Introduction

Composed sometime around 1300, the *Arzneibuch* (Book of Medicine) penned by Ortolf of Baierland (Bavaria) was one of the first German-language medical texts. A small textbook of medicine, it would be copied by hand for decades, finding its way into the libraries of physicians, as well as those of monasteries and wealthy layfolk. It would even be printed at least six times in the 1470–80s, making it one of the most popular medical texts in German-speaking areas by the end of fifteenth century. And yet, little is known of its medieval author and even the dating of the text is uncertain. Manuscript versions of the *Arzneibuch* give some clues: that Ortolf was from Bavaria and that he was “a doctor of Würzburg” and a “master,” both appellations suggesting that he was university-trained. He may have been a physician, though it is perhaps even more likely that he was surgeon, given both the text’s interest in surgery and archival evidence of a “Master Ortolf” who was a surgeon in Würzburg in 1339.

Whoever he was and wherever he learned his medical knowledge, Ortolf was a gifted medical compiler taking part in a broad trend of medical dissemination taking place in the later Middle Ages. He took a large body of sophisticated university-level medical theory and practice and synthesized it, creating a vernacular handbook of medicine that covered every major area of medieval medicine and healing. The list of the Latin authors he knew (though some only in derivative sources) includes the most famous names of medieval medicine: Hippocrates, Galen, Avicenna, Constantinus Africanus, Macer, Isaac and Aegidius, and Gilbertus Anglicus. Ortolf himself offered little content that was truly new to medical theory or practice. His textbook was reductive and simplified, not cutting-edge. But it was not merely a German copy of a Latin textbook. Ortolf chose what to include and what to omit, he decided how to explain complex etiologies in simplified language, and he selected which therapies to offer his audience.

Ortolf began his *Arzneibuch* with chapters that briefly explained the theoretical foundations of medicine: the elements, the qualities of heat/cold and wet/dry inherent in every natural thing, the basic temperaments, the primary organs of the body, and the fundamentals of health and disease from diet and bloodletting to pregnancy and pill-taking. He then included tracts on the pulse and on urine (the two classic diagnostic tools of the medieval physician), and a section on the most famous Hippocratic aphorisms, the “sound-bites” of ancient Greek medical theory and prognosis that were a part of any medical student’s first-year studies. The bulk of the book, however, was Ortolf’s rendition of a typical head-to-foot textbook of diseases. It is here that we find Ortolf’s most sustained treatment of madness.

By the end of the thirteenth century, drawing from the Greek, Roman, and Arabic medical traditions, European medicine had developed a sophisticated approach to explaining and treating madness. While medical theory was largely silent on intellectual disability (finding states of “natural folly” to fall outside their purview), sudden irration-
ality was perceived, at least by doctors, as a medical problem. Medieval doctors understood various forms of madness as illnesses that were located in the brain. The most common illnesses known to produce irrational behaviors were frenzy, mania, melancholy, and the more catatonic states of lethargy and stupor. All of these illnesses were caused by humoral imbalances or by corrupted humors and vapors that rose up into the brain and disrupted sensory and cognitive functions. (Before the modern age, Western medicine understood the body to be governed by four primary fluids, or humors: blood, phlegm, black bile, and yellow bile.) The specific descriptions, causes, and even treatments of madness were exceptionally wide-ranging and often overlapping. Symptomatic behaviors included excessive speech or laughter, debilitating emotional states, superhuman strength, delusions, and a failure to recognize well-known people and things. Causes ranged from head injuries, bad food, and dog bites to shock, childbirth, unrequited love, and even prior demonic possession. Most medical explanations of madness, however, honed in on one or more of the non-naturals, factors external to the body that affected the body’s health: air and environment, food and drink, bodily excretion, sleeping and waking, rest and exercise, and passions of the soul or emotions. Any imbalance in one of these areas could disrupt the health of the whole body, including the workings of the mind. Based on this principle, medieval medicine promulgated an equally wide range of remedies generally related to diet, medication, and environmental therapies both benign (e.g., sweet smells) and extreme (e.g., prescribed confinement or chaining up). Treatment often involved topical applications and ingestible concoctions made from the animal, vegetable, and mineral ingredients that comprised medieval pharmacopeia. Perhaps most striking for modern audiences is the absence of any attempt to talk to those suffering from mental illness. Indeed, there was no such thing as a medieval “psychiatric” approach to mental illness, for the problem was perceived as fundamentally physical. Isolation, protection, and the provision of basic foods and remedies, not talk therapy, was the rule of the day.

We find very little of the complicated Latin specifications of various mental illnesses in Ortolf’s text. Faced with the need to simplify medical theory as well as to determine or invent the best German words for terms that had really only existed in a Latin setting, Ortolf chose not to render the concrete, diagnostic Latin terms for different types of mental illnesses into different German terms. Instead, he called them all unsinnigkeit, or madness. Ortolf also drastically cut the complicated explanations of internal and humoral causations of each kind of madness that the Latin tradition contained, offering instead a synthetic look at the many ways madness could arise and the various symptoms displayed.

Despite his simplifications (and conflations), Ortolf was clearly very interested in madness and his textbook influenced generations of doctors and interested lay readers. Brief discussions of madness are scattered throughout the Arzneibuch and Ortolf explains it at length twice in his head-to-foot discussion of various diseases. These are the chapters presented below. The first section offers a description of mad states that in the Latin tradition fell under the rubric of “frenzy,” but Ortolf rather intriguingly also tacks on therapies for lethargy (the sleeping sickness) at the end of his discussion. The second section, as he states himself, addresses the condition known in Latin as mania, but it also includes discussions and therapies related to melancholy in more sophisticated texts. By taking all of these specific diagnoses and relabeling them all as “madness,” Ortolf was perhaps showing a sensitivity to the practical fact that much of his audience would not likely parse out distinctions between different mental illnesses. But he was also laying the foundation for a general category of mental illness in German culture. Unsinnigkeit was
now claimed as a generic medical term for madness, and its prominent use in Southern Germany in legal and civic records in the fifteenth century suggests that Ortolf’s text had a linguistic impact, and perhaps a medicalizing influence, on cultural conceptions of madness in Southern Germany in the later Middle Ages.

It is also important to note that Ortolf was particularly interested in therapy. His chapters on how to treat the “mad” are far longer than his chapters describing what madness actually is, and his treatments run the gamut: from complex compound medications to simple therapies. This focus on therapy emphasizes again the practical nature of Ortolf’s text. One need only know a few key diagnostic markers of madness in order to understand the condition enough to try out appropriate treatments. Some of those treatments, moreover, are particularly easy to enact. Ortolf’s emphasis on treatment thus serves to draw attention to the treatability and curability of irrational states. In fact, one might argue that the great takeaway from Ortolf’s text is that madness is a physical malady that can be cured by physical therapies. Madness would remain a troubling and anxiety-producing phenomenon in late medieval Germany, but Ortolf’s text suggests that it was not perhaps as mysterious or as irreversible a condition as modern observers might assume.

Bibliography


Ob der mensch von seinen sỳnnen kompt.

Und wirt der mensch unsỳnnig in einer sucht oder nach der bekerung des geschicht ettwenn von einem geswer in dem haubt, ettwenn von unbriger hitze und von dem pradem der in im pliben ist. Ist es von einem geswer das soltu also erkennen, so ist sein harnn plaich und dunne und hat zu aller zeit starcke hitze und sihet mit den augen greulichem umb und ist albeg unsỳnnig. Ist aber es von dem unraÿnen pradem, so ist der harnn nicht als weis und nicht als dunne und hat nicht als gros hitze und als gros unsỳnne.

dem hilff also, du solt den sichen in ein vinsternus legen und das man wenig mit im reden, das er icht unsỳnniger werde. darnach nỳm essig und saltz und reib im hende und fusse an den solen damitten. Darnoch ob er in dem leibe herte sei. so leret Gilbertus in seinem puch das man im sol machen das Clister. Nỳm pappeln und ebische wurtzel. linsamen. fenugrecum und ein wenig saltzes. seud es in vier pfunden wassers und seih es durch ein tuch und tu ein wenig hônig und paumöls dartzu und gewss es bei einem pfund mit einem Clistere unden in dem leib. Oder nuym das ist als gut. einen loffel vol hònigs und als vil saltzes und seud es mit einander untz das honig swartz werde so thu es herab und las es ein wenig kalten und mach da von zephelein also lang ein vinger seỳ. und schewb im eins nỳden in den leib oder zwaỳ so wirt er waìch in dem leib. Man sol auch nemen ein hun und sol es auffreissenn auff dem ruchen und lege ims auff das haubt und an die stirne es senfftet sere. Nim mahensamen und weissen pilensamen Stos es klain und misch es mit einem weỳssen eins aỳs und mit frawen milch und bestreich im das haubt damit und an die

If a man goes mad

If a man goes mad during an illness or after a bettering of the condition, it is sometimes from a tumor in the head, other times from excess heat and vapor that remains inside him. If it is from a tumor, then you should find that his urine is pale and thin, and the patient continually has a strong heat, and he has an appearance with frightful eyes and is totally mad. If, however, it is from unclean vapor, then his urine is not as white and not as thin and he does not have so great a heat nor such great madness.

You help him thus: You should place the sick man in darkness and others should speak little to him so that he does not become even more mad. Then take vinegar and salt and rub his hands and the soles of his feet with it. Then, if he is constipated, Gilbert in his book teaches that one should make him this clyster: Take mallow and marshmallow root, linsseed, fenugreek, and a little salt. Simmer them in four pounds of water and strain it through a cloth and add a little honey to it and olive oil and administer to the patient one pound at a time up into the body with an enema. Or take this, which is just as good: a spoonful of honey and just as much salt and simmer it together until the honey turns black. Then take it off the heat and let it cool a bit and make a suppository from it as long as a finger and position one or two in the body. Then his body will soften. One should also take a hen and cut open from the back and place it on the head and forehead and it is very calming. [This is also a noble remedy:] Take poppy seeds and white henbane seeds ground them small and mix them with an eggwhite and breast milk and spread

henbane seeds also ”Pilzenkraut” (lat. Justicianus), a plant commonly used in therapies for madness, but also often warned against as causing madness
it on his head and forehead and ears and in his nostrils and on his temples. Or take two lots\(^7\) of henbane seeds and grind them with good wine and then spread it on the forehead and in the ears and nostrils. He will immediately sleep. One should also note that if a person prevails against the sleeping sickness,\(^7\) that is good. If, however, he is mad after the sleeping sickness, he will die. If, however the person is physically well, then bleed him in the middle of his forehead. You can give him almond milk and barley water\(^8\) to drink. You should also lay him in a place that is cool and strewn with red willow or with roses. This helps.

**Von der unsinne**

Mania is an illness that is called madness and develops sometimes from bad food or drink. Or from the excessive drinking of strong wine. Or from hot\(^9\) food like from garlic or overly peppered food. Or from a mad animal that has bitten a person. Or from unhealthy air. Or from anger or excessive drunkenness.\(^10\) Sometimes the illness comes from excessive heat or moisture, or from [too much] blood. [In these cases] the mad are always happy and singing and laugh often from the whole heart. If it comes, however, from blood burned in the body, then they are sometimes happy and sometimes angry. If it comes from heat and from dryness, then they are angry and cry out and hit [themselves and] others. If it comes from cold and dryness, then they are always sad and fear what they should not fear and hide in the dark and cry or they imagine they are God and that Heaven has been taken from them. Some think that they have lots of goods in their hands and no one can open their hands. Some crow as though they are roosters. Others bark and believe they are dogs, or they believe that they do not have heads.

lots a lot is unit of weight typically 1/32 of a pound
Man sol in also helffen sind sie von grosser kranckheit und von trübnüs unsinnig worden. so sol man sie fröhlich machen und sol in geloben vil gutes dinges die kost sol ring sein als zigenflisch oder junge hüner und newe gelegte aÿr und schön prot und geit man in weine den sol man in mischen mit wasser. Man sol in paden und sol in frawen geloben wan das benympt in den zorn und die unsinnigkeit. du solt im lassen die adern bei der minsten zehen auf den fuesse es wart nÿe so guttes nicht. Ditz ist die aller edelste ertzneÿ für alle unsinnigkeit. Nÿm mirabolani citrini kebuli indi sandali violarum iglichs .iii. quintein cinamomi gariofoli lignum aloes spicis kasie lignee petre semis maratti elleboris nigri iglis als wie ein quintein. radicis fenici apii scarioli iglichs . v. quintein capilli veneris semen lactuce iglichs .ii. quintein. stos es alles miteinander sewd es mit .ii. pfuntuen wassers untz das drittayl eingesotten seÿ und solt es drücken durch ein tuch und thu zu dem wasser .iii. pfunt zuchers und sewd es mit dem zucker anderwaiit untz das wasser wol eingeseid und gib sein dem siechen .iii. quintein mit warmen wein und enhilffet dem das nicht und der sieche vil plutes hab. so las im die ader mitten an der stiren. kompt es aber von übriger hitze so gib im gerstenwasser da lacaricie und wegwart in gesotten seÿ und gib im die lectuarien die da haisset diaporiginatum ᵇ dÿ reiniget das plut gar sere man so im auch keint pflaster auf das haubt legen ee man im den leib reiniget. Man so im auch das haubt twahen mit einer lawgen da gammelen und uerbene in gesotten seÿ ist aber ein grosse hitz an dem haubte so bestreich es im mit hauswurtz und mit rosen und mit frauen milich miteinander getemperirt.

One should help him thus: If a person has become mad from great illness and sorrow, then one should make him happy and promise him many good things. His food should be light, like goat meat or young hens and newly laid eggs and fine bread. And if he is given wine, it should be mixed with water. One should bathe him and promise him women, if that takes away anger and madness from him. One should bleed him from his smallest toe, there is none better. This is the finest remedy for all madness: Take yellow, black and kebule myrobalan,° sandalwood, violet, three-quarters each; cinnamon, balsam, clove, aloe-wood, lavender, cinnamon bark, parsley seed, fennel, black hellebore, each a measure; fennel root, wild celery, prickly lettuce, each five measures; venus hair,° lettuce seeds, each two measures. Grind it all together and simmer it with two pounds of water until a third boils off and strain it through a cloth. And add to the water three pounds of sugar and simmer it with the sugar another time until the water boils off. Give four measures of it to the sick man with warm wine. And if that does not help and the person has a lot of blood, bleed him at the middle of the forehead. If, however, the madness comes from too-much heat, then give him barley water in which licorice and chicory were simmered and give him the electuary which is called dyaboraginatum ° which cleans the blood. One should not lay a plaster on his head before cleaning his body. One could also wash his head with brine in which chamomile and verbena have been simmered. However, if there is a great heat in the head, then smear it with a tempered mixture of houseleek and roeswater and breast milk.

° myrobalan trees bearing nut-like fruits, indigenous to southern Asia, that became common in medieval herbals after the influx of Arab medicine. There are five kinds: citrinus, kebulus, indus, bellericus, and emblica.° three-quarters medieval measurements varied considerably, but this likely meant three-quarters of a lot ° venus hair a fern with a number of medicinal uses going back to Greek medicine ° dyaboraginatum a remedy made out of borage, a cultivated flowering plant popularly used in medieval German food and medicine
Endnotes

1 The text below has been compiled by Anne M. Koenig based largely on the 1477 edition printed by Koberg in Nuremberg, but in consultation with three earlier manuscripts, Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek (BSB) Cgm 430 and Cgm 723 and Würzburg, Universitätsbibliothek, Ms. M. ch. f. 79. A copy of the 1477 printing is held in the Bavarian State Library: Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, 2 Inc.c.a. 642, cited passages on f. 17v–18r and 20r–21r. The edition’s spellings and punctuation have been retained but abbreviations have been expanded. Chapter numbers are those given by modern scholars to the text, most recently Ortrun Riha in her 2014 modern German edition of the text (see bibliography). The English translation of the text, as well as the glosses and endnotes, have also been provided by Anne M. Koenig.

2 Noticing the shifts in topic, the 1477 printed edition breaks up the rest of this paragraph and adds two new titles, the first one here: Ob ein mensch nit geschlaggen mag. A few lines later, after Es schleffet zuhant, the printer inserts the title: Von der schlaffende sucht. I have omitted both, since they do not belong to the earlier manuscript tradition.

3 The 1477 text prints klein (“small”) here, however the manuscript tradition clearly indicates that word is meant to be kein (“no”).

4 The therapy of splitting chickens (or puppies!) and placing the spatchcocked carcass on the head is a surprisingly consistent cure offered across medical and popular texts alike.

5 While not present in the 1477 printed text, the manuscript tradition introduces the next recipe with this endorsement.

6 Breast milk is a common ingredient in medicines, going back to ancient times. Pliny the Elder offers a long chapter on the therapeutic uses of “women’s milk” and includes madness among the list of illnesses that it can cure (Pliny the Elder, Naturalis historia, Bk 28.21). Breast milk (like semen) was understood as a substance made from refining blood, and appears frequently in treatments for certain ailments, particularly those of the ears and eyes. Ortolf himself cites it several times, each time for application to a part of the head.

7 This was another disease of the head, and one that Ortolf treats in the chapter following this one. It could cover any range of conditions, from coma and catalepsy to lethargy and excessive sleepiness. Ortolf notes that it particularly affects the aged.

8 Barley water has long been considered a healthy, restorative beverage, from ancient Greece to modern times. It was generally made by boiling barley grains in water and then, if desired, the strained liquid was sweetened or infused with herbs, fruit, or honey. Because barley water was believed to cool and moisten the body, it was a perfect therapy for “hot” maladies.

9 “Hot” here refers to the quality inherent in a thing, not the temperature at which a food is consumed. Some foods, like garlic, were considered to have “hot” properties, while others, like melon, for instance, were considered to have cold properties. Everything that a person ate thus could disrupt, maintain, or restore the body’s own internal balance between hot and cold (and moist and dry).

10 The Nuremberg edition (as well as other print version from the 1470s) substitutes “drunkenness” here. Earlier manuscripts more correctly identify excessive sadness as a cause for madness. Anger and sadness had long been understood by doctors to be dangerous emotions (or what they called “accidents of the soul”) that had clear somatic effects, from constricting the heart to affecting the brain and its psychological faculties.

11 Nuremberg 1477 omits the reference self-harm, but it is an important part of the manuscript versions of the text, so I have reinserted it in this translation.

12 There is some inconsistency in the pronouns in the first few lines, going from ihn to sie back to ihn. I have rendered it all as a masculine singular, in keeping with the rest of the text.

13 The manuscript tradition has “sadness” or “grief” (trawrichait) not “illness” here. The 1477 printed edition thus twice effaces sadness as a cause of madness (see note 11 above).