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M.A. Thesis

The Representation of Madness in Jacobean Drama In Selected Plays of William Shakespeare and John Webster

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Introduction

Throughout history, madness has posed a challenge to man's powers, as well as a threat to his self image as a rational being. Human beings were preoccupied with extreme forms of mental aberration and bizarre behaviour long before they recorded it in literature.

The purpose of this thesis is to demonstrate how madness was represented and the different attitudes towards it in two of the great tragedies that were written during the Jacobean era (1603-25): William Shakespeare's *King Lear* (1606) and John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* (1613—14). In both Shakespeare and Webster madness occupies an extreme place. They both lived in an age of transition compromising the last decade of the sixteenth century and the early decades of the seventeenth century. The Jacobean era witnessed some social, political, cultural, and economic circumstances that instigated the psychological instability of the English people and led to a change in the general perception of madness. Apprehension and disillusionment spread through political and social life of the English people obliterated their serenity and imperiled their sanity. Jacobean drama encompassed all the fears and uncertainty of the age with all the poverty of spirit. Abnormality and melancholy became the core of most of the plays.

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Representation of madness during the first two decades of the seventeenth century has been influenced by the socio-ideological matrix of the Jacobean era. Madness was feared, repressed, neglected, mocked, and instrumentalised. The two selected plays encompass different attitudes towards madness. Madness also became the only way left to deal with the unbearable terrors of the age.

Many incidents coalesced to intensify the mood of apprehension and pessimism that overwhelmed the English people during the Jacobean era. These incidents include the uncertainty that followed the death of Queen Elizabeth in 1603 after forty four years of prosperity and the successive attempts to assassinate the new king. The death of the promising Prince Henry was also shocking. The Black Death broke out and harvested thousands of souls. Along with these unendurable incidents many treatises were published to certify that the earth no longer became the centre of the universe. Man lost his former status as the centre of his world. Madness hence became the only way to evade the frustrating circumstances that can not be endured. Malcontents filled the Jacobean courts. Being a typically Jacobean product, the malcontent, considered mentally ill, became an emblem of his distorted world.

As a result of the vast changes in the political, social, economic, and cultural strata, the general perception of madness was also changing. Madness was feared and repressed as it was

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threatening to any established order. Madmen were confined as being idle and chaotic. The mad were also mocked and seen as a source of entertainment. Malcontents were also instumentalised and contained.

King Lear encompasses different attitudes towards madness. The play represents the fall of man when kings are deprived of sanity and serenity. King Lear acts against all norms of reason as he parcels his kingdom into three portions without any clear purpose. The abnormal behaviour of the king is signaled by Goneril and Regan from the first scene who will consequently behave accordingly. Having been driven savage by their father's unbearable behaviour, they elicit consent for their scornful behaviour, first they neglect him, and then they exclude him.

Shakespeare introduces a prototype of a madman in the figure of Edgar disguised as Tom O' Bedlam, the mad beggar who incarnates the lowest point of humanity. Edgar stimulating the role of Tom O' Bedlam, articulates the suppression of the naked by autocratic force. Bedlams were confined, repressed and even were exploited as a source of entertainment. Madness in Lear depicts the fall of man in Jacobean drama. Madness was not only seen as a subversive element to authority, King James himself exploited madness to impose "fiction" upon the English people and to consolidate his power in a time when the Parliament tried to wrest power from the monarch. Lear seems to provide a

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theatrical version of James's theory of divine-right kingship that life would be unbearable without a powerful king.

The Duchess of Malfi opens with a powerful prince who fills the whole scene from the very beginning. Ferdinand's choleric behaviour is underlined. His vehement choler is incited when his sister, the Duchess, marries Antonio, her steward, a man inferior to her rank. The Duke also instrumentalises a group of madmen to intensify her misery and break her will.   Having seen his murdered sister, all hidden impulses of anger and violence overwhelm him. Now he is metamorphosed into a werewolf, a disease known as lycanthropy. His anger causes him to be deformed into a beast. This illness not only threatens the identity of him as a duke but as a human being. Malcontents—or pseudo madmen—were also instrumentalised to carry out the prince's instructions. Bosola, the malcontent, is presented as the opportunist malcontent with parasitic qualities and the one who is capable of moral awareness in the pursuit of justice and disowning in himself a compassion for others.

During the Jacobean era madness was seen as having had a feminine origin as women were prone to mental illness rather than men. The female characters in the two plays offer a contradicted hypothesis to this idea. In the two selected plays, matters are turned upside down. The males are weak, insane, powerless, and need to be tamed. Goneril and Regan tame the insane king, scorn him, emasculate him and finally exclude him.

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They show strength from the very beginning of the play. Cordelia's potency lurks in her silence, Goneril and Regan in their tongues' lash. They transgressed the king's sovereignty and masculinity. The Duchess too disobeys her brothers' will and marries a man inferior to her. The Duchess has the power her brothers lack. She shows aggressive female sexuality which interrogates the traditional boundaries between male and female. Her sanity opposes her brother's insanity. Shakespeare and Webster do not seem to provide an alternative form of power incarnated in woman. Do Shakespeare and Webster provide an alternative form of power incarnated in the woman in a male-dominated society? It does not seem so as all the female characters fail to assert their power till the end. The female's voice is eradicated and the appearance of their bodies on the stage brings some satisfaction to the audience who see the transgression of the female characters.

This thesis is divided into three chapters and a conclusion.

Chapter One, entitled **"Madness and the Context"** tackles two points: First, a bird's eye view on the history of treating the insane in the English society. Secondly, demonstrating some of the socio-political, economic, and cultural circumstances instigated the psychological unrest of the Jacobean society.

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Chapter Two, entitled **"Madness and the Text"** attempts to examine the different attitudes towards madness and to reach a conclusion that the insanity of the two major characters represents the fall of man. The chapter attempts to demonstrate the instrumentalisation of madness when King James exploited madness to consolidate his political theory of divine-right kingship. The chapter ends with more elaboration of the malcontent, or the semi-mad man and how madness was instrumentalised through exploiting the malcontent for the duke's interest.

Chapter Three, entitled **"Madness and Gender"** tackles the relationship between madness and gender. The chapter attempts to find an answer to the following question "Do Shakespeare and Webster provide an alternative form of power incarnated in the female character?" The chapter demonstrates how the female characters try to assert their power against the insanity of the male characters.

The conclusion is an evaluation of all issues raised in this thesis.

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