

Madness and Narrative Understanding: A Comparison of Two Female Firsthand Narratives of Madness in the Pre and Post Enlightenment Periods

Alison Torn

Key Words: Madness, Narrative, Dialogue, Chronotope, Identity, Recovery, Margery Kempe, Mary Barnes

Abstract

This study uses a narrative analytic approach to explore the similarities and differences between pre-Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment firsthand accounts of madness in order to answer the question; what is the relationship between madness, narrative, understanding, identity and recovery? Drawing on the work of Foucault, the research traces the historical and cultural development of conceptualisations of reason and unreason, the rise of psychiatry and the marginalisation of the voice of madness. I argue that this marginalisation is continued in narrative research where the focus is on the stories of the physically ill, rather than madness. The narrative method provides a means of giving space to these marginalised voices and it is Bakhtin's constructs of dialogicisim, polyphony, unfinalizability and the chronotope that provide the tools for the narrative analysis of two female English writers; Margery Kempe and Mary Barnes. The analysis highlights three critical issues in relation to firsthand narratives of madness. First, the blurred boundaries between madness and mysticism and the role of metaphor in understanding distressing experiences. Second, the complex, multi-dimensional nature of subjective timespace that challenges the linear assumptions underlying both narrative and recovery, which, I argue, demands a radical reconceptualisation of both constructs. Third, the liminal social positioning within the analysed accounts is closely related to Bakhtin's notion of unfinalizability, a form of being that enables the search for meaning and the transformation of the self. Insights can be gained from this research that may place stories and understanding central in contemporary healthcare.