



**BRAVE SPIRITS THEATRE  
ARCHIVE**

DRAMATURGY: ASYLUMS  
*The Lunatic Rep: The Changeling & The Duchess of Malfi*  
2018

**Directors:** Charlene V. Smith and Casey Kaleba  
**Dramaturg:** Claire Kimball

**Artistic Director:** Charlene V. Smith  
**Resident Dramaturg:** Claire Kimball

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## EARLY MODERN FOOLS, MAD MEN, & ASYLUMS

During the early modern period, local officials were concerned with two major groups of neurodivergent behavior: those with mental disability (labeled “natural fool,” “innocent,” or “idiot”) and those exhibiting some form of mental illness or psychosis (labeled “mad,” “distracted,” “lunatic,” or “melancholic”).

### The “Natural Fool” or “Idiot”

*A person with a congenital mental disability who had displayed a lack of faculty or reasoning since birth or from a physical accident shortly thereafter.* Sometimes referred to as a “changeling” owing to folklore about children who were stolen away by fairies and replaced with deformed or mentally disabled children. It’s impossible to say the extent to which this classification would have included spectrums of autism.



From “*The Wits, or Sport upon Sport*” by Francis Kirkman (1662)

The supposed hallmarks of mental disability at that time were a vacant face, a limp physicality, and (by legal definition) an inability to answer simple questions about names, dates, number reckoning, and coinage.

← Scholars point to the Kirkman frontispiece in *The Wits* and claim that it probably depicts costuming for Middleton and Rowley’s popular Antonio character. Kirkman’s changeling wears a dunce cap, displays a limp or “despairing” physicality in his hands, and carries a child’s school primer (hornbook) attached to his wrist.

Citizens considered “fools” or “simple” were often cared for at home unless funds were unavailable. If they were poor, their care was provided by hired caretakers who were paid through dispensations from charitable infrastructures and legislation like the Poor Law. Mental disability was not a criterion for admittance to the famous Bethlem Hospital, though some early modern hospitals in other parts of Europe did create sections to accommodate both the “mad” and the “idiotic”.

## The “Lunatic” or “Mad” Person

*One who suffered from a distracted cognition, erratic behavior, or mood swings.* Unlike congenital disability, persons driven to “madness” could experience intermittent periods of lucidity or a complete return to their sanity. Doctors believed that the condition could become permanent if left to deteriorate.

A “mad” person was typically thought to appear in a state of undress (with active rending of clothes), perhaps talk to themselves, and display a temperamental or violent mood. Violence against children was particularly alarming. Their speech may have been considered abruptly nonsensical, but not deemed a congenital lack of reason.

Early modern society feared madness and melancholy because it was believed to come from many unpredictable sources: astronomical anomalies, demonic possession, excesses of emotion, unstable humours, illness, fever, etc. Monarchs and nobles were as susceptible to madness as the common laborer.



From EBBA 35517, “Tom O Bedlam”

Contemporary folktales and ballads describe “Tom O’Bedlam” characters. These beggars claimed to have been released from the famous “Bedlam” Hospital (Saint Mary of Bethlehem, later Bethlem Royal Hospital) in order to panhandle. Tom O’Bedlams were conflated with other vagrants whom society believed were faking physical or mental disabilities out of laziness.

← The stereotypical “Bedlamite” appears with little clothing, a long staff for travel, and a cow or ox-horn worn about his side. His madness was also expressed with fantastical ribbons and feathers in his hat or clothes. They were said to blow their horn at doors for alms and may have consumed drink through the horns as well.

## TREATMENT

Both mentally disabled and mentally ill citizen groups were usually cared for at home by their own families or employed caretakers. Mad persons were admitted to Bethlem Hosptial via petition (and subsequent official examination) when funds were lacking at home or behaviors had become too difficult to manage. If a would-be patient was found to be feigning or merely idiotic, they would be transferred to a workhouse, another hospital, or sent home.

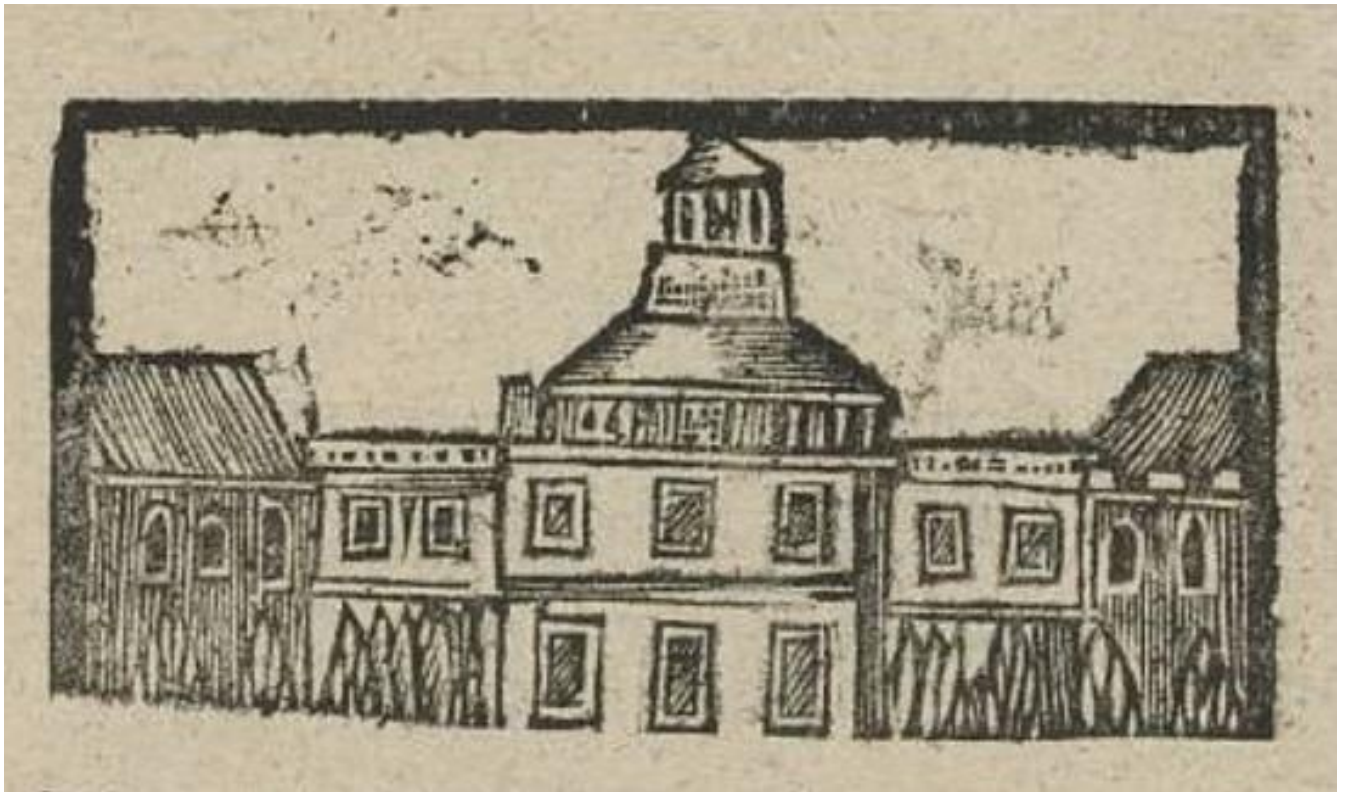


*From EBBA 33051, "Mad Mans Morice"*

eight rooms more for servants and the poor to lie in" (Neely, 171). Upon inspection, the building was often found in a state of disrepair.

By the sixteenth century, Bethlem had transformed from a hospital for the sick poor to the chief institution for the commitment of distracted citizens (though some private madhouses appear to have developed in the seventeenth century). Madness and melancholy were presumed to be treated with medicine, purging, and bloodletting, but patients were also subjected to physical brutality, neglect, and restraint. Asylum prisoners were fed a poor diet, chained, and given straw for sleep in a small cell. A 1632 report noted that Bethlem contained "a parlour, a kitchen, two larders, a long entry throughout the house, and 21 rooms wherein the poor distracted people lie, and above the stairs

ADDITIONAL IMAGERY



*Bedlam Hospital from EBBA 35464, "The Distracted Sailor"*





*An engraving from Jonathan Swift's 'A Tale of a Tub' (1710) depicts the popular impression of Bedlam*



*Hogarth's depiction of visitors at Bedlam (from A Rake's Progress, 1733)*

*Consulted Works:*

*UCSB English Broadside Ballad Archive, History of Bethlem (Andrews), Non Compos Mentis (Brydall), Chirologia (Bulwer), Being Mad in Early Modern England (Dimitrijevic), Curiosities of Literature (Disraeli), Academy of Armory (Holme), Medicine and Society in Early Modern Europe (Lindemann), Prerogativa Regis 1322 (The National Archives UK), Distracted Subjects (Neely), The Player's Passion (Roach), Rhetorics of Bodily Disease (Vaught), From Idiocy to Mental Deficiency: Historical Perspectives (Wright)*