

Review: Roy Porter, *Madness: A Brief History*, OUP, London, UK, 2013

Pages: 239

A Sane But Secular Attempt to Explain Madness

This is a high-quality and dense history which *tries* to tread the line between wholesale denial of ‘mental illness’ and materialistic ‘modern’ medical care, as per the DSMs et al. It stretches from ancient Greece to the modern West and catalogues the important figures and ideas.

It’s greatest weakness is the author’s atheistic philosophy which has blinded him to evil spiritual entities as the cause of illnesses. He frequently derides such cases as “superstitious” and backwards pre-Enlightenment thinking. This is quite amazing given the camp he backs openly admits they don’t even have any objective operational definitions of “mental illness”, and that both modern asylums (institutions) and pharmacological treatments are proven failures. The latter have actually *devolved* from high-quality moral-treatment based Church institutions, to soulless secularised zombie prisons.

The gnawing feeling after reading is neither the author nor anyone else can actually define “madness”, which casts doubt on the whole enterprise of writing a history!

I) Introduction (pp. 1-9)

Thomas Szasz holds that ‘mental illness’ and the ‘unconscious’ are just metaphors.

Violent cold water immersions were used on witches; if they floated they were guilty. It was also used as a ‘cure’ for madness.

An asylum is a “convenient place for inconvenient people.”

II) Gods and Demons (pp. 10-33)

Stone Age skulls have been found trephined and trepanned by flint tools; it was thought surgeries could make holes for devils to escape.

Madness was thought of as a means to bring a sinner into a crisis state, and so was prelude to a recovery.

Anglicans generally believe all demonic possession is fraudulent or self-delusion and so have done away with exorcisms.

Doctors seek to pathologise Christianity, claiming glossolalia, weeping, and convulsions are the same signs of madness.

In *Zoonomia* (1794), Erasmus Darwin blamed Wesleyans for preaching hellfire and damnation.

Pathologisation of religious madness led Enlightenment ‘free-thinkers’ to pathologise all religions.

“In time doctors replaced clergy.” [p33]

III) Madness Rationalised (pp. 34-61)

Medicine excludes the supernatural by definition.

Blood was the source of vitality; choler for good digestion; phlegm all colourless secretions acting as lubricant and coolant; black bile for melancholy. These different hues also accounted for the different races.

Winter was linked to phelgm when people got sick.

Blood-letting was also known as phlebotomy or venesection.

Melancholy sufferers were dull or stern, dejected or unreasonably torpid, mean-spirited, and desired to die.

Possession was common among Cybelines, who would castrate themselves and offer their penises to the goddess Cybel (Juno).

Maniacs would “do everything unreasonably”.

Robert Burton thought melancholy was caused by: “idleness, solitariness, and overmuch study”. He recommended music therapy.

Descartes was educated by Jesuits.

IV) Fools and Folly (pp. 62-88)

Fools were portrayed with a protruding from the forehead, thus the “stone of folly”.

Cacoethes scribendi is “writers itch”.

“If civilised society is wholly disordered, what right has it to pass judgment on the ‘insane’ ”? [p88]

V) Locking Up the Mad (pp. 89-122)

Plato: “If a man is mad, he shall not be at large in the city, but his family shall keep him in any way they can.”

Insanity was deeply shameful to a family.

St Mary of Bethlehem religious house was founded 1247 and eventually became Bethlem (“Bedlam”).

Madhouse inmates were treated as wild beasts in a cage.

Private madhouses were part of the ‘trade in lunacy’.

‘Consequential’ insanity was most common after a specific event.

Porphyria was a metabolic disorder causing chronic pain and delirium, thought to be the illness of George III.

In 1796, Quaker William Tuke established the Retreat based on moral means rather than medication. It was a great success.

Improper confinement scandals led to the 1774 Madhouses Act.

In 1890, two medical certificates were made compulsory for a committal.

In the 19thC, asylums were built in the countryside since it was believed natural surroundings had healing properties.

The French and Germans preferred work therapy for the insane.

Jeremy Bentham's asylum rules separated women, the violent from non-violent, and clean from dirty.

Public asylums had lower cure rates and extended stay durations creating zombie patients; dustbins for hopeless cases.

“The uniform tendency of all asylums is to degenerate.”

Bromide and chloral hydrate are used to pacify and sedate inmates.

“The keys of St Peter had been replaced by the keys of psychiatry.” [p122]

VI) The Rise of Psychiatry (pp. 123-155)

Insanity was now rooted in “the real, mechanical Affections of Matter and Motion”. It was said to be a nerve disorder (*vesania*).

Vincenzo Chiarugi pioneered moral therapy in Italy.

Jean-Etienne Dominique delineated kleptomania, nymphomania and pyromania.

General paresis is syphilis-caused dementia when the bacteria attack the brain.

“ ‘Medical materialism’ ... buttressed the doctor's claim that psychiatric practice should be exclusive to the medically qualified, sanctioned laboratory research and gave some credibility to the ratbag of physical treatments ... sedatives, bathing, purging, and bleeding ... the stock-in-trade of the profession.” [p143]

Prof. Wilhelm Grieslinger: “every mental disease is rooted in brain disease.” [p144]

Westphal's sign is loss of the knee-jerk reflex from neurological disease.

Paul Mobius wrote, "The Psychological Feeble-Mindedness of Women" (1900).

George Beard (1839-83) claimed neurasthenia was caused by frantic pressures of advanced civilisation.

In 1799, James Hadfield tried to assassinate George III, but his lawyer convinced the court he was insane. Thereafter, British courts could return verdicts of 'not guilty by reason of insanity' ."

The insanity defence dilemma: "who was bad?", "who was mad?"

VII) The Mad (pp. 156-182)

Former inmate John Perceval: "The staff ignored me ... [staff had] a callous belief that the insane do not suffer and that any problems they may express are bound to be 'imaginary' ". Such callous treatment would, "drive a sane man to violence".

VIII) The Century of Psychoanalysis? (pp. 183-214)

Henry Maudsley developed a psychiatric thesis grounded in Darwinism.

Alfred Adler (1870-1937) developed the idea of the inferiority complex.

"Our asylums detain, but they certainly do not cure."

"It is now accepted that most people have some degree of mental illness at some time." [p208]

IX) Conclusion (pp. 215-218)