Medieval Models of Disability History

Madness in Medieval Law and Custom is an edited collection of essays by six scholars. The eight papers are framed with an introduction by the book’s editor, Wendy J. Turner, and an afterword by Irina Metzler, a medieval historian. The authors explore the phenomenon of mental disability in medieval Europe as it appeared in legal records and related primary literary sources, while refraining from shaping their interpretations about disablement around ill-fitting frameworks based on modern medical and philosophical assumptions. This well-synthesized volume has the tone of an active scholarly conversation. As is the case with most collected essays, there are problems of balance in the volume as a whole, but its strengths, especially its potential as a model for exploring disability in premodern history, outweigh its weaknesses.

The twentieth-century imposition of modern terminology and concepts about mental health onto premodern history, Turner explains in the book’s introduction, has been detrimental to our understanding of the medieval world. As a corrective, the authors of this collection approach mental disability holistically, describing symptoms of collapse in “the delicate relationship of an individual’s mind, body, and spirit” (p. 2).

Skilful editorship lends unity to this collection. The chapters are consistent in style, and the material is accessible to the non-specialist. Background literature and philological details appear in convenient footnotes, along with the original French, Greek, and Latin of translated passages, allowing the specialist to glance down the page for a fuller reading. The bibliography is divided into archival sources, printed sources, and secondary material; a general index follows.

Turner’s “Town and Country: A Comparison of the Treatment of the Mentally Disabled in Late Medieval Common Law and Chartered Boroughs” reports English society in flux. Legal commentaries such as the Flega reveal a change in attitude over the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and between urban and rural areas. During the fourteenth century, urban wills began to exclude mentally disabled people, who were perceived as being in a state of perpetual childhood.

Margaret Trenchard-Smith’s “Insanity, Exculpation and Disempowerment in Byzantine Law” is an excellent discussion of terminology from the late Roman period through tenth-century Byzantine law. Trenchard-Smith pairs legal and hagiographic texts to explain that the concept of madness and sanity was fluid: a sane person, for example, could have episodic madness. An individual’s volition and mental status served as fluctuating measurements of each other.

James R. King, in “The Mysterious Case Of the ‘Mad’
Rector of Bletchingdon: The Treatment of Mentally Ill Clergy in Late Thirteenth-Century England," investigates day-to-day realities of mental disability, fleshing out and interpreting the Prerogativa Regis with memoranda rolls, the bishop’s detailed administrative records. King challenges the general depiction, in the scholarly and popular imagination, that “mad” people in medieval society were denigrated and punished. Reminding us that no thirteenth-century English institution was designated for housing people with mental disabilities, King concludes that mentally ill clerics “were simply individuals who were incapable of performing the duties of their offices” (p. 69).

Wendy Turner’s second essay, “Silent Testimony: Emotional Displays and Lapses in Memory as Indicators of Mental Instability in Medieval English Investigations,” discusses tests and measurements of competence. Royal and administrative legal records indicate that such tests and measurements existed, and that the results determined matters of wardship and economic transactions. Long-term mental stability was measured by one’s capacity for memory; emotion, or lack thereof, and indicated the quality of one’s short-term mental stability.

Aleksandra Pfau’s “Crimes of Passion: Emotions and Madness in French Remission Letters” is a thorough reading of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century letters of supplication to the king asking for pardon from the penalties of death. The subtleties of the letters’ historical context are important: late medieval French secular law was a “patchwork of competing and cooperating systems” (p. 109) in this pre-Cartesian age. Of the sample of 38,600 letters of remission that Pfau examined, only 1 percent focused on madness. These letters provide “case studies” for the way in which madness was understood.

Kate McGrath, in “Royal Madness and the Law: The Role of Anger in Representations of Royal Authority in Eleventh- and Twelfth-Century Anglo-Norman Texts,” focuses on didactic cautionary tales about the embodiment of anger, especially the parameters of anger as a ruling device. The Good King, in these Good King/Bad King tales, strikes a balance of managed anger, avoiding both inaction and inappropriate action resulting from uncontrolled anger. Texts written by ecclesiastical historians, supplemented with vernacular texts such as the popular narrative Roman de Thèbes, express anxiety about the growth of royal authority and demonstrate the benefits of restrained rage.

Cory James Rushton’s essay, “The King’s Stupor: Dealing with Royal Paralysis in Late Medieval England," suggests three reference points—sin, humoural imbalance, and holy experience—through which to understand the mental disability of Henry VI. Upon his death, the king’s image transformed from the political to the hagiographic realm; Rushton puts this transformation in the language of disability studies when he suggests that Henry’s disability was accommodated, posthumously, by sainthood. Alchemical treatises, astrological lore, ballads, devotional images, legal documents, letters, medical texts, poems, and sermons weave an intricate tapestry of Henry VI’s status as a legendary Fisher-King, reflecting the hopes and anxieties of fifteenth-century medieval English society.

The final essay in this collection is Turner’s “A Cure for the King Means the Health of the Country: The Mental and Physical Health of Henry VI,” which complements Rushton’s essay by emphasizing the fifteenth-century concept of the king’s two bodies (the corporeal king and the spiritual king). In her third essay of the collection, Turner explains alchemy as a dual cure, both for the king and the country. The essay’s discussion of the phenomenon of miracles is especially strong.

“A Cure for the King” is well written, but it is odd to include two essays on the same figure in a collection already dominated by one author. Turner edited the volume, wrote the introduction, and contributed three essays, while no more than one piece appears by other authors. An energetic and skilled scholar cannot be criticized for the act of publishing too much per se, but perhaps some of the material could have been published elsewhere in order to balance the distribution of authorship in this volume.

In addition to the imbalanced authorship, the collection has a heavy emphasis on the Anglo-Norman world and its chronological reach is short overall. Furthermore, the source material is almost exclusively literary, peculiar for an age known for its visual communication. The only image is the book’s cover illustration, a stained glass image of Mad Matilda from the “miracle windows” of Canterbury Cathedral.

Irina Metzler offers a retrospective framework that addresses the collection’s gaps. Metzler opens and closes the afterword by underscoring the dangers of misinterpreting premodern source material, using as an example Michel Foucault’s misreading of the Ship of Fools, persistent in scholarship even though the too-literal reading of the theme has been debunked since 1982. Metzler then situates the collection in a larger historical context by suggesting other medieval realms, for example the Dutch
Middle Ages, and by discussing the ancient legal, philosophical, and scientific foundations from the early Roman Republic, the Aristotelian school, and the work of Galen. She also pulls the collection forward in time by comparing the incompetent medieval clerics with modern civil servants. Finally, Metzler notes the importance of visual source material, and points the reader to Ruth Mellinkoff’s 1993 work on visual representations of social outcasts.[1]

Overall, the collection fills a gap in the scholarship about mental disability and it provides a model for discussing mental disability as a social force, yet is oddly silent about both achievements. Disability historians will be disappointed by the collection’s lack of reference to the theoretical foundations of disability history and disability studies. Douglas Baynton’s classic “Disability: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis” is notably absent, as is Catherine Kudlick’s well-known, anthologized summary of disability’s place in historical inquiry.[2] While many of the collection’s authors caution against imposing binary and statistical categorization, there is no citation for Lennard Davis’s foundational analysis, Enforcing Normalcy (1995). Disability theory is explicitly named as a parallel to queer theory, but the obvious reference to Robert McRuer’s Crip Theory (2006) is missing.

The book’s failure to claim its place in disability history is not a reason to ignore it. The clear and approachable material will interest a wide audience, and every library should own a copy, especially since the cost of the hardcover (over $100) will be prohibitive to many people. The collection as a whole emphasizes that we must understand disability as a set of social determinations rather than as a monolithic medical reality. In this way, Madness in Medieval Law and Custom practices disability history at its best.

Notes


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