

PREMODERN HEALTH, DISEASE, AND DISABILITY



Aleksandra Pfau

# Medieval Communities and the Mad

Narratives of Crime and  
Mental Illness in Late Medieval France

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## Medieval Communities and the Mad



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# Premodern Health, Disease, and Disability

*Premodern Health, Disease, and Disability* is an interdisciplinary series devoted to all topics concerning health from all parts of the globe and including all premodern time periods: Antiquity, the Middle Ages and Early Modern. The series is global, including but not limited to Europe, the Middle East, the Mediterranean, and Asia. We encourage submissions examining medical care, such as health practitioners, hospitals and infirmaries, medicines and herbal remedies, medical theories and texts, care givers and therapies. Other topics pertinent to the scope of the series include research into premodern disability studies such as injury, impairment, chronic illness, pain, and all experiences of bodily and/or mental difference. Studies of diseases and how they were perceived and treated are also of interest. Furthermore, we are looking for works on medicinal plants and gardens; ecclesiastical and legal approaches to medical issues; archaeological and scientific findings concerning premodern health; and any other studies related to health and health care prior to 1800.

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in Late Medieval France*

*Aleksandra Pfau*

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# Introduction

## Abstract

The concept of madness as a challenge to communities lies at the core of legal sources. This book considers how communal networks, ranging from the locale to the realm, responded to people who were considered mad. The madness of individuals played a role in engaging communities with legal mechanisms and proto-national identity constructs, as petitioners sought the king's mercy as an alternative to local justice. The resulting narratives about the mentally ill in late medieval France constructed madness as an inability to live according to communal rules. Although such texts defined madness through acts that threatened social bonds, those ties were reaffirmed through the medium of the remission letter. The composers of the letters presented madness as a communal concern, situating the mad within the household, where care could be provided. These mad were usually not expelled but integrated, often through pilgrimage, surveillance, or chains, into their kin and communal relationships.

**Keywords:** Madness, Insanity Defense, Pardon, Community

In August of 1350, the first Valois King of France, Philip VI, granted a pardon to one Jehan le Vignon. As his children explained, Jehan had been 'out of his senses and all good memory' for the past three years, such that he had tried to kill himself by throwing himself into a well. It was only through the 'diligence' of his wife Richeu and his four children, Jencon, Marie, Jehanne, and Ysabeau that he was not able to commit suicide. However, the Thursday after the feast of Saint James in July their attention wavered enough that Jehan was able to pick up a stick and hit his wife on the back of the head. Their children noted that she may have died partly from her 'frailty and ancient age of seventy-two years or thereabouts'. Regardless, Jehan was taken up by the local officers of justice, and his children feared that he might be put to death. Thus, they brought the case to the king's attention, requesting that he pardon their father and allow him to return to the family's care.

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Philip agreed, on condition that in future Jehan must stay ‘in the care of the above said supplicants, his children’.<sup>1</sup>

Madness has often been imagined as an isolating condition, in terms of both the nature of the condition itself and the way the mentally ill have historically been treated. The kinds of intellectual histories that have been written about insanity in the Middle Ages tend to support this view, focusing on theoretical treatises and literary treatments of the mad.<sup>2</sup> More recent work has shifted to consider the wider social significance of the disease, acknowledging that madness is a social condition and examining the ways that families and communities coped with individuals they identified as mad.<sup>3</sup> Jehan le Vignon was clearly not an isolated figure, abandoned by his family or his community. Rather, his wife and children banded together to ensure that he was unable to harm himself, and when, despite their efforts, he harmed his wife, his children fought to have him released from prison and returned to their care. This book examines Jehan le Vignon and others whose stories appear in the collection of pardons granted by the king of France. Historians have suggested that medieval concepts of social identity were defined through membership in multiple communities.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the communities examined in this book range from the vastness of Christendom as a whole and the French realm, down to local villages and particular kin groups. Rather than being marginalized, mad people became central to narratives which sought to ameliorate the damage they had done and begin the process of reconstructing their fractured communities, not by isolating or imprisoning them, but by ensuring familial or communal care. However, it is important to note that community is not always supportive, and family or communal care was not always easy or successful. Embedded within the narrative about Jehan le Vignon’s crime, we can see the fissures and failures of care in the community. In restructuring the community around the very individual whose actions threaten it, these letters reimagine and reform communal participation and belonging.

1 Archives Nationales Series JJ book 78, folio 145, recto number 262 (henceforth abbreviated as AN JJ 78 fo 145 no 262; verso folios will be indicated with a v): ‘hors de son sens et de tout bon memoir; ‘diligence’; ‘sa frelesse et ancienete de laage de soixante douze ans ou environ’; ‘en la garde des dessus dis supplians ses enfans’. Transcriptions and translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

2 See particularly Huot 2003, Fritz 1992, Laharie 1991, Neaman 1975, and Doob 1974.

3 For the most important recent work in this area, see Ternon 2018, Ternon 2015, Mellyn 2014, Trenerly 2019, and Turner 2013a.

4 Bynum 1984, pp. 82–109; Watt 1997, pp. 1–19.



## I. Language and Narrative

Following in the footsteps of scholars including Erik Midelfort and Elizabeth Mellyn, I have chosen to use madness as an overarching term in this book in an effort to access broader linguistic, social, cultural, and political meanings.<sup>5</sup> The French language in the Middle Ages had a multiplicity of terms and phrases to describe the elusive condition of mental disturbance. Indeed, as a condition that was recognized through behavioral patterns, that was described in terms of a rupture of communal expectations, and that infringed upon many social concerns, madness was peculiarly suited to linguistic exchange. The languages of the law, of medicine, of religion, and of literature each borrowed extensively from one another in efforts to depict the state of madness. Many texts use descriptive phrases, such as the French phrase *hors de son sens* ('out of their senses') rather than just one word, as we still do in modern discourse when we refer to people who are 'out of their minds' or who 'come back to their senses'. Modern terminology includes some of the same range of possibilities as medieval terminology, and the large scope of the term 'madness' allows for this expanse. 'Madness' also avoids enforcing modern anachronistic understandings that were not always present in the vast array of terms used in medieval texts to describe this condition. Insanity insists on an interpretation that pairs madness as the opposite of sanity, or health, and mental illness is equally focused on diseases of the mind. While both of these concepts existed in the Middle Ages, there were also a number of alternative ways of thinking about what madness was and what it meant, as there are now. The ideas of 'not sane', 'foolish', 'mentally ill', and 'mentally disturbed' do have their place within the greater conceptualization of madness. Therefore, I will use all these terms according to context, with 'madness' as an umbrella under which the others can be found. The term madness, rather than limiting my focus to a single lens, allows the engagement of a range of interpretive frameworks.

In using a term that allows for a large array of discourses, I am also conscious of the narrative nature of my sources. This book focuses on French letters of remission as the main source base because of the richness of the narratives contained within these texts. Pardons originated in the early fourteenth century, when the French king began to demonstrate his grace

5 Midelfort 1999, pp. 11; Mellyn 2014, p. 19. I acknowledge that this is a fraught term, as the work by disability activists and the recent 'Mad Studies' movement demonstrate. See Beresford 2019. Nevertheless, because I am writing about people who were labeled by their contemporaries, I find it a useful term of analysis.



and mercy by granting remission for crimes. The criminal, or the criminal's family members, with the help of a royal notary, told the story of the crime, focusing on the details of the event and providing background information as the narrator deemed appropriate. Remission was only available for crimes for which the punishment was death, and the pardon rhetorically erased the crime, not only on the level of government officials, who could no longer pursue the pardoned criminal for that crime, but also on the level of the community, since the letter restored the criminal to his or her 'good reputation and renown'. 'Good reputation', as Ron Akehurst has argued, was a legal category that could affect a person and his or her family's standing in civil cases, ability to make contracts, and likelihood of conviction in criminal cases.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, as Barbara Hanawalt has shown, 'good reputation' was also a social category, determined by and affecting one's standing in the community,<sup>7</sup> and threats to an individual's reputation could threaten the reputation of the entire family. Of course, despite the rhetorical claim that remission letters erased the crime, many of the acts that were pardoned in these letters could never truly be undone. Jehan le Vignon's wife could not be brought back to life, and his family could not be fully restored. While all remission letters were intended to erase the crime and to represent it as an aberration in an otherwise good lifestyle, the small fraction of letters that used the language of madness sought to remove the crime even more fully from the identity of the perpetrator, since medieval law asserted that the mad lacked intent for their actions.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, however, deploying the language of madness could be a risk for the composers of the letter, since the reading of a remission letter was a public act and admission of madness could have longer-term repercussions. As a result, the choice to craft a narrative of madness was not a common one.

Through the letter of remission, the French king was making a number of claims about his personal authority. At the same time, however, as the largest output of the French royal chancery from the 1350s, remission letters also demonstrated the ability of the French bureaucracy to continue to function through instability and conquest. Increasingly throughout the

6 Akehurst 2003.

7 Hanawalt 1998, esp. pp. 1–4.

8 Despite Guido Ruggiero's assertion that Venice in the early Renaissance was unusual in refusing to hold mad people responsible for crimes because it was ruled by bankers and merchants who were more practical (1982), this practice originates in Roman law and was commonly recognized everywhere in the Middle Ages. In general, see Walker 1985. For France, see Fritz 1992, pp. 153–164. For England, see Green 1972. For Florence, see Mellyn 2014, pp. 58–93. For Germany, see Midelfort 1999, pp. 187–196.

late-fourteenth and early-fifteenth centuries, the individual holding the French crown was unable to personally engage with the petitions of his subjects, yet the language of the remission letters obscured these truths. Through the letter, the French king was likened to God, whose powers of grace and mercy allowed him to act above the law. From the perspective of supplicants, this meant that the remission letters did not need to follow a prescribed storyline to ensure validation.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, some mutually agreed version of 'truth' was necessary, since the letter had to be read aloud by the local judge in the presence of the adverse party, and if they raised an objection the remission could be annulled. Remission letters were also expensive, and to get them ratified a petitioner had to travel to the king's council, which could be difficult, particularly for people who did not live in or around Paris. The price was officially set at 32 sous in the fourteenth century, more than a week's wages for most artisans, and each step had charges attached to it, so the final price could be much higher.<sup>10</sup> Access to such letters, then, often required assistance from family or friends. In cases of mad perpetrators, like Jehan le Vignon, remission was only possible through the intervention of his relatives, specifically his children, who asked the king to pardon their father for killing their mother. Despite the ways that Jehan le Vignon's crime tore at the very fabric of the family, his children sought a pardon, promising to care for him in their household rather than allowing him to face justice for his crime.

Since the 1980s, the 'linguistic turn' in history writing has made historians more conscious of how language shapes the writing of history in multiple and complex ways.<sup>11</sup> Historians have been reminded that their documents, as well as their own historical narratives, have been shaped by discourse, narrative, and literary conventions. Subsequently, the profession has become more critical of the ability of texts to reflect what actually happened in the past. As John Toews claims in a 1987 review essay, at the very least historians

seem ready to concede that language can no longer be construed as simply a medium, relatively or potentially transparent, for the representation or expression of a reality outside of itself and are willing to entertain seriously some form of semiological theory in which language is conceived

9 As distinct from the English law courts, where there were strict conditions for proving madness, which caused a certain amount of conformity among cases. See Green 1972, p. 680.

10 Gauvard 1991, v. I, p. 68.

11 The phrase 'linguistic turn' was first used in the title of a collection of essays in 1967; see Rorty.

of as a self-contained system of 'signs' whose meanings are determined by their relations to each other, rather than by their relation to some 'transcendental' or extralinguistic object or subject.<sup>12</sup>

This focus on semiotics was part of a movement towards interdisciplinarity, or at least towards mining other disciplines, including philosophy, literary studies, and cultural anthropology, for useful theoretical tools. For example, in 1981, Natalie Zemon Davis pointed out the increasing use of the works of anthropologists such as Mary Douglas, E. E. Evans-Pritchard, Clifford Geertz, and Victor Turner, especially among medieval and early modern historians who were seeking a way to comprehend events that had previously 'been defined by historians as irrational or superstitious, or as an arbitrary cover for real and serious social and political conflicts'. Where historians attempted to dismiss descriptions of such events as spirit possession and witchcraft accusations, anthropologists 'have such events at the center of their observation'.<sup>13</sup> Anthropological works have thus allowed historians to take certain phenomena or descriptions seriously, considering the meanings that contemporaries saw in these events.

Davis also stressed the relevance of literary theory in her 1987 book on remission letters (or pardon tales), provocatively entitled *Fiction in the Archives*. She encouraged historians to confront the particular way that their sources are informed by narrative construction. Her focus is on the 'fictional' aspects of the documents, by which she explains she 'do[es] not mean their feigned elements, but rather, using the other and broader sense of the root word *fungere*, their forming, shaping, and molding elements: the crafting of a narrative'.<sup>14</sup> This awareness of and, more significantly, valuation of narrative provides much richer analytical possibilities than the discarding of narrative elements in search of a hidden 'truth' common in historicist practice. Davis reveals the ways 'information, values, and language habits could flow across lines of class and culture', arguing that supplicants, listeners, and pardoners 'were all implicated in a common discourse about violence and its pacification'.<sup>15</sup> Her project provides a model for thinking about narratives like those addressed in this book. How were stories about madness and crime constructed, and what distinguishes them from other narratives?

12 Toews 1987, pp. 881–882.

13 Davis 1981, p. 268.

14 Davis 1987, p. 3.

15 Davis 1987, p. 112.

In the 1990s, gender historians above all took on the challenge of thinking through the implications of linguistic concerns for history as a discipline, in particular the suggestion that language ‘not only shapes experienced reality but constitutes it’.<sup>16</sup> In what has emerged as a classical formulation, Joan Scott’s 1991 essay argues that historians ‘need to attend to the historical processes that, through discourse, position subjects and produce their experiences. It is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience’.<sup>17</sup> As Gabrielle Spiegel notes in her introduction to a 2005 reprinting of Scott’s essay, however, many historians prefer ‘to see language as the place where experience is made meaningful via a creative appropriation of the conditions of daily life, rather than created’.<sup>18</sup>

Indeed, in her own work, Spiegel has grappled with the relationship between language and experience, proposing a ‘middle ground’ that attempts to mediate between acknowledging the importance of language and discourse and the historians’ desire for empirical research.<sup>19</sup> She posited in 1997 that

the power and the meaning of any given set of representations derive in large part from their social context and their relation to the social and political networks in which they are elaborated. Even if one accepts the poststructuralist argument that language constitutes the social world of meaning, it is possible to maintain that language itself acquires meaning and authority only within specific social and historical settings.<sup>20</sup>

This need to examine what Spiegel calls the ‘social logic of the text’ rests on a recognition of language as constituted as well as constitutive. It focuses attention not only on how texts are discursively inscribed but also on how they are embedded within particular social contexts. This interest in language and discourse is particularly useful for discussions of madness, in part because mad historical actors so seldom speak for themselves. In

16 Toews 1987, p. 882. Many historians have been troubled by the implications of this theory, objecting to the more radical interpretations that deny any reality in the past. See Richard Evans 1999.

17 Scott 2005, p. 203. In her critical response, Kathleen Canning contends that Scott ignores the mutually constitutive nature of experience and language. Canning posits that the key to ‘analyzing how discourses change, how subjects contest power in its discursive form, and how their desires and discontents transform or explode discursive systems is the concept of agency’. Canning 2006, p. 76.

18 Spiegel 2005, p. 200.

19 Spiegel 1997, pp. 44–56.

20 Spiegel 1997, p. 53.



facing the aftermath of a crime committed by a mad person, people came to terms with madness as a social, not just individual, phenomenon.

The impetus to consider the linguistic and narrative nature of the texts that historians use equally opens into questions about historical narratives as shaped and constructed by historians.<sup>21</sup> What role does the historian now play in relation to her documents? John Arnold, in his work on the Inquisition in southern France, responds to this question by challenging the historian's 'desire to establish whether or not we can "trust" the sources'.<sup>22</sup> He suggests that the power relationships that led to the creation of these particular documents be brought to the fore, not to deconstruct them and reveal the underlying 'truths', but rather for what these power relationships can tell us about themselves.<sup>23</sup> Cordelia Beattie, who uses legal documents to talk about the lives of women, also refuses to discard the structures that brought these documents into being. She notes that 'the petition and the answer do not allow access to unmediated voices, that the structure and language of the petition and the answer were affected by the involvement of lawyers and the nature of the court' and suggests that 'recognition of the limitations of the evidence is not to give up on historical subjects but rather a refusal to simplify their lives, which were lived within discursive systems'.<sup>24</sup> As Sarah Maza notes in her discussion of crime narratives in pre-Revolutionary France, '[s]tories give us both an individual and a collective sense of identity and purpose; they can undermine our world just as easily as they order and confirm it'.<sup>25</sup> As explored in more detail below, these efforts to complicate the relationship between historians and their sources have proven particularly fruitful in the study of mental illness in the past. My own approach to texts about madness and my efforts to form them into a historical narrative have been informed by this scholarship. In this book, a focus on discourse and language seeks to capture the process by which people identified, reacted to, and told stories about madness.

21 Hayden White considers the problem posed by the fact that the historian's own construction of historical narratives is equally embedded in language. See Hayden White 1987.

22 Arnold 2001, p. 7.

23 Rather than following in the footsteps of Emmanuel LeRoy Ladurie, in attempting to remove the Inquisitorial lens to uncover the 'direct testimony of peasants' providing 'an extraordinarily detailed and vivid picture of their everyday life' (Ladurie 1978, p. vii), Arnold 'tr[ies] to examine and understand [...] the conditions that brought about the possibility of this history'. Arnold 2001, p. 3.

24 Beattie 2006, p. 193.

25 Maza 1993, p. 17.



## II. Historiography on Madness

In the sixteen years since I first began research into this topic, there has been an increasing interest in considering the social history of madness in the Middle Ages, and several scholars have helped to broaden our view of the subject. After my initial project was completed in 2008, ground-breaking work by Wendy Turner, Elizabeth Mellyn, and Maud Ternon among others further highlighted the ways that legal sources in particular can begin to shed some light on the lived experiences of mad individuals and their communities.<sup>26</sup>

The work of these scholars, appearing in the last decade, has complicated earlier narratives about the treatment of the mad in the Middle Ages. Large-scale histories of mental illness often fell into a narrative either of the triumphalist progress or decline of modern psychiatry. In these narratives, the Middle Ages generally served as a cipher onto which scholars projected either horrific mistreatment or a golden age before the intervention of medicine. The image of the isolated mad individual in the Middle Ages emerged from this debate, particularly in Michel Foucault's *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*, published in 1961.<sup>27</sup> Foucault's discussion of the discourse of madness remains compelling, even several decades after its initial publication. Ultimately Foucault's main focus is on the development of a system of confinement as part of his larger interest in critiquing the creation of institutional control as a force of modernity. In articulating the relationships between power, knowledge, and control, Foucault is interested in destabilizing the medical model of defining madness in order to demonstrate that it is as much socially constructed as earlier models. He considers the Middle Ages as the starting point from which his history of the medicalization of madness develops, but his desire to create a coherent narrative of change figured as a rupture leads him to idealize the status of the medieval mad as involved in an open 'conversation' with the sane. As he notes in his preface,

[i]n the Middle Ages, and up until the Renaissance, the debate between man and madness was a dramatic debate that confronted man with the dark powers of the world; and the experience of madness was absorbed in images that spoke of the Fall and the End of All Things, of the Beast, of Metamorphosis, and of all the marvellous secrets of Knowledge. In

26 Turner 2010, Turner 2013a, Mellyn 2014, Ternon 2018.

27 Foucault 1961, Foucault 1972, Foucault 2006.



our time, the experience of madness is made in the calm of a knowledge which, through knowing it too much, passes it over.<sup>28</sup>

Despite his romanticism, the section of Foucault's book that deals with the Middle Ages makes a number of important points about the symbolic value of madness in medieval society, even though his application of that symbolism to real mad people falls short.

Foucault focuses particularly on Sebastian Brant's 1494 *Narrenschiff*, or *Ship of Fools*,<sup>29</sup> arguing that 'among these satirical and novelistic ships, the *Narrenschiff* alone had a genuine existence, for they really did exist, these boats that drifted from one town to another with their senseless cargo'.<sup>30</sup> He elaborates on the literary trope of these ships that 'with a crew of imaginary heroes, moral models or carefully defined social types set out on a great symbolic voyage that brought them, if not fortune, at the very least, the figure of their destiny or of their truth'.<sup>31</sup> Foucault here establishes the symbolic power of the mad as one among many figures that loomed large in the imagination of the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance. In Foucault's analysis, these literary fools represented actual mad people who, especially in Germany, were expelled from towns and set afloat together on ships or sent out on pilgrimages in large groups, becoming 'quite a common sight' on the roads and waterways of their contemporaries.<sup>32</sup>

Foucault acknowledges that some mad people were not expelled, but taken to a 'special place reserved for the detention of the mad', noting that 'only foreign madmen were expelled, and that each town only took responsibility

28 Foucault 2006, pp. xxxiii-xxxiv. The original preface does not appear in the 1972 edition or in any subsequent edition. Foucault 1961, p. iv: 'Au Moyen Âge et jusqu'à la Renaissance, le débat de l'homme avec la démence était un débat dramatique qui l'affrontait aux puissances sourdes du monde ; et l'expérience de la folie s'obnubilait alors dans des images où il était question de la Chute et de l'Accomplissement, de la Bête, de la Métamorphose, et de tous les secrets merveilleux du Savoir. À notre époque, l'expérience de la folie se fait dans le calme d'un savoir qui, de la trop connaître, l'oublie'.

29 Brant 1962.

30 Foucault 2006, p. 9. Foucault 1972, p. 19: 'Mais de tous ces vaisseaux romanesques ou satiriques, le *Narrenschiff* est le seul qui ait eu une existence réelle, car ils ont existé, ces bateaux qui d'une ville à l'autre menaient leur cargaison insensée'.

31 Foucault 2006, p. 8. Foucault 1972, p. 19: 'La mode est à la composition de ces Nefs dont l'équipage de héros imaginaires, de modèles éthiques, ou de types sociaux, s'embarque pour un grand voyage symbolique qui leur apporte sinon la fortune, du moins, la figure de leur destin ou de leur vérité'.

32 Foucault 2006, p. 9. Foucault 1972, p. 19: 'Souvent, les villes d'Europe ont dû voir aborder ces navires de fous'.

for its own citizens who had lost their wits'.<sup>33</sup> Both of these treatments of the mad combine in his depiction of the symbolic value of placing the mad in a liminal social and physical space:

This enforced navigation is both rigorous division and absolute Passage, serving to underline in real and imaginary terms the *liminal* situation of the mad in medieval society. It was a highly symbolic role, made clear by the mental geography involved, where the madman was *confined at the gates of the cities*. His exclusion was his confinement, and if he had no *prison* other than the *threshold* itself he was still detained at this place of passage.<sup>34</sup>

His image of the mad as simultaneously mentally and physically 'liminal' figures offers a compelling interpretation, suggesting a linkage between the mad person's mental state and his or her social treatment. Indeed, Foucault's ability to elucidate particularly powerful symbols and extrapolate meanings from them provides his most useful legacy. However, since the abridged version of *Histoire de la folie* was first translated into English in 1965, Foucault's work has been both criticized and praised in the Anglophone academy. Many critics argue that he does not provide sufficient evidence to support some of his claims, especially those that cover a wider geographical area.<sup>35</sup> Erik Midelfort, one of the most careful critics of Foucault's historical evidence, found only one recorded instance of an actual ship of fools.<sup>36</sup> More recent

33 Foucault 2006. Foucault 1972, p. 20: 'un lieu de détention réservé aux insensés'; 'On peut donc supposer qu'on ne chasse parmi eux que les étrangers, chaque ville acceptant de se charger seulement de ceux qui sont au nombre de ses citoyens'.

34 Italics in original. Foucault 2006, p. 11. Foucault 1972, p. 22: 'Cette navigation du fou, c'est à la fois le partage rigoureux, et l'absolu Passage. Elle ne fait, en un sens, que développer, tout au long d'une géographie mi-réelle, mi-imaginaire, la situation *liminaire* du fou à l'horizon du souci de l'homme médiéval – situation symbolique et réalisée a la fois par le privilège qui est donné au fou d'être *enfermé* aux portes de la ville: son exclusion doit l'enclorre; s'il ne peut et ne doit avoir d'autre *prison* que le *seuil* lui-même, on retient sur le lieu du passage'.

35 Midelfort 1980, pp. 247–265; Scull 1992, pp. 150–163.

36 Midelfort 1980. Foucault's defenders have cited his much longer and much more heavily-footnoted original French publication to deflect such critiques, arguing that many of the problems other scholars found in his work stem from faulty translation and an inability on their part to read French. On the question of the footnotes, Andrew Scull notes that Foucault was writing from 'intellectual exile' in Sweden, where he lacked access to primary sources and much twentieth century secondary work. Thus, Scull argues, 'Foucault's isolation from the world of facts and scholarship is evident throughout History of Madness. It is as though nearly a century of scholarly work had produced nothing of interest or value for Foucault's project. What interested him, or shielded him, was selectively mined nineteenth-century sources of dubious provenance'. See Scull

research on southern German civic records by Anne Koenig has uncovered significantly more cases, both of temporary confinement of the mad and compulsory movement. When the mad were expelled, in some cases they were sent to family and friends in other towns, but if that was not an option they were sent 'away' more broadly. There is evidence of raftsmen paid to take some 'down the river' but this was done individually, not in a group.<sup>37</sup>

What Foucault ignored in his focus on mad people who were expelled from towns is the significance of the fact that the first resort was always to send them home. Those mad people who traveled on pilgrimages were generally taken there by their families, not sent in large groups of other mad people. Indeed, while some of the literary mad were expelled from society, the literal mad were often cared for in the family home and reincorporated into their previous lives and livelihoods when they were believed to have recovered their sanity. Scholars considering madness in the Middle Ages between the 1970s and the 1990s often followed Foucault's focus on discourse, working to categorize the multiple forms of intellectual discussion about madness. In doing so, they separated the strands of theoretical knowledge, focusing on each one individually.

In 1974, Penelope Doob came out with *Nebuchadnezzar's Children*, and a year later Judith Neaman published *Suggestion of the Devil*.<sup>38</sup> As is clear from their titles, both books considered medieval religious ideas about madness as particularly significant. Doob's study focused strongly on literary texts about madness, while Neaman's concentrated on the various intellectual traditions. Clearly influenced by Foucault's linkage of leprosy and madness, Neaman argued that '[l]epers and madmen, who fell into one social and moral group, were reflections of their diseases, which were

2007. Finally, in 2006, Jonathan Murphy and Jean Khalifa translated the full version, making it more widely available to English-speaking academics. This translation is very conscious of the debate, including all Foucault's original footnotes and carefully translating particularly controversial phrases to provide a defense in translation. To cite one especially pertinent example about the Middle Ages, Foucault asserted 'Les fous alors avaient une existence facilement errante'. (1972, p. 19.) Richard Howard, in the 1965 abridged English edition, translated this as 'Madmen then led an easy wandering existence'. (Foucault 1965, p. 8.) Colin Gordon, in an essay defending Foucault published in 1992, suggested it might be better translated as 'the existence of the mad at that time could easily be a wandering one'. (Gordon 1992, p. 33.) The new translation offers another similar, but even more defensive version by removing the dangerous connotations of 'easy' or 'easily' entirely: 'An itinerant existence was often the lot of the mad'. (Foucault 2006, p. 9.) New translations notwithstanding, the statement is still a problematic one. As Midelfort notes, Foucault's itinerant mad people, traveling from town to town in ships or on the roads, do not appear 'often' in medieval records. (Midelfort 1980, p. 254.)

<sup>37</sup> Koenig 2020.

<sup>38</sup> Doob 1974, Neaman 1975.



either tests of martyrdom, purgations or punishments for sin'.<sup>39</sup> The two authors cover medieval England, with some forays into French sources, particularly Froissart's chronicle with his account of the madness of Charles VI of France. Carole Rawcliffe, in her overview of medieval English medicine, follows Doob's moral analysis of madness, asserting that 'the insane aroused particular fear and unease because (in theory, at least) their sins seemed so terrible and their punishment so extreme'.<sup>40</sup>

In the early 1990s, two French scholars, Jean-Marie Fritz and Muriel Laharie, argued that in medieval France ideas about madness were polymorphic. Fritz has analyzed medical, theological, and juridical discourses about madness, as well as literary treatments of the mad. He is heavily influenced by Foucault, positing that 'the Foucauldian approach is perfectly suited to the Middle Ages'.<sup>41</sup> The literary focus of Doob and Fritz is unsurprising, given the number of medieval literary figures who exhibit symptoms of mental disturbance, and it is certainly true that the descriptive languages about madness were similar in literary and other texts. However, Stephen Harper may be overstating the case with his contention that '[r]eal lunatics behaved like literary madmen'.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, Muriel Laharie falls into this assumption as well. She sees the treatment of the mad as part of the growth in the persecution of marginal figures in the twelfth century, describing negative attitudes towards and violence perpetrated against mad people. However, the sources that she uses to demonstrate violent acts against the mad are exclusively literary texts from twelfth-century France.<sup>43</sup> As Sylvia Huot argues, the audience is granted a double perspective on the insane hero in medieval romances: 'When the madman has a character and a personal history, his treatment can be judged as just or unjust'.<sup>44</sup> Thus, the mad figure in romance may be represented as debased and treated violently specifically because of the contrast with his previous exalted state. Much of the work on medieval French literary depictions of madness has focused on the twelfth century. One notable exception is the work of Julie Singer, whose compelling reading of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century literature focuses on the rich metaphorical language used to describe mental function and dysfunction.<sup>45</sup>

39 Neaman 1975, p. 112.

40 Rawcliffe 1995, p. 10.

41 Fritz 1992, p. 4: 'l'approche foucauldienne convient parfaitement à l'âge médiéval'.

42 Harper 2003, p. 62.

43 Laharie 1991, pp. 241–266. She is drawing on the 'persecuting society' posited by Moore 1987.

44 Huot 2003, p. 89.

45 Singer 2018.



Social histories of madness in the Middle Ages have emerged more recently, drawing on a much more extensive and earlier scholarship on the early modern period.<sup>46</sup> In many ways, the focus on the early modern period has been driven by a perceived lack of sources for social histories of madness in the Middle Ages, but recent scholars have found new ways to address that. Social historians have been heavily influenced by the sociological approach of 'labeling theory', which focuses on the importance of language as a tool of social construction. This theory stresses the role of the observer in identifying, comprehending, and describing behavior. The sociologist Erving Goffman, studying asylums in the 1960s, explained how he saw social construction at work:

Persons who become mental hospital patients vary widely in the kind and degree of illness that a psychiatrist would impute to them, and in the attributes by which laymen would describe them. But once started on the way, they are confronted by some importantly similar circumstances and respond to these in some importantly similar ways. Since those similarities do not come from mental illness, they would seem to occur in spite of it. It is thus a tribute to the power of social forces that the uniform status of mental patient can not only assure an aggregate of persons a common fate and eventually, because of this, a common character, but that this social reworking can be done upon what is perhaps the most obstinate diversity of human materials that can be brought together by society.<sup>47</sup>

Interestingly, Goffman examines the way that these social forces work through narrative. The mental patients he studied created 'an image of [their] life course – past, present, and future – which selects, abstracts,

46 Indeed, early modernists were the first to truly grapple with Foucault's arguments and complicate his narrative. See particularly the essays collected in both volumes of Bynum, Porter, and Shepherd 1985.

47 Goffman 1962, p. 129. For more on labeling theory, see Scheff 1999. Labeling theory has come under considerable criticism for its claims that insanity was solely a social construction, where behaviors were arbitrarily designated as insane by lay people, health professionals, and institutions, a view challenged by other scholars citing biological explanations for mental illness. Although no scholars deny that social construction has a role to play in designations of insanity, the discipline of sociology in particular has chosen to focus on biological explanations. Walter Gove, one particularly vocal proponent of the biological model, argues that 'For all practical purposes, the labeling explanation of mental illness is of historical interest only'. Gove 1979, p. 301. From the historian's perspective, however, the question of the extent to which mental illness is biologically caused versus the extent to which it is socially constructed through the process of labeling is ultimately irrelevant.

and distorts in such a way as to provide [them] with a view of [themselves] that [they] can usefully expound in current situations'.<sup>48</sup> However, these life narratives were consistently deconstructed by the employees of the institution, ranging from nurses to psychiatrists, who challenged the mental patient's interpretation by reasserting the 'truth'.

Historians have found Goffman's work compelling for the ways that it allows them to engage with the social construction found in their narrative sources. The prolific Roy Porter, Michael MacDonald, and Andrew Scull, among others, have studied early modern England, while Erik Midelfort's work has focused on early modern Germany.<sup>49</sup> Michael MacDonald's pioneering analysis of Richard Napier's voluminous case books, in which the physician/astrologer recorded details about his patients and their treatments, is particularly useful for thinking about how madness was understood on a social level. His observations about the crimes committed by mad people are revealing:

[t]he peculiar nature of much mad crime was that it menaced or destroyed people and property that ought to have been dear to the lunatic. Unreasonable lawbreaking imperiled one's social identity because it attacked the relationships and material objects that situated one in the village community of households and the wider social hierarchy.<sup>50</sup>

Crimes, and indeed legal questions in general, provide much of the available evidence about madness in popular culture, and the nexus between particular criminal actions and madness is significant. This pattern of perceiving the targets of mad crime as inappropriate precisely because they threaten the mad person's membership in the community holds true for medieval France just as it did for early modern England.

In some ways, considerations of the social construction of madness have influenced and in turn have been influenced by new research in disability studies. As I have argued elsewhere, the modern understanding of disability as a politically manifested social identity, like other modern identities, cannot and should not be forcibly laid on the medieval past. Nevertheless, it is fruitful and revealing to use these concepts to think, not about who people were, but about what people did, and, especially in the context of

48 Goffman 1962, p. 150.

49 Andrews and Scull 2003; MacDonald 1981; Midelfort 1994; Midelfort 1999; Porter 1987; Scull, MacKenzie, and Hervey 1996.

50 MacDonald 1981, p. 126.



disability, what they were able to do, what they were allowed to do, and what they were prevented from doing.<sup>51</sup> Mental illness has not always been categorized as a disability in current discourse or in historical accounts. For example, in the medieval section of his *History of Disability*, Henri-Jacques Stiker likens the disabled to the mentally ill, but distinguishes between the two. He sees the disabled, like the fool, as the ‘cared-for, integrated marginalized’, and traces a Foucauldian trajectory towards confinement, but he does not address the question of madness as a disability.<sup>52</sup>

In her ground-breaking study on medieval disability, Irina Metzler uses religious and medical texts as well as accounts from saints’ shrines to examine the treatment of the disabled in medieval culture. Using theories from modern disability studies, she makes a distinction between ‘impairment’, which she defines as ‘a “real”, physiological condition’ and ‘disability’, which she calls ‘a socially constructed or cultural condition’. In the end, she argues, ‘there were very few medieval disabled people’.<sup>53</sup> She suggests that they were economically liminal figures, but she also demonstrates the mechanisms that were put in place, ranging from prostheses like crutches to the cooperation of fellow-travelers, to aid the impaired in reaching their goal of accessing saints’ shrines.<sup>54</sup> In her first book, she specifically chose not to discuss mental illness or to address legal aspects of disability, not because she does not see mental illness as part of the larger category, but because she feels that, like leprosy, madness had its own layers of symbolic meaning in the Middle Ages, distinct from other impairments.<sup>55</sup> In her more recent work, Metzler turns her attention to the concept of intellectual disability, arguing that this needs to be studied separately from other kinds of mental incapacity. Her study of normative texts in natural philosophy, theology, and law clearly demonstrates that medieval intellectuals distinguished between mental incapacity that was present from birth and that which was acquired later in life. Nevertheless, they still discussed it in the context of considering mental incapacity in general, and in practice the question of when an individual began to experience it was not always of primary importance.<sup>56</sup> Other

51 Pfau 2010b, p. 96.

52 See Stiker 1999. In current discourse, there is still an uneasy relationship between the physically and the mentally impaired, as addressed by Peter Beresford in an article published in *Disability and Society*, highlighting in particular the need for inclusion. See Beresford 2000.

53 Metzler 2006, p. 6.

54 See Metzler 2006. For other work on disability, see Neugebauer 1996; Stiker 1999; and Turner 2013a.

55 Metzler 2006, p. 6.

56 Metzler 2016.



scholars, including Wendy Turner, working on medieval England where royal wardship cases provide extensive documentation about how madness was defined and how mad people were cared for, have argued that madness more generally can be considered as a disability in this period.<sup>57</sup> This category of disability also leads to questions of social perception and participation. How was madness defined and determined? In what circumstances were people considered mad allowed to interact with others, and in what ways were they socially limited by their perceived illness?

Recent work has demonstrated an increased focus on legal questions about madness. Brendan Parlopiano has provided a thorough study of understandings and treatment of madness in Roman and Canon law. By looking at legal commentary, Parlopiano demonstrates the complexity of medieval ideas about the insanity defense, establishing that '[b]y the fourteenth century then, canonists and civilians alike endorsed the unreserved principle that an insane person, properly proven, could not be held responsible for his or her actions'.<sup>58</sup> Ultimately, Parlopiano, embracing insights from scholars who have focused on evidence of legal practice, brings those studies back to his own analysis of legal theory. He argues that the insane were not expelled from but integrated within society, not only in practice, but also in theory, where 'integration within acceptable limits suffused the concept of insanity; it was part of reflection on the law as well as its practice'.<sup>59</sup> In making this argument, Parlopiano is drawing upon recent work by scholars who have shifted focus from normative texts to legal cases in order to allow access to more nuanced descriptions of madness and its effects on family and community. This work has widened the historical lens beyond the individual to the wider community.

Wendy Turner's wide-ranging work has focused primarily on questions of custody for the mentally incapacitated in England, where from the mid-thirteenth century they became wards of the crown. This created a need for a royal infrastructure that could establish mental incompetence, and evidence of these legal cases survive in the English court rolls. These rich resources provide fascinating evidence of the ways that madness was defined and indeed what was considered necessary mental capacity for functioning in medieval society.<sup>60</sup> Turner also considers a number of legal cases involving crimes committed by people who were, in her terminology, mentally incapacitated.

57 Neugebauer 1996; Turner 2013a.

58 Parlopiano 2013, p. 230.

59 Parlopiano 2013, p. 341.

60 Turner 2013a.



In a larger study of the use of witness testimony in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century French law, Susan Alice McDonough includes a detailed analysis of the case of a woman held captive by her neighbors who argued that they were protecting her because of her insanity.<sup>61</sup> As McDonough notes, the case provides access to a moment of culture clash, where she can see ‘two discourses that overlap and yet run in different directions: first, a legal discourse focused on punishing transgressors for laws abridged and with a defined idea of expertise, and second, a vernacular discourse confident in its pragmatic definition of madness with a focus on neighborhood safety, whether or not it met the legal standard’.<sup>62</sup> This case-study approach can be particularly fruitful, as demonstrated by Sara Tilghman Nalle’s microhistory of Bartolomé Sánchez, whose Inquisition trial took place between 1553 and 1560 in Cuenca, Spain. As she demonstrates through a careful reading of the record, the Inquisitors struggled to make sense of Sánchez’s visions and his claims about his messianic identity. Ultimately, they chose to label him as mentally ill, using the Galenic theory that Nalle notes was experiencing a revival at the time.<sup>63</sup> Both McDonough and Nalle approach their sources with sensitivity, recognizing the ways that legal sources are shaped by the interactions between witnesses, the accused, and representatives of the legal system, and how these interactions can simultaneously reveal and obscure the experiences of individuals and families dealing with the mad.

Elizabeth Mellyn has also been interested in the ways that kin and communities responded to madness and how those responses leave echoes in the legal system. In her study of Florentine judicial records, she works to reveal ‘what families, communities, and civic authorities *did* to address the disorder or, in its worst manifestations, the chaos that [madness] visited on their households or unleashed in their streets’.<sup>64</sup> She uncovers the ways that families and communities worked with and through civic authorities to seek resolutions to the problems posed by the mad in both civil and criminal cases. In Florence in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries that meant that the mad individual was often granted a guardian and sometimes placed in prison. As she notes, these courts became sites ‘of social experimentation’ where petitioners and officials sought solutions to familial struggles while making space in which ‘predators’ could ‘exploit the vulnerable for their own gain’ at the same time.<sup>65</sup>

61 McDonough 2013, pp. 97–121.

62 McDonough 2013, p. 98.

63 Nalle 2001, especially chapter 8.

64 Mellyn 2014, p. 1. Emphasis in the original.

65 Mellyn 2014, p. 5.



Maud Ternon has recently undertaken a similar project for French legal sources. Her work on guardianship cases has shown the ways that French families, like the Florentines studied by Mellyn and the English studied by Turner, used the legal system to control the actions of individuals who were perceived as threatening the patrimony.<sup>66</sup> Through the examination of guardianship cases, Ternon examines the judicial mechanisms whereby decisions limiting an individual's legal capacity to act were put into execution and made public knowledge. In the fourteenth century she finds an increase in recourse to the king's justice in cases of guardianship, driven not by any royal legislation (as we see in England), but rather by demand from the litigants themselves.

All of these scholars have used legal sources to provide an important corrective to the ways that medieval madness had been studied. In each case, criminal records provide a small but significant addition to a larger study of madness and the law. As a result, these works leave space for a deeper consideration of the links between madness and crime, and particularly the ways that individuals could both deploy a language of madness to help comprehend particular criminal acts and seek to ameliorate the damage done to the wider community by those crimes.

### III. Structure of the Book

This book seeks to build on the work on legal texts begun by other scholars, by narrowing its focus on the ways that specific narratives about madness and crime reveal the struggles of individuals faced with communal crises. The goal of this book is not to provide a comprehensive consideration of the ways that the mad and their communities interacted with the legal system, on the model of Turner, Mellyn, and Ternon. Rather, it has a more limited and targeted goal of uncovering the understanding and use of madness in a particular source base, the *lettres de remission* ('letters of remission'). As we shall see, these narratives were carefully constructed through a collaborative process between petitioners and royal notaries, and they allow for an in-depth case study of the ways that madness could function as a mechanism for attempting to resolve violent community ruptures.

The texts considered in this book have pointed to a more fluid categorization process in dealing with individual cases than medieval discourses imply. The notaries who were responsible for recording the stories of the

66 Ternon 2018; Ternon 2015.

mad did not force a case to fit into a specific framework, but instead allowed the behavior to be explained with multiple possible reference points. These individuals could be simultaneously described as acting 'like' or 'as though' they were out of their *bonne sens* ('good sense') or *bonne memoire* ('good memory'), frenetic or melancholic, or even possessed. By approaching madness within a particular source base with specific social ramifications, my book calls into question the neat boundaries created by intellectual historians. In practice, the definition of and the need to cope with the mad caused medieval people to embrace a large number of potentially conflicting frameworks in order to understand them and arrive at pragmatic solutions. People whose behavior did not fit into expected patterns, often through violent or excessive manifestations, could be considered mad, but that was not the only possible interpretation of their behavior. On the level of theologians and physicians, such concepts as melancholy, frenzy, possession, witchcraft, and folly were mutually exclusive. However, when faced with unusual, inexplicable behavior, medieval people often used many combinations of these terms to try to explain the problem. Madness as a category, much like today, could cover anything from making a foolish decision to a frenetic fury leading to murder.

Historical records showing how people identified madness and sought to understand and respond to it particularly lend themselves to considering social construction. The texts used for this book describe social interactions and the ways they were interpreted by participants and observers. These interactions are necessarily mediated, and may tell us very little about the 'reality' of the events and the conditions depicted. Nevertheless, the texts provide a great deal of information about how certain behaviors could lead communities to identify individuals as mad, who was involved in providing that identification, what kinds of and how many 'proofs' were expected in order to confirm that identification, and what mechanisms were available for treating or coping with a person who had been identified as mad. Ultimately, the language of madness provided a space through which ruptured communities could be, at least on the surface, repaired.

Between 1364 and 1498, the king's chancery filled one hundred and thirty-four registers, containing 52,622 acts, of which 38,860 are letters of remission, or seventy-four percent of the total.<sup>67</sup> From this large base, I selected a sampling of thirty-five registers to search, around a quarter of

67 These numbers are my own calculations. They differ slightly from those in the study by Michel François. He found 52,698 total acts and 38,655 remission letters. The difference is minimal, and may be due to some typographical errors in his article, most notably when he

the total, containing 13,671 acts, 9,852 of which are remission letters. In addition, I gleaned a few other letters from the regional indices and editions available.<sup>68</sup> My sampling garnered one hundred fifty-five letters that mention madness, comprising one percent of the total letters read. These letters are scattered throughout the registers, not clustered around particular dates, suggesting that mental illness was not a common trope in the genre but a relatively unusual manifestation for the royal notaries who recorded and helped to compose these letters.

There were many ways to write a letter of remission in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. There was no need to prove a lack of guilt in remission letters, although many did strive to do so, and it was certainly not necessary to invent circumstances that would exculpate the accused. Even if an attempt was made to provide extenuating circumstances for the crime, generally the letters were focused on the bad reputation of the victim or the crime was explained as an accident. The invocation of madness was not necessary and, in some cases, could lead to further difficulties, since some letters included a caveat requiring the person to be kept under guard as a condition for pardon.<sup>69</sup> Indeed, claims of mental disturbance appear in the archives rarely, but consistently, over the one hundred fifty year period under examination here. On average, letters about madness appear in one percent of the total remission letters in a book, and in the books that were fully examined they never exceeded three percent. On the other hand, only two of the thirty-five books searched yielded no references to mental illness. Thus, the choice to mention madness appears to have been a conscious one, and there is little likelihood that the notaries developed a standard form for writing about it, the way they appear to have for writing about tavern brawls. Instead, the choice to explain a crime in terms of mental disturbance was a difficult and potentially damaging one.

Chapter One delves into the complexities of language about madness through an examination of the intellectual context within which the royal notaries were working. Legal discourse about madness engaged with questions of responsibility, governance, culpability, and punishment. Legal texts conceived of mental illness as an inability to comprehend, and therefore a propensity to infringe upon, the rules governing social and legal interactions.

lists AN JJ 204 as containing 116 total acts, of which 120 are remission letters. In that register I found there were in fact 136 total acts. See François 1942, 317–324.

68 Chevalier 1993; Dossat, LeMason, and Wolff 1983; Guérin 1909; Gut 2000; Le Cacheux 1907–1908; Petit-Dutaillis 1908; Samaran 1966.

69 For example, at the end of AN JJ 173 fo 33v no 63 (in 1425).

The threat to order that mad people represented was therefore twofold: they could not be trusted to care for themselves or their own property, and they might not respect other people's lives or properties. Because the mad did not understand what they did, they were not held responsible for any contracts into which they entered. However, law codes reveal an uncertainty about mad criminals. Although all the legal texts agreed that the mad should not be punished for crimes, the explanations for their immunity differed, often within a single text. This ambiguity may have contributed to a need for royal intervention into such cases, which manifested in the form of the king's remission for crime. The royal notaries were not solely influenced by legal terminology and concepts, however. The language they used to describe madness pulled from a wide variety of discourses in order to present a fuller understanding of the meaning of mental incapacity.

Chapter Two examines the narratives in remission letters to consider how the family advocated for the mad person by constructing stories about the crime, but also about the person's entire life. The evidence provided for mental illness earlier in the person's life was often idiosyncratic, and sometimes the narratives tried to provide logical linkages between the earlier behavior and the ultimate crime of the mad person. These individual narratives reveal a wide spectrum of beliefs about what caused madness and what kinds of behaviors and criminal acts were coded as mad. Although each narrative was distinct, a clear pattern emerges whereby the actions of the individual identified as mad disrupt familial and communal bonds.

Chapter Three discusses the evidence in these letters for community and family actions, examining the networks available to help or hinder the mad. As noted in Chapter Two, the crimes of the mentally ill most often targeted their kin and communal ties, rupturing the identity of the criminal. Through the medium of remission letters, these ties were reformed, and connections were reconstructed. The family and the community simultaneously wished to aid the mad and feared the possible consequences of insanity. The mentally ill were sometimes taken to saints' shrines to seek cures, but often they were kept in chains or otherwise guarded. The remission letters also often sought to tell the story from the perspective of the criminal, thereby encouraging the family members and the notary composing the letter to attempt to rationalize the insanity, creating an alternative understanding of reality through which the mad person's crime was comprehensible.

As Jehan le Vignon's case suggests, madness was generally determined through acts that were identified by other people, and generally disrupted expectations of kin and communal rights and responsibilities. The disease was not marked on the body, and the mad did not make up minority



communities within the larger whole. Insanity could appear at any point during an individual's lifespan, and could happen to any person. Indeed, in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries it affected the French king himself. Madness could be cyclical, as people who were mad for a time could suddenly become sane and vice versa. Yet, rather than being expelled, the mentally ill were generally reincorporated into these networks they had ruptured. During periods of sanity, most people were allowed to resume their normal lives and engage in their usual activities and duties. The very instability of the mad identity and the investment of the community make these narratives about madness particularly rich and compelling. Despite the ways in which madness was imagined in terms of interiority and individuality, in the end all these discussions returned to the implications of madness: how the singular mad person affected and was affected by the larger community.

Through a close examination of these sources we can begin to unpack the complexity of the individual stories told. Though we can never truly access lived experiences, in these carefully constructed narratives about the actions of people labeled as mad, we can get a glimpse of the efforts and struggles of families and communities both to understand and to cope with the repercussions of these actions. The positive note of familial and communal solidarity in rallying around the mad individual is often belied within the main narrative that reveals the difficulties of dealing with mad family members. In this way, the narrative structure of remission letters about the mad are similar to fairytale structures as elucidated by Marina Warner. Critics of fairytales often suggest that they create an unrealistic view of marriage as a perfect state, but Warner argues that the structure of the 'happily ever after' conclusion in a wedding 'masks the fact that many stories picture the conditions of marriage during the course of their telling' and not in positive terms. Instead the 'glib promise of [fairytales'] traditional ending' is set against the background of 'the knowledge of misery within marriage that the preceding story reveals in its every line'.<sup>70</sup> Similarly, remission letters imagine the reconstruction of a community by reintegrating the very person who had ruptured it in the first place. However, within the narrative we can see the cracks of that community, the pressures put on individuals to fulfill the expectations of others, the ways that families struggled to provide household care, and the consequences of failure on multiple levels. The promise of the narrative, that the friends and family of the mad individual will care for him or her in future, is undermined by the

70 Warner 1994, pp. 217–219.



story that has already been told, just as the fairytale promise of 'happily ever after' rests on a blithe dismissal of the rest of the tale. In telling their story publicly to their neighbors, remission seekers invoked that same power of words to reframe and reconfigure their hopes for the future, denying their knowledge of the more likely outcome based on the past. Despite the clear evidence of the struggles and challenges of coping with mad people in the community, these remission seekers still planned to continue their efforts.

