

Book Review

Out of Her Mind: Women Writing on Madness

Book by: Rebecca Shannonhouse (Ed.)

Review by: Marissa Bialowas

In the book *Out of Her Mind: Women Writing on Madness*, editor Rebecca Shannonhouse brings together a collection of astounding literature by “often misunderstood women” (p. xii) who collectively offer a courageous voice to the neglected history of women and their experiences with madness. Spanning nearly six centuries, the collection of 22 book excerpts, stories, letters, and essays begins with an excerpt from *The Book of Margery Kempe*. First published in 1436, Kempe reveals the harsh exile women faced when deemed “far out of herself” and “hard to control” (p. 7) by society’s strict standards; dominated by a system that was governed by men, women were bound by iron chains, losing any chance to exert control over their bodies and lives. Though the literary works following Kempe’s autobiography are drawn from the 18th and 19th centuries, it becomes clear that throughout the course of history, women were figuratively and literally chained down, while constantly being “cast aside for their ‘otherness’” (p. xvii).

The stories and experiences featured in this book stem from a vast range of social locations and time periods, and thus each woman’s experience with madness is unique and differs greatly from the others. Nonetheless, Shannonhouse manages to illuminate major recurring issues found within the women’s writings.

Perhaps the most noteworthy issue is the timeless stigma around behaviour perceived as “abnormal,” now commonly labeled as “mental illness,” and the unwarranted control exerted by society that comes along with it. Being deemed mad, it seems, stripped women of their human identity; their basic human rights were no longer guaranteed, and their basic human needs were regularly left unmet. The stigma around the notions of mental illness cast mad women in a light that left them perceived as less than human. As a result, those in control responded in appalling ways that were perceived as admissible at the time, leaving women rejected and isolated from society. Whether cast away in private homes, or forced into a distressing solitude within institutions, women believed to be “insane” were far from being considered equal members of society.

Stemming from this systemic domination arises the issue of merciless and unwarranted to which many of the women fell victim. Dorothea Dix, who petitioned in “On Behalf of the Insane Poor” against the barbaric conditions of Massachusetts almshouses in 1843, witnessed women being treated as if wild animals, locked up in “cages, closets, stalls, pens! Chained, naked, beaten with rods, and lashed into obedience!” (p. 9). Such treatment was not unique to the places visited by Dix. In *The Snake Pit*, published more than a century later in 1946, Mary Jane Ward

reflected on the torturous use of shock therapy; yet again, women experienced being tied down, and even physically held down by hospital staff. As Ward said, it was “three against one and the one tangled in machinery” (p. 69). In Ward’s case, it was three against one; in the field of mental health, it was the oppressive, patriarchal system and those maintaining it against women identified as mentally ill. As Shannonhouse’s selection of literature illustrates, the system never ceased to be in the advantageous position.

Shannonhouse’s selection of works reveals another issue that manifests itself within the realm of treatment, which is the use of antipsychotic medication and its imprisoning effects. As seen throughout the book, medication was typically one of the only remedies willingly considered by professionals. Thrust upon the women in an array of toxic concoctions and doses, little regard was given to side effects such as lethargy and dependency, leaving the women uninformed and robbed of their autonomy and selfhood. Simply put, the consumption of medication was not the result of a self-governed decision, but rather was an outsider’s attempt to manipulate and silently ostracize. In fact, in her 1990 *The Loony-Bin Trip*, Kate Millet described medication as the “true evil” (p. 100). As the various women explore their raw and genuine experiences with medication, readers are provided the opportunity to better understand the true role medication has played in the world of mental health. Millet described asylums as “an irrational deprivation of every human need”; likewise, medication further deprived the women of what they truly needed. Instead, it only gave women many exhausting side effects. In her essay “Black Swans,” first published in 1996, Lauren Slater divulged her experiences with Prozac and momentarily offered an alternative viewpoint of medication that explored its powers to relieve an individual from her inner turmoil. However, as seen with Slater, the relief was only temporary. An important conclusion that can be drawn from the medicated experiences explored in Shannonhouse’s compilation is that these women possessed an intense awareness; they were not only cognizant of the medication being forced upon them, but also of its extreme effects. When deemed mentally ill, women are most likely also seen as incompetent and oblivious to reality. Together, however, these stories scream otherwise.

Finally, focusing specifically on women’s experiences with madness, Shannonhouse exposes the patriarchal nature of society, highlighting the intersection of the oppressive forces of sexism and sanism. It is the patriarchal systems and societies in which these women found themselves that often left their voices unheard, sometimes transforming their marginalization into a dangerous internalized oppression. First published in 1995, Tracy Thompson’s book *The Beast* reflected on her family’s explanation of mood disorders and drew attention to the mention of “female troubles” (p. 134). Such language explicitly places a type of blame in biology; “mood disorders,” “insanity” and many other patronizing labels were perceived as being rooted in women. In her introduction to the collection, Shannonhouse demonstrates how deep this belief ran in society in explaining that the word *hysteria* is in fact derived from the Greek word for uterus (p. xiii). Even surgical procedures targeted women; removing a woman’s ovaries and cauterizing her clitoris were shocking attempts to alleviate “hysteria.” Madness was perceived as

being a tangible and physical error not just in the human body, but the female human body specifically. Having evolved from a society so entrenched in patriarchal values, how could we be sure that we have left these ways behind entirely? Shannonhouse, alongside the works she compiled, would most likely argue that we have not.

Looking beyond the misconceptions around the origins of madness, Shannonhouse chooses a selection of writings that bring attention to the way mad women have been perceived and treated by both loved ones and society. Charlotte Gilman's autobiographical short story published in 1892, "The Yellow Wallpaper," so simply depicts how belittled women were, even in their intimate relationships. Though most likely justified as titles of endearment, the patronizing language of Gilman's husband is a clear example that women's mental health was not taken seriously nor treated respectfully. By calling her a "blessed little goose" (p. 36) and claiming, "She shall be as sick as she pleases," (p. 41), he exerted his dominance by speaking to her as if she were a child, ordering her to get well "for his sake" (p. 40), and minimizing her experiences. Other works in this book showcase the overlap between male and medical domination, which left women's fate in the hands of men who foolishly claimed to know better than the women who heard voices. Ironically, but perhaps not surprisingly, the men never stopped to listen to the voices of the women themselves.

While Shannonhouse clearly illustrates the dark and troublesome realities endured by these women, it is worth noting that the majority of selected works are by white, middle class women. By failing to include a greater diversity of experiences, she has missed the opportunity to explore how madness intersects with various aspects of identity—such as race, class, and sexuality. Though not minimizing Shannonhouse's responsibility to include diverse voices, the lack of marginalized women among the collected works in *Out of Her Mind* may reflect oppression at the societal level; specifically, marginalized women may not have been provided the same opportunities to have their works published.

Regardless, Shannonhouse does create a space for the voices of mad women that were left unheard during their time. In sum, she challenges modern day beliefs and practices, which perhaps have yet to escape entirely from the oppressive, traumatizing, and sexist ways represented in history.

References

Shannonhouse, R. (Ed.). (2000). *Out of her mind: Women writing on madness*. New York, NY: Modern Library.

Reviewer Note

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