# *Distracted Subjects: Madness and Gender in Shakespeare and Early Modern Culture* , and: *Performing Blackness on English Stages, 1500-1800* (review)

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**Carol Thomas Neely. *Distracted Subjects: Madness and Gender in Shakespeare and Early Modern Culture.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004. Pp. xiii + 244. $52.50 casebound; $21.95 paperbound.**

**Virginia Mason Vaughan. *Performing Blackness on English Stages, 1500–1800.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. Pp. xiv + 190. $75.00.**

These two books by respected scholars are comparable in many ways—particularly because of their shared interest in "marginal" groups who functioned as "others" in English Renaissance culture. Virginia Mason Vaughan explores staged representations of black skin color over the course of three centuries in early modern England, while Carol Thomas Neely studies staged representations of "mad" or "distracted" persons, especially in the hundred or so years beginning with the mid-1570s. In style, method, argument, and even in physical design, the two volumes have much in common, and both are also comparably successful.

Both books, for instance, are concerned to untangle what Vaughan calls the "collapsed chronology" (3) of some earlier scholarly accounts of their subjects. In other words, each seeks to examine the process of historical change patiently and minutely, warning against the tendency of some earlier writers (including, in Neely's case, Foucault) to make sweeping generalizations in a way that erases our awareness of gradual, incremental developments. Each book, then, necessarily engages in helpful and illuminating dialogue with earlier scholarship, and indeed Neely's volume is especially impressive in this regard. Her footnotes (and both books, thankfully, do place their notes at the foot of each page, rather than in the rear) are often quite lengthy and detailed. Each book makes its readers aware of trends and tendencies in earlier scholarship, and each also indicates clearly how the present volume differs from its predecessors. Each book, then, provides a solid introduction not only to its nominal topic but to earlier relevant studies.

Both books also, by surveying a multitude of dramas and studying how patterns "are repeated from play to play" (Vaughan, 4), provide a comprehensive overview of staged works dealing with their respective topics, even as they also call attention to the ways in which particular plays altered customary patterns. Neely has an advantage over Vaughan in this respect since many of the plays dealing with madness are fascinating works by major, canonical authors (especially Shakespeare) and thus are likely to be of interest to a broader range of readers because they are often aesthetically intriguing. Vaughan, on the other hand, surveys (and summarizes) not only canonical plays but also some that

seem of slight literary merit (however interesting they may be in other respects). Vaughan, though, does focus major attention on *Othello* (surely one of the most interesting plays ever written). Readers who have admired her wonderful earlier work on that play will welcome her new thoughts here (and they may also wish that Neely had paused to examine the issue of madness in this Shakespearean tragedy, as she does so well when writing about *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *Lear*).

Both books emphasize the need to be familiar with period-specific terminology. Thus Vaughan writes (for instance) that the Moors discussed in her book would mainly "have been considered 'blackamoors' in the early modern period, as opposed to the tawny Moors of northern Africa" (5). Likewise, Neely begins with an extensive discussion of the various terms used by early moderns to describe what we would term mental illness, and she particularly stresses the usefulness of the terms *distracted* and *distraction* since these words imply "early modern attitudes toward madness as a temporary derailing" rather than as a necessarily permanent condition (2). In both cases, then, the books seek thoroughly to historicize their discussions of conditions that might otherwise seem to invite discussion from ahistorical perspectives.

Other similarities between the two volumes are numerous. Both make effective use of illustrations; both draw, in illuminating ways, on the work of scholars from other disciplines (this is especially true of Neely); both allude briefly to present-day works of art dealing with the nominal topics of their volumes; both employ a method that encourages comparisons and contrasts between and among a whole series of works; both tie their titular themes to issues of sex and gender; and both show how an "exotic" condition could be used to help define "normality." In addition, both works show how their topics affected (and were affected by) different dramatic genres (e.g., comedies, tragedies, revenge plays, etc.); both books are (given the limited state of the surviving evidence) necessarily somewhat speculative; both insightfully compare and contrast particular plays with their earlier sources; and both are written in generally clear, mostly jargon-free prose. Both books, moreover, intriguingly show how blackness as well as madness could be adopted by onstage characters as disguises and also how both blackness and madness were sometimes associated with the demonic.

The main argument of Vaughan's book is nicely summarized in a passage from early in the text: "Used prominently in the medieval period as a marker of religious difference, blackened faces became increasingly complicated by inchoate conceptions of race. Fear of the devil overlapped with fear of the black African other; on the stage, the fascinating and sometimes frightening characteristics dark pigmentation came to signify were acted out. Over time, the actor's

blackened face hardened into a marker of racial difference; by the Restoration, it denoted slave status, and in the eighteenth century, it could also evoke the audience's pity" (8–9). In the middle ages and early sixteenth century, black faces were often associated with the devil or damnation (19–20, 24), while "Moorish figures who appeared in urban processions" during the reign of Henry VIII usually "connoted misrule" (29). As European exploration and exploitation of Africa developed, however, more and more plays began to appear in which "black Moors are constructed as being 'true'—not fictional at all, but representative of real people in real places of northern Africa and Spain" (56). Vaughan's book is especially interesting when discussing Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* and *Othello*. Vaughan argues, for instance, that Aaron from the earlier play "is the first in a long line of black male heroes (crafted by white authors) who flaunt their sexuality as a quality inherent in their blackness" (43), and she later contends that "Aaron's characterization seems to cross the line from color-coding into the murky territory George Frederickson terms 'proto-racism.' In Aaron, Elizabethan audiences saw blackness as a causative factor. Aaron was not black because he was evil, but evil because he was black" (47–48). Yet Vaughan also suggests that in spite of "his evil deeds, his fierce determination to protect his child humanizes him, complicating and thickening blackness's signification" (49). "Miscegenation" (Vaughan asserts concerning *Titus*) "became a marker for a variety of social problems, and *Titus Andronicus* established a pattern that would be repeated in English and American literature and culture for centuries" (50). Vaughan, like Neely, makes a fascinating case for the argument that drama could help produce (not merely reflect) cultural change. Both authors also show that these changes were not always positive and that Shakespeare (for better or worse) was often at the "cutting edge" of such cultural innovation. Thus Vaughan argues (for instance) that in *The Merchant of Venice* Portia "rejects the Moroccan lover, not because of his merits, but because of his complexion" (61) and that Shakespeare's racial attitudes, here and elsewhere, were not only influenced by, but also helped influence, larger cultural transformations.

Such transformations were not always or entirely negative, and Vaughan shows how Shakespeare's Othello was one of a number of black figures who are presented with a certain degree of sympathy and admiration. She even coins a term—"Othellofication"—to describe the impact of Shakespeare's hero on depictions of later figures, and she also shows how, by the eighteenth century and afterwards, some plays had actually begun to help generate sympathy for blacks and support for the abolition of slavery. Vaughan's book, in short, traces a complex evolution in English attitudes toward blackness, showing how black characters could be depicted sometimes as demons, sometimes as noble, sometimes

as villains, sometimes as slaves, and sometimes as sympathetic victims. Her discussion of the use of black characters in "bed-trick" plots is especially interesting, as are her ruminations on whether black or white actors should routinely be cast in the role of Othello. Vaughan's book is the culmination of several decades of extensive (and intensive) study of the issues it discusses; for that reason alone it deserves the attention of anyone interested in the drama of the early modern period.

The same is true of Neely's volume, a book that contains some often surprising and highly provocative arguments—arguments which, if valid, may help fundamentally transform our thinking about madness (and the treatment of the mad) in Renaissance England. Theoretically sophisticated and historically informed, Neely does a fine job of setting her plays in multiple contexts, and her book is especially fascinating when it draws on little-known documents from the era. Thus she employs, for example, evidence drawn from the records of "Richard Napier, doctor, minister, and astrologer, [who] from 1597 to 1634 treated about sixty thousand patients in Great Linford in northern Buckinghamshire, taking notes on each consultation. Two thousand and thirty-four of these patients (from all social classes) consulted him for disorders of the mind" (47). Neely ties evidence drawn from Napier's records to her discussions of *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *Lear*, and her procedures in this chapter are typical of the highly interdisciplinary methods she uses throughout her book.

In the course of her discussions, Neely touches on a number of intriguing issues, such as Hamlet's feigned madness versus Ophelia's real madness; the differences between calculated and impulsive suicide; the respective "madnesses" of Lear and Edgar; the intertextual complications of Edgar's "religious" discourse; the special condemnation of fetishism in treatises on lovesickness in the early modern period; the ways in which accusations of madness could be used to manage conflict and the ways in which scape-goating could be used to validate romance; and numerous other examples. One advantage of the fact that Neely seems to have read and thought about nearly every text relevant to her topic is that she can make claims that are often exceedingly precise (and thus testable). In discussing the three Shakespearean tragedies already mentioned, for instance, she asserts that "characters' madness is always interpreted for the audience when it first appears" (50–51); likewise, much later she is able to assert confidently that of "the total of twenty-one mad characters in the five plays" discussed in her sixth chapter, "seventeen have just about 300 lines. Only two madpersons are women. These seventeen comic caricatures confute [common scholarly] assumptions of hordes of Bedlamites on stage and [Duncan] Salkeld's claim that these texts specialize in the 'confinement of women'" (187). Here as so often elsewhere, Neely is able to engage in productive debate with

other scholars because her claims are specific, precise, and thus capable of either confirmation or refutation.

Enumerating all the strengths of Neely's book would take more space than is available here, but a few other strong points include the following: a willingness to challenge received wisdom; an acute awareness of the importance of particular editions of the works discussed; a fine ability to summarize key claims; a concern with the formal elements of texts (an issue often ignored in "thematic" studies); and (as in Vaughan's work) an interest in how drama could (sometimes negatively) help inaugurate cultural transformations rather than simply reflect them. Many of the virtues just mentioned are on display, for instance, in the following passage from Neely's book: "As Shakespeare strives to surpass Plautus, to provide additional theatrical pleasure, and to displace censure from lovesickness; and as he reworks the scene of confinement, drawing on popular witchcraft beliefs, Skimmington rituals, and exorcism practices, his plays circulate debates and images that promulgate new attitudes toward the mad" (163). Neely contends that we today "may have a hard time seeing these changes since we have inherited their consequences," but she makes a persuasive case that "the emergence of attitudes on stage" helped promote tendencies to "newly segregate and dehumanize the mad" (163). Here as in Vaughan's book, we catch glimpses of the ways in which drama could promote views and behavior that can now seem highly unattractive.

In Neely's work as in Vaughan's, however, the picture is always more complicated than it may first appear. Thus, Vaughan showed how Shakespeare could endorse a kind of "proto-racism" when depicting Aaron, even while presenting Othello as (at least in part) a noble Moor. Similarly, Neely shows how early modern dramatists, even while sometimes dehumanizing the mad, may not have been as representative of a larger cultural tendency (in this respect) as has often been claimed. Indeed, one of the strongest chapters in Neely's book is the one in which she challenges the widespread assumption that mad persons on stage were mocked and gawked at in imitation of the ways they were allegedly mocked and gawked at in the notorious Bedlam hospital. Supposedly, thousands of visitors each year came, in the early seventeenth century, to amuse themselves by witnessing the behavior of these distracted "Bedlamites." Neely is at her historical best in her efforts to debunk such assumptions, especially in her painstaking dissection of the one document on which all such claims are allegedly based. She provocatively contends that merely one "single (ubiquitously cited) entry in the nonfictional records before 1632 provides the only documentation for Bethlem [sic] Hospital as a spectacle and tourist attraction. This entry, read closely, seems unlikely to refer to Bethlem Hospital at all" (200–201).

Historians and other specialist scholars will have to assess the credibility of Neely's claims here, although it seems to this reader that she makes a plausible case. The important point is that here, as elsewhere, she is willing to (re)examine evidence closely and is also willing to let the evidence take her wherever it leads. In this instance it leads her to conclude that attitudes toward (and treatment of) the mad, at least during and before the Jacobean period, were far more charitable (both literally and figuratively) than is sometimes assumed. For the early decades of the seventeenth century (according to Neely) no surviving documents provide "a shred of evidence that (*pace* Foucault) the sick, the disruptive, and the seditious were warehoused indiscriminately and left abandoned and silenced.... Distracted people [during the era Neely is studying] are not viewed as essentially or permanently different from those who are healthy. Far from being condemned or mocked, characterized as inhuman, as animal-like, or as outside humanity, they are attended to with concern and compassion" (180). Early modern dramas may sometimes have dehumanized the mad and may have encouraged people in later eras to make life imitate art in this unfortunate respect, but, if Neely is correct, Elizabethans and Jacobeans as a whole may have been a more compassionate bunch than we have sometimes been led to think.

It will be fascinating to see how other scholars, especially historians, respond to Neely's claims. Her book will (I suspect) be the more controversial of the two examined here, especially because of its surprising sixth chapter. Whatever the final outcome of the (expected) debate, that chapter should be recommended to students as a model of the methods a conscientious scholar can employ to marshal evidence and present it in ways that ignite real thought. Both Neely's book and Vaughan's, meanwhile, can be recommended to anyone as examples of the kind of historically informed thematic criticism that can help us better understand how history can help shape plays while also being shaped by them.

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