“She Was the Mad Woman”: Misdiagnosed Madness in Harriet Prescott Spofford’s “Her Story”

Sirpa Salenius

Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ejas/15277>

DOI: 10.4000/ejas.15277

ISSN: 1991-9336

Publisher

European Association for American Studies

Electronic reference

Sirpa Salenius, ““She Was the Mad Woman”: Misdiagnosed Madness in Harriet Prescott Spofford’s “Her Story””, *European journal of American studies* [Online], 14-3 | 2019, Online since 31 October 2019, connection on 08 July 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/15277> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejas.15277>

This text was automatically generated on 8 July 2021.

Creative Commons License

"She Was the Mad Woman": Misdiagnosed Madness in Harriet Prescott Spofford's "Her Story"

Sirpa Salenius

- 1 Harriet Prescott—later Spofford—started her literary career as one of the *Atlantic Monthly*'s most celebrated writers; she was defined as a genius "destined for great things" (Boyd 11, 27). She published, as noted by Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, "hundreds of stories, poems, essays, children's books, travel books, and novels" (28). Immediately at the start of her career, she created a sensation with the publication of her story "In a Cellar," which appeared in the *Atlantic* in February 1859. The story was hailed as a "new and brilliant contribution," which dazzled the readers "with the splendors, the manners, the political intrigues, the sin-spiced witchery of Parisian life" (Bendixen ix). "The Amber Gods," which followed in the January and February 1860 issues of the *Atlantic Monthly*, fully launched Prescott on her career: she was recognized as an innovative and unconventional author. Her unique female characters remained her trademark, so to speak, through the entire repertoire of her short fiction. Often her women protagonists can be seen to transgress the conventional social boundaries, as Alfred Bendixen notes, "of both language and morality" (x). Many of her fictional stories introduce women characters who are "'ghosted' by a culture that refuses to recognize women as active agents in control of their own destinies" (Weinstock 27). The ingenious, complex women figures Prescott-Spofford¹ created range from self-centered dead narrators or political activists plotting with revolutionaries in wine cellars to oppressed women who sometimes find themselves trapped in mental asylums. Although nearly forgotten today, Spofford has been applauded for her proto-feminist texts, for their originality, poetic language, sensuous descriptions, and striking images. According to Bendixen, she was immediately recognized "as one of the most important, exciting, and promising young writers in the nation" (x). She was admired by such prominent authors as Henry James, Emily Dickinson, and William Dean Howells. In particular, they enthusiastically praised the "strength and brilliancy of her descriptions" (quoting James, Bendixen xi), recognizing her as a major talent. To be

sure, her short stories remain brilliant testimonies of her capacity to address in impressively imaginative ways the many concerns that troubled the period's women. At the same time, the stories still seem relevant to women in the twenty-first century.

- 2 One of Spofford's stories with vivid images and a highly unique female protagonist is "Her Story," which appeared in the *Lippincott's* December 1872 issue. It has been identified as a forerunner for Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) because of the similarities in settings, characters, and circumstances of the narrators as well as the stories' themes and ambiguities. Both stories present a woman protagonist who seems to have lost her sense of self because she has sacrificed her identity in a patriarchal society. In addition, both stories address the frustrations and submissive nature of nineteenth-century women. Lastly, in both stories the protagonists, also first-person narrators, are confined in mental asylums.
- 3 In this paper, I will argue that the protagonist of "Her Story" is an early representative of the modern New Woman who, however, not only follows the period's gender-specific expectations by trying to accept her role as wife and mother but also ventures into the public sphere when assuming some of the professional responsibilities of her husband. Thus, she renounces her creative pursuits and becomes burdened with too many responsibilities. As a consequence, she suffers from anxiety not only over her family and marriage but also over work. She ends up feeling mentally and physically exhausted, which is evident in the symptomatic anxiety, insomnia, paranoia, hallucinations, feelings of worthlessness, anger, violent outbursts, and contemplation of suicide that subsequently are misdiagnosed as her "madness." The woman's inner conflict in trying to reconcile the two opposing sides of her identity—one entailing her sexuality, creativity, and independence; the other characterized by submissiveness, obedience, and sense of responsibility—reaches its climax with the arrival of another woman, the step-daughter of the narrator's husband's uncle, against whom she mirrors her own self.
- 4 The narrator of "Her Story" appears to be partially responsible for the loss of her selfhood because of her (seemingly) unquestioned renunciation of her agency after her marriage to Spencer, a priest with whom she fell in love after hearing his "deep, sweet voice" delivering a Sunday sermon (Spofford 150). Scholars have argued that this "female protagonist passively accepts her role as the ideal Victorian woman," and the ward, who becomes part of her family, "can be seen as a phantom, a projection of the narrator's inner self and an embodiment of the sexual passion that is frighteningly Other to her" (Murillo 763, 766). Others, for example Eva Gold and Thomas H. Fick, read the story as exploring "the way the oppositions common to male- and female-authored fictions (blond-passive-chaste; dark, aggressive, sexual) serve to divide women from each other" (512). Although I agree that the polarity between the narrator and ward is significant to the understanding of Spofford's message, I argue that the oppositional traits represent the narrator's identity. I take the cue from Spofford-scholar Rita Bode's insightful interpretation of the story that places its focus "on the way in which motherhood and maternal responsibilities take control of women's lives" ("Lost and Found" 142). In Bode's reading, the protagonist suffers from postpartum depression (whereas in my reading she suffers from exhaustion), and the story explores the "dark side of motherhood" ("Lost and Found" 154). "Her Story," which scholars have also seen as exploring women's rivalry and jealousy (see, for instance, Murillo), follows the narrator's journey from what she presents as her youthful innocence to her

exploration of passion that lures her into what she perceives as a romantic triangle² whose core is her husband, Spencer; the woman's journey finally ends at a mental asylum, which becomes the starting point of the story she recounts.

- 5 The protagonist's loss of identity, or a confused sense of self, is foregrounded by leaving her unnamed. The author's choice to use a nameless narrator represents the annihilation of the individual woman, the negation of her goals, ambitions, desires, and passions. At the same time, she becomes a universal representative of women of her time. When she is locked up in an asylum that many scholars see as representing her marriage in a patriarchal society, she is stripped of any freedom and independence she might have had outside the walls of the "madhouse." She narrates her own story as a flashback from the mental institution where she was confined after being diagnosed as "mad."

1. Insanity Narratives

- 6 In the nineteenth century, the category of "insanity," or "madness," referred to a range of vague ideas and beliefs, although doctors tended to agree that it was an illness that affected the mind, reflected mental instability, and manifested more in actions than in speech (Glew n.p.). Commonly, people believed that madness could result from "a blow to the head, from the inhalation of poisonous vapors, from indigestion, from masturbation, from hereditary predisposition, or from another disease," as Benjamin Reiss explains, "although asylums' annual reports and other writings of asylum superintendents also include such causes as excessive study, religious enthusiasm, anxieties over work, and even 'blowing Fife all night,' 'reading vile books,' and 'extatic [sic] admiration of works of art'" (4). In the case of women, their reproductive organs were often believed to be the source of hysteria and other mental illnesses. The wide range of causes that were believed to lead to "madness" demonstrates that neither doctors nor lay people knew what triggered mental instability. Spofford's protagonist, for instance, seems to suffer not only from "anxieties over work," caused by both tending to her family and taking care of many of her husband's responsibilities, but also from anxieties over her marriage. Moreover, she struggles to reconcile her passion for music and desire for free-spirited companionship with her husband with the responsibilities of wife and mother. It is only recently that researchers have started paying attention to work-life balance, in particular in the lives of professional women, but Spofford already around the 1870s seems to have recognized the excessive demands nineteenth-century women had to face. Today the protagonist's "madness" would most likely be diagnosed as physical and mental fatigue, exhaustion, or burn out. These medical conditions, however, were unknown in the nineteenth century.
- 7 Before the establishing of psychiatric institutions, those suffering from diseases of the mind were regularly incarcerated rather than hospitalized, or they found themselves in institutions that resembled prisons. Since the 1700s, patients had customarily been confined in isolated cells and it was common to use chains to regulate their movement. Cold and hot baths were considered proper treatments, while psychological and physical abuse was far from uncommon. In the late 1840s, Dorothea Dix started to advocate for the creation of state and federal insane asylums that would provide medical treatment for the mentally ill. She campaigned to find funding for the building of national institutions that would replace the hospitalization that too closely

resembled incarceration. She envisioned these mental institutions with sunny bedrooms and spacious gardens where patients could take rejuvenating walks. As a result of her efforts, these utopian establishments became a reality. Soon, however, stories of patient abuse started to circulate again, this time receiving national attention. Consequently, it became rather common never to release the patients, thus guaranteeing their silence; they were not allowed to return to their homes to tell stories of their mistreatment. Instead, they remained locked up in the institutions under the vigilant supervision of figures of authority who controlled their every act (Reiss 1-21; Walter 17-24). As Benjamin Reiss points out: "Lunatics, like slaves, were deprived of the right to vote, to sign contracts, to make wills, and to hold property" (15). This, of course, was also the situation of nineteenth-century women in general.

- 8 Dorothea Dix's campaigns to improve the condition of patients suffering from mental illnesses contributed to making the 1850s a crucial time in the national discussion about mental illness and asylums.³ Around the same time, the first autobiographical asylum memoirs appeared in print. In 1855, Phebe B. Davis published her story entitled *Two Years and Three Months in the New York Lunatic Asylum at Utica*. It was followed by asylum memoirs by such women as Elizabeth Parsons Ware Packard and Lydia A. Smith, who also raised awareness of the ill treatment of mental patients by telling their stories: they were forcibly confined in asylums by their husbands. Disagreement in opinions or women's behavior that their husbands found unacceptable were reasons for the women to be diagnosed as insane. Elizabeth Packard, who established the Anti-Insane Asylum Society, wrote about her experience in *The Prisoner's Hidden Life, or, Insane Asylums Unveiled*, which came out in 1868, four years prior to Spofford's publication of "Her Story," and in *Modern Persecution, or Married Woman's Liabilities*, which was published in 1873. She ended up in the asylum merely because she disagreed with the conservative views of her pastor husband, the Reverend Theophilus Packard, on questions of slavery, religious beliefs, and the ways to raise their children. Lydia Smith, who was drugged and abducted six years after Packard's forced institutionalization in 1860, contributed to the genre of insanity narratives or asylum memoirs with the publication of *Behind the Scenes, or, Life in an Insane Asylum* (1878). Other stories followed in the 1880s, the most famous of them perhaps being *Ten Days in a Mad-House* (1887) written by the journalist Nellie Bly (Elizabeth Cochran). Spofford's "Her Story," similarly to other multi-genre asylum memoirs and many nineteenth-century women's narratives in general, resists any conventional categorization of the text as pertaining to one specific genre. Instead, it connects with confessional narratives but also ties in with the early examples of the asylum memoir genre. The story thus contributes to the national discussion about mental illness and asylums that reached its peak around the 1850s. At the same time, it affirms that women, just like "lunatics," were deprived of many rights and liberties that pertained to (white) men; moreover, their bodies, minds, and behavior operated in accordance to social presumptions and expectations, and often were controlled by figures of authority.

2. A "Mad" Woman's Version of "Her Story"

- 9 The frame narrative is set in one specific place, the mental hospital where the nameless protagonist is confined. Following the scholar William A. Gleason's line of thinking according to which "[s]tories rooted in specific spaces and housed in particular

structures can tell us a great deal not only about past practices but also about meanings and ideologies, both shared and contested" (2), it can be argued that the asylum reflects shared dominant ideologies concerning women in the period's society. As space, the asylum serves to explore the ways in which human life fits into and responds to various social environments. This specific place with its confining walls is limiting, in action and expression, forming the opposite of freedom and self-reliance. It entails relentless control of its inhabitants by figures of authority, making it a space of powerlessness for the nameless narrator, who refers to the asylum in which she is entrapped as "this prison, this grave" (Spofford 148). In this closed space, isolated from her family, she is trying to recover her lost identity by exploring her psychological, emotional, and social circumstances. Although the narrator is eager to escape from her confinement, at the same time, though, Spofford presents the place in positive terms as one of repose, one in which the protagonist has time for herself. In this way, the physical space intertwines with her psychological, emotional, and moral search for self-knowledge.

- 10 The reader realizes quite early on that the narrator is manipulating her story, which she tells to a visitor, a friend, Elizabeth, whom she has known since her school days. Her story abounds in omissions, contradictions, and misinformation. As Bode notes, the "first-person narration ... suggests more than its madhouse narrator consciously reveals" ("Narrative Revelations" 236). The frame narrative works as a confessional in which the narrator is in control over her story, thus drawing attention to the story's unreliability. As Jo Gill observes: "To think about confession is, paradoxically given confession's apparent proximity to truthful revelation, to enter into profound uncertainty" (8). The confessional becomes a retelling of events filtered by the confessor, consciously or unknowingly. As scholars point out, "women's active manipulation of confessional conventions" involves "a process of selection and repetition" (Gammel 3, 5). The nameless woman's narrative becomes one of distorted realities as it is filtered through her own selection and interpretation of the events that led to her confinement in the mental institution.
- 11 The frame narrative starts by making the reader question the veracity of the protagonist's story, and, with the repetition of the word "true," it draws attention to the subjective nature of "truth" in general: "If it were true," the narrator ponders, "that accounts for my being here. If it were not true, then the best thing they could do with me was to bring me here. Then, too, if it were true, they would save themselves by hurrying me away; and if it were not true—" (Spofford 148). Although the phrasing seems to suggest that these are the thoughts of a person who is fundamentally confused, if not mad, the patient in the mental asylum is, in truth, considering the moral and ethical justifications as well as consequences of what occurred between her, another woman (the ward), and the protagonist's husband. Such thought processes imply a rational, questioning mind with a propensity for analytical thinking, one that seeks to understand the motivation of others as well as find explanations or some logic she can accept, or refute, concerning her own circumstances. The narrator then assures her visitor, after pointing out the impossibility of knowing what is true and how "the worst of it all is the mystery," that she would tell her story "all exactly as it was"; however, by now it is evident that she is incapable of telling her story truthfully since she herself seems confused about what exactly constituted the truth (148). The promise of an accurate narrative is further complicated by her reference to her insanity: "Mad! There was never a drop of crazy blood in the Ridgleys or the Bruces, or any of the

generations behind them," she insists and then continues, referring to the younger woman with whom, the narrator believed, her husband has become infatuated: "she was the mad woman, not I" (148). Thus, the question of reliability is foregrounded right at the beginning of the story. The narrator, clearly confused and questioning, is locked up in a mental institution, yet in denial of her own madness.

- 12 Such refutation is immediately contradicted, thus reinforcing the sense of her confusion and difficulty to accept the diagnosis of her insanity, when she reveals her muddled idea of her self: "I am as much myself, I tell you, as you are," she says, then, realizing how absurd it sounds, adding: "To ask you not to be afraid of me because I am myself I am as much myself as you are myself!" (Spofford 149). With such statements, she again provides a glimpse into her confused mind, but she also seems to imply that neither she nor Elizabeth truly know who they are, and yet, they are the same, they are both women. She thus articulates the problem of the period's women to understand their true identity when entrapped in a state of powerlessness under patriarchal control. It becomes clear as she narrates her story that her confusion stemmed from a struggle to reconcile societal expectations and her desire to express herself through art (music). In addition, being a woman and being sane, she clarifies, does not mean "that one is a saint" (150). Here the nameless woman, representative of women in general, offers another glimpse into her identity conflict: while, in some ways, she represents the modern New Woman with her passions and love of art as well as certain liberties, in others, she conforms to the period's expectations of her as a devout True Woman, the domestic angel. Here, Spofford seems to invite her readers to find out more about the woman's true identity.
- 13 In her youth, the woman explains, she was quite alone, an orphan, insecure and shy. Like others, she attended church on Sundays, but she, unlike others perhaps, went there "idly and dreamingly as usual," not because of her religious calling (Spofford 150). She even confesses that she "had no faith" (152). The description of her as idle and profane distances her from the idealized true woman of her time. Instead, she was an emotional girl with a tendency to dream, one who was sensitive to music, to colors in nature, and to the scent of flowers (150). Encouraged by the priest, her future husband, the young woman would enjoy singing, either with him, her cousins or alone (151). This implies that the woman had artistic pursuits and music was the outlet for her creativity. She could express herself through singing, which, literally, enabled her to make her voice heard. Soon after meeting him, she became infatuated with the priest, and as she looks back to the time of her youth, she recalls herself as "that fresh young girl that loved so" (151). Such romantic love, Karen Lystra notes, "flourished in nineteenth-century America in response to many factors, not least among them the growing popularity of this romantic concept of self" (30). The idea of romantic love was offered as a prelude to marriage and motherhood that appeared as the ultimate goals set for young women. In "Her Story," the emotional and spiritual love soon led to carnal desire.
- 14 Although the narrator claims to be shy, her actions reveal that she was bold and transgressive: she allowed the priest to kiss her on the mouth. The two became lovers and took their pleasure "as lovers do," which may imply a premarital sexual relationship. Scholars, as Lystra argues, have challenged the idea that nineteenth-century Americans were passionless and prudish: "married or unmarried, American Victorians recognized and expressed sexual desire, interest, and passion" (59; emphasis

mine).⁴ The idea that the couple engaged in a physical relationship does not seem too far-fetched when considering the young woman's acceptance of the kiss on her mouth; perhaps she even desired and welcomed it. Moreover, for the young woman, their relationship was heaven (Spofford 152). She thus turns out to be a modern woman whose heaven was found in emotional and physical pleasure that was earthly, emotional, passionate, and perhaps even sexual.

- 15 The religious setting of their initial meeting underscores the confessional genre of the protagonist's narrative in which the woman brings together the priest and herself. However, rather than "turning the confession of sin into a private act," as is commonly done in confessionals, she denies her "sin" altogether (Gammel 3). Her self-presentation relies on an impression of her innocence and purity, despite her confession that the couple took their pleasure "as lovers do." In confessional readings in general, Irene Gammel suggests, "women's voices of sexuality are not so much silenced as they are appropriated, tamed, and recolonized to fit patriarchal frames of reference" (4). In telling her story, the nameless narrator distorts reality, in particular concerning her self-fashioning. The reader's task is to tease out the significance of what the narrator either omits or merely mentions in passing.
- 16 To regain respectability, the narrator and the priest are married in the fall. The couple's love found "its soul" in their marriage. This seems to correspond to Lystra's findings of nineteenth-century views of "sex as the ultimate expression of love [...] Imbued with romantic love, sex was seen as an act of self-disclosure, not so much in the sense of revealing one's body as one's essential identity" (59). In addition to romantic love, the passion for music, which the husband and wife shared, form the pillars of the young woman's married life. Moreover, marriage not only recognized their union legally and formally but also condoned the couple's sexuality.
- 17 "Luxury and beauty," the narrator recalls, filled their "happy home" in which "a marble Eros held a light up, searching for his Psyche" (Spofford 153). Mentioning Eros as the center of the household indicates the importance sexuality had for the woman, whereas Psyche seems to foreground her abandonment, but also to evoke her own betrayal of Eros. Once again, it seems that the narrator may be withholding information in her attempt to create an image of herself that would correspond to gender-specific expectations. Her indirect reference to the centrality of her sexual desire contradicts the image of her as the idealized, domesticated wife and mother. And yet, following the period's expectations, her sexuality seems geared at procreation. According to the narrator, the two children who were born as a result of their sexual relations made their union perfect; they all seemed happy in their domesticity. Nonetheless, the temple for Spencer and his wife was their music room, filled with instruments that included a pianoforte for her, one she had "never touched before." Together the husband and wife would spend their time playing music and singing. When the first child was born, the narrator rejoiced because this daughter could join them in the music-room: she learned to sing when she started to walk. "Her sister sang earlier yet," the narrator explained, which demonstrates the importance music and artistic skills had for the protagonist (153-54). Her domestic happiness, then, seems to reflect a highly idealized image of marriage and motherhood that were set as the main goals for nineteenth-century women. It seems that within this romanticized image of family life the narrator found happiness in being able to express her creativity: it was

spending time together with her husband and children playing music and singing that made the family's life one of bliss.

- 18 Things turned sour, however, with the arrival of the step-child of Spencer's uncle. When the ward arrived to be part of the family, the narrator was already taking care of her husband's responsibilities, in addition to tending to their children. She had her duties that she could not neglect. As she explained: "I was wanted in the parish, sent for here and waited for there: the dying liked to see me comfort their living, the living liked to see me touch their dead; some wanted help, and others wanted consolation; and where I felt myself too young and unlearned to give advice, I could at least give sympathy" (Spofford 158). Despite her feelings of inadequacy, she attended to the needs of the parishioners. Her husband, instead, would spend time with the ward talking, walking, and drawing, while his wife "was busied with servants and accounts or with the children" (156). She was not only burdened with work but also felt ignorant, which led to the resentment she felt toward the more educated, younger woman.
- 19 The narrator "did not like the things [she] heard about her" and was quite worried when the "delightful," intelligent, and "charming" girl of "infinite variety" moved in with the couple (Spofford 154). The description she gives is full of contradictions because of the narrator's resentment, envy, and jealousy of the girl who seems to have everything the narrator herself desired: she was educated, knew foreign languages; she had traveled to Spain and had visited Venice; she knew how to draw; she was even devout; she had time and the freedom to go horseback riding when she wished; she was fearless; she would "dash away" with her "veil streaming behind her" (155-156). In sum, she was "a wonderful and gifted being" (156). The image of the ward is one of a dynamic, independent, courageous girl who is used to doing what she wants. This is further underscored through her relationship with the children. She would dance with them when she pleased but would push them away when she preferred not to be with them (155). Again, this is something the mother could never do.

3. The Narrator's Downward Spiral

- 20 The young ward, who had neither worked nor borne children, is physically beautiful, whereas the overworked wife and mother seemed "very thin and ghastly" (Spofford 161). In addition, the ward is gifted. The narrator, instead, devalues her own skills in playing musical instruments, singing, and taking care of the household. Her resentment toward her domestic duties is palpable and her envy turns into anger toward the girl, toward her religious devotion, education, talent for drawing, and beauty, while it seems that her rage, rather, stemmed from her own lack of educational opportunities and her self-sacrificing willingness to tend to her own domestic duties and her husband's responsibilities. What is more, the woman, unlike the younger ward, had always been unable to praise her husband and make him feel his manhood (149); she had replaced her husband as the head of the family and had always taken care of everything. Because she had assumed the more masculine role of a caretaker, she envied the ward's femininity, "the delicacy of her womanhood" (149). The narrator's envy and jealousy of the young ward torments her, to the point that, foreshadowing her own doom, she prophesies in one of her heated outbursts: "she will die in a madhouse, depend upon it" (157).

- 21 Although the narrator depicts herself as a devoted wife who was betrayed by her husband and a younger woman, her impatience with her children and propensity to subsequently plot a violent revenge indicate the contrary. She shows signs of domestic distress caused by a fear of losing her husband, but she also reveals her anxieties and repressed anger as well as ambiguity toward her traditional gendered role. Similarly to Gilman's narrator in "The Yellow Wallpaper," she appears both to hate and love her husband and children (for Gilman, see Hume 6). The turning point occurs when Spencer informs her that "his marriage was a mistake" (Spofford 159). Her husband's rejection, after she has sacrificed herself and assumed the identity of an obedient domestic angel, triggers the eruption of her oppressed emotions.
- 22 The strong negative emotions make the seemingly submissive narrator quite unique. Her envy and jealousy, so explicitly expressed, turn into boiling rage: the nameless protagonist turns "white and cold and [is] shaking" as she refuses to let her husband go. The violent outburst ends with the two of them crying together. They "had been one soul, and now [they] were two" (Spofford 159). Such impressions recall the period of their courtship and early phase of their marriage but contradict their everyday reality: they had lived quite separate lives, she assuming the responsibilities of the parish, which in reality were her husband's duties, taking care of the living and the dead so as to leave him time to work on his sermons. In a way she had been simultaneously emancipated from and entrapped in her domestic life. Again, resembling Gilman's narrator's "grotesque domestic nightmare," Spofford's nameless woman also "embraces and participates in it from beginning to end – and this is what makes it difficult for readers to determine when or how this narrator's madness surfaces" (Hume 10). Michel Foucault also offers an explanation for similar psychological states: "Madness occurs when the images, which are so close to the dream, receive the affirmation or negation that constitutes error" (91). In "Her Story," the error becomes manifest when it is evident that the dream can no longer be affirmed in reality. In other words, nineteenth-century women's dream, one which society insisted upon, was marriage and motherhood, but both were idealized to the extent of being unrecognizable in the much harsher realities of many wives and mothers.
- 23 The submissive wife gradually lost herself in the confining solitude of her home; subsequently, she nearly lost her own life in exhaustion when tending to her child who had fallen ill. The self-sacrificing mother "was worn to a shadow," as she explains, "with the weight of my responsibility as to her life" (Spofford 160). Here she confesses what a burden her domestic responsibilities were,⁵ the weight of them causing her anxiety and insomnia; thus, these responsibilities had become a potential danger to her health. The condition of the burdened mother and betrayed wife degenerates even further because she is unable to sleep.
- 24 The medicine she had received from her doctor "nerved" her "wide awake," and although her eyes, brain and body hurt, she could not sleep. "I counted the spots on the wall," she remembers, here resembling Gilman's protagonist, "the motes upon my eyes, the notes of all the sheets of music I could recall" (Spofford 160). She already clearly reveals the symptoms of what today would be diagnosed as mental and physical exhaustion, fatigue, or more commonly known burn out. She suffers from insomnia and is depressed. She blames herself for allowing her husband to be "exposed" to the ward's power. She no longer finds time to sing or play the piano; her voice becomes "choked with tears" (160). The case of her exhaustion appears severe: self-accusations, crying,

and feelings of not being valued already are symptomatic of the gravity of her illness, but she also contemplates suicide fancying that her husband might then realize he loved her: "when I was gone perhaps he would love me again" (161).⁶ Her rage and paranoia, also symptomatic of exhaustion, push her to contemplate murder: "I thought I had better put him [her husband] out of the world than let him, who was once so pure and good, stay in it to sin" (161). If the woman's self-presentation can be seen as untruthful, so is the perception of her husband: he had never been so pure and good but had seduced her by brazenly kissing her on the mouth. Moreover, the narrator has no proof of her husband's infidelity. Rather, he appears quite concerned for the condition of his wife. By now, however, it is rather evident that the woman is potentially dangerous not only to herself but also to others.

- 25 Indeed, the extent of her rage, which today is believed to be another side of depression, had become such that she was ready to murder her husband. Her confession appears tragicomic, colored with black humor as it vividly places the resourceful and revengeful woman in the corridors of her house, actually going as far as trying to open the door to their bedroom:

I could have stolen back into our own room with the chloroform, and he would never have known. I turned the handle of the door one night, but the bolt was slipped. I never thought of killing her, you see: let her live and sin, if she would. She was the thing of slime and sin, a splendid tropical growth of the passionate heat and the slime: it was only her nature. But then we think it no harm to kill reptiles, however splendid. (Spofford 161)

- 26 The passage reminds the readers of what happened in real life to such women as Packard and Smith, whose husbands had them drugged with chloroform and then locked up in mental asylums. Here, however, the gender roles are reversed: it is the woman who contemplates harming her husband.
- 27 The reference to the younger woman implies that she may, indeed, be black or mixed-race, perhaps from some tropical place that in stereotypical imagery was governed by passion and heat. The idea of her as naturally inclined to "sin" seems to refer to the prevailing prejudiced idea of black women as sexually alluring and available. The passage indicates how the narrator's anger, the sleepless nights, and resentment of her domesticity have pushed her toward mental instability. It is curious, though, that the victim in her murder plans should be her husband rather than the younger woman. This could imply that the target of her rage was, indeed, her husband, whose obligations she had so readily assumed.
- 28 In addition to contemplating suicide or killing her husband, the woman had started hearing voices. Hallucinations, just like paranoia, have been indicated as yet another symptom of fatigue. For the narrator, the boundaries between reality and imagination started to get blurred, and after she witnessed her husband kissing the young girl in their music-room, which had been her temple, she fainted, only to wake up in the mental hospital where she has now been, in the present moment of the narrative, for ten years.
- 29 Talking to her friend, the narrator claims to feel better; she affirms that her nerves feel cured. She confesses to feeling homesick and ready to forgive her husband. Although she has been in the asylum for a decade, she still feels anxious over her family, in particular her husband, doubting his capacity to take care of the duties that had been the narrator's responsibility: "How could he do without me all this time?" (Spofford

149). Since the narrator has always taken care of everything, she has been defeated by the repressive domestic culture that keeps her in chains; her willpower has been crushed, and her energy drained. Although her madness may give her a sense of "liberation from oppressive cultural constraints" (Rieger 5), her sense of responsibility is such that she wishes to return to her former life, not fully escape from it. Spofford's narrator, like that of Gilman, "reveals that her 'madness' is paradoxically aligned with the same domestic sphere that oppresses her" (Hume 18). Her "insanity" reflects her failure to fully embrace motherhood, but demonstrates how she has internalized the patriarchal gender-biased dictate of being a mother and wife to the extent of wanting to return to her family. Her personal psychosocial conflict over her desires, roles, and responsibilities are the cause for her "madness."

- 30 However, it is rather evident that because of her repressed anger, which suddenly surfaced when confronted with rejection and the dramatic experience of nearly losing her child, she had become a danger to herself and those around her. In her prison-like space, instead, she no longer is a threat, neither physically to herself or others nor by challenging her circumstances. What is more, in the mental institution, she has a chance to rest, to read books, sing, and take walks in the garden. Around Christmas, after thinking about her children and the time "when I [the narrator] had been used to take such pains for their pleasure," she sleeps in the barn, alone, feeling "so free, so free and glad!" (Spofford 165). In the asylum, she is free of her burdens, she has her "amusement," and the place itself is "fine; the halls are spacious and pleasant" (165). The "madhouse" in "Her Story" appears as an example of the institutions envisioned and promoted by Dorothea Dix, a positive, regenerating place with pleasant gardens. If the author wished to present it as an environment in which a woman could escape the demands of her children, husband, and work, it could then be understood to underscore the unsettling situation of women. Anticipating Virginia Woolf's demand for "a room of her own," Spofford would seem to imply that the only place where a nineteenth-century woman could find repose was a "madhouse." It was there that the protagonist could come to terms with her desire for independence, passion, and artistic pursuits that she had tried to reconcile with the demands of traditional gender roles. In the asylum, the woman is gradually recovering her strength now that she has freedom, space, and time to read and sing, without having to worry about her family or the parish (165). And yet, the narrator longs to return home, which draws attention to the way women felt divided between extremes, being torn between desires and expectations concerning their lives and social roles. The narrator's initial confusion about her identity is evoked in her conflicting desires for rest and freedom on the one hand, and husband and family on the other.
- 31 The only responsibility given to Spofford's protagonist in the mental hospital is to look after another woman, whose hair is "whiter than leprosy" and who may be the protagonist herself as well as any woman. She succumbs to her fate, assumes once again the role of a caretaker, a responsibility corresponding to gendered expectations. Although the narrator thinks she saw "a gleam of intelligence" in the eyes of the white-haired woman who follows her around like a dog, according to the doctor, her case is hopeless: "Hopeless, poor thing! – that is an awful word: I could not wish it said for my worst enemy" (Spofford 166). Hopeless, Spofford seems to suggest, was the condition of most women of her time. They were unable to resolve the dilemma of their identity and

self-fulfillment, to reconcile their own desires with the gender-specific societal assumptions concerning their destiny.

- 32 In unconventional, unusual ways Spofford's women make readers question and protest against the repression of patriarchal society and the parameters used to conceptualize women's value, identity, and experience. The protagonist in Spofford's "Her Story" is in all senses a true human being with suppressed passion and sexual desire but also negative feelings especially toward her gender-defined roles, her motherhood, and limited lot in life. The story explores the psychological world of women, the variety of their feelings, and their tragic loss of identity. Since the protagonist conforms to, yet deviates from the period's conceptualization of women as submissive, silent, and saintly, her emotional outbursts are diagnosed as "insanity." She insists that she is not crazy, despite her acknowledgement that she would sit "mumbling and nodding" to herself, and would even wish the death of her children: "If only they never waked! they never waked!" (Spofford 164). Such statements indicate the woman's rejection of the responsibilities and burdens that come with motherhood, which was a role imposed on the period's women. Spofford's feminist message comes across in the woman's prescribed cure, which in addition to medicine and rest, was "books and work." She wishes her husband would come and take her home: "take me to my girls, my fireside, my music," so she could "rest in his arms" and "be blest again" (166; emphasis mine). She yearns for rest, for her artistic outlet, the moments she used to share with her husband and girls singing. As the narrator concludes: "if I had no memory, no desires ... if I had never been happy before, I might be happy now" (165). Unfortunately for her, just like any woman, she did have desires—most of which remained unfulfilled or led to her destruction.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bendixen, Alfred. "Introduction." *The Amber Gods and Other Stories*. Ed. Alfred Bendixen. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1989. ix-xxxvii.
- Bode, Rita. "Lost and Found: Harriet Prescott Spofford's Telling of Her Story." *Neglected American Women Writers of the Long Nineteenth Century*. Eds. Verena Laschinger and Sirpa Salenius. New York: Routledge, 2019. 141-57.
- . "Narrative Revelations: Harriet Prescott Spofford's 'Amber Gods' Revisited." *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance* 50.2 (2004): 233-67.
- Boyd, Anne E. "'What! Has She Got Into the 'Atlantic?': Women Writers, the Atlantic Monthly, and the Formation of the American Canon." *American Studies* 39.3 (1998): 5-36.
- Ellis, R. J. "'Latent Color' and 'Exaggerated Snow': Whiteness and Race in Harriet Prescott Spofford's 'The Amber Gods.'" *Journal of American Studies* 40.2 (2006): 257-82.
- Foucault, Michel. *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*. Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Mentor Book, 1967.

- Gammel, Irene. "Introduction." *Confessional Politics: Women's Sexual Self-Representations in Life Writing and Popular Media*. Ed. Irene Gammel. Southern Illinois UP, 1999.
- Gill, Jo. "Introduction." *Modern Confessional Writing: New Critical Essays*. Ed. Jo Gill. London: Routledge, 2006. 8-13.
- Gleason, William A. *Sites Unseen: Architecture, Race, and American Literature*. New York: New York UP, 2011.
- Glew, Liana Kathleen. "On Intake and Insanity: Women's Narratives of Institutionalization." C19 Podcast S2ET. <https://soundcloud.com/c19podcast/s2e7-on-intake-and-insanity-womens-narratives-of-institutionalization>
- Gold, Eva and Thomas H. Fick. "A 'Masterpiece' of 'the Educated Eye': Convention, Gaze, and Gender in Spofford's 'Her Story.'" *Studies in Short Fiction* 30 (1993): 512-24.
- Hume, Beverly A. "Managing Madness in Gilman's 'The Yellow Wall-Paper.'" *Studies in American Fiction* 30.1 (2002): 3-20.
- Lystra, Karen. *Searching the Heart: Women, Men, and Romantic Love in Nineteenth-Century America*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992.
- Murillo, Cynthia. "The Spirit of Rebellion: The Transformative Power of the Ghostly Double in Gilman, Spofford, and Wharton." *Women's Studies* 42 (2013): 755-81.
- Reiss, Benjamin. *Theaters of Madness: Insane Asylums and Nineteenth-Century American Culture*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2008.
- Rieger, Branimir M. "Introduction." *Dionysus in Literature: Essays on Literary Madness*. Ed. Branimir M. Rieger. Bowling Green (OH): Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1994. 1-15.
- Spofford, Harriet Prescott. "Her Story." *"The Amber Gods" and Other Stories*. Ed. Alfred Bendixen. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1989. 148-66.
- Walter, Madaline Reeder. *Insanity, Rhetoric, and Women: Nineteenth-Century Women's Asylum Narratives*. Ph.D. dissertation. Kansas City: University of Kansas, 2011.
- Weinstock, Jeffrey Andrew. *Scare Tactics: Supernatural Fiction by American Women*. New York: Fordham UP, 2008.

NOTES

1. Harriet Prescott married lawyer and poet Richard Smith Spofford in 1865. In this essay, I will refer to her as Spofford.
2. To complicate the relationship between the three even further, it has been suggested that it may be an inter-racial triangle, the younger woman being black (see Ellis 275).
3. These asylums appeared in nineteenth-century literature, for example in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), Fanny Fern's *Ruth Hall* (1855), and E.D.E.N. Southworth's *The Hidden Hand* (1859) (for more about asylums in nineteenth-century popular fiction, see Reiss 180-84).
4. For more information about premarital sex, see Lystra 276-77.
5. For more about the burden of motherhood, see Bode "Lost and Found."
6. There are numerous online sources about twenty-first century mental and physical exhaustion (burn out), for example, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/blog/high-octane-women/201311/the-tell-tale-signs-burnout-do-you-have-them>.

7. I wish to thank Stephanie Durrans for pointing out that this could also be taken in a figurative sense as a spiritual awakening: she wishes her little girls would never wake since awakening, i.e. opening one's eyes to the reality of one's plight, necessarily implies pain and suffering.

ABSTRACTS

Harriet Prescott Spofford's female protagonists are complex women who often aim to appear as good mothers and wives, sometimes at the cost of denying their sexuality and creativity as they tend to their families and become burdened with responsibilities. The persistent myth that women found fulfillment only in marriage and motherhood, Spofford seems to suggest, failed to reflect the reality of all nineteenth-century women. This essay will examine the female protagonist in "Her Story," which is one of the brilliant short narratives in which Spofford questions gender roles and expectations in the period's patriarchal society. At the same time, it contributes to the national discussion about mental illness and asylums, pointing out how women, just like "lunatics," were deprived of many rights and liberties and how their bodies, minds, and behavior operated in accordance to social presumptions and were even often controlled by figures of authority. The protagonist's desires and circumstances are viewed through her "madness," which Spofford offers, to some extent, as a politics of survival. However, central to the story is the identity conflict experienced by the transgressive, music-loving woman who follows the period's gender-specific expectations, trying to adjust into the role of wife and mother, while also assuming some of the professional responsibilities of her husband. As a consequence, she suffers from anxiety over work, family, and marriage, which leads to physical and mental exhaustion evident in the symptomatic paranoia and violent outbursts that are misdiagnosed as her "madness." The story thus focuses on the problems faced by modern women.

INDEX

Keywords: Harriet Prescott Spofford, madness, confessionals, gender roles, insane asylums, women

AUTHOR

SIRPA SALENIUS

Sirpa Salenius is Senior Lecturer in English-language literature and culture at the University of Eastern Finland. Her research interests include Transatlantic Studies, African American and Women's Studies. Her publications examine race, gender, and sexuality in the transatlantic context. Her most recent publications include *Neglected American Women Writers of the Long Nineteenth Century* (Routledge, 2019), co-edited with Verena Laschinger, and "'Passionément was what I wanted': Female Sexuality in Grace King and Alice Dunbar-Nelson's Fiction," published in *Nineteenth-Century Southern Women Writers: Grace King and Modernism* (Routledge, 2019).