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My Neighbor Made Me Do It: Madness in *Nu noch*

For many years, historical researchers have highlighted the medieval European belief in the close connection between madness and demon possession. George Rosen, in his study entitled *Madness in Society* (Chicago, 1968), summarizes the belief: "There is no doubt that if the circumstances were too bizarre or too far beyond their past experience physicians would accept supernatural explanations" (p. 146). The demon or devil, it was believed, controlled an individual's actions and thoughts, and the victim could be cured only through a priest's exorcism of the invading demon. *Nu noch* corresponds to this belief in that the play centers on the wife's discovery of her husband's madness and the priest's attempt to exorcise the devil from the husband. The humor of the play lies in the audience's knowledge that there truly is no demon. Or is there? I see four scenes in *Nu noch*: 1) the discussion of the neighbor's plan; 2) the implementation of the fake madness; 3) the call for the priest; and 4) the discovery of the plan. By examining each scene, I shall show that we do indeed find a demon formulating and maintaining the husband's planned insanity. That demon is the neighbor.

In Scene 1, following the husband's initial lament over his nagging wife in which he establishes his comedic stock-character role as the henpecked husband, the neighbor appears. Within the first few exchanges of dialogue, the neighbor manages to assess the husband's situation and discovers that the husband has all but given up trying to change his nagging wife. It is here, when the husband reveals his desperation, that the neighbor steps into his sinister role as "possessor" of the husband and supervisor of his faked madness.

The neighbor does not wait long before tempting Jack to listen to his advice with promises that his wife is sure to "change her tune" (20). The neighbor offers his advice twice, and the husband, with much skepticism, finally consents to hear the plan. The neighbor explains it to Jack: "When you get home, no matter what happens . . . just say 'Now again'. . . . Soon you'll have such a hold over her that she'll be scared and think you are going crazy. . . . And then I'll come and explain to her that she's knocked you around until you went crazy, that you're possessed by the devil, and that it's her fault for beating you up so much" (29-30, 53-54, 58-61). By the time the neighbor finishes outlining the scheme, the husband is completely wrapped up in the machinations of the diabolic plan. In effect, the neighbor places himself in the role of the manipulating demon behind the husband's insanity.

Once the husband goes home in Scene 2, all proceeds according to plan. After a few clouts, the wife begins to believe that there is truly something wrong; she runs out of the house in fear and frustration with "Now again" ringing in her ears. And who does she find to ask for help? None other than the conveniently present neighbor. In her panic, she places herself in his hands, and he, without hesitation, suggests that they contact a priest because she has beaten her husband until he has gone insane. This episode is significant to the madness theme on three distinct levels. The neighbor is the first to suggest employing a priest, and therefore the first to voice the direct connection between madness and demonic possession. The call for a priest, coupled with the neighbor's statement, "It's obvious that he's lost his mind" (115), also confirms and underscores the wife's as yet unspoken fears, that her husband has indeed gone mad. The audience, however, sees that the neighbor is cunningly manipulating the scene to deceive the wife by convincing her of her husband's insanity.

The neighbor's diabolic manipulation, however, is not confined to the gullible secular characters of the play. In Scene 3, when the neighbor and wife find the priest and she describes her husband's strange behavior, the priest draws no conclusions as to the cause of the action; he only rhetorically asks, "what curse can be hidden in that?" (138). Questions and confusion being his cue, the neighbor again steps forward. Without being asked for his opinion directly, the neighbor whispers in the ear of the priest and tells him the same as he told the wife: "It's clear

he's lost his mind. His wife has hit him and beaten him so that he could very easily be possessed because of this unbearable treatment" (139-40). The neighbor has now planted the idea of demon possession in the fertile imaginations of all those who must be fooled by the scheme in order for it to succeed.

Upon meeting Jack, the priest, with more showmanship than religious substance, attempts to conjure the demon that possesses him. Twice the priest attempts to exorcise whatever it is that has taken control of the husband before he proclaims, "Why, God help us! I don't know what's the matter with him" (174-75). But as is always the case, the neighbor *does* know. The moment the priest gives up his conjuration, the neighbor suggests a physical resolution to this seemingly spiritual problem: "Suppose we gave him something to eat?" (176). With little hope otherwise, the wife and priest approve the suggestion while the neighbor continues to goad the wife into curing her husband's madness with much-desired food.

While Jack gorges himself on meat pies, the priest begins to doubt the severity of the husband's illness. With an air of skepticism, he proclaims that he does not "think there can be all that much wrong with him" (183). Drawing the wife's attention away from the priest's doubt, the neighbor lays the full brunt of the blame on her, chastising her for her cruelty. Her guilt gets the better of her, and with meek and submissive words, the wife asks forgiveness of Jack for the way she has treated him. The neighbor's plan is a success.

And in Scene 4, when the wife escorts the priest out of the house, the two players in this little game, the submissive husband and the demonic neighbor, cannot help but revel in their victory. Even in their success, though, the neighbor is still in control of Jack's madness, and he advises him to continue the charade: "If she turns macho again or tries to shove you around again, or starts nagging you again, just try saying 'Now again' . . . and she'll think that these attacks come over you when she beats you. That's how you'll stay the boss in this house" (212-17). In this advice, the audience is shown how much control the neighbor truly has over the husband: the creation, application, and now the maintenance of Jack's madness come directly from the neighbor.

The play does not end, however, with the neighbor victoriously in "possession" of a husband who discovers peace and happiness in his madness. The wife overhears the schemers' boasts, and comes back with a vengeance, not only clouting the husband but including the neighbor in the row as well. In the midst of this concluding violence, we hear a meek and battered voice emerge from the scene: "It was him, our neighbor, who told me to do it" (225). The truth has finally emerged. The neighbor, who has controlled the husband in everything, is finally discovered. Through the wife's admonitions, he is evicted from the controlling position in the husband's sanity, in effect "exorcised" *into* the murderous hands of the wife and the hell that awaits him there. And what of Jack during the neighbor's exorcism? He, too, anticipates a type of hell: "I'll never say it again in all my life, I promise, my dear wife!" (223). In the end, the neighbor and Jack do not find a "grand joke" or happiness; the plan of insanity has instead created a hell on earth, of which the wife is master.

To say that *Nu noch* is simply a play about a violent wife and her hen-pecked husband's scheme to feign madness is far too limiting an evaluation. The play is an intriguing study of the manipulation of madness. For what does it say to the audience about the cause of insanity? There is always a neighbor lurking in the background controlling events to whom we can always point and say, "The devil made me do it."