
Mrs. Packard, Mrs. Givings, and Mrs. Daldry: Subverting the Madwoman Metaphor

Kristen Rogers*¹

¹Texas Tech University – United States

Abstract

This essay examines and compares two contemporary American plays, *Mrs. Packard*, by Emily Mann, and *In the Next Room or the Vibrator Play*, by Sarah Ruhl, analyzing their engagement with the concept of "using madness to represent women's rebellion"-a metaphor that has long been championed, but has more recently come under scrutiny as feminist disability theories seek to disrupt this "almost monolithic way of reading mental illness within feminist literary criticism" (Donaldson 93-94). Though they approach their subjects in vastly different ways-one a tense drama based on a true story, the other a somewhat bawdy, yet heartbreaking comedy-both Mann and Ruhl seem to set up, but then ultimately subvert, the madness-as-rebellion metaphor. Both plays focus on the experiences of American women in the mid- to late 1800s, exposing the imbalance in power along gender lines and the absurdity of the conditions under which a woman's "abnormal" thoughts or behaviors (as observed, defined, and reported by her husband) could label her "ill." In *Mrs. Packard*, the title character is condemned to confinement-like Bertha Mason, the original "madwoman in the attic"-due to an act of rebellion against her husband. Mann seems to undermine this parallel, however, by emphasizing throughout the play that *Mrs. Packard's* true power and rebellion exist not in her acts of madness, but in her insistence on proving her sanity. In the vibrator play, Ruhl investigates the diagnosis of hysteria as a blanket explanation for unladylike behavior. She skews the narrative, however, when she puts the "cure" literally and figuratively in the hands of the women themselves. In both plays, the female "madness" in question does seem to represent a sort of resistance, but the true rebellion comes in each woman's eventual ownership of her identity.

*Speaker