John Brown's "Madness"

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This essay explores how divergent interpretations of John Brown's alleged "madness" in the aftermath of the Harper's Ferry Raid defined the meaning and import of his actions for the Republic's increasingly unstable social and political order. It argues that popular characterizations of Brown illustrate that "madness" can serve a number of rhetorical functions in the civic sphere. The essay first explores the popular etiology of insanity in antebellum America. It then argues that prevailing views of insanity in the mid-nineteenth century invited three metonymic interpretations of the origins of Brown's "madness"—and hence of the larger significance of his actions: Brown as pariah, Brown as pawn, and Brown as prophet. A concluding section discloses how these competing views may enrich our understanding of "madness" as a recurrent trope in American political and social controversy.

> How admirable is the symmetry of the heavens; how grand and beautiful. Everything moves in sublime harmony in the government of God. Not so with us poor creatures. If one star is more brilliant than others, it is continually shooting in some erratic way into space.
>
> —John Brown, 1856

John Brown's revelation to an eastern reporter as the two studied the night sky from a Kansas field one summer evening in 1856 proved uncannily prophetic.[1] Three years later, the scourge of Bloody Kansas and a small group of followers briefly seized the Federal Arsenal at Harper's Ferry, Virginia. The raiders hoped to rally slaves from nearby plantations and lead them on a campaign of liberation throughout the South. Brown's audacious movement and its repercussions for a nation already teetering on the edge of civil war have been the subject of endless speculation and debate ever since.[2] For many observers, the Harper's Ferry Raid has come to symbolize the peril that fanatical

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devotion to a cause, however noble, can pose to civil society. Others have seen it as a shining, principled moment in the nation's history, a hammer blow that shattered the brittle veneer of civility and compromise that safeguarded slavery. In the storm of popular commentary that surrounded the event itself, everyone, it seemed, had an opinion about the strange, charismatic figure who, Samson-like, set out to pull down the Republic on his own head.

But on one point, at least, a great many of Brown's contemporaries were agreed: Brown himself was almost certainly "mad." In pulpits, public meetings, and a significant number of the nation's 4,000 newspapers, North and South, Brown was routinely judged to be "deluded," "fanatical," "maniacal," or "crazed." The indefatigable diarist George Templeton Strong confided to himself that Brown's foray was an "insane transaction" and feared it might lead to "grave results" if prominent northern abolitionists were found to be involved. Even abolitionist editor William Lloyd Garrison wondered at Brown's "misguided, wild, and apparently insane" adventure.[3] But although the *fact* of Brown's "madness" was ceded by most contemporaries, its *meaning* was sharply disputed. Some pointed to heredity or personal tragedy as the source of Brown's derangement, dismissing Harper's Ferry as a frightening but isolated incident. Others saw Brown as a man driven to insanity by the words or deeds of others, arguing that the raid was representative of the increasingly chaotic and irrational state of the Union itself. And still others believed that Brown's mania was divinely inspired, his raid a providential intervention into the nation's affairs.

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A POPULAR ETIOLOGY OF MADNESS IN ANTEBELLUM AMERICA

The debate over Brown's "madness" must be understood within the context of the popular etiology of insanity in the mid-nineteenth century. Then, as now, the average American's understanding of insanity was an amalgam of received wisdom, scientific study, and personal prejudice.[4] As a result, public

attitudes toward the insane were confused and often ambivalent. They were frequently shunned, mocked, and persecuted as unwelcome object lessons in the perils of private or public sin. But they could be regarded with an almost superstitious veneration as well. After all, Western tradition has long associated madness with the genius of the poet and the foresight of the prophet.[5] Whether they were kept at home, confined in institutions, or simply left to wander the streets, the "mad" maintained a tenuous relationship to civil society, at least as it was envisioned in Republican theory: they were agents of disruption in an ordered world, shooting stars within the symmetry of the heavens.

The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries witnessed the first scientific efforts to study and treat insanity in Western Europe and the United States. Following the pioneering work of Philippe Pinel and William Tuke, and reformers such as Dorothea Dix, efforts to treat the insane on a more systematic and humane basis took hold in Western Europe and the United States by mid-century.[6] Along with the penitentiary, public school, and temperance meeting, the insane asylum took its place at the vanguard of a new age of social reform.[7] The origins, nature, and treatment of madness were fashionable topics in scholarly and popular journals of the period. In general, insanity was thought to result when severe stress was placed on a "constitutionally weak nervous system."[8] The stress itself could originate internally—the result of hereditary disposition, illness, injury, alcoholism—or externally from a sudden reversal in business, grief over the loss of a loved one, or religious agitation. By mid-century some observers found inducements to insanity just about everywhere, and especially in "the exceptionally open and fluid quality of American society" itself.[9] To be sure, the era's rough-and-tumble economic conditions, religious excitements, and political and social upheavals played havoc with long-established patterns of life. Sudden fortune and sudden financial ruin seemed ever-present possibilities and with them came constant pressure to get—and stay—ahead. As Toqueville, writing in the 1830s, had foreseen, if industrialized democracy opened new vistas for those with ambition, it also introduced new ways those ambitions could be frustrated.

> When all of the privileges of birth and fortune are abolished, when all professions are accessible to all, and a man's own energies may place him at the top of any of them, an easy and unbounded career seems open to his ambition. . . . But this is an erroneous notion, which is corrected by daily experience. The same equality which allows every citizen to conceive these lofty hopes, renders all the citizens less able to realise them: it circumscribes their powers on every side, while it gives freer scope to their desires. . . . [T]his constant strife between the propensities springing from the equality of conditions and the means it supplies to satisfy them harasses and wearies the mind.[10]

Mounting sectional tensions over slavery in the 1840s and 1850s only intensi-
fied the emotional turmoil and sense of crisis that were thought to foster insan-
ity in the vulnerable. As David J. Rothman notes, "The style of life in the new
republic seemed willfully designed to produce mental illness. Everywhere they
looked, they found chaos and disorder, a lack of fixity and stability."[11]

Medical authorities of the period held that insanity could manifest itself in
a number of ways: melancholia, mania, monomania, dementia, and idiocy.[12]
Of these, the species of insanity most often associated with Brown by observers
at the time was monomania. Monomaniacs were characterized by the ability
to reason and behave normally in most situations accompanied by a tendency
to "become irrational and obsessive on specific subjects."[13] The monomaniac
was thus only "partially insane," though perhaps all the more dangerous for
this, because much of the time, he or she seemed an intelligent, reasonable
person. But in pursuit of his or her obsession, the monomaniac could become
implacable and ruthless, forsaking friends, family, even life itself in the head-
long pursuit of a desired (and usually unrealistic) goal.

One of the most compelling portraits of monomania produced during this
period was that of Captain Ahab in Herman Melville's 1851 novel, *Moby Dick*.
Although the novel was not a commercial success, it vividly captures ideas popu-
lar at the time about the nature of monomania and its potential dangers to soci-
ety. Melville's antagonist, Ahab, is a competent and successful mariner, a man
who has risen to the top of his profession. But he also bears grievous physical
and psychological wounds, the legacies of an earlier encounter with the malevo-
lent white whale, "Moby Dick." After a tortuous convalescence, Ahab gradually
regains his physical strength. He is fitted with a new leg and given command
of the whaler *Pequod*. But, as Melville cautions readers, "Ahab, in his hidden
self, raved on," tormented by a compulsion to wreak vengeance on the white
whale.[14] At sea, Ahab's behavior grows increasingly erratic. He broods alone in
his cabin by day and paces the deck fitfully by night. "If such a furious trope may
stand," Melville writes of his tragic antagonist, "his special lunacy stormed his
general sanity, and turned all its concentrated cannon upon its own mad mark;
so that, far from having lost his strength, Ahab, to that one end, did now pos-
sess a thousandfold more potency than he ever had sanely brought to bear upon
any one reasonable object."[15] Magnified by madness, Ahab's virulent compul-
sion quickly infects the *Pequod*'s crew until they, too, are won over to his single-
minded quest. It is, as every reader of the novel learns, the death of them all.

MADNESS AND THE CIVIC SPHERE

Melville could hardly have drawn a starker portrait of the monomaniacal leader
willing to wreak havoc in pursuit of his mark. As Leland M. Griffin conjectured

of President Kennedy's alleged assassin Lee Harvey Oswald, the turn to violence is all too seductive when ambition and heroic vision are unbridled from some internal "principle of self-restraint." "The problem seems to be that the dreamer of Utopia—of all beings truly 'rotten with perfection'—once convinced by an internal rhetoric of the virtue of his New Order, is tempted to bring it to power, to 'round things out,' by any means possible"[16] But Ahab, at least, was a fictional character in a not very successful novel. On the other hand, John Brown, obsessed with slavery and willing to wreck the Union to secure its demise, was a figure all too real. What was the meaning of his "special lunacy" and what did it portend for the country?

To appreciate the range of responses to Brown's alleged monomania, it is important to understand late antebellum views of the nature and vulnerabilities of the civic sphere. Although Jürgen Habermas initially conceived of the "public sphere" as a space for enlightened debate and discussion, I use a variant of the term here to denote instead the collective norms operating at any one time to circumscribe the legitimate modes of civic expression. In American political culture, the civic sphere is both dynamic and contested; it can and does transform itself over time, conferring respectability on previously unknown or proscribed forms of expression while casting aside others that have become outmoded. Moreover, as James Darsey has argued persuasively, there is a long and honorable "prophetic tradition" in American culture that frequently tests the limits of civility and decorum in civic discourse.[17]

But the fundamental tendency of the civic sphere over time is toward coherence and stasis of some kind. Thus, although it can accommodate new forms of dissent, the civic sphere is also stable enough to enable parties that strongly disagree on the issues to concur nonetheless that certain types of (usually violent) protest behavior, such as assassination, kidnapping, insurrection, and mob actions, lie squarely outside its boundaries. For instance, historian Kimberly Smith argues that in the post-Revolutionary period, public rioting by aggrieved groups was a relatively common and legitimate vehicle of social and political protest, at least in certain circumstances. However, as less volatile avenues of civic expression opened up to a greater number of citizens in the early nineteenth century, mob action became less acceptable as a form of civic expression.[18]

When they do occur, breaches of something so essential to a democratic polity as the norms of public controversy are apt to occasion soul-searching concerning the integrity and resiliency of the civic sphere itself. An assassination or insurrection may in this way come to be viewed as a metonymic indicator of some disorder afflicting society-at-large.[19] For example, in the aftermath of the Kennedy assassination, commentators anguished over the "climate of extremism" said to have been responsible for the president's death. President Lyndon

Johnson's frequent evocation of Isaiah 1:18 ("Come let us reason together.") over the following months may be understood in this respect as a kind of "secular prayer" ("the *coaching of an attitude*") aimed at restoring calm to the civic sphere.[20] Three decades later, after Timothy McVeigh and an accomplice blew up the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City in 1995, President Clinton voiced the concerns of many when he recognized the need to "purge ourselves of the dark forces which gave rise to this evil. They are forces that threaten our common peace, our freedom, our way of life."[21]

In her recent study of political engagement during the antebellum period, *The Dominion of Voice*, Smith argues that the boundaries of appropriate public discourse remained unusually fluid in the half century following the American Revolution. Having rejected a traditional society in which the norms of public expression were clear, if highly deferential and restrictive, Americans adopted competing ideas about *how* they should participate in democratic society. Similarly, John M. Murphy asserts that the founders anticipated the difficulty of establishing a stable public sphere in a nation of competing interests and loyalties. In response, he urges, they sought to inculcate through precept and example a model of citizenship that was "cool, prudent, disciplined and deferential," and willing to sacrifice self-interest to the public good. And historian Peter Knupfer contends that, ever-conscious of the potential for single interest factions to tear apart the Union, the post-Revolutionary generation consciously instantiated "compromise" as a civic value. Even Darsey allows that "dread of chaos was epidemic in early-nineteenth-century America."[22]

Within this logic, Brown's violent challenge to the dominion of reasoned deliberation was ipso facto "irrational" and possibly indicative of a much larger threat to the civic sphere. But from whence that threat came and with what measures it should be met was less clear. Answers to these questions depended largely upon whether one believed that the civic sphere, as then constituted, was capable of coping with the passions aroused by slavery. For Americans who felt that the civic sphere could weather this storm, as it had so many before, the maintenance of stability and order remained the paramount consideration. Some of these dismissed Brown as a deluded, self-aggrandizing fanatic—a *pariah* whose protest should be ignored. Others agreed that Brown was a dangerous monomaniac, but believed that he had been *driven* to this state by the rancorous controversy surrounding slavery. For these observers, Brown was merely the *pawn* of malignant political factions whose extremism, if unchecked, threatened to destroy the civic sphere. For a third group of contemporary observers, Brown's "madness" signified something altogether different: paradoxical proof that the civic sphere itself had grown dangerously disordered. To these observers, Brown was a *prophet*, whose defense of the innocent could only be viewed as "mad" within a civic sphere that had itself

become morally compromised through its complicity with the abomination of slavery.

It is important to note that all three of these views were articulated from both sincere and cynical motives (and sometimes both at the same time). One might, for example, hold that Brown truly was insane, a tragic figure, and still appreciate the political capital to be gained by blaming his "madness" on one's political foes. Similarly, one might believe that Brown was quite sane, yet recognize that he could be discredited by being labeled mad. It is doubtless impossible to know with any certainty whether individual users of the three tropes of "madness" were in earnest or merely exploiting an opportunity to promote (or discredit) an ideology. What is clear is that all three views were voiced in the aftermath of Brown's raid and that each invited a differing interpretation of its meaning.

BROWN AS PARIAH

Popular opinion in Antebellum America held that "madness" typically originated when some inherent flaw or weakness within an individual's mental character was subjected to severe stress. Everything from a physical injury to the brain, to the effects of alcoholism, to traumatic experiences, to an over-stimulated imagination might trigger insanity in a weak constitution. Grounding insanity in an "imbalance" between a weak-minded individual and a stressful or turbulent environment invited speculation as to whether the behavior of the "mad" had any real social significance. Charles E. Morris notes that "madness" could be a politically expedient diagnosis as well, because "the cultural discourse of madness . . . serves readily and efficiently as a rhetorical mechanism with which the rebellious might be disciplined or silenced." Indeed, Morris has argued that nineteenth-century concepts of gender, power, and madness conspired to silence abolitionist agitator Abigail Folsom in just such a fashion.[23]

Morris demonstrates how an accusation of "madness" can insulate a movement's leadership from the unruly behavior of one of its own members, even as movement leaders profess sympathy for his or her motives. In a similar vein, M. Jimmie Killingsworth and Jacqueline S. Palmer have shown how some early environmentalists were dismissed as "hysterical" by their foes in the agribusiness and chemical industries.[24] More recently, politically embarrassing revelations concerning allegedly corrupt actions by Illinois governor Rod Blagojevich that threatened to reflect badly upon the incoming Obama administration were arguably minimized by attributing the governor's behavior to "madness."[25] While the use of invective to silence one's opponents is hardly new, a charge of "madness" has distinct advantages when applied to individuals or groups whose actions directly challenge the legitimacy of the civic sphere

itself. First, it renders problematic any critique of the civic sphere raised by the actions of the accused. One can, after all, negotiate with a rational adversary, but there is no negotiating with a monomaniac who, by definition, compromises with no one. Second, by isolating and diminishing the credibility of the accused, it underscores the apparent rationality of the public sphere as it is. For the *unreasonableness* of one's opponents doubtless bolsters one's own claims to *reasonableness*.[26]

But although Brown was neither the first nor the last social activist to be labeled "mad," he was in some respects unique in earning that appellation from his friends as well as his enemies. In this regard, Abolitionists and Fireaters, Unionists and Disunionists, Republicans and Democrats—parties that could agree on almost nothing else—found some common ground, however temporary. It is true that the fear and outrage inspired by Brown's raid were more pronounced in the South. Even so, the widespread consensus that Brown's behavior had been irrational offered some reassurance to those worried about the possibility of a violent sectional conflict that the norms of republican civility were still in force. Hence, by labeling Brown "mad," opinion leaders in the press and politics could effectively contain the damage caused by Harper's Ferry and even, in a sense, convert it to their own advantage. Brown-as-pariah provided a kind of scapegoat whose exclusion from the public sphere might cleanse and heal a divided nation.

It is not surprising, therefore, that many public commentaries in the raid's aftermath discounted it as the product of one man's fevered imagination. Brown, it was argued, was a pathetic figure, a victim of heredity, perhaps, and certainly of his own delusions of grandeur. He represented no one except himself. The most ardent champions of the Brown-as-pariah trope may have been Republican politicians and editors. Their reasoning is understandable, given that secessionists and Democratic leaders, North and South, were eager to tie Brown to the new party. Brown's actions seemingly placed Republican leaders on the horns of a dilemma. Republicans could not pretend to be a truly *national* party unless they condemned Brown's "assault" on the South. At the same time, they could not affirm their antislavery credentials unless they defended Brown, or at least expressed sympathy with his ends. In the end, they chose to split the difference, by condemning his actions as an "irrational" response to an honorable cause. For example, the Republican-leaning *Chicago Press and Tribune* professed sympathy with Brown's desire to help the slaves, but lamented the "fanaticism which led him to his present strait." In Pittsburgh, the *Gazette* editorialized:

> We cannot but disapprove his mad and folly-stricken act, but the unselfishness of
> his deed; his moderation, when victorious, over the town which he captured; his

spartan courage in defending himself and his fellows, and his sublime contempt
of death while overborne and made the manacled tenant of a prison; his stern
integrity in scorning the technicalities of the law, and his manliness *in all things*,
will not be quickly forgotten.[27]

Abraham Lincoln, testing the presidential waters out in the Kansas territory,
lamented: "Old John Brown has just been executed for treason against a state.
We cannot object, even though he agreed with us in thinking slavery wrong.
That cannot excuse violence, bloodshed, and treason." In nearby Lawrence,
Kansas, a local paper summed up the affair: "Poor silly fellows! A straightjacket
should be their reward, for they lack moral responsibility because of lunacy."[28]

Brown's legal team did attempt to mount an insanity defense for their cli-
ent. Working feverishly, they collected more than two dozen affidavits from
friends and relatives of their client in an effort to establish that he was now
and had been insane for years. Had the effort succeeded, Brown might have
been spared the gallows, but the significance of his acts would surely have
been severely diminished. Brown must have realized this, for he strenuously
objected to every suggestion that he was not of sound mind.[29] One contem-
porary historian has argued that Brown and Virginia Governor Henry Wise
(under whose jurisdiction Brown was tried) shared a tacit understanding that
precluded an acquittal on the grounds of insanity. Wise needed Brown to be
seen as sane by the public because only then did his actions provide tangible
proof of Northern designs on the interests of the South. Wise's political ambi-
tions demanded that he slay a formidable dragon, not a deluded loner. For his
part, Brown needed above all to be taken seriously. In any event, the effort to
have Brown acquitted at trial on grounds of insanity came to nothing. And
Brown was duly convicted on charges of murder and treason against the state
of Virginia. Appeals for clemency on the grounds that Brown was insane came
from many quarters, right up to the day of the hanging. But Wise refused to stay
the execution.[30]

BROWN AS PAWN

The ambiguity inherent in the popular notion that insanity arose from an
imbalance between a subject's weakened mental constitution and a stressful
environment opened the possibility for multiple interpretations of the cause
and significance of Brown's alleged derangement. Emphasizing the former
could support the conclusion that Brown alone was responsible for his actions
and that they signified little about the state of overall health of the Republic's
civic sphere. Emphasizing the latter produced an entirely different set of con-
clusions about the meaning of his actions.

Opinions varied among those who saw Brown as a product or extension of larger forces operating within (or upon) the civic sphere. Southern editorialists, defenders of slavery, and Democratic leaders tended to blame Northerners, opponents of slavery, and Republicans, for Brown's antisocial behavior. Northerners blamed slaveholders and Democrats. But regardless of their viewpoints on the origins of Brown's insanity, proponents of the Brown-as-pawn trope tended to embrace one of two views about its significance. One view held that Brown had been driven to "madness" by the bitterly partisan rhetoric in which both sides of the slavery debate increasingly indulged. His "madness" was but a harbinger of some darker and far greater rhetorical disorder that threatened to destroy the equilibrium of the civic sphere. The other held that Brown's insanity resulted not from words, but from deeds of violence committed against him or his sons during his Kansas sojourn earlier in the decade. In both views, Brown was depicted as a fairly normal citizen whose capacity to function rationally within the civic sphere had been subverted by the slavery controversy.

Those inclined to attribute Brown's fanaticism to the prevailing rhetorical climate in the late 1850s differed, of course, over just whose "violent speech" had incited Brown.[31] Foes of slavery offered a range of possibilities. For example, the *Chicago Press and Tribune* put the blame on Congress: "As respects the attempt of an insane old man and his handful of confederates to excite a negro insurrection in Virginia and Maryland, it is easy to determine where the responsibility really belongs. The act is but a part of the legitimate fruit of the repeal of the Missouri Compromise." Lyman Trumbull (R-IL), on the other hand, argued on the Senate floor that the Democratic Party was to blame for Harper's Ferry, because it had failed to repudiate a similar raid by proslavery forces on the Federal Arsenal at Liberty, Missouri, in 1855. Yet another opinion was voiced by Thurlow Weed's *Albany Journal*, which blamed the incident on slave holders who planted the idea of insurrection in the minds of slaves by continually fussing about abolitionists' plans to free them. Had not such agitation incited Brown's mad movement?[32]

On the other hand, the raid unleashed a storm of invective from critics who saw Brown as the product of virulent antislavery discourse. *Memphis Appeal*, for example, insisted that if indeed Brown was crazy, he had been made so "by the teachings of abolitionists" and that the "only tendency of abolition theories is anarchy, bloodshed and confusion." The *Nashville Union and American* asserted a commonly held view in the South that "Abolitionism is working out its legitimate results in encouraging fanatics to riot and revolution. . . . For the fanatics engaged there would never have dared the attempt at insurrection but for the inflammatory speeches and writings of Seward, Greeley, and the other Republican leaders." The *Richmond Enquirer* sounded an equally common theme, asserting that the Republican Party had "impelled [Brown and his

followers] forward in their mad career of treason and bloodshed." Some commentators laid the blame for Brown's actions on the words of specific individuals. The *Republican Banner and Nashville Whig* editorialized, "The effect of the speeches of [Senator William] Seward, [Representative Joshua] Giddings, and other prominent leaders of the Republican Party is to inflame the minds of such fanatics as Ossawatomie Brown and his confederates, and incite them to deeds of blood upon the holders of slaves," a view seconded by newspapers such as the Raleigh, North Carolina, *Register*, which concluded that "fanaticism at the North is rampant, and overrides every thing."[33]

Nor were such opinions confined to Southern editorialists. James Gordon Bennett's *New York Herald* asserted that Brown's sympathies had been inflamed and exploited by the "Black Republicanism" of men such as William Seward and Charles Sumner: "They—not the crazy fanatic John Brown—are the real culprits; and it is they, not he, who, if justice were fairly meted out would have to grace the gallows." The newspaper called him "a victim of the mad fanaticism which would plunge the country into bloodshed for its own gratification." Another newspaper in Concord, New Hampshire, decried Brown and the instigators of "these fools and madmen." And in his annual message to Congress in 1859, President Buchanan denounced Brown's raid and worried that it was a symptom of "an incurable disease in the public mind, which may break out in still more outrages."[34]

Another body of opinion attributed Brown's madness to his searing experiences in "Bloody Kansas" three years earlier. There, Brown had lost one son to Border Ruffians. Another had been beaten nearly to death and scarred for life. Brown himself was suspected in the murder of five proslavery settlers. The abolitionist orator Wendell Phillips, speaking at Henry Ward Beecher's Plymouth Church in Brooklyn, argued that "the South planted the seeds of violence in Kansas and taught peaceful Northern men familiarity with the bowie-knife and the revolver. They planted nine hundred ninety-nine seeds, and this is the first one that has flowered."[35] In the Senate, Ben Wade of Ohio alleged that the violence done to Brown's sons had maddened him: "Undoubtedly, sir, that raid was the parent of this. . . . I believe that he was maddened by the scenes through which he passed in Kansas, because I do not believe that any sane man on earth would have undertaken the enterprise that he undertook at Harper's Ferry."[36] The *Albany Evening Journal* similarly theorized that in Kansas, Brown

> was robbed of his property, maltreated, his house was burned, and three of his sons murdered in cold blood. It is not strange that these wrongs kindled in him a thirst for revenge amounting to monomania. Brooding over them, he has conceived the wildest plans for repaying them, not only upon the guilty authors of his own misery, but upon all Slaveholders. The whole transaction at Harper's

Ferry evinces this. None but a madman could seriously expect that twenty men
could make head against the whole Union, and none but those whose sense of
Justice was blunted by deep passion could fail to see that they were committing a
crime against Innocent men, women, and children, which would inevitably meet,
and justly deserve, universal condemnation.

The next day, the *Journal* expanded its indictment: "But who made Brown a
madman by murdering his sons? Who taught that crazy crew to band together
with arms in their hands, as the most effective way to accomplish political pur-
poses? The Border Ruffians of Kansas and the Democratic Administration
at Washington!"[37] Later on the Senate floor, Republican James Doolittle of
Wisconsin wondered rhetorically, "Where did Brown get his education? Who
taught him to draw blood on this question, and to open up the sluices of civil
discord and civil war?" To which Tennessee's Andrew Johnson countered that
Brown's raid was the "legitimate result" of antislavery agitation, declaring that
"John Brown did not go to Kansas to go to school. He went there as a teacher."[38]

BROWN AS PROPHET

Portrayals of Brown as pariah and as pawn presuppose that, in a democracy,
ideological fervor taken to the point of inflicting or suffering violence is, by
definition, "irrational." To be sure, Brown's actions went well beyond the usual
limits of incivility or civil disobedience. It is one thing to spend the night in jail
for not paying one's poll tax, quite another to lead an armed assault against a
federal installation. Even those who otherwise approved of Brown's audacious
undertaking struggled to understand his reasoning. What were his intentions
once the arsenal had been secured? How could he have hoped to succeed with
so small a force? Why did he not flee Harper's Ferry when it became clear that
the raid had failed? What was he thinking?

Yet, for at least some of Brown's defenders, the very insanity of the raid on
Harper's Ferry confirmed that it had been divinely inspired. Brown was "mad"
all right, at least as the world reckoned such things, but his was the mania
(*enthousiasmos*) of the prophet. Like a latter-day Jeremiah, Brown had been sent
by God to chastise and redirect a nation that had lost its moral bearings and
gone seriously astray. It was, after all, a commonplace among radical abolition-
ists that the Union as it was amounted to a pact with the devil. "Compromise"
was, for them, not a virtue but an enabler of vice. Of Wendell Phillips, the
movement's most strident voice, Darsey writes:

The mentality of compromise that Phillips excoriated in both politics and the
church was intended by its proponents as the vehicle for continued unity. It was

a beguiling notion in its passivity—"live and let live." It was not a strenuous doc-
trine. It reflected the realities of the world in all its imperfections. But compromise
also has a sharply dyslogistic element: it does not always preserve the interests of
opposing elements in mutual deference and respect, but sometimes surrenders
one to the other. Compromise can be a "shameful or disreputable concession,"
particularly when it is the self that is compromised. . . . In an age where the self is
asserted only through the exercise of virtue, the life of ease involves the horrible
anxiety of the loss of self, a condition of slavery.

And for radical abolitionists such as Phillips, compromise with slavery
amounted not only to a "failure of moral vision" at the national level, but to a
surrender of personal integrity on the part of every "free" man as well.[39]

No one was more certain of this truth that Brown, himself. While he did not
consider himself to be possessed or irrational, Brown certainly believed himself
to be divinely appointed to the work of destroying slavery (a fact that doubtless
convinced many *others* that he was "mad"). In a dramatic post-capture inter-
view widely reported in the North, Brown had been asked: "Do you consider
yourself an instrument in the hands of Providence?" "I do," he calmly replied.
Later in the same interview, one of Brown's interrogators had asserted: "I think
you are fanatical." In reply, Brown defiantly turned the accusation back on its
maker: "And I think you are fanatical. 'Whom the Gods would destroy, they first
make mad.' And you are mad."[40]

Brown's trial, which formally commenced on October 27, 1859, and played
out over the next two and a half weeks, afforded additional opportunities to
affirm his status as a divinely appointed martyr. Indeed, Marouf Hasian has
argued that Brown ingeniously exploited the situation to transform himself
into the "iconic embodiment of the natural law itself," and that his deliberate
"blurring of the secular and the sacred allowed millions of Americans to visu-
alize the possibility that natural laws could be both beautiful and reasonable."[41]
Brown's moving plea to the court at the trial's conclusion, writes Stephen Oates,
was intended to "win an entire generation to his side." But it failed to impress
the trial judge, who sentenced him to hang on December 2, 1859.[42]

Between his sentencing and execution three weeks later, Brown received a
steady stream of visitors and corresponded regularly with family, friends, and
supporters throughout the North. Brown's composure during these last weeks
and masterful manipulation of the rhetorical possibilities of his confinement
helped to lay the foundation for his enduring martyrdom. Brown's jailhouse
correspondence testifies eloquently to his faith in the transcendent purposes
of his work and to his confidence that it had set in motion the machinery that
would one day end slavery. It is clear that Brown believed himself to be playing
a central role in a grand historical drama. As he wrote to one Boston friend: "I

know that the very errors by which my scheme was marred were decreed before the world was made. I had no more to do with the course I pursued than a shot leaving a cannon has to do with the spot where it shall fall."[43]

Perhaps the most notable public proponent of the Brown-as-prophet trope was the philosopher and essayist Henry David Thoreau. On hearing the news of Brown's execution, Thoreau famously apotheosized his subject: "Some eighteen hundred years ago, Christ was crucified; this morning, perchance, Captain Brown was hung. These are the two ends of a chain which is not without its links. He is not old Brown any longer; he is an angel of light." As for Brown's executioners, Thoreau pronounced them "but helpless tools in this great work. It was no human power that gathered them about this preacher."[44] Abolitionist orators such as Wendell Phillips argued that Brown was doing God's work, identifying him with Protestant heroes Jan Wycliffe and John Huss, as well as the early Christian martyrs. "It is honorable, then, to break bad laws, and such law breaking history loves and God blesses," pronounced the Reverend George Cheever, an influential New York Congregationalist. John Brown is "God's handwriting on the wall of Slavery; and the knees of the whole South knock together at the apparition. John Brown is God's own protest against this tyranny, against the unrighteous laws that sanction it, against the men and states that support it." At a memorial service for Brown held only days later, Cheever compared Brown's apprenticeship to that of the prophet Jeremiah.

> Attended by such angels, commissioned by such words, John Brown grew onward to the sphere of character and duty for which God had appointed him. The same influence in kind came upon him as came upon Jeremiah, the same concentration and intensifying of Divine revelation in one direction, as always happens when God pleases, and when, for his own great purposes, He will discipline and prepare a man for Himself, to bear the reproach among men of being a fanatic,— a man of one idea.[45]

James Freeman Clarke, fellow abolitionist and prominent Unitarian minister in Boston, labeled Brown's raid "one of those acts of madness which History cherishes, and which Poetry loves forever to adorn with her choicest wreaths of laurel." Still other ministers compared Brown to Samson, Moses, John the Baptist, and in the case of at least one Southern divine, Satan.[46]

Conclusion

As a meaningful clinical diagnosis, "madness" has long since lost whatever standing it might have enjoyed. It is wildly imprecise, easily abused, and freighted with centuries of prejudice. But these same ambiguities endue "madness"

with formidable rhetorical power in popular usage, where it still evokes images of dark, chaotic, and often violent behavior. In civic discourse, "madness" remains a grave accusation, usually applied only to individuals or groups whose behaviors are perceived to be both irrational and threatening to the public good. To level a charge of "madness" against an individual or group operating within the public realm is to situate that person or group within a narrative that is tragic and cautionary. Fanatical idealists, after all, threaten the cherished goal of open and reasoned debate that undergirds the stability of a democratic society. They cannot be bribed, bargained with, nor bullied. They can only be banished beyond the margins of the civic sphere lest others, perhaps including ourselves, fall under their spell. However, this does not mean that the "mad" have no voice, or that their words and deeds cannot be made to serve other, more legitimate interests within the public sphere. Indeed, as I have argued here, they serve a necessary function in our civic life.

Nineteenth century popular thought held that "madness" could result when an excessive amount of stress was placed upon an inherently weak mental constitution, a view that is not unfamiliar today. In effect, this view allowed physicians and the public observers to attribute any given case of insanity to a range of causes, from the individual level to various levels of outside influence, whether originating in the family or social or religious fervor or political agitation. Side-by-side with these newer scientific explanations of "madness," lay the more traditional theogenic interpretations of insanity. All three of these explanations were invoked by contemporary commentators on John Brown's raid.

Some critics attributed Brown's fanaticism to heredity and a history of personal disappointment. In so doing, they minimized the scope and significance of Brown's actions—his was a private tragedy played out, unfortunately, on a public stage. But it held no larger significance for society. If anything, Brown's "madness" offered critics on both sides of the slavery issue a brief respite from contention and an opportunity to affirm mutually that certain kinds of behavior, at least, would not be countenanced in resolving the slavery issue. The important thing was to *silence* Brown so that his words might die with him as quickly as the Virginia authorities could arrange for it. Other commentators saw Brown's words and actions as symptomatic of larger forces (political leaders, sectional interests, abolitionists, slaveholders) that threatened to destabilize the republic. For these critics, it was important not to silence, but to *deflect* his voice by attributing his "madness" to their adversaries' words and deeds. Still other contemporaries held that Brown's madness was divinely ordained. Rather than a confused outcast or an overwrought idealist, Brown, they urged, was an instrument of divine chastisement and correction. Slavery had so compromised the nation's capacity to reason and act justly that Brown only *appeared* insane and his captors reasonable. In truth, it was the other way

around. Brown's purifying voice should be neither *silenced* nor *deflected*, but *amplified* throughout the land until the nation was cleansed of its great sin.

Much as did Brown's contemporaries, historians in the century and a half since Harper's Ferry have argued endlessly over the origin and meaning of his "madness." Brown has become, for generations of American schoolchildren, emblematic of the dangers that extremism, even in a good cause, can pose in a democratic society. Paradoxically, Brown has also become the patron saint of would-be martyrs for social justice everywhere. John Stewart Curry's iconic image of a wrathful Brown, arms thrown back, a Bible in one hand and a gun in the other, sweeping like a whirlwind off the Kansas prairie has come to symbolize the righteous fire of populist anger as a purifying force in American life. In the end, the enigma of Brown's mind will probably never be solved. But the debate over Brown's "madness" is itself instructive of the subtle elasticity of this common trope.

For students of public address and the rhetoric of social movements, Brown's case raises questions that transcend his own historical circumstances. How have a century and a half of advances in the understanding and treatment of mental illness influenced the character and function of "madness" as a trope in political controversy? What do those changes reveal about the changing dynamics of public controversy? What do they tell us about the mythology of our civic life? In what ways do the "mad" help to sustain, even as they challenge, consensus-based systems of deliberation and governance? How does the trope of madness shape our understanding of and response to terrorism?

For there is no lack of "madmen" in the political life of our own era. We, too, have our Browns: our Lee Harvey Oswalds and Timothy McVeighs, our Ted Kaczynskis, our Weathermen and MOVEs. And we struggle, as did Brown's contemporaries, to understand the meaning of their madness and to fathom what it foretells for society. Perhaps, we even need them, as if the very act of naming them "mad" helps us in some way to clarify and maintain the boundaries of rational civic life. In any case, the rhetoric of madness would seem to be a recurrent feature of American political discourse, a trope that reflects as well as shapes the character of the public sphere; like Brown himself, endlessly debatable—at once fascinating, terrifying, and deserving of our continued attention and study.

NOTES

1. William A. Phillips, "Three Interviews With Old John Brown," *Atlantic Monthly*, December 1879, 740.

2. The literature on the Harper's Ferry raid is wide and deep, reflecting sharp divisions of opinion over Brown's motives and the significance of his actions. See, for example: James Redpath, *Echoes of Harper's Ferry* (Boston: Thayer & Eldridge, 1860); W. E. B. Du Bois, *John

Brown (New York: Everyman's Library, 2001); C. Vann Woodward, "John Brown's Private War," in *America in Crisis: Fourteen Crucial Episodes in American History*, ed. Daniel Aaron (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952), 109–32; Stephen B. Oates, *To Purge This Land with Blood: A Biography of John Brown* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970); Paul Finkleman, ed., *His Soul Goes Marching On: Responses to John Brown and the Harper's Ferry Raid* (Charlotte: University of Virginia Press, 1995); David S. Reynolds, *John Brown Abolitionist: The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War and Seeded Civil Rights* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf: 2005); and Evan Carton, *Patriotic Treason: John Brown and the Soul of America* (New York: Free Press, 2006).

 3. See John Edward Byrne, "The News From Harper's Ferry: The Press as Lens and Prism for John Brown's Raid" (Ph.D. diss., George Washington University, 1987), 24; Allan Nevins and Milton Halsey Thomas, eds., *The Diary of George Templeton Strong* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1952), 465; *The Liberator*, October 21, 1859, 166.

 4. Norman Dain, *Concepts of Insanity, 1789–1865* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1964), 202; William S. Bainbridge, "Religious Insanity in America: The Official Nineteenth Century Theory," *Sociological Analysis* 45 (1984): 236–37; Gerald M. Grob, *The Mad Among Us: A History of the Care of America's Mentally Ill* (New York: Free Press, 1994), 57–60.

 5. Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (New York: Random House, 1965), 8, 13; Dain, *Concepts of Insanity, 1789–1865*, 43.

 6. Grob, *The Mad Among Us*, 11.

 7. David J. Rothman, *The Discovery of the Asylum: Social Order and Disorder in the New Republic* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1970), xv, 108–29.

 8. Rothman, *Discovery of the Asylum*, 110–11; Bainbridge, "Religious Insanity in America," 236.

 9. Rothman, *Discovery of the Asylum*, 133; Dain, *Concepts of Insanity, 1789–1865*, 88.

10. Alexis De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Henry Reeve (New York: Oxford, 1947), 346.

11. Rothman, *Discovery of the Asylum*, 114, 112.

12. Bainbridge, "Religious Insanity in America," 237; Grob, *The Mad Among Us*, 58; Dain, *Concepts of Insanity, 1789–1865*, 197–98.

13. Lynn Gamwell and Nancy Tomes, *Madness in America: Cultural and Medical Perceptions of Mental Illness Before 1914* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 80.

14. Herman Melville, *Moby Dick, or the White Whale* (New York: Everyman's Library, 1988), 185.

15. Melville, *Moby Dick*, 185. I am indebted to Professor Robert E. McGlone, whose use of this passage in his own essay on the "politics of insanity" in the Brown case spurred my thinking about the parallels between Ahab's monomania and that attributed to Brown by some contemporaries; "John Brown, Henry Wise, and the Politics of Insanity," in Finkleman, ed., *His Soul Goes Marching On*. See also Andrew Delbanco, *Melville, His World and His Work* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 165–66, and especially 170–74.

16. Leland M. Griffin, "When Worlds Collide: Rhetorical Trajectories in the Assassination of President Kennedy," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 76 (1983): 125.

17. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989); James Darsey, *The Prophetic Tradition and Radical Rhetoric in America* (New York: New York University Press, 1997).

18. Kimberly K. Smith, *The Dominion of Voice: Riot, Reason, and Romance in Antebellum Politics* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999), 11–83.

19. In Burke's view, "The basic strategy of metonymy is this: to convey some incorporeal or intangible state in terms of the corporeal or tangible." Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (1945, rpt. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 506. Lakoff and Johnson underscore the reflexive nature of metonymy in observing that "[m]etonymic concepts allow us to conceptualize one thing by means of its relation to something else" and that "like metaphors, metonymic concepts structure not just our language but our thoughts, attitudes, and actions." George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 39.

20. Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 322; emphasis in original.

21. William J. Clinton, "Oklahoma Bombing Memorial Service Address," April 23, 1995, in *Public Papers of the Presidents: William J. Clinton, January–June, 1995* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1996), 573.

22. Smith, *The Dominion of Voice*, 3–4; John M. Murphy, "Civic Republicanism in the Modern Age: Adlai Stevenson in the 1952 Presidential Campaign," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 80 (1994): 315; Peter B. Knupfer, *The Union as It Is: Constitutional Unionism and Sectional Compromise, 1787–1861* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991); Darsey, *The Prophetic Tradition*, 63.

23. Charles E. Morris, "Our Capital Aversion: Abigail Folsom, Madness, and Radical Antislavery Praxis," *Women's Studies in Communication* 24 (2001): 69.

24. M. Jimmie Killingsworth and Jacqueline S. Palmer, "The Discourse of 'Environmentalist Hysteria,'" *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 81 (1995): 1–19.

25. See, for example, "Being Rod Blagojevich: There's No Way to Know Why He Sees Politics as He Does. But Few Seem Surprised," *Newsweek*, December 22, 2008, 30; "A Portrait of a Politician: Vengeful and Profane," *New York Times,* December 10, 2008, A1.

26. Of course, it can be countered that political protestors in the postmodern era have made something of an industry out of mocking the conventions of the civic sphere, delighting in zany and outrageous stunts that call attention to its manifold hypocrisies and limitations. However, I contrast these "comic" exertions, which are (I believe) motivated by the impulse to *reform* a corrupt civic sphere, with the fundamentally "tragic" impulse of the madman or madwoman developed in this essay. An individual such as Brown, I believe, seeks not to reform the civic sphere, but to annihilate it altogether as a condition for the birth of a more just civic order.

27. "The Fatal Friday," *Chicago Press and Tribune*, December 2, 1859; *Pittsburgh Gazette*, December 3, 1859. I wish to express my appreciation for the efforts of the Furman University Project on Secession Era Editorials for making available many of the original newspaper editorials cited in this essay. This valuable archive can be accessed at *http://history.furman.edu/editorials/see.py* (accessed December 23, 2008).

28. Abraham Lincoln, "Address at Leavenworth, Kansas," December 3, 1859, in *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln,* ed. Roy P. Basler (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 502; *Lawrence (Kansas) Herald of Freedom*, December 1859, quoted in Byrne, "The News from Harper's Ferry," 154.

29. Robert E. McGlone, "John Brown, Henry Wise, and the Politics of Insanity," in Finkleman, ed., *His Soul Goes Marching On*, 215. The question of whether Brown was clinically insane has been a subject of lively debate among historians for generations. The assault on Harper's Ferry was certainly premeditated. It was, moreover, abetted by a small group of wealthy northern abolitionists calling themselves "The Secret Six." But whether either of these facts is inconsistent with Brown having suffered from what would today be recognized as

a psychological disorder remains unclear. For contrasting views on the matter of Brown's mental condition at the time of the Harper's Ferry Raid, see: Carton, *Patriotic Treason*, and C. Vann Woodward, "John Brown's Private War"; for insight into the planning and abetting of Brown's raid, see Edward J. Renehan Jr., *The Secret Six: The True Tale of the Men Who Conspired With John Brown* (New York: Crown, 1995), and Otto J. Scott, *The Secret Six: John Brown and the Abolitionist Movement* (New York: New York Times Books, 1979).

30. McGlone, "John Brown, Henry Wise, and the Politics of Insanity," in Finkleman, ed., *His Soul Goes Marching On*, 216.

31. Peter Knupfer, "A Crisis in Conservatism: Northern Unionism and the Harper's Ferry Raid," in Finkleman, ed., *His Soul Goes Marching On*, 141; Lorman A. Ratner and Dwight L. Teeter Jr., *Fanatics and Fire-eaters: Newspapers and the Coming of the Civil War* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 74–75.

32. "Where the Responsibility Belongs," *Chicago Press and Tribune*, October 20, 1859; *Congressional Globe*, (36th Cong., 1st Sess.), December 7, 1859, 38; quoted in Ratner and Teeter, *Fanatics and Fire-eaters*, 81.

33. *Memphis Appeal* quoted in Ratner and Teeter, *Fanatics and Fire-eaters*, 75–76; "The Riot at Harper's Ferry," *Nashville Union and American*, October 21, 1859; "The Harper's Ferry Invasion as Party Capital," *Richmond (VA) Enquirer*, October 25, 1859; "The Irrepressible Conflict," *Nashville Republican Banner and Nashville Whig*, October 25, 1859; "Execution of John Brown," *Raleigh Register*, December 3, 1859.

34. *New York Herald*, October 27, 1859, 6. See also, Ratner and Teeter, *Fanatics and Fire-eaters*, 78; *New York Tribune*, December 2, 1859, 4; "The Harper's Ferry Affair," *New Hampshire Patriot*, October 26, 1859; John Bassett Moore, ed., *The Works of James Buchanan: Comprising His Speeches, State Papers, and Private Correspondence*, vol. X, 1856–1860 (New York: Antiquarian Press, 1960), 339.

35. Wendell Phillips, "Harper's Ferry," in *Speeches, Lectures, and Letters by Wendell Phillips*, ed. James Redpath (Boston: Lee and Sheperd, 1892), 273. Interestingly, the following day's edition of the *New York Tribune* described Phillips's address as "The most extraordinary speech that was ever delivered by a man professing to be sane." *New York Tribune*, November 2, 1859.

36. *Congressional Globe* (36th Cong., 1st Sess.), December 13, 1859, 142.

37. *Albany Evening Journal*, October 19 and 20, 1859.

38. *Congressional Globe* (36th Cong., 1st Sess.), December 12, 1859, 35; Leroy P. Graf and Ralph W. Haskins, eds., *The Papers of Andrew Johnson*, vol. 3, 1858–1860 (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1972), 348; see also *New York Herald*, November 2, 1859.

39. Darsey, *The Prophetic Tradition*, 68, 66.

40. F. B. Sanborn, ed., *The Life and Letters of John Brown, Liberator of Kansas and Martyr of Virginia* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1885), 565, 569.

41. Marouf Hasian Jr., "Jurisprudence as Performance: John Brown's Enactment of Natural Law at Harper's Ferry," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 86 (2000): 210, 209; see also Oates, *To Purge this Land With Blood*, 326–27.

42. Oates, *To Purge This Land With Blood*, 337–39.

43. Sanborn, ed., *Life and Letters of John Brown*, 624.

44. Henry David Thoreau, "A Plea for Captain John Brown," in Redpath, ed., *Echoes of Harper's Ferry*, 41; see also Paul D. Erickson, "Henry David Thoreau's Apotheosis of John Brown: A Study in Nineteenth Century Rhetorical Heroism," *Southern Communication Journal*

61 (1978): 307–9; Thoreau, "A Plea," 31; Herbert L. Carson, "An Eccentric Kinship: Henry David Thoreau's 'A Plea for Captain John Brown,'" *Southern Speech Journal* 27 (1961): 152.

45. Hasian, "Jurisprudence as Performance," 204–5; Wendell Phillips, "Harper's Ferry" in Redpath, ed., *Echoes of Harper's Ferry*, 279; George Cheever, "The Example and Method of Emancipation by the Constitution of Our Country and the Word of God," in Redpath, ed., *Echoes of Harper's Ferry*, 157–58; Cheever, "The Martyr's Death and the Martyr's Triumph," in Redpath, ed., *Echoes of Harper's Ferry*, 215.

46. James Freeman Clarke, "Causes and Consequences of the Affair at Harper's Ferry," in Redpath, ed., *Echoes of Harper's Ferry*, 328; Glenna Schraeder, "We Must Look This Great Event in the Face: Northern Sermons on John Brown's Raid," *Fides et Historia* 20 (1988): 34–36; Reynolds, *John Brown Abolitionist,* 431.