

Mad Literature: Insane Asylums in Nineteenth-Century America

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In the nineteenth century, American mental institutions occupied a unique and controversial place in the public consciousness. At various points in time, or often simultaneously, asylums were seen as either the guardians or the adversaries of science, compassion, and liberty. Though the institution itself was commonly debated, the public generally agreed that the patients held within insane asylums were a danger to society, best kept separate and silent. For most patients, this was their experience. However, a small number of the so-called “mad” were able to work within the confines of the asylum to create a public literary voice for themselves and their fellow patients in the form of asylum periodicals and asylum exposés. This paper examines how men and women who were confined, abused, and stigmatized wrote various works of literature to subvert the oppressive and powerful institution of insane asylums, while also creating public identities for themselves to oppose the stereotypical perceptions of the mad.

“A most iniquitous, villainous system of inhumanity, that would more than match the bloodiest, darkest days of the Inquisition or the tragedies of the Bastille... Mad Houses, Insane Asylums.”¹

Nineteenth-century asylums evoke terrible images of dark and dirty cells, shrieking lunatics, horrible experiments, and abusive doctors. The disturbing nature of these impressions is not unfounded. Abuses and poor conditions in American mental institutions have been well documented. Former patients often published sensational exposés to reveal the dark and horrid nature of these secret places. However, for most of the nineteenth century the asylum was also conceived of as a beacon of human rights, an enlightened institution to protect and cure the mentally ill. This saintly image was occasionally upheld by the patients themselves, through

¹ Isaac H. Hunt, *Astounding Disclosures! Three Years in a Mad House* (Skowhegan, ME: A. A. Mann, 1851), 1.

periodical literature published from within the asylums. The most prolific of these, *The Opal*, was written, edited, and printed by patients in the New York State Lunatic Asylum at Utica and sold to the public for a profit.

Asylum periodicals and exposés are markedly different forms of literature, both in style and in message. Periodicals worked to advocate the benevolent mission of the asylum, whereas exposés claimed to reveal their hidden corruption. Asylum periodicals and exposés provided important commentary on insanity and mental institutions themselves, and were part of the larger social and political discussions of the nineteenth century. The institutionalized had lost many of their rights as humans and as American citizens. Patients were seen as mentally and socially defective, even after they had been released, and were largely ignored as individuals. By publishing within the framework of institutional periodicals and sensational novels, these men and women created a public forum in which they could discuss serious issues and have their voices heard. Through their literature, mental patients in the nineteenth century were able to shed light on how American asylums deprived citizens of their liberties and human rights through forceful imprisonment and unwarranted abuse.

Asylums, as they existed during the mid-nineteenth century, were unique within the larger history of mental institutions in America. In the early colonial era, communities were small and closely-knit, so the few “distracted” people, as they were known at the time, were dealt with informally by family or neighbors.² Insanity was considered more of a social and religious problem than a medical one. People saw mental illness as an outward expression of sin or a punishment from God.³ However negative these religious suspicions may seem, there is no indication that the colonists treated most mentally ill people cruelly.⁴ A tolerant and often generous outlook was due in part to the small size of the communities, as well as the Puritan emphasis on charity.⁵ A number of developments gradually altered public opinion over the eighteenth century, and toleration of the insane in America proved to be short-lived.

2 Gerald N. Grob, *Mental Institutions in America: Social Policy to 1875* (New York: Free Press, 1972), 4-8.

3 Constance M. McGovern, *Masters of Madness: Social Origins of the American Psychiatric Profession* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1985), 24.

4 Grob, *Mental Institutions in America*, 12.

5 McGovern, *Masters of Madness*, 25.

As the population of the colonies grew in the eighteenth century, there was a significant increase in the number of insane or otherwise dependent people.⁶ Before this point, confinement or exclusion was rarely resorted to, and was only utilized in response to the violently insane that posed a danger to the community.⁷ The more dependents there were, however, the less the community could care for them. Increasingly, the insane as a whole came to be seen as dangerous because of their uselessness and the burden they placed on society.⁸ Along with the population growth, the initial influence of the Enlightenment reached the colonies in the eighteenth century, which drastically altered many people's perceptions of the world. Its emphasis on reason reduced the supernatural explanation for madness, and introduced the concept of insanity as a disease. However, many people still believed that this particular disease was the fault of the ill person, a result of their poor lifestyle.⁹ Furthermore, the Enlightenment's idea that to be human meant to be reasonable had the unfortunate result of classifying the mentally ill, who were without reason, as less than human.¹⁰ These ideas led to the overwhelming practice of confinement in response to the mentally ill.¹¹ People saw the mad as inhuman, dangerous, diseased, and a threat to human reason. As such, the insane were no longer cared for as members of the community, but were isolated, out of sight.

Most people with mental illnesses were kept shut up in almshouses, poor houses, jails, and hospitals for much of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.¹² Although many of these institutions were charitable in nature and provided guardianship for their charges, the public impression of them was negative. These establishments served simply to keep the insane out of society, rather than to provide any kind of medical care, either physical or mental.¹³ The conditions were very poor. The inmates or patients were kept chained in cells or pens, and were physically

6 Grob, *Mental Institutions in America*, 13.

7 Grob, *Mental Institutions in America*, 11; McGovern, *Masters of Madness*, 26.

8 Grob, *Mental Institutions in America*, 13.

9 McGovern, *Masters of Madness*, 26-28.

10 Maryrose Eannace, "Lunatic Literature: New York State's The Opal, 1850-1860" (PhD diss., University at Albany, State University of New York, 2001), 19.

11 *Ibid.*, 18.

12 Eannace, "Lunatic Literature," 18.

13 Grob, *Mental Institutions in America*, 14.

abused.¹⁴ Hospital wards for the insane were damp, cold, and unclean, and caused the deaths of many patients.¹⁵ While these custodial and often inhumane facilities were being utilized to remove the insane from the public eye, a number of social movements changed American asylums yet again.

By the nineteenth century, the Enlightenment was embraced for its optimism about the human spirit and mind, as well as the capacity for human perfectibility through reason.¹⁶ Enlightenment thinkers believed that all deviant humans, such as criminals or the mentally ill, could be cured and molded back into useful and reasonable citizens.¹⁷ Unlike in earlier years, when the Enlightenment had a negative effect on the public opinion of the insane, its effects in the nineteenth century were more positive. This was in part because of the renewed religious spirit of the Second Great Awakening in the early nineteenth century.¹⁸ The main change that this movement brought was a rejection of the Puritan belief in the inherent sinfulness of man in favor of man's internal goodness and a kinder, more forgiving God.¹⁹ Insanity was no longer seen as an expression of evil, nor was disease a divine punishment. A kind God would wish for people to treat the mentally ill with love and empathy rather than fear.

Changes came in the world of mental health as well. Philippe Pinel, a French philosopher and asylum doctor, famously unchained his patients in 1793 and created a new system of caring for the mentally ill. This was called the "moral treatment," a theory which posited that insanity was curable not by locking the mad up in chains and punishing them, but through kindness, conversation, and the close attention of a physician.²⁰ By the 1830s and 1840s, most asylums in America were being built and operated to fit this treatment style, which became the earliest form of psychiatry.²¹ The new asylums were seen as humanitarian institutions, providing moral care

14 Eannace, "Lunatic Literature," 20.

15 Grob, *Mental Institutions in America*, 19.

16 McGovern, *Masters of Madness*, 33; Grob, *Mental Institutions in America*, 39.

17 Janet Miron, *Prisons, Asylums and the Public: Institutional Visiting in the Nineteenth Century* (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 21.

18 McGovern, *Masters of Madness*, 33.

19 Eannace, "Lunatic Literature," 21; Grob, *Mental Institutions in America*, 49.

20 Grob, *Mental Institutions in America*, 39-42.

21 McGovern, *Masters of Madness*, 41-57.

for the mentally ill who had been so abused by the previous system.²² Those who founded and reformed asylums during this period had tremendous optimism about the curability of the mind.

Within the moral asylums of the mid-nineteenth century, doctors believed that mental illness could be cured given the proper, controlled environment.²³ Since many associated insanity with negative and dangerous connotations, the asylums operated on the idea that, provided with healthy and moral surroundings, the insane could be returned to sanity, and therefore humanity.²⁴ Superintendents stressed the necessity of occupational activities for the health of the patient's mind.²⁵ Many asylums had workshops where the patients could build practical skills, such as sewing, farming, blacksmithing, and printing. Asylums became centers of cultural activity, where the work of patients could include theater, photography, and writing.²⁶ One such activity encouraged by doctors was the creation of patient periodicals. Writing could help cure diseased minds, and at the same time provide good public relations for the asylum.

The literary journals produced by patients were perhaps the most public form of expression from within the asylums. Periodicals could reach a wider audience than tourism, which was a popular practice at the time.²⁷ The optimism that surrounded the asylums was infectious, and public sentiment in these early years was overwhelmingly positive toward the asylum system.²⁸ Many people were initially confident that the hospitals could fulfill all of society's religious and moral obligations to the insane, through reason, understanding and science.²⁹ Periodicals and tours helped to expose the inside of the asylum to the public, so that there would be no suspicion of internal corruption.³⁰ Much of what was presented to the public, however, was a sanitized version of the truth.

22 Miron, *Prisons, Asylums and the Public*, 5.

23 Benjamin Reiss, *Theaters of Madness: Insane Asylums and Nineteenth-Century American Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 4.

24 Grob, *Mental Institutions in America*, 88.

25 Reiss, *Theaters of Madness*, 4; Grob, *Mental Institutions in America*, 66.

26 Reiss, *Theaters of Madness*, 3.

27 Miron, *Prisons, Asylums and the Public*, 5.

28 *Ibid.*, 4.

29 Grob, *Mental Institutions in America*, 109.

30 Miron, *Asylums and the Public*, 6.

Patient periodicals were a way for the institutionalized to express themselves and their true ideas to the outside world. However, literature from within the asylum was required to adhere to the same normative program as the rest of the treatment.³¹ The practice of official asylum literature likely originated in 1837 with the *Retreat Gazette*, which was written by the patients of the Hartford Retreat in Connecticut.³² Following this was the *Asylum Journal* from Vermont, which ran from 1842 to 1846.³³ Their motto was “Semel insanivimus omnes,” or “We have all, at some time been mad.”³⁴ The authors attempted to normalize insanity, stating that they were not raving lunatics, but people just like everyone else. These journals had a decent circulation, though the profits were collected by the institution rather than the patient-authors.³⁵ While these early journals created a public interest in asylum literature, perhaps the most significant patient periodical was *The Opal*, produced by the New York State Lunatic Asylum at Utica.

The Utica asylum was in many ways the center of psychiatry. The *American Journal of Insanity*, the first official periodical for this field of medicine, was created by the superintendent, and a print shop was established in the asylum for its publication.³⁶ This print shop proved useful for the patients as well. Patients wrote literary compositions in asylum classrooms as a way to exercise their intellects for the moral treatment. In 1850, a group of female patients took their works and put them together in journal form to sell at the Asylum Fair.³⁷ This was the earliest edition of *The Opal*. The popularity of this work at the fair prompted more patients, both male and female, to create an official asylum journal.

From 1851 to 1860, a group of patients at the asylum wrote, edited, and printed *The Opal*, the most financially successful and widespread of asylum periodicals.³⁸ The motto of their journal was “Dedicated to Usefulness,” and while their stated purpose was to fund a library for the asylum, their clear goal was to

31 Reiss, *Theaters of Madness*, 7.

32 “Progress of the Periodical Literature of Lunatic Asylums,” *American Journal of Insanity* 2, no. 1 (1845): 77.

33 *Ibid.*, 78.

34 Judson B. Andrews, “Asylum Periodicals,” *American Journal of Insanity* 33, no. 1 (1876): 43.

35 *Ibid.*, 44.

36 McGovern, *Masters of Madness*, 173; Reiss, *Theaters of Madness*, 23.

37 Reiss, *Theaters of Madness*, 27.

38 Andrews, “Asylum Periodicals,” 44.

change the minds of the public about the insane.³⁹ Nineteenth-century literature, as Maryrose Eannace explained in her study of *The Opal*, typically portrayed the mentally ill as “lazy, useless and even counterproductive, violent, and, significantly, voiceless.”⁴⁰ Despite the enlightened changes in opinions about the insane, the idea that they were inhuman and dangerous lingered within the public for some time. The Opalians, as the writers called themselves, proclaimed their journal was for “usefulness” and aimed to counteract this false image. They also fashioned their journal after other popular “sane” periodicals of the time, with quality print, engravings, and similar features of “literary miscellany.”⁴¹ The *Opal* contained works of short fictions, poetry, letters, editorials, and opinion pieces on current political and social subjects. The works were largely rational and thoughtful, and presented the insane as having a voice that is reasonable rather than animalistic.⁴² The Opalians were able to create a respectable literary place for themselves and a link to the outside world.

Despite its intention, *The Opal* rarely presented an accurate depiction of life in the asylum. It was, as David Reiss argues, “at best an elliptical record of the lives, thoughts, and experiences of the authors.”⁴³ While *The Opal* was ostensibly the voice of the patients, it had to adhere to the message of the institution first. It can be seen in part as an advertisement for the asylum and for moral treatment.⁴⁴ According to the journal, the everyday lives of the patients were filled with activities and care, and the doctors acted as loving fathers to their wards.⁴⁵ In short, the asylum pictured within *The Opal* is the Utopia that superintendents wanted to present to the public. However, this is not all that *The Opal* and other such literary journals accomplished. The act of writing and publishing from within the asylum can itself be seen as transgression, a way to break free from oppression.⁴⁶ Upon close reading, there are many works within *The Opal* where the author’s true opinions can be seen, hidden beneath a number of literary conventions.

39 Eannace, “Lunatic Literature,” 1.

40 *Ibid.*, 2.

41 Eannace, “Lunatic Literature,” 1-2; Andrews, “Asylum Periodicals,” 44-45.

42 Reiss, *Theaters of Madness*, 24; Eannace, “Lunatic Literature,” 2-3.

43 Reiss, *Theaters of Madness*, 24.

44 *Ibid.*, 25.

45 *Ibid.*, 24.

46 *Ibid.*, 25.

The patients who contributed to *The Opal* were in some senses the elite of the asylum. Eannace's thorough study of patient casebooks reveals that among *The Opal*'s contributors were lawyers, musicians, professors, teachers, and physicians.⁴⁷ Many had received classical educations, came from prominent families, and tended to be the wealthiest patients in the hospital.⁴⁸ Because they were well-educated, these patients were able to produce quality literary work and use advanced techniques to avoid the censors in the asylum. The Opalians did attempt to portray the reality of the asylum through coded speak, but their reality was presumably not as bad as that of the less fortunate patients. Nonetheless, their works are an invaluable record of asylum life in the mid-nineteenth century. *The Opal* is a complex and often conflicting journal. Comprised by multiple patients, the opinions presented often opposed one another.⁴⁹ Taken as a whole, however, it is possible to understand the ordeals of the patients within the asylum.

It seems that within the asylum, or at least within *The Opal*, the patients developed a kind of culture, their own literary niche in the asylum and the world. The authors referred to their fellow patients as "Brothers and Sisters of Asylunia," demonstrating the sense of community that was built within the mental hospital.⁵⁰ The authors often addressed statements or questions to the other patients, and sometimes even inside jokes or flirtations.⁵¹ Male authors would often comment on the "loveliness" of the ladies of the asylum, from whom they were separated except on special occasions.⁵² Although only a small group of patients wrote for *The Opal*, many others within the asylum read it.⁵³ The journal allowed patients to communicate with one another in a way that would be otherwise impossible in a large and controlling institution.

Most patients who wrote for *The Opal* left their work unsigned as a way to protect themselves and their families from the stigma of being in an insane asylum.⁵⁴

47 Eannace, "Lunatic Literature," 70-89.

48 Ibid., 87-89.

49 Ibid., 249.

50 "Pinel," *The Opal* 2, no. 1 (1852): 21.

51 Eannace, "Lunatic Literature," 214.

52 "Fourth of July at the Asylum," *The Opal* 2, no. 7 (1852): 206.

53 Eannace, "Lunatic Literature," 214.

54 Reiss, *Theaters of Madness*, 27.

The works that were not left anonymous, however, were signed with the pen names of frequent contributors. These pseudonyms included “Etta Floyd,” “Asbestos,” “Cecilia,” “Topsy,” “Tacita,” “C.A.H.,” “Addison,” “Alex,” and “A.W.L.S.,” among others.⁵⁵ The pen names are various and sometimes strange, and also indicate the large number of women who wrote for the journal along with men. The pseudonyms not only gave the authors anonymity in the outside world but also allowed them to create distinct personas within *The Opal*. Some were mainstays who wrote for many years, such as Etta Floyd and Cecilia, who were primarily poets but often wrote prose as well.⁵⁶ These personas gave the writers a sense of stability and importance. Even though they were in the asylum, hidden away from family and society, their works in *The Opal* would reach outside and even give them a kind of immortality. “To the *Opal* Contributors,” one short poem reads, “themselves will fade, but not their memory.”⁵⁷ The *Opal* writers gave themselves eternal identities, something of extreme importance to patients who no doubt felt their own insignificance while shut up in the asylum.

Many works of *The Opal* are dedicated to the praise of the asylum system. “Pinel,” a work from the second volume by an anonymous author, dedicates eight pages to this founder of the moral system, complete with an engraving of the man.⁵⁸ “To no other [than Pinel] is the present humane system of our institutions indebted,” the author wrote, for “previous to the organization of this system, the insane were treated most rudely, ruthlessly, inhumanely... Their mental condition was entirely neglected.”⁵⁹ Attendants used to whip their “prisoners (patients they could not be called), and goad them on to madness with chains.”⁶⁰ The benevolence of the nineteenth-century asylum is contrasted with the horrifying past, where the asylums were filled with “direful, real woe.” The author claimed that now, “cheerful eyes portentive of gay thought are ever cherished in Asylumia’s halls.”⁶¹ The moral

55 Eannace, “Lunatic Literature,” 117.

56 See, for example, Etta Floyd, “A Retrospect,” *The Opal* 3, no. 10 (1853): 282; Cecilia, “The Elm Tree Bough, From My Window,” *The Opal* 5, no. 3 (1855): 74.

57 “Fragmentary Thoughts,” *The Opal* 2, no. 6 (1852): 177.

58 “Pinel,” *The Opal*, 15.

59 *Ibid.*, 19.

60 *Ibid.*

61 *Ibid.*, 20-22.

work of Philippe Pinel, carried out by the current doctors, turned sadness into joy for the insane.

The happiness that patients apparently always felt was written about often. One “Editor’s Table” from the fourth volume stated that in the asylum, “love, joy, cheerfulness, hope and mirth shall chase the phantoms from the fairy grounds of cherished ones.”⁶² The happiness of the asylum could supposedly dispel the delusions of insanity. “Indeed,” The Opal’s editor once mused, “such a city set on a hill is this Asylum, [and] such independent, wonderful persons are the Asylumians... that everyone [should] come hither and rest under this wonderful shade of humanity.”⁶³ The Utica asylum is such a wonderful place, he claimed, that everyone should stay there, not just the patients. “With eyelids bright and gay,” another poem reads, “In the halls of Asylum’s best, / A woman sat the live long day, / Making her shirt as her happiest rest.”⁶⁴ This patient is described as happy, and crucially, her happiness was caused by the meaningful work that she was given by the asylum as a seamstress. This emphasizes how important labor was in the psychiatrists’ theory of treatment, while also demonstrating the patients’ usefulness as productive members of society.

The myriad of work and activities available at Utica was often praised. One piece, which detailed a visit of the state legislature to the asylum, described how there were chefs among the patients who cooked and a band who played for the guests.⁶⁵ The legislators toured the tailor, the print shop, and various other work departments.⁶⁶ The patients are described as cheerful, friendly and intelligent. They are presented as the opposite of the stereotypically insane, and even delivered beautiful orations for their guests.⁶⁷ The author concluded his account by stating, “We will never forget the joy of that occasion.”⁶⁸ This positivity and praise by the patients was often repeated throughout *The Opal*, to the point where it is hardly believable that the insane resided within such a cheerful paradise.

62 “Editor’s Table,” *The Opal* 4, no. 11 (1854): 351.

63 “Editor’s Table,” *The Opal* 2, no. 10 (1852): 317.

64 “Our Version of the Song of the Shirt,” *The Opal* 2, no. 5 (1852): 150.

65 “Visit of the Legislature to the Asylum,” *The Opal* 4, no. 4 (1854): 111, 116.

66 *Ibid.*, 111.

67 *Ibid.*, 113.

68 *Ibid.*, 111-117.

The Opalians at times made it plainly known that their words were not always their own. Many notes from the editor, particularly in the first volume, stressed the fact that the journal was written entirely by patients and always would be.⁶⁹ This is true, however there are also a number of pieces in which the authors either alluded to or plainly stated the fact that they were censored. One work explained that The Opal was “sustained by the mutual contributions of the males and females,” and “censored by the physicians and assistants, who are bound to support the Constitution of the United States.”⁷⁰ The writers understood that they were censored by the doctors, who were likely more loyal to the American Journal of Insanity than to the Constitution. Anything the patients wrote that was seen as subversive to the institution could be removed and the patient punished. As such, patients often hid their subversive opinions within their works.

Many oppressed groups produce literature that is outwardly submissive to power, yet contains coded seditious messages.⁷¹ The Opalians likewise took advantage of the obscurity inherent in writing, as hinted in a poem that advises how best to write for the journal: “In metaphor he’d clothe his verse, / I would not have it always be so terse. / And now I have done, my efforts prize— / I would not ye the Opal should despise.”⁷² Metaphor and poetry were not the only ways to clothe the truth. Opalians utilized a number of strategies for hiding meaning within text, such as the appropriation of some characteristic of the oppressive group to make the work blend in.⁷³ The Opal is formatted to the standards of popular periodical literature of the day, as well as to the American Journal of Insanity, the voice of the oppressive asylum.⁷⁴ Since it had a familiar and high-quality appearance, The Opal came across as unthreatening and respectful to the authorities whose style it mimicked.

Another strategy the Opalians utilized was misdirection through the use of euphemisms or substitutes for the truth.⁷⁵ For example, one poem, which discusses pretty young women, says that men will “find, most sure, when ‘tis quite too late, /

69 Eannace, “Lunatic Literature,” 249.

70 “On the Claims of the Insane to the Respect and Interest of Society,” *The Opal* 2, no. 8 (1852): 242.

71 Eannace, “Lunatic Literature,” 206.

72 “My Legacy to —,” *The Opal* 5, no. 3 (1855): 87.

73 Eannace, “Lunatic Literature,” 206-207.

74 *Ibid.*, 207.

75 *Ibid.*, 210.

That aid they need in finding a mate, / Vexations deep will poison their way. / And mittens warm they'll get for their pay."⁷⁶ To many, this little poem seems innocuous. Within the asylum, however, they would know that "mittens" were a kind of restraining device used on patients to prevent masturbation.⁷⁷ It can be assumed that many more euphemisms such as this were used throughout *The Opal* that few could understand. The institutional censors would overlook these harmless phrases, which would have been recognized as subversive by other patients.

Opalians also often used the plight of another oppressed group, slaves, as a literary substitute for themselves.⁷⁸ *The Opal* followed the issue of slavery closely, and often published passionate polemics against it. "Nebraska" is one such piece. The author called slavery "that act of national perfidy and despotism," and asserted that the state governments "too often forget their appropriate functions... the protection of the poor and needy, the weak and helpless."⁷⁹ Certainly, he or she was truly speaking of the enslavement of African-Americans, but at the same time the connection must be drawn between slaves and the mad. Like slaves, the insane were not able to vote, hold property, make wills, or sign contracts.⁸⁰ Enslaved people and the mentally ill were both seen as less than human, or at least the intellectual equivalent of children.⁸¹ People believed that they were incapable of dealing with the responsibilities of citizenship and independence. The asylum capitalized upon the labor of patients, who, like slaves, were not paid for their work. "Both institutions," Reiss argues, "revoked the civil liberties of a confined population in the name of public order and the creation of an efficient labor force."⁸² Though the comparison is never explicitly stated in *The Opal*, the parallels are impossible to ignore when reading the journal's condemnations of slavery. "Nebraska," a work that describes the injustice of stripping humans of their God-given and government-protected rights, was written by a person who had also been stripped of their human rights.

76 "Leap Year," *The Opal* 2, no. 4 (1852): 102.

77 Eannace, "Lunatic Literature," 210.

78 *Ibid.*, 210.

79 Addison, "Nebraska," *The Opal* 4, no. 7 (1854): 209.

80 Reiss, *Theaters of Madness*, 15, 29.

81 *Ibid.*, 29

82 *Ibid.*

Another way in which the Opalians criticized their oppressors was by masking that criticism with praise. “Truthfulness with the Insane” is an opinion piece about how doctors should not lie to their patients, as it creates confusion, paranoia, and distrust. The author wrote that “those who have to do with the insane in our Asylums are governed by no rule on the subject unless it be [that of] employing falsehood.”⁸³ This criticism, the author assured, applies to other asylums, but not Utica. At Utica, “there is but one rule on the subject... that of invariable truthfulness in the treatment of the insane.”⁸⁴ The author’s tone throughout the piece, however, comes off as angry. He wrote that he did not hesitate to judge the conduct of untruthfulness “to be as uncalled for and cruel as it is treacherous and wicked.”⁸⁵ The author was offended by the psychiatric practice of lying to the insane. This anger and distrust does not seem to have come from a patient who truly believed that his or her doctors never lied. The author’s insistence that Utica doctors were the only ones who were honest is hard to believe in this light. It is likely that he or she only praised Utica in order to appease the censors. This Opalian was able to publicly complain about the Utica doctors by stating the opposite of his true argument.

The patient-authors were also able to be subversive through the use of sarcasm. One writer criticized the public attitude towards the insane by agreeing that they are “an oppressive burden, and must be ‘out of the way’ of the wiseacres who build up their own character and sit enthroned on the majestic sweetness of their own self-esteem.”⁸⁶ This criticism of society seems blatant, but perhaps the sarcastic tone was missed by the censors, or was excused due to the author’s earlier praise of Utica’s superintendent and the *Journal of Insanity*. Whatever the reason, the author was also able to criticize the process by which one could be institutionalized. “The enstamp of the word crazy or lunatic is on the forehead” of every person who is brought before the requisite judge and two “respectable” physicians before they are even declared insane.⁸⁷ Once a person was accused of insanity, the author complained, he or she was already convicted of it, no matter what was said to the

83 “Truthfulness with the Insane,” *The Opal* 2, no. 2 (1852): 34.

84 *Ibid.*

85 *Ibid.*

86 “On the Claims of the Insane to the Respect and Interest of Society,” *The Opal* 2, no. 8 (1852): 242.

87 *Ibid.*

judges. However, “it would be impolite indeed to question the authority of such personages.”⁸⁸ People who underwent this process were often not insane but simply stressed or suffering, perhaps because they were poor, and “soul-withering poverty can’t always be self-possessed in the presence of the concentrated humanity of New York.”⁸⁹ This is a fairly overt example of a criticism of both society and the asylum system, but many authors of *The Opal* used similarly bitter and sarcastic tones to hide their true anger over the subjects they wrote about.

A subject the Opalians often criticized was that of asylum tourism. “Our own wish for Asylums is that they should be retired— that they should not be the gaze of idle curiosity,” one patient wrote, while covering the recent Ladies’ Fair.⁹⁰ Despite the excitement and joy about fairs and visitors that were elsewhere expressed in the journal, even in this piece, the author politely included his true opinion. Asylums were popular tourist locations in the mid-nineteenth century, with some of the more popular institutions such as Utica receiving upwards of 10,000 visitors a year.⁹¹ “It is absurd to suppose,” another patient remarked, that other people in their private homes “should be exposed to the gaping curiosity and whole-soul disposition of whomever chooses to gaze at.”⁹² The patients had to put on happy faces for the tourists, but they did not actually like being seen as zoo animals and amusements.

While the patients may not have been pleased with the amount of visits from strangers, they were surely less happy about the lack of familiar visitors. Patients were not allowed to have personal visitors, who the psychiatrists believed would disturb the carefully controlled environment of the asylum and damage the healing process.⁹³ The absence of loved ones was strongly felt by the Opalians, who often heard no news of them.⁹⁴ Many writers used this public space to attempt to send private messages to friends and family. One poem, addressed “To Miss H****,” asks, “Old loves and old friendships, are they then forgot? There is one to whose heart

88 Ibid.

89 Ibid., 242-243.

90 “The Ladies’ Fair,” *The Opal* 5, no. 3 (1855): 82.

91 Miron, *Asylums and the Public*, 18.

92 “On the Claims of the Insane to the Respect and Interest of Society,” *The Opal*, 242.

93 Reiss, *Theaters of Madness*, 13.

94 Eannace, “Lunatic Literature,” 218.

very sad is the thought... for memory still treasures it spotless and pure.”⁹⁵ This piece conveys the sadness of patients who are away from their loves and the fear of being forgotten while in the asylum. Without any contact for months, or even years, patients believed that they were no longer loved. Some of these private messages expressed not sorrow, however, but hope and comfort. “To Jane,” one poem reads, “I felt thy love... and oft by day my heart’s control / My solace e’en by night.”⁹⁶ Expressing a similar sentiment is “The Love Letter,” by Etta Floyd. “To know that I’m remembr’d still / Brings happiness to me, / To know thy love has found no chill, / While warm mine flows for thee... / These fourteen months have slowly sped, / Each day has seemed a year.”⁹⁷ These poems express the faith that many had in love and how it often got them through their time in the asylum, as did writing to their loved ones through *The Opal*.

Whatever the motivation or form, the writers of *The Opal* produced a unique and important body of literature. *The Opal* is not a straight portrayal of the lives and thoughts of the insane. It is filtered through the asylum itself, tinted with positivity. But the authors often did manage to express themselves and how they truly felt despite these constraints. *The Opal* was written for a variety of purposes, be it to subvert the oppressive asylum, promote the rhetoric of psychiatrists, reach out to loved ones, or to change the public perception of the insane. Many authors contributed to this work, and whatever each patient intended their writing to achieve, the *Opalians* were unified in one important way. Through literature, they who had so long been voiceless were given a voice.

The moral asylum that was promoted, at least on the surface, by *The Opal* was not in existence for very long. Despite the positivity and supposed success of the moral hospitals, their golden age passed quickly. From their inception, most asylums faced financial difficulties.⁹⁸ Superintendents had to convince state legislatures that their asylums deserved money, and one of the ways they did that was by inflating their cure rates.⁹⁹ Many psychiatrists boasted cure rates as high as

95 “To Miss H****,” *The Opal* 5, no. 4 (1855):114.

96 “To Jane,” *The Opal* 2, no. 4 (1852): 120.

97 Etta Floyd, “The Love-Letter,” *The Opal* 5, no. 4 (1855): 104.

98 Grob, *Mental Institutions in America*, 69.

99 McGovern, *Masters of Madness*, 5-6.

80 percent or more.¹⁰⁰ Public sentiment was not so optimistic about the asylums for long, particularly after these false statistics were revealed. The asylum institution was also reported to use cruel experimental medicines and procedures on the patients, and was occasionally questioned for its power to rescind the natural rights of its patients.¹⁰¹ A major influence in the diminishing support of asylums came from the patients who had lived in them.

Literature of the mad was not only characterized by patient periodicals from within the asylum. Asylum exposés written by former patients claimed to reveal the shocking crimes of the asylums, foremost of which was the deprivation of human and civil rights.¹⁰² Many authors recounted a common narrative in which they were wrongfully imprisoned in the asylum, terrified by the truly insane within, and tormented by villainous doctors and attendants, all the while maintaining their own sanity until their eventual escape or release. They ended their tales with addresses to the public, filled with the rhetoric of human rights, urging them to take action to reform asylums for the insane.¹⁰³ Some of these books became bestsellers and turned public opinion against asylums.¹⁰⁴ The works were intended to entertain as well as to galvanize the public into action.

From the 1830s through the nineteenth century, former patients related this basic story with modifications from their own experiences. The formulaic nature of exposés served a purpose. As Mary Wood explains in her study of the genre, the authors of these memoirs were “faced with the problem of how to create self-narratives that would be read as legitimate, as sane, when they themselves had been labeled insane.”¹⁰⁵ The authors utilized popular literary conventions in order for their stories to reach a wider audience and enact the change they hoped for. Unlike *The Opal*, these works did not even attempt to hold up asylums as the humanitarian institutions they claimed to be. Instead, their ultimate goal was to reveal that asylums were an affront to the very ideals they claimed to embody.¹⁰⁶

100 Reiss, *Theaters of Madness*, 5.

101 *Ibid.*, 25.

102 *Ibid.*, 169.

103 *Ibid.*

104 Grob, *Mental Institutions in America*, 136.

105 Mary Elene Wood, *The Writing on the Wall: Women's Autobiography and the Asylum* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 11.

106 Reiss, *Masters of Madness*, 169.

Asylum exposés exist within the genre of Gothic mystery, which originated in the late eighteenth century and gained immense popularity in America in the nineteenth century.¹⁰⁷ Many key elements of Gothic fiction were appropriated for asylum literature. The “Gothic cult of mystery,” which Karen Haltunnen explores in relation to patient memoirs, focused on that which was hidden, secret, and therefore evil.¹⁰⁸ Asylum memoirs exposed these veiled evils to the public. Robert Fuller, a former inmate, commented that “any institution, governed by such secret and arbitrary laws” as were asylums, “ought to excite not the jealousy only, but the fears of the whole community.”¹⁰⁹ “Secrecy always implies guilt,” echoed Isaac Hunt, who spent three years in an asylum.¹¹⁰ The literary and public worlds of the nineteenth century were concerned with corruption and vice, and were suspicious of anything that seemed to be hidden out of sight.

The Gothic motif of the haunted and gloomy castle was translated into the asylum buildings, which were often grand and imposing structures.¹¹¹ Fuller, who wished to change the public’s positive perception of asylums, described the power of such buildings. The inner depravity of asylums, he argued, is kept secret by the grandiosity and beauty of the outer buildings. Hidden inside, one could “hear the groans of the distressed... see inmates shut up with bars and bolts... how they are neglected and cruelly treated.”¹¹² Gothic mysteries, and many asylum exposés, often invited their readers on a tour through the evil building in order to pull back the curtain on the secrets contained within.¹¹³ Lydia Smith took her readers on an imagined “walk about the asylum grounds” of the Kalamazoo asylum where she was imprisoned for seven years.¹¹⁴ Her literary tour includes “a view of the interior... behind the scenes,

107 Karen Haltunnen, “Gothic Mystery and the Birth of the Asylum: The Cultural Construction of Deviance in Early-Nineteenth-Century America,” in *Moral Problems in American Life: New Perspectives on Cultural History*, eds. Karen Haltunnen and Lewis Perry (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 42.

108 Haltunnen, “Gothic Mystery and the Birth of the Asylum,” 48, 54; Reiss, *Theaters of Madness*, 183.

109 Robert Fuller, *An Account of the Imprisonment and Sufferings of Robert Fuller, Of Cambridge* (Boston: privately published, 1833), 26.

110 Hunt, *Astounding Disclosures!*, 41.

111 G. R. Thompson, “Romanticism and the Gothic Tradition,” in *The Gothic Imagination: Essays in Dark Romanticism*, ed. G. R. Thompson (Pullman: Washington State University Press, 1974), 12; Haltunnen, “Gothic Mystery and the Birth of the Asylum,” 42, 49.

112 Fuller, *An Account of the Imprisonment and Sufferings of Robert Fuller*, 23.

113 Haltunnen, “Gothic Mystery and the Birth of the Asylum,” 49.

114 Lydia Adeline Jackson Button Smith, *Behind the Scenes, or, Life in an Insane Asylum* (Chicago: Culver, Page, Hoyne, & Co., 1879), 203.

behind the bolted doors and barred windows, back to the dens of misery.”¹¹⁵ This is an element of Isaac Hunt’s memoir as well, in which he described the grounds of the asylum and let his readers “look in through the guard grates” to see the forbidden rooms.¹¹⁶ This motif allowed the writers to place the reader within their stories, which gave them a heightened sense of horror while reading.

The primary purpose of the Gothic genre was to inflict horror upon the reader, which the asylum memoirs achieved in part through descriptions of the insane as monstrous. The evil and supernatural were typical tropes of Gothic horror, characterized by demons, incubi, spirits, and beasts.¹¹⁷ While asylum memoirs did not contain ghosts, they did transform other patients into terrifying creatures. They capitalized on popular conceptions of the mad as violent and animalistic, and used this to create the “monsters” of their tales.¹¹⁸ This was in part to enforce their own claims of sanity, by emphasizing the horror they felt in reaction to the truly insane.¹¹⁹ Lydia Smith invited her readers to imagine the terror she experienced when an actual madwoman stood by her bed all night, “with her large unearthly eyes, staring at me.”¹²⁰ Reverend Hiram Chase often commented on how frightened he was of the “raving maniacs” he was shut up with in the Utica asylum.¹²¹ Elizabeth Parsons Ware Packard described similar fears of the insane, saying “each night, my life was exposed, by the violent hands of these maniacs,” with whom she was forced to share a room.¹²² Unlike the writers of the *Opal*, many of these authors were not interested in changing society’s view of the insane, and painted them as figures of dread rather than empathy.

Another way to frighten the reader was through accounts of violence and torture, which most exposés contained in the descriptions of abuse by attendants or doctors.¹²³ Lydia Smith described the physical abuse she suffered on her first

115 Ibid., 203-204.

116 Hunt, *Astounding Disclosures!*, 13; Haltunnen, “Gothic Mystery and the Birth of the Asylum,” 49-50.

117 Thompson, “Romanticism and the Gothic Tradition,” 6.

118 Haltunnen, “Gothic Mystery and the Birth of the Asylum,” 50.

119 Ibid.

120 Smith, *Behind the Scenes*, 77.

121 Hiram Chase, *Two Years and Four Months in a Lunatic Asylum* (Saratoga Springs, NY: Van Benthuysen & Sons’ Steam Printing House, 1865), 22, 48.

122 Elizabeth Parsons Ware Packard, *The Prisoners’ Hidden Life, or, Insane Asylums Unveiled* (Chicago: privately published, 1868), 91.

123 Haltunnen, “Gothic Mystery and the Birth of the Asylum,” 51.

day at the hands of attendants, including being boiled in a bath, forced into a small cage, and having her teeth knocked out.¹²⁴ Isaac Hunt described a scene in which he refused to take medicine (which he believed was poisonous), and an attendant struck him on the head, knocked him to the floor, and choked him, all while Hunt “begged for mercy.”¹²⁵ Hunt’s account also included testimonies from the legislative investigation of the Maine Insane Hospital. These detailed several horrible abuses, including inmates being neglected, burnt, boiled to death, choked, tortured with the “shower box,” and fed spoiled meat.¹²⁶ The brutality of the violence the authors related was shocking and thrilling to readers of Gothic horror.

Gothic and sentimental novels always contained a villain, typically a man who initially seemed harmless but later oppressed and abused the hero.¹²⁷ The domestic novel, another genre linked to Gothic, “pits the heroine’s virtue and intelligence against the nefarious schemings of an evil rake.”¹²⁸ The best example of this trope can be seen in Lydia Smith’s portrayal of the charming Dr. Vandusen. Smith implied that the superintendent raped a young woman in the asylum, Hattie Russell.¹²⁹ “Poor, unfortunate Hattie” later disappeared, and Smith suspected that she was killed by Vandusen or one of the doctors under him.¹³⁰ Since Hattie had confided in Smith, Dr. Vandusen went to extreme lengths to kill her, including letting poison gas into her room and feeding her poisoned food.¹³¹ Smith evaded all these attempts through her wits and religious faith. She often called the power of God down on Vandusen after his failed attempts. “God is mightier than thou art,” she told him, “and He will defend me... Dost thou think thy puny hand could smite me when God wills that I should live?”¹³² Vandusen embodied the nefarious and sexually immoral villain, who caused the ruin and death of a young, innocent woman, and Smith was the typical pious hero for defeating him.

The issue that Smith discussed of the abuse of women in asylums was a fairly common element of memoirs. Elizabeth Packard’s exposé was perhaps the

124 Smith, *Behind the Scenes*, 2-4.

125 Hunt, *Astounding Disclosures!*, 5.

126 *Ibid.*, 25-38.

127 Reiss, *Theaters of Madness*, 180.

128 Wood, *The Writing on the Wall*, 15.

129 Smith, *Behind the Scenes*, 32-33.

130 *Ibid.*, 35, 67-70.

131 *Ibid.*, 40-74.

132 *Ibid.*, 64.

most influential of the genre during the nineteenth century, and her reform efforts led to the “Packard laws,” which restricted the power of doctors to detain women against their will.¹³³ Packard’s memoir regarding her time in the Jacksonville Insane Asylum related a similar experience to those of other women. She was religious, outspoken, and committed to the asylum by her abusive husband against her will.¹³⁴ Her exposé touched on an element of institutionalization that was unique to women. While men had to be declared insane by a judge, women could legally be locked away simply by the request of their husbands.¹³⁵ The law that allowed this was ostensibly to save women from the embarrassment of going before a judge, but was often used to get rid of bothersome wives.¹³⁶ In many ways, women were legally owned and controlled by their husbands, an issue Packard focused on. She linked her husband with the superintendent of the asylum, as both abused the people under their care and could take away their liberties at whim.¹³⁷ Women’s rights, however, were less important to most former patients, who lobbied for basic human rights instead.

Many asylum memoirs discussed how the institutions legally deprived patients of their liberty, and occasionally of their lives as well. Almost all the authors likened asylums to some historic monument of tyranny, such as the Spanish Inquisition or the Bastille. Isaac Hunt lamented the fact that Americans “aid and abet the inquisitors of my dungeon, more atrocious than any part of the French Bastille [sic] in the bloodiest days of the Revolution,” by supporting the asylum system.¹³⁸ Elizabeth Packard said that she considered it her duty to “to report this Inquisition” to be public.¹³⁹ “It is true they do not have the rack, the inquisition, and the torture,” said Lydia Smith of asylums, “but they might as well have had. It was torture just the same.”¹⁴⁰ Hiram Chase claimed that if the public knew of what happened within

133 Reiss, *Theaters of Madness*, 173.

134 Packard, *The Prisoners’ Hidden Life*, 14-51.

135 Linda V. Carlisle, “‘New Notions and Wild Vagrancies’: Elizabeth Packard’s Quest for Personal Liberty,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 93, no. 1 (2000): 46.

136 *Ibid.*, 44-47.

137 Packard, *The Prisoners’ Hidden Life*, 117, 250-253; Wood, *The Writing on the Wall*, 6.

138 Hunt, *Astounding Disclosures!*, 14.

139 Packard, *The Prisoners’ Hidden Life*, 84.

140 Smith, *Behind the Scenes*, 192.

these “humane and benevolent institutions. . . it would be classed with those ancient Bastilles.”¹⁴¹ Robert Fuller called McLean Asylum a “worse Spanish Inquisition. . . where not only the rights of man are trampled upon, but the claims of humanity are disregarded.”¹⁴² These dramatic descriptions were employed in part to lend a greater air of terror to the asylums.¹⁴³ The comparisons also served to incense readers against the asylums by recalling familiar abuses of liberty.

Many exposé authors criticized the fact that asylums could so easily take away an American citizen’s human rights. Robert Fuller painted a particularly stirring picture, saying that as long as insane asylums exist in America, “the liberty which we have enjoyed, and which the half finished monument on Bunker Hill was intended to commemorate, has vanished. —Let that monument be torn from its base, — we are no longer worthy of it!”¹⁴⁴ Elizabeth Packard classified asylums as institutions of “absolute despotism.”¹⁴⁵ Hunt claimed that the asylums “by brutal force attempt to divest glorious man of his inalienable rights!”¹⁴⁶ He also adopted revolutionary rhetoric against his doctors, saying that “all men are born free and equal,” and called for “liberty or death” from the abuses of the asylum.¹⁴⁷ Elizabeth Olson, who told her story in a section of Packard’s book, described how patients planned to stage a “Revolution” against their attendants, who ran a “Reign of Terror” by physically abusing patients.¹⁴⁸ Regardless of literary convention, these authors all clearly recognized that their rights as humans and citizens were being taken away by the asylums, and there was nothing being done about it. These former patients took on the roles of revolutionaries, and utilized the rhetoric of the American and French Revolutions to give their arguments strength.

Most exposé authors concluded their stirring tales with a call to the public to help enact reform. Robert Fuller earnestly “call[ed] on the public to remedy these evils, while it is in their power,” and asked “the Legislature to enact such laws as shall be necessary to protect the citizens, and protect the happiness of the whole

141 Chase, *Two Years and Four Months in a Lunatic Asylum*, 31.

142 Fuller, *An Account of the Imprisonment and Sufferings of Robert Fuller*, 23.

143 Haltunnen, “Gothic Mystery and the Birth of the Asylum,” 53.

144 Fuller, *An Account of the Imprisonment and Sufferings of Robert Fuller*, 29.

145 Packard, *The Prisoners’ Hidden Life*, 86.

146 Hunt, *Astounding Disclosures!*, 56.

147 *Ibid.*, 14.

148 Packard, *The Prisoners’ Hidden Life*, 76.

people.”¹⁴⁹ Isaac Hunt also hoped that “the people [would] see to it that none are abused,” and specifically called for reform of the cell structures and the banning of torture.¹⁵⁰ Lydia Smith closed her account with a plea “To the People of the State of Michigan” to reform asylums.¹⁵¹ Elizabeth Packard addressed “the need of a universal and radical reconstruction in this department of humanitarian reform... which should at once command the attention of every philanthropist.”¹⁵² These closing addresses have the universal goal of reforming the asylum system in which the authors suffered. Their accounts are entertaining and sensational in the fashion of Gothic horror, but they also inspire political action against the asylums that had once been held in such high esteem in America.

The writers of asylum exposés faced many difficulties in creating their works. Though these authors were no longer under the censorship of the asylum, the public would not readily believe the word of a supposed lunatic, and would discount their memoirs as the ravings of madmen. In order to speak the truth about asylums, these writers had to strategically ensure their books were read, believed, and widely disseminated. They did so in a number of ways. Many utilized conventions of the popular Gothic literature of the day, so their works could be seen as entertainment. They portrayed the mad as frightening, so they would appear sane by contrast. They linked the rights of the insane to the rights of women, a more popular topic. They also emphasized their messages of freedom and human rights, which the American public would strongly sympathize with. These authors had terrible experiences in the asylums, and decided to expose themselves to public humiliation by publishing their stories. Some, like Elizabeth Packard, were able to use the fame from their stories to enact real change in the country, rather than simply scandal or literary entertainment.

By the 1860s, most American asylums were faced with overcrowding, underfunding, and a general pessimism about the curability of insanity.¹⁵³ With the growth in resident populations, many tenets of the moral treatment were seen as

149 Fuller, *An Account of the Imprisonment and Sufferings of Robert Fuller*, 29.

150 Hunt, *Astounding Disclosures!*, 83.

151 Smith, *Behind the Scenes*, 212-227.

152 Packard, *The Prisoners' Hidden Life*, 339.

153 Grob, *Mental Institutions in America*, 174-192.

impractical and obsolete by the late nineteenth century.¹⁵⁴ Additionally, the field of moral psychiatry became increasingly archaic in the face of new medical advances. Scientific psychiatrists saw the old ways as outdated, and based on philosophical musings rather than fact.¹⁵⁵ From this time on, insane asylums functioned mainly as custodial facilities for the mentally ill. Their primary purpose was to keep the insane out of the public world, and they rarely had such lofty goals as the old asylums did.¹⁵⁶ For better or worse, the age of the moral asylum had come and gone. The rise and fall of this idealistic institution was echoed in the works of the patients.

Asylum periodicals and exposés were two very important literary products of the nineteenth century. The unique social climate of the time, as well as the simultaneous public fascination with and revulsion to the insane, created the opportunity and audience for this genre of literature. Whether they were truly mentally ill or not, these writers had to hide their truths beneath layers, be it false positivity or the rhetoric of popular fiction, in order to be taken seriously. Through their written works, men and women who had been deemed lunatics managed to promote the insane as a group capable of intelligence and reason. The authors of asylum periodicals and exposés set out to alter the public's perception of the institution, which was often shielded by the altruistic superiority of the "moral system." These works of mad literature were able to break through that shield, in their own ways, to expose the true flaws and abuses of insane asylums.

154 McGovern, *Masters of Madness*, 160.

155 *Ibid.*, 158.

156 Grob, *Mental Institutions in America*, 204-205.

