

Ophelia Has a Lot to Answer For (Lecture)

The following speech was given at the Stratford Festival in September, 1997.

It's always a pleasure to be here at the Stratford Festival; also it's good for my health. According to a recent article quoted in the Utne Reader and originating with no lesser an authority than Forbes Magazine, attendance at cultural and sporting events is now considered the most reliable predictor of a longer life, ahead of such other factors as gender, diet and income. The theory is that the adrenaline released by drama and tension and shock and fear tones up your system. Having seen the productions of Oedipus and Richard the Third here this year, I can report that my system is now thoroughly toned, while The Taming of the Shrew surely qualifies as a sporting event. All theatrical companies should add this information to their advertising packages: See More Plays and Eat Dessert Too! Improve Your Health! Live Years Longer! It would work wonders for the fund-raisers as well.

My subject today is another sort of health – the mental kind – and the way it has been depicted; in other words, madness and the artistic reflections of it, and how the portrayals of madness influenced how people thought about it and dealt with it. I'm supposed to be talking about something related to plays, and to Shakespeare if at all possible, and I'll do the best I can for someone who is neither a playwright nor an actor, nor an expert on any of these things. All I'm really qualified to speak about is my own work as a novelist, so I'll get that in as well. My most recent novel, *Alias Grace*, contains a character called Grace Marks, who is based in a real person of the last century who was not only convicted in connection with a double murder, but who was thought, for a couple of years at least, to be mad.

It must be said at the outset that the field of mental illness has always been debatable ground. Who is sane, who isn't, and who is qualified to judge? Standards have fluctuated wildly, and abuses have been numerous. In the last century, in the United States, a wife could be committed to an asylum on the say-so of her husband and two easily-paid-off doctors alone, and there are cases on record of wives who were "put away" for holding theological opinions that differed from those of the husband, or for refusing to have as much sex as he would like. That old standby of melodrama, the rich uncle shoved into the bin so the greedy relatives could get their hands on his estate, had a sound basis in fact. The Victorians cleaned up the straw and the chains of the old Bedlam-like institutions of the eighteenth century, but they didn't always clean up the practices. Patients were drugged, starved, drained of vast quantities of blood, beaten up, swung from ropes, immersed in cold water and whirled around in the air upside-down, all in the belief that it would improve their mental states. Ask yourself whether this is likely to have been true.

Similarly debatable have been the causes of so-called madness. "The lunatic, the lover and the poet," Shakespeare says, "are of imagination all composed," but what caused this excess of imagination? Did it come from the outside in – from God or the gods as a judgment on sin, from the Devil as a temptation, from a knock on the head or a sudden shock, from thwarted love, riotous living, too much meat, an exposure to the influence of the moon, too much alcohol, too much religion, too much studying, a poverty-stricken upbringing, an indulgence in solitary sex, a trauma in childhood? Or did it come from the inside out – from heredity, from bad blood, from being a poet, from a disease – such as syphilis – passed on by a sinful parent, from a physical deficiency – a wandering womb, too much black humour, female orgasm, something wrong with your liver, something wrong with your nerves, something wrong with your brain? All have had their proponents.

For every age there is a popular idea about what madness is, what causes it, and how a mad person should look and behave; and it's usually these popular ideas, rather than those of medical professionals, that turn up in songs and stories and plays and books. Today I'll attempt to trace a line of descent from Shakespeare's plays, through the images of madness in writers of the Romantic period such as Wordsworth and Sir Walter Scott, through the operatic traditions of the nineteenth century, all the way to the real-life Susanna Moodie's view of the real-life Grace Marks in the Toronto Lunatic Asylum in 1851 – all of which had a bearing on Grace's later appearance as a character in my own novel, and the problems I faced while writing the Toronto Lunatic Asylum interlude in her story.

For a thousand years, the Bible was almost the only book people read, if they could read at all. The stories that were officially told and portrayed were Biblical and religious stories. That other fount of Western civilization as we know it today – the Greek classics – went largely unknown until the Renaissance. For our purposes, there's a noteworthy difference between these two literatures: in the Bible people are hardly ever said to be mad as such, whereas in Greek drama they go off their rockers with alarming frequency. It was the rediscovery of the classics that stimulated the long procession of literary madpeople of the past four hundred years.

In the Bible, the best-known mad person is Nebuchadnezzar, who in the Book of Daniel is punished by God with madness for being too arrogant. He is driven forth to eat grass in the fields, but later becomes sane again, and much later becomes a striking illustration of himself by William Blake, with staring eyes and claw-like nails and hair like eagles' feathers. In First Samuel, David feigns madness to escape death at the hands of the King of Gath; in Luke 6 the scribes and Pharisees are spoken of as being filled with madness, the symptom of which is that they want to destroy Jesus; and in John 10 Jesus himself is spoken of by some as having a devil, and being mad. Those are about the only Biblical madnesses I, and indeed the Cambridge University Press Concordance, can think of. The concept of madness was certainly known to the writers of the Bible, and so was the idea that you could pretend to be mad, but remarkably little is said on the subject.

However, there are all sorts of behaviours in the Bible that might be called mad now, but aren't designated as insanity by the text itself. People see visions – of angels going up and down ladders, of fiery chariots – and, like Moses, who hears a bush talking, and Balaam the prophet who has a conversation with his donkey, they hear voices of those who cannot be said to be present in any usual sense of the word. They also speak in tongues, as the disciples do at Pentecost. Like madness, the visions, the voices and the speaking in tongues are due to external and usually divine agencies.

In a world so permeated with supernatural powers, there are no accidents, and in one so riddled with prophets – who went into a frenzy while prophesying – many more kinds of behaviour were accepted as normal, at least for a prophet or an inspired person, than would be the case now. John the Baptist, dressed in animal skins and wandering around in the wilderness denouncing his social superiors, was not thought of as a de-institutionalized street person who's gone off his medications, but as a saint. And this was the pattern for mediaeval views of aberrant behaviour – if you were acting crazy it was a divine punishment, or else you were possessed, by powers either divine or demonic – perhaps aided, in the latter case, by witches.

During the Renaissance, the Greek tragic plays again became available, and Western writers started to imitate them and to be inspired by them. Madness is frequent in Classical Greek

plays and stories, and is again ascribed to external agencies: it's the gods who drive you crazy, as part of their own often obscure agendas: he whom the gods would destroy they first make mad. Pursuit by the Furies was obligatory for matricides, as we see in the story of mother-murdering Orestes. Hercules was driven mad by the goddess Hera for overweening arrogance, and killed his wife and children while under the influence. Perhaps the most dramatic example of divinely-inflicted madness is in the play *The Bacchae*, presented here at Stratford a few seasons ago, in which Pentheus, king of Thebes, is destroyed for opposing the worship of the god Dionysus. The god drives Pentheus's mother mad, and under the impression that Pentheus is an animal, she tears her own son to pieces, and then does a mad scene featuring the severed head.

What Elizabethan playwrights learned from the Greek classics was not theories of insanity, but dramatic practice – that is, madness is a dandy theatrical element. It focuses the audience's attention and increases suspense, since you never know what a mad person may get up to next; and Shakespeare himself makes use of it in many forms. In *King Lear*, there's a scene in which one man pretending to be mad, another who has really gone mad, and a third who has probably always been a little addled, are brought together for purposes of comparison, irony, pathos, and tour de force acting. In *Hamlet*, there are two variations – Hamlet himself, who assumes madness, and Ophelia, who really does go winsomely bonkers. In *MacBeth*, it's Lady MacBeth who snaps. Since it's madwomen rather than madmen who concern us most today, I'd like to add a little about these last two, since they are surely the great-grandmothers of almost every poetic and theatrical and operatic madwoman of the nineteenth century.

What causes their derangement? In the case of Ophelia, it's a combination of thwarted love – Hamlet leads her to think she has prospects, and then drops her – and a sudden horrible shock – Hamlet kills her father. In the case of Lady MacBeth, it's guilt, as it often is for the Classical Greeks: she can't get the murdered king's metaphorical blood off her hands.

Their maladies take different forms. Lady MacBeth is spoken of as having an "infected mind;" she sleepwalks, and is haunted by visual hallucinations – the famous dagger and the famous spot of blood. Her speech is coherent enough, once we understand what it is that she believes she's seeing. Ophelia's language on the other hand is confused and nonsensical, and sometimes lewd, and interspersed with snatches of song; madness gives her the license to say things that in a sane state she would not be permitted to express. In each case, a nightgown-like outfit is essential – loose and dishevelled clothing for Ophelia, a real nightgown for Lady MacBeth. The hair should of course be down, loosened female hair having long been a danger sign. When women let their hair down, it means either sexiness or craziness or death, the three by Victorian times having become virtually synonymous.

In the stage directions, Ophelia is "fantastically dressed with straws and flowers," as is King Lear too during his own mad scene. This floral motif, though it probably didn't originate with Ophelia, was given such a push by her that it became almost *de rigeur* for nineteenth-century literary madwomen; though mad persons of the male gender don't go in for plant and flower arrangements much in the nineteenth century. Finally, the manner of Ophelia's death – by drowning, while singing, with floral decoration – also made a deep impression. The Ophelia stereotype is still with us so strongly that when the twentieth-century New Zealand writer Janet Frame speaks of "Opheliana" – being the whimsical speeches and the botanical and musical accoutrements that people who haven't known any real mad people think madwomen ought to have – we know exactly what she means.

Sometime between the seventeenth and the nineteenth centuries, and perhaps via the medium of the Gothic novel, Ophelia and Lady MacBeth got together and exchanged genetic material, giving rise to a hybrid that is the type of the nineteenth-century literary and dramatic madwoman. In the perfect version of this hybrid, you get innocence and guilt, both blood guilt and that very best Victorian thing, sexual guilt, which isn't much of a factor in Shakespearean mad scenes. You get floral motifs and obsessive haunting images, as well as singing and death.

The comprehensive Victorian madwoman was thus an innocent maiden who is seduced and abandoned, and gives birth to an illegitimate baby which she then murders, going mad either right before this event or right after it. The writers of poetic examples include Wordsworth, who makes one of these mad mothers the subject of a Lyrical Ballad, complete with a quivering hill of moss where the dead baby is buried; and Sir Walter Scott, who in his ultra-famous long poem *The Lady of the Lake*, gives us a pathetic madwoman carried off and raped on her wedding day who wanders around in the Highlands decked out with weeds and warbling soulfully. This was Queen Victoria's favourite poem; she kept thirty-two copies of it at Balmoral Castle, to amuse the guests during long wet Scottish Sunday afternoons. Tennyson is in full flight on the subject in his late dramatic poem, "Charity," which adds a couple of twists – not only is the maiden seduced and abandoned and pregnant and crazy and thinking of drowning herself, but who should arrive to care for her but the widow of the man who ruined her. It's the innocent widow who then dies – assuming that portion of the Ophelia part – and who then fittingly gets the floral tributes.

In the novel, there are of course the madwoman in the attic of *Jane Eyre* – her madness is due to a hereditary taint not unconnected with sex, we are led to believe. There's Little Em'ly, seduced and abandoned in *David Copperfield*; and Catherine, in *Wuthering Heights*, who goes mad after marrying the wrong man and before her death and after the birth of her baby; and many more. In opera too there's lots of choice. The favourite opera of Queen Victoria was Gounaud's *Faust*, which ends with Marguerite crazy and locked up in prison, having been seduced and abandoned and having then killed the baby. What does she sing about? Flowers. Lucia di Lammermoor loses it after being forcibly wed to a second-string baritone, whom she stabs; in *MacBeth*, Lady MacBeth goes mad for the same reasons as in the play; in *I Puritani* the heroine – her wits unsettled over nothing more than an imagined abandonment – goes mad twice, and gets two mad scenes, which is a bit greedy.

Thus, the real-life Susanna Moodie, who saw the real-life Grace Marks in the Toronto Lunatic Asylum during her visit there in 1851, was looking at her through tinted glasses. She saw the kind of madwoman she had been conditioned to see, and presented her accordingly; since Grace had been involved in a murder, she leans towards the Lady MacBeth end of things. Her account of Grace in the asylum appears in her 1853 book, *Life in the Clearings Versus the Bush*, and right after it she prints her own poem, "The Maniac," which, although written in the same jolly verse form as "The Night Before Christmas," has the virtue of hitting all of the expected Victorian notes. I shall try to do it justice.

There you have it – Opheliana crossed with Lady MacBeth's guilty spottiness – the seduced maiden, the wreath of wild flowers, the singing, the unbuttoned clothing, the illegitimate child, the death by drowning, with the bloody murder of the faithless lover thrown in for good measure. What could be more complete?

Moodie's treatment of Grace Mark's story also reflects her absorption of contemporary ideas. In *Life in the Clearings*, Moodie describes her meeting with Grace in the Kingston Penitentiary in 1851; she then re-tells the double murder in which Grace was involved. The motive, according to

Moodie, was Grace's obsessive passion for her employer, the gentleman Thomas Kinnear, and her demented jealousy of Nancy Montgomery, Kinnear's housekeeper and mistress. Moodie portrays Grace as the driving engine of the affair – a scowling, sullen teenage temptress – with the co-murderer, the manservant James McDermott, shown as a mere dupe, driven on by his own lust for Grace as well as by her taunts and blandishments. In Moodie's version, Grace offers sexual favours in exchange for the death of Nancy; but when James McDermott realizes he's been had, he kills Kinnear as well, and threatens to kill Grace too if she interferes. In real life, Thomas Kinnear and Nancy Montgomery were found dead in the cellar, and Grace and McDermott made it across Lake Ontario to the States with a wagonful of stolen goods. They were caught and brought back, and tried for the murder of Thomas Kinnear; both were convicted and condemned to death. McDermott was hanged. Grace was sentenced as an accessory, but as a result of petitions by her well-wishers, and in consideration of her feeble sex and extreme youth – she was barely sixteen – her sentence was commuted to life. The murder of Nancy was never tried, so the evidence about it wasn't thoroughly examined. On the scaffold, James McDermott declared that Grace had helped him to strangle Nancy, and was the instigator of the whole affair. Although he was a known liar, his is the version that Moodie chooses to believe. Why? Partly because it makes Grace a stronger and more fascinating character. If Grace was just a terrorized victim – as she herself claimed – there's a lot less of her for Moodie's dramatic purposes, which include blood guilt, haunting, and madness as God's vengeance, as in Greek tragedy, MacBeth, and much Victorian melodrama.

Moodie then relates an anecdote which she claims originated with Grace's lawyer. Moodie has Grace say to him, "Since I helped Macdermott to strangle Hannah Montgomery, her terrible face and those horrible bloodshot eyes have never left me for a moment. They glare upon me by night and day, and when I close my eyes in despair, I see them looking at my soul – it is impossible to shut them out. If I am at work, in a few minutes that dreadful head is in my lap. If I look up to get rid of it, I see it in the far corner of the room. At dinner, it is in my plate, or grinning between the persons who sit opposite me at table. Every object that meets my sight takes the same dreadful form; and at night – at night – in the silence and loneliness of my cell, those blazing eyes make my prison as light as day. No, not as day – they have a terribly hot glare, that has not the appearance of anything in this world. ... Oh! This is hell, Sir – these are the punishments of the damned!"

This is Lady MacBethland, complete with the visual hallucinations. It's also Charles Dickens, who was much influenced by the theatre of his day. The glaring, haunting eyes are ominously close to those of the murdered Nancy in *Oliver Twist*; and the objects that take the form of a head have more than a whiff of the Marly's-ghost door-knocker in *A Christmas Carol*. It's noteworthy that Dickens was one of Susanna Moodie's favourite authors, and that Moodie is the only commentator who calls Nancy Montgomery "Hannah." Could it be that she herself was aware of the resemblance between the two Nancys, and changed the name to deflect attention from it?

There's an intriguing footnote to this bit of the story. After *Alias Grace* was published, I received a clipping from an 1885 Toronto newspaper. The piece claimed to be by a chaplain who had attended Grace in prison. His version claims that Grace said she was haunted every night, not by Nancy Montgomery, but by the ghost of Thomas Kinnear – of whose murder she was most certainly innocent. But the Victorians knew you had to be haunted by someone.

Moodie saw Grace again, this time in the violent ward of the newly built Lunatic Asylum in Toronto. She's there because, says Moodie, "the fearful hauntings of her brain have terminated in madness. Let us hope," she says, "that all her previous guilt may be attributed to the

incipient workings of this frightful malady." She observes Grace "no longer sad and despairing, but lighted up with the fire of insanity, and glowing with a hideous and fiend-like merriment." There Moodie's account ends, with a pious hope that thin afterlife she will sit at the feet of Jesus, with "the stain of blood washed from her hand, and her soul redeemed, and pardoned, and in her right mind." She obviously felt Grace was doomed to remain in the Asylum until her death.

Alas for Moodie's version – right after she published *Life in the Clearings*, Grace Marks was sent back to the Penitentiary, with a letter from the superintendent that described her as a kind and helpful inmate, who was certainly too sane to stay at the Asylum any longer. Why was Grace sent to the Asylum in the first place? The official records don't tell us. When she was sent back, did that mean she'd been cured? Or perhaps – as later commentators claim – she was faking madness all along, as many did, since the food and treatment at the Asylum were better than those at the Penitentiary. Was the resemblance between Grace's so-called madness and the popular, theatrical image of madness that would have been familiar to Victorians due to Susanna Moodie's own social conditioning, or was Grace herself putting on the kind of performance that she knew would convince and intrigue her observers? Grace Marks was a celebrated figure in her own time partly because of the hint of transgression and aberration and sex and plain craziness that hung around her.

That was one set of problems I faced while writing *Alias Grace*. Another came from the sheer number of accounts about her, and from the disagreements among them. Was Grace a demon or a victim, crazy or faking it, sexually innocent or McDermott's mistress? I felt that, to be fair, I had to represent all points of view. I devised the following set of guidelines for myself: when there was a solid fact, I could not alter it. Much as I might long to have a real doctor called Doctor Workman as a major character in my book, it could not be done, because the records showed that his time as the head of the Lunatic Asylum overlapped Grace's stay there by only three weeks. Also, every major element in the book had to be suggested by something in the writing about Grace and her times, however dubious such writing might be; but in the gaps left unfilled, I was free to invent. Since there were a lot of gaps, there is a lot of invention.

One of my inventions was a character who could represent the other side of the Victorian attitude towards madness – not the popular Ophelia-like image, but the body of medical and scientific opinion on the subject. My invented character is Dr. Simon Jordan, a specialist in mental disorders who is hired by the pro-Grace faction which has continued to work for her freedom. Dr. Jordan has studied in London and Paris; thus he had access to the most advanced thinking of his time. Even Susanna Moodie, keen as she is on the vengeance-of-God theory, speaks of madness as a "malady," and it was increasingly coming to be seen as an illness. The supposed seat of madness in the body had moved around from century to century, but by the nineteenth century the nerves and brain were coming to the fore, thus leaving us such expressions as "frayed nerves," "nervous breakdown," and "nut case," the nut being the head. Phrenology, or the measurement of bumps on the skull to determine character, was taken seriously as a science – Susanna Moodie was a believer in it herself; and there was a growing notion that the physical side of a person might have something to do with his or her psychic side.

But the interest in aberrant states of mind, and in the workings of the psyche, was intense during the whole of the nineteenth century. We tend to think of Freud as a great innovator, but the truth is that he himself rested, like a ship on an iceberg, on a huge body of theory and knowledge which had accumulated before his time. Even the famous Unconscious had made its appearance at least seven decades earlier. As for such supposedly modern phenomena as

multiple personalities, the vogue for them began in the first half of the nineteenth century; and the first case in which the perpetrator of a murder pleaded amnesia, and got off, was in the eighteen eighties. As I was writing about Grace Marks, and about her interlude in the Asylum, I came to see her in context – the context of other people's opinions, both the popular images of madness and the scientific explanations for it available at the time. A lot of what was believed and said on the subject appears like sheer lunacy to us now. But we shouldn't be too arrogant – how many of our own theories will look silly when those who follow us have come up with something better?

But whatever the scientists may come up with, writers and artists will continue to portray altered mental states, simply because few aspects of our nature fascinate people so much. The so-called mad person will always represent a possible future for every member of the audience – who knows when such a malady may strike? When “mad,” at least in literature, you aren't yourself; you take on another self, a self that is either not you at all, or a truer, more elemental one than the person you're used to seeing in the mirror. You're in danger of becoming, in Shakespeare's works, a mere picture or beast, and in Susanna Moodie's words, a mere machine; or else you may become an inspired prophet, a truth-sayer, a shaman, one who oversteps the boundaries of the ordinarily visible and audible, and also, and especially, the ordinarily sayable. Portraying this process is deep power for the artist, partly because it's a little too close to the process of artistic creation itself, and partly because the prospect of losing our self and being taken over by another, unfamiliar self is one of our deepest human fears.

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