in the uterus, which would cause it to move toward the heart and corrupt emotions. The accumulated blood was explained as a result of sexual inactivity or irregular menstruation. Therefore, Ophelia’s hysteria can be interpreted in two different ways.

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<sup>5</sup> This is a result of a belief that the oppression of women during the Renaissance might have been the cause of them going mad. It was a patriarchal society and women were destined to be housewives, obey and be silent. Any act of rebelling against the social norms or disobeying the patriarchal laws was a sign of a madwoman (O’Brien 10). Moreover, if they would not rebel and remain controlled, the male pressure would also cause their distress and subsequent madness.



One reason behind her hysteria can be explained by her unfulfilled sexual desires. In the beginning, Hamlet shows signs of affection towards her, which she is not allowed to return. Her brother Laertes warns her to keep herself chaste from Hamlet's seductive behaviour, despite what she might want or feel. Later in the play, when she is given the chance to express her true feelings to Hamlet, it is now he who rejects her because he is aware that she is insincere: "God hath given you one face/ And you make yourself another" (3.1.151-152), that she has been sent to spy on him. She tries to remind him of how he once felt about her, and shows him that she is ready to return his love: "My lord, I have remembrances of yours,/ That I have longed long to re-deliver;/ I pray you, now receive them." (3.1.93-95). But to all that, Hamlet stays cold and unaffected and denies ever having feelings for her: "I loved you not" (3.1.122) (Chen 6-7). Ophelia's feelings and desire remain suppressed. She cannot release the sexual desire she has long been feeling and keeping inside. According to Greek medicine, if a woman would have irregular menstruation or avoid sexual intercourse, the blood would accumulate in the uterus and caused it to wander and travel upwards, as indicated previously. This wandering uterus would have an impact on female emotions and cause hysteria. A remedy for that would be marriage and frequent intercourse, something that Ophelia cannot have. Hamlet depriving her of his love is one of the reasons behind her hysteria.

Another factor which leads towards Ophelia's hysteria is the male dominance over her. During the Renaissance, women were denied their own voice. In every aspect, they had to be subdued to a dominant male figure. They were destined to be obedient housewives. The pressure they suffered was often a cause of their mental distress, which would lead to madness, that is, hysteria in female patients. Ophelia is one such character. Hamlet and Polonius have the most significant impact on her behaviour. They regard her as an object, as a

means to achieve their goals. Her father Polonius tries to gain the king's respect (Leverenz 302). When her father asks her to stop seeing Hamlet, she answers "I shall obey my Lord" (1.3.145). She respects her father because he was the only role model in her life. He taught her to behave and what to think. But, it is evident that she also fears her father. She would rather express and receive Hamlet's love, but cannot because Polonius' instructions are different. She remains a subservient daughter out of respect and fear.

Unrequited love, chastity, deprived sexuality and oppression are things which contribute to her hysteria. Once Hamlet kills her father, her loss of reason becomes evident. She exhibits symptoms such as "winks, and nods, and gestures" (4.5.11), that is, muscle spasms, which Neely interprets as twitches of the womb which are manifested through the bodily contractions (*Distracted Subjects* 52). Moreover, she "beats her heart" (4.5.5), sings songs, and "speaks things in doubt,/ That carry but half sense: her speech is nothing" (4.5.6-7). Her speech becomes nonsensical and repetitive, replaced mostly by songs. Through her songs, she mourns the loss of her father: "His beard as white as snow/ All flaxen was his poll" (4.5.194-195). They allow her to mourn and part with Polonius. Moreover, she also sings

"Young men will do't if they come to't,

By Cock they are to blame ...

before you tumbled me,

You promis'd me to wed." (4.5.61-64),

suggesting that she possibly lost her virginity (*Distracted Subjects* 52), or that it was stolen by Hamlet. Singing, as a consequence of hysteria, replaces normal speech and allows Ophelia to express the loss of her father, Hamlet's love and possibly lost innocence.

There are two different readings into Ophelia's hysteria. One is that it is a consequence of the male oppression she had to suffer and denied to act according to her wishes. The other one is her possibly stolen virginity, or the fact that she remained a virgin. On the one hand, Hamlet could have seduced and tricked Ophelia only to satisfy his desire, leaving Ophelia humiliated. On the other hand, Ophelia could have remained a virgin, which would likewise lead towards her becoming a hysteric. Her state worsens and she ends up drowning herself in a river, all the while singing "snatches of old tunes" (4.7.178), and doing nothing to save herself. Ophelia's death is shown to be passive, quite like Ophelia was for most of her life.

### 5.3 Witchcraft and madness in Macbeth

As it was previously described, one cause of madness in the Middle Ages and Renaissance was thought to be a possession of the Devil. This resulted in many women being accused of witchcraft and prosecuted accordingly. Shakespeare's tragic play *Macbeth* deals with the similarities and relationships between human madness and witchcraft. It has to be noted that the character of Macbeth also shows signs of madness. In this paper, I will not focus on the origin and symptoms of his madness, but rather on the madness of Lady Macbeth and her connection with the supernatural world.

The play *Macbeth* opens with a scene introducing the audience to the Weird Sisters. There are three of them and it is not evident whether they are human or witches. Right from the beginning they say that "Fair is foul, and foul is fair" (1.1.9), which means that nothing is certain, including their identity. Nevertheless, there are some clues which indicate what they might be. Firstly, they call out to their families, a cat and a toad, animals which were then, as are today, associated with the witches.

Next clue which deems them as non-human is that they can move through the air, suddenly disappear, as the end of the first scene reports that they “hover through the fog and filthy air” (1.1.12). This ability is given to them as the associates of the devil. In the Renaissance and today also, it was thought that the possessed women could fly in the air, appear and disappear as they want since they possess magical powers. This clue is an indication that what is happening is unnatural.

Later in the play, it becomes clear that they are real witches when they are depicted with a cauldron, mixing potions and talking to Hecate, the goddess of witchcraft (Thienen 55). Cauldron and potions were devices strongly associated with witchcraft, and this idea persists even today. The power to make potions and perform spells were given to them by their evil allies. At the beginning of the play, the witches give an important prophecy which will determine the course of the play. The visions, which enabled them to see the future, are also a “gift” of the evil forces. In this case, the Weird Sisters reveal to Macbeth that he will become the king. This is important for Lady Macbeth’s behaviour, her siding with the forces of evil and consequent descent into madness. The portrayal of Weird Sisters is chilling - their looks, behaviour and malice is something which is mimicked in Lady Macbeth, hence the dubiousness behind her identity (Thienen 44-45).

Lady Macbeth appears towards the end of the first act. She seeks the help of spirits: “Come, you spirits/ That tend on mortal thoughts...” (1.5.41-42). The witches were the allies of evil forces and could perform unnatural acts with their help. By doing the same, Lady Macbeth’s invocation is sufficient for her to be seen as a devil’s accomplice (Levin 39). The reason why she needed help from the spirits is her fear that her femininity might make her fragile for her ascent to power. She is excited about the news that her husband Macbeth might become a king but is afraid that he will not be brave enough to kill the current king Duncan.

Therefore, she calls upon the spirits to “unsex” (1.5.42) her. It was already stated that only one-fifth of reported cases of witchcraft were men. Even though women were often seen as witches, their behaviour resembled more to what is typically regarded as masculine. This is related to the fact that females who were accused of witchcraft were not actual witches, but as some thought, displayed the same symptoms as melancholics, which was a male disease, a consequence of an excess of the black bile.

The witches would mock, insult, scream, they were merciless, greedy, showed no compassion. Their pact with the devil allowed them to change a person physique and behaviour. Evil causes more evil. This is reflected in Lady Macbeth’s behaviour. She is portrayed to be more masculine than her husband. She needs to be sure that her husband, who she says is weak, will listen to her and let her execute the plan of taking over the throne (Rocha 105). Oftentimes, she mocks him for his lack of courage, saying that he is “too full o’ the milk of human kindness” (1.5.18) and “infirm of purpose” (2.2.53), that is, he is too weak to execute the plan. Ruthlessness is another “symptom” of her wickedness. She sees human kindness and compassion as a sign of weakness. To the audience, she is equally terrifying as the Weird Sisters and witches. Her viciousness is further shown when Macbeth is trying to avoid killing the king and Lady Macbeth responds that he was more of a man when he was willing to kill than he is now: “When you durst do it then you were a man” (1.7.49). By commenting on his lack of masculinity, Macbeth is humiliated and proceeds to blindly listening to his wife, as if he were put under a spell.

Things change toward the end of the play. Once bold and courageous, Lady Macbeth’s mental state begins to deteriorate after she sees the ghost of Banquo, who is killed by Macbeth's orders and after the murder of the king. The next time she appears on the stage, in the last act, she is changed. Her madness is in opposition to her possession from the beginning

of the play. Once fierce and brutal, she is now fragile and delirious. Guilt has a severe influence on her mind and it results in her sleepwalking and hallucinating. As a reminder, sleepwalking and hallucinations were considered to be the symptoms of both demonic possession and melancholy. Lady Macbeth cannot rid herself from the guilt she is feeling. She is haunted by the image of blood on her hands, and despite her efforts to wash the blood, begging “Out damned spot!” (5.1.38), the image of blood persists. This is the opposite from her previous behaviour when she was controlling Macbeth after he killed the king telling him that “a little water clears us of this deed” (2.2.68). Now, this is changed and the guilt has replaced the control she once had. She wants to be cleared of the stains and darkness of evil forces which once surrounded her.

There are two different approaches to Lady Macbeth’s madness, which can be explained through the treatment she received. One is that her madness is a result of accumulated blood in the uterus. Although melancholy as an illness (or hysteria in women) was believed to be cured by blood-letting or other purging treatments, Lady Macbeth finds herself in an incurable state where physicians cannot help her. Madness in her case is a „disease beyond my practice (5.1.64)“ as Lady Macbeth's doctor explained, leaving her to the divine mercy (*Madness and Civilization* 30). She could not be treated medically, because „More needs she the divine than the physician“ (5.1.81). This is where her illness could be explained by demonic possession, which would be cured by prayers and exorcism. When the mad could not be helped medically, the doctor would order prayers and attentive care for the patient, out of fear that they might harm themselves or someone else. This is also a reflection of care for the mad in the Renaissance. Invoking God’s help should alleviate the symptoms when there was no earthly cure, and the Lady’s women were there to care for her when she could not be admitted to the hospital.

As mentioned previously, alleged witches manifested the same symptoms as male melancholics – they had hallucinations and imagined that they were something they were not in real life. A similar symptom could be noticed in Lady Macbeth's life. The violent ambition, her bold decisions and lack of her femininity she once wished for turned her into the complete opposite of what she desired. Her desire to be "fill[ed] ... of direst cruelty" (1.5.45) to become the queen ultimately cost Lady Macbeth her own life. Despite trying to summon the evil forces for help, her deeds did not amount in her obtaining the crown, but rather guilt and madness.

#### 5.4 Madness and chaos, Tom o'Bedlam and bestiality in King Lear

The tragedy of *King Lear* portrays madness in relation to the universe according to the concept of the Great Chain of Being, which was a part of Renaissance philosophy. The play features both real and feigned madness. In this paper, I will not discuss in detail Edgar's pretend madness, but rather Lear's real one, and explain its connection with nature.

The tragedy begins with Lear who decides to divide his kingdom of Britain among his three daughters - Goneril, Regan and Cordelia. Regan and Goneril trick Lear into giving them his kingdom by lying about how much they love him, something Lear realizes toward the end of the play: "They flatter'd me like a dog" (4.6.99). His youngest, Cordelia, refuses to flatter and lie. This is why Lear thinks she does not love him, becomes angry because he "lov'd her most" (1.1.125) and renounces her. Shortly after he gives the kingdom to Regan and Goneril, they disown and banish him from his land. Lear's desire to create a new order results in the exact opposite - chaos. Kent, his servant, is the first one to notice that Lear's actions are not a result of a clear mind, and that Lear is going mad (1.1.148) (Storozynsky 163-4). The kingdom is in political chaos, ruled by Lear's evil daughters, instead of by the king. The fact that the daughters have rejected their father, that the father has rejected his daughter, and that

the land is being ruled by the unjust disrupts the harmony of the universe. As explained previously, chaos enters the world when one link in the Chain of Being, which connects every living and unliving thing, from earth to God, breaks. The breaking of the family bond is the beginning of chaos. It seems that Lear predicts that something might go wrong when he says “O! let me not be mad...” (1.5.51), fearing a possible insanity from the turmoil. This later becomes a certainty after Goneril and Regan plot against him and deny him his servants: “I shall go mad” (2.4.281). After saying this, another character warns that outside the storm is starting.

After Lear is exiled from both of his daughters, he becomes furious and runs outside into the raging storm. In this case, the weather is a reflection of how Lear truly feels. As it was mentioned, the macrocosm is reflected in microcosm. This analogy can be applied here. Lear’s mind is a reflection of the chaotic universe, and nature mirrors Lear’s mind. Lear proclaims that there is a “...tempest in [his] mind...” (3.4.12), along with the real storm outside. At first, the storm is furious and it grows stronger just as Lear’s rage. He calls the destructive force of nature to “Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! rage! blow!” (3.2.1), that is to ravage the world in which his daughters live. He experiences the storm personally, as its ruthlessness reminds him of his “pernicious daughters” (3.2.22). He becomes accustomed to the storm and barely notices its power because the storm in his mind is now equal to the storm outside. That is why he does not want to take shelter from it. Again, the universe reflects Lear’s anger and agony. The raging storm is a mirror of Lear’s raging mind.

When Lear sees his Fool amid the storm, he asks “How dost my boy? Art cold?” (3.2.68). By beginning to show compassion for others, instead of being focused on his suffering, Lear begins the process of redemption. As he grew more considerate, the storm in



his head, and ergo, the storm outside, begins to calm. When he meets Edgar in disguise, he begins to pray to gods to show mercy for those who are less fortunate than him.

Gloucester's son, Edgar, after he has been falsely accused of murder by his step-brother Edmund, disguises himself into a beggar, firstly to avoid his father's men, and later to look after Lear. While doing so, he changes his name to Tom Bedlam (Tom o'Bedlam was a popular name for a madman at that time), dresses in raggedy clothes and is deemed as a lunatic beggar. Bedlamites, in the eyes of society, were fraudsters and vagabonds who either escaped or were released from Bethlem Hospital to search for food (Carroll 431). Poor Tom observes how he, and similarly Bedlamites, were treated at the time:

„The country gives me proof and precedent

Of Bedlam beggars, who, with roaring voices,

Strike in their numb'd and mortified bare arms

Pins, wooden pricks, nails, sprigs of rosemary...“ (2.3.13-16).

Edgar has to transform, to mutilate his body, starve it to make people believe he comes from Bedlam. This represents how the mad were treated in the hospitals - the food was scarce, they were often chained to the walls, tortured, neglected, which resulted in a wounded body. It was mentioned that the hospital would offer one-penny tours where the public would laugh at or despise the insane. The same happened to Edgar. A respected nobleman turned into a rejected lunatic: “Who gives anything to poor Tom?” (3.4.49).

When Edgar drastically changes his body, he becomes not only mad but also a monster. As reported previously, the madmen and the beasts were considered to be the lowest form of human life in the Great Chain of Being. This is an reflection of the idea that the flaws

in body and mind make human life insignificant. Mutilations and monstrosity of Tom's naked body and his distorted speech and roaring voice make him more similar to an animal than a human. Even he says that he will „... take the basest and most poorest shape ... [and be] brought near to beast“ (2.3.7-9). Lear, too, notices the resemblance between Tom and beasts when he comments: “thou art the thing itself; ... man is no more but such a poor,/ bare, forked animal...” (3.4.109-111). People would give such madmen money rarely out of compassion, and more out of fear, as well as to avoid being disturbed by them. Their disfigured bodies resembled a thing, a beast (Carroll 434-5). Lear also says that “Man’s life is cheap as beast’s” (2.4.270). No one cares if the beasts are dead or ill. Madmen, similarly to beasts, illustrate something unnatural, that is, a disordered mind and as such, do not have much value.

## 6 Conclusion

By analysing different approaches in diagnosing madness in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, I was able to recognise the differences in the behaviour of characters, which, in those times, would be regarded as madness. Since there was not much differentiation between the mental diseases of the time, the only factors taken into consideration when diagnosing someone as mad was the supposed origin of the illness and the person’s sex. Hamlet displays melancholy and Ophelia is a hysteric. King Lear suffers the consequences of his deeds, which disrupt the macrocosm and throw the whole world into chaos. Lady Macbeth is a fierce woman, who decided to ask for help from the supernatural realm, which contributed to her madness. Shakespeare also provides some insight into the ways in which the society treated the mad, which is especially evident in the case of Poor Tom, that is Edgar, Gloucester’s son. It is safe to say that the treatments the madmen received were far from perfect, but it should come as no surprise, considering the degree of medicinal knowledge and the fact that madness was rarely discussed from the ancient time to the Middle Ages.

While studying different ways of how madmen were treated, and taking onto consideration that they were seen as the lowest form of human life, equalled to beasts, I could not help but wonder whether our comprehension of madness changed. Considering the fact that madness is still a taboo topic today, and that contemporary society is still very much focused on people and things conforming to the idea of “normalcy”, what happens to those deemed “imperfect”? Some might say that we have come a long way from the Middle Ages. While that may be true scientifically, when it comes to the treatment of those who suffer from disabilities, who stand out by being different, it seems that there is little place in the society for them. They are still closed in hospitals, hidden from the general public, and rarely discussed openly. Although the institutional treatment of madness has improved, has the society really change? And aren't those who do not “fit in” still marginalised, as they were in the Middle Ages?

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### Summary and key words

Madness acquired different interests and interpretations through time. During the Middle Ages and Renaissance, madness was believed to be caused by humoral imbalance, detached uterus or patriarchal oppression, a disturbed harmony of the universe, or demonic possession. Madmen were either “jailed” in hospitals, left to the care of their families, or wandered around the town. Examples of these are found in Shakespeare’s tragedies and presented in this paper as part of the analysis of the characters and madness-induced behaviour which they exhibit.

Keywords: Shakespeare, madness, the great chain of being, the theory of four humours, Renaissance, witchcraft

Sažetak i ključne riječi: „Ludi Shakespeare”: Analiza ludila u engleskoj renesansi i Shakespeareovim dramama

Zanimanje i interpretacija ludila kroz povjest su se mijenjali. U srednjem vijeku i renesansi smatralo se da su mogući uzroci ludila disbalans tjelesnih tekućina, sindrom odvojene maternice, opresija patrijahalnog društva, poremećena ravnoteža svemira ili opsjednutost. One koje se smatralo ludima, zatvaralo bi se u bolnice, ostavljalo na brigu obitelji ili puštalo da sami lutaju gradom. Primjeri navedenog se mogu naći u Shakespeareovim dramama, te su predstavljeni u ovom radu kao dio analize likova i njihovih ponašanja uzrokovanih ludilom.

Ključne riječi: Shakespeare, ludilo, veliki lanac bića, teorija o četiri tekućine, renesansa, medicina, vještice







