COMMITTED AGAINST HER WILL: THE STORY OF THE EAU CLAIRE POETESS
MAUD PHILLIPS ALSO KNOWN AS VIOLET LEIGH

Megan M. Beer
History 489
Professor James Oberly
May 13, 2009
To: The Eau Claire Poetess, Mrs. Maud Phillips, also known as Violet Leigh. It is with great hope that those who read this paper conclude with a better understanding of a unique and talented woman.
## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Progressive Era</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental Health in the Progressive Era</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Maud J or A Phillips also known as Violet Leigh.</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis/Conclusion</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Acknowledgments

In the process of writing this paper I feel that there are people that I should thank for helping me along the way.

I would like to acknowledge the University of Eau Claire archivist, Colleen McFarland, for her special interest in my topic and all the help throughout the research process. Without her, and the staff in the archives, this paper would not have been possible.

I would like to acknowledge Mr. Harry Miller and Ms. Dee A. Grimsrud at the Wisconsin Historical Society for all their time and effort in helping me locate the necessary information and materials needed for this paper.

I would like to acknowledge Thomas Pemberton for his patience, willingness to listen and excitement to travel along on my research expeditions, while I was preoccupied with this project.
Life is infinitely stranger than anything the mind could invent.

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine the life and times of Maud Phillips, also known as Violet Leigh, an Eau Claire poetess who came under intense scrutiny at the turn of the century for the actions she took both in her personal life and the ideas she chose to publish. Because of her actions, Maud was twice institutionalized in the Mendota Mental Health Institute. Though it was believed she was suffering from a mental illness it was actually Maud’s inability to conform to the social standards set at the turn of the century that lead to her confinement which was believed to be for the benefit of both her and society.
Introduction

The cave, located on the banks of the Eau Claire River, became the home of the Phillips family in the fall of 1917, when they were asked to leave their home on Wilson Street after falling behind in the rent. The cave itself was not intended to be a family occupied residence when it was created, but used instead by E. Robert Hantzch, a local brewer, who had the cave excavated and equipped for the cooling and storing of beer in 1905.\(^1\) After a few years, Mr. Hantzch stopped cooling his beer within the cave, at which time it was used for the safe storage of blasting powder. The cave was eventually abandoned and passed through the hands of locals who used it as a place to change when swimming to escape the summer heat, and where the men who hauled logs down the Eau Claire River, later to end up at the mills on Half Moon Lake, stopped to have a pint or two.

From a description of their new abode, printed in the *Eau Claire Leader* on August 15, 1917, one learns of a unique, but inviting home created by the Phillips family within the cave. From the article, a traditional image is painted of an untraditional residence:

Before entering the cave one is met with a flagpole placed in front of the entrance, upon which “old glory” waves. At the base of this flagpole is an old boiler that is “lit upon the arrival of the twilight hours to help drive away the mosquitoes and keep away the chill of the early morning”. The interior of the cave is laid with carpet on the floor and a curtain divides the cave into two parts. There is furniture, which includes an oil stove, chairs, bureau, and bed. A table in the center of the “room” is piled high with books, manuscripts, and paper; a large dictionary has a prominent place amongst the chaos.

There is a ledge made of rock that runs along the roof of the cave, of which is also lined with books.²

It is apparent that though their circumstances were dire, the Phillips family, most notably their matriarch, Maud, made do with what was available to them and was determined to not only survive, but to live. However, it was because of that determination and choices made in her life, such as her willingness to live in a cave, disregard for social conformity, and outspokenness, that Maud’s sanity was questioned and she was committed to Mendota Mental Health Institute.

I began my research with the intention of looking into the treatment of the mentally ill during the period of 1890-1920, also known as the Progressive Era in the United States. I wanted to explore the conditions of the facilities in which those deemed mentally ill were kept and what specific care was thought to be necessary for the healing of those individuals. While in the early stages of my exploration, the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire archivist informed me of a woman named Maud Phillips, who was also known by her pen name Violet Leigh. Violet was a local poet and rather colorful community member, who lived in Eau Claire, Wisconsin between the years of 1900 and 1920. She was married to a man by the name of Wilbur Phillips, a musician and tradesman, with whom she had five children. After being evicted from one of many residences, she took shelter in a local cave. She was rather famous as a local poet, with many of her works published regularly in the *Eau Claire Leader*. She enjoyed commenting on political and social issues and was very outspoken, all of which garnered her criticism from the community. She was involved in several illicit affairs, one of which was with a clergyman. It was because of her outspokenness, lifestyle choices and family role that it was determined in a court of law that she was insane and committed to Mendota Mental Health Institute.

---

² *Eau Claire Leader*. Poetess Adopts Big Cave on Bank of Eau Claire River as Her Home. August 15, 1917.
The era in which Maud lived did not allow for a woman to express themselves as openly as women might today. Not only that, but there was very little room for anyone to venture outside the lines of morality and normalcy practiced by society without being questioned. Maud, a woman who ventured outside the lines, was victim to the judgment of early 20th century mental health beliefs and societal principles of behavior. As someone who was not afraid to speak her mind, raise and teach her children as she saw fit, and carry on relationships with men outside her marriage, Maud was thought to be insane by late 19th century and early 20th century standards and she was institutionalized. Not only was she sent away, but she was sent away for extremely long periods of time, not once but twice. In this paper, I will shed light on the life of Maud Phillips and why an unusual woman was committed on two separate occasions.

The Progressive Era

In the United States, during the Progressive Era, optimism was the dominant mood of Americans and progressivism came to be the banner appropriated by the period’s many groups of political and social reformers. The United States was growing in size with the surge of foreign immigration, and such things as new innovations in technology and science, which produced devices such as the internal combustion engine, making travel and industry more dominant in the lives of Americans. However, amidst the optimism, the Progressive Era was also marred by the fear, social conflict, and hatred that were born out of these new advancements. Progress in science and technology bred discontent among religious Americans; the industrial developments of the era brought forth the rise of economic monstrosities, huge trusts spread the fear of corruption of public life and the stifling of economic opportunity; racial and ethnic resentments

---

grew with the influx of people from Europe. Among those who felt the discontentment of the era were women.

The ‘ideal’ woman during the Progressive Era, 1890 through the beginning of the 1920’s, stemmed from Victorian Era notions of true womanhood that characterized women as innately pure and domestic. Women were supposed to be the moral “beacon” of hope for society, setting the standards for how men and children should act. Women were to keep this beacon lit at home, being the refuge for men at the end of the day as they came in from amongst the chaos of the world. Hers was the task of guiding the worldlier and more frequently tempted male past the maelstroms of atheism and uncontrolled sexuality. Women were to protect children from obscenity, educating them on moral virtues, laced with religious fervor, and keeping them in school, all the while managing their domestic sphere with love, peace, and joy. In this position women had little to no legal rights, including no suffrage. As the Progressive Era advanced, women began to become less content with their limited roles and began to become more active outside the domestic sphere. What varied was the role women decided to take in expounding their new found confidence.

Many women became active participants in reform efforts. One example was the anti-obscenity groups formed that were aimed at civilizing the public domain through helping the poor, the rescuing of prostitutes, promoting temperance, and spreading domestic values and virtues. The women’s suffrage movement was picking up momentum and in the field of

4 Cooper, xiv.
literature women were developing new confidence and creativity. A new style of writing emerged known as regionalism. Unfortunately, opposing forces continued to push women towards traditional roles amongst the family. Legislation, such as anti-abortion laws and laws regulating birth control specifically the Comstock law, prohibited women from their legal right to limit family size. The media also played a role in convincing women that their place was at home and their time and energy should be devoted to child rearing. It was within these social expectations that Maud Phillips made herself a resilient force in the Eau Claire community through her poetry and avocation of a woman’s right to love whom she wished.

Mental Health in the Progressive Era

In the world of the field of psychology today, mental disorders are looked upon differently than they were at the turn of the century. A mental disorder today is defined as:

A clinically significant behavioral or psychological syndrome or pattern that occurs in an individual and that is associated with present distress or disability or with significantly increased risk of suffering death, pain, disability, or an important loss of freedom. In addition this syndrome or pattern must not be merely an expectable and culturally sanctioned response to a particular event.8

Today, in making a diagnosis, mental health professionals use the standard terms and definitions contained in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). The causes and treatments of abnormal behavior must be made on the basis of solid, scientific research rather than speculation.9

The Progressive Era was not just a time for change in society and politics but a time for change in the field of psychology as well. Beginning in the last decade of the 19th century new

---

9 Ibid.
theories as to the ‘causes’ and ‘appropriate’ treatments of the mentally ill were taking place. Before 1890, most thought that the mentally ill needed to only be treated through restorative and custodial care; afterward, people realized that mental health was a much more complex field than had previously been accepted and a vast new wealth of theories and treatments emerged at the turn of the century. Based on these new theories and treatments, Psychiatrists tended to divide themselves into a bewildering variety of groups, each with their own set of assumptions and beliefs.10

In defining mental illness many theories abounded. The older school of thought believed that mental illness was somatic, brought on by physical origins. The new idea of thinking was that it was neurologically based. However, a variety of often unrelated concepts appealed to different practitioners and more important was the fact that the very concept of mental illness could not be separated from the deeper and more profound problem of explaining the nature of human beings in general and their behavior in particular.11 Some psychiatrists emphasized brain pathology; others found autointoxication, described as poisoning by toxic substances produced inside the body, as a precursor to mental disease; others believed the endocrine system caused mental illness.12 Overall, there was no clear, known, idea as to the cause of mental illness and in many times, when it came down to diagnosing and treating the mentally ill it was about the bureaucracy mounting a powerful campaign for cultural and institutional authority over problematic behaviors and suspect emotions.13

11 Ibid.
12 International Dictionary of Medicine and Biology, s.v. “Autointoxication.”
Often the official definition of insanity was attributed to individual cases that were powerfully influenced by culturally born moral conceptions; madness was an elastic status that could be applied to persons whose major problem was poverty, homelessness, or physical disabilities. This was never more evident than during the Mental Hygiene Movement which began in the early twentieth century. Mental hygienists believed that mental disease was a product of environmental, hereditarian, and individual deficiencies and its eradication required a fusion of scientific knowledge and administrative action. Those involved with the Mental Hygiene Movement believed with the proper instruction, and preventative measures, such as eugenics, marriage regulation, and immigration restriction, a better society could be created that fit with the social and political standards set at the time in America.

In 1881 Wisconsin adopted what was known as the “Wisconsin Plan” which was a dual system of state and county care for the mentally ill. This was due to the failure of the consolidated state hospitals to meet the needs of the growing population of both acute and chronic mentally ill in the state. This meant that there would be more facilities to house those who needed long term care around the state, relieving the pressure of the state hospitals and allowing them to focus on those who required shorter term care. During the Progressive Era there was not much done to change the state and county care system and Wisconsin psychiatrists shared many of the assumptions common to the Progressive Movement as a whole.

---


15 Grob, 144.


17 Ibid.
In Wisconsin, to commit a person who was believed to be mentally ill was a relatively simple and routine matter up until the 1970’s. Wisconsin required that a person subjected to commitment proceedings be mentally ill and a proper subject for custody and treatment.\(^{18}\) The qualifications of the “proper subject” were determinant on the judgment of the treating psychiatrist. It was very possible that behavior simply deemed irresponsible by the psychiatrist could satisfy the statutory requirement for commitment.\(^{19}\)

**Mrs. Maud J or A Phillips also known as Violet Leigh.**

According to the 1870 United States census records, Maud Safford was born in September of 1868 to a Mr. Walter Safford and his wife Katherine, a Vermont native, in Ohio.\(^{20}\) It was when Maud was less than a year old that Walter, a farmer, and Katherine, a house wife, made the trek to Wisconsin and settled in Weston, located in Clark County. Sometime between the years 1870 and 1880 two other children were born, a daughter Georgia and a son, Walter. It was also in this time span that Walter, the father, passed away and was buried in Pine Valley Cemetery in Neilsville, WI. The family had since relocated to the town of York in Clark County before Walter’s death and in order to support her family, Katherine took to teaching school.

In 1890 Maud married a man by the name of Wilbur H. Phillips, a New York native, who was born in September of 1857. By 1900 Wilbur, a musician, and Maud were living in the town of Naples, in Buffalo County, Wisconsin with four children: Ruth, born in February of 1892, 


\(^{19}\) Ibid.

Violet, born in February of 1894, Wilbur, born in March of 1897 and Wesley, born in May of 1899. According to the 1910 census, another daughter, Joy, was born in 1902. Oddly enough, listed on the 1920 census is another daughter named Rosemary and, based on her age at the time of the census, she would have been born in 1903, even though she is not listed on the 1910 census.

It was sometime around the year of 1906 that Maud and her family relocated to the City of Eau Claire and appeared in the Eau Claire Leader in an article entitled “Is Sheriff to blame In Sad Case of Young Girl?” published on August 17, 1906. The article begins by stating that information previously printed on this case is “grossly misconstrued and unfair” in portraying the sheriff. The sheriff, in fact, did everything in his power to apprehend the seducer when he was called off the case and told to let the matter drop. What case was this in regards to? According to the article, in which the sheriff was interviewed, he explained that on the 26th of July, Mrs. Maud Phillips, and another woman, came to his office and asked for a warrant for the arrest of a man named Otto A. Wilson whom they accused of seducing Maud’s 14 year old daughter.

Maud explained that Mr. Wilson, who was the captain of the Salvation Army, an organization that provides social services to communities and its members most often the poor, in Eau Claire, met her daughter, became acquainted, and “the man called several times and a friendship developed into a strong mutual affection”.21 According to Maud the two went on walks frequently in the evening and it is supposed that during one of these walks “hearts were pledged and promises of marriage exchanged”. It was under this promise that the accused led the young girl ‘astray,’ after which Wilson disappeared. After his disappearance Maud took it upon herself to have him located, tried in a court of law and clear her daughter’s name. The sheriff

---

21 Eau Claire Leader, Is Sheriff to Blame?, August 17, 1906.
instructed Maud and her friend to go to a judge, obtain a warrant, and give it to him. After following his orders, Maud and her friend did just that, at which time the Sheriff departed for Red Wood Falls, Minnesota, which is where Mr. Wilson had a home. He was not found by the Sheriff and was thought to be at the home of another sweetheart. It was upon the Sheriff’s arrival back in Eau Claire that he was instructed by the district attorney that he [the district attorney] had in fact not issued a warrant and that he [the district attorney] told Maud the matter would be dropped unless he [Mr. Wilson] was found within the county at which time he [the district attorney] would take steps to arrest him. As it turns out the district attorney was out of town when the warrant was issued and the article concludes saying that the sheriff was only acting on orders and should not have blame laid upon him by Mrs. Phillips for not taking further actions in locating Mr. Wilson.

Two following articles entitled “Sad Case of Young Girl: Mother Appeals to Governor Davidson…Governor Sympathizes with Woman but Endorses Action of District Attorney” were published in the *Eau Claire Leader* on August 31, 1906. The August 31st article and one more, appearing in the *Eau Claire Sunday Leader*, were printed on the Phillips matter. Both articles describe a “dramatic curtain rising” on a Phillips-Wilson-District Attorney-political drama”.22 According to the article Mrs. Phillips believed that Mr. Arnold (the district attorney) was not acting in strict accord with his official duty, and she in turn appealed to the governor. In the governor’s response, also printed in the paper, it mentions the fugitive Mr. Wilson, and the warrant that was issued for his arrest. It seems that Mrs. Phillips wanted the sheriff and district attorney to be more diligent in their search for the said Mr. Wilson but the governor states that he would very much like to help her in her troubles but has no jurisdiction over the matter. He also

---

22 *Eau Claire Leader*, Sad Case of Young Girl, August 31 1906.
goes on to say that the district attorney has no authority to send the sheriff out on a searching expedition unless the whereabouts of the fugitive are known. He concludes with the remarks ‘that he believes [Maud] has judged the district attorney too hastily and he has in fact been doing his job’. The article goes on to note that since receiving this letter and presenting it to the district attorney, Mrs. Phillips is more kindly disposed towards the district attorney. This is the first example of Maud’s persistent nature to take matters into her own hands when she felt that things were in fact not going as she saw fit. Her confidence to seek out those in authority and question their motives was a highly risky venture at this time, especially for a woman.

The earliest poem written by Maud to appear in the *Eau Claire Leader* was published on October 26, 1906 in a section entitled “What is Best for Eau Claire?”. According to the article there was a contest in the community on what they thought was best for the city and what they could do to garner more interest in the town. Of the entries listed, Maud was the only female to have a submission printed. Of those printed, they suggest, what is best for Eau Claire, is to keep the existing mayor, extend the railways lines, a businessman’s organization, affordable housing, and cleaning up the city of its garbage. One interesting submission suggests that it is the character of the citizenry of Eau Claire that needs to be addressed. The submission suggests “she [Eau Claire] will never reach a higher moral plane, a deeper and broader intellectual culture, a greater industrial development than the character of her citizens is able to make possible.” It also goes on to suggest that the schools and church be generously supported and places such as saloons and “all that degrades society” should be abolished. This gives a look into what it was that the people of Eau Claire at the time believed should be taken care of within the city. There was not just a concern for its visible, physical appearance but for its moral character as well.

---

23 *Eau Claire Leader*, What is the Best for Eau Claire?, October 26, 1906.
Maud’s submission on the other hand had a somewhat different angle than the rest. Maud, who had not yet used her pen name Violet Leigh, believed it was a city official’s greed and party vote that were the bane of Eau Claire’s existence, and in fact it was “for the help of other folk, take the Savior’s yoke, each will find the burden light, and a heart than snow more white, This is the best for everywhere, is the best for Eau Claire”.\textsuperscript{24} It was within that year of 1907 that Maud was first committed.

Though there is no newspaper account of the committal, according to Mendota admission and discharge records, Maud Phillips, age 38, was brought by the sheriff of Eau Claire on March 19, 1907, in good health, listing her occupation as a housewife, and her husband as her guardian.\textsuperscript{25} What is listed in regards to her mental condition is that she if suffering from melancholy, which can be described as a depressive episode, for the duration of which is not known, and has had no previous attacks, the cause of which is unknown and no previous stays in a hospital were reported. It is by looking at her medical log, which is recorded at the end of each month throughout her stay, that you are able to get a better sense of her ‘ailments’ and a glimpse of Maud’s own personality and how in fact it seems that her health deteriorated as time went on. The first log recorded her basic information which included the day she was admitted, age, birthplace, marital status, number of children, which at this time was five, the youngest being five years old, and occupation. Again it said that the duration and cause of her disease was unknown but she was suffering from increased, fixed delusions two of which are “she imagines education in public schools would injure her children and she has delusions her oldest daughter

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{25} Mendota Mental Health Institute of Wisconsin, Admission and Discharge Records, 1907-1908. Series 2166. Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin.
is pregnant”\textsuperscript{26} The latter would not entirely be hard for her to imagine, especially considering the before mentioned instance of her 14 year old daughter having a relationship with the older Mr. Wilson, whom led her astray. If one were to assume that “led astray” meant a sexual relationship, all of which occurred at the end of the previous July 1906, and the time at which Maud was admitted was close to eight months later, her daughter could have in fact been pregnant. The medical log also recorded Maud’s disposition throughout her stay. The day she arrived stated that she had “no disposition to injure herself or others, not destructive or filthy, and good physical health”. Two interesting notes to point out, it mentions that her mother was said to be insane, though it goes no further in explanation, and that that she [Maud] was eight months pregnant.

Later log entries noted Maud to be “cheerful, amiable, resigned and conversing rationally, associating well with others and taking interest in her surroundings”.\textsuperscript{27} On Sunday, April 14\textsuperscript{th} at 8 am in the morning, she gave birth to a baby girl, who was taken home by the grandmother. This is noted on April 30\textsuperscript{th} which also noted that Maud “tries to be cheerful, is very homesick, cries at times, and still converses rationally”. It is in this entry that we get some clue as to why she was committed to begin with, when it says that Maud claims “she was mistaken in some of her ideas, willing to help”.\textsuperscript{28} What ideas were mistaken it is not clear; she could possibly be referring to the fact she did not want her children educated in public school, the idea her daughter was pregnant, or something else not listed such as her publications. Up to this point she had not used her pen name so what was published in the paper was able to be linked directly to


\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.
her where as if she would have used a pen name there is always somewhat of an uncertainty as to who it belongs to; which is why she may have decided to in fact adopt the pen name Violet Leigh.

As time goes on it is apparent that Maud’s demeanor continued to deteriorate. Later entries note her to ‘be about the same, sad, passive, and anxious to return home’. This continues from late May into August where it is noted that she “spends most of her time writing poetry and letters for self and other ladies on ward…inclined to be cute.” It is in September that it seemed she sinks into an even deeper depression when it is noted that she has no “stability, no sense of duty or obligations, makes no serious efforts, listless.” In October she seems to take a turn for the worst, though it is said that she is still “pleasant and agreeable” she is at times “despondent, sad and gloomy, cries readily, but more obedient”. It is not until November that her “delusions which she still possesses for numerous people” are mentioned again and it is here that it says she is “infatuated with another man but claims she wants to go to her children.” As will be discussed later, she did in fact have several extramarital affairs, one of which was with her psychiatrist at Mendota. It is possible that it was at this time she did in fact begin this affair. In December of 1907 Maud was released to go back to Eau Claire after her husband came to retrieve her. However, she was readmitted on April 23, 1908 after coming to Mendota for a visit. In her log book it says that she “refused to go and asked to be allowed to remain as a patient”. It is written that she is “delusional and imagines she is unable to do home duties”. A few days later on April 30th it is written that she is “well behaved, contented here, and does not care to return to husband.” On May 1, she was transferred to Eau Claire County Asylum. It is from there that her husband petitioned to have her removed from the asylum.
In a petition filed on May 16, 1908, by Wilbur, to the Hon. George L. Blum in the County Court for Eau Claire County it states:

That Maud Phillips is, at the present time, detained in the County Asylum of Eau Claire County, and that the reason for said detention is that the said Maud Phillips is an insane person. That the said Maud Phillips was duly adjudged insane by the County Court of Clark County…that the said Maud Phillips is not insane as this petitioner is informed and believes, and is now being unlawfully detained in said County Asylum. 29

Based on the petition filed by Wilbur and his request of a reexamination, the judge, upon reading and filing the petition, ordered that Maud be examined by “qualified physicians” and report to the judge “their opinion as to the sanity or insanity” of Maud. On May 19, 1908, at two o’clock in the afternoon, in the office of the judge, two doctors of the city of Eau Claire examined Mrs. Phillips:

We, the undersigned, physicians appointed by the order dated May 16, 1908, to examine Maud Phillips, a person detained in the County Asylum for Eau Claire County, having this day examined the said Maud Phillips, do report that it is our opinion, and we do hereby find that the said Maud Phillips to be a sane person.

The next of her poems to appear in the Eau Claire Leader was on October 14, 1910 under the pen name Violet Leigh. As is the case with the publication on October 14, it usually is not one poem but several that are printed. On the surface the themes of her poetry go between love, social injustices, the natural world, and commentary on random happenings in the community. A few examples of work are as follows:

---

The Girl with the Auburn Hair (1911)

Full many a saint
Did Titian paint,
And this his artful care:
To find the colors that agree
With the hue of hair that’s her’s
You see,
The Girl with the Auburn hair.

With shapely nose,
And cheeks of rose,
And skin beyond compare;
And milk-white teeth like pearls
Ashine.
Her dainty loveliness is fine:
The girl with the auburn hair.
He is a brute
Most hard to suit
Who would not call her fair:
He’s sordid, with a soul that’s dead,
Who’s style her glorious tresses red;
The girl with the auburn hair.

Spring Violets (1911)

When I am sadly out of tune.
With all things ‘neath the sun and
Moon

I haste to find spring violets.

Where do they hide, the dainty pets?
Their comfort bringeth no regrets;
Hope springs up with spring violets.
Where the soft moss is bright with
Sheen,
They stand and wave their hands of
Green.

And how to me, dear violets.

Concealed from all but loving eyes,
They look at me in meek surprise;
Spring’s dear and precious violets!

They’ve wakened from their winter
Nap.
And each has donned a silken cap;
Who would not love the violets.

I’ll bend me down as low as they.
That may gather just a spray.
Of fair and fragrant violets.
A response that Maud wrote in 1911 entitled “By the Way, What’s my Class?” gives the reader insight on how Maud feels about her life and social class. More poignantly it gives you a sense of how Maud felt about herself.

Yes, I always trudge on the beaten trail for I know no other way, and I follow my leader win or fail no matter what people say. I never, never lose my nerve when I’ve left the “madding” crowd and its “ignoble strife”; I serve so why should I feel cowed?

I plug along at my trifling work and never question why? My Leader was never known to shirk, then wherefore, pray, should I? I’m never too busy to stop and smile and there’s nothing so dear as love. Sometimes I stop and rest awhile and watch the stars above.

A beast can follow and work and sleep and eat as well as I: and a beast can mourn and I can weep and like me a beast can die. A beast can be quite meek and still when hungry or hurt or lone; I can learn of a beast if I only will; he excels me, I must own.  

Maud’s husband Wilbur was a musician by trade and taught music as well as performed locally. It was not uncommon for Maud to accompany him to performances and read her poetry. One such instance was in December of 1914 when one night Wilbur performed at the Rod and Gun Club. Violet is listed on the agenda for the evening, as reading poetry. In publishing and performing her poetry in such a public manner that Maud garnered both criticism and praise for her work. A case in point was her feud with a woman by the name of Mary Grant O’Sheridan, who claimed that Violet was plagiarizing in her poems. Printed in the December 20, 1911 Eau Claire Leader, in the section named “the Voice of the People”, Ms. O’Sheridan claims that “Violet, whoever that may be, better fish up a few original ideas, and not be making over other people’s poems all the time”. She uses a poem Violet published that was similar to one written by the poet Ethna Carbery. She then continues to prove her point by comparing Violet to a second hand clothes repair shop owner, of which she says: “perhaps Violet keeps a second hand

30 Eau Claire Leader, By the way what’s my class, October 3, 1911.
31 Eau Claire Leader, Voice of the People, December 20, 1911.
clothes repair shop…if she does, is she allowed to run down the passersby, and strip off their raiment, and make it over to suit her own fancy and wear it herself?” Continuing on she attacked Violet and questions whether anyone in their right mind would be willing to go to her to have “Polonaise or poem made over” and concludes by saying that the sooner Violet gets over her nasty trick the better.

Underneath the letter that was written by Ms. O’Sheridan, was a note from the Leader, declaring their faith in Violet saying “we feel quite sure that Miss Mary Grant O’Sheridan is not correct in her views which charge plagiarism.” As the Leader explained, they understand that Violet is into ‘remodeling poems’ and gives full credit to the authors and does not seek to pass them off as her own. The Leader goes onto explain that Violet does not steal the material of other poets and writers but adopts their style of writing and has even received compliments from the original authors. Though the Leader gave a fair explanation this did not stop Maud from defending herself.

In a response written to the Leader, Maud expresses her dislike for such quarreling but defends herself in saying she “did not start this fuss and hates cynicism as much as she hates the devil but since I must wade in it…” In a quip that displays Maud’s confidence in herself and her work she says “I am not a recensionist…I am a paraphrast…’recensioh’[sic] was the word you used. You should have used the word ‘paraphrase’…I think we should select simpler words while squabbling Mary…we wish everyone to comprehend this controversy do we not? Only highly educated people understand abstruse language.” In another response to Ms. O’Sheridan’s accusations Maud expresses her surprise at the realization of how deep Mary’s

---

32 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid.
35 Eau Claire Leader, Voice of the People, December 24, 1911.
hatred runs for her. It seems that in another letter to the Leader Mary accuses Violet of appropriating her [Mary] poems and says that Violet should only be given the chance to paraphrase others work “on the penitentiary walls”. Violet compares this feud to sparring and even writes a poem about the debacle and at the end addresses Mary “have you got enough Mary?”

On a much lighter note it is necessary to point out that Maud, or Violet, did receive much praise for her work. One such instance was published in the Leader on February 28, 1912, when a woman from Wheaton, Wisconsin wrote in inquiring where the “eloquent Violet Leigh was” since it had been a while since her last publication. She described Violet’s work as “inspiring eloquence”. Other such admirers included a woman from Wyoming, who was a previous resident of Eau Claire, a Wisconsin State Assemblyman, Mr. J. L. Schnitzier, along with other members of the State Legislature, and a woman from Superior, WI, all of whom sent letters thanking Violet for her poetry and bestowing admiration for her work. Praise such as this continued on through the years, even when she moved to Madison after she was committed for the second time, at which time such praise appeared in Madison newspapers.

As time went on Maud published more poetry including a book entitled “A little book of verses” written and published in 1915. Throughout the years more praise and criticism was bestowed upon “Eau Claire’s poetess” and through it all she continued to work, never yielding to the criticism, always speaking her mind, and never swaying from her convictions. It was in 1916 that Maud began a magazine entitled the Eau Claire Monthly, which did not last long, not making it past its first issue. Within the magazine were various prose, some written by Violet herself, along with others from around the area and other parts of the United States.
Also occurring during these years were several extra-marital affairs between Maud and local men. It is believed, based on accounts during her trial, that she had an affair with a local doctor and lawyer and the most infamous, an Altoona Methodist preacher, the Rev. Herbert Stafford, whose poetry appeared in her magazine. It was said that it was over poetry that the two met: Mr. Stafford, upon hearing of Maud, sought her out for consultation over his love of poetry.

It is not known for certain how long the affair lasted, but it is believed to have occurred over a few years, and it was the Reverend “tiring” of Maud and fleeing to Iowa that set in motion the Phillips’ family eviction from their home and the taking up of residence in a local cave, that led to her second committal to Mendota.

According to the published reports of the sanity hearing, in early 1918, that was held to determine Maud’s fate, things began to take a turn for the worst when the married Reverend, decided he no longer wanted to see Maud and took a call from a congregation in Iowa. It was then that Maud, along with the help of her husband, began sending letters to the Reverend’s new congregation exposing their affair. Upon receipt of these letters, the Reverend Stafford informed Maud that if she did not stop he would “have her arrested for insanity” also saying in a letter to her “that the fact of her having been once in the hospital would make it easier to get her there again and that he had plenty of money behind him to do so”.

Adding to the question of her sanity was her present living situation, which was in a well known cave along the banks of the Eau Claire River that had once been used for the storing and cooling of beer. The Phillips family spent several months in the cave, from August 1917 to January 1918, at which time the city poor commissioner, a medical doctor and policemen tried to convince the family to leave. To no avail,

---

36 *Eau Claire Leader*, Violet Leigh’s Sanity Questioned, Poems Written to Clergyman Cited, December 13, 1917.

37 Ibid.
the family insisted on staying including Maud’s 76 year old mother who claimed to be quite content with her present condition and refused to be taken away. It was during her stay in the cave that physicians were appointed to inquire into the mental condition of Mrs. Phillips. On December 21, 1917 Maud was declared insane by said physicians, and in response, she demanded a trial by jury contesting the decision made about her sanity. The trial began on February 1, 1918 with a jury that consisted of six men.

The reasons, presented by the district attorney, for the questioning of Maud’s sanity included: first, her present manner of living in a cave on the bank of the Eau Claire River; second, her refusal to obey the law requiring her to send her children to school; third, certain details of her unsuccessful effort to launch a poetry magazine; fourth, her correspondence with Rev. Herbert Stafford. 38 Her trial began with her testimony on the stand, being questioned by both the district attorney and her lawyer, A. J. Sutherland, on her affair with Reverend Stafford and other details of her life, of which the “facts she was most forthcoming and continuously made a point of saying she was not ashamed of what she had done”. Of her affair with the Reverend she said “I was quite charmed with him, and he seemed of me. The only trouble is that he is no longer charmed by me while I continue to be charmed by him”. 39

When asked about their exchange of poetry Maud replied “he [Reverend Stafford] told me of getting up at midnight to compose verses so he could come and see me about them.” When asked if she liked his poetry she answered “yes, I liked it…it is very abstruse…I doubt not that the jury here would have to sit up all night to understand some of it even though they are intellectual”. 40 It was then that the district attorney presented the court with a series of poems that

38 Ibid.
39 Eau Claire Leader, Violet Leigh on Trial for Sanity, Tells of Love for Clergyman, February 2, 1918.
40 Ibid.
Maud had written and sent to the Reverend’s new congregation in Iowa. After which the Reverend took legal action. When asked why she did not stop sending the letters she merely replied “Why should I stop? Do you suppose I am afraid of those attorneys?”

After extensive questioning about her liaisons with the Reverend, Maud’s attorney began his round of questioning. In his defense, he painted a picture for the jury of Maud’s struggle for existence. Maud described her early marriage to her husband Wilbur and how after the birth of one of their children he used the last of their money to go to a concert of a great pianist instead of calling a midwife. She described another time she was left with her children, one of whom was seriously ill, and having to wade through deep snow to get some bread and milk for her family. It is briefly mentioned that her mother was the reason for her first consignment to the state hospital though no further details were given.

A number of witnesses were called during the proceedings for either side. One such witness was a man by the name of W. Ager who declared Violet’s poetry to resemble that of Percy Shelley and even compared her romantic life to that of the poet. When asked if he considered her sane or not he replied “that all geniuses were to some extent abnormal and that such abnormal traits in them he would not characterize as indicative of insanity…Violet was a woman of more than ordinary ability”. Other witnesses included a man by the name of John Sorlie who described the cave of which the Phillips family resided. He thought that “many homes in the city were not as warm as the cave but it is not an appropriate place for a human being to live if any other houses were available”.

---

41 Ibid.
42 Ibid.
The district attorney brought to the stand previous doctors who had attended to Mrs. Phillips. District attorney Gilbertson reviewed their reports which characterized the defendant in several ways: “said to have always been eccentric always” and “always erratic and a dreamer” and was described as “having no inclination for ordinary living; always having friction with school, charitable and other local authorities; she had her own way of living and rearing her children and saying that she would be all right if just left alone”; physicians found her habits “not guilty of anything intemperate or filthy”. A description of Maud throughout the proceedings was given which said “the defendant wore a black suit, black furs, and a black veil, and quietly sat beside her attorney except in the instance when the district attorney made an offhand remark of which she hotly denied.”43

On February 3, 1918 the jury of six men, who deliberated for just over a half an hour, declared Maud Phillips insane. Immediately after the verdict was handed down, Maud’s attorney asked for a rehearing, which was conducted that day. As the hearing began attorney Sutherland denounced the Reverend Stafford saying that “if hell were raked with a fine tooth comb there could be found none worse”44 and asked the jury to “judge the defendant with full realization of the lack of financial support and of the hard life that she has had”. It was then that the judge brought to the attention of the jury, once again, of the refusal of Maud to stop sending malicious letters to Reverend Sutherland, and recommended that she be sent to an institution where she “will have no harmful influence over her children, can get proper food and care and where her poetic instincts can have free expression”. It was also during this rehearing that Maud was brought to the stand, yet again, and disclosed of three other affairs that she had had, one with

43 Ibid.
44 Eau Claire Leader, Violet Leigh is Pronounced Insane by Jury and Committed to Mendota, February 3, 1918.
a prominent Eau Claire man, another with a Madison physician, and the third was with a doctor at the Mendota asylum. During her time on the stand she spoke of her love in general “I love for keeps when I love a man” and stated that she fell out of love with her husband when he sent their daughter Ruth to an industrial school while she was away at Mendota. In her final words on the stand she said “it is a women’s birthright to love. If she cannot love her husband, she must love some other man.”

The last person to be called to the stand during the rehearing was a Dr. M. E. Mitchell, who had previously examined Maud. He said that he “did in fact believe her to be insane” and admitted he thought that “for the benefit of both her and society she would be better in ‘some institution’”. Dr. Mitchell was then asked what he believed the definition of insanity was; he believed insanity was “a prolonged departure from the normal mental state, the person’s feeling, thinking, and acting being affected” going on to say that there was “really no hard and fast definition of the term but classified Maud as an ‘institutional psychopath’.”

Though Maud’s attorney tried to keep her out of Mendota, even with a rehearing of the evidence, she was, again, admitted to Mendota Mental Health Institute in February of 1918. According to the admission record she was brought by the Sheriff, was under good physical health and listed her daughter as her guardian. In regards to her mental condition, the form of mental illness she was suffering from was psychopathy, which had been in duration for many years, the cause of which is listed as constitutional make-up. Unlike with her first committal to Mendota, the only records available about her second stay are the admission and discharge registers and infirmary and ward night and day reports from 1904-1922 of which the only

\[\text{\textsuperscript{45} Ibid.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{47} Mendota Mental Health Institute of Wisconsin, Admission and Discharge Records, 1918. Series 2166. Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin.}\]
volume that was available from Maud’s second stay began in July of 1918 until December 1918. 
Within the reports Mrs. Phillips, as she is referred to, appears on the day report for December 3, 1918 and is said to have arrived from floor three. She then appears on the day report for December 4, 1918 and is listed as receiving a dose of Magnesium Sulfate, in an unknown dosage amount, at 11am, for treatment of an unknown ailment. According to contemporary information on the usage of Magnesium Sulfate it is classified as a therapeutic mineral and electrolyte replacement and supplement that is used in the treatment and prevention of hypomagnesemia (magnesium deficiency) and hypertension (high blood pressure), as well as, used as an anticonvulsant associated with severe eclampsia, pre-eclampsia (pregnancy complications) or acute nephritis (inflammation of the kidney), its most common use being that of a laxative. Maud was discharged from Mendota on December 5, 1918, the discharge register listing her as being removed by a friend and her condition, when discharged, as unimproved.

According to the 1920 census records, the Phillips family which included Wilbur, Maud, their daughter Violet, Rose Mary, and Maud’s mother Katherine, now 78, were residing in Madison in a home they owned. According to the census, it is apparent that Wilbur is the sole provider for the family, whose occupation is listed as ‘teaching music’. It is also evident that from the time Maud was discharged from Mendota until her death, she resided in Madison. Throughout the 1920’s various articles appeared in the Capital Times, a local Madison

---

48 Mendota Mental Health Institute of Wisconsin, Infirmary and ward night and day reports, female, October-December 1918. Series 1988/212. Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin.
newspaper, with headlines such as “Madison Poet Writes Verse for Music Magazine” and “Local Woman Will Publish Book of Poetry”. Other times Maud appeared in the *Capital Times* were in announcements advertising her reading of original verses at such places as the Labor Temple in Madison. Upon research of Labor Temple records it does not appear that Maud was a member of the Labor Temple but was a frequent guest, always reading her poetry. Within the decade after her trial Maud only appears in the *Eau Claire Leader* on a few occasions, one being in January 1922 announcing her visit to the city, and later that year, in December, with the publication of one of her poems. The last known appearance of Maud Phillips, in publication, began with a series of Superior Court of Dane County Summons for Mr. Wilbur Phillips Sr. and relatives in the matter of collecting the estate of a deceased Maud A. Phillips, in 1930. The first of these summons appeared in July of 1930 as well as three more times in August of that year. The date and whereabouts of her death are unknown.

**Analysis/Conclusion**

The gendered and mental expectations embedded in society at the turn of the century left no room for Maud Phillips to openly voice her opinion without coming under intense scrutiny and speculation in regards to her moral and psychological reasoning. Because she chose to live a life that was not conventional by the standards of the era, it was thought that she was a harm to society and its’ proper code of conduct, which meant that she must be removed in order to not disrupt what was taken as normal.

As a woman, Maud was expected to embrace her basic motherly and domestic instincts and create a suitable home for her family, and make sure that her children were educated and cared for. If she were to do anything outside the home it was in the form of charity and helping
better society. In a sense Maud did fit the ideals of the era, just in her own unique way. She did provide a home for her family, both when they were able to afford rent and when they were not; she used the resources available, which was in this case a cave, to provide shelter for her family and made it as domestic as she could. She did provide education for her children but believed that she could do better than the public schools. In the *Eau Claire Leader* on August 22, 1912, Maud’s mother, Katherine Safford, wrote a letter condemning the rigid enforcement of the compulsory attendance policy in Eau Claire at the time. She argues:

The parents of those children [Wesley and Joy] are well educated and have both been successful school teachers, the father having taught forty-five terms in both rural and city schools. These parents are musicians and music-teachers. The mother studied drawing with an art correspondence school and the children are all more or less proficient in drawing and music…the instruction is “substantially equivalent to instruction given to children in public, private and parochial schools. It would seem that parents who are intellectual and accomplished would not be violating any law if they chose themselves to instruct their children.”

Maud did believe her children should be educated but because she wanted to do it on her own, the community looked down on her and her husband.

Maud did believe that her poetry was a service to the community in highlighting social ills and grievances and wanted to share her unique ability to write, with those around her. Again, her idea of helping the community was not the same of those around her and she was ostracized by some who found her poetry to be offensive and that she should “be quiet”. The only major issue of which Maud was somewhat ahead of her time was her belief in a woman’s right to love whom she wanted.

With the information presented was it really necessary for her to be committed to an institution? Judging by the definition of mental health and social beliefs at the time it is apparent

---

51 *Eau Claire Leader*, Voice of the People, August 22, 1912.
that she did meet the criteria for her second committal. However, based on today’s standards of mental health and social acceptance it would appear that she was most likely not mentally ill and would not be committed. Though her actions may have been different than what is defined as normal what does the term normal really mean? Normal to one person may be weird to another; eccentric outbursts unaccepted by some may be to others thought of as genius. In the end it would seem that Maud was a misunderstood woman, who suffered from the arduous conditions of poverty, only trying to find what little happiness she could in the world through her children, writing, and in the end, was really just seeking to love and to be loved in return.
Bibliography

Secondary Sources

Books


Riley, Glenda. *Inventing the American Woman: A Perspective on Women's History.* Arlington


**Articles**


**Primary Sources**


Mendota Mental Health Institute of Wisconsin, Infirmary and ward night and day reports, male and female, 1904-1922. Series 1988/212. Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin.

Sources Considered

Secondary Sources

Books


Articles

Harris, Benjamin and Fran Brotherton. “Communism, miscegenation, and dementia simplex: The


**Primary Sources**

Leigh, Violet, ed. The Eau Claire Monthly, 1, no. 1 (November 1916).

