

The art of medicine

Feeling Ecstatic: Shakespeare, emotion, and the out of body experience

Today, we tend to associate ‘ecstasy’ with feelings of intense happiness and delight, an experience of being temporarily ‘outside ourselves’ in the way that the term etymologically suggests—from the Greek *ekstasis* (ἐκ, out; *ιστάναι*, to place). But ecstasy has a more complicated history. In its early form, it was an experience of drunken frenzy, where worshippers of Dionysus (the Greek god of wine, theatre, and ecstasy - later the Roman Bacchus) would lose themselves in intoxicating worship. At its best, ecstatic experience could facilitate a moment of inspired, prophetic clarity or union with the divine. At its worst, ecstasy could be agonising – an experience that is violently realised in Euripides’ play *The Bacchae* (first performed in 405 BC) where Dionysian influence causes King Pentheus to, quite literally, lose his head as he is torn apart by the maenadic women of Thebes. Ecstasy, very simply, could be both pleasurable and painful, delightful and dangerous.

In Renaissance Europe, ecstasy retained its early sense of a religious experience, of losing oneself in order to find God. But it also captured the imagination of writers as a state that connected with thinking about other experiences where the soul was thought to temporarily leave the body. Discussing ‘the act of Generation or Copulation’, for example, Helkiah Crooke, physician to King James I and author of the highly influential anatomical treatise *Mikrokosmographia: A Description of the Body of Man* (1615), describes how the ‘whole body is delighted and as it were stupefied with an ecstasy of pleasure, or if you will, suffereth a pleasant convulsion’.¹ In moments such as these, Crooke notes, echoing ecstasy’s etymology, ‘we are transported for a time as it were out of our selves’.

For literary writers in particular, the experience of being transported out of oneself held a curious fascination and great metaphorical potential. The ‘ecstasy of pleasure’, as Crooke had it above, is a central conceit in John Donne’s poem ‘The Ecstasy’ (printed 1633), where he describes lovers in bed, mixing souls:

As ’twixt two equal armies, Fate
Suspends uncertain victory,
Our souls (which to advance their state
Were gone out) hung ’twixt her and me.
And whilst our souls negotiate there,
We like sepulchral statues lay;
All day the same our postures were,
And we said nothing all the day.

In other literature of the period, Shakespeare’s work offers a snapshot of the early modern interest in ecstasy as a secular, common experience, one that had begun to extend beyond its associations with religious rapture to encompass feelings of desire, sex, grief, loss, anger, jealousy, and alienation, and is used as an umbrella term for intense feeling across the emotional spectrum, from the desirable to the torturous. In *Macbeth*, for example, the contagious grief that afflicts Scotland after the murder of the King is described as a ‘modern ecstasy’ – an intensity of suffering that is so familiar and widespread that it has become an everyday (a now obsolete meaning of ‘modern’) emotion:

Alas, poor country,

¹ N.b. All early modern spelling has been modernised.

Almost afraid to know itself. It cannot
Be called our mother, but our grave, where nothing
But who knows nothing is once seen to smile;
Where sighs and groans and shrieks that rend the air
Are made, not marked; where violent sorrow seems
A modern ecstasy.

Elsewhere, in the *The View of France* (1604), travel writer Robert Dallington described the state of France during its recent civil wars in similar terms: 'See here a Country in an ecstasy, distracted in herself, and transported out of herself, ready to fall into a falling sickness [epilepsy], like the soul of a distempered man'. In these examples, 'ecstasy' is a useful metaphor to articulate feelings of political unease, an emotional state that could be imaginatively mapped on to an entire populace to register widespread, distracted unrest.

As well as exploring its metaphorical associations, Shakespeare presents ecstasy not just as an intense emotion or mental state, but also as an intense physiological experience, bound up with and capable of having deleterious effects on the body. It might, for example, be accompanied by 'trembling' or violent shaking, perhaps even a temporary loss of the senses. We find this in the poem 'Venus and Adonis', where a moment of paralysing fear leaves the goddess Venus standing 'in trembling ecstasy' with 'her senses all dismay'd'. More striking still are moments where characters suggest a connection between ecstasy and pulse. In *The Comedy of Errors*, having had his life turned upside down by the unexpected arrival of his long-lost twin, Antipholus of Ephesus falls into an angered 'frenzy'; 'mark how he trembles in his ecstasy', remarks one onlooker, while Doctor Pinch (a schoolmaster and conjurer) sets about a diagnosis: 'give me your hand', he instructs, 'and let me feel your pulse'. In a later play, Hamlet also signals a connection between ecstasy and pulse in order to reject his mother's suggestion that the ghost he sees is a mere hallucination:

GERTRUDE	This is the very coinage of the brain. This bodiless creation ecstasy Is very cunning in.
HAMLET	Ecstasy? My pulse as yours doth temperately keep time, And makes as healthful music. It is not madness That I have uttered.

It is his steady, 'healthful' pulse, Hamlet argues, that can prove that he is not in the throes of ecstasy. While the plays themselves do not specify exactly what an ecstatic pulse might feel like, the relationship between this emotion and body is clarified in part by other sixteenth and seventeenth century writers who suggest that during these out-of-body experiences, the heart would stop, sometimes for an extended period of time. 'Sometimes I am without any pulse at all, as if I were utterly dead', wrote Spanish mystic St Teresa of Avilla in a description of her ecstatic, religious trance. In his essay 'That to Philosophise Is to Learn How to Die', French philosopher Michel de Montaigne likewise tells the story of a Priest 'whose soul was ravished into such an ecstasy, that for a long time the body remained void of all respiration or sense', leaving him with 'neither pulse nor breath'. Even the physician Crooke, writing about fainting and swooning, confirms that 'many are buried in such fits (for they will last sometimes 24. hours or more, and the bodies grow cold and rigid like dead carcasses) who would recover if space were given'. For these writers, the ecstatic experience involved leaving the body behind, temporarily.

The relationship between ecstasy and the body, then, seems to have captured Shakespeare's interest, and it is in *Othello* that the playwright dramatizes its physical effects most acutely. Here, the trembling that accompanies ecstatic experience elsewhere in his work escalates into a seizure; tricked into believing that his wife has been unfaithful, the title character trembles and collapses into a 'trance', one that is referred to in the play as 'epilepsy', 'ecstasy', and 'lethargy'. This is the only seizure or fit to occur on the Shakespearean stage (though they are referenced elsewhere, as in *Julius Caesar*), and it curiously hints at some overlap between ecstasy and other recognised medical conditions. An affinity between these altered states is in part clarified by other seventeenth century texts that employ similar vocabularies in their descriptions of ecstatic trances and those who have epilepsy or the 'falling sickness'; where Calvinist preacher Thomas Adams describes those 'foaming under a[n] epilepsy' (1633), for example, philosopher Henry More describes the 'swelling ... bodies' and 'foaming at the mouth' of those in 'wild ecstasies' (1660). While discussion of epilepsy was unquestionably more clinical than its ecstatic sister-state, by the late seventeenth century ecstasy would come to earn a place in Swiss Physician Felix Platter's *A Golden Practice of Physick* (1662) as a 'Consternation of the Mind', and under an index of 'distempers of the brain' in a chapter on 'Inward Diseases, and Distempers of the Body' in Alderman Randle Holme's encyclopaedic text of early modern society and daily life, *The Academy of Armory* (1688). No longer exclusively an experience of a select spiritual few, ecstasy was indeed becoming more 'modern'.

What, then, does it mean to be 'blasted with ecstasy', as *Hamlet*'s Ophelia has it? What do the throes of extreme emotion, or experiences at the edges of consciousness, look like? Feel like? Is ecstasy an experience of the body, or of the mind? Is it the domain of art, theology, or medicine? As clues, the work of Shakespeare and his contemporaries leave us with more questions than answers. But perhaps that's rather apt – the enigmatic ambiguity and multifaceted nature of these altered states is in itself a large part of what makes them so captivating, for early moderns as for us. Ecstasy, with its capacity to evoke both anguish and joy, to affect us both mentally and physically, is perhaps best apprehended not as a static, single concept, but rather, to borrow the words of essayist Walter Pater (1893), as an experience that 'call[s] us out of ourselves in a thousand forms of action.'

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Further reading:

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Budra, P. Werier, C. (eds), *Shakespeare and Consciousness* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016)

Edwards, J. 'Suffering Ecstasy: *Othello* and the Drama of Displacement', *Shakespeare Survey*, vol. 72 (2022), 180-193

Pertile, Giulio, *Feeling Faint: Affect and Consciousness in the Renaissance* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2019)

Potential images:



'Mary Magdalen in Ecstasy' by Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1606)



'Death of Pentheus'. Detail from an Attic red-figure clay vase c.480 BC. Kimball Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas. [as used [here](#)]

