

**Bedlam in Mind: Seeing and Reading Historical Images of Madness**

**Simon Cross**

Department of Media and Cultural Studies  
Nottingham Trent University  
Clifton Lane  
Nottingham  
NG11 8NS  
NOTTINGHAM  
UK

Email: [simon.cross@ntu.ac.uk](mailto:simon.cross@ntu.ac.uk)

Fax: 0115 9418418

Dr Simon Cross is Senior Lecturer in Media and Cultural Studies at Nottingham Trent University. He is the author of *Mediating Madness: Mental Distress and Cultural Representation*. Houndsmill: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

**Bedlam in Mind: Seeing and Reading Historical Images of Madness**

**Abstract.** In this article I explore mythical Bedlam of popular imaginings. London's Bethlem Hospital was for centuries a unique institution caring for the insane and its *alter ego* 'Bedlam' influenced popular stereotypes of insanity. For instance, while the type of vagrant beggar known as a 'Tom of Bedlam' was said to have disappeared from English society with the Restoration, the figure of Mad Tom retained a visual and vocal presence within popular musical culture from the seventeenth century up to the present era. Using the ballad 'Mad Tom o' Bedlam' as a case study, I illustrate how an early modern stereotype of madness has maintained continuity within a popular song tradition whilst undergoing cultural change.

**Keywords: Bethlem Hospital; Bedlam; historical image of madness; continuity and change in Bedlam stereotype; 'Mad Tom of Bedlam' (Bedlamite ballad)**

**Introduction<sup>i</sup>**

In the English-speaking world, the symbol of a segregative response to insanity has long been fixed on London's Bethlem Hospital, popularly known as Bedlam (Scull, 2006). Dating from as early as 1247, Bethlem's origins were as a monastic foundation, The Priory of St Mary of Bethlehem (from which both Bethlem and Bedlam are corruptions), before becoming involved with the care of the lunatic since at least the fifteenth century (Andrews et al., 1997). Since then it is as 'Bedlam' that Bethlem has contributed a lasting impression on popular consciousness and vocabulary because Bedlam 'passed into common usage as a description of random, disruptive, undisciplined noise and impulsive behaviour (Bailey, 1996: 54).

## Bedlam in Mind: Seeing and Reading Historical Images of Madness

Roy Porter, whose stories of the insane during the period from the Restoration to the Regency (Porter, 1987) sheds light on cultural interrelations between Bethlem and its *alter ego*, has asked the question: “Why did Bethlem become ‘Bedlam’, a metaphor for madness?” (Porter, 1997: 45) Porter’s answer is that it was not primarily for anything that went on inside since the daily grind was pretty uneventful. Bedlam’s iconic status in early modern England stems from the fact that it was the only public collection of mad people in the country: ‘Being for so long the only public receptacle for the insane, Bethlem became equated with madness itself’ (Porter, 1997: 45).

While other European cities such as Valencia in Spain have provided continuous shelter for lunatics from the fifteenth century, it is only Bethlem that has been turned into everyday speech and become part of a national culture (Andrews et al., 1997). In English parlance, to say that something is ‘utter Bedlam’ has from Shakespeare’s time become detached from Bethlem, assuming a life and a persona of its own. Thus, when the seventeenth century physician-clergyman Richard Napier identified some of his patients as being ‘stark Bedlam mad’ (MacDonald, 1981: 112) he was invoking a slang term for utter madness understood everywhere in the kingdom.

Seventeenth century England was fascinated with madness (MacDonald, 1981). The signs of its fascination are to be found in the treatises on the topic by philosophers like Robert Burton and the aptly named Bethlem physician William Battie; in theatrical representations of insanity including by Shakespeare and Dekker; in widespread references to and representations of Bethlem, or Bedlam; and in the large numbers of patients who consulted doctors like Richard Napier and John Hall

## Bedlam in Mind: Seeing and Reading Historical Images of Madness

(Shakespeare's son-in-law) (Neely, 1991). This is why Roy Porter (1997: 45) has suggested that, 'If Bethlem had not existed, it would have had to be fantasised'.

Bethlem was small; Bedlam by contrast loomed large in the early modern imagination (Jay, 2003). Thus, while Bethlem housed only twenty to thirty patients at any one time between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries (Andrews et al., 1997), in the visual culture of early modern England, the popular image of Bedlam was embodied in a range of mad figures, mad images, and mad stereotypes. This demands that, while we examine patterns of continuity in the historical image of Bedlam, we need also to consider changes in its visual form and mediation. That is why in this article I aim to keep continuity and change in the image of Bedlam in twin view of each other.

My analytic approach in support of this argument is to outline a strategy for seeing and reading the popular image of Bedlam. There are three inter-connected dimensions of continuity and change that I pay attention to. Firstly, I identify *visual stereotypes* of Bedlam that are historically perpetuated. Secondly, I examine the *visual form* in which they are historically mediated. Thirdly, I consider how the *visual reading* of Bedlam changes when one moves between, say, an early modern ballad such as 'Mad Tom o'Bedlam' and a nineteenth century performance of the same song. Paying attention to these inter-connected dimensions shows that, while historical images of Bedlam appear to be fixed, ways of seeing Bedlam are not.

### **Seeing and Reading Images of Madness Historically**

## Bedlam in Mind: Seeing and Reading Historical Images of Madness

Firstly, I want to begin by making a case for seeing and reading media images of madness historically. The literature about madness and the media is predominantly concerned with contemporary text-based media such as newspapers, advertising and fiction, along with visual depictions in film and television (e.g. Philo et al., 1996; Wahl, 1995). This literature shows that the mass media tends toward using stereotypes, colloquial language and stigma in depictions of mental distress.

One internationally influential commentator on mass media representations of mental distress, Otto Wahl (1996), following Sander Gilman's work on images of madness in the Western pictorial tradition (Gilman, 1982), suggests a historical explanation for why stereotypical media images of mental illness persist:

The images of mental illness that appear in today's mass media reflect conceptualizations and representations of people with mental illnesses that have been around for centuries. The creative professionals of today's media are, in some ways, just carrying on traditional depictions of the past. Many of today's images are repetitions or residuals of long-standing popular beliefs. (Wahl: 1995: 114)

Thus, Wahl argues that contemporary mass media depictions of people with mental illnesses as dangerous are consistent with the stigmatizing images of bestial insanity that are found, for example, in Greek mythology or the Bible. Wahl's assertion that there is direct continuity between historical and contemporary images of madness purports to explain why the mass media systematically misrepresent psychiatric patients as inherently violent or dangerous contra to modern psychiatric knowledge,

which insistently rejects this view as false. In some ways, this may seem reasonable, but what I want to suggest is that Wahl's claim for continuity between historical and contemporary images of mental illness obscures more than it reveals.

My approach emphasises that we can only properly understand continuities in the images and representations of insanity in relation to changing perceptions of madness (Cross, 2010). Nor are continuities in the image of insanity perceived in the same way from one period to another. They appear to embody sameness from one time to another but they are always understood within a particular present, which is always historically defined. What appears continuous therefore has to be seen against what is historically different. Thus, change becomes the key to unlocking continuity.

It is only in this way that apparent continuities across broad swathes of time make any sense at all. There is always a two-way relation between continuity and change, with that relation being historically contingent and historically variable, which is the emphasis we have come to take in modernity and through history itself as a discipline of modernity (Burke, 2008). This two-way relation between continuity and change is easy to miss when contemporary media images of madness are our sole preoccupation.

The problem that Wahl's study of contemporary media images of madness does not address concerns how patterns of continuity in the historical image of madness build up over time. Wahl sees contemporary media stereotypes of madness as a straightforward cultural inheritance from past times, i.e. older images of madness are a misrepresentation of 'mental illnesses that have been around for centuries'.

## Bedlam in Mind: Seeing and Reading Historical Images of Madness

Thus, historical images of madness assume the representational form that they do because madness or insanity was not recognised and treated for what it really is: mental illness or psychological disorder. Whilst not wanting to wholly undermine the historical explanation suggested by Wahl, reading *into* historical images of madness does not necessarily provide evidence of continuous historical othering of the mad.

For instance, Michel Foucault's claim in *Madness and Civilization* that, 'from the fifteenth century on, the face of madness has haunted the imagination of Western man' (Foucault, 2001: 12) identified in the medieval imagination fascination with the cultural image of madness that has reverberated down the centuries and also helped shape our current era's social fears about madness and dangerousness (Scull, 2006). As Foucault puts it: 'Something new appears in the imaginary landscape of the Renaissance; soon it will occupy a privileged place there: the Ship of Fools, a strange "drunken boat" that glides along the calm rivers of the Rhineland and the Flemish canals' (Foucault, 2001: 5) Foucault reads Hieronymus Bosch's painting *Ship of Fools* (1498), in which the medieval insane are depicted searching for their Reason on board ship, as evidence that the mad were not only symbolic but also literal outcasts.

The idea that European mariners sailed mad cargo along the canals of Europe gives a historically false impression of early modern mad folk as living symbols of Folly adrift from the shores of rationality; in England for example, no 'ship of fools' ever set sail (Midelfort, 1989). The historical reality is that the mad were cared for by their families, whilst others were beaten, locked up, left to rot, or forced to beg. And rather than literally and symbolically casting madness beyond the community, as is Foucault's (2001) thesis, the range of representations that circulated in the historical

encounter between mad folk and their community, reflected multiple sites of clinical or street corner contact (Porter, 1987). Thus, early modern mad folk were configured into various stereotypes including fools, melancholics and Bedlamites (Porter, 2002).

### **Bedlam and Bedlamites**

I have suggested above that Bedlam's historical potency was maintained through its changing visual form. It is therefore apt to note that Bethlem has undergone a number of building and location changes over the centuries, the most significant of which for understanding its emblematic status in the early modern era was its move in 1676 to a site on the city boundary at Moorfields ((Russell, 1997). The move occurred when old Bethlem located in Bishopsgate was destroyed by fire and subsequently rebuilt by Robert Hooke, closely modelled on the Tuilleries Palace in Paris. It became one of the renowned sights of early modern London, with details of its palatial façade included in at least thirty-six tourist guides published in 1681 and after (Stevenson, 1997).

While the crowds flocked to see the new Bethlem, the building strained under a weight of symbolic meaning (Ingram, 2005). For instance, the visual impact of Hooke's building was both intensified and undermined by the twin images of madness sculptured by Caius Gabriel Cibber, which from around 1676 adorned the main portico to the institution. Known as 'raving' and 'melancholy' madness, the statues gave symbolic confirmation that Bethlem was a portal to Bedlam, to a world of craziness. It is in this sense of imposing crazy caricatures on the historically real Bethlem that Bedlam serves as both a mask and a mirror of madness (Porter, 1987).

## Bedlam in Mind: Seeing and Reading Historical Images of Madness

The large number of visitors strolling out to Moorfields to take in Bethlem's magnificent façade led its Governors to seize on a market opportunity allowing the paying public entry to the Hospital to view the inmates. Until at least 1770 viewing the inmates in Bethlem was a popular tourist attraction alongside the lions in the Tower and the attractions of Bartholomew Fair (Porter, 1997). However, the actual numbers of eighteenth century visitors entering Bethlem are moot; Macdonald's (1981) suggestion of 96,000 visitors to the Hospital has been rejected by Bethlem's principal historians (Allderidge, 1985; Andrews et al., 1997) for its dubious projections based on the quantity of money recorded in the poor box takings.

What is certain however is that eighteenth century spectators thronged to Bethlem because of the lure and *frisson* of the freakshow (Porter, 1987). Amongst the voyeurs was the Grub Street hack Ned Ward who memorialised his visit to Bethlem in the *London Spy* magazine through ingrained stereotypes of insanity (Gilman, 1982). Recounting his visit to the Hospital Ward describes experiencing 'such drumming of doors, ranting, holloaing, singing and rattling, that I could think of nothing but Don Quevedo's vision, where the damn'd broke loose, and put Hell in an uproar' (quoted in Porter, 1987: 37). Ward's reportage is also a useful pointer to the ways in which fantasy and reality are inextricably entwined in Bethlem's *alter ego*.

Nor is this simply a historical observation. For instance, Bethlem's fantasy image as a human zoo and freakshow is replicated in a twenty-first century enactment of the eighteenth century Bedlam tour. Thus, in its 2010 promotional flyer, the London Dungeon visitor attraction includes Bedlam in a list of London's '1000 years of dark history'. Alongside a photograph of bloodied Bedlamites with arms straining

to reach visitors through the bars of their cell, the twenty-first century promotional puffery promises to the potential tourist that you will, “Feel your heart pound as you enter the madhouse’ and asks: ‘will you survive the tunnels of terrifying torment?’

The contemporary tourist experience of seeing actors perform as Bedlamites is, ironically, not too far from Bethlem’s eighteenth century reality. Bethlem’s inmates knew well enough that to extract money and privileges from visitors they had to play to the gallery, performing to the stereotypical Bedlamite image. ‘In the greatest age of English drama’, says Michael Macdonald (1981: 121), ‘the longest running show in London was Bedlam itself’. This is what no less a figure than Samuel Johnson presumably meant when the great lexicographer wrote in his diary that on his visit to ‘see the Bedlam show before having dinner, he was entertained by a furious patient beating straw, supposing it to be the Duke of Cumberland’ (Porter, 1987: 145).

The early modern image of Bedlam as theatre, of Bethlem patients playing parts as in a play, seems to have been equally if not more pervasive than does the image of the hospital as a human zoo (Stevenson, 2000). Reconsiderations of established ideas about Elizabethan and Jacobean drama (Neely, 1991; Hattori, 1995) dissents from the view that plays about Bedlam were observational about Bethlem (proposed by Reed, 1952) noting for example how typical Bedlamite madmen provided spectacle, comic diversion and a morality play using stock characteristics – rolling eyes, gnashing teeth, and clanking chains – setting in motion a kind of typecasting of the Bedlamite later employed by eighteenth century visual artists.

### Seeing Past Bedlam

William Hogarth is usually credited by art historians with ‘inventing’ the visual image of madness for the modern world (Kromm, 1985). In the final scene of Hogarth’s *The Rake’s Progress* series (painting 1733; engravings 1735), the protagonist’s moral decline has brought him to Bedlam, which has been described by one twenty-first century reader of the image ‘as close to hell on earth as any in the Western imagination’ (Jay, 2003: 28). What then do we see?



Credit: Wellcome Library, London

## Bedlam in Mind: Seeing and Reading Historical Images of Madness

Demented and dumped, Tom Rakewell, sent mad from frittering away his marriage and fortune, is shown, semi-naked, being manacled while surrounded by his fellow lunatics, which include: ‘a mad lover (‘love sickness’ had long featured in the roster of insanity), a mad bishop, a mad king (*a pretender?*), sitting with make-believe orb and sceptre on his close-stool of a throne, a popish religious enthusiast, a mad tailor, and a crazy astronomer, gazing up to the rafters through a rolled up paper telescope’ (Porter, 2002: 74, emphasis in the original). Asks Porter (1988: 118): ‘Is this what Bethlem was like, how mad people behaved and were treated?’ After all, Hogarth knew Bethlem well. The answer, says Porter, is almost certainly not.

For a start, Hogarth has cast the Rake in the reclining pose of raving madness, in the manner sculpted by Caius Cibber, which in Hogarth’s time reflected cultural perceptions of madness in society (Gilman, 1982). Hogarth’s Bedlam scene is suspect not only as a historical document of insanity vis-à-vis its emblematic lunatics, but of Georgian Bethlem itself (Porter, 1988). Furthermore, in 1763, Hogarth updated his painting to include a mad artist, Hogarth’s double, scribbling on the wall a guinea inscribed ‘Britannia 1763’. Hogarth is directing us to see not Bedlam, but England, where not all madmen are in chains (Kromm, 1985). Even so, seeing past Hogarth’s Bedlam image to the real Bethlem is not easy, ‘for practically all the other prints we have of Bethlem themselves comment on Hogarth’s engravings’ (Porter, 1988: 118).

The official archivist to Bethlem Hospital, Patricia Allderidge (1985), has noted an interesting parallel to this art-historical dilemma, which is that every history of psychiatry she has read, acknowledges Bethlem’s historical importance, but only in terms of it being an irredeemably bad institution. This accusation is constantly stated

by historians based, she suggests, not on the real facts of Bethlem's history, but because 'the instantly recognizable 'Bedlam' image can be used ... to fill in odd gaps in the picture, and add a touch of verisimilitude to the whole' (Allderidge, 1985: 18). Allderidge suggests that historians *per se* do not want to see past the 'evil Bedlam' cliché to refine its history in academic research because, 'It has after all, fulfilled this role in the popular imagination for much of its existence' (Allderidge, 1985: 18).

Bethlem's imagined history as 'evil Bedlam' is ironic when we recall what the art historian John Berger (1972: 11) once noted about ways of seeing the past, which is that 'history always constitutes the relation between a present and its past'. The hermeneutical dilemma this raises about how we understand the past from our vantage point in the present is evident when we consider a recent popular history of Bedlam. According to Catherine Arnold, author of *Bedlam: London and its Mad* (2008), the crowds who thronged to an exhibition dedicated to Hogarth at Tate Britain in 2007 were reminiscent of those who toured Bedlam in the eighteenth century:

Scores perused the fate of poor Tom Rakewell, and gawped at his eventual breakdown and incarceration, surrounded by mad stereotypes. A more cynical commentator might add that reality television programmes serve the same purpose, as millions examine and comment on the public spectacle of helpless, and often it seems senseless, individuals, losing their dignity on screen (Arnold, 2008, p.275).

I disagree with Arnold not only because I was one amongst thousands of London tourists gawping at Hogarth's work. I disagree more so because Arnold's facile

comparison between eighteenth century Bedlam tourists and the twenty-first century TV talk show audience is so nakedly rhetorical that Hogarth and his satirical vision of Bedlam are altogether drained of historiographical value. This is where the pitfalls of relativism and presentism lie in wait for the unwary cultural analyst (see Pickering, 2009).

By contrast, I want to suggest that we can better understand continuity and change in the historical image of Bedlam by seeing another Bedlamite figure, this one historically real. In 1814, lunacy reform campaigners including the campaigning journalist William Hone and the politically well-connected philanthropist Edward Wakefield visited Bethlem and discovered amongst its inmates some who were chained to their cell wall (Wilson, 2005). These inmates included James Norris, a former American marine who had been pinioned in the following unique manner:

A stout iron ring was riveted round his neck, from which a short chain passed through a ring made to slide upwards and downwards on an upright massive iron bar, more than six feet high, inserted into the wall. Round his body a strong iron bar about two inches wide was riveted; on each side of the bar was a circular projection; which being fashioned to and enclosing each of his arms, pinioned them close to his sides (quoted in Porter, 2002, p.107).

Norris had spent around 12 years of his detention in Bethlem pinioned in this custom-built harness. What made it all the more shocking was that Norris could apparently converse rationally with his visitors. On a further visit to Bethlem, Norris'

visitors included an artist who sketched Norris in his iron structure. Shortly after, the image of Norris in chains was transformed into an engraving, and became news.

The image of Norris in chains formed part of a portfolio of evidence for the House of Commons Sub-Committee on Madhouses Enquiry of 1815 (Andrews et al., 1997, chapter 23). The focus was almost entirely on Bethlem, whose officials, including its physician Dr Thomas Monro and the apothecary John Haslam, defended the manner of Norris' restraint arguing weakly that it was for his own benefit, and also that they were about to release him just as the lunacy campaigners knocked on their door (Wilson, 2005). For his part, Norris was released from his torment in 1812 only to die weeks later of tuberculosis exacerbated by his years spent in a static position.

When Bethlem moved to its third premises at St George's Fields, Southwark, in 1815, the ghost of James Norris also relocated. The image of Norris in chains was revived in newspaper stories and lunacy campaign pamphlets over the next two decades, whenever the politics of lunacy reform were reported (Wilson, 2005). The difficulty for Bethlem was that the idea of Bedlam could always serve as the bogey image of psychiatric progress (Allderidge, 1985). While the image of Norris in chains added to nineteenth century gothic motifs of Bedlam as a madhouse of horrors (Porter, 1997), we shall now see how a Bedlamite figure from the early modern era changed form and meaning in the popular musical culture of the nineteenth century and later.

### **Change and Continuity in the Historical Stereotype of Tom of Bedlam**

I want to develop a dialectical reading of historical images of Bedlam where we can see change/continuity *through each other*. This strategy allows me to highlight and emphasise specific differences in the mediation of mad images and stereotypes over time. As Pickering's (2001) work on the historical process and practice of stereotyping shows, it is, in the end, always a matter of seeing sameness through difference, and difference through sameness. I shall illustrate this dialectical mode of seeing and reading the historical image of madness through an important early modern embodiment of the Bedlamite vagrant known as Tom of Bedlam.

I noted earlier Porter's (1997) point that for centuries Bethlem was unique and that is crucial for understanding the popularity of the stage Bedlamite in early modern English theatre (Hattori, 1995). The image of the Bedlamite spilled over onto the streets through notorious lunatic vagrants known as Abram-men (named after Bethlem's Abraham men's ward) and Toms of Bedlam, wandering the lanes busking for their supper 'supposedly singing Bedlamite Ballads that told mad tales and perpetuated the Bedlam myth' (Porter, 1997: 44). While a few ex-patients no doubt sang songs and told tales of their time inside Bedlam, counterfeit madmen swelled the numbers by pretending to have suffered in or escaped from Bedlam (Jay, 2003).

Abram-men and Toms of Bedlam were commonly associated with theft and fraud, counterfeiting physical and mental ailments to gain a sympathetic advantage (Kromm, 2002). John Awdeley described their occupational costume in 1561: 'An Abraham man is he that walketh bare armed, and bare legged, and faineth him selfe mad, and carryeth a packe of wool, or a sticke with baken on it, or such like a toy, and

nameth himselfe poore Tom' (quoted in Carroll, 82). Some poor Toms were also said to wear a metal plate around their arm falsely identifying Bethlem as giving them license to beg, while another of poor Tom's traits is his penchant for self-mutilation (Kromm, 2002). Shakespeare picks up all of these characteristics of the poor Tom figure in *King Lear*, when he has Edgar disguise himself to escape his enemies:

Edgar: The country gives me proof and precedent  
Of Bedlam beggars, who, with roaring voices,  
Strike in their numb'd and mortified bare arms  
Pins, wooden pricks, nails, sprigs of rosemary;  
And with this horrible object, from low farms,  
Poor pelting villages, sheep-cotes, and mills  
Sometimes with lunatic bans, sometimes with prayers,  
Enforce their charity. Poor Turlygod! poor Tom!

In Shakespeare's play, the vagrant lunatic, referred to by Edgar as a 'Bedlam beggar', a 'poor Tom', is a complex emblem of suffering, poverty, displacement and counterfeiting (Carroll, 2002). This association would not last, however.

Where Shakespeare left off, popular literature of the sixteenth and seventeenth century offers a unique perspective on English popular conceptions of madness (Hattori, 1995). The cheapest and most widely distributed popular literature of the time was street ballads, which reveal a pervasive fascination with madness:

The views of madness presented in popular literature presented no sustained discourse or in-depth studies, but rather stylized portraits ranging from melodrama to social comedy. The ballads' thrust, subtly different from the more exotic, theatrical, clinical, or religious concerns of elite literature, was to examine madness along its boundary with the normal round of social interaction (Wiltenburg, 1988: 102).

Thus, street-ballads used madness as a metaphor for making sense of foolish behaviour such as jealousy, family strife, religion and sin, love-sickness, and so on, i.e. everyday foibles and tensions packaged in the language of disease and deviance.

Thomas Percy claimed in his *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (published in 1765) that there were more mad-ballads in English than in other languages (Porter, 1987: 288, note 91). Amongst them are a collection of songs in which the Bedlamite emerges to tell his 'story' or account for how he came to end up in the plight that he was in (Wiltenburg, 1988). Bedlamite ballads also offered a generalized picture of the Bedlamite's condition as it was presented to the public. These were stories of Bedlam and the Bedlamite mediated through a distinctive voice or persona in the ballads. 'Some were sung in the character of 'Poor Tom' ... a good number were sung by 'Mad Maudlin' or Bess of Bedlam, Tom's female counterparts' (Hattori, 1995: 289).

Bedlamite ballads were sung to popular tunes from the sixteenth century on, and included in song collections from the seventeenth century. According to Wiltenburg (1988) one seventeenth century song about Mad Tom has survived complete in ballad form, although many others mention Tom as a widely accepted

embodiment of insanity. I now want to focus in the remainder of this article on this bedlamite song titled 'Mad Tom of Bedlam' (1675, often reprinted) because from the early modern era up to the present it has mediated a stereotype of madness:

For to see Mad Tom of Bedlam,  
Ten thousand miles I've travelled  
Mad Maudlin goes on dirty toes  
For to save her shoes from gravel

*Chorus:*

It's well that we sing bonney boys  
Bonney mad boys  
Bedlam boys are bonney  
For they all go bare, and they live in the air  
And they want no drink nor money

I went down to Satan's Kitchen  
For to break my fast one morning  
And there I got souls piping hot  
All on the spit a-turning

A spirit howled as lightning  
Did on that journey guide me  
The sun did shake and the pale moon quake  
Whenever they did spy me

My staff has murdered giants  
And my pack a long knife carries  
For to slice mince pies from children's thighs,  
From which to feed the faeries

Tonight I'll go a-murdering  
The man in the moon to a powder  
His dog I'll shake and his staff I'll break  
And I'll howl a wee bit louder

To see Mad Tom of Bedlam,  
Ten thousand miles I've travelled  
Mad Maudlin goes on dirty toes,  
To save her shoes from gravel

These lyrics to 'Mad Tom of Bedlam' (also known as 'Boys of Bedlam') offer a celebratory image of madness, openly parading and relishing its monstrous nature. The ballad is far from a straightforward case of stereotyping Mad Tom as dangerous however, since the outlandish notion that Mad Tom's staff has 'murdered giants' or that he carries a knife to 'slice mince pies from children's thighs' paradoxically confirms and glorifies Mad Tom as occupied with wild fantasies of adventure among the gods of classical mythology (Wiltenburg (1988: 119)).

My reading of this ballad is of the celebratory portrait of madness which it offers. Thus, the image of Mad Tom is far from the miserable, abject, snivelling creature that is associated with some images of madness. He is a larger-than-life character; full of bombast and *braccadocio* about his physical feats of strength and ingestion of ‘souls piping hot’. While one might read this as a portrait of the extreme self-delusion of the insane it can also be seen in as a symbolic statement against the compulsive non-madness of the sane. In this sense, Mad Tom is a magnificently grand figure, and we are told in the chorus – which gains by repetition – that it is well, it is good, that we sing of the ‘bonney boys’ of Bedlam. That is why Bedlam boys are represented as fabled creatures like dryads living in the air and all going bare.

This ballad in fact subverts the stereotype such that while we cannot regard Mad Tom as a mirror image of how madness was perceived in early modern England, we can view it as an *image in reverse*, illuminating a historically grounded sense of the danger precipitated by the wandering insane. It is perhaps initially surprising therefore to learn that despite Mad Tom’s historicity as a sixteenth and seventeenth century wandering beggar, songs about Tom of Bedlam were still being sung in theatre and music hall in the 1840s (Carroll, 2002).

In this changed historical and popular entertainment context, the social conditions of the song’s early modern performance were lost as Tom of Bedlam, ‘once a complex emblem of suffering, poverty, displacement, and, in part histrionic counterfeiting’ (Carroll, 2002: 82), assumed a different guise as a music-hall entertainer. Such continuity *and* change in the figure of Mad Tom is less surprising if

we recall that until the 1840s, when a national asylum-building programme was implemented, Bethlem was still England's only public lunatic asylum.

Mad Tom's transformation into a music-hall entertainer reflects the appeal of singing about the Bedlamite across two and a half centuries. However, I do not mean to imply that the musical appeal of Tom of Bedlam is transhistorical. To the contrary, the appeal of singing about Mad Tom is historically variable and in the early- to mid-Victorian period it resides in a popular fascination with grotesquerie.

Thus, according to one historian of nineteenth century popular song, 'Mad Tom of Bedlam' achieves longevity within the popular tradition because, 'To startle, horrify, or terrorize the audience, with or without excuse, was the height of the Victorian baritone's ambition. And since people did not walk out on him, we must conclude that to be startled, horrified, and terrorized was the height of the audience's ambition' (Disher, 1955: 36). Thus, another mid-century song about madness, Henry Russell's 'The Maniac' (written in 1840), was sung alongside songs with overt moral messages such as 'The Gambler's Wife' and 'The Drunkard's Child'. Why does this juxtaposition of Victorian morals and maniacs matter?

For the Victorian period at least, singing about madness must be seen in relation to the attractions of melodrama, fairy tales, gruesome murder ballads, penny dreadfuls, and so on. Thus, when Maurice Willson Disher (1955: 36) notes that the Victorian's pleasure in singing about 'Mad Tom' or 'The Maniac' reveals a 'relish for insanity', there is a danger of losing sight of the figurative specificities of Mad Tom even though, at the same time, we can recognise the song's relation to popular

tradition and popular aesthetics. However, there remains a begged question about how we can imagine the mediation of Mad Tom in early modern musical performance.

Fortunately, historians of musical culture such as Graves (1969), MacKinnon (2001) and Carroll (2002) have noted how in the largely non-literate culture of early modern England Bedlamite songs were enhanced by histrionic gestures and a horrid, terrifying voice that whooped and hollered with a 'distracted ugly look' (Carroll, 2002: 84). Such musical performances would have left illiterate and literate hearers in no doubt that 'madness' is being represented. Laughing at stereotypes of mad people in early modern Bedlamite ballads (Hattori, 1995) remind us not only that our own failure to 'get' this kind of joke today should alert us to the problem of historical understanding (see Darnton, 1984) but also to be aware of interplay between historical mediations of madness, historical consciousness, and characteristics of visual change.

How then are we to read change/continuity in the stereotypical figure of Tom of Bedlam? Rather than interpreting songs about Mad Tom as benighted compared with our own historically 'enlightened' times, since this limits recognition of our own culture's use of mad stereotypes for popular entertainment, we can think about the continuity of the Tom of Bedlam figure over two and a half centuries in relation to the relatively little change in the social and psychiatric construction of insanity up to the 1840s. When, in the 1850s, a programme of literally concrete psychiatric change emerged in the form of public asylums (for historical context see Scull, 1989), the figure of Mad Tom diminished not only as social commentary but also in visual potency. This is not the final curtain call for the song 'Mad Tom of Bedlam', however.

Contemporary performers sensitive to the rich musical heritage of English traditional song have included songs from the mad genre in their recording and live performance repertoire. Notable examples include, firstly, the English folk-rock group Steeleye Span who perform a version of 'Boys of Bedlam' on their 1973 *Please to See the King* recording. Secondly, the English folk singer Maddy Prior (an occasional member of Steeleye Span) performs a different version of 'Boys of Bedlam' on *Year*, her 2003 recording. Thirdly, 'Mad Tom of Bedlam' appears on American singer Jolie Holland's 2004 *Escondida* recording indicating that mad Tom has legs enough to cross national borders. In each of these contemporary 'folk' manifestations, 'Boys of Bedlam' is far from an unsettling song performance. Why do I make this point?

The reason is that early modern *performances* of Bedlamite ballads construct Mad Tom as the embodiment of insanity. By contrast a modern *recording* cannot convey how the song mediated madness in past times to audiences in performances in taverns, fairs, and in the streets (MacKinnon, 2001). Thus, while the Steeleye Span recording of 'Boys of Bedlam' (for example) conveys bedlamite madness in its musical arrangement and choral accompaniment, it cannot overcome our modern sensibility, which recoils from laughter at the spectacle of madness. Thus, unlike Victorian music hall performances of 'Tom of Bedlam', there is no 'terrifying voice' in contemporary folk song performance (leaving aside cruel jokes about folk singers' vocal talents), nor are performers likely to be inviting ridicule of mad Tom. This begs another question as to what is the contemporary appeal of singing about Mad Tom.

Mad Tom's contemporary appeal is evidenced in the many amateur 'folk' renditions/performances of 'Mad Tom of Bedlam' posted on the popular Internet website YouTube. These performances seem to invite affiliation or alliance with the self-glorifying Tom. Mad Tom's continuing appeal, it seems to me, is explained by English sentimentality for eccentricity. Thus, Porter's (1991: 183) insight that 'England is a land that has held liberty so dear as to be overrun with weirdos', and Showalter's (1987: 7) Anglo-American witticism that, 'The English have long regarded their country ... as the global headquarters of insanity' suggest to me at least that Mad Tom's contemporary appeal has revived within an English culture of 'folk' eccentricity, for instance alongside the madcap antics of Morris Dancing.

In the late-twentieth and early twenty-first century era of promoting cultural heritage including folk music, the past appearances of Mad Tom is lost from view. To manage this difficulty, Maddy Prior, in her CD sleeve notes to 'Boys of Bedlam', points out that 'Bedlam was the popular name given to Bethlem Hospital for the insane. This lyric is certainly one of the most grotesque and alarming images of madness that I know'. Prior's historical note on the meaning and performance of the song unfortunately confirms Allderidge's (1985) point noted earlier, which is that the instantly recognizable 'Bedlam' image is used to fill in the gaps in the historical picture. I do not want to labour this point except to say that referencing the Bedlam image is of course not the same as writing a cultural history of Bedlam ballads.

However, if giving historical context to singing traditional song matters at all (and I think it does) then I do want to point out that the Bedlam image obfuscates how the resurgence of interest in singing 'Mad Tom o' Bedlam' noted above depends not

on the historically real Bethlem Hospital, but on the grotesque nineteenth century music-hall entertainer version of Mad Tom. In its contemporary folk song manifestation the song 'Mad Tom of Bedlam' is not intended to 'startle, horrify, or terrorize' the audience, which we have seen was the Victorian baritone's ambition.

Similarly, we can also contrast the Victorian music hall performance of 'Mad Tom of Bedlam' with early modern performances that construct Mad Tom as the self-radiant embodiment of insanity. Mad Tom's transformation from early modern street ballad through musical hall grotesquerie, to twenty-first century folk song illustrates the change/continuity argument that I have been promoting in this article in relation to seeing and reading historical images of madness. Bedlam was retained/maintained as a cultural trope not because we are wedded to continuity in how we perceive madness and mad others, but for precisely the opposite reason: because it enables us to see changing meanings of madness and insanity.

## **Conclusion**

'The madman is a protean figure in the Western imagination' (Sass quoted in Lavis 2005: 151). That he is a figure whose masks and guises have shifted to reflect, and also to influence his contemporary socio-cultural climes (Lavis, *ibid.*) is a description that can be applied to the culturally resilient figure of Tom of Bedlam. Mad Tom emerges, disappears, and interleaves, only to re-emerge in unexpected ways. Because Mad Tom slips in and out of our musical culture to inhabit the real historical and contemporary world of stereotypes, he continues to exert his place in the English fascination with the idea of Bedlam. And while keeping Bedlam in mind, Mad Tom also continues to play a role in the popular aesthetics of representing insanity.

## References

Allderidge, P.H. (1985) 'Bedlam: Fact or Fantasy?', in W.F Bynum, Porter, R. and Sheperd, M. (eds.) *The Anatomy of Madness Vol. 2*, pp. 17-33. London: Tavistock.

Andrews, J., A. Briggs, R. Porter, P. Tucker, K. Waddington (1997) *The History of Bethlem*. London: Routledge.

Arnold, C. (2008) *Bedlam: London and Its Mad*. London: Simon and Schuster.

Bailey, P. (1996) 'Breaking the Sound Barrier: A Historian Listens to Noise', in *Body and Society* 2(2): pp 49-66.

Berger, J. (1972) *Ways of Seeing*. London: BBC/Penguin Books.

Burke, P. (2008) *What is Cultural History?* Cambridge: Polity Press. Second Edition.

Carroll, W.C (2002) 'Songs of Madness: The Lyric Afterlife of Shakespeare's Poor Tom', in P. Holland (ed) *Shakespeare Survey: An Annual Survey of Shakespeare Studies and Production* 55: 82-95.

Cross, S. (2010) *Mediating Madness: Mental Distress and Cultural Representation*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.

Darnton, R. (1984) *The Great Cat Massacre: And Other Episodes in French Cultural*

Bedlam in Mind: Seeing and Reading Historical Images of Madness

*History*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Disher, M.W. (1955) *Victorian Song: From Dive to Drawing Room*. London: Phoenix House.

Foucault, M. (2001) *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*. London: Routledge.

Gilman, S. (1982) *Seeing the Insane*. New York: Wiley.

Graves, R. (1969) 'The Rediscovery of "Loving Mad Tom"', in J. Lindsay (Ed.) *Loving Mad Tom*. Seven Dials Press. Originally published in 1927 by the Fanfrolico Press.

Hattori, N (1995) 'The pleasure of your Bedlam: the theatre of madness in the Renaissance', *History of Psychiatry* 6(23): 283-308.

Ingram, A. (2005) *Cultural Constructions of Madness in Eighteenth-Century Writing: Representing the Insane*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan,

Jay, M. (2003) *The Air Loom Gang*. London: Bantam Press.

Knowles, C. (2000) *Bedlam on the Streets*. London: Routledge.

Bedlam in Mind: Seeing and Reading Historical Images of Madness

Kromm, J. (1985) 'Hogarth's Madmen', in *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 48: 238-242.

Kromm, J. (2002) *The Art of Frenzy: Public Madness in the Visual Culture of Europe, 1500-1850*. London: Continuum.

Lavis, A (2005) 'La Muse Malade', 'The Fool's Perceptions' & 'Il Furore dell'Arte': An Examination of the Socio-cultural Construction of Genius through Madness, *Anthropology and Medicine*, Vol. 12, No. 2, pp. 151-163.

MacDonald, M. (1981) *Mystical Bedlam: Anxiety and Healing in Seventeenth-Century England*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

MacKinnon, D. (2001) 'Poor Senseless Bess, Clothed in her Rags and Folly': Early Modern Women, Madness, and Song in Seventeenth Century England, in *Parergon* 18(3), 119-151.

Midelfort, H.C.E. (1980) 'Madness and civilization in early modern Europe', in B.C. Malament (ed.) *After the Reformation: Essays in Honor of J.H. Hexter*, Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press: 247-265.

Neely, C. (1991) "'Documents in Madness'": Reading Madness and Gender in Shakespeare's Tragedies and Early Modern Culture, in *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 42(3): 315-338.

Bedlam in Mind: Seeing and Reading Historical Images of Madness

Philo G. (1996) (ed) *Media and Mental Distress*. Harlow: Addison Wesley Longman.

Pickering, M. (2001) *Stereotyping: The Politics of Representation*. London: Palgrave.

Pickering, M. (2009) 'Engaging with History', in M. Pickering (ed.) *Research Methods for Cultural Studies*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press: 193-213.

Porter, R. (1987) *Mind-Forg'd Manacles, A History of Madness in England from the Restoration to the Regency*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson.

Porter, R. (1988) 'Seeing the Past', in *Past and Present* 118(1): 186-205.

Porter, R. (1991) (ed.) *The Faber Book of Madness*. London: Faber and Faber.

Porter, R. (1997) 'Bethlem/Bedlam Methods of Madness?', in *History Today* 47(10): 41-46.

Porter, R. (2002) *Madness: A Brief History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Reed, R.R. (1952) *Bedlam on the Jacobean Stage*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Russell, D. (1997) *Scenes From Bedlam: A History of Caring for the Mentally Disordered at Bethlem Royal Hospital and the Maudsley*. London: Balliere Tindall.

Bedlam in Mind: Seeing and Reading Historical Images of Madness

Scull, A. (1989) *Social Order/Mental Disorder: Anglo American Psychiatry in Historical Context*. London: Routledge.

Scull, A. (2000) 'The madhouse of Dr Monro', *Times Literary Supplement*, 27 October: 14.

Scull, A. (2006) *The Insanity of Place/The Place of Insanity: Essays on the history of psychiatry*. London: Routledge.

Showalter, E. (1987) *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980*. London: Virago.

Stevenson, C. (1997) 'The architecture of Bethlem at Moorfields', in Andrews, J., A. Briggs, R. Porter, P. Tucker, K. Waddington (1997) *The History of Bethlem*. London: Routledge: 230-259.

Stevenson, C. (2000a) 'Hogarth's Mad King and his Audiences', in *History Workshop Journal* 49: 25-43.

Stevenson, C. (2000b) *Medicine and Magnificence: British Hospital and Asylum Architecture, 1660-1815*. London: Yale University Press.

Wahl, O. (1995) *Media Madness: Public Images of Mental Illness*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Bedlam in Mind: Seeing and Reading Historical Images of Madness

Wilson, B. (2005) *The Laughter of Triumph: William Hone and the Fight for the Free Press*, London: Faber and Faber.

Wiltburg, J. (1988) 'Madness and Society in the Street Ballads of Early Modern England', in *Journal of Popular Culture* 21(4): 101-27.

---

<sup>i</sup> Thanks to Professor Michael Pickering for commenting on a previous draft of this article and generously sharing his reading of the song, 'Mad Tom of Bedlam'. Thanks also to Professor Perti Alasuutari and to very helpful anonymous referee comments.