

Wilson on Murat (2014)

Murat, Laure. *The Man Who Thought He Was Napoleon: Toward a Political History of Madness*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014. Pp. x + 288. ISBN: 978-0-226-02573-5

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This impressive volume, following on from the prize-winning *La Maison du Docteur Blanche* (2001), further cements Laure Murat's position as one of the preeminent historians of French psychiatry in her generation. It is based on the meticulous analysis of newly identified archive material from the great Parisian madhouses: Bicêtre, Charenton, the Salpêtrière, and Sainte-Anne, and various obscure private clinics. Murat examines the mutually influential relationship between political history and the discourses of the insane during the heyday of alienist medicine, from Pinel's 1800 *Traité* to the collective trauma of the "semaine sanglante" of the 1871 Paris Commune, unpicking how the belief systems of the insane offer a commentary on their times: "What does madness *make* of history ['Comment délire-t-on l'Histoire?'], and how, in turn, were nosologies contrived or discarded as a function of change in regime?" (4).

In many respects, this is a book about the aftershocks of historical occurrences for ordinary people. It describes the ripple effects created by a traumatic national event, expressed in the mental language of delusions, visions, and recurring nightmares. The first chapter, "Revolutionary Terror," focuses on the dread of the guillotine and its symbolism: "psychiatry and the guillotine share an attachment to the link between head and body (whether joined or separated), to the integrity of self and consciousness" (34). Conversely, historically contingent ideas also influenced medical diagnosis, such as the term "révolution": "records at the Salpêtrière notably featured *révolution* in the sense of physiological 'turmoil' [...], sometimes employed in expressions such as 'delusion subsequent to turmoil [*révolution*] from having seen a man hanged' and 'she experienced turmoil on the death of her child.'" (54). These archival references to the guillotine seem to stop in 1857, marking out its singular presence in the collective imagination for generations. Such observations, as well as the thoughtfully positioned postamble on the current state of psychiatric services, raise crucial questions about the influence of political and cultural beliefs on the diagnostic process. Murat correctly points out that a lack of archival material would make such an endeavor impossible today, but the question is a valid one. In this respect, Murat's book reaches far beyond the realm of nineteenth-century history in its significance.

Further chapters examine the function of asylums as political prisons, through the cases of the Marquis de Sade, at Charenton, and Condorcet, who was protected by Pinel. Murat takes a measured view of the question of repressive medical power: a careful analysis of the evidence demonstrates that while "psychiatrists participated in a system of government surveillance and control, shaped by the authoritarian morality of their century," neither were they "sadistic jailers" (82). In fact, one of Murat's most original observations is that, far from being a monolithic group, alienists themselves sometimes resisted the very power networks in which they were implicated.

The chapter on Napoleon's legacy offers a highly entertaining and astute analysis of the phenomenon of "monomanie ambitieuse," that is to say, "delusions of grandeur," as a description inspired by—but also applicable to—the late Emperor himself. There were swathes of usurpers imitating the ultimate usurper. Given this appreciation of the fragility of medical discourse and its potential application to any type of unwanted behavior (which laid it open to so much contemporary criticism, particularly from outside the profession) what is perhaps missing from this account—presumably due to the need to prioritize new archival material—is a sense of psychiatric medicine itself as a politically controversial entity. Murat listens attentively to the voices of patients, whose beliefs reflect the turmoil and times in which they lived, but given the linguistic focus here we do not get much sense of political resistance to alienism from patients through the appropriation and subversion of officially sanctioned ideas. Discussion of some noteworthy cases of legally recognized "séquestration arbitraire," which are well documented in the primary material, such as the lawyer Léon Sandon and musician Hersilie Rouy, is notably absent. It should be noted that these cases were never recognized as arbitrary commitments by the medical establishment, but it would have been fascinating to see what Murat would have made of these cases through re-examination of the original archival and published material, if only to nuance some of the unhelpfully polemical accounts of these cases produced by other historians. The book is also brilliantly translated by Deke Dusinberre: with the exception of one or two specialist psychoanalytic terms Murat's stylish prose is transformed into elegant and idiomatic English with all the subtlety of the original French in this highly readable and thought-provoking study.

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