

King James I's Contribution to the Understanding of Mental Health

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There was a particular monarch in Britain who has been treated rather shabbily by the historians. James VI of Scotland, who eventually became James I of Great Britain when he assumed the English throne on the death of the childless Elizabeth I, had a very difficult upbringing. He lost both his parents in infancy under very tragic circumstances. His mother, Mary Queen of Scots, was forced to abandon him and abdicate in his favour when he was just about a year old. He was the *de jure* King of Scotland when he was just about 13 months old. Brought up under the care of a succession of regents, some with very unsavoury reputations, it is nothing short of a miracle that he managed to emerge from the medieval intrigues and conspiracies that haunted his crown.

But unlike most, if not all, the British rulers, he was known to be an avid reader, and his erudition is very much in evidence in the three major books he authored viz. *Demonologie* which was authored in 1597, *The True Law of Free Monarchies*, which was published in 1598, and *Basilikon Doron* which was published in 1599. Fully cognizant that his subjects were not proficient in Latin, he actively sponsored the translation of Bible into English. He was also known for his scholarly pursuits.

Yet the sobriquet that has been assigned to him in practically every biography that has emerged through several centuries is anything but flattering. He has been identified as the 'wisest fool in Christendom,'^[1] a title he certainly did not deserve. I lay no claim to be a historian but many of my academic colleagues in differ-

ent universities have taken it upon themselves to erase the false impression his sobriquet carries. His contribution to the propagation of Christianity is universally acknowledged. It was he who got the Bible translated into English and even today King James' version of the translated Bible is regarded as the most authentic. It would therefore be perfectly in order to appreciate his contribution to the understanding of mental health.

During my doctoral work in the history of psychiatry at Cambridge, I was intrigued to discover that King James I (1566-1625) was the only reigning monarch who wrote a book which gave impetus to the development of psychiatry. Alarmed at the growing tendency to explain as natural diseases, what in his eyes were supernatural manifestations and work of devil, he was "mooved to preasse so far as I can, to resolve the doubting harts of many; both that such assaultes of Sathan are most certainly practised & that the instruments thereof, merits most severly to be punished; against the damnable opinions of two principally in our age, whereof the one called Scot an Englishman, is not ashamed in publike print to deny that the other can be such a thing as Witch-Craft.... The other called Weirus, a German Phisition..." On his accession to the English throne, James republished his book in London in 1603 and enforced by law, "what exact trial and severe punishment they merite."^[2]

His new Witchcraft Act of 1604 replaced a milder Elizabethan one of 1563 and revived many of the severities of that of 1542 that had been enacted during Henry VIII's reign. Although James's fervor naturally whipped up enthusiasm for witch hunting, it lead paradoxically in the long run to progress. More supposed witches and bewitched, accused and accusers, came before the courts but were now subjected to closer scrutiny for fear of wrongful conviction in face of the drastic penalties. So much importance came to be attached to the issue of witchcraft that apparently for the first



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time medical evidence was called upon in criminal trials. The Church withdrew the right of the priest to examine and exorcise supposed witches and transferred it to the Diocesan Bishop (in whom it theoretically still remains vested even today). In this way, James created unprecedented opportunities for careful and prolonged study of individual cases and himself took an active part in the interrogation, supervision and treatment of some.^[2]

Such detailed investigations of single patients, as always in the history of medicine, lead to an advancement. Growing interest in the phenomenology of nervous and mental diseases quickly resulted in the first book on the subject, and the realization dawned that mental illnesses could produce manifestations like those of possession, which brought in its train new terms like 'imposture' and 'mimical witchery' and to medicine the concept of feigned or simulated insanity as an important differential diagnosis. Next to insanity, hysteria became the medical heir to possession and the fact that as a diagnostic term it still retains the implication of nothing very serious if not actually of being 'put on' can be traced to James I's reign. Incidentally it is interesting that James, in his eagerness to distinguish between possession and insanity, ultimately resorted to differences in body build and personality types which remind the modern reader of Kretshmer's leptosomatic and pyknic habitus and of Jung's introvert and extrovert.

It is very clear that the monarch's ideas on mental illness were nothing short of revolutionary. And the psychiatric community should rightfully extend its debt of gratitude to this pioneering ruler. He actively encouraged philosophical debates on how religion as it was practiced in those days was an impediment to enlightenment and any effort to treat a mentally ill. I would very strongly recommend every historian, not just of psychiatry, but of medicine and philosophy to peruse his seminal work, *Demonologie* where there is a debate on sorcery and witchcraft, that I am reproducing here^[3] using the spellings as they appear in the text. Please bear in mind that this book was written in 1597 when witch-burning and sorcery were very common and widely practiced.

The Description of Sorcery and Witchcraft

PHILOMATHES:

"maniee can scarceley believe that there is such a thing as witchcraft. Whose reasons I will shortly allege unto you, that ye may satisfie me as well in that, as ye have done in the rest. For first whereas, the Scripture seems to prooove

Witchcraft to be, by diverse examples and speciallie by sundrie of the same, which ye have alleaged it is thought by some that these places speakers of Magicians and Necromancers onlie & not of Witches. ...Secondlie where ye would oppone the dailiepractiqu. & confession of so manie, that is thought likewise to be but veriemelancholicque imaginations of simple raving creatures. Thirdly, if Witches had such power of Witching of folkes to death,as they say they have, there had bene none left alive long sence in the world but they, at the least no good or godlie person or whatsoever estate could have escaped their devilirie"

EPISTEMON:

"Your three reasons as I take, ar grounded the first of them negative upon the Scripture. The second affirmative upon Physicke: and the thirde upon the certain prooffe of experience. As to your first, it is most true indeede that all these wise men of Pharoah were Magicians of art. As likewise it appears wel that the Pythonisse, with whom Saul consulted was that of same profession. & so was Simon Magus. But yee omitted to speake of the Lawe of God, wherein are all Magicians of Enchantes, Sorcerers, Witches & whatsoever of that kinde that Consultes with the Devill, plainlieprohibited, and alike threatened against. And besides that, she who had the Spirite of Python, in the Actes whose Spirite was put to silence by the Apostle, could be no other thing but a verie Sorcerer or Witch, if yee admit the vulgar distinction to be in a maner true, whereof I spake in the beginning of our conference. For that spirit whereby she conquested such gaine to her master was not at her raising or commanding as she pleased to appoynt, but spake by her toung, aswel publickly, asprivatelie. Whereby she seemed to draw nearer to the sort of Demoniakes or possessed if that conjunction betwixt them, had not been her owne consent. As it appeared by her not being tormented therewith. And by her conquesting of such gaine to her masters, as I have already said. As to your second reason grounded upon physicke, in attributing their confessions or apprehensiones, to a naturall melancholicque humour. Anie that pleases Physicallie to consider upon the naturall humour of melancholie, according to all the physicians, that ever writ thereupon, theysallfinde that all will be over short a cloak to cover their knavery with. For as the humour of Melancholie in the Self in blacke, heavie ad terrene, so are the symptomes thereof, in any persones that are subject thereunto, leanes, palenes, desire of solitude. And if they come to the highest degree thereof, mere folie and manie; whereas by the contrarie, a great number of them that ever have bene convict or confessors of Witchcraft, as ay be presently seene by manie that have at this time confessed. They are by the contrarie I say, some of them rich and wordly wise, some of them fatte or corpulent in their bodies, and most part of them altogether given over to the pleasures

of the flesh, continual haunting of companie, and all kinds of merrines, both lawfull and unlawfull, which are thinges directly contrarie to the symptomes of Melancholie, whereof I spake, and further experience daylie proves how loathe they are to confesse without torture which witnesseth their guiltines, whereby the contrarie the Melancholicques never spare to bewray themselves, by their continual discourses, feeding therby their humour in that which they thinke no crime. As to your third reason it scarseliemerites an answer. For if the devill their master were not bridled, as the scriptures teacheth us, suppose there were no men or women to be his instrumentes. hee could finde waies inough without anie help of others to wreck al mankind... But beside all this, there is over greate a certainty to prove that they are, by the daily experience of the harmes that they do, both to men, and whatsover thing man possesses, whome God will permit them to be the instrumentes, so to trouble or visite, as in my discourse of that arte, yee shall hear clearelie proved!"

Acknowledgement

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3. King James. Daemonologie. A Critical Edition. In *Modern English*; 2016.

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