

Carol Thomas Neely. *Distracted Subjects: Madness and Gender in Shakespeare and Early Modern Culture*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2004. Pp. xviii, 244.

In *Distracted Subjects: Madness and Gender in Shakespeare and Early Modern Culture* Carol Thomas Neely gives us 'a detailed series of genre paintings of distraction in England between 1576 and 1632' as an antidote to the skewed image of the period conjured up in Foucault's 'bold sketch of Renaissance and Enlightenment madness' (9). Her 'eclectic' (8) approach teases out the complex, diverse, and gendered attitudes toward madness and the mad in literary, documentary, and medical texts of the period. Showing how 'early moderns drew on the traditional humoral discourses of Galen and Aristotle to rethink the parameters of the human by reimagining madness' (1), her portrait of these 56 years challenges the traditional historical view that very little changed in theory and practice between the Middle Ages and the Enlightenment. The milestones that frame her study, 1576, the year the first professional theatre opened in London, and 1632, the year that Bethlehem Hospital was consolidated, are integral to her argument, which debunks the prevailing belief that portrayals of Bedlamites in early modern English drama reflect contemporary attitudes toward the mad as well as their actual treatment in the hospital for which they are named.

Neely's title aptly signals the difficulty of defining madness in the period: the more general opening term, 'distracted,' denotes a temporary lapse, a larger category that embraces intense emotional states such as melancholy, lovesickness, grief, and anger. The second word of the title, 'subjects,' denotes that during this time mad persons were viewed as fully human, and madness itself served as a vehicle for exploring philosophical questions regarding the boundaries of the human.

Neely deftly weaves several strands through her argument as she moves back and forth between exploring how the stage influences cultural debates and how emergent cultural concepts are, in turn, informed by the public theatre. Her book is organized into three pairs of chapters. The first two chapters focus on how stage representations influence cultural debate. The second set of chapters move in the opposite direction, showing how cultural conceptions are 'picked up by the drama and circulated' (8). The final two chapters brilliantly unite the many threads of her argument while also critiquing current theoretical approaches that oversimplify the relationship between culture and literary production. In chapter 1 Neely sets forth two early paradigms of stage madness

that continue to inform representations throughout the period. Diccon the Bedlam, the central trickster character in *Gammer Gurton's Needle*, is the prototypical comic figure who is not mad himself, but rather embodies the potential for madness in human affairs. Hieronimo, the berserk revenger of Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, is the prototypical tragic figure whose grief and acute awareness of injustice drives him mad. Neely argues that these figures are primarily stage inventions – their language as well as their gestures transform their Latin sources into something new that in turn influences ongoing debates about gender, the supernatural, and the human subject. She continues this line of argumentation in her second chapter where she contrasts pairs of characters: Ophelia and Hamlet, Lady Macbeth and the Witches, Lear and Edgar. These pairs engage contemporary concerns regarding madness by revealing to the audience differences between female distraction and feigned madness in *Hamlet*; between witchcraft and natural alienation in *Macbeth*; and between natural madness caused by guilt and feigned demonic possession in *Lear*. The mad speech of Ophelia, Lady Macbeth, and Lear is characterized by dislocation, fragmentation, and repetition, and what Neely calls 'cultural quotation' (50). This 'linguistic coding' via 'alienated speech' shows audiences 'what madness looks like' (49), and in doing so shapes attitudes toward it. Chapter 3 focuses on emergent conceptions of women's melancholy and how these ideas are represented in *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, while chapter 4 explores the relationship between new understandings of lovesickness in medical texts and how these theories shape the unfolding action in *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It*.

In chapters 5 and 6 she shows that material differences in the production and purposes of dramatic texts may result in very different cultural meanings from other texts. In particular, the five plays in which Bedlamites appear in Jacobean drama mock not the mad but rather caricature 'women, ethnic others (Welsh madmen), and, predominantly, early modern professions: lawyers doctors, parsons, merchants scholars – the very professionals who are regular playgoers' (189). The subjects of these satires do not correspond to the 'mostly poor' and 'mostly old' persons who occupied Bethelam Hospital. Because plays are written to entertain and also secure their own survival, 'brief shots of madness permit theatrical excess and inoculate the plays' against critics of the theatre (199). These scenes 'displace onto mad persons and the houses where they reside those offenses for which antitheatrical polemic attacked the stage: salaciousness, immorality, and unreality' (199). She shows that in contrast to the plays' portrayals of mad persons, the period in general displayed compassionate attitudes toward madness and the mad. They viewed the state as temporary lapse. Mad persons were not looked upon as subhuman: rather it is the discursive

practices of Jacobean drama that dehumanize them, and in doing so foreshadow and perhaps even influence subsequent attitudes toward madness.

Neely's argument has important ramifications not only for our understanding of the history of madness, but also for critical theory. She calls attention to the importance of genre, expertly demonstrating that all texts in a given cultural moment are not created equal. As she puts it, plays do not 'exist in quite the same historical register' as other textual remains (67). She masterfully demonstrates how the integration of formalism and historicism can provide more accurate readings of the past. Yet greater attention to literary history seems warranted. As David Quint argues in *Epic and Empire* literary genres are not merely of the moment in which they are written, they also 'carry their own history forward with them'.¹ From this vantage point, I would have liked to have seen a consideration of the portrayal of madness in medieval English drama. Like Greenblatt's *Hamlet in Purgatory*, Neely's book makes claims about the differences between medieval and Renaissance English culture without discussing a single medieval English dramatic text. This is a longstanding problem in studies of Renaissance drama that is only now beginning to be addressed. Because *Distracted Subjects* focuses on the genre of drama, some consideration of medieval English dramatic sources seems necessary. The medieval English religious cycles portray the Virgin Mary and Lazarus' sisters as driven mad by grief. Moreover their 'mad speech' is echoed by Ophelia and the Lady Constance in *King John*. Lady Constance is an especially interesting case as her mad speech critiques the social and religious tensions Neely identifies in the other works she discusses. On the comic side, the medieval morality play *Mankynd* has a precursor for Diccon the Bedlam in *Titivillus*. An examination of these medieval English precedents in addition to the Latin sources Neely identifies would have enriched and may have qualified some of Neely's points, especially her claim that Shakespeare 'invented' the mad speech of his characters. The distracted holy women of medieval drama suggest a resonant precedent for this mad speech. I also take issue with Neely's claim that 'grief over bereavement, as registered in Napier's practice rarely results in the extreme distracted behavior enacted by Ophelia' (53). My own reading of the representation of female grief in medieval and early modern English drama within the framework of Michael MacDonald's research on Napier's practice (the source of Neely's evidence) has led me to a different conclusion.² Such behavior seems to have derived from mourning practices that were suppressed after the Reformation in England. Shakespeare's portrayal of Ophelia secularizes and naturalizes what was formerly an efficacious communal ritual performed by women. MacDonald writes of 'the searing grief experienced by

bereaved mothers among Napier's patients' in post-Reformation England.³ He also explains that 'grief' was viewed as a serious illness, and that 'bereavement' was among 'the four most common categories of stress reported by Napier's patients'.⁴ Of the bereaved with extreme symptoms, 88% were women. The bills of mortality from the early seventeenth century record fourteen deaths caused by grief each year.⁵ MacDonald, paraphrasing Burton in *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, writes that '[n]obody, not even the most stolid soul, could endure the death of a father, a husband, as son, a mother, a wife, a daughter without a fit of grieving madness'.⁶

These qualifications aside, Neely's work makes an important contribution to our understanding of the history of madness as well as providing a theoretically sophisticated model for further literary scholarship on Renaissance drama. She shows that portrayals of madness on the stage critique and satirize the social and religious institutions in early modern England even as they explore complex questions about what it means to be human.

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Notes

- 1 David Quint, *Epic and Empire* (Princeton, 1993), 15.
- 2 Michael MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam: Magic, Anxiety and Healing in Seventeenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 1981).
- 3 MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam*, 82.
- 4 MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam*, 75.
- 5 MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam*, 182.
- 6 MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam*, 77.