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Aleksandra Pfau, *Medieval Communities and the Mad: Narratives of Crime and Mental Illness in Late Medieval France*. Premodern Health, Disease, and Disability. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021. 202 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, and index. €117.00 (hb). ISBN 9789462983359; €0.00 (pdf). ISBN 9789048533329.

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Aleksandra Pfau's new book, *Medieval Communities and the Mad: Narratives of Crime and Mental Illness in Late Medieval France*, offers one of the most recent studies of medieval mental illness. It draws from a rich, highly illuminating corpus of legal sources: remission letters sent to the French king asking for mercy. As a concept, or as a phenomenon, madness played a central role in decisions made within the French legal system. Mental illness was most visible in an afflicted person's inability to live and, importantly, to act according to contemporary social norms and communal rules; their inability to do so could result in the unwitting commission of a crime. Pfau focuses on the various ways in which these remission letters demonstrate the challenges individuals and communities faced in negotiating madness within the legal system.

Pfau situates her work in the burgeoning field of medieval madness and disability studies. Much has been written about the vocabulary of medieval disabilities or infirmities, and a central question for many studies has been what we mean exactly when we talk about "disability" or "illness," whether physical or mental. Pfau uses "madness" as an overarching term to describe mental states that contemporaries interpreted as disturbed or non-normative. The term also enables her to avoid diagnoses and categories that would be anachronistic and not necessarily recognised by those who wrote the remission letters under study. As Pfau points out, the letters cannot reveal any actual lived experience of the "mad"; nevertheless, she argues that a careful analysis of these texts can give the modern reader a "glimpse of the efforts and struggles of families and communities both to understand and to cope with the repercussions of these actions [i.e., crimes committed by the mad]" (p. 31). In Pfau's analysis, those considered mad emerge not as marginal members of society, but rather as central characters of communal concern and negotiation.

The book opens with a powerful introduction, in which Pfau both lays out the goals of her study and carefully delineates the theoretical landscape in which it sits. She structures the rest of the book around three main chapters. The first focuses on the language of madness in the remission letters and what it reveals about the communities that produced the letters and their attitudes towards illnesses of the mind. Here, the role of the royal notaries who penned the letters plays a significant role, and Pfau shows how the specific language they used both resulted from their

learned status and derived from various contemporary discourses concerning madness. The second chapter analyses madness as a communal threat, focusing particularly on the different types of crimes that the mad committed against their family members and their communities. Pfau pays special attention to the narrative structure of the letters, which attempt to paint a favourable picture of the person guilty of crime, identifying instances where the family members who sent the letters revealed various details about their lives. The third main chapter explores the ways in which the mad were reintegrated into their communities following their crimes, and how the process of reintegration helped to repair the damage they had caused to communal cohesion.

Pfau's analysis raises several interesting points about medieval communal life and the role of madness/mental disability in it. One concerns the way narrative structures, or cultural scripts, shaped and interpreted lived experience. While it is naturally impossible to reach the lived experience of the mad person or their family, Pfau convincingly shows how careful dissection of the narrative techniques used in the letters reveals the importance of madness as a state that was defined and negotiated in communal settings. In the letters composed on behalf of mad people, it was crucial to show that they indeed were mad and therefore not responsible for their actions. From these descriptions we receive a vivid picture of what was thought to cause madness in the first place, as well as how mad behaviour was justified or at least understood. What I found particularly interesting was the discussion of how others viewed mad people's sense of reality and what effect that perception had on the way their crimes were explained. Pfau clearly shows how contemporaries were baffled by the experiences of the mad, and yet how attempting to understand and explain it was a critical part of the communal process of negotiating madness. As the author demonstrates, by presenting the actions of the mad as somewhat comprehensible, those arranging for the remission letters often pointed to mundane troubles as the source or cause of madness.

The book also touches upon emotions, particularly in the chapter that discusses the reintegration of the mad into their communities. Within medieval studies, the history of emotions has been a recurring focus in recent years, particularly in studies of medieval religion and lay devotion, but the theme also arises in the context of crime and justice. Although emotions are not the primary focus of Pfau's work, her analysis suggests their importance for the experience and cultural script of madness. In her discussion of a case concerning a woman named Marguerite Bouchart, for example, Pfau pointedly remarks that "the discourse of madness...provided a space within which Marguerite could act upon her emotions, of sorrow and frustration, in a violent way" (p. 159). On one hand Pfau's analysis demonstrates how central the interpretations of emotions were for communal life and its regulation, while on the other, it shows that the ways in which emotions were acted out could delineate a person's mental health. Pfau's analysis, then, nicely ties mental illness, emotions, and communal life together, while also demonstrating the significance of emotions, and their overt demonstration, to the French legal system.

Family, and particularly the roles and functions within a family, is also an underlying theme in this book. A significant proportion of the crimes that Pfau analyses were committed against family members. As a result, crises and conflicts within families highlight moments in which madness or emotional turmoil figured. Towards the end of chapter three, Pfau includes a very intriguing discussion of gender roles and family dynamics in a case in which a man killed his wife in a moment of madness after contemplating suicide. The explanation for this act, as described in the remission letter, was that the family was going to starve because of a food crisis caused by

plague. Although not discussed in any detail in the text, such extreme reactions to a failure to fulfil one's societal roles are important in the context of disability history, one of the research traditions in which Pfau situates her study. One definition for pre-modern and early modern "disability" has been an inability to fulfil one's social role; regaining "health" meant regaining this ability.[1] In this light, a moment of madness leading to a crime committed against one's family members could be seen as an ultimate consequence or symptom of disability. Obviously, however, the inability to support a family or to take care of other duties were not, in these sources, usually caused by an infirmity.

Another important point from a disability history perspective is the reintegration of the mad. Pfau explains that the remission letters offer an example of such reintegration and reconstruction of the communal ties ruptured by the mad: "[T]he letter composers sought to place mad people at the centre of communal responsibility and concern" (p. 167). As such, Pfau's study serves as an illuminating analysis of medieval attitudes towards madness: medieval people sought to reintegrate rather than exile and to include rather than marginalise, at least when the mad person in question belonged to one's social sphere. Even an extreme failure to act according to one's prescribed social role or to social norms did not necessarily constitute a reason for marginalisation; rather, the community's priority was to secure and guard cohesion.

Medieval Communities and the Mad is a well-written and captivating work. The author's profound expertise is evident throughout. At times, the theories and research, so well presented in the introduction, could have been more elaborately explored or integrated into the actual analysis, or at least in the footnotes. In its current form, however, the text is concise and therefore accessible to an audience beyond experts in medieval legal history or disability/ madness studies. The book also opens up several possibilities for new analyses and discussions about madness and medieval communities, leaving the reader curious to learn more.

NOTE

[1] See e.g., David Gentilcore, *Healers and Healing in Early Modern Italy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), pp. 186-187.

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