Psychology and literature: from Margery Kempe to Sylvia Plath

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It has often been said that there is a fine line between genius and insanity and the relationship between literature and mental health has been of intense interest to both literary scholars and psychologists. This seminar will explore mental illness and instability in several major authors, focusing on Margery Kempe, a medieval housewife and mystic who became the first autobiographer in English; John Bunyan, the seventeenth-century author of Pilgrim's Progress; John Clare, a nineteenth century nature poet who became incarcerated in an asylum; and two key twentieth-century female authors, Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath. Both iconic figures in the history of women's writing, Woolf and Plath each struggled with extremes of mood and ultimately committed suicide. We will read their writings in the light of psychological theory and of cultural and feminist contexts. Complex questions will emerge as we study these authors; what is the true nature of 'mental illness'? To what extent is it valid or helpful to apply modern psychology to writers from a very different age? How is emotional disorder expressed within the texts themselves? To what extent can other modern theories, especially feminism, help us in encountering these key authors, their lives and their legacies? Led by a literary scholar who is also a psychologist and psychiatrist, this seminar will bring unusual insights to the study of these distinctive texts.

Seminar specific student learning outcomes

Students who have taken this seminar will:
- have a basic knowledge of the key issues involved in applying psychology within a literary context
- be able to comment on selected passages by Margery Kempe, John Bunyan, John Clare, Virginia Woolf, and Sylvia Plath
- know how to employ techniques of close reading to further their understanding of these authors
- understand the relevance of cultural and ideological as well as psychological and biological factors in historical constructs of 'mental illness'.
- have a broad knowledge of the understanding and treatment of psychological disorder in the time of each author.

Required reading

J. Bunyan, 'Grace abounding to the chief of sinners', in *Grace abounding, with other spiritual autobiographies*, ed. Anita Pacheco (2008)

J. Bate, *John Clare* (2004)

G. Claridge, R. Pryor, and G. Watkins, *Sounds from the bell jar: ten psychotic authors* (1999)

M. Kempe, *The book of Margery Kempe*, ed. B. Windeatt (1985)

S. Plath, *Collected poems,* ed. T. Hughes (2002)

V. Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* [any modern edition, e.g. ed. E. Showalter (2000)]

Recommended reading list

J. Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's progress*, ed. N.H. Keeble (1984)

J. Clare, *John Clare by himself*, ed. E. Robinson, D. Powell, and J. Lawrence (1996)

S. Gilbert and S. Gubar, *The madwoman in the attic: the woman writer and the nineteenth-century literary imagination*, 2nd edn (2000)

L. Gordon, *Virginia Woolf* (2001)

R.L. Greaves, *John Bunyan* (1969)

T. Kendall, *Sylvia Plath* (2001)

C.A. Kirk, *Sylvia Plath* (2009)

R. Lawes, 'The madness of Margery Kempe', in *The medieval mystical tradition in England, Ireland, and Wales*, ed. M. Glasscoe (1999), 147–67

——, 'Psychological disorder and the autobiographical impulse in Julian of Norwich, Margery Kempe, and Thomas Hoccleve', in *Writing religious women*, ed. D. Renevey and C. Whitehead (2000), 217–43.

H. Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (1996)

J. Malcolm, *The silent woman: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes* (2005)

S. Plath, *The bell jar* (1996)

——, *The journals of Sylvia Plath* ed. K. Kukil (2001)

R. Sharrock, 'Spiritual autobiography in the Pilgrim's progress', *Review of English Studies*, 24 (1948), 102–20

E. Showalter, *The female malady: women, madness, and English culture, 1830–1980* (1987)

E. Wagner, *Ariel's gift: Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath, and the story of birthday letters* (2001)

V. Woolf, *To the lighthouse*, ed. S. McNichol and H. Lee (2000)

——, *Selected diaries*, ed. Q. Bell (2008)

——, *Selected letters*, ed. H. Lee (2008)