

Book Reviews

H C Erik Midelfort, *A history of madness in sixteenth-century Germany*, Stanford University Press, 1999, pp. xvi, 438, illus., £35.00, \$55.00 (hardback 0-8047-3334-1).

At a time when historians seem all too often to have lost confidence in their craft and turned to other branches of knowledge for inspiration, Erik Midelfort has written a very *historical* book. *A history of madness in sixteenth-century Germany* brilliantly demonstrates how much an accomplished historian can achieve. While Midelfort is by no means oblivious to the insights other disciplines offer—he listens to the “engaged and emphatic ethnography” of Nancy Scheper-Hughes and heeds the words of the philosopher Ian Hacking on multiple personality disorder¹—his analysis rests on historical methods. Like Carlo Ginzburg, Midelfort fashions a history that is “really dead”, one that stresses the strangeness of the sixteenth century (without exaggerating it) and that accepts the past as unique. He, moreover, rejects Foucault’s “moral tone poem” as not “of much assistance” (pp. 7, 9), and prefers instead to do what historians are best-suited to do: exploit extant sources critically and creatively.

Midelfort prefers the word “madness” precisely because it is an anachronism and because this vague term “well serves the purposes of an empirical historian” (p. 11). While Midelfort shuns the dreadful twins of retro-diagnosis and biological reductionism, he does not fear to accept that the perspective of almost four hundred years may well cast light on the experiences of distant times. The results

are impressive. Midelfort’s discussion of madness covers a wide variety of sixteenth-century disturbances ranging from those almost uniformly judged unlucky or evil—such as the madness of sin—to those of a more ambivalent nature which sometimes enjoyed a more exalted interpretation—folly, demonic possession, and melancholia. Interpreting sin and demonic possession requires an understanding of the “deeply felt and broadly all-encompassing religious language of the major thinkers” (p. 79), in particular Luther and Paracelsus. An effulgent chapter addresses the extent to which both reformers (and many contemporaries) “viewed madness as an ultimate threat to the order and peace to which God called all true believers” (p. 138).

But the understanding, the experience, and the reality of madness in the sixteenth century did not begin and end with sin nor even with the increasing demonomania of the period. “Galenic observation”, that is, the onset of the medicalization of madness, was also crucial. None the less, the detailed case histories men like Johann Weyer and Felix Platter constructed, linked up with a groundswell of anxiety about possession. Midelfort devotes a long and learned section to the rise of the insanity defence “before it became thoroughly medicalized” (p. 183) when writers on the subject mixed medical and demonological views in asking questions about the humanity of the insane, or rather, about whether the insane were fully human.

Midelfort’s story then sprawls into the field of foolery and folly. He reviews the amazing story of a tribe of fools, the Lalen, whose foolish wisdom or wise folly became proverbial. Palace jesters, too, find their place in Midelfort’s discussion of madness, either as the impotent “natural

¹ *Saints, scholars, and schizophrenics: mental illness in rural Ireland*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1979; *Rewriting the soul: multiple personality and the sciences of memory*, Princeton University Press, 1995.

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fool” or the wily “artificial fool” like Friedrich Taubmann who served as “merry counselor” to the electors of Saxony. Midelfort’s discussion of court buffoons, like his closing chapters on pilgrims and hospital inmates, exploits little-known, or insufficiently utilized, archival and printed literature in ways that help overturn facile generalizations. ‘Pilgrims in Search of Reason’ mines miracle books to round out the picture of the mad in the sixteenth century. Although the percentage of the mad who went on pilgrimages or who were cured at healing shrines was always small (only 7 per cent of all cases reported in the Franconian miracle books), these sources expose the madness of simple men and women and how they and their families sought cures for mental disturbances.

The final sort of “madness” to which Midelfort turns is madness defined as “simple helplessness”, that is, the madness of those who found their way into hospitals. Midelfort uses the records of two reformation hospitals, one in a Catholic and one in a Protestant part of Germany, to discuss the relative medicalization of madness in the sixteenth century. Not surprisingly, Midelfort’s findings support what is now pretty much a new orthodoxy on early modern hospitals: medical treatments were attempted, conditions were not horrible, and the mad were neither mistreated nor forced to labour. They were “certainly not part of any ‘great confinement’” (p. 383).

The strength of Midelfort’s book rests to a large extent on the deep knowledge of sixteenth-century society, legal thought, and religion he brings to the subject. His earlier work on witchcraft informs his lucid treatment here, allowing him to weave witchcraft persecutions into the larger fabric of madness in the sixteenth century without naively claiming that “witches were mad”. The sweep of his inquiry, his willingness to open the boundaries of madness beyond our

contemporary understanding of it and to see the mad with sixteenth-century eyes make the book absolutely compelling and overwhelmingly persuasive. If one might quibble that not quite everything he treats—such as social impotence or contrived folly—fits so neatly within the domain of madness, or that in expanding the frontiers of madness, its definition also begins to blur, Midelfort would only reply that if we restrict madness to “a few categories that serve our political or moral purposes . . . we do it an injustice” (p. 321) and simultaneously deny the validity of sixteenth-century reality and the subtlety of sixteenth-century thought.

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David Gentilcore, *Healers and healing in early modern Italy*, Social and Cultural Values in Early Modern Europe, Manchester University Press, 1998, pp. xiii, 240, illus., £45.00 (0-7190-4199-6).

This book is conceived as a comprehensive description of medical and other healing practices, together with the institutions that shaped them, in the kingdom of Naples between about 1600 and 1800. The region, Gentilcore argues, was awash with sources of healing; these included not only the relatively well defined occupational groups of physicians, surgeons, barbers, and apothecaries, but also monastery and hospital infirmarers and nurses, midwives and itinerant sellers of nostrums, cunning men and women in city and countryside, and a variety of saints and holy people, both dead and alive. These healers formed a highly pluralistic therapeutic network, which offered three distinct, though overlapping