



The Rise of Cats and Madness:

I. The Renaissance

3

3.1 Cats and Satan

From the middle of the thirteenth century until the end of the Renaissance, cats were regarded as utilitarian creatures to guard food supplies from rodents. Otherwise, except for a small group of artists, writers, and clerics, most people regarded cats as being associated with the Devil. During these years madness was relatively uncommon and, in most cases, caused by medical conditions which had existed for many centuries.

To understand the profound change that has occurred in our relationship with cats over the past five centuries, one must first understand how they developed such a bad reputation. Their road to infamy began in 30 BCE when Roman forces under Octavian defeated Egypt and made it a Roman province. The Romans then imported the Egyptian goddess Isis and her companion, the cat-headed goddess, Bastet. According to Donald Engels' book on *Classical Cats*, "The enormous popularity of Isis during the Roman Empire cannot be stressed enough: there are vast quantities of dedicatory inscriptions, votive offerings, altars and temples dedicated to her throughout Europe." Over time Isis merged with the Roman goddess Diana, the goddess of the hunt and nature. As her companion, Bastet protected women and children and was also associated with fertility and childbirth. The Isis-Diana-Bastet religious cult was especially popular with women and spread throughout Southern Europe as the Roman Empire extended its reach. Thus the cat became an important symbol for a religion that became increasingly widespread [1].

At the same time as Roman administrators and traders were disseminating a cat-related religion across Europe, the Roman army was disseminating cats. Cats were important to the army to protect its food supplies and were also regarded as symbols of good luck. According to one source, "a cat was often emblazoned on the shields and flags of Roman soldiers." Thus, for example, cats were brought to England by Roman legions who invaded in 43 CE under Emperor Claudius. After defeating the Celts, Claudius entered their capital at Colchester "at the head of an army made

doubly impressive by elephants.” The Romans would remain in England for almost 400 years [2, 3].

Although the cult of Diana was widespread in Southern Europe, other religions existed in the north. There the various tribes of Teutonic stock, including the Goths, Franks, Saxons, Angles, and Jutes, had largely resisted the Romans and their influence. Many of them followed the Norse religion and worshipped Odin, also known as Wotan, the warrior god; his son Thor (the origin of Thursday), the thunder god; and Freya (the origin of Friday) the fertility goddess and sister-in-law of Odin. The importance of these deities was illustrated by the description of a Norse temple in Uppsala, Sweden:

In the great temple, 900 ells [450 yards] in circumference, and glittering on all sides with gold, stood the image of Odin, sword in hand. In his right was Freya, with the emblem of fertility, and on his left Thor with his hammer.

All of these deities play roles in Richard Wagner’s four nineteenth-century operas, “Der Ring des Nibelungen” [4].

Freya, like Isis and Diana, was strongly associated with cats, two of which were said to pull the chariot by which she traveled. According to one source, “the warriors in the ancient German tribes, unacquainted with big cats [such as lions], made the European wildcat an emblem of courage,” and thus it is not surprising that cats have an important place in their religion. Pictures of Freya with two cats have been found dated to as early as the seventh century, so the association was very old. In addition to fertility, Freya was associated with love, sex, war, and death, and she presided over the afterlife of half the warriors who died in battle; the other half went to Odin’s hall, Valhalla [5].

Prior to the reign of the Roman Emperor Constantine (306–337 CE), Christianity was one of many religious sects in Rome, and its adherents were frequently persecuted. In 313 CE, Constantine issued an edict prohibiting further persecution and became a Christian himself. In 380 CE Christianity was made the official religion of the Roman Empire.

Thus began a struggle that would last for a thousand years to establish Christianity throughout Europe and beyond. The struggle involved internal divisions of Christianity, such as the Cathars and Waldensians who had their own ideas regarding how Christianity should be practiced and challenged the church’s orthodoxy. The struggle also involved external challenges to convert the “pagans” who worshipped deities such as Isis, Diana, and Freya.

Many of the existing religions did not meekly accept Christianity. For example, in the sixth century, after the fall of the Roman Empire, Saxons from Northern Germany invaded Britain and “showed a special hatred of Christianity. They destroyed the churches...slew the clergy, burnt the sacred books, and did their utmost to extinguish the faith.” Attempts by Christians to convert groups such as the Saxons were equally brutal, often based on a choice between being converted or being killed. For example, in 782 CE, Charlemagne, who was the Christian king of

the Franks, defeated the Saxons at Verden in Northern Germany and ordered all 4500 captives to be beheaded in a single day [6].

Despite such tactics, many northerners were reluctant to abandon their traditional gods. It has been claimed that “a majority of the French peasantry, and hence the French people, were still practicing pagans through the eleventh century and even beyond... Female divinities were especially popular among women... A statue of Isis continued to be worshipped in the church of St. Germain-des-Pres in Paris through the thirteenth century, before it was finally removed and smashed.” The worship of Bastet survived in Ypres, Belgium, “through AD 962 when the cult was finally suppressed.” The cult of Diana was still practiced in parts of sixteenth-century Italy where her followers assembled and “feasted and danced in her honor in order to insure the fertility of their fields” [7, 8].

A common method used by the Catholic Church to increase the conversion of “pagans” to Christianity was to discredit the traditional religions. This is illustrated as early as the tenth century by the canon *Episcopi*, an official church document. It described “certain wicked women who, deceived by Satan, believe themselves to join the train of the pagan goddess Diana during the night, and to cover great distances with a multitude of women riding on beasts, and during certain nights to be called to the service of their mistress.” The canon then instructs that:

The bishops and their ministers should by all means make great effort so that they may thoroughly eradicate the pernicious art of divination and magic, invented by the devil, from their parishes, and if they find any man or woman adhering to such a crime, they should reject them, turpidly dishonoured, from their parishes.

This was the beginning of the linking of traditional European religions to sorcery and witchcraft, a linkage that would become prominent over the following four centuries [9].

Another method used by the Catholic Church to discredit traditional religions was to link them to sexual excesses and sinful behavior. This was especially true of the cat-associated Norse goddess, Freya, who was also linked to both fertility and sexual behavior. The contrast between Freya and the Virgin Mary was stark, as noted by a historical account of Freya:

Freyja’s erotic qualities became an easy target for the new religion, in which an asexual virgin was the ideal woman ... Freyja is called “a whore” and “a harlot” by the holy men and missionaries, whereas many of her functions in the everyday lives of men and women, such as protecting the vegetation and supplying assistance in childbirth, were transferred to the Virgin Mary [10].

Insofar as traditional goddesses like Diana, Isis, and Freya were becoming linked to Satan, it was merely a question of time before their associated cats would also be so linked. In *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages*, Jeffrey Russell cited an 1182 account as “one of the first times the Devil appears to his worshippers in the form of a cat.” Saint Dominic (1170–1221), the founder of the Dominican Order, also taught that the Devil sometimes appeared as a black cat [11, 12].

It was Pope Gregory IX, however, who officially and definitively linked cats to the Devil. Trained as a lawyer, Gregory was a friend of Saint Dominic and was most concerned to confront the church's heresies when he became Pope in 1227. To gather information on heresies associated with the worship of Freya in Germany, Gregory appointed a local priest, Conrad of Marbury. Through the use of torture, Conrad elicited wild tales of Devil-worshippers holding orgies presided over by a large cat. Anxious to put down such heresies, Pope Gregory accepted the stories as truth and in 1233 issued an official papal bull, "Vox in Rama." In it he repeated some of Conrad's stories:

Now this pestilence arises from the following beginnings. At first, a certain postulant [potential initiate] enters this school of perdition and is received. A kind of frog appears, which some are accustomed to call a toad. Some kiss it on its rear end and others give the damnable kiss on the mouth, receiving the tongue and saliva of the beast in their mouth. Along with the frog, sometimes a number of other animals are present, such as geese or ducks. These are often placed in an oven to bake. Then a thin pallid man comes forward to see the postulant. He appears like the skin drawn over bones that is left after some meat is consumed, and has the blackest of eyes. The postulant kisses him and feels cold and frigid. After the kiss, the memory of the Catholic faith completely disappears from his heart. They recline on couches during the banquet and they stand up when the meal is over. At this time, a black cat (*gattus niger*), the size of a small dog, with an upright tail descends backwards down a statue which is usually at the meeting. The postulant first kisses the cat's rear, then the master of the sect, and then other individuals in order who are worthy of the honor and perfect. Those who are imperfect and those not regarded as worthy, receive a word of peace from the master. Then, each member takes his place and after singing some songs, they face the cat in turn. The master says, "Save us" to the cat, and the one next to him states this. Then those present respond three times and say, "We know the master," and four times they say, "and we ought to obey you."

Following a sexual orgy a man then appears "from an obscure corner of the meeting." His upper body "shines with rays brighter than the sun" but his lower body "is hairy like a cat." This was Satan [13].

"Vox in Rama" urged the bishops to root out such heresies. "No vengeance against them is too harsh," according to Pope Gregory. "It is quite fitting that this pestilence be ground down as if by the pounding of the sea." Gregory then reminded the bishops that such actions were justified by the Bible, such as "zealous Elijah who put 450 prophets of Baal to the sword in the torrent of Kishon." Here, then, was an official death warrant for heretics and their cats. It would take cats 500 years to recover [13].

3.2 Cats During the Renaissance

At the same time as cats were valued for pest control during the Renaissance, they were otherwise held in low esteem and widely suspected of being associated with Satan. Indeed, the church had said that Satan often transformed himself into a cat and had therefore sanctioned their killing. Thus throughout Western Europe during the Renaissance, cats were tortured "to drive out the Devil," especially during Lent:

They were killed and buried in Oldenburg, Westphalia, Belgium, Switzerland and Bohemia; burnt on Shrove Tuesday in the Vosges, and in Alsace at Easter. In the Ardennes they were thrown into bonfires or roasted on the ends of long poles, or in wicker baskets on the first Sunday in Lent.

At Ypres during Lent, cats were thrown to their death from a high tower, a practice that continued until 1618. At Metz beginning in 1344, 13 cats were placed in an iron cage and burned, a practice that continued annually until 1777 [14–16].

The association of cats with Satan is also reflected in some paintings from the Renaissance period. A well-known example is Lorenzo Lotto's 1534 painting of "The Annunciation." Archangel Gabriel, with God the Father in the background, tells the Virgin Mary that she will give birth to a son. A cat, thought by many to represent Satan, flees in terror (Fig. 3.1). Art historian Caroline Bugler called this "one of the most memorable images of a feline ever produced." Another example is Domenico Ghirlandaio's 1481 painting of "The Last Supper." Judas is seated apart from the other Disciples across the table from Christ and a cat sits prominently at Judas' feet (Fig. 3.2). Renaissance artists portraying Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden also "often added a cat to emphasize her insubordination" [17, 18].

Fig. 3.1 Lorenzo Lotto, "The Annunciation", 1534. Oil on canvas. As Archangel Gabriel tells the Virgin Mary that she will give birth to a son, a cat, thought to represent Satan, flees in terror. (Image courtesy of the Recanti Musei, Recanti, Italy)





Fig. 3.2 Domenico Ghirlandiaio, “The Last Supper”, 1481, Fresco. Judas, seated apart from the other Disciples, has a cat, thought to represent Satan, sitting at his feet. (Image courtesy of Angelo Tartuferi, Director of Museo di San Marco, Florence, Italy)

The association of cats with Satan was strengthened following the bubonic plague of 1348–1349 which killed up to half the people in Europe. The population of England was reduced from 5 to 2.5 million. Some people believed that cats had caused the plague. For example, one document from the Inquisition described “a powder made from the body of a cat stuffed with herbs, grain and fruit, which is then hurled down from mountaintops in order to cause plague.” In fact, the killing of cats probably made the plague more severe by allowing the rat population to increase [19].

The situation for cats grew even worse after 1400 when “witch hysteria” overtook Western Europe. Initially many animals were associated with witches, including cats, dogs, goats, wolves, rabbits, and toads, and “it was only in the later centuries when...cats were perceived as attractively exotic and mysterious, that they became the featured animal.” In one of the first witch trials in Italy in 1424, a woman was said to have assumed the shape of a cat and had tried to kill her neighbor’s child; she was burned at the stake. In the first witchcraft trial in England in 1566, a woman was said to have “a whytte spotted catte...[and they] feed the sayde catte with breade and milkye...and call it by the name of Satan.” Accused of using sorcery to kill her husband, she was convicted and hanged [20–22].

Thus during the Renaissance period for the vast majority of the population, cats were thoroughly discredited. They continued to be used for pest control but were otherwise held in low esteem by most people. In his 1607 book *The History of the Four-Footed Beasts*, Edward Topsell described cats as “an unclean and impure beast that liveth only upon vermin and ravening.” And William Shakespeare spoke for many when he wrote in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*: “Hang off, thou cat, thou burr! Vile thing, let loose, or I will shake thee from me like a serpent!” [23, 24].

3.3 The Beginning of Cat Rehabilitation

Remarkably, in the middle of the Renaissance period, at the time when the status of cats had reached its nadir, the rehabilitation of cats began. Major credit for this goes to Leonardo Da Vinci. According to art historian Stefano Zuffi, “Leonardo was fascinated by every aspect of nature, but he had a particular fondness for horses and cats.” During the 1470s, when Leonardo was still in his 20s, he made a series of drawings of the Madonna with baby Jesus holding a cat. One of these appears to have been a sketch for an altarpiece, but it is not known whether it was ever painted. When Leonardo was in his 60s, he was still drawing cats, including a famous sketch of cats in different poses that hangs in Windsor Castle [25].

What is most unusual about Leonardo’s interest in cats is that it occurred during the period when cats were being strongly associated with Satan and witches. In 1486 the *Malleus Maleficarum*, usually translated as the “Hammer of Witches,” was published in Germany. This was the infamous book on witchcraft that was used by officials for identifying witches by means of torture; it recommended burning at the stake as the proper punishment. Yet even as this book was widely circulating, Leonardo was portraying a cat as a pet for Jesus. Increasingly over the next century, other European artists included cats in benign poses in their paintings, such as Germain Le Mannier’s 1553 childhood portrait of the French King Charles IX holding a cat, Annibale Carracci’s 1590 painting of two children playing with a cat, and Federico Barocci’s 1580 painting the “Holy Family with a Cat” in which John the Baptist, as a child, plays with a cat as Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus look on. By contrast, during this same period, many other artists were associating cats with evil.

Leonardo’s drawings of baby Jesus holding a cat and subsequent paintings of children holding or playing with cats by other artists suggested that cats were occasionally being used as pets. Pet keeping at that time was a comparatively novel idea in Europe. In England it was strongly associated with royalty and the aristocratic ladies of the court. For example, King Richard II, who ruled from 1377 to 1399, kept a pet greyhound dog, even allowing it to sleep on his bed. Most of the earliest pet keeping, however, involved aristocratic ladies and small dogs. The noble women would carry them around and feed them from the table during meals. John Caius, a physician and naturalist, was the court physician to King Edward VI, Queen Mary, and Queen Elizabeth so had abundant opportunity to observe this practice. In his 1576 book *Of English Dogges*, Caius ridiculed the practice:

These dogges are little, pretty proper and fine, and sought for to satisfie the delicatenesse of folly for them to play and dally withal, to trifle away the treasures of time, to withdraw their minds from more commendable exercizes, and to content their corrupted concupiscences with vaine disport.

Such women, added Caius, “delight more in dogges that are deprived of all possibility of reason, than they do in children that be capable of wisdom and judgement” [26].

As an artist and scholar, Leonardo became one of the first of this group to support pet keeping. In a dissertation on “Late Medieval Pet Keeping,” Kathleen Walker-Meikle described the importance of pets for writers at that time:

There is a great deal of evidence to suggest that pets, as portrayed in iconography, verse and letters, formed part of scholarly domestic life and these sources signify that the practice, which received little criticism, was widespread. The iconography suggests that pets became an artistic motif common to scholars, while verses written by scholars eulogizing their pets often received acclaim, and were widely imitated. The strong emotional attachment of scholars to their pets was not seen as an eccentricity but rather as a typical response to owning a companion animal.

Walker-Meikle cited not only published works and letters but also evidence from tombstones and especially “elegies and epitaphs written on the death of a pet, marking the owner’s emotional attachment to the animals.” In short, she concluded, “pet keeping was widespread among scholars” [27].

Although most of the writers cited by Walker-Meikle kept small dogs as pets, a few kept cats. For example, Italian poet Francesco Coppetta (1509–1553) wrote a lengthy elegy on the death of his cat, describing how “the cat would playfully bite his foot, leap on his chest and then go to sleep on his shoulder, presumably while the poet was writing at a desk.” Joachim du Bellay (1522–1560), a prominent French Renaissance poet, wrote a poem lamenting the loss of his cat that had been allowed to sleep on his bed “and even steal from his master’s plate.” Italian poet Cesare Orsini (1571–1640) also wrote an epitaph to his dead cat, recalling how it “leaps into his lap with gentle paws, climbs up his shoulder, licks his face, purrs to the delight of his owner’s ears, and playfully bites his hand.” Thus according to Walker-Meikle, “owning a pet for a scholar is seen as a common occurrence, nothing to be commented on, apart from possibly being eulogized in verse” [28].

An example of feline iconography from this period is Antonello da Messina’s 1475 painting of “St. Jerome in His Study.” St. Jerome, a fourth century theologian and historian, was credited with having translated the Bible into Latin. In the painting, St. Jerome is depicted reading at his desk with a cat lying quietly near his feet. According to Stefano Zuffi, placing the cat “alongside the scholarly saint is to fortify the alliance between intellectuals and cats.” Walker-Meikle made the same point: “The presence of a pet in depictions of scholars portrays the social reality of widespread pet keeping by scholars, in keeping with their interior lifestyles...there is reason to think that it was a general phenomenon: that a pet was a normal accessory of a scholar in his study along with a desk, writing implements and books” [29, 30].

Another group that pioneered pet keeping in the late medieval period was the clergy. As Walker-Meikle noted, “It is fairly clear that pet keeping was a common feature of monastic life that was only occasionally officially condemned, and generally tolerated.” This was said to be true “especially in nunneries.” Dogs and small birds were the most common clerical pets, but cats were not rare and had the advantage of being justified to control rodents. Thus in about 1500, a long elegy was written on the death of a pet sparrow, killed by a cat at a Benedictine nunnery in England. Similarly, in a Dutch publication, a nun is shown spinning wool, while “a white cat catches and plays with the spool” [31].

According to Walker-Meikle, “the best evidence of the prevalence of pet keeping in religious orders is the constant criticism of the practice.” An early fifteenth-century directive, for example, ordered that “cats, dogs, and other animals are not to be kept by nuns as they distract from seriousness.” Indeed, the church was obligated to issue such directives even though it was aware that such prohibitions were being widely ignored. Officially the church was claiming that cats were associated with witches and Satan and was beginning to prosecute suspected witches. At the same time, many nuns were keeping cats as pets. James Serpell, in his book *In the Company of Animals*, suggested that “the only reason why the aristocracy and clergy were allowed to indulge in the same practice [of keeping cats as pets] was because they were quite literally above suspicion; their special status elevated them beyond the reach of public censure” [32–34].

The most important Renaissance clerical figure in England who was publicly associated with cats was Cardinal Thomas Wolsey (1473–1530), lord chancellor to King Henry VIII and the most important cleric in England after the archbishop of Canterbury. He was also regarded as the most powerful political figure after the king. Wolsey was described as “a great cat-lover [who] took his cats with him to important meetings, state dinners and church services.” Similarly, William Laud (1573–1645), who was the archbishop of Canterbury and a senior advisor to King Charles I, was also a lover of cats and said to have been “one of the first people in England to import a tabby in the 1630s” [35, 36].

In summary, the Renaissance period in general was not a good time to have been a cat in Europe. Despite being used for pest control, cats were frequently abused and often killed. As the period progressed, a few cats became valued as pets by a small group of aristocrats, scholars, writers, and clergy. It was a modest beginning to what would become a markedly different relationship between cats and people. But it was a beginning.

3.4 Madness in the Renaissance

As had been true in the Middle Ages, occasional cases of madness continued to be described during the Renaissance. According to one scholar, people were considered to be mad if their behavior was “wild, extreme, violent or dangerous...Attacks on kith and kin were especially likely to be interpreted as evidence of insanity, as was self-violence and the destruction of personal property.” Mentally disabled

individuals were divided into “natural fools,” also called idiots, who had been disabled from birth, and “non compes mentis,” also called lunatics, who had developed mental illness later in life. Legal jurisdiction over idiots and lunatics in England was vested in the Court of Chancery until 1540 when it was transferred to the Court of Wards and Liveries [37].

Case histories of madness during this period were relatively few in number. Probably the best-known example was the case of Margery Kempe who came from an affluent family near Norfolk. Following the birth of her first child—she subsequently gave birth to 12 other children—she developed what today would be called postpartum psychosis with prominent auditory and visual hallucinations. She interpreted these as coming from God and in 1438, since she was not literate, sought out a priest who wrote down her story as *The Book of Margery Kempe*. This manuscript was rediscovered in 1934 and subsequently has been widely cited as the first English-language autobiography of a person with psychosis [38].

Another example of madness from this period was the psychosis of King Henry VI who ruled England from 1422 to 1453. He was described by historians as having been a weak and timid but well-meaning ruler. At the age of 31, he had a sudden onset of madness with “no known prodromal signs.” The madness lasted for a year and a half during which time he also had neurological symptoms; for example “he could not walk or keep his head up.” The king’s maternal grandfather, King Charles VI of France, had also had intermittent episodes of madness during much of his reign [39].

An example of madness accompanied by violence was Peter Berchet, a law student in London. Over a period of several weeks in 1573, he exhibited increasingly strange behavior: “He rarely slept and would pace up and down in his room, striking himself upon his breast...and speaking softly to himself.” Ultimately he stabbed a member of parliament thinking the man was someone else. Confined in the Tower of London, Berchet killed a guard and was then executed [40].

The most commonly assumed causes of madness during the Renaissance were physical. Thus Bartholomew de Sackville was said to be mad because of “a blow received on the head,” and John Fitzwilliam’s madness was dated to the time he had been “gravely ill.” Consistent with such physical causes, most cases of madness were expected to eventually recover, as indicated by the fact that court-appointed guardians were only temporary [37].

As noted above, the Black Death and recurrent plagues that followed it decimated the population of England and Wales. By 1485 the total population had been reduced to 2.2 million but then it started to recover. By 1600 the total population had doubled but was disproportionately concentrated in urban areas. London, which had only 50,000 residents in 1500, had quadrupled in size to 200,000 by 1600. This meant that there were an increased number of mad people, including violent ones like Peter Berchet. Hospitals for mad people had become relatively common in Moslem countries, the first having been opened in Baghdad in the ninth century and the first in Europe opened in Moslem Spain in 1410.

The first, and for many years only, mental hospital in England was Bethlem. It was founded in 1247 in the Bishopsgate section of London as a religious priory and,

like all such institutions, sheltered some individuals who were poor or sick. By the early 1400s, it had begun specializing in caring for mentally ill individuals and by 1598 had a census of 21 patients.

The year 1536 marked a major turning point for mad people in England. That year King Henry VIII, in an attempt to weaken the influence of the Catholic Church, began what became known as the dissolution of the monasteries. In addition to the regular churches, there were almost 900 other religious institutions—monasteries, convents, priories, and friaries—housing an estimated 12,000 people. Included in this group were many poor, elderly, and sick people, including mentally ill individuals who could not be managed at home. Some of these institutions were allowed to continue, such as the priory that became Bethlem Hospital, whose ownership was transferred from the church to the city of London. The majority of the institutions, however, were closed, leaving large numbers of poor and sick people with nowhere to go.

Even before the dissolution of the monasteries, mad people who had been released from Bethlem had been observed begging on the streets of London and surrounding villages. For most people begging was illegal in Tudor England, but those who had been in Bethlem were given a special badge allowing them to do so. Many of them adopted a distinctive dress, decorating themselves with multicolored ribbons, a foxtail, and a staff with streamers. These people were widely known as Tom O'Bedlam and Bess O'Bedlam. Since they had a legal right to beg, other people also created false badges, adopted their dress, and begged on the streets.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, following the dissolution of the monasteries, mentally ill beggars became a much more common sight in England. One measure of this was the number of ballads written about them. Such ballads were printed on single sheets or “broadsides” and sold for a penny apiece. The ballads could be read (approximately half of London's males were literate at that time), or they could be sung in the streets or at fairs and were “the cheapest and probably the most widely distributed form of popular literature of the time” [41, 42].

According to a historian of English popular culture, “amongst many individual songs and verses, two principal song-families stand out: ‘Bedlamite verses’ and ‘mad songs’.” Many of them featured Tom O'Bedlam:

From forth my sad and darksome cell,
And from the deep abyss of hell
Poor Tom is come to view the world again,
To see if he can ease distempered brain.
Fear and despair possess his soul,
Hark how the angry furies howl!

Bishop Thomas Percy claimed in 1763 that “the English had more songs and ballads on the subject of insanity than of their neighbors... We certainly do not find the same in the printed collections of French and Italian songs.” And according to David Mellett, “It would be a logical assumption to consider them [Bedlamite songs] as evidence of contemporary popular imagery, and an imagery which they reinforced as well as reflected” [42, 43].

In summary, until the end of the Renaissance period in England, most people in England, except for a small group of artists, writers, and clergy, continued to link cats to Satan. There was also no indication that the incidence of madness exceeded the baseline rate, as described in Chap. 1, of 0.5 per 1000 population associated with cerebral infections, brain trauma, nutritional deficiencies, etc. Bethlem Hospital, England's only mental hospital, housed only 21 patients. But all this was about to change.

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