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Female Madness in Greek Tradition and Medicine

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Abstract
This paper considers the similarities and differences in Greek thought concerning female madness among both traditional views of madness and medical views. It identifies three broad types of female madness – Dionysian madness, most often associated with maenads and maenadism; desire-induced madness, associated with Aphrodite or Eros; and the medical views of madness of the Hippocratic Corpus, Plato, and other writers. Divinely-inspired madness was considered an assault on the individual from the outside, while the physicians considered madness to be an affliction from within. However, while desire-induced madness and medical madness were seen as the results of women avoiding men, Dionysian madness prompted women to leave male society. Finally, all three types of madness could be cured or ended through contact, often but not always sexual, with men.

Keywords
Madness, Greek Medicine, Hippocrates, Maenad, Desire

Disciplines
Ancient History, Greek and Roman through Late Antiquity | Classical Literature and Philology | Women's Health | Women's Studies

Comments
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Female Madness in Greek Tradition and Medicine

Caitlin Connelly

CLA 335-A
Research Paper
5/5/17

I affirm that I have upheld the highest principles of honesty and integrity in my academic work and have not witnessed a violation of the Honor Code.

As late as 1980, hysteria, or hysterical neurosis, was considered a clinically diagnosable disorder by the American Psychiatric Association, and while Freud had challenged the notion that this disease was confined to women at the end of the 19th century, this perception had dominated Western medical thought since the time of the ancient Greeks and the writing of the Hippocratic Corpus during the 5th century BCE (Tasca et al. 2012, 110). Greek medicine, as well as more traditional beliefs, considered women to be particularly susceptible to madness, though these two schools of thought differed on the cause of the affliction. This difference reflects the clash between tradition and science, or perhaps more accurately, between the old and the new, that always accompanies innovation. However, Greek medicine did not evolve in a cultural vacuum; it was shaped by tradition, and this influence can be discerned through the analysis of a condition such as female madness.

This analysis of female madness as portrayed in both tradition and medicine reveals three main themes. The first is that traditional beliefs tended to view madness as a divinely-inspired invasion from outside the body, while medicine viewed it as an affliction that came from within the self. The second is that traditional causes of madness were attributed to either Dionysus or a deity associated with desire, such as Aphrodite or Eros. While Dionysus-inspired madness may be seen as a way for women to avoid men and male civilization, Aphrodite or Eros-inspired madness may be seen as a result of such avoidance, which tends to correspond with the medical cause of madness. Finally, all three of these categories – Dionysian, induced by desire, and medical – emphasized the need for some action to cure the affliction. Thus, though tradition and medicine ascribed different causes to madness, they agreed, in a broad sense, on the cure, which illuminates the cultural continuity between these schools of thought.

The earliest evidence for divinely-inspired madness comes from the depictions of maenads, the female followers of Dionysus, on Attic vase paintings during the fifth and sixth centuries BCE. Scholar Sheila McNally warned that the maenads depicted in art cannot necessarily be equated with maenads in literature or the real women who worshipped Dionysus (McNally 1978, 105). However, these artistic renditions still convey useful evidence for perceptions of female madness. The earliest maenads are shown dancing in a slow rhythm with their male counterparts, the satyrs. This dance often takes on erotic tones and leads to sex, and in general reveals harmony and joy for all figures involved (McNally 1978, 102, 111, 127). However, between 530 and 500 BCE there were two distinct changes in the depiction of maenads: their dance became more energetic and wild, and they became more associated with the natural world through additions of animals, such as snakes, to these scenes and through the maenads' wielding of the thyrsus. The thyrsus, symbolizing the power of nature, was both phallic and fertile (McNally 1978, 107, 111, 121 130).

This second development, in particular, imbued maenads with their own power, which seemed to cause an increasingly hostile relationship between them and the satyrs. The new maenad often uses her thyrsus to defend herself from the satyr's lustful advances, and while earlier maenads went with satyrs willingly and even enthusiastically, now satyrs can only achieve their goals through violence (McNally 1978, 120, 130). These developments in the representations of maenads reveal that female worship of Dionysus, at least in art, grew increasingly associated with nature and the kind of ecstatic dancing that was characteristic of Dionysian madness. The maenads' possession of the thyrsus, with its phallic symbolism, hints at a usurpation of male power that gave them an authority to reject the satyrs. These themes of

association with nature and rejection of male authority in favor of their own are mirrored in drama, perhaps most famously in Euripides's *The Bacchae*.

There are, in fact, two types of maenads in *The Bacchae*, and the central difference between them is their madness. The first type are the Asian bacchants, the worshippers of Dionysus who have followed him to Thebes from their homes in the east. Though they express a longing to participate in ecstatic, all-night dances in the wilderness and even cheer the murder of Pentheus by his mother, their comments seem guided by an internal logic and are portrayed rationally (Euripides, *The Bacchae* 862-877, 1030-1131). The other type of maenad are the women of Thebes who have been driven mad by Dionysus in retribution for his aunts' slander of his mother. They have gone to Mount Cithaeron and are "compelled…to wear my [Dionysus's] ritual uniform," (Euripides, *The Bacchae* 20-36). His "uniform" likely refers to animal skins and the thyrsus. Here, the women have left the city and its civilization dominated by masculine authority for the wilderness. Their madness also bears a significant characteristic that is seen elsewhere in literature, namely that it has been forced upon them by an outside source. In effect, the maenads of *The Bacchae* are only mad when they are affected by the god. The madness seems to be both an affliction and a form of worship. The women are cured once Agave murders her son Pentheus and her father, Cadmus, helps her to realize what she has done (Euripides, *The Bacchae* 1264-1300). Cadmus's intervention seems to represent Agave's reentrance into civilization, coming back into the male-centric dynamic of Greek society where she is no longer an independent huntress but a proper mother and daughter. *The Bacchae* thus characterizes Dionysian madness as associated with nature and the feminine, lacking a male presence with the exception of the god himself, and being brought on by Dionysus. Madness inspired by desire presents itself somewhat differently.

Like Dionysian madness, desire-induced madness is characterized as an affliction from an outside divine source, but rather than being presented as an impetus *to* reject male civilization, it seems to stem *from* a rejection or lack of the male presence. The two types of madness were apparently similar. In *The Bacchae*, Pentheus accuses the Theban women of claiming to worship Dionysus while "it's really Aphrodite they adore," suggesting that the women were engaging in illicit sexual behavior under the guise of religious rites (Euripides, *The Bacchae* 224-225). Of course, the Attic vase paintings depicting maenads reveal that they could be quite in control of their bodies and their sexuality. In contrast, madness inspired by Aphrodite or Eros, exemplified by Phaedra in Euripides's *Hippolytus*, belied the loss or the slipping of this control. To punish Hippolytus for failing to worship her, Aphrodite makes Phaedra, his step-mother, fall in love with him (Euripides, *Hippolytus* 21-26). Aphrodite does not necessarily inflict Phaedra with madness, but rather her madness comes about because of her love for Hippolytus, which cannot be acted upon, and is anyway unrequited. This madness drives her to convey maenad-like sentiments, such as wanting to go to the mountains and hunt animals (Euripides, *Hippolytus* 215-220). Another woman who was said to be like a maenad is Andromache in the *Iliad*. In Book Six, she learns that the tide of the battle is turning against the Trojans and rushes to the walls of the city "like a woman gone mad" to find her husband, Hektor (Lattimore, *Iliad* 6.88-6.89). The worship of Dionysus clearly did not inspire Andromache's apparent madness, but rather her concern for Hektor's safety. Here again, desire – Andromache's love for Hektor – causes madness.

Madness inspired by desire must also be cured by some action. In the case of Andromache, she eventually finds Hektor (Lattimore, *Iliad* 6.393-6.395). The love of a wife for her husband is appropriate, and so its conclusion is unproblematic. Phaedra's love is quite

different, meaning her madness must find a different outlet. Unable to satisfy her desire, and now afraid that Hippolytus will reveal her feelings to her husband, Phaedra commits suicide by hanging herself (Euripides, *Hippolytus* 778-779). The cases of Andromache and Phaedra reveal that the madness caused by Aphrodite or Eros could be resolved in either two ways: either by fulfilling whatever lack had caused the madness, or by death. Either way, like Dionysian madness, it could not go on indefinitely, but had to be brought to its conclusion somehow. In this way, the affliction of madness seems very much like a disease.

Notably, madness was not the only such affliction caused by desire. Archaic love poetry often, if not exclusively, describes the experience of desire as decidedly unpleasant. For example, the poet Sappho describes a moment of jealousy as causing her to go mute, blind, and deaf, and to tremble and become pale (Sappho, *31(L-P)* 8-16). Anacreon describes the effects of Eros in violent terms, comparing the desire induced by Eros to being hit with a ball, boxing, and being hit with an axe and then doused with cold water (Anacreon, *PMG 358*; *PMG 396*; *PMG 413*). Strikingly, he writes, “The dice that Eros plays with are raving madness and battle din,” (Anacreon, *PMG 398*). In addition to the connection made between erotic desire and the chaos of war, this short poem makes clear the association between Eros, the experience of desire, and madness. The idea of madness as an affliction was thus quite established in Greek culture and tradition when the medical texts of the Hippocratics and Aristotle were written.

For the medical writers, female madness was the result of the physiological differences between men and women. Two main schools of thought emerge to describe this difference: Aristotle and the Hippocratic writers. Aristotle describes the determination of the sex of offspring as a question of heat. Heat allows the semen to “concoct” correctly and form a male child. If there is not enough heat, however, this concoction is incomplete and forms a female

child. Stemming from this, women are colder than men and have more blood in their bodies, presumably because their lack of heat does not allow the blood to concoct into a different, more useful substance (Aristotle, *Generation of Animals* 765b.15-765b.20, 766a.20-766a.25). In this theory, women are failed or substandard men. The Hippocratics, however, believed women to be made of a different substance altogether than men. They say that a woman has soft, sponge-like flesh that draws more blood from her belly into her body, while a man's hard, solid flesh prevents his body from becoming too filled with blood (Hippocrates, *Diseases of Women 1* 1). The difference between the two theories seems to be how "other" the writers view women to be. Both agree that women are inferior to men, but whereas Aristotle considers women to be essentially the same as men but lacking heat, the Hippocratics saw women as a completely different type of being (Dean-Jones 2003, 200-201). Both theories also account for menstrual blood as being integral to the nature of women.

Medical writers considered most female maladies to be associated with menstruation and the womb. The Hippocratics believed that the womb could become displaced, which caused pain and blocked menstruation. This displacement resulted from the womb drying out. As it dried, it became lighter and would move upwards through the body, sometimes hitting other organs and causing sudden suffocation. Menstruation could add some moisture to the womb, but by far the most effective way to keep the womb moist and in place was through sexual intercourse with a man. Pregnancy, the desired result of such a treatment, could also weigh the womb down (Hippocrates, *Diseases of Women 1* 7; Hippocrates, *Generating Seed/Nature of the Child* 4). In addition, certain herbs, drugs, or other scented substances could be used to bring the womb back into place (Dean-Jones 2003, 194). Aristotle believed that the human womb was held in place as in other animals, but that it could be pushed upwards and cause a similar suffocating sensation

(Dean-Jones 2003, 195). The wandering womb thus held a certain amount of power over a woman. Marriage became a medical necessity for women in order to stay healthy, as sexual intercourse was evidently the only way to keep the womb moist. This would seem to rationalize the sexual dominance of men over women, portraying women as victims of their own sexuality – a fairly common theme in Greek literature – and men as their saviors. Female medical issues came about as a result of avoiding sexual contact with men, and female madness fits into this characterization.

Madness seemed to afflict young, unmarried women in particular. The Chorus in *Hippolytus* briefly refers to the wife of Herakles, Deianira, as the "untamed Oechalian filly," and compares her to a bacchant or maenad (Euripides, *Hippolytus* 545-550). Notably, this is a depiction of Deianira just before her wedding. The implication is that her marriage to Herakles, and specifically sexual intercourse with him, "tamed" her and took away her madness.[1] Like Deianira, unmarried women were susceptible to madness because they had never had sexual intercourse with men before, which was necessary to unblock the flow of their menstruation. The blood would build up in their bodies, flowing upwards to the heart and diaphragm, causing at first numbness, lethargy, and fever. If unabated, the young woman would apparently seek to commit suicide by hanging or drowning (Hippocrates, *Diseases of Young Girls* 251). The suffocation by hanging or drowning would seem to mirror the suffocation caused by the womb or menstrual blood, a double strangulation that mimics the upward motion of the womb and blood to the chest, throat, or head (Loraux 1995, 113). Madness in women, particularly in maidens, was thus caused by a lack of sexual contact with men and characterized by the drying of the womb and the buildup of menstrual blood in the body, which led to physical pain and

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1. This is not to suggest that Euripides intended to convey a medical perception of madness. Sexual intercourse was also a method to treat the madness inspired by Aphrodite or Eros. Here, this example is simply meant to illustrate a known, if mythological, case of madness in a young, unmarried woman.

emotional instability. Much like the madness of Aphrodite and Eros, this medical madness had two possible conclusions: marriage and sexual intercourse, which would open the pathways for the flow of menstrual blood and moisten the womb to keep it in its correct position; or death by suicide, particularly in a way that mimicked the internal strangulation by blood.

The medical interpretation of suicide prompted by madness signifies a divergence with cultural practices and ideas. The Hippocratic writer of the *Diseases of Young Girls* identifies suicide by hanging or drowning as the negative consequences of not being married, and that, naturally, getting married is the best way to resolve this issue. However, traditionally these methods of suicide were considered culturally appropriate ways of avoiding unwanted sex. They offer a way to preserve virginity, and, being bloodless means of suicide, they allow the girl or woman to avoid the bloodshed associated with rape. In cases of women who commit suicide in these ways after being raped, the lack of bloodshed may seek to suggest the "non-bleeding, closed body of the virgin," (King 1998, 83). Thus, while Greek culture may have explained these actions as efforts to avoid sex, the medical writers interpreted them as the results of having avoided sex, and offered marriage as the solution.

It should be noted that medical writers did not always confine madness to women. In his analysis of the Hippocratic texts *The Sacred Disease* and *On Regimen*, the *Timeaus* by Plato, and the works of the later physician Galen, scholar Jacques Jouanna identified two types of madness described by these authors. One is depressive madness, associated with cold phlegm and water and characterized by a calm unresponsiveness, sorrow, and eventual loss of memory. The other is hyperactive madness, associated with hot bile and fire and characterized by agitation and fear (Jouanna 2013, 99-100, 117-118). Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Jouanna's study is that it does not deal with or even mention gender. However, the oldest of the texts, *The Sacred*

Disease, indicates early on a recognition that men specifically could suffer from madness, noting that some men were known to groan, choke, and walk around in their sleep, acts which the writer describes as “mad and delirious,” (Hippocrates, *The Sacred Disease* 1.20-1.29). If Jouanna’s binary madness applies only to men or even to both men and women, where does the female madness discussed in this paper fall? Its symptoms would seem to indicate hyperactive madness, and the blood that causes it is hot like bile. Perhaps female madness is a separate, third type of madness caused by an imbalance of blood, just as depressive and hyperactive madnesses are caused by the imbalance of other humors. Perhaps female madness is something altogether different, a peculiarly feminine malady associated with the womb and with women’s spongy flesh and which can have no true male equivalent. All three possibilities continue to emphasize the internal nature of madness, that unlike divinely-inspired madness it is something that comes from within the self rather than from outside.

Several themes emerge from this consideration of female madness in Greek traditional and medical thought. The most obvious conclusion is that while the two traditions agree that madness was an illness, they ascribe very different causes to it. Traditional divinely-inspired madness, whether brought on by Dionysus, Aphrodite, or Eros, is described as an invasive force or an attack from the outside. This is seen in Dionysus’s punishment of the Theban women in *The Bacchae* through the affliction of maenadism, and in Phaedra’s love for Hippolytus that was inflicted upon her by Aphrodite, not as a punishment for Phaedra but as a punishment for Hippolytus’s failure to be pious. In these cases, maenadism and the desire-induced madness are the results of a failure to properly revere a deity, though both Attic vase painting and the Asian bacchants in *The Bacchae* reveal that maenadism was also a form of worship, and the Archaic love poetry would seem to suggest something similar about desire-induced madness. In contrast,

the medical perceptions of female madness view it as an entirely internal disorder caused by the peculiarities of the female body. The only outside force involved here is men, whose intervention is required to cure the madness but is not necessarily connected to its cause. In fact, the medical writers believe that female madness is the result of a lack of sexual contact with men. Desire-induced madness takes a similar approach, but Dionysian madness is somewhat different. Maenadism is not the result of leaving male society, but rather what compels women to leave.

Despite these differences, the various strains and interpretations of madness all agree that, as a disorder, madness requires some action to bring it to its conclusion. This is not necessarily a cure. Certainly Andromache is cured of her madness, or semi-mad state, when she finds Hektor, and Deianira of her madness when she marries Herakles. The medical writers advocate sexual intercourse as a cure-all for women's health problems, including madness. In addition, Dionysian madness, despite the difference in its cause, seems to be cured in a similar way, by reentering male society as Agave does, transferring from the influence of Dionysus to the influence of her father, Cadmus. However, the story of Phaedra and Hippolytus reveals that sexual intercourse, or male influence in general, was not always a viable option, and that suicide was another avenue for relieving oneself of madness. Clearly, the traditional and medical views of madness are not as dissimilar as they may initially appear.

The story of the Argonaut Melampus and the daughters of King Proetus of Argos offers a further bridge between tradition and medicine. Proetus had several daughters who went mad, according to Apollodorus, either for disregarding an image of Hera or for refusing to worship Dionysus. Reminiscent of the widespread madness within Thebes in *The Bacchae*, the madness of Proetus's daughters began to spread as they left the city of Argos and roamed around the Peloponnese. Fortunately, Melampus arrived and offered to cure the women. He was considered

the first to discover how to cure madness through drugs and purifications, and presumably used these methods to cure the women (Apollodorus, *Library* 2.2.2). The writer Ovid relates the same story, though more tersely, merely noting that Melampus cured the women using charms and herbs (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 15.322). Both writers lived long after the writing of the Hippocratic and Aristotelian medical texts, when these ideas had become more firmly embedded in Greek society. This story would then seem to suggest two possible interpretations. Either it represents an effort by later writers to establish the antiquity of medical practice by associating a mythological figure with the use of herbs to cure madness, or it reflects a more longstanding tradition. This latter interpretation in turn carries the implication that medical cures for madness were rooted in traditional thought, and that the writings of the Hippocratics and Aristotle represent, at least in part, a codification of tradition rather than a break with it.

Clearly, female madness in ancient Greece was a complex concept. Two main schools of thought offer their views on madness: tradition, which sees madness as an external attack, and medicine, which sees it as something that afflicts from the inside. Within the former, there seems to be a distinct division between madness caused by Dionysus and that caused by Aphrodite or Eros, though the two appear similar. While Dionysian madness may be considered a means for women to escape male society, desire-induced madness and medical perceptions of madness view it as a result of such an avoidance. However, in spite of these differences, all three types or perceptions of madness consider it to be an affliction which requires an action in order to be brought to a close. This final similarity perhaps speaks most strongly to the cultural continuity between these schools of thought. It emphasizes that no innovation evolves in a cultural vacuum, and that very few new ideas make a complete break with the old.

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