

‘The simple words the people speak’

**On Hilary Mantel’s introduction to a 2014 seminar on ‘Maya Abbott and the Abbotts’
in Laing and Esterson’s *Sanity, Madness and the Family* (1964)**

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R. D. Laing and Aaron Esterson wrote in *Sanity, Madness and the Family: Vol. 1. Families of Schizophrenics* (1964: 13):

We believe that the shift of point of view that these descriptions both embody and demand has an historical significance no less radical than the shift from a demonological to a clinical viewpoint three hundred years ago.

Fifty years later, the ‘clinical viewpoint’ still reigns supreme – even among most ‘existential analysts’ and ‘phenomenologists’, although Laing and Esterson’s book was published in the series *Studies in Existential Analysis and Phenomenology* (edited by Laing).

But William Shakespeare saw beyond both the demonological and the clinical viewpoints more than four hundred years ago.

Inner Circle Seminar No. 202, ‘Sanity, Madness and Shakespeare’, on 27 April 2014, marked the four hundred and fiftieth anniversary of Shakespeare’s birth and the fiftieth anniversary of Laing and Esterson’s book. We listened to Arthur Jonathan and Angela Buxton reading aloud the dialogue in which Hamlet contradicts his mother Gertrude’s assertion that he is mad. Then

we heard Esterson's 1961 recording of Mary Irwin resisting *her* mother's insistent attribution that Mary is either selfish or ill. The parallels were startling.

The novelist Hilary Mantel, who had just been made a Dame in the Queen's Birthday Honours, applied for a place at Inner Circle Seminar No. 205, 'Maya Abbott and the Abbotts', on her own birthday, 6 July 2014, as (she explained) a 'treat' for herself. This was the first of eleven seminars in which I present my research findings on the eleven families in *Sanity, Madness and the Family* after fifty years. I invited Hilary Mantel, instead, as a guest speaker to introduce the seminar.

Why is she interested in this book? Why has she taken it everywhere with her? In a *Guardian* article she explained that it gave her the courage to become a writer (Mantel, 2008):

Some of us need a little push, before we recognise we have the right to pick up a pen.

In my case it came from a book by the psychiatrists R. D. Laing and Aaron Esterson...

*The people in it seemed close enough to touch... **Sanity, Madness and the Family** is vivid, direct, gripping. It is a series of interviews with families, who each include one member who has spent time in psychiatric hospitals. Each interview is a novel or play in miniature...*

So many of these family conversations seemed familiar to me: their swerves and evasions, their doubleness. All the patients profiled in the book are young women. I know their names are pseudonyms, but over the years I've wondered desperately what happened to them, and if there's anyone alive who knows, and whether any of them

ever cut free from the choking knotweed of miscommunication and flourished on ground of their own: Ruth, who was thought odd because she wore coloured stockings; Jean, who wanted a baby though her whole family [actually, only her husband – A. S.] told her she didn't; and Sarah, whose breakdown, according to her family, was caused by too much thinking...

For most of my life I had been told that I didn't know how the world worked. That afternoon I decided I did know, after all. In the course of my twenty-one years I'd noticed quite a lot. If I wanted to be a writer, I didn't have to worry about inventing material, I'd already got it. The next stage was just to find some words.

In her introduction to the seminar, she said (Mantel, 2017 [2014]):

*I know this, I thought. I have always known it. Moreover, I have lived it, in a sense I have lived it. These family conversations, I have heard them. I could, I felt, have constructed another chapter and called it *The Mantels*.*

In *Giving Up the Ghost* (Mantel, 2003) she gives an astonishing account of her own family.

Her historical novels twice won the Man Booker prize.

I wrote to her after reading her *Guardian* article (Mantel, 2008). I explained that I was researching the eleven families and could answer some of her questions. This was the start of our friendship.

All the others, including psychiatrists, who wrote to her about that article told her how wrong she was.

The ‘professionals’ claim Laing and Esterson said families ‘cause schizophrenia’. But Laing and Esterson wrote (1970 [1964]: vii):

No one can deny us the right to disbelieve in the fact of schizophrenia.

And Mantel, a twenty-year-old ‘laywoman’, understood (2017 [2014]):

Laing and Esterson did not set out to show that family interactions cause schizophrenia. They questioned the existence of the condition, and observed that the behaviour described as psychotic became intelligible, seen in context; to understand the context, you had to listen when the families told you about themselves.

Ordinary people, and extraordinary ordinary people (Shakespeare, Mantel), often see what psychiatrists, and even ‘existential analysts’ and ‘phenomenologists’, do not – or in bad faith will not.

Mantel writes of those who wrote to ‘correct’ her (2016 [2014]):

This long failure to engage seemed to me dishonest.

She ends (2017 [2014]):

Just read the simple words the people speak.

The simple words may be subtle and profound; they may condense, or clarify, complex contradictions and incompatible injunctions. Aaron Esterson once said to me: ‘These are the deepest secrets.’

At the seminar on the Abbotts we heard a 1959 recording of Maya Abbott telling Esterson about her experience. Some participants voiced surprise at his straightforward way of speaking with her. He was struck by her unusual awareness of her bodily experience, and said so. Because of his interest, and his willingness to make time to listen and learn as she explained in detail, we were privileged to hear her describe how she could imitate other people’s actions but only at a price. For example, she could talk with ‘hardened’ vocal cords, but to do so would be to lose touch with the ‘soft’ vocal cords that children have.

Hilary Mantel was clearly moved to hear Maya speak. But she wrote to me (Mantel, 2014a):

It was interesting how hard it was for participants to keep the reality of schizophrenia ‘in parenthesis’. The discussion kept jumping the rails. You said it would be like that.

Who is the phenomenologist here, able to keep the unproved assumption of ‘schizophrenia’ in parenthesis? The ‘existential’ and ‘phenomenological’ participants, or the ‘lay’ author?

Mantel wrote to me (2014b):

I shall always remember the moment of hearing Maya’s voice. Over the years the women who live in the book have become fabulous creatures to me. I no more expect to meet them than I expect to meet a mermaid; they speak from the depths.

Three weeks after the seminar, Maya Abbott died peacefully in her sleep. Hilary Mantel wrote to me (2014c):

I find tears in my eyes. It may be fanciful or superstitious to say this, but perhaps you have released her. Perhaps it was the act of letting her voice free into the room the other week; while her body lay, as you said, bedbound and inert, her spirit was escaping. I felt it was an important moment then and I feel it more now.

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