



**Dionys Fitzherbert.** *Women, Madness and Sin in Early Modern England: The Autobiographical Writings of Dionys Fitzherbert.* Edited with an introduction by Katharine Hodgkin. Farnham: Ashgate, 2010. 300 pp. \$114.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7546-3018-0.



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**Published on** H-Disability (March, 2011)

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Reflecting the nature of the available historical sources that usually originate from institutions, medical practitioners, and the families of those labeled mad, the history of madness has tended to focus on the social construction of insanity and responses to it, rather than on how individuals experienced madness. Indeed, first-person narratives, and especially reflections on mental health from people who were labeled mad by their communities, are rare. Given this dearth, the writings of the early-seventeenth-century gentlewoman Dionys Fitzherbert, which give her perspective on a period during her life when she was considered mad by her family and friends, are an exceptional record. *Women, Madness and Sin* is an edited transcription of the writings of Dionys Fitzherbert, accompanied by a scholarly introduction by Katharine Hodgkin.

Dionys Fitzherbert was born around 1580, one of several siblings in an Oxfordshire, Anglican, gentry household. In her late teens, she went to work as a lady's maid for several high-status families. During this time, according to Fitzherbert's account, she increasingly put the pleasures of the world in front of her spiritual devotions, culminating in her feigning a physical illness to be excused from New Year's festivities as she did not have enough money to buy the customary presents.

This feigned illness became real and Fitzherbert recounted being physically ill—feverish and vomiting—and delusional, speaking against her friends and family and against God. She believed that she had stolen her clothing, that she was to be burned to death by her family, and she contemplated suicide. Fitzherbert seemed to recover from the physical manifestations of her illness after a short time, but remained delusional and was sent to live with a doctor and his wife, before recovering enough to be sent to her family home, where she was finally restored to full health. After her recovery, she wrote a narrative of the events during this time, which was copied twice and placed in two archives. Unusually, all three versions of the text survive. In addition, she wrote various prefaces to the main narrative, as well as letters to friends and family and church leaders, thanking them for their help during this time; or to those of different religious sects, urging them to think on her example and reconcile themselves with (her) God.

Fitzherbert's construction of this period of her life was not of mental ill-health and recovery, but spiritual crisis. Her weakness in forgoing her spiritual devotions for worldly pleasure offered Satan an opportunity to attack her, while God allowed the attack to humble her, like Job, and bring her back to righteousness. Her narra-

tive is full of biblical allusions and verses and her experience was interpreted as a spiritual battle for her soul. This battle manifested in physical illness and delusions, and so required treatment from both medical practitioners and spiritual leaders, mirroring the care she received from her family during this period. Her final steps towards full health were manifested in her ability to return to her spiritual devotions, as well as normal daily activities, like sewing. Physical, mental, and spiritual health, therefore, were entwined and inseparable.

Fitzherbert's narrative is fascinating, being full of competing tensions as she attempted to make sense of what happened to her. She was driven, presumably by a need to resist the label of "madness," to convey her experience as a spiritual battle, and this is a narrative that had social currency during the period. Not only was her version of events apparently accepted—at least by some of her correspondents—but the inclusion of prayer, psalm-singing, religious texts, and religious men in her family's armory of remedies provides insight into the central role of religious practice in the treatment of mental and physical illness in the early modern period. At the same time, her story was full of other hidden tensions, never fully explored. Fitzherbert's anxiety around her family, with hints at resentment over a lack of financial provision for her as a single woman, as well as her belief that that they were going to burn her to death (the punishment for petty treason, where lower-ranking family members killed those of higher status), suggested a personal anxiety over her place within the family network and a sense that she had perhaps betrayed them or let them down. Fitzherbert also appears as a woman trying to resist social conventions through her religious beliefs. She used religion as an excuse to read avidly, reinforcing this by claiming she could not read when ill, but that reading the Bible and other texts was central to restoring her to full health—disrupting conventional beliefs that associated reading with melancholy, especially for women. Similarly, she actively sought to publicize her writing (through having it copied and distributed), arguing that it was justified by the public nature of her illness but also allowing her to stake a claim as an authority on spiritual crisis.

The social context of Fitzherbert's writing is explored within Hodgkin's very comprehensive introduction. Hodgkin places the narrative within the historiography of "madness" in early modern England, as well

as that on women's writing and spiritual autobiography. She provides a sophisticated and comprehensive overview of the literature, locating the text within its cultural context and comparing it to other similar writings of the period. Hodgkin also provides a detailed background to Fitzherbert's life, reconstructed from other sources, helping us place the many family and friends that appear throughout her tale. This is supported by numerous footnotes throughout the transcript that provide background for the central actors. Finally, Hodgkin discusses her editorial decisions in the transcription process, beginning with an exploration into the options and scholarly best practice, before detailing the particular issues that arose with transcribing this particular set of writings.

Particularly impressive, and speaking to the high standard of scholarship that has gone into this endeavor, is the provision of two transcriptions of Fitzherbert's writings. The first, appearing on the left-hand page, is a replica of the original text, containing the original spelling, grammar, and line breaks, providing as much as possible the content and "feel" of the original source. On the right-hand page is a modern transcription of the text, with standardized spelling and the introduction of necessary, but still minimal, grammar. On this page are numerous footnotes providing definitions for archaic words, sense for inscrutable sentences, the Bible verses for the numerous biblical allusions, observations on where the original narrative differs from the copies, and the social background to the central characters and events. There is also an appendix that includes transcriptions of sections from the copy versions of the text that differ significantly from the original text. Overall, this is an excellent example of a high-quality transcript that provides the nuances of the original text required by the academic specialist and the accessibility needed for the non-specialist, but knowledgeable, reader.

*Women, Madness and Sin* contributes a unique source to the field of disability studies, which gives insight into how early modern England understood and treated mental illness, but in addition, it is a wonderful contribution to the social history of the period, providing information on family relationships, religious belief, women's work and social activities, as well as their sense of self and social authority. With its comprehensive introduction and meticulous transcription, Hodgkin has made this fascinating source available to a broad audience.

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**Citation:** Katie Barclay. Review of Fitzherbert, Dionys, *Women, Madness and Sin in Early Modern England: The Autobiographical Writings of Dionys Fitzherbert*. H-Disability, H-Net Reviews. March, 2011.

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