

Article

The staff of madness: The visualization of insanity and the othering of the insane

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journals.sagepub.com/home/hpy**Alvise Sforza Tarabochia**

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Abstract

In this article I trace a history of the most ubiquitous visual symbol of madness: the staff. First, I argue that the staff, in its variants (such as the pinwheel) and with its attachments (such as an inflated bladder), represents madness as air. It thus represents madness as an invisible entity that must be made visible. Secondly, I claim that the staff – being iconic of other ‘unwanted’ categories such as vagabonds – represents the insane as outsiders. Also in this case, the staff serves the purpose of making madness visible. Through this interpretation I show that the urge to make madness visible outlives icons of insanity such as the staff, making it a constant presence in popular culture and medical practice.

Keywords

Air, iconography, madness, otherness, vagrancy, visibility

Introduction

‘If sanity and insanity exist, how shall we know them?’ Rosenhan’s (1973: 250) question has troubled the long history of the discourse of madness in Europe (and beyond), and the answer has been sought primarily in the visual field. Why? Perhaps because, by and large, madness is invisible and therefore, in order to understand it, we try first and foremost to make it visible. As Padel (1992: 14) notes, ‘our innards in themselves are hard to see’, and to facilitate vision, across history, ‘we [have tried] art: an art of understanding what we do not know’.

The first claim of this article is that the *topos* of visibility itself (and, simultaneously, of the invisibility of madness) is often openly thematized in representations of insanity. That is to say, madness is depicted as an invisible and ephemeral entity that has to be brought to visibility. For this reason, I argue, madness is often represented in a close relationship with the invisible element par excellence: air. Foregrounding the centrality of the *topos* of visibility in visual depictions of madness is crucial to understanding what I maintain is a parallel process in the representation of insanity: the ‘othering’ of the insane. Because of the need to make madness visible, which is

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explicitly thematized when madness is depicted as air, the insane have often been represented similarly to various ‘outsiders’ – such as vagabonds, wild men and witches – whose visual characteristics might be more readily recognizable. According to Gilman (2014: 2), ‘the insane are branded as outsiders through their visibility’. This suggests that the insane are represented as visibly different first and this is the reason why they are recognized as outsiders. The second claim of this article is, to a certain extent, the inverse of Gilman’s. To make madness visible, the insane have been depicted by employing iconographic characteristics associated with other ‘unwanted’ categories of people. The insane are thus branded as outsiders, I maintain, because of the underlying urge to make madness visible, not the other way around. Finally, I will also show that the *topos* of the invisibility of madness and the othering of the insane have a bearing on the contemporary depiction of mental disorders – in general parlance and the use of idiomatic expressions, and also in psychiatry.

I demonstrate my claims by tracing a history of the depiction of madness as air and its relationship with the visual othering of the insane. My approach is iconographic rather than grounded in art history, inasmuch as I privilege the content of representations as opposed to their form. This enables me to consider a wide array of primary sources. I do not limit my analysis to canonical visual arts. Rather, I consider visual culture broadly understood, including for instance idiomatic expressions and textual descriptions of the visual appearance of insanity. As Kromm (2010: 5) has it, ‘the fact that these objects [and experiences] are on the margins of traditional art production makes them well-suited to studying the function of images and to probing the conceptual processes that informed them’. This article is thus a history of visual culture or a cultural history of the visualization of madness. To this extent I further subscribe to Kromm’s take on visual studies, in that I do not believe that visual culture ‘is a unique aspect of our contemporary era and intimately related to the proliferation of visual technologies’. On the contrary, with Kromm (p. 5), I maintain that visual culture has a ‘significant historical dimension in relation to visual preferences and developments’. Ultimately, such an analysis enables us to better comprehend how our contemporary understanding of mental disorders not only has a long history, but is also still very dependent upon their visual depiction.

My analysis covers a broad span of time, ranging from ancient Greek medicine to the present. It does, however, pivot around one element in particular: the staff of madness – a polysemic prop that is omnipresent in medieval and early modern representations of fools and madmen. I begin my analysis by introducing the staff of madness in the next section. I consider medieval illuminations (c. the twelfth to fifteenth centuries) of *insipientes* (fools) and variants and evolutions of the staff, approximately up to the seventeenth century. Following this, I advance my interpretation of these prominent features of the iconography of madness. I argue, on the one hand, that the staff displays madness as air (e.g. as an inflated bladder or a pinwheel operated by wind) and thus visually represents the invisibility of madness. On the other, I maintain that the insane are depicted as outsiders – with whom they share the staff more than any other iconographic element, to make them visible. Prior to concluding, I show that the triangulation between madness, air and otherness/outsideness recurs in iconography and even in medicine in modern and contemporary eras.

According to Cross (2010: 2), ‘the meaning of madness is mediated in and through cultural forms that construct its appearance such that we know that this is what madness “looks like”’. What does madness ‘look like’ and what has it looked like over the course of history? In this article I conclude that the difficulty (if not impossibility) of defining what madness looks like is openly thematized in depictions of insanity, by representing madness as air. At the same time, to sidestep this difficulty, the insane are depicted by means of iconographic characteristics of other outsiders. The triangulation madness–invisibility–otherness underpins the history of the depiction of insanity, but also significantly informs our contemporary understanding of mental disorders.

The staff of madness

Here I present the most recurring prop in the iconography of the insane: the staff of madness. This can be invariably seen in depictions of the *insipiens* (the fool) in medieval illuminations. First, I present the main recurrent features of the depiction of *insipientes* (see below). I then discuss the possible origins of the staff of madness and its different iterations (jester's *marotte* and wild man stick). I continue by analysing a prevalent attachment of the staff (an inflated bladder) and conclude with two evolutions of the staff: the pinwheel and the witches' broom.

Dixit insipiens

During the Middle Ages, the most recurring depiction of the insane, in particular of the fool, can be found in the initial D of Psalm 52 (53 in CEI 2008 numbering): '*Dixit insipiens in corde suo: non est deus*' [The fool says in his heart: 'There is no God.'] (Figure 1). The iconography of the *insipiens*, especially in relation to the professional court fool, the buffoon and the jester, has been the object of several scholarly studies (Assirelli, 1992; Gifford, 1974; Pietrini, 2002; Saffioti, 2013; Valente, 2018). For the purposes of this essay – to trace a history of the depiction of madness as invisible and the insane as outsiders – I will summarize the most recurring characteristics of the iconography of the fool, which undergoes a marked evolution from a relatively variable appearance to the quasi-uniform of the jester (c. fifteenth century).

Even before the standardization of the jester, fools in the Ds display recurrent characteristics:



Figure 1. Historiated initial 'D'[ixit] at the beginning of Psalm 52, 1276. *Psalter and Book of Hours, Use of Saint-Omer*; France (British Library, Yate Thompson 43, f. 54).

they are usually naked, dressed in rags or poorly dressed; barefoot or with only one shoe on; bald or with the head unevenly shaven. They almost invariably hold a round object in their hands, which they sometimes eat. They are at times portrayed with a king, who points in their direction (e.g. *Bromholm Priory Psalter*, ms. Ashmole, f. 66, Bodleian Library, Oxford) or towards the sky (e.g. *Wilton Abbey Psalter*, f. 66v, Royal College of Physicians, London), where there might be an image of God overseeing the exchange (e.g. Ms. *Rawlinson G 185*, f. 43v, Bodleian Library, Oxford). In some Ds, the fool is in the presence of a dog (e.g. *La Bible Hystoriaus ou les Hystoires Escolastres*, ms. *Royal 17.E.VII(I)*, f. 241, British Library, London) and, in some rare instances, he commits suicide (e.g. Ms. 34, f. 202, Bibliothèque Mazarin, Paris). Invariably, though, the fool holds a staff, to which I will return shortly.

The nakedness or the rags of the fool could be a reference to his inappropriateness and disregard for social conventions; he seems a marginalized social outcast. The slightly later addition of the bold or strangely shaven head (Haseloff, 1938: 25) could be a sign of *diminutio* (Ménard, 1977), loss of vitality and strength. Alternatively, Pietrini (2002: 97) suggests it could be a variant of the clerical tonsure, either as a satire or, more

likely, to recall vagrant clerics, who, 'outcast by society and harshly condemned by religious authorities [led a] dissipated life'. Towards the end of the tenth century, the Church had decreed that the tonsure should be shaven off vagrant clerics to delete their affiliation to the Church (as per the Archbishop of Sens Gautier Cornut's statute in *Statuta*, XIII, pl. 132, 720).

The most plausible interpretation for the round object is that it represents a loaf of bread (Assirelli, 1992: 29). Psalm 52 continues by stating that the *insipientes*, the evildoers who do not believe in God, 'devour my people as though eating bread' (Psalms 53: 4–5). According to Assirelli (p. 29), madmen in Medieval literature are often eager to devour bread, while Pietrini (2002: 83) notes that in the Bible bread is often a synecdoche for food. Unsalted bread could also be a reference to the lack of taste, drawing on the etymological relationship between *sapientia* (knowledge) and *sapor* (taste), established by Isidore of Seville in his *Etymologiae* (X, 240). The *insipiens* therefore would lack knowledge as much as bread would lack taste/salt, a correspondence that recurs in sayings such as the Latin *cum grano salis* ('with a pinch of salt' to express scepticism) or the Italian *avere sale in zucca* ('to have salt in the pumpkin [head]' to say that someone is wise). It is also worth noting that the typical central Italian saltless bread is called *sciocco*, which means both saltless and stupid (see Stabile, 2008).

Vis-à-vis the king, *insipientes* may be portrayed as his *alter ego*, his counterpart (the fool's staff and round object could be a parody of the sceptre and the orb). The presence of the dog could be explained, following Gross, as a confusion between *panis* and *canis*, an allusion to the stupidity and animality of the fool or even as a satire of the cynics (Gross, 1999). We could also venture to advance a possible reference to the canine *Lyssa*, the personification of madness (and rabies) in fifth-century Greek tragedy (see Padel, 1992: 14). The *insipiens* sometimes commits suicide like Saul does in the Bible, perhaps suggesting that not to believe in God means to kill one's soul.

The staff: origins, jesters, wild men

Despite the relative variability of individual elements of the image of the *insipiens*, one is omnipresent: the staff. This is also the iconographic element that interests me especially, not only because it is the most frequent one, but also because it is the one that has survived the longest. As Gilman (2014: 11) says, 'like the leper's clapper, the staff comes to represent the inner nature of the one bearing an outer sign'.

It is perhaps not possible to identify once and for all the origins of the omnipresent staff of the mad. The most plausible explanation is that its origins are as varied as its evolutions and meanings. Gilman (2014: 10–11) borrows potential interpretations: it could have originated from Chronos/Saturn's scythe (Klibansky, Panofsky and Saxl, 1964), from Seth-Typhon's flail (Gifford, 1974), or it could also be a semantic slippage coming from the bifurcated staff that Brant, in his 1494 *Ship of Fools*, depicts as the devil's tool to capture souls (Brant, 1962: 299). In looking for its origins, I believe Gilman overestimates the prevalence of bifurcated staffs in the iconography of the insane. While there certainly are depictions of madmen with bifurcated staffs, there are many more with clubs, bindles, *marottes*, that is, non-bifurcated sticks. Also, the two-pronged pitchfork is one of the most prevalent tools of peasants and shepherds in medieval iconography, and therefore the semantic slippage from the tool of the shepherd (transhumant, vagabond par excellence) to the symbol of madness might be more readily explainable in this way.

The simplest form of the staff is that of a club or cudgel, a rough stick ending with a bulge, probably a rudimentary weapon in contrast to the knightly ones (such as swords or maces) (see Figure 1). In several initial Ds the bulge at the end of the club becomes a head that often resembles the head of the *insipiens* himself – much like the later *marotte* (see below).

Over the course of the fifteenth century, the image of the fool evolves. His depiction appears in contexts other than the Ds of Psalm 52, and his garments and props turn into the iconic imagery of the jester: court fools are dressed in vivid bi-coloured garments, with the typical cap and bells, pictured handling a staff ending in a head, the *marotte*. This is his main stage prop, which he seemingly uses as his own *alter ego*, to stage dialogues and to reach out for the entertained audience (Figure 2).



Figure 2. A fool, beginning of Psalm 52. *Bible du XIIIe siècle*. 1475(?); Rouen, France (Courtesy of Free Library of Philadelphia, Rare Book Department, Widener 2, f. 290r).

Also, wild men are depicted with a coarse staff, as if they were using a long branch as a walking stick. At times, there is some overlapping in the depiction of wild men, fools and jesters (Amateis, 2015). For instance, in Thiers (France) the wooden façade of a fifteenth-century house (now occupied by the Musée de la coutellerie) features an *homme des bois*, a wild man, carrying a knobstick, which ends with a head, much like the *marotte*.¹

The bladder

There are also variants that depend on what is attached to the staff, rather than its shape. The most prevalent of these is an inflated bladder. A third possible appearance of the staff of the *insipiens* is that of a short stick with a sack or bladder hanging at its end.² Pietrini (2002: 84) notes that this iconography dominates Anglo-Saxon manuscripts and is almost entirely absent from continental ones (such as Figure 1). According to her, it is a *bauble*, typical of English fools – an instrument ‘whose function was to make noise when it was rotated’, normally consisting of an inflated pig bladder containing dried peas (p. 84). Thus, for her the bladder is not an attachment to the *marotte* or to the staff, but, when present, makes of the staff a musical instrument in its own right. Pietrini seems to be extending to all staffs with bladders attached a description taken from *Gargantua and Pantagruel* in which Rabelais (1653: 301) describes Panurge giving the jester Triboulet a ‘hog’s bladder puffed up with wind and resounding because of the hard peas that were within it’. Triboulet ‘took a huge delight in the melody of the rickling crackling noise of the peas’ (p. 301). Pietrini’s interpretation contradicts Willeford’s, who uses the term *bauble* as a synonym of *marotte*, and maintains that ‘attached to the *bauble* of European court jesters was often a bladder formed into a clear representation of a phallus’ (Willeford, 1969: 11). We can rule out the possibility that it represents a bagpipe, as no *insipiens* is depicted blowing into it, in contrast to a number of Bohemian and Hungarian tiles in which court fools are unmistakably playing bagpipes (see: Cserey, 1974; Gruia, 2008; Richterová, 1982).

The interpretation of the bladder at the end of the stick as a *bauble*, a ‘musical’ instrument that predates the ‘profession’ of the jester, is certainly plausible. The bladder, however, survives in depictions of non-jester fools in the modern era. For instance, Mitelli’s 1678 *Proverby figurati* illustrates the proverb ‘He who believes himself the wisest, is the craziest’, with a badly dressed, semi-barefoot dancing fool, holding a pinwheel in each hand, from each of which hangs one inflated bladder (Mitelli, 1967: plate 10).³ Since the proverb has no reference to the court fool, the image seemingly depicts a madman. His demeanour is not that of a jester and he does not have a *marotte*, but instead he handles two pinwheels with bladders.

The pinwheel and the broom

In the sixteenth century, when the iconography of the jester is well-established, the non-jester fool is indeed often depicted holding a pinwheel – a child’s toy operated by blowing air (Pinson, 2003). This is the case for instance in Holbein’s illustration of Psalm 52 in his 1547 *Icones historiarum veteris testamenti* (Green, 1864). In this illustration, the fool, dressed in rags and with a feather cap resembling Giotto’s *Stultitia* in the *Cappella degli Scrovegni*, trips on (or rides) his staff while holding a long pinwheel under his right arm.

In the emblem book *Iconologia*, by Cesare Ripa (1593), *pazzia* [madness] is described as a ‘normal’ person (i.e. not bald, not dressed in rags, not barefoot), but riding a long staff and brandishing a child’s pinwheel, as if it were a sceptre or mace. Mitelli’s plate 10, mentioned earlier, pictures the madman by combining pinwheels and bladders. The last plate of Mitelli’s book, plate 48, reiterates the use of the pinwheel as a symbol of insanity. The proverb is ‘The bier gives intellect’ (Figure 3). The figure who contemplates the bier is dressed in rags and half barefoot, his head is adorned by a hat with feathers, and he seems bald under it: all traditional characteristics of the *insipiens*. Most importantly, at his feet there lies a broken pinwheel: by contemplating mortality, the fool becomes wise.



Figure 3. Giuseppe Maria Mitelli, *Proverbi Figurati*, Plate 48 (Courtesy of Biblioteca Casanatense, Rome).

81r, *Flemish Psalter*, circa 1430, Koninklijke Bibliotheek, L'Aja; see Saffioti, 2013: 139), and that not all witches ride brooms.

Finally, the staff of the mad recurs in the witch's broom. According to Gilman (2014: 10), the very first image of a flying witch, in Molitor's 1489 *De lamiis et phitonicis mulieribus*, depicts a demon flying on a bifurcated stick. The first illustration of a flying witch however predates Molitor's: it is a marginalis to the 1451 edition of Martin Le Franc's *Le Champion des Dames* (Figure 4), as noted by Kors and Peters (2001). The marginalis features two women flying: one on a long stick, the other on a broom. The jury is still out on whether the iconographic origins of the witch flying on the broom is the staff of the *insipiens* or otherwise. We need not stretch it as far as Mann's (2000) pharmacological interpretation (according to him, witches would trip on alkaloids whose only non-lethal route of administration is vaginal, whence the rubbing on a broomstick) to problematize the stick-marotte-broom line of iconographic filiation. It is sufficient to observe that in numerous images of the *insipiens*, the madman and the jester ride their staffs (e.g. Ms. 76 F 28, f.



Figure 4. Illumination of two witches on a broomstick and a stick. Martin Le Franc's edition of *Champion des Dames Vaudoises*, 1451 (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS. Fr. 12476, fol. 105v).

The visibility of madness and the othering of the insane – iconography and etymology of fools and other outcasts

In this section I advance my interpretation of the staff of madness. Why was it such an omnipresent prop assigned to the insane? Could it be interpreted in representational terms? That is, did fools carry a club to fend off animals or a walking stick because they were ramblers? Did they have a sack at the end of the stick to carry their scant possessions? It is certainly possible. But why would they carry a pinwheel or an inflated bladder? I believe the key to understanding the omnipresence of the staff of madness and its variants is in a symbolic reading. In this section I argue, on the one hand, that the staff displays madness as an invisible entity that the insane carry around as a burden – invoking air either as that which inflates the bladder at the end of their stick or as that which operates their pinwheel (see below). On the other, I then argue that the insane share the staff as a recognizable feature of their status with several other outcasts, such as vagabonds.

Folly as emptiness or fullness of air

In order to show that air is used as a visual metaphor for madness and its invisibility through the staff, in this section I begin my argument by analysing the etymology of the noun ‘fool’. Numerous European languages have cognates of the words ‘folly’ and ‘fool’, for instance French with *folie* and *fou* and Italian with *folia* and *folle*. While in English folly and fool are not synonyms of madness and mental disorder, in Italian *folia* is by and large considered a synonym of *pazzia*, madness. The best accepted etymology for the word folly derives from the Latin *follis* (see: Pianigiani, 1907: 548; Skeat, 1888: 215). The first meaning of *follis* is bellows, a device used to blow air: an empty bag that is inflated and deflated repeatedly (whence also the Spanish vulgar word *follar* – to have sex). Further meanings of the word *follis* are purse, sack, bag and inflated ball, all referring to empty (or full of air) containers. The metaphorical use of *follis* to indicate the fool rests on this: the head of the fool is empty but also swollen. The semantic history of this metaphor leads back to early Christianity. Somewhat following Tertullian (1931: 224), who called Anaxarchus’ body a ‘case’, *follem*, Augustine (1991: 244) asks: if there is nothing humbler than God, who let himself be humiliated on the cross for all human beings, ‘why do you still rear up, still swell up, you inflated balloon [*follis inflatus*]?’ God is humble, and are you proud?. This is often quoted as the first written metaphorical use of *follis* in relation to the madness of straying from God’s path, in particular in relation to the capital sin of pride (e.g. Martino, 2008: 30).

Hence, rather than only a realistic depiction of the bauble ‘musical’ instrument, an item that a court fool might have carried, the bladder at the end of the madman’s stick represents a *follis*, both as inflated balloon and empty container. It is thus also and perhaps especially a metaphorical signal that the depicted individual is a fool in that he carries, as a burden/bundle, his *follis*.

Air was long held as the element that animated the body, that is, it enabled the immaterial soul to interact with the material body (Tertullian’s ‘case’, *follem*). According to Stoic philosophers, this happened ‘through the agency of *pneuma* (*spiritus* in Latin), or bodily spirits’ (Trenery and Horden, 2017: 64) (Erasistratus’ *pneumatists* based their entire medicine on this assumption; see Nutton, 2004: 207.) The very word ‘psyche’ derives from Plato’s soul, *psyché*, a word which, in turn, originally meant ‘breath’. In Homer’s *Iliad*, *psyché* is the last breath that humans exhale before dying (e.g. Book V line 696). *Psyché* does not originally refer to mental processes but is the ‘breath of life’: ‘It . . . behaves sometimes like breath, sometimes like blood. Sometimes it means simply ‘life’ . . . You have only one, which leaves you at death’ (Padel, 1992: 30). *Thymós*, the ancient Greek word for, loosely put, ‘vital energy’, also connects to breath and air. As Onians (2000: 44) says, ‘*thymos* itself is the breath, which may always be felt as vaporous and sometimes is visible.

With it may be compared *fumus*, Sanscrit [*sic*] *dhūmah*, “vapour, smoke”, Old Slav. *Dymū*, “smoke”, *duchū*, “breath, spirit”, etc’. *Thymos* is not ‘mere breath but breath related to blood, not mere air but something vaporous within’ (Onians, 2000: 48). Ancient Greek Gods breathed emotions and thoughts into men (p. 56). The Ancient Greeks knew perfectly well that without air there was no life (Thivel, 2005), even though it is invisible or, better still, visible only through reason:

[Air] is invisible to sight, though visible to reason. For what can take place without it? In what is it not present? What does it not accompany? For everything between earth and heaven is full of wind. (Hippocrates, 1923: 231)

The notion that air animates the body dominates the medical conception of the psyche throughout the Middle Ages and the modern era. Harvey (1975: 2) calls the ‘spirits’ that animate the body according to medieval doctors the ‘inward wits’.

‘Spirit’ is also one of the archetypes that populate the collective unconscious, according to Jung (2010: 385–6): it is ‘the principle that stands in opposition to matter . . . the *ligamentum animae et corporis*’). Also, the ‘development in man’s idea of spirit rests on the recognition that its invisible presence is a psychic phenomenon’ (p. 390). The archetype of the spirit is ‘in keeping with its original wind-nature, [it] is always an active, winged, swift-moving being as well as that which vivifies, stimulates, incites, fires, and inspires’ (p. 389). We do not need to embrace an archetypal psychoanalytic reading to recognize that indeed the notion of innards, psyche, soul and spirit has a deeply rooted correlation with air (the very etymology of the Latin noun for soul, *animus*, from which the Italian *anima* derives, can be traced back to the Ancient Greek noun *ánemos*, wind).

However, in antiquity and the Middle Ages, reference to the air in the *follis* – and in its metaphorical derivative the fool – does not necessarily stem from the omnipresence of inward wits or spirits; after all, air *qua* inward wits had a neutral if not positive connotation: it was the air that animated the body, not necessarily causing madness or illness. The air that causes disease is the air that blows:

A breeze is a flowing and a current of air. When therefore much air flows violently, trees are torn up by the roots through the force of the wind . . . Such then is the power that it has in these things. (Hippocrates, 1923: 231)

The blowing air, wind in particular, can cause madness: ‘gusts of passion’, such as when ‘a raging *pneuma* of madness carries off Io’ or “‘blasts of hostile winds’” are breathed by an impious besieger of Thebes’ (Padel, 1992: 92); ‘winds shake *phrenes* . . . hatred and fury are gusts in the mind. ‘Antigone’s soul suffers “blasts of the same winds”’ (p. 116).

The reference to blowing air as causing madness surfaces in Sanskrit, in which both the words *vātula* (inflated with wind) and *vātika* (windy, stormy) mean ‘affected by the wind-disease’, thus mad (Williams, 1872: 900–2), although *vātika* can also refer to a medical procedure to ‘calm the wind’ (Scharfe, 1999: 615). Both derive from *vāt*, which means to blow gently but also to go, to act favourably towards one setting out on a journey (Williams, 1872: 900). From *vāt* also derives *vāta*, one of the three humours/faults (*doshas*) of the *āyurveda*, the traditional Indian medicine, a humour made of ether and air (Scharfe, 1999). This conception not only survives in contemporary *āyurvedic* alternative medicine, but also in indigenous medicines such in Tibet’s notion of *rLung* (wind/breath), which is involved in both the cause and the treatment of what conventional medicine would consider mental disorder (Deane, 2019).

The *follis* refers also to the act of inflating, *blowing* madness into humans. This emerges in iconography for instance in one of the fourteenth-century misericords of the Great Malvern Priory,

which depicts a man blowing air up another man's bottom by means of a pair of bellows. The one who is being inflated is naked and his head is that of an ass (or at least he has ass's ears) (Figure 5). It is also on display in the iconographic evolution of the staff into the pinwheel: a child's toy which symbolizes the changeability, the unpredictability of the mad, but also spins because of the blowing air, the wind (cf. the German idiom *Am Rad drehen*, 'to go crazy', literally 'to spin the wheel' but also the English 'winds of change').



Figure 5. Wooden misericord from Great Malvern Priory, Worcestershire, UK (© Copyright www.misericords.co.uk 2019).

Finally, it is worth noting that it is on a staff/broom that the witch flies *in the air*. 'Air, breath, wind are the soul's elements. Of course it flies', concludes Padel (1992: 97). We could say the same about the witch. The air inflates the mind with emptiness and madness and is symbolized in the staff on which this emptiness is carried. Of course the witch flies in the air on a stick.

In iconography, therefore, the *follis* establishes a complex relationship between inside and outside: the air that causes madness is blown in from outside the fool, but it resides within him. Blowing air also operates the pinwheel and accounts for the inconstancy of the insane. The stationary air inside the *follis*, instead, is a reference to the emptiness that fills the head of the fool. Mitelli's '*pazzo*', who carries a pinwheel with an inflated bladder in each hand, is indeed captioned: 'nothing fills your mind, but vapours' (Mitelli, 1967: plate 10). However, in iconography this air is not inside the fool. On the contrary, it is an emptiness that the fool *has*, perhaps as his only possession, and that he carries with him as a burden. Arguably, it is a very 'light' bundle, made of air, which also alludes to the light-headedness and fickleness of the insane. It is a bundle

nevertheless: the only ‘luggage’ in the vagabondage of the insane. It is to this extent that, in the next section, I move on to analysing the overlap in the depiction of the insane and the vagabond.

The fool and the vagabond

As Laharie (1991: 157) has it, the fool is ‘an a-social being, he is not part of any group and his life is that of a vagabond. Or, for that era, to wander alone was a symptom of madness’. Assirelli (1992: 32), in passing, notes that the *insipiens* is often depicted ‘walking, carrying the wayfarer’s bundle’. Perhaps Foucault’s (2006: 9) affirmation, that ‘an itinerant existence was often the lot of the mad’, is an overstatement, but the staff of the madman is indeed also a symbol of vagabondage. The iconography of the madman overlaps with ‘all the figures associated with any divergence from the society’s accepted norms’ (Gilman, 2014: 2). While Gilman is thinking of ‘the maniac, the idiot, the melancholic, the wild man, or the possessed’, I would add the vagabond as a central figure in the semantic slippages of key elements of the representation of the outcast. Much has already been written on vagabonds in medieval and early modern times (e.g. Cubero, 1998; Geremek, 1994; Mazzi, 1991; Mollat, 1990; Pullan, 1978; Riis, 1981). As Dani (2018: 15–16) put it, ‘The vagabond, like the migrant . . . infringes the founding values of the *civitas* The vagabond, free from any bond, circumventing these values and thus calling into question the very archetype of *civitas*, ends up incarnating . . . the Other’.

Other social categories share with the vagabond his mobility. We have already mentioned vagrant clerics, but we could add ‘pilgrims, students, apprentices, merchants and sellers, preachers, healers, knights and soldiers, shepherds, evicted peasants, brigands, nomads and beggars’ (Dani, 2018: 19). Mobility was considered suspicious and tantamount to vagrancy. As Geremek (1994: 83) says, ‘migrating workers were condemned as vagrants, and it became illegal to beg, or to move from one place to another, without special permission . . . Legislation of this type was enforced with varying degrees of severity in each European country’.

Despite the Christian message of charity, at the apex of medieval development, in the mid-thirteenth century, vagabonds and paupers were increasingly marginalized, probably as their numbers grew: ‘from the thirteenth century, the number of *extranei* or *vagantes*, landless paupers trekking here and there in search of work, grew at a sharp pace’ (Lis and Soly, 1979: 16).

The vagabond seems to have a lesser visual presence than the *insipiens*, suggesting that, partly due to the similarities in depiction, the two categories by and large overlapped in medieval iconography, at least until the *insipiens* evolved into the codified image of the jester. The vagabond as a beggar is depicted in the mid-fourteenth-century manuscript *Meditatione de la vita di Nostro Signore Ihesu Christo*.⁴ Four beggars – a woman, two men and a child – are receiving food from a saint. They are receiving a loaf of bread, a round, white, object similar to the bread of the *insipiens*. The first beggar is depicted with a long fur coat and has a stick, much like the wild man. He wears a straw hat, whereas the beggar in the middle has a monk-like tonsure.

Also, due to the paucity of visual sources specifically depicting vagabonds, it is interesting to note how much of the representation of the *insipiens* (and also of the cognate wild man) suggests vagrancy: the *insipiens* is dressed in rags, devours bread, and his head is often shaven in the guise of vagrant clerics. Most significantly, he carries a staff, that might be a walking stick, or the bifurcated pitchfork of peasants/shepherds. The staff often ends with a bladder or a sack: the bundle of the vagrant (and also of the transhumant shepherd, another ‘mobile’ category looked at with suspicion for its mobility; see Geremek, 2014: paras 28 and 38), which in the case of the *insipiens* is seemingly empty as is his *foliis*. In other words, through a varying combination of symbols he is always depicted as an outcast – a homeless, hungry outsider, a beggar and/or a vagabond.

Etymology again helps us to understand this visual overlap and the semantic exchange between vagrancy and folly. Vagabond comes from the Latin *vagus*, rambling, roaming, wandering, thus

also unfixed and unsettled, much like animals: ‘wandering [vagi] through the woods like wild beasts’, as Quintilian (2002: 384) writes in the *Institutio Oratoria* (8, 3, 81). *Vagus* was also used figuratively as unsteady, inconstant, wavering, vague. Catullus (1913: 90), for instance, in verse 4 of *Carmen* 63, describes the state of the enraged Attis as *vagus animi*. Insane, vagabond and wild man converge in the early thirteenth-century German adaptation of Chrétien de Troyes’s Arthurian romance *Yvain*. The author, German poet Hartmann von Aue (1979), tells of Sir Iwein’s quests and focuses on his struggle with madness, for which he ends up roaming the forest like a beast, much like Nebuchadnezzar in the Bible (Daniel 4:33).

It is important to note that the blowing air, the wind, can certainly cause madness and disease, but also inflates the sails and sets ships on their journeys. Earlier, I have shown this semantic overlap at work in the Sanskrit *vāt*. The wind that causes the wind-diseases also inflates the sails; the wind that spins the pinwheel also sets travellers at sea on their journeys. These water-based vagabondages are represented in the numerous images of ‘ships of fools’ (see Midelfort, 1999: 232ff.) that follow the publication of Brant’s *Narrenschiff* in 1494 (see Brant, 1962) and which, according to Gilman (1988: 22), rest on (although I would rather say create) ‘the myth of the mad as travelers, an image still with us’.

The insane and the vagabond share in iconography the stick with a bundle and their vagueness, their marginalization and their condition of being outside society. I believe this condition of out-sideness is also represented in the early iconography of the *marotte*. The prop almost universally used by jesters from the fifteenth century appears in iconography well before the standardization of the representation of the court fool. The earliest occurrences are attested in the thirteenth century.⁵ While these could certainly be regarded as *ante litteram* stage props, a symbolic reading in addition to the representational one helps us to weave together the semantic slippages of the staff during history. The head at the end of the staff, at least in early depictions of the *insipiens*, seems to represent the condition of folly as being out of oneself. It makes visible the dichotomy inside-outside and its inversion in madness. Early Greek ‘psychology’ already pointed to a physical, albeit of uncertain location, seat for the mind: the *phrenes*. ‘One can lose one’s hold on [the *phrenes*], be “struck out”, . . . “no longer in one’s *phrenes*”’ (Padel, 1992: 22). Madness is to be out of oneself – *ekstasis* – not only in negative terms of fury (*mania* and *manike* from the verb *mainomai*) but also in prophetic terms. Plato (1914: 467) had already noted, in the *Phaedrus* (244c), that *mantiké*, prophecy, ‘the noblest of arts, that . . . foretells the future’, and *manike*, madness (which ‘men of old . . . thought . . . neither shameful nor disgraceful’) are connected. ‘Mania, when it comes by gift of the gods, is a noble thing, but nowadays people call prophecy the mantic art, tastelessly inserting a T in the word.’

Madness as the condition of being out of oneself, and in particular to be out of one’s head, are still common idioms in most European languages: to be out of one’s mind, *essere fuori di testa* (to be out of one’s head) in Italian; *hors de soi* (out of oneself) in French; *as do mheabhair* (out of one’s mind) in Irish; *aufßer sich sein* (to be out of oneself) in German. Similarly, there are idioms pointing to the idea that to be mad is to be out of one’s home, such as ‘the lights are on but nobody’s home’ in English; *sortir de ses gonds* (to go out of one’s hinges) in French; *eser fora dei copi* (to be outside the roof tiles) in Triestine dialect. These idioms reiterate the permanence of the blurring between insanity and vagrancy (homelessness) in popular culture. In addition to the sense of out-sideness, the early *marotte* also incarnates the symbolism of being other from oneself or alien to oneself: *alienatio mentis*, the mind that is alienated, other to itself, a notion that would be frequently used in Western medical jargon well into the 1950s, but which had roots in Roman medicine (first used by Caelius Aurelianus in his *De morbis acutis et chronicis*, c. fifth century CE; see Coughlin, 2018: 114). The *insipiens* is therefore out of himself in life as much as in iconography,

like the vagabond (and the wild man) who is outside civil society, without a home, constantly travelling.

Madness, vagabondage and air beyond the *folis*

In this section I will move my analysis past the seventeenth century to discuss examples of the survival in modern and contemporary times, in medicine and popular culture, of the triangulation between madness, air and otherness as an attempt to visualize the invisible.

The overlapping between madness, vagueness, wildness, emptiness and air outlives the iconography of the *insipiens* with his staff. Towards the end of the fifteenth century, the image of the fool had already branched into the codified image of the jester, with his *marotte*, an image that will endure for centuries and is arguably still in use today (e.g. in Carnival costumes, popular culture imagery, the jolly or joker card added to the standard 52-card French-suited pack in some games, etc.). In the sixteenth century, we see the first images of madmen, as distinguished from court fools and jesters, carrying pinwheels, sometimes also bladders. The image of the *insipiens* carrying a staff with a sack at its end survives almost unchanged, at least in one iconographic repository of the

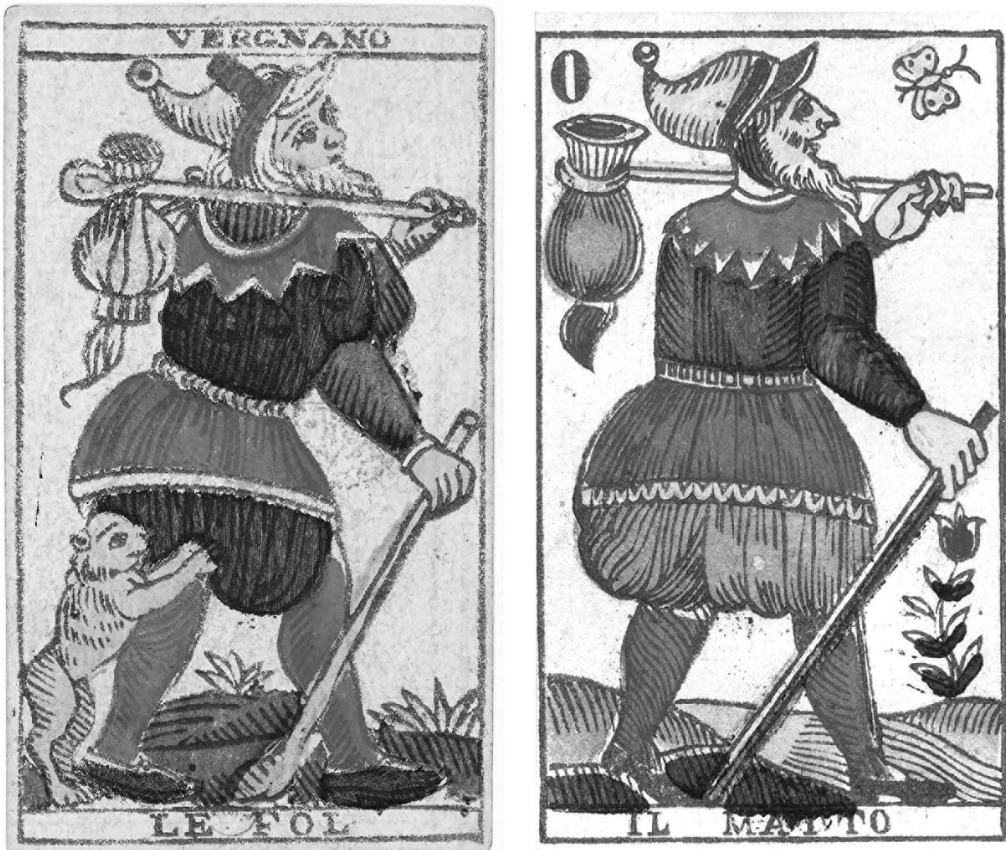


Figure 6. *Le fol* and *il matto* in two different versions of the Piedmontese Tarot game cards, 1827 and 1830, printed in Turin by Stegano Vergnano.

present: Tarot cards. In the occult Tarot cards (as well as in the *Tarocco Piemontese* gaming cards) *le mat, le fou, le fol, il matto* or the fool on the first (0) or the last (XXII) of the major arcana, is invariably depicted as carrying a bundle at the end of a stick (Figure 6). This bundle resembles the post-depression bindle of American hoboes. The ‘hobo stick’ or ‘bindle’ is recognized as the universal icon of vagabondage, possibly thanks to its use in comics and cartoons (from Donald Duck to the Smurfs). Of course, I am not suggesting that Disney intentionally depicts its characters with a bindle to recall the iconography of the *insipiens*, but that both madmen and vagabonds are traditionally and enduringly depicted in popular culture as carrying a bundle of some sort, a symbolic reminder that they have no home, are outsiders, and travel with few possessions (or even an empty sack in the case of the madman).

Moreover, the connection between madness and air perseveres in history, independently of the staff of the madman and of folly, repurposing the above-mentioned notion of inward wits or bodily spirits. In 1621, in *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, Burton (2004: 1.II.V, para 5) maintains that:

The devil many times takes his opportunity of such storms, and when the humours by the air be stirred, he goes in with them, exagitates our spirits, and vexeth our souls; as the sea waves, so are the spirits and humours in our bodies tossed with tempestuous winds and storms.

While on the one hand Burton seems to be referring to the tradition of considering stormy winds as harbingers of mental disorder and its conveyance into one’s soul, he is also tapping into the centuries-old medical imagery of ‘vapours’. According to Pormann (2013: 240), ‘vapours rising from the stomach to the brain are one of the explanations for [melancholia] that we find in a variety of sources’. In 1733, the pioneering physician George Cheyne published *The English Malady; or, A Treatise of Nervous Diseases of all Kinds*. According to Cheyne (1733: 194), vapours (and its synonym spleen) is a generic term that was so broadly used in English that ‘it is a common subterfuge for meer ignorance of the nature of distempers’. Vapours proper should only be called a first degree of the disorder

when . . . the symptoms then, besides lowness of spirits are wind, belching, yawning, heart-burning, croaking of the bowels . . . a pain in the pit of the stomach (which is sometimes mistaken for lung case, especially if attended with shortness of breath, and a tickling cough, from a wind in the cavity pressing on the diaphragm, and thereby pressing on the lungs, which is common and goes very justly by the name of an hysterick, or nervous cough) and sometimes inflation, and an actual visible swelling, to a very considerable bigness, in the stomach to be seen. (pp. 196–7)

The *vapours* or *spleen*, later called just the nerves or the ‘hyp’, milder forms of hysteria or hypochondria, referred to disorders ‘thought to have their origins in the hypochondrium, or the upper abdomen’ (Scull, 2016: 163). Although neither air as an external cause nor movements of internal vapours are explicitly mentioned in Cheyne’s description, numerous symptoms relate lowness of spirit to air (e.g. bloating, cough, etc.), not to mention the name itself – vapours. Most interestingly, Cheyne (1733: 52) explicitly splits the relationship between air and folly: ‘It is a common observation . . . that *fools* . . . are seldom much troubled with vapours or lowness of spirits.’ Starting with Cheyne, those affected by the air in the form of vapours, the spleen or the hyp, will be the higher and middle classes: ‘From the eighteenth century onwards, polite society has continued to find in such ‘nervous’ disorders (the vapours, the spleen, and hysteria, . . .) a rich social idiom’ (Porter, 2002: 86).

Even in the contemporary era, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, studies have been carried out in psychiatry to ascertain the impact of weather, in particular of wind, on mental disorders (e.g. Bos et al., 2012; Bulbena et al., 2005). The fact that none has proved conclusive is beyond the scope of this essay. What these studies testify is that indeed the metaphorical relationship between wind and mental disorders is far from being regarded as surpassed and remains the potential object of scientific enquiry.

Conclusions

I started this historical overview with the staff of the madman as a pivotal and polysemic iconic element that encompasses numerous references, including the *follis*, air, emptiness and lightness, the dialectics inside-outside and inside-out, vagrancy and vagueness. I have thus unravelled the overlap in the representation of different outcasts, in particular the insane, showing that it pivots on dichotomic ‘root metaphors’ (Pepper, 1942: 92) such as visible–invisible, empty–full, inside–outside, that recur in history. These indeed emerge in iconography through specific elements (such as the bladder or the pinwheel) representing, both realistically and metaphorically, a condition of emptiness, vagueness, changeability, that is incarnated in the insubstantial element par excellence: air. This element is by and large invisible, but not in its effects (e.g. inflating a bladder, moving the pinwheel), much like insanity. Using air to represent the unrepresentable does not bring madness closer to being made visible, and the stone of folly, such as the one Hieronymus Bosch depicts as being extracted in his c. 1494 painting *The Cure of Folly*, for instance, might be a more effective concrete incarnation of an invisible malady (Gilman, 2014: 36–42). Yet these images of the past, by foregrounding air, show us the struggle to deal with mental disorder: so historically and culturally mutable, so ephemeral and invisible, yet deeply impactful on individuals, communities and societies. Also, it demonstrates that over the course of history numerous semantic slippages blurred the representation of madmen, vagabonds and other ‘unwanted’, implying that the struggle to deal with mental disorder corresponds more generally to the struggle of dealing with difference and the ‘other’.

Are the insane driven out of society to become outcasts as a consequence of insanity, or are they regarded as insane because they are outcasts already? Do they become outsiders as a result of being marginalized because of their odd behaviour (and is this tantamount to ‘madness’) or is their behaviour regarded as mad because they are already vagabonds? Do the insane turn feral because of their insanity or are they regarded as mad because they live in the forest? Legal history might help us distinguish these categories: insanity could be used to plead innocence of a crime, but vagrancy was criminalized. Iconography, however, blurs the answers to these questions, showing clearly that wild men, outcasts, vagabonds and *insipientes* (whether they were born as fools or driven mad) are very intimately related in terms of their representation. This in turn shows that in common perception, popular culture and imagination, there is an element of vagrancy and vagueness in mental disorder, just as there is something insane in being a vagabond. The fool, the vagabond and the wild man unsettle the *status quo*, for good or for ill, just with their presence and existence. Outsiders trouble boundaries – the boundaries of reason, of the nation, of civilization. There is therefore something witch-like, evil and threatening in everyone who is marked as other, as different; almost invariably, the other comes from the outside, whether this outside is populated by vagabonds coming from foreign lands, mental ailments coming from the outside of the head, or madness chasing someone out of oneself.

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Notes

1. An image of the *homme des bois* façade can be seen at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Thiers_-_%27Homme_des_Bois_-_JPG1.jpg (All web pages mentioned in notes were accessed 8–9 Dec. 2020.)
2. Of the several potential examples, suffice it to mention the historiated ‘D’ in the *Carrow Psalter*. Mid-XIII Century. East Anglia, England. Walters Art Museum, Walters Ms. W.34, fol. 113r; see: <https://art.thewalters.org/detail/3667/fool-with-bladder-on-stick-eating-cusped-loaf-2/>
3. The plate can be viewed at: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1872-1012-3838
4. Illumination of beggars. *Meditatione de la vita del nostro Signore Ihesu Christo*. XIV Century. Siena, Italy. Paris, BNF, Italien 115, fol. 8v; see: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b10527648k/f20.item>
5. Arguably, the best-known early example of this is the historiated initial ‘D’ in Amiens, Bibl. mun., ms. 0124, f. 054v (c. thirteenth century); see: https://bvmm.irht.cnrs.fr/consult/consult.php?VUE_ID=1388469

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