

“A Secret Worth Knowing”: Gender and Madness in the Shadow of the Asylum

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In this paper, I will build upon the work of social historians of medicine and historians of women by taking a gendered approach to the study of the life writing of those individuals who were either labeled “mad” or “insane” or took on a mad identity in the 19th century United States. Unlike Judy (Lensink) Temple (1989) and Linda Carlisle (2010), who explore the life of an individual 19th-century woman, I will take a more thematic and gendered approach to studying those “mad” or “insane” women and men living on the edges of 19th century society. Disability (madness or insanity), and often gender and class worked to marginalize a diverse array of 19th-century women and men in influential and instructive ways. I will use the experiences of two women and two men from different parts of the country (Tennessee, New York, Massachusetts, and Maine) to gain a fresh perspective on being made in the United States during the formative years of asylum medicine, roughly the 1830s–1860s. By making a closer analysis of mad people’s dynamic lives both inside and outside the asylum, I seek to move beyond the “(ex-)patient” or “(ex-)inmate” perspective and the “therapeutic encounter” and expose a richly complex and intricately gendered history that extends beyond well-worn notions of “social control” and “resistance” and challenges many of the common (mis)conceptions (primarily among social historians of medicine) of the “19th century mad person.” Most notably, the notion that articulate (and published) mad people and those individuals who spent relatively brief periods in the asylum are somehow “unrepresentative” of those “mad” and “insane” Americans who occupied the liminal spaces of 19th-century towns, cities, and families. Madness was a uniquely gendered and relational experience that extended well beyond the asylum walls and the conversations of elite “medical men.”