

**Theatre of the Mind:
Towards a Topography of Mental Health and
Victorian Theatrical Practice in Nineteenth-Century Britain**

My interdisciplinary dissertation in the medical humanities and drama examines intersections between medical and theatrical understandings of madness in nineteenth-century Britain. I place performances of madness in the theatre in dialogue with a medical community growing with both scientific discovery and reform surrounding mental health. This conversation, mapped as micro-historic moments of dialogue between medical writing and performance, will illuminate in new ways perceptions of madness in Victorian society.

To date, there is no book-length study dedicated to intersections between medical writing and theatrical practice. Existing critical scholarship on madness in the theatre is limited to discussions of canonical works that feature a mad character, mainly Ophelia and Hamlet in *Hamlet*, Lear in *King Lear*, and Lucy Audley in *Lady Audley's Secret*. They also often focus on close textual analyses of the plays, rather than investigations of the historic performance; how the actor played the role and the subsequent audience receptions toward that performance is often unknown. Meanwhile, medical writings on madness in this period are unpublished or long forgotten, their potential relevance to theatrical portrayals left undiscovered. However, early psychologist and asylum reformer Dr. John Conolly's *A Study of Hamlet* (1863), a treatise on the medical diagnosis of Shakespeare's protagonist, suggests that Conolly was motivated not only by reading *Hamlet*, but from seeing the play in a theatre and reading about its audience reception. My dissertation investigates to what extent the medical and theatrical communities, both worlds in which Conolly was well versed, influenced and responded to the other.

While canonical resources including *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, and *Lady Audley's Secret* will provide an invaluable framework for this study, my dissertation will examine distinct moments of intersection between the medical and theatrical communities that involve lesser-known plays, performances, and medical texts. This set of texts will include characters from the dramatization of Opie's *The Father and Daughter* (1817), Morton's *A Roland for an Oliver* (1826) and Jones' *The Case of Rebellious Susan* (1894). Additionally, the medical writing of early psychologists will include Conolly's *A Study of Hamlet*, Henry Maudsley's *Heredity, Variation, and Genius; with an Essay on Shakespeare*, and John Bucknill's *The Mad Folk of Shakespeare: Psychological Essays*. The method of extrapolating both causal connections and thematic similarities from these primary source texts and additional archival material draws upon Rhys Isaac's notion of "knots of dramatic encounter." He identifies these knots as colliding moments of history that "initiate, reshape, or more often, repeat and confirm patterns of association."¹ Subsequently, I will view these texts, in conversation, as micro histories that will challenge and redefine common narratives of madness on the stage and in the medical community.

Extensive archival material, both related and in addition to these theatrical works and medical writings, will shape this new narrative of madness. Unpublished play scripts, theatrical ephemera including playbills, images, and programs, as well as the personal papers and writings of early psychologists will reveal new connections between the theatrical and medical worlds. As these archival sources are the lynchpin for much of my study, it is necessary for me to spend 4-6 weeks in London investigating these materials that will be essential to the completion of my dissertation. Several archives in particular will be vital to my research. First, unpublished work

¹ Isaac, Rhys. *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790*, 332.

in the Lord Chamberlain's Plays and Modern Playscripts Collection held at the British Library, and the Theatre and Performance Archives, held at the Victoria and Albert Museum, will produce additional play texts and theatrical ephemera related to the performance of madness. Second, the Mental Health and Psychiatry collection at the Wellcome Library contains the personal papers of early psychologists including Conolly, Maudsley, and Bucknill, as well as additional medical writings, images, and documents.

I am applying for funding from the Graduate Student Research Competition so that I can complete the next phase of this dissertation work: a research trip to London in July and August of 2015. I have presented investigations on this subject at the American Society for Theatre Research Conference in November 2013 and at the Mid-America Theatre Conference Articles-in-Progress Workshop in March of 2014. I have already completed a significant amount of primary and secondary reading connected to my dissertation. I anticipate the approval of my prospectus by mid-March.

In London, not only will I consult major archival collections at the Wellcome Library, the British Library, and the Victoria and Albert Museum, I will also analyze material from national and county record offices and asylums, including the Greater London Record Office, The Royal Bethlem and Maudsley hospitals (now the Museum of the Mind), and the National Register of Archives. The Royal College of Physicians and the Royal College of Surgeons archives both contain unpublished medical writing by early psychologists, upon which this project relies. Without these resources, my exploration can only reiterate existing narratives surrounding mental health and the theatre.

I will not be able to successfully complete this next phase of research without additional funding from the Graduate Student Research Competition. This funding will help defray the cost of this research trip, including room and board, airfare, and meals. With regards to other funding sources, I am also applying for £1000.00 from the Society for Theatre Research. While I estimate the total cost of the trip to be approximately \$5000.00, I am requesting \$1000.00 from the Graduate Student Research Competition to defray the cost of summer accommodations in the dormitories at the University of London. The remaining cost of the trip will be financed through the Graduate School Fellowship.

This trip will allow me to illuminate close links between the worlds of medicine and the theatre in the nineteenth century. Through the close reading of understudied primary source texts, as well as extensive archival research, I will create new narratives surrounding these seemingly disparate communities. This interdisciplinary project provides an invaluable link and fills an important gap between the humanities and the sciences.

Itemized Budget: Research Trip, July 26-August 31, 2015

- Accommodations at the University of London (35 nights @ \$65/night):
\$2296.57

Total Amount Requested from Graduate Student Research Competition: \$1000.00