
Reviewed by Patrick McDonagh (Concordia University)

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Commissioned by Iain C. Hutchison (University of Glasgow)

Alice Equestri’s *Literature and Intellectual Disability in Early Modern England* takes on a significant task: tracking and correlating the idea of folly in Renaissance literary, theatrical, legal, and medical culture, and, further, connecting these ideas with our own notions of intellectual or developmental disability. This task is complicated by the fluidity of terms: “folly” is a polyvalent concept in the English Renaissance, and even today the parameters of “intellectual disability” continue to shift. But Equestri is equal to the task, drawing on recent research into the history of ideas of intellectual disability and on disability theory to present a compelling analysis of how the Renaissance perceived folly and represented it in her primary realms of analysis—that is, literature, law, and medicine. She is well qualified for the job, having previously published a monograph on actor and writer Robert Armin (“Armine … Thou art a foole and knaue”: The Fools of Shakespeare’s Romances [2016]), the period’s most comprehensive literary documenter of Renaissance “natural folly.”

Equestri’s work is divided into two main sections, the first on law and the second on medicine and physiognomy, plus an introductory chapter and a concluding epilogue. Her introduction, “Fools, from Popular Culture to Disability Studies,” provides us with the parameters of her research, as well as a brief literature review. As Equestri notes, much early work in the history of disability representation drew on a medical model, but this has been supplanted by social and, subsequently, cultural models of disability. She goes on to discuss three dominant forms of “literary” fools: “natural fools and gulls”; “sharper-witted fools or clowns” who achieve a balance between jesting and being mocked; and those, such as Shakespeare’s Feste from *Twelfth Night*, who are “witty jesters” (p. 15). Drawing on Tobin Siebers’s notion of complex embodiment as defined in his *Disability Theory* (2008), she argues that all three of these categories represent characters in disabling social positions.

The law section, divided into three chapters, focuses primarily on formal declarations of idiocy, which was a legal concept going as far back as the thirteenth-century *Prerogativa Regis*, well before it entered medical discourse. Idiocy can be read here as a more formalized and restrictive condition than folly: it is possible that all idiocy might be folly, but clearly all folly is not idiocy. In the first chapter of this section, “The Legal Discourse of ‘Idiocy’ on the Stage and Page,” Equestri provides a summary of the early modern legal history of “idiocy,” using it as evidence of how the
concept was understood and exploring how it was then reproduced in literature and theater. She presents examples from such diverse works as Shakespeare’s *Cymbeline*, Robert Armin’s *Two Maids of More-Clacke* (1609), and Thomas Middleton and Samuel Rowley’s *The Changeling* (ca. 1622) to mark how literary texts reproduced legal criteria, thus establishing a clear connection between literary and nonliterary understandings of idiocy and its more divergent cousin, folly. She sustains this connection throughout the work, providing a forceful argument that the representations of folly and idiocy on stage and page are clearly connected to legal understandings of these notions.

She builds on these ideas in the second and third chapters of the law section, “‘A Fool and His Money Are Soon Parted’: The Fool and Property” and “‘An You Knew My Properties Somebody Would Ha’ Me’: The Fool as Ward.” The first of these explores the complexities of property ownership if the legal owner of property was legally identified as an idiot—the concern that motivated the *Prerogativa Regis*. A legal declaration of idiocy effectively ruled that an individual was not competent to manage their estate, thus depriving the Crown of revenue, and so, to avoid this outcome, management of (and profits from) the declared idiot’s property were taken over by the Crown. Equestri uses this chapter to explore how some literary representations of idiocy can be used to illuminate the relationship of idiocy to class and power, drawing on an impressive range of examples, from plays including George Peele’s *The Old Wives’ Tale* (1583), John Marston’s *The Malcontent* (ca. 1603) and Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*, as well as historical documents, such as Richard Rooke’s 1613 examination for idiocy. The following chapter explores the implications of legal wardship for individuals formally identified as “idiots,” a concern of the Court of Chancery and, from the early 1540s, the Court of Wards. Drawing on such literary examples as Ben Jonson’s *Bartholomew Fair* (1614) and Middleton’s *Women Be-

ware Women* (1657), Equestri argues that these works identify folly with social exclusion while also noting the disproportionate power exercised by guardians.

Equestri adopts a similar approach when exploring medical theories of and responses to “idiocy” in the second section of the book, “Medicine and Physiognomy.” This section also contains three chapters, focusing on “the fool’s head,” “the fool’s face and body,” and “causes and risk factors.” In the first two of these chapters, she tracks the ways (sometimes contradictory) early modern medicine attempted to read “folly” in the psychological and physical features of the individual, drawing a connection between these theories and the ways that folly was represented on stage. The challenge is different from her previous chapters, as, while a declaration of idiocy had serious legal implications, folly and idiocy were not particularly of concern to the medical profession as they were seen not as disease but rather as part of the natural and expected range of human states. Indeed, for much of the early modern period, all of humanity was often represented as being fundamentally foolish (as evidenced in such works as Sebastian Brandt’s *Ship of Fools* [1494], Erasmus’s *The Praise of Folly* [1509], or even Armin’s *A Nest of Ninnies* [1608]). That said, there were medical/philosophical theories of how folly comes to be, what its relationship was to the “inorganic” or rational soul, and how it was connected to ideas of wit, especially concerning speed, which in this period acquired growing importance in ranking levels of cognition (hence the value placed on being “quick-witted”). Notably, folly was not expressed solely through wit but was fully visible in the nonnormative physical features of the fool’s body, discussed in the second chapter in this section. These included a broad range of characteristics, from short height to scanty beards to large, fleshy lips—all potential markers of folly (interestingly, Armin, the actor for whom many of Shakespeare’s most famous fool roles were written, was quite short, according to what evidence
can be gleaned from contemporary sources). The third chapter of this section delineates some of the theories underlining Renaissance ideas of folly, ranging from humoral theories to cranial structures to diet. Throughout, Equestri connects the medical and philosophical writings on folly with stage representations, demonstrating the familiarity of writers and their commitment to reproducing characteristics that their audiences might have recognized as signifying “folly” or “idiocy.”

Equestri’s work consolidates much disparate previous research in medical and legal understandings of folly, bringing it all together as a cohesive early modern history. This is in itself an impressive accomplishment. But her work also makes some important new contributions to our understanding of folly—both “natural” and “artificial”—in this period. It explores in much greater depth than any previous work the relationship between legal, medical, and theatrical/literary understandings of folly and idiocy. In documenting and analyzing this relationship, she draws on an astonishing range of Renaissance texts. Her argument is supported and illustrated not only through the more predictable canonical works of Shakespeare, Jonson, and Middleton but also by relatively obscure works by John Lyly (Mother Bombie [1589]), Richard Brome (The Queen and Concubine [1635]), and many others.

This range makes Equestri’s book of interest not only to historians of disability, law, and medicine but also to literary critics interested in Renaissance theater, where her observations are both new and significant. Literature and Intellectual Disability in Early Modern England is a major contribution to the understanding of ideas of folly and idiocy, their social and cultural representation in professional and literary/theatrical realms, and their place in the range of historical concepts of intellectual difference feeding into our contemporary notions of intellectual disability.
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