

Perceptions of Mental Health around 1600

Madness is an “elastic concept” and would be perceived differently in Jacobean England than today. The late 16th and early 17th Century was a very interesting time in the history of madness; there were a complicated multitude of different, frequently contradictory viewpoints. Those different perceptions often reflected the turmoil and conflicts in thinking about religion, politics and natural philosophy. Shakespeare was only one of several contemporary playwrights to mine madness as a rich source of drama. I would argue that mental illness is in part a social construct and, as in recent times, classifying individuals or groups as mad was a useful weapon in social control and stigmatising certain people (for example “witches” and non-conformists).

Possession beliefs

Since ancient times, madness had been frequently seen as symptomatic of divine or, more commonly, diabolical possession and this view was still widely held. This view was supported, not rejected, by physicians who were just becoming organised Shakespeare’s time. They might question supernatural possession in particular cases but were unlikely to reject the possibility. At this time, witches were often seen as the agents of diabolical possession which was not inconvenient for the physicians and the clergy. The two peaks of English witchcraft prosecutions were from 1563 to 1603 and from 1645-47. The distinguished physician, Sir Thomas Browne, was comfortable giving evidence on the reality of witchcraft in the 1630s.

There were some more enlightened people such as Richard Scot, a magistrate from Kent, who saw witches as more likely to be the victims of insanity rather than its agent. In *Discovery of Witchcraft (1584)* he argued that witches deserved compassion and treatment rather than fear and punishment. It was to refute this scepticism that King James wrote his *Daemonologie (1597)* in which he specifically rejects Scot’s views.

Christian beliefs

The clergy played a significant role in matters of body and spirit so not surprisingly madness was often perceived in terms of good and evil. The Churches generally supported the belief in possession and saw insanity as a punishment for sin. Insanity as a punishment can be traced back to Hebrew monotheism where, for example, in Deuteronomy insanity is listed as one of the curses that God will serve on those that fail to obey him. And to be rational was to be in harmony with God, and therefore the irrational behaviour of insanity was a symptom of consorting with the devil. In the widely read *Anatomy of Melancholy (1620)* Robert Burton, an Oxford don, identified the devil as the true author of despair and suicide. He was particularly harsh on the role of Catholic priests. Like others, he saw sinning as causing madness, not one of the as consequence in the modern zeitgeist.

Jesus was seen to give authority to the possession model of insanity, as when he drove the demon out of the insane Legion into the nearby swine causing them to stampede over a cliff (Mark 5, 2-15). Biblical authority was, of course, particularly significant to Puritans.

Some of the appalling treatments of the insane were inspired by the belief that evil spirits could be driven out by beatings and immersion in cold water (comparable to the torture and murder of 15 year old Kristan Bamu in London, December 2010). Roman Catholics in England also organized exorcisms - the most famous case being that of a Jesuit priest called William Weston at Denham in 1585-6. Indeed, some Roman Catholic propagandists tried to make capital from the assertion that only Catholic priests (not Protestant impostors) could dispossess the afflicted. The current Catholic exorcism rites date from 1614. Despite the official

disapproval of the Anglican Church, crowds would flock to watch attempts to expel the devil from the possessed.

At Shakespeare's time, the widespread religious disputes played a part in defining insanity and were even seen to be generating madness. Some doctors pointed out the similarities between religious zealots and outright lunatics; for example, both displayed glossolalia (speaking in tongues). Richard Cosin's 1592 pamphlet *Conspiracie, for Pretended Reformation: viz. Presbyteriall Discipline* exploited a scare after an antimonarchist plot of William Hacket (a fanatical puritan with messianic delusions) to attack the Presbyterian notion of discipline that included the ideas of resistance to bad magistrates, and deposition of kings. His pamphlet also contains discussion of his definitions of degrees of insanity that I think might be helpful in considering King Lear's mental state.

furor: fury, rage; madness. From Latin *furere* to rage. "an entire and full blindness or darkening of the understanding of the mind, whereby a man knows not at all, what he does or says.."

delirium "that weakness of conceit and consideration which we call dotage: when a man, through age or infirmity, falls to be child again in discretion, albeit he understand what is said, and can happily speak somewhat pertinently unto sundry matters"

dementia (Latin *demens*: = senseless, mad, foolish), "a passion of the mind, bereaving it of the light of understanding: Or... when a man's perceivance and understanding of all things is taken away..."

Some, like Richard Napier (1559-1634), an Anglican clergyman and also doctor, blamed the "unquiet mind" of many of his over two thousand mentally disturbed patients on the religious despair aroused by Calvinist Puritanism.

Secular beliefs.

The dominant "natural" explanation of insanity (and other health problems) was the shifting balance of the four humours, a thesis that had been espoused since classical times. Physicians devoted their energies to trying to rebalance the humours using a combination of dietary, exercise and lifestyle regimes and a plethora of herbal remedies combined with surgical procedures such as bleeding. This model led to some interesting ideas relevant to modern beliefs, such as mania and melancholy being seen as "opposites".

In 1603, a London doctor, Edward Jorden, was called to testify in a case of a 14 year old girl who other physicians believed had been bewitched by a woman called Elizabeth Jackson. In a "*A Brieve Discourse of a Disease Called the Suffocation of the Mother*" Jorden relied on the teachings of Galen to argue for a natural explanation based upon vapours released by the womb. I think it noteworthy that this natural explanation of female madness only replaced one form of prejudice with another.

It is believed Shakespeare learnt much of the medical explanations of mental health from reading Timothy Bright's popular *Treatise on Melancholie* ((1586) which distinguishes between the depression caused by physiological disorder and that caused by mental or spiritual anguish. That of the body was mainly blamed by Bright on poor diet, and could be treated by medical doctors. But for the sickness of the soul a doctor of divinity was needed.

A supplement to my notes on Mental Health in Shakespeare's time. (June 2012)

Brian Annersley (d. 1603) was a contemporary of Shakespeare, a possible model for King Lear. In 1603 Annesley, a one-time gentleman of the court of Queen Elizabeth, had become insane and was the object of a court case; two of his three daughters sought to have him committed and his estates turned over to

them. The third daughter, Cordell (a variant form of Cordelia), opposed them and wrote to King James' minister, Robert Cecil, asserting that her father's service to the late monarch deserved a better reward than the madhouse. Cecil intervened and Annesley lived his final months in the care of a family friend. He bequeathed his estates to Cordell, and the other sisters went to court again but failed to break the will.

This family was known to Shakespeare's patron and friend the Earl of Southampton; in fact, Cordell Annersley married Southampton's stepfather, William Hervey not long after her father's death. It is thus likely that the playwright—who was writing *King Lear* at the time at or shortly after Brian Annersley's death knew of this case of madness and filial loyalty.

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