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Gender, Melancholia and the "Fallen Woman": Gendered Visions of Mental Illness in *The Hours* (Stephen Daldry [dir.]: 2002).

In the opening shot of *The Hours*[1] we see a tight close-up of a fountain pen accompanied by the voice-over of Virginia Woolf (Nicole Kidman), one of the film's three central characters from one of the three different temporal and periodical zones. The opening voice-over dialogue can be immediately understood as the composition of a suicide note: "Dearest, I feel certain that I am going mad again, I feel we can't go through another of these terrible times and I shan't recover this time. I begin to hear voices and can't concentrate, so I am doing what seems to be the best thing to do." The voice-over continues on as we are then shown Virginia placing heavy stones into her coat and wading into a river up to her neck, before finally submersing herself entirely and sinking into the darkness below. This is an immediately striking way to begin the film, effectively by showing the end, and exemplifies *The Hours'*s experimentation with temporality and nonlinear storytelling. The image of Virginia sinking head first into the blackness of the river carries explicit connotations that label her as a melancholic figure, and reveal her fate to the audience at the first opportunity.

Virginia's opening dialogue alludes to her affliction with mental illness, her hearing of voices, and establishes mental anguish and suffering as a key theme of the film from the outset. Since the year 2000 there has been a noticeable rise in the number of biographical films that feature mentally ill characters. What becomes apparent from evaluating the range of titles in this group of films is that male narratives are largely dominant, with fewer films portraying mentally ill women as their subjects. Releases such as *Pollock*[2]*, A Beautiful Mind*[3]*, The Aviator*[4]*, Ray*[5]*, Walk The Line*[6] and *The Soloist*[7] have, for the most part, proven to be financially, commercially and critically successful examples of masculinised "true stories" of notable mental illness sufferers. Comparatively smaller in number, films such as *Girl, Interrupted*[8]*, Iris*[9]*, The Hours* and *Sylvia*[10] are noticeably different in terms of themes and narrative approaches.

In this paper I contend that biopic narratives of mental illness can be seen to operate in accordance with a clearly gendered divide in terms of tonality and representation. Using *The Hours* as my central case study, I will provide an overview of the different aspects of gender and sexuality that appear to influence the construction of mental illness representations in biopic cinema. To this end, the

narrative strand focussing on Virginia Woolf in *The Hours* will be central to my analysis, as this is the only narrative strand of the three that we can deem to be biographical, thus enabling a more cohesive comparison with the films that make up the male contingent of biopic cinema.

In the majority of the given examples of male narratives there is an observable trend of what we may term "heroic suffering", in which the central protagonists appear to excel and overcome the throes of their respective condition towards a state of enlightenment or exceptional achievement. John Nash (Russell Crowe) in *A Beautiful Mind* contends with his paranoid schizophrenia and in the latter stages of his life wins the Nobel Prize. Howard Hughes (Leonardo DiCaprio) in *The Aviator* successfully builds a pioneering aircraft empire, and after a self-imposed exile due to a period of struggle with his OCD successfully defends himself against a wrongly instated court investigation. So too in both *Ray* and *Walk the Line*, both musical protagonists battle with alcoholism and drug addiction and in doing so come to re-evaluate their life and moral choices, elevated in the end to a state of personal betterment. This "heroic suffering", or what Stephen Harper terms a 'struggling genius'[11] thematic, is a recurring trope of such film narratives, and can be starkly contrasted to the dominant thematics typical of women's stories of mental illness in biopic cinema. Prolonged periods of suffering and inescapable turmoil instead replace any sense of impending redemption, with female protagonists often pushed to the limits of their resistance by their illness, frequently resulting in a tragic demise or seemingly inevitable death. Therefore it appears that triumph and suffering have become dichotomous attributes of gender and mental illness and that, as Emmons contends, 'cultural archetypes and gendered ideologies pervade the discourses surrounding depression.'[12] Nowhere is this better typified than in *The Hours*.

While biopic films arguably exhibit gendered divisions in terms of their representation of mental illness, I would argue that several of the prevalent tropes used to depict female depression can be traced back to a wider lineage of artistic examples that precede the advent of cinema. For instance, Virginia's drowning in the opening scene clearly evokes the longstanding historical associations between "fallen" women and water. The fallen woman is a conceptualised figure that has widely populated the arts, especially 19th Century British art. As Cregan-Reid highlights, 'The most frequently appearing drownee in nineteenth-century modes of representation is that of the fallen woman...Historians and critics who have worked on

such imagery have rightly established a sinewy bond between drowning and gender.'[13] Traditionally, fallen women were those who had lost their "purity" through having sexual encounters outside of wedlock. The association of the fallen woman and water lies in the connotations of rebirthing or regaining a sense of purity, often employing 'womb-like'[14] iconography, in which the water can be read as symbolic of amniotic fluid. Iconography of this kind appears more than once in *The Hours*. Both Virginia drowning in the river and Laura Brown's (a 1950s housewife who is another of the central protagonists, played by Julianne Moore) abandoned suicide attempt in a hotel room employ this technique, in each case signifying a form of rebirth. Laura's decision not to commit suicide is illustrated in a surrealist sequence in which she is subsumed by river water (presumably from the same river in which Virginia drowns) and then re-emerges into the hotel room, while Virginia's suicide becomes symbolic of rebirthing through her descent into the darkest depths of the river's bottom.

Depictions of fallen women often suggest that purity is regained through suicide, and thus the female body becomes purified only in death. In particular, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood have been noted for their paintings that include fallen women as subjects. For example, John Everett Millais' painting *Ophelia*[15] takes Shakespeare's character from *Hamlet* and illustrates the scene in which she drowns. Therefore Virginia's drowning in *The Hours* can be seen as a reference to the association between 19th Century women and drowning, an acknowledgement of the artistic heritage of suffering "fallen" women. This is especially relevant given Virginia's standing as a prominent literary figure, who would presumably have been well aware of characters such as Ophelia and the notion of the fallen woman in both art and literature, adding an extra layer of relevance to her suicidal modus operandi.

Indeed Ophelia provides an interesting link in this instance. Not only does her depiction in Millais' painting exemplify the dominant cultural rhetoric of 19th Century fallen women and their association with drowning, but Ophelia was also a character who was understood as being "mad". In *Hamlet*, Ophelia's melancholy is heavily tied to ideas of patriarchal control and sexual purity. As Neely contends, 'Ophelia's madness, as the play presents it, begins to be gender specific...associating her with the condition of female hysterics'[15]. Her father Polonius and brother Laertes act as the dominant controlling forces in Ophelia's life, controlling her relationship with Hamlet and insisting she remains pure whilst she is unwed. Hamlet too enforces patriarchal control upon her, calling her (and in turn, women on the whole) a "breeder of sinners"

and banishing her to a "nunnery" once he suspects her of helping Polonius spy on him. Thus Ophelia's descent into madness appears as the result of her inability to break away from her enforced passive role within a patriarchal milieu, and her suffering and suicide can be read as the final result of her oppression. Neely later explains that 'the context of [Ophelia's] disease, like that which [is] termed hysteria, is sexual frustration, social helplessness, and enforced control over women's bodies.'[16] Therefore Ophelia and later conceptualisations of the "fallen" woman form a bridge between themes of female hysteria, madness and imagery of water and drowning. All of these elements provide important historical precedents for considerations of the representation of Virginia Woolf in *The Hours*.

In opening the film by showing Virginia's suicide, a very different version of the "troubled genius" narrative is presented, particularly in comparison to male centred narratives of mental illness such as *A Beautiful Mind* and *The Aviator*. In both these cases the protagonist's mental disorder comes as a surprise to the audience as the scenes of mental anguish and suffering are reserved for the latter narrative stages. Here though Woolf's death cannot be a surprise, but instead an inevitability, as the audience know from the outset that her condition will eventually overwhelm her entirely. It therefore appears that there is a gendered divide in cultural attitudes towards notions of genius, and this becomes reflected within biopic narratives. As Dolan, Gordon and Tincknell contend, in *The Hours*, '[Woolf's] genius is pathologised as the *cause* of her fragile mental health'[17] (original italics). While in *A Beautiful Mind* Nash's exceptional mathematical abilities become revered and understood as the final product of his triumphant battle with schizophrenia, Woolf's genius instead is portrayed as an intrinsic facet of her melancholia, and becomes understood as a contributing factor to her suicide. This becomes coherent with Kristeva's view that melancholia possesses a self-destructive impulse, an unconscious death-drive, linked to abandonment of hope and an inability to regain any sense of hope: 'The melancholy woman is the dead one that has always been abandoned within herself and can never kill outside of herself.'[18] This extract suggests that suicide has a natural affinity to women with depression, and Virginia Woolf's characterisation in *The Hours* appears to typify this.

Harper claims that 'in films about famous women...the heroism or nobility that might attach to psychological struggle tends to be vitiated by tragedy, melodrama, hysteria and death.'[19] This would certainly seem to be the case for Virginia. This

gendered model appears to be consistent across the few other biopics of mentally ill women, as both *Iris* and *Sylvia* chart similar narrative trajectories in which the eponymous protagonists (Iris Murdoch [Judi Dench] and Sylvia Plath [Gwyneth Paltrow] respectively) die, consumed by their experiences of suffering because of their disorders. Whilst, to some degree, the endings of biopics are dictated by the actual fate of the subject that they represent (scriptwriter Akiva Goldsman and director Ron Howard would likely have faced mass criticism should John Nash have died in *A Beautiful Mind* while the real John Nash is still alive today), this does not stop the tragic and sombre endings of women's mental health biopics being problematic. That these narratives belabour the suffering of their protagonists and consistently end in death appears to represent the differing cultural perspectives towards male and female geniuses. Bingham argues that this is a common trend, stating that 'female biopics...found conflict and tragedy in a woman's success. A victim, whatever her profession, made a better subject than a survivor with a durable career and a non-traumatic personal life. Early deaths were preferable to long lives.'[20] Bingham's argument here suggests that suffering and death is a commonly observable trend amongst female biopics more widely, and therefore mental illness can be understood as just one of the narrative techniques used in articulating this discourse.

One of the key motifs of *The Hours*, in terms of providing an explanation or origin for the characters' depression, is sexuality. In particular, latent female homosexuality becomes implicated with psychological trauma and disorder. Hubert claims that there is a cultural association between 'societal disapproval of lesbianism [and] the social stigma of madness'[21], and *The Hours* certainly endeavours to make that link explicit. During a scene in which Virginia's sister, Vanessa (Miranda Richardson), visits with her children, the two characters are presented as once being very close, albeit now much more distant (both geographically and emotionally). During this scene Virginia is shown cradled in her sister's arms, and at the end of Vanessa's visit Virginia passionately kisses her on the lips, looking longingly into her sister's teary eyes. There is a hint of reciprocation from Vanessa, who kisses Virginia on the hand and has to pull herself away whilst remaining wistful in her expression. Clearly there are homoerotic feelings between the two sisters, and the sadness expressed by both characters suggests that both are repressing incestuous romantic feelings for one another, which is potentially the reason they are no longer close. This stifled homosexual relationship can be read as a crucial part of Woolf's psychological

trauma because, as Wiener suggests, 'unfulfilled lesbian yearning, or unfulfilled desire more generally...can lie behind depression.'[22]

In implicating repressed lesbian feelings as a factor of her condition, *The Hours* also subverts and discredits the "love as cure" motif that is ubiquitous in the narratives of male mental illness. This trope revolves around the notion that heterosexual love can serve as a quasi-medicinal cure for the recuperation of the lead (male) character. In his review of *A Beautiful Mind*, Sam Khorrami sardonically quips that 'happily, we learn that a good woman can help a man overcome any difficulty, even including paranoid schizophrenia.'[23] Whilst this is a problematic construction of gender roles, it is nevertheless a common feature of male mental illness biopics. However, *The Hours* consciously presents a critical subversion of this convention, as Virginia's husband Leonard (Stephen Dillane) attempts to create a more tranquil and stable environment for Virginia by moving out of London and into more rural surroundings, although her suicide proves that this was ultimately futile. Thus the notion of love as a hetero-normative cure is shown not to work when it is the wife who is mentally ill and the husband is positioned as the lover/carer. It is also further complicated in that Leonard's role of the lover/healer does not come at the expense of his career as a publisher, rather he attempts to negotiate both roles, and this can ultimately be argued as a reason why he fails to provide a suitable living environment for Virginia to contend with her illness. Therefore the gender dynamics between Virginia and Leonard can be read as a comment that aims to highlight that the suffering that comes as a consequence of mental illness cannot simply be "cured" by the support of a doting and loving partner.

To conclude then, *The Hours* is rich with critiques of conservative or traditional gender dynamics, which often affect the way in which characterisations of mental illness are represented. The implementation of iconography that evokes the "fallen" woman archetype in the film acknowledges the heritage of artistic articulations of female melancholy, particularly associated with water and drowning. Where male protagonists often play out a form of "heroic suffering" by battling their way through the turmoil of mental disorder to a state of enlightenment or success, often female protagonists are isolated and ostensibly "defeated" due to pre-existing cultural attitudes towards female genius. The axis of genius and madness, a staple of Western cultural beliefs dating as far back to philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle, seems to be predominantly weighted in favour of male characters who battle and prosper while

their female counterparts are destined to suffer indefinitely. In subverting and deconstructing formulaic ideas of gender roles *The Hours* urges us as viewers to begin to take female subjects and their mental conditions more seriously. Depictions of female mental disorder in the biopic may at times be problematic, suggesting that often women are 'passive victims of their disordered psyches'[24], but in expanding biopic discourses to consider women and their mental illnesses alongside men with theirs, the biopic may still prove to be a platform for real women's tales of mental disorder to find a mass outlet.

<u>Notes</u>

1. *The Hours*. Directed by Stephen Daldry,

2. *Pollock.* (2000) Ed Harris (dir.) USA

3. *A Beautiful Mind.* (2001) Ron Howard (dir.) USA

4. *The Aviator.* (2004) Martin Scorsese (dir.) USA

5. *Ray.* (2004) Taylor Hackford (dir.) USA

6. *Walk the Line.* (2005) James Mangold (dir.) USA/Germany

7. *The Soloist*. (2009) Joe Wright (dir.) USA/UK/France

8. *Girl, Interrupted*. (1999) James Mangold (dir.) USA

9. *Iris*. (2001) Richard Eyre (dir.) USA/UK

10. *Sylvia.* (2003) Christine Jeffs (dir.) UK

11. Stephen Harper. *Madness, Power and the Media: Class, Gender and Race in Popular Representations of Mental Distress* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) 74.

12. Kimberly Emmons. 'Narrating the Emotional Woman: Uptake and Gender in Discourses on Depression', in *Depression and Narrative: Telling the Dark*, ed. Hilary Clark (Albany: State of New York University Press, 2008) 111.

13. Vybarr Cregan-Reid. 'Drowning in Early Dickens'. *Textual Practice.* 19(1): 71-91.

14. Ron M. Brown. *The Art of Suicide*. (London: Reaktion Books, 2001) 153.

15. Millais, John Everett. *Ophelia*, oil on canvas, c. 1851 (Tate Britain, London).

16. Carol Thomas Neely. *Distracted Subjects: Madness and Gender in Shakespeare and Early Modern Culture.* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2004) 52.

17. Ibid.

18. Josephine Dolan, Suzy Gordon and Estella Tincknell. 'The Post-Feminist Biopic: Re-telling the Past in *Iris*, *The Hours* and *Sylvia*.', in, *Adaptation in Contemporary Culture: Textual Infidelities,* edited by Rachel Carroll. (London: Continuum, 2009) 180.

19. Julia Kristeva. *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (West Sussex: Columbia University, 1989) 30.

20. Harper, *Madness, Power and the Media*. 77.

21. Dennis Bingham. '"I do Want to Live!": Female Voices, Male Discourses, and Hollywood Biopics' *Cinema Journal,* 38(3) (1999) 3-26.

22. Susan J. Hubert. *Questions of Power: The Politics of Women's Madness Narratives.* (London: Rosemost, 2002) 107.

23. Diane R. Wiener. 'A Meditation on Depression, Time, and Narrative Peregrination in the Film *The Hours*.', in, *Depression and Narrative: Telling the Dark*, ed. Hilary Clark (Albany: State of New York University Press, 2008) 160.

24. Sam Khorrami. 'Madness and Masculinity: A Beautiful Mind Examined Through a Men's Issue Model.' *Men and Masculinities* 5(1) (2002) 117.

25. Harper, *Madness, Power and the Media*. 77.

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