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psychiatry in literature

St Bartholomew's: a 12th-century clinical case series; and, a young man, Robert by name, 'his witte was recoueryd'

Greg Wilkinson

Bartholomew the apostle was skinned alive and beheaded – according to legend. Miracles were attributed to him and he became associated with medicine and hospitals. The report of Robert's case, from the shrine of St Bartholomew in Smithfield, is preserved in a manuscript in two versions, one in Latin (c.1180) and the other in Middle English (c.1400). *The Book of the Foundation of St. Bartholomew's Church in London* was edited from the original by Moore (1923), to the memory of the founder in 1123 of St Bartholomew's church and hospital, Rahere, who himself is fabled to have recovered miraculously from fever. Wilmer & Scannon (1954) count 57 examples, children and adults, 22 neuropsychiatric in nature. Beyond psychiatric phenomena, the text brings to life medieval romantic and religious motifs in comprehensible prose:

'A Certeyne yonge [man] cumly [handsome] of persone, Robert by name / from his yonge age norrysshid [brought up] yn courte, from Northampton purposid to Londone / And it happid hym / thorow a thyke woode to make his passage / where he, wery of his iorney / toke his reste / one the grownd, and a while with a litill slepe recreate [refresh] hym / that, his way begone / the swyfterly he might parforme / but loo, whyle he sowghte reest / he fownde labur, and whan he wolde with a litill reest his wery lymys refresshe, he was yntanglyd with the snarys of his ennemy [the devil]. In his slepe his olde ennemy aperid to hym / yn the forme of a right fair womane / the wichie with flateryng chere it semyd to haue sitte at his hede; And whan, with flaterynge blandysh / A goodwhyly she hadde flateryd hym / And smothid hym / she put a litill bird yn to his moweth, And so aperid no more / the man awakid, was afrayed of this vrwount vision / and the same houre he lost his wytte / and resoun [reason] of all myght [capacity] was priuate [deprived] / and what was for to be done / or lefte, he knew nat / ledynge hym woidenes [agitated] / nowe this way / now that way / he wanderid rennyng / vnknowynge what he did / hastily he went whedyr the ympetuoussnes of the malicious woodenes [madness] ympellid hym / At the last he was takyne at Londone, And brought to the chirche of seynt Barthilmewes / And ther yn shorte space his witte was recoueryd; where a litill tyme he taried / blessyng God, that to his Apostles hath vouchesaf to commytte his excellent power / to hele syke / to clense lepers / and to caste owte feendys.'

Robert and his fellow patients were all received at the shrine or hospital. Most experienced 'miraculous' relief. Some remained as in-patients for a time or recovered over a period with contemporaneous local care – as they still do today.

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