

The Mythos of Lilith: a Collection of Madwomen

by

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This series of blogs is born out of both love and anger. It is with the utmost tender love and precious care that I weave these stories, yet I am angered that I have to. Beginnings are hard for me. I want to jump right into the middle of the action and figure it out as I go, but I am constantly reminded that you cannot build a house starting with the windows; the foundation has to come first. An introduction to this problem comes down to my realization that nothing has changed in the way society views and oppresses women ever. You can make the argument that women have the right to vote, they can get divorced, they can legally drink, they can drive, they can hold jobs and public offices. But what that argument is missing is the foundation: the beginnings of femalehood. As Western society settled and congealed into some semblance of order, women were ordered to the bottom--subservient to their patriarchal figures. Patriarchy does a good job at justifying its positions, by producing literature and scholarly thought on how a woman's constitution was best suited for domesticity¹. This is where an artificial value system comes into play that makes women believe in their domestic duties as the place where they can achieve what their men are achieving in the public sphere. The traditional thought being if women feel they are appreciated and needed, they won't be tempted to step out of bounds. Men get the social mobility that their sex allows them, while women chafe against the stifling boundary of confinement. The difference of a few organs should not be the reason for oppression.

A *proper lady*, the specifics of which changes depending on the time, was meant to wait, be sedentary until the man told them to move. Daya's song "[Sit Still, Look Pretty](#)" could have been

¹ The ideas of "True Womanhood" or the "cult of Domesticity" [The Cult of Domesticity: Definition and History](#).

sung by Roman women in 509 B.C. The rights of women could only rise when they started below the bottom. How have things not actually changed you may ask? Well while women may have more rights today than before, those rights are conditional as are the public roles women can hold. Women are held to an impossible standard where they have to be enough but not too much. Sure they can work in an office, but how often are [female CEOs](#) challenged and undermined?² How often are the sexual exploits of a young woman ridiculed and judged, or the lack of sexual experience mocked? Yes, we can vote, but our bodily autonomy is always on the docket to be cut. It's maddening. Where my thesis comes in is to act as a moderator, an observer of this trend, and narrate it to a broader audience. Things can change but more people need to be as maddened as I am if we are to ever be able to have an actual conversation about what needs to change.

I find that the words of Mary Wollstonecraft pioneer what contemporary scholar Sara Ahmed calls a feminist killjoy. Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, originally published in 1792, pointed out the ridiculousness of patriarchal oppression and called for actual education of women--not just in domestic duties. Wollstonecraft pointed out what I am arguing now in 2022 (230 years later), "I do frankly acknowledge the inferiority of woman according to the present appearance of things. And I insist that men have increased that inferiority until women are almost sunk below the standard of rational creatures". Many can pretend that our society is equal now and we have come a long way, but until Mary Wollstonecraft's novels stop relating to current attitudes, then we still have a long way to go.

² 8.2% of CEOs of Fortune 500 companies are female

I am not arguing that women have never had a voice or a sway when it comes to the way society works. I am arguing that those stories are often not telling the whole truth. Something happens between putting their pens down and someone else reading their words. For too long, their stories have been mitigated, translated, truncated, and censored, if they were even recorded at all before the world could hear them. What could women be writing that would be so threatening to incite such censorship? To a male-dominated world, anything that could disrupt their illusions of power is a threat. If a woman penned a narrative of her experiences in this world, or if she were to begin speaking on a new way of thinking that called for change, that must be stopped. The ultimate goal is to prevent women from writing or stepping out of their boxes before they even begin. This project could go on endlessly, but for the sake of the time I have between now and my graduation, I aim to focus on Western civilization and the dominant views of femininity and female gender roles. This will begin with some mythological beginnings and Christianity and then move through 19th-century literature where the madwoman had her heyday, into second-wave feminist theory and writers, and finishing with my contemporary observations and examples.

MAD/WOMAN

What is a madwoman? My simple definition is that it is made up of the two words “mad” and “woman”. Both terms open up a variety of meanings depending on language/culture, societal norms, and beliefs. I will attempt to give my definitions for these terms within the scope of my project in as concise terms as possible. The term “woman” to me represents any person that identifies as female, was socialized as female and/or has female characteristics. Being a “woman” has all sorts of political and biological characteristics attached to it, so I mean “woman” broadly for anyone who has felt repressed and oppressed by patriarchy.

The word “mad” or “madness” has many definitions. The Oxford English dictionary has several with usage going back 1275. Some of those definitions include:

“Of a person: insane, crazy; mentally unbalanced or deranged; subject to delusions or hallucinations; (in later use esp.) psychotic”

“Of a person, action, disposition, etc.: uncontrolled by reason or judgement; foolish, unwise”

“Of an animal: abnormally aggressive...”

“beside oneself with anger; moved to uncontrollable rage; furious”

These are the definitions that I am referring to when I discuss madness. Being mad is polysemous with being out of control. Looking at these definitions the meaning and usage of mad have changed some, however, the notion of madness as “abnormal” or deviating from societal expectations has not. Taking that general idea of madness and adding it to the misogynistic practices of discrediting powerful women a connection emerges. A madwoman is a

woman society deems out of control, an abnormal woman who has deviated from proper tradition and expectations.

There are two kinds of ‘mad’ women that I will examine over the course of this project. The first is the most common and studied, the insane madwoman. In literature, these characters are most often villainous characters. Something snapped within her psyche that caused her to lose all grasp on societal niceties. She is now a broken, defective woman. These insane women, these madwomen are to be shut away and locked up. Being literary characters allows them to be played with and interpreted which, mostly in the postmodern period, has led these characters to be read through a feminist lens. Historically, women did go mad as well. Their stories are more unpleasant and repressive than their literary counterparts. It is difficult to get accurate statistics as there were many institutions both public and private that kept records very differently. I do want to recognize some of the most popular reasons a woman was admitted to an asylum. In a report from the Jacksonville asylum, some of the reasons women were admitted include “domestic trouble”, “religious excitement”, “disappointed love”, “over exertion”, “hard study” and “novel reading” (see Table IV)

TABLE IV.

Supposed exciting causes of Insanity in cases admitted since December 1, 1854.

Domestic trouble	33	Sun stroke	2
Religious excitement	32	Intemperance	5
Business anxieties	16	Novel reading	3
Death of friends	13	Fear	1
Puerperal	22	Brain fever	2
Disappointed love	15	Epilepsy	12
Over exertion	13	Paralysis	6
Vicious indulgences	25	Hereditary	19
Spiritualism	8	Unknown	193
Hard study	8		
Physical injury	7	Total	446
Change of life	3		

Chart showing the supposed causes of insanity in those admitted to the Jacksonville asylum—including three patients admitted for “novel reading”

Table IV from Tenth Biennial Report, 20. Courtesy of Oskar Diethelm Library, DeWitt Wallace Institute of Pyschiatry: History, Policy, & the Arts, Weill Cornell Medical College.

Women go mad because patriarchal society is so stifling, so controlling of all aspects of life, and it is utterly maddening trying to fit into all their boxes. The madwoman had her heyday across much of 19th-century literature, but she is very much still around.

The second definition of a madwoman is the angry type of madness. The best explanation for these women is the example of a woman who loses control of her emotions and lets out an angry outburst. It does not matter the cause of her anger, but the typical response (based on Western social norms) is to deem her reaction as immature, unprofessional, or unhinged. These madwomen are shamed for their anger and aggression which in men is often seen as a characteristic of testosterone. Female anger has been in the process of being reclaimed as feminist rage used to advocate for societal shifts. In their brief analysis of the regulation of female anger, feminist theorists Shani Orgada and Rosalind Gillb argue that even in the wake of events like #MeToo, female anger is still being mediated by the media. They use an example of Uma Thurman's portrayal by the media in the wake of her accusations against Harvey Weinstein; moving from her own posts to a described “zen outlook” by the New York Times. What they argue is that Thurman is clearly angry, but the media keeps playing back into the *tropes* of the calm and composed woman. Orgada and Gillb end their article with this, “our analysis acts as an important reminder that even when unleashed, this anger continues to be carefully regulated so as not to exceed the “safe” level allowed by a patriarchal system (“Safety valves for mediated female rage in the #MeToo era” 601). I believe that is the crux of male-defined femaleness: not exceeding the status quo, not being too much.

No matter which definition is used, madness is subjective and is depicted and lived in a variety of forms. One consistency, though, is the source of the madness: domineering patriarchs

dictating how a woman is to exist. Whether the reaction to oppression is insanity or anger, the madwoman's message is clear: she is tired of being held back, enclosed, and censored. Her stories deserve to be told in their entirety and we all need to listen. Through my thesis project I hope to help get these stories out while advocating for change.

Lilith's Ancient Origins



Lady Lilith, Dante Gabriel Rossetti.

Any discussion of female oppression and vilification would be incomplete without including Lilith. You may have read of her as the villain, a succubus, mother of demons, a winged she-demon who preys on men and children, or a nocturnal force that delivers impure dreams. These are all stories of her, yes, but she started as a woman who refused to lay beneath a man on the grounds of gender hierarchy. In that context, Lilith was banished and punished for her refusal to submit to her husband, but she has been reclaimed and invoked often in the name of modern feminist power. In this blog, I will outline some of the mythologies of Lilith: where she came from, how she was viewed then, and where she ended up. It is vital that Lilith be included in this collection because she is the original madwoman. Her innate power and desire for equality are what led to her condemnation and usage as a warning to other women should they follow her

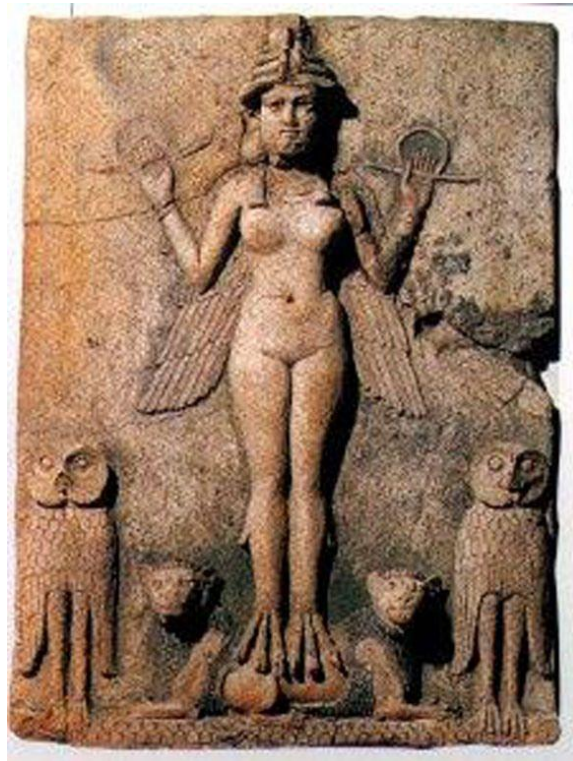
path. To be reclaimed, she is a call to anyone who needs her. She is there to offer her power and strength to those who have had their power stagnated and suppressed.

Several realms of mythology include Lilith, either as the first woman or as a tempting demon. The most well-known in the Western world, from the Judo-Christian faith, Lilith was Adam's first wife. In the story of Genesis, when God created the universe, he made both Adam and Lilith from the same dust, "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:27). This is in the first part of the Genesis story; however, in the second part, there is a reference to Woman's creation again. This time the woman is made from the man; this is agreed to be Eve's creation. In Genesis 2:22, God removes Adam's rib, "made into a woman and brought her to the man". There is an apparent disagreement in the way that woman came to be. In one, she is man's equal, and in the other, she is made from a piece of man and therefore belongs to the man. The Church leaders, all men, were then faced with the task of explaining this plothole in the Creation story. Their solution? Come up with a story about Adam's first wife who had to disappear so that God would create him a new wife. This served two purposes: it explains why God made woman twice, but it also allowed them to educate women on their proper places by using Lilith's fate as a cautionary tale. The same education is done with the end of Eve's story. If their patriarchs do not properly dominate them, women become unruly temptresses that disrupt and destroy the social order. In her ancient origins, Lilith represents the aspects of the feminine that must be suppressed. Her innate sensual, sexual, passionate, mobile desires are dangerous to the patriarchy.

While Lilith's story as Adam's wife is arguably the most canonical version of her story, her relation to a patriarch is not her own story. Lilith has a history before and after Adam, which I

find more interesting anyway. Scholar Barbara Black Koltuv says of Lilith's origins that she "arose from the chaos" (1). She is an ancient force of counterbalance, an opposition to the maleness of the early world. One of the most cited origin sources comes from the [Alphabet of Ben Sira](#). This is where the invention of her as Adam's first wife is established. Kabbalistic myths of Lilith present her as the feminine aspect of God's male-centric powers. In the Zohar, Kabbalistic work from the 13th century, Lilith emerges with Samael as God emerges with his female aspect Shekkina.

"...out of the dregs of the wine, there emerged an intertwined shoot which comprises both the male and female. They are red like the rose, and they spread out into several sides and paths...Just as in the side of Holiness, so in the Other (Evil) Side as well, male and female are contained in one another" (*Zohar* I 148a)



Sumerian or Assyrian terra cotta relief of a woman with bird feet, accompanied by various desert animals, sometimes speculated to be Lilith. Courtesy of London Museum Collection.

This *Zohar* passage continues to name some epithets for Lilith that I feel set up the ancient views of her: “Woman of Harlotry”, “end of All Flesh”, “Serpent”, and “End of Day”. Each of these names underscores her as an evil counterpart to the holy. There are even earlier mentions of Lilith-like figures from a Sumerian king-list dating back to 2400 B.C. where a she-demon called

a *Lilitu* a vampiric succubus that could visit men at night and bear their ghostly children (Patai 295).

These brief mentions are sprinkled throughout the ancient world with

Lilith’s shape and character

shifting each time. Although

ancient texts are scarce,

archeological digs have revealed

much. From terracotta pieces that

depict Lilith as a female form with

owl feet to incantations of protection, Lilith’s power was keenly felt and feared. Raphael Patai

describes [a collection of bowls](#) that were found in Nippur in Babylonia from an excavation

conducted by the University of Pennsylvania. The bowls contain “Aramaic incantation texts”

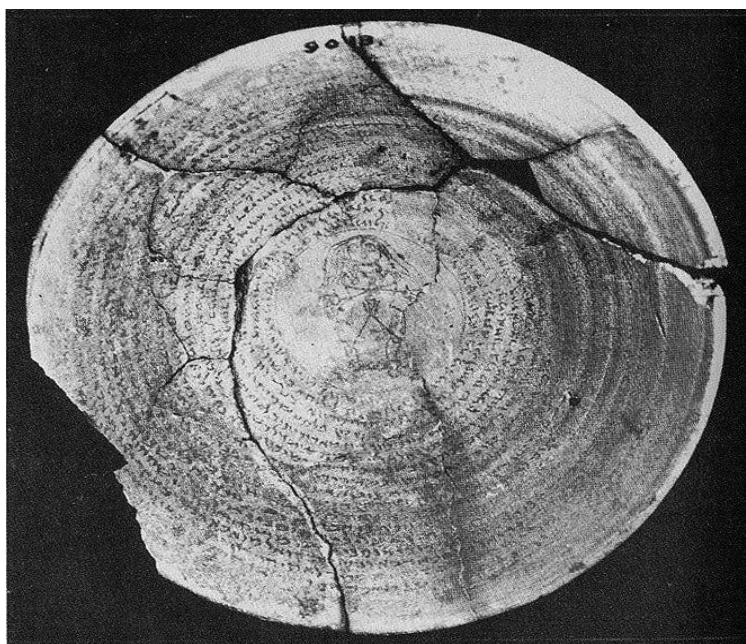
that date back to 600 A.D. (Patai 297). The magical text inscribed in these bowls was used to

ward off Lilith(s). Rather than continue to belabor all the sources that include mere mentions of

Lilith I will digress with this. Ancient sources depict Lilith as a deep well of dark power that was

near impossible to understand, but patriarchy cannot have a powerful woman in the world

without making her a source of fear, not admiration.



6th century CE incantation bowl. Courtesy of University Museum, University of Pennsylvania

Barbara Black Koltuv's book *The Book of Lilith*, "...is an attempt to tell her story, to evoke her presence in consciousness, and to inquire into her meaning in the modern psyche" (Koltuv *Introduction* xii). Madness and gender oppression have a rich history with ancient origins that continue to plague us today. The adoption by Western Judeo-Christians of Lilith's mythic origins and powers is one of the first instances of patriarchy creating a fallen woman and then condemning her for their own gain. Lilith's story as the Biblical Adam's first wife was made as a teaching moment of what will befall a woman who questions the status quo, who desires better for herself. For millennia Lilith has been left behind as a villain, a source of fear, and yet she has been recaptured by modern feminists as an icon. While I would agree that she is more than a villain. I would caution against worshipping her. She is a feeling, a moment, a glimpse of the power within all of us. She does not want to be feared, she is not evil, but she is not to be followed lightly. She wants to be seen, to no longer be boxed in--to be herself. Lilith is here to be called upon for the women who are ready to brave the work, forge their own path, and revel in their own power without even a thought to what anyone else is thinking of them. She is a villain. Yes because of what society has deemed acceptable for a woman they can control, but more so because as a villain she is free to be herself. Villainy has given Lilith her power for once they made her a villain, they feared the power they had given her. She was finally recognized as someone who could touch them back.

Medea's Righteous Anger

"We are not goddesses or matriarchs or edifices of divine forgiveness; we are not fiery fingers of judgment or instruments of flagellation; we are women forced back always upon our woman's power"

Audre Lorde

The quote above comes from Audre Lorde's essay "Uses of Anger," where she argues that anger is a powerful force of energy that creates change. As Lorde explains, anger is a legitimate response to societal injustices and should be understood as such. Feminist scholar Sara Ahmed argues something similar with her term "[feminist killjoy](#)." Ahmed's essay imagines someone pointing out a moment of sexism and racism (i.e., a joke) and being labeled a killjoy. Ahmed argues that yes, being a feminist means killing other people's joy, but in the name of equality. The path of a killjoy ties into Lorde's belief of anger as power. Situations of inequality and oppression create anger in the people who are paying attention. Still, those angered souls have to brave the resistance from others who would call them killers of joy. If anger is power for change, why are angered women often written off as 'having a moment?' If our society has come so far in the name of equality, why are feminist killjoys ostracized for calling for change? An angry woman is just another term for a madwoman. It's maddening to see the world through this lens, but it is a long-lived reality. Euripides' play *Medea* can be read as a document of both the ancient past and a present representation of the struggles of modern madwomen. Traditionally, it is a play about revenge and morality. I want to complicate that view and argue that Euripides' play shows women's unequal role and calls for radical change. The insane crimes that Medea commits

are unredeemable for any reasonable person. Still, audiences are not meant to forgive her for her murders, only understand the position she was in and empathize. For its purposes here, Medea's plight and the subordinate role of women in society is not a bygone relic of the ancient past.

A brief exposition of Jason and Medea would be helpful here, as its original audiences would have already been familiar with the connected myths before seeing the play. Jason's father was the king of Iolkos, who was tragically killed by his brother Pelias. Jason's mother hides him away before he, too, can be killed. Jason grows and trains, planning to return to Iolkos and challenge his uncle for the throne. When he arrives in Iolkos to avenge his father, Jason is tasked with finding the Golden Fleece. If he can return with it, Pelias will give him the throne, and Jason will have avenged his father's death. What follows is a series of adventures that are too long to detail here. If you want the whole story, I recommend this [episode](#) of the podcast "Let's Talk About Myths Baby," created by Liv Albert, or read this brief PBS [article](#). For this blog, all you need to know is that Jason recruits Medea to his crew, where she plays a critical role in Jason's success. I would like to point out that her love for Jason led her astray; he talked a big game as a great hero, yet it was Medea who actually slew the serpent guarding the Fleece. Euripides does mention some of these events in Medea's argument with Jason, including some of the horrible things she had to do to help her lover succeed. Medea deceived her father and allowed the murder of King Pelios by his daughters (*Medea* lines 483-487). They find the Fleece, and Jason takes his throne, and they are presumably happy for a while. However, the locals dislike Medea's status as a foreigner and her magic and run Jason and Medea out of Iolkos. The play begins after Jason, Medea, and their children have settled in Corinth. As the play unfolds, audiences watch as Medea takes her predicament into her own hands. She is a master at calculating and assessing risk as she constructs her revenge.

Some have called Medea's character "deranged and vengeful" ([Hart](#)), but that is precisely why I am drawn to her. Medea is a perfect combination of both types of madwomen: the insane one and the angry one. I want to focus on the cause of her deranged behaviors: anger. Her anger at the patriarchal forces in her life turns her to act in what a reasonable person would consider unstable ways. Murdering your husband's new wife, her father, and then your two children is not what any reasonable person would consider sane. But if we really look at what *Medea* is communicating to us as modern audiences. She is mad, wholly and righteously, because of her place in a man's world. If we consider anger as a legitimate response to injustice, then we would consider Medea's anger at Jason's betrayal reasonable. I am not arguing that murder is the answer to injustice but that Euripides' play is a dramatized depiction of a woman responding to the unjust world around her. Medea's righteous anger flows freely throughout the play; the word "rage" is repeated by the Nurse and the Tutor in reference to Medea's emotional state quite frequently in the opening pages. The Nurse frets, "She'll not relax her rage till it has found its victim. God grant she strike her enemies and not her friends! (lines 94-95). What Medea does with her rage, I think, is truly brilliant. To go back to "Uses of Anger," Lorde writes that when anger is "focused with precision, it can become a powerful source of energy serving progress and change" (127). Medea's anger is such a source of energy that she inspires the Chorus of Corinthian women to call for a gender recast. Yes, she is a murderer; she is a madwoman, there is no denying that. But consider that by the end of the play, she appears in a chariot pulled by *dragons* that carry her away. This is remarkable because a typical Greek play would have one of the gods coming out and setting everything right. But they don't, showing that the gods are at ease with Medea's actions.



Picture courtesy of wikicommons

Medea's anger has been established, as is what she does with her anger, but what of Jason, the once-great hero? In today's vernacular, we would consider Jason's behavior as gaslighting. When Medea points out all she has done for him, he claims that it was not her doing but Aphrodite's. Aphrodite made Medea fall in love with him, so everything she did out of love for him was caused by Aphrodite. Medea rightfully calls him out on that point. He even has the audacity to tell her to calm down. Jason says to her, "--you'll change your mind and be more sensible" (lines 629-630). Jason's behavior is just one in a long line of men then and now that have disregarded a woman's argument because she was too emotional. The relationship between Medea and Jason in this play aligns itself nicely with the double-standard of anger between men and women. To historicize my argument, "within the long history of western civilisation, women's anger has been construed as deviant, monstrous or otherwise taboo..." (Jilly Boyce

Kay “Introduction: anger, media, and feminism: the gender politics of mediated rage” 591). Female anger is often seen as a sign of immaturity or unreasonability, but a man’s anger is justified as a sign of masculine power. If you are looking for a modern example of this divide, I would guide you to the Brett Kavanaugh [Senate Judiciary Committee hearings](#) when he was accused by Dr. Ford of sexual assault. In this example, one of many, I would add, Justice Kavanaugh is seen having his moment. He is angry, cries, and shouts, all in the name of what he calls “a calculated and orchestrated political hit.” In other words, his anger is fueled by an injustice he feels was committed against him. Instead of disqualifying him for his emotional outburst, Kavanaugh was supported and protected. For a white man, anger is considered an emotion of power, but if Dr. Ford had given her testimony with the same level of emotion, she would have been considered hysterical and an unreliable witness. To return to Sara Ahmed for a moment, “we can hear what is at stake in how women who speak out are heard. To sound strident is to be heard as loud, harsh or grating” (Ahmed “[Collection](#)”). Women are not given the same privilege of self-representation as men are. To even command an iota of the respect that men are given, women have to stuff themselves into a calm and submissive package. Medea knows that her reputation is not for her to decide but for Jason to weave.

Though victimized, Medea is not the victim of this play. This play is her time to get angry, get even, and reclaim herself. Any moment she is on stage, Medea assesses the other characters around her and evaluates the best course of action to take. When King Creon approaches her to banish her from Corinth for his daughter’s safety, Medea assures him, “don’t let *me* alarm you, Creon. I’m in no position--/ A woman--to wrong a king” (lines 317-318). She continues to play-act this submissive woman until she has swayed Creon to allow her one more day in Corinth. When he leaves, she turns to the Chorus, saying, “Do you think I would ever have fawned so on

this man, / Except to gain my purpose, carry out my schemes?" (lines 370-371). She recognizes her position and uses it to her advantage, lulling Creon into a false sense of security. If Medea is a murderess, the Chorus is even more bloodthirsty. They call for a complete gendered recast, "deceit is *men's* device now...A time comes when the female sex is honoured;" (lines 416 & 419). The Chorus has recognized Medea's plight and sees their own situations reflected back at them. These women have had it with being told they don't matter, and they are calling for radical change.

One of the most remarkable things Euripides does with this play is that we can sympathize with Medea. Audiences are given her perspective and thoughts as she processes and plans her next moves. Not only that, but Euripides casts the Chorus as a group of Corinthian women who also empathize with Medea and express their dissatisfaction with their role in society. The audience and the Chorus see the turmoil she goes through and how she rationalizes her actions. We can understand why she is mad. To return to Kay's commentary on mediated rage as a closing, "Women's anger has for so long been cast as unreasonable, hysterical, as the opposite of reason; but actually, it is full of the power of insight and understanding" (595). Now is the time to express all our anger, break down all the patriarchal oppression holding us down, and like Medea, ride our chariots beyond it.

My lack of “pen” still creates



Picture courtesy of elker-free-vector via Pixabay

I've been asked why I decided to do my thesis project in blog form as a digital humanities project. It's a question I asked myself repeatedly while I was planning and preparing for my final semesters of Grad school. There is a short, simple answer, and then there is a longer answer that ties neatly into the scope of my project. The short answer is I decided to do this project as a series of blog posts because I like writing in this format. The tones I can use, the humor, and the language are more my style than a traditional analytical thesis paper. For example, I can admit here that I really hate long and dry academic articles, and I did not want to write one. If I were writing an actual thesis, I would have to lie and discuss the new historicist lens that this can be viewed through, and the anthropomorphic nature of the bench does...blah blah blah. That does not mean that I have not read and written some kick-ass academic papers, but those were few in a large pile of dryness. I guess I could have decided to write the traditional thesis paper and made

it light and fun to read, but that leads us to the other part of the simple answer. Blogs are more accessible for people of any background to read and interact with. The stories I am sharing, what I am bringing to light, is something that should be shared with everyone regardless of academic standing.

When I started thinking about madness and researching how it is heavily applied to women as a way to undercut their successes, to silence them before they could ever speak up, I was so mad that I had to speak up for them. To be a voice for the voiceless. I wanted to do my part in helping to shed some light on a centuries-old, actually millennium years old problem, and writing about it was how I could do it. From that, I realized two things: I would never be calm enough to write a rational and cohesive single paper. I wanted to write about too many examples and sides to this topic that I would never have finished the project in one semester. I will never be done writing about the injustices that face all women, but with this format, I can come back to the conversation easier than if it was a static paper. This blog is alive and ever-evolving; the women I have written about and will write about have guided me and told me their stories; I am their humble scribe sharing their stories with a world that might finally be ready to hear them. And that was the simple answer!

The more complex answer is that I choose to do blogs because academia and all that comes with it is a patriarchal structure. Much has been done to work on that in the higher-ed field, and I love my English department, but there is still a long way to go. Historically, the voices that get heard most often in these academic settings have been white men--who have always been given the privilege of self-representation. White men have written theses and read theses, setting a precedent for what a thesis project is. With my project, I am charting my own course towards a

more inclusive future. I set the precedence for what a digital humanities thesis project looks like. Not to take my own power trip, but this carries into the patriarchal world we have all grown up in. White men have set the precedent for just about everything in this world, including writing. There is a long history of male writers being published and/or well-respected on the basis of their sex alone. Virginia Woolf wrote and spoke on this prolifically throughout her life. In her recorded speech, *A Room of One's Own*, she talked about women writers. Specifically, how so many female writers have been silenced before they wrote a single letter that to talk about women and fiction, one has to acknowledge that fact first. Woolf writes extensively on this topic, but for brevity's sake, I want to include this: "That woman, then, who was born with a gift of poetry in the sixteenth century, was an unhappy woman, a woman at strife against herself. All the conditions of her life, all her own instincts, were hostile to the state of mind which is needed to set free whatever is in the brain" (Woolf 52). Patriarchy made writing unnatural to women. Along with that, most of what is considered a part of the Canon in literature was written by men or approved by men for public consumption. It would be easy to say that Woolf's work changed everyone's minds and patriarchal oppression is no more, but then I would not be writing this today. Theorists Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have dedicated their lives to writing on this topic and documenting its history. In their trailblazing *Madwoman in the Attic*, their first chapter is dedicated to unpacking the male-dominated field of writing. Gilbert and Gubar explain the idea that to write is an act of creation (which it is), but creation is done by man. While this seems counterintuitive, because when has a man ever created anything, this idea stems from the Judeo-Christian belief of God being male and creating the universe. From then on, the act of creation has been deemed to be an act of male power. Gilbert and Gubar point out that "in patriarchal Western culture, therefore, the text's author is a father, a progenitor, a procreator, an aesthetic

patriarch whose pen is an instrument of generative power like his penis” (6). The act of writing a novel or an article then is an act of male power. Men decided that the only stories, the only analyses, the only facts worth listening to came out of another man’s mouth. To be heard over the sound of men, someone has to conform their ideas to fit the accepted narrative or get louder.

So back to the question of why I’m writing these blogs in the first place. I am writing these blogs because I want to speak (well type) louder than the centuries of men who have held women down. I want to shout over their comments about our appearances, opinions, and our emotions. I want my daughters and everyone else’s daughters to know they can enter any room and speak their minds without having to mitigate it to society’s norms about women. I want them to speak, write, sing, dance, create, heck even just breathe and not be fighting so hard to break a mold that they were born into. Hell, maybe that’s idealist of me to want, but it’s something I am going to dedicate my life to. I will always point out something that’s wrong or needs to be changed, and I really don’t care who tells me I’m too loud.

“Indeed, I would venture to guess that Anon, who wrote so many poems without signing them,
was often a woman”

-Virginia Woolf

Images of Enclosure

When I first began researching madwomen, my search began in literature. I combed through books, short stories, and poetry across periods. I found so much madness not only in the characters but in the writers' own lives. Writing, after all, is an extension of ourselves and our circumstances. If so many female writers were experiencing the madness of patriarchal enclosure, I began wondering how many other women were experiencing it, but not writing it down? How many were 'mad' in reality and not just fiction? There are very interesting parallels that can be drawn between fiction and reality. I want to refer to scholars Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *Madwoman in the Attic*. Their research into the same topic is focused mainly on 19th-century literature authors and characters, but as I argue that sort of oppression has not changed. Gilbert and Gubar write in their *Preface* that women have often been, "enclosed in the architecture of an overwhelmingly male-dominated society" (xvii). They are using the term architecture to describe the structural facets of patriarchal society. Women then are confined to the areas men have defined for them; that really gives the phrase 'women belong in the kitchen' new meaning.

If patriarchy defines the spaces, then I can argue that women have had to find creative ways to rebel. Aside from active protests, there is passive activism that exists in works that include this madwoman character. These writers could have written these "images of enclosure and escape" (Gilbert & Gubar *Preface* xvii) as an act of both *pointing it out* and as an act of rebellion. Even though many women have been unable to shed the shackles of patriarchy, they were able to disguise their rebellion in their writing cleverly hiding their dissatisfaction and protests in their

novels and poems. As Gilbert and Gubar point out, writings by and of madwomen have certain characteristics and tropes. The madwoman starts out as a “normal” woman and then for some reason she goes mad. Once she goes mad there is no returning to the genteel housewife. In this blog, I want to examine the similarities between a fictional short story and a real madwoman’s life story.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s short story “The Yellow Wallpaper” (TYW) has been analyzed and examined since its initial publication in 1892. Authorial intent is not usually something that matters to me as an English grad student. I think that’s the beauty of literature: that you can interpret things in lots of different ways (provided you have actual evidence). For this text though, Gilman actually wrote about her reasons for writing the short story, and I believe those should be considered when this story is examined. After all, the text is based partly on her own experiences with postpartum depression. In the entry, she writes that she was given the same advice as the character in her story to rest in bed and never write ever again. She states that the advice from this “wise-man” sent her “so near the borderline of utter mental ruin that I could see over [it]” ([Perkins Gilman](#)). This was never meant to be a feminist tale (I think it still is though), instead it was supposed to be a cautionary tale. At the very end of the brief entry she writes, “It [TYW] was not intended to drive people crazy, but to save people from being driven crazy, and it worked” ([Perkins Gilman](#)). For its use here, TYW offers an example of the madwoman character arc in literature, that takes its ideas from real-life.

The structure of TYW is a series of journal entries written by the wife as she spirals into madness. At the beginning of TYW, readers are informed that the wife has been advised, or should I say ordered, by her husband to remain locked up in an “atrocious nursery” (Perkins

Gilman), after her mental health has taken a turn for the worse during her postpartum period. Her choices about her health and care are made by the patriarchal figures in her life, “if a physician of high standing, and one’s own husband, assures friends and relatives that there is really nothing the matter with one but temporary nervous depression—a slight hysterical tendency—what is one to do?” (TYW Perkins Gilman). As with the case of many madwomen, her husband decides to just sweep her off, away from prying eyes, away from the society she cannot conform to. It is not explicitly stated in the text, but it is implied that she will remain away from society until she is decent enough to rejoin.

Once they arrive at the mansion, her husband sets her up in the nursery. In this nursery, she becomes increasingly obsessed with the yellow wallpaper in the room. Also in this room, the windows are barred and there are rings hanging out from the walls. Within the wallpaper she sees forms and shapes moving about until she believes it to be a woman trapped behind the paper. She watches the figure move “the faint figure behind seemed to shake the pattern, just as if she wanted to get out” (TYW Perkins Gilman). The woman believes that this same treatment happened to another woman before her; that the wallpaper swallowed her up and now it wants her too.

The patriarchal hold over her eventually breaks when she snaps, becoming utterly mad, peeling all the wallpaper off and pacing around the room continuously “‘I’ve got out at last,’ ... ‘and I’ve pulled off most of the paper, so you can’t put me back!’” (Perkins Gilman). There is no going back to the submissive wife, she is a monster now, but literature is often conveying a message to its readers. With her transformation she surpasses the patriarchy, “now why should that man have fainted? But he did, and right across my path by the wall so that I had to creep over him

every time” (Perkins Gilman). She physically and metaphorically tramples over the patriarchal hold over her.

This is often the point where critics argue this is not a feminist tale. They believe that because she spirals totally into madness with no hope for her sanity then it must mean that her husband was right; she was mad. I want to caution readers from rolling down the hill to that conclusion so quickly. As a cautionary tale, Gilman was attempting to warn other women about the treatment she, and her heroine, were prescribed. When she breaks out of the wallpaper she is utterly mad, but she is mad because she was enclosed both physically and societally. The patriarchal force in her life saw a woman as unable to perform her domestic duties so she must be reprogrammed and confined. Gilman takes that notion and shows how shutting a woman away does very little good for their sanity.

If the fate of literary madwomen is bleak, the fate of real madwomen is bleaker. Historically the Victorian era saw the height of admissions to asylums. I say that it is sooner than that because people who differ from societal norms have always been excluded in some way. To focus on the Victorian era, 18th and into the 19th century, [the emerging field of psychiatry was used to justify women’s oppression](#). Perhaps one of the most influential madwomen of this time is [Elizabeth Packard](#). Packard was an advocate for the rights of women and the insane after her own time in an asylum. Kate Moore’s novel *The Woman they Could Not Silence* chronicles the story of Packard’s experience of being condemned to the Jacksonville Insane Asylum in Illinois in 1860 by her husband, Theophilus. She was put there not for the sake of her own mental health, but because of her outspoken differing opinions from her husband and his church. She would be there for three years before a jury took seven minutes to deem she was sane. During her time

there she observed the doctors and attendants, their treatments, and the other patients. What she found was a large group of women as sane as she was, there for the same reasons she was: they were not perfect, quiet angels. When Packard is forcibly removed from her home Moore writes, “If she screamed, she sealed her fate. She had to keep her rage locked up inside her, her feelings as tightly buttoned as her blouse” (Moore “Prologue”). What Moore has done with this scene is perfectly capture the restrictive nature of patriarchy. Both her locking up of her emotions and also the “tightly buttoned...blouse” work together to convey how trapped Packard must have felt. If she let those emotions, presumably rage and hurt, she would play out the insanity her husband had prescribed to her.

As I read Moore’s novel I found so many aspects of Packard’s life that echoed the literary “Yellow Wallpaper”. While Gilman did not credit Packard’s story in why she wrote TYW, Gilman’s own experience lends itself to the historical medical treatment of women like Packard. There is a common theme of physical enclosure for both Gilman’s heroine, and Packard is a direct result of the ever-present patriarchy. In TYW, the heroine is locked away in a “colonial mansion, a hereditary estate” (Perkins Gilman). Her description as a hereditary estate works not only to set the scene but also further embeds her in patriarchal control. Often hereditary estates were passed through generations by male heirs, women were used to merge estate holdings through marriage arrangements. In the very first chapter of Moore’s novel she describes Packard’s bedroom, “The morning of June 18, Elizabeth’s eyes were drawn again to the green shutters in her bedroom. There was a reason why they no longer let in light. Theophilus had boarded them shut” (Moore 15). Her husband has locked the outside world away in an attempt to keep her unsightly opinions away from others. Even after she is released from the asylum he

locks her in the nursery and boards all the windows (Moore 290). It seems the literary madwoman is not as exaggerated as it is argued.

If the madwoman is so permeated into literature, why does it seem like no one is realizing its real-life implications? These madwoman characters were not meant to be understood as only villains, or antagonists to scare the heroine into the hero's arms. These madwoman characters were cries for change, points of activism that fell largely on deaf ears. Historically in the 19th century, the medical [wisdom of the age was that assertive, ambitious women were unnatural, and therefore sick](#). Women like Elizabeth Packard and Gilman's character were physically shut away for their inability to conform to the idyllic angels they were told to be. I think that if we really look we will still find all sorts of different forms of confinement that exists over us today.

Not a conclusion, but a pause.

As much as this project has been about telling other women's stories, this has also been about telling my own. I have delved into the origins and mythologies of the madwoman. I've explained the subjective definitions and looked at how madwomen are portrayed across various mediums and genres. But I can hear my skeptical readers asking "so what?". So, let this blog serve as what this all has to do with postmodern society. I've said in most of my other blogs that this problem (patriarchal oppression) has not gone away, instead, it has morphed to hide in plain sight while still holding control. Like some sort of societal BeetleJuice, if we say its name three times in a row patriarchy comes out of the depths of hell to remind us of our place. If anyone is looking for more concrete proof, I would advise them to just look around and take in everything they see. If you really look, I know you will see the madwomen around you. Watching our favorite new TV series, you'll see her, reading a romance novel for some light reading--you'll see her. Or at the very least you'll see the constraints around the female(s) and their potential for madness. I know I'm still speaking in generalities, and we'll get there. Here's a question to ponder though, when was the last time that you did anything without thinking of all the implications around it? This question is not inherently sex/gender based, but depending on those characteristics I would bet there is a significant disparity.

Gender roles and gendered experiences are a direct cause of madness. As long as patriarchy continues to exist and oppress women, there will be madwomen. A modern-day madwoman is someone who sees the constraints stifling them and works to fight against them. If we think metaphorically, a straightjacket of societal beliefs is slowly tightened as childhood innocence declines. The more socially aware a person becomes, the tighter the confines. For me, it was

about middle-school age when suddenly all the girls were wearing makeup and perfume to impress the boys and started pointing out to me my pants were ugly, that I was too loud, and I shouldn't raise my hand so much in class. You see, no boy would ever like a loud, nerdy, know-it-all. That's when I felt it, the slightest tug to change, to fit in with those girls, to get a boy to *like-like* me. From there, I was faced with a choice, continue to conform or break it all open. I tried for a time to fit in. I wore make-up, stopped wearing my favorite pants, and quieted down in class, but guess what? I hated it. I never felt so untethered, so alone as when I was doing everything "right." So I stopped; well, it took a while, but I finally said enough.

That's when my story gets harder.

When you say "enough" and try to get out of your straightjacket, the ties tighten. It's brief, and it's worth it in the end, but for those moments, being free doesn't feel worth it. People you thought were your friends leave. People continue to tell you that you're wrong, only now they're louder. But in that first snap of the ties, you feel it. This overwhelming rush of warmth like the sun on your skin that feels like *home*. Yes, they continue to call you mad; crazy; bitch; bossy, judgemental, but their voices don't matter to you now. There is nothing wrong with you; they don't understand the path you took because they were too scared to try for themselves.

This brings me to less personal modern relevancy. On the world stage, the biggest example comes from the unfortunately named Trump era. During the years 2016-2020, [there was a reemergence of what many considered bygone times of misogyny and sexism](#). Here was a self-proclaimed sexual assaulter, being elected to the highest position in the United States. Living through those four very long years was terrifyingly close to Margaret Atwood's Gilead from *The Handmaid's Tale*. Still, we persisted. Within these same four years, the same president proceeded to verbally harass and discredit some of the most powerful women in the United

States. He called Hillary Clinton “[nasty](#)” in the Presidential debates, just because she was smarter and more qualified than him. Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi’s mental state was called into question by the same man. The Trump era made public what had been polished over by much of society: threatening and discrediting powerful women so that men stay in power. I will point to one more political example: the treatment of Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC). AOC is a young, outspoken, woman of color currently representing New York’s 14th district. She is a big advocate of changes that threaten to topple the status quo, therefore, she is a threat. In an effort that can only be described as bullying, other government representatives, mostly male, [harass and belittle her](#). Yet she persists. Fighting for changes for us all even when so many don’t want her help. If you need further proof of the treatment of any of the women above, I would advise you to search their names on your favorite browser and then select Images. These women I’ve mentioned and even more that I could not include are modern-day madwomen.

So what is the relevance of studying madwomen and their origins? The relevancy is that it is a fight we’re still fighting. As long as patriarchy continues to set the stage for women to play act for the male-gaze there will always be the women who don’t fit into the neat, pretty, little boxes. Those women that don’t fit are condemned and that leads to madness. As long as we all keep pretending things are better, nothing ever changes. We all have to see it, get mad, go mad, and make changes.

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