

# Medieval & Renaissance

## Ideas of Madness

Until the start of the nineteenth century, there were two possible interpretations of how and why people were “mad”:

- 1) They had an imbalance in their “humours”: they either had too much phlegm (and were therefore too calm and unemotional), too much choler (and were therefore too ambitious and passionate), too much blood (too light-hearted and airy), or too much black bile (and were therefore too melancholy and depressed). The way you could tell this was by (literally) “taking the piss” to a “wise woman” (white witch or doctor) who would be able to diagnose what could be done. Ben Jonson wrote a number of plays about people in or out of their “humour”.
- 2) They were possessed by the Devil (or demons). The way you could tell this would be an obsession with evil things (such as sex, women, a refusal to go to Church etc). The best way to cure this would be to make sure that the afflicted person was exorcised. An example of this (from the Geneva Bible) was this story from Mark’s Gospel (chapter 5):

- 1 And they came over to the other side of the sea into the country of the Gadarenes.
- 2 And when he was come out of the ship, there met him incontinently out of the graves, a man which had an unclean spirit,
- 3 Who had his abiding among the graves, and no man could bind him, no not with chains;
- 4 Because that when he was often bound with fetters and chains, he plucked the chains asunder, and brake the fetters in pieces, neither could any man tame him.

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- 5 And always both night and day he cried in the mountains, and in the graves, and struck himself with stones.
- 6 And when he saw Jesus afar off, he ran, and worshipped him,
- 7 And cried with a loud voice, and said, What have I to do with thee, Jesus the Son of the most high God? I charge thee by God, that thou torment me not.
- 8 (For he said unto him, Come out of the man, thou unclean spirit.)
- 9 And he asked him, What is thy name? And he answered, saying, My name is Legion; for we are many.
- 10 And he prayed him instantly, that he would not send them away out of the country.
- 11 Now there was there in the mountains a great herd of swine, feeding.
- 12 And all the devils besought him, saying, Send us into the swine, that we may enter into them.
- 13 And incontinently Jesus gave them leave. Then the unclean spirits went out and entered into the swine, and the herd ran headlong from the high bank into the sea, (and there were about two thousand swine) and they were drowned in the sea.
- 14 And the swineherds fled, and told it in the city, and in the country, and they came out to see what it was that was done.
- 15 And they came to Jesus, and saw him that had been possessed with the devil, and had the legion, sit both clothed, and in his right mind, and they were afraid.

## WHAT COULD YOU DO WITH A MAD PERSON?

If a person was mad because of the imbalance of his humours, some way would be given to rebalance these. The most obvious would be by cutting him to let out blood, or bile, or phlegm, from his body. Herbs could be given to him that might rebalance his humours.

If a mad person was possessed, he would be put in a dark room, away from other people (because his mad words might infect others, or at least lead them away from God). He would probably be secured (chained up) and holy water would be poured onto him to enable the exorcism to work. He would be visited by priests and curates, who would talk to him about his soul and persuade him to renounce the devil.

If nothing could be done to cure a possessed person, he would eventually be burnt at the stake as a heretic.

As today, with the confusion between mental handicap and mental illness, anyone with special needs was very often thought of as “mad”, or at least a “fool”. Most villages would have a “village idiot” or fool, who would be used as the butt of many people’s jokes. A professional fool (jester) was something quite different: he had the authority and power to say things that other people could not, because his words were seen as ravings: as a result, he was able to say things that other people could not get away with.

## WHAT COULD BRING ON MADNESS?

Obviously, any sort of relationship with the Devil was liable to push someone over the edge, but any succumbing to temptation, such as the consumption of too much alcohol, allowing lust to take you over (tertiary syphilis can cause dementia, but only after some time) could cause one to become mad. Mad people were therefore kept away from members of the opposite sex, and from alcohol.

The most common thing to bring on (at least temporary) madness was the full moon. Mad people were often known as “lunatics”



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