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## psychiatry in literature

### Epidemics: dancing manias (reassuringly rare in Great Britain)

Greg Wilkinson 

Dancing manias of medico-politico-religio-sociocultural origin broke out from the 7th to the 17th century in Europe, notably Strasbourg (1518):

'Amidst our people here is come  
The madness of the dance.  
In every town there now are some  
Who fall upon a trance.  
It drives them ever night and day,  
They scarcely stop for breath,  
Till some have dropped along the way  
And some are met by death.' (Straussburgh Chronicle of Kleinkawel, 1625)

Here, in more recent times, anonymously *The Inquirer* (*Edinburgh Medical and Surgical Journal*, 1807; **3**(12): 434–47) reports 'some convulsive diseases':

The first of these that I shall notice, is peculiar to a part of Forfarshire, and is called by the people of that district the *Leaping Ague*, and incorrectly by some medical men St Vitus's Dance. [...] Those affected with it first complain of a pain in the head, or lower part of the back, to which succeed convulsive fits, or fits of dancing, at certain periods. During the paroxysm, they have all the appearance of madness, distorting their bodies in various ways, and leaping and springing in a surprising manner, whence the disease has derived its vulgar name. Sometimes they run with astonishing velocity, and often over dangerous passes, to some place out of doors, which they have fixed on in their own minds, or, perhaps, even mentioned to those in company with them, and then drop down quite exhausted. At other times, especially when confined to the house, they climb in the most singular manner. In cottages, for example, they leap from the floor to what is called the baulks, or those beams by which the rafters are joined together, springing from one to another, with the agility of a cat, or whirling round one of them, with a motion resembling the fly of a jack. Cold bathing is found to be the most effectual remedy; but when the fit of dancing, leaping, or running comes on, nothing tends so much to abate the violence of the disease, as allowing them free scope to exercise themselves, till nature be exhausted. No mention is made of its being peculiar to any age, sex, or condition of life, although I am informed, by a gentleman from Brechin, that it is most common before puberty. In some families it seems to be hereditary; and I have heard of one, in which a horse was always kept ready saddled, to follow the young ladies belonging to it, when they were seized with a fit of running. It is said, that the clattering of tongs, or any similar noise, will bring on a fit. By some, it is considered entirely as a nervous affection, and by others, as the effect of worms. In various instances, the latter opinion has been confirmed by facts. It was first observed in the parish of Menmuir, and has prevailed occasionally in that and the neighbouring parishes, for about seventy years; but is not now nearly so frequent as it was about thirty years ago.'

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