



# Madness: A Brief History

*Roy Porter*

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Looking back on his confinement to Bethlem, Restoration playwright Nathaniel Lee declared: "They called me mad, and I called them mad, and damn them, they outvoted me." As Roy Porter shows in *Madness: A Brief History*, thinking about who qualifies as insane, what causes mental illness, and how such illness should be treated has varied wildly throughout recorded history, sometimes veering dangerously close to the arbitrariness Lee describes and often encompassing cures considerably worse than the illness itself.

Drawing upon eyewitness accounts of doctors, writers, artists, and the mad themselves, Roy Porter tells the story of our changing notions of insanity and of the treatments for mental illness that have been employed from antiquity to the present day. Beginning with 5,000-year-old skulls with tiny holes bored in them (to allow demons to escape), through conceptions of madness as an acute phase in the trial of souls, as an imbalance of "the humors," as the "divine fury" of creative genius, or as the malfunctioning of brain chemistry, Porter shows the many ways madness has been perceived and misperceived in every historical period. He takes us on a fascinating round of treatments, ranging from exorcism and therapeutic terror--including immersion in a tub of eels--to the first asylums, shock therapy, the birth of psychoanalysis, and the current use of psychotropic drugs.

Throughout, *Madness: A Brief History* offers a balanced view, showing both the humane attempts to help the insane as well as the ridiculous and often cruel misunderstanding that have bedeviled our efforts to heal the mind of its myriad afflictions.

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