

H-Net Reviews

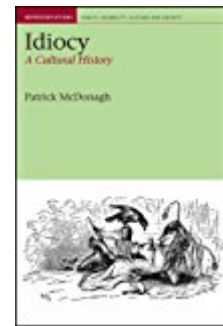
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Patrick McDonagh. *Idiocy: A Cultural History*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008. 320 pp. \$95.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84631-095-9; \$39.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-84631-096-6.

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The Pinnacle of Foolishness

Activists and scholars in disability studies have made great strides over the past decade to make visible the issues of mental disabilities through the lens of a mature disability studies. This new wave of sophisticated scholarship includes Allison Carey's 2009 *On the Margins of Citizenship: Intellectual Disability and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* and Licia Carlson's 2010 *The Faces of Intellectual Disability: Philosophical Reflections*. Tobin Siebers's 2010 *Disability Aesthetics* demonstrates the benefits of considering mental disability alongside physical disability. Patrick McDonagh's *Idiocy* is a superb historical account of intellectual disability from the perspective of disability studies. Much of the conceptual mesh of the nineteenth century underpins our collective imagination about intellectual disability even today.

McDonagh demonstrates that neither intellectual disability nor its counterpart, intelligence, is an ideologically neutral designation. He also dismantles the notion that mental disability is necessarily invisible: characteristics of mental disability are embodied in their relational constructs. Drawing on the most forward-thinking historical scholarship of intellectual disability, such as the work of Chris Goodey and Tim Stainton, this is a coherent and engaging narration of the emergence of idiocy as a socio-medical category. (Here and throughout, I use such terms as "idiot" in the context of McDonagh's work and as historical markers, not as offensive epithets.) In-

tellectual disability is both a force and a tool of analysis in this deep investigation into the representation of idiocy.

Each of the thirteen chapters, the first of which is the book's introduction, is of high quality in both content and style. A short epilogue provides a tidy summary, and the extensive bibliography is a treasure trove of primary sources and secondary material. Chapter 1 provides a succinct overview of the fool in popular imagination; here, McDonagh deftly organizes a wide range of secondary material in the literature review. Chapter 2 showcases a close reading of William Wordsworth's 1798 poem "Idiot Boy" against its literary and cultural context and alongside Robert Southey's less-familiar ballad of the same year, "The Idiot." Idiocy is a cultural reality whose components are revealed through literary analysis: "poetic decorum," McDonagh writes, "has its analogues in the world outside of books" (p. 40). To explore the social environment behind poetic convention, chapter 3 turns to the Wild Boy of Aveyron, the "feral" boy captured in 1797 and later named Victor. Reflecting a stabilization of the concept of idiocy, nineteenth-century scientists developed a formal taxonomy for intellectual disorders. Here, McDonagh highlights John Locke's concept of static idiocy and of the feral idiot as the unadorned, natural man, as well as Jean Itard's codification of these ideas. The chapter is streamlined by careful relegation of subtopics to the endnotes; twentieth-century retrospec-

tive diagnoses (e.g., was Victor autistic?) do not overwhelm the narration. The idiot son in George Crabbe's 1810 poem "The Borough" begins chapter 4, which focuses on masculinity. The thirteenth-century English legal document, the *Prerogativa Regis*, reflects assumptions about lineage; the portrayal of idiocy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries grew out of this framework of patrimonial anxiety. The infantilizing qualities of masculine idiocy manifest a striking absence of sexuality in accounts of male idiots.

Chapter 5, "Essential Women: Femininity and Idiocy," traces the concept of female sexuality and its accompanying dangers back to Aristotle, then to the sixteenth-century Spanish nobleman Juan Luis Vives, culminating in a discussion of the nineteenth-century social place of women and the representation of female idiocy. "The notion of 'idiocy,'" McDonagh writes, "exists in a complex relation with ideas of the feminine" (p. 127). The literary theme of the idiot girl parallels the madwoman in the attic, but has not received equivalent scholarly attention. Scholars of disability studies ought to take this and run. Chapter 6, on holy fools, begins with Erasmus (whose name has a typo on page 129). Sebastian Brant's *Ship of Fools* (1494) and its accompanying woodcut is discussed next to the works of Hieronymus Bosch and Pieter Bruegel the Elder. Together, these works reflect a shift in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in representation of the cause of foolish behavior from surface folly to inherent moral degeneracy. The festive fool of the medieval and early modern periods becomes a dangerous lunatic by the seventeenth century, and, by the nineteenth century, we see the moral fool and Christian idiot. Having established their conceptual precedents, chapter 7 examines holy fools and idiots in the nineteenth century, focusing on the reflection of political trends in Charles Dickens's *Little Dorritt* (1855-57). The analysis of the fool in economic terms continues in chapter 8 with a deep reading of Dickens's *Barnaby Rudge* (1840-41).

With a focus on institutionalized concern for working-class people accompanying the formal authority of paternalism, the concept of the dangerous idiot as a type of human being was brewing in the nineteenth century. Chapter 9 features the "asylum idiot" and the before-and-after report of his ostensible correction through institutionalization. The 1845 Lunacy Act incorporated the notion of generational idiocy. Descriptions of fools, modified to fit the asylum model, transformed from innocent individuals to members of a pitiable group in need of restriction and protection. Fool Houses appeared, accompanied by the notion of rehabilitation with

overtones of Christian duty. Hereditary degeneracy is examined more thoroughly in chapter 10. Sensation fiction, a response to shifting class identity, contains what McDonagh terms a "degeneracy subtext," including the horror and revulsion of embodied degeneracy. McDonagh makes an especially astute comparison between a sickening passage from Wilkie Collins's 1875 novel *The Law and the Lady*, in which the coarse, cabbage-like Ariel is cruelly and literally manipulated as a puppet, and nonfictional institutional training manuals that promoted similar, puppet-like manipulation as rehabilitation exercises (p. 252).

Chapter 11 continues the theme of degeneracy. Especially as a result of intermarriage, both idiocy and lunacy, by the mid-nineteenth century, threatened not just the family but the Anglo-Saxon race, as McDonagh outlines in the chapter's subtopic, "Degeneration Anxiety." Medical studies of idiocy and moral degeneracy conflated moral and physiological characteristics in the expanding and increasingly medicalized catalogue of idiotic behavior. The very long endnote 11 provides important background on evolutionary theory and the emergence of the "Mongoloid idiot" (pp. 286-287). Chapter 12 locates urban idiots—categorically degraded humans—in impoverished slums. Idiocy had become a heuristic device in the urban population explosion, as reflected in John Hollingshead's 1861 *Ragged London*, a voyeuristic report of alarmingly hardy pauper children. Now, by the mid- to late nineteenth century, urbanization linked degeneracy, idiocy, and criminality. Cranial measurement emerged as a way to determine the subcategory of feeble-mindedness. This standardized and measurable feeble-minded person appeared in Joseph Conrad's 1907 *The Secret Agent* as well as in his 1898 short story "The Idiots." Segregation was the institutional response to the hereditary and socially dangerous problem of feeble-mindedness. The ultimate segregation, applied eugenics, is discussed in chapter 13, with emphasis on the formal exclusion of the degenerate in the Royal Commission's 1913 Mental Deficiency Act. The short epilogue reminds us that the meaning of "idiocy," which is the fluid space between intelligence and intellectual disability, symbolizes and is shaped by its cultural and historical contexts.

McDonagh is a skillful writer, but he interrupts his own narrative flow frequently with lengthy block quotations. Already in the introductory chapter, the reader is subjected to a lengthy block quote from Michel Foucault; and a thirty-three-line passage from David Hume's commentary in chapter 2 is a hindrance, not a help. Long lines of antiquated English are annoying to the nonspe-

cialist, or at least to this nonspecialist. A sixteen-line quotation from Robert Armin, for example, which begins “Well the World so buffeted the Cinicke at his owne weapon, that he playes with her as weake fencers, that carries fleshe up and down for others to dresse,” is more irritating than illustrative (p. 144).

The title of the book is also unfortunate, as it suggests a universal, inclusive history, but this is a history of (mostly) nineteenth-century representation of idiocy in the Western world. McDonagh himself points out that the core concept of idiocy remains relatively unexamined by historians, and little is written, even though “the history of idiocy is long and rich” (p. 11). The title also fails to alert specialists in nineteenth-century literature and history to this important new work.

Overall, though, McDonagh has set a new standard in the history of intellectual disability. The book should be in every library, and available to disability activists, advocates, allies, and consumers. The book has an obvious appeal to scholars interested in disability studies and disability history, but is also valuable to scholars of literature, social and medical history, the history of education, and gender studies. McDonagh’s prose is far from breezy, but it is also far from pompous, and the book is as suitable for any persevering reader as it is for the specialist. In sum, *Idiocy* is an outstanding study of the representation of idiocy as a fluid, symbolic cultural force. McDonagh uses the best of disability studies and, in turn, contributes greatly to the field.

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