'A Curious Dance Round a Curious Tree': Agency and Amusement in Victorian Asylums

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Abstract:

The perception of the Victorian asylum is dominated by images of manacles, leeches and padded cells. Yet this obfuscates a very different side of these institutions; throughout the nineteenth century a vast array of entertainment was offered in line with new treatment options. This paper will shed light on these activities by discussing Charles Dickens’s article ‘A Curious Dance Round a Curious Tree’ (Household Words, 17 January 1852) alongside an illustration of Christmas celebrations at St Luke’s Hospital (Illustrated Times, 19 January 1861) to investigate whether these embodied a real opportunity to exercise agency or whether they merely represented another tool of social control.

When Charles Dickens visited St Luke’s asylum on 26 December 1851 he was full of trepidation, for he remembered vividly the neglect and abuse in mental institutions of the recent past.¹ St Luke’s had been founded for pauper lunatics in 1750 and during its initial phase enforced the old regime of purges and shackles on the basis of fear and submission.² Dickens’ opening paragraphs highlight this environment, describing the Bethlem and St Luke’s of old and condemning the attendants responsible:

Chains, straw, filthy solitude […]; spinning in whirligigs, corporal punishment, gagging […] nothing was too […] monstrously cruel to be prescribed by mad-doctors. It was their monomania (385).

There is no doubt that certain asylums left much to be desired with regards to adequate patient care. Conditions were often harrowing and the public was understandably outraged. James Norris, chained to the wall in a custom-built harness in his cell at Bethlem was a ubiquitous image,³ and novels such as Elizabeth Braddon’s Lady Audley’s Secret and Charles Reade’s Hard Cash tapped into and fed this particular stream of Victorian consciousness. However, as Showalter declares, ‘during Victoria’s reign, […] the theory and treatment of madness in England underwent enormous, even revolutionary, change’.⁴ Following Pinel and Esquirol’s implementation of so-called ‘moral treatment’ in Paris⁵ and new legislation of the County Asylums Acts of 1808 and 1828 and the Lunatics Act of 1845⁶ a number of institutions sprang up, many of which were pioneering this now fashionable non-restraint system with a focus on cure instead of long-term confinement.⁷ Moral treatment was to be characterised by kindness and attention afforded to all patients, who in turn would ‘be actuated by the common impulse

³ Simon Cross, Mediating Madness: Mental Distress and Cultural Representation (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2010), pp. 53-54.
⁵ Showalter, p. 2.
⁷ Frontrunner of these was Samuel Tuke at the Retreat in York, closely followed by John Conolly at Hanwell and Robert Gardiner Hill at Lincoln; see Jones, p. 21.
of enjoyment, all [...] busy, and delighted by being so'.

This ‘busyness’ would include employment in the asylum as well as participation in recreational activities, be it sporting, creative or otherwise.

The purpose of Dickens’s visit was to witness the celebrations around the Christmas tree, an event still in its infancy in 1851. In light of his own special interest in Christmas as expressed in his novel *A Christmas Carol*, it is not surprising that he chose to describe his experience of this particular visit in great detail. The observations are imbued with a ‘mix of humor [sic], sentiment, and realism’, taking the reader on a journey through the various male and female dayrooms. Dickens laments the state of one gallery as devoid of ‘domestic articles to occupy, to interest, or to entice the mind away from its malady’ (386), thus predisposing its inhabitants to hebetude and ennui. Yet soon after, he voices his relief at the sight of the next room which boasts ‘coloured prints over the mantel-shelf, and china shepherdesses upon it’ (387). It leads him to conclude that there is indeed ‘a great difference between the demeanour of the occupants of this apartment and that of the inmates of the other room. They were neither so listless nor so sad’ (387). This accentuates the role of the material world and emphasises the importance of domesticity in line with new moral treatment ideas. We witness occasional engagement in activities such as ‘a game of bagatelle’ (386/7), before reaching the core of the evening’s festivities. Here, the room is being adorned with holly, music entertains patients and guests alike, and quadrille dancers are setting the scene. Dickens informs us that ‘[...] the ball was proceeding with great spirit, but with great decorum’ (387). The rich plethora of patients taking part in the dance are introduced in typical Dickensian style; we can admire a ‘brisk, vain, pippin-faced little old lady’, ‘a quiet young woman, almost well, and soon going out’, partnered by (as this was one of the few occasions where the sexes could mix) a ‘wry-faced tailor, formerly suicidal but much improved’ and ‘a man of happy silliness, pleased with everything’ (387). It is easy to forget that in Victorian times causes for admission to asylums alongside mania and melancholy included epilepsy, grief, disappointments in love, over-work, masturbation, syphilis, and economic worries, which explains Dickens’s astute observation regarding such differing patient types.

The vigorous dancing and singing ‘until the quaint pictures of the Founders [...] might have trembled in their frame’ (388) pays testament to the popularity of such activities, just as much as the fact that – as soon as the music stopped – the dancers’ return to their respective stations demonstrates an element of control. The lighting of the tree, the procession of patients around it and the distribution of fruit and cake were followed by another session of merriment, ‘compounded of a country dance and galopade’ (388). Dickens closes the account with the following appeal to the public: ‘if you can do a little in any good direction—do it. It will be much, some day’ (389). Here, we can therefore discern an observational sketch of a mid-century lunatic asylum coupled with an attempt to raise funds. Dickens was well known for his social critique of the time and had not only visited other asylums but also included many articles about insanity in both his publications, *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*.13

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13 For a discussion about the changing face of these articles in response to hereditary theories see Deborah Wynne, ‘Dickens’s Changing Responses to Hereditary Insanity in *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*, *Notes and Queries*, 46.1 (1999), pp. 52-53.
According to Simon Cross, Dickens’s visit to St Luke’s was no more than a ‘shrewd public relations manoeuvre by its management’. He contests that Dickens was deployed to write an article which would distance St Luke’s from the notorious Bethlem, hence the initial paragraph referring to malpractices there. However, this is contradicted by the less than flattering descriptions which punctuate the account throughout. Dickens applauds the recovery rate of 69%, yet in the same breath laments the lack of exercise and the ‘rapid accumulation of flesh’ (387), comparing it unfavourably with other institutions of this kind. It was also a fact that Bethlem had undergone major changes, now catering mainly for the middle classes and itself a paragon of moral treatment. The article was indeed used for publicity purposes, but not until 1860, when the governors were granted permission to reprint the report; this now included a section entitled ‘Contrast between 1852 and 1860’ and detailed the improvements in surroundings and occupation. Cross objects to ‘Dickens’s characterisation of the asylum dance’ as a ‘happy event’, judging it ‘a curious, even perverse, interpretation’. He perceives the description of the dance as “media spin”, referring to the numerous appearances of such images in mid-nineteenth-century newspapers. The terms ‘numerous’ and ‘perverse’ are debatable but a similar image depicting a Christmas celebration at St Luke’s was indeed published in the Illustrated Times on 19 January 1861 (Figure 1).

![Figure 1. A Christmas Tree at St Luke’s Asylum, London. Engraving. Illustrated Times, 19 January 1861. Reproduced with kind permission of Bridgeman Images.](image)

The recreation hall is festively decked out; a ‘welcome’ banner is displayed at one end and the band just about discernable on the right hand side, rather suggestive of the harmonious conviviality first mentioned in A Curious Dance. This portrays a later stage of

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14 Cross, p. 75.
17 Cross, p. 75.
18 Cross, p. 75.
the proceedings – following two or three hours of dancing – when according to the accompanying editorial the ‘large tree ornamented with toys, fruit, bonbons, and other appendages was wheeled into the middle of the room’. The attendant beside the tree is distributing these gifts which some of the patients in the foreground of the picture seem to be displaying, whilst the figures in the background are blurring into a sea of indistinguishable heads. The description of this image mirrors the domesticity and decorum of the 1851 account, if perhaps not the vivacity captured by Dickens in the final scene; however, we can expect this somewhat static appearance to be reanimated as soon as dancing recommences.

Both artefacts point to this important component of moral treatment, which was far more commonplace in the search for a cure than perhaps illustrated either in contemporary fiction or modern literature on the history of madness. The publication of Samuel Tuke’s *Description of the Retreat* (1813) set the tone for the ‘need to balance the emotions and distract the patient from painful thoughts and associations’ through the ‘creation of varied employment and amusements’. Provisions for recreation and exercise were often featured in advertisements and credited with ‘valuable restorative function’.

Colney Hatch, for example, Middlesex’s second Pauper Lunatic Asylum which opened in 1851, also regularly entertained its inmates, especially but not exclusively at Christmas (see Figure 2).

![Figure 2. Entertainment to the Patients, at the Middlesex County Lunatic Asylum, Colney Hatch. The Illustrated London News, 15 January 1853. Reproduced with kind permission of the Wellcome Trust.](image)

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23 Showalter, pp. 37-38.
One 1864 account in the *Times* applauds the great success of Colney Hatch’s Christmas festivities which included Chinese Jugglers, contortionists and quadrille bands (‘to keep up a continual succession of dance music’), only to be sarcastically exploited in a subsequent issue of *Punch*.[24] The comical element of insanity highlighted here is mirrored in *A Curious Dance*, where Dickens compares his impending experience to a ‘jocund world of pantomime’ (385), yet the time of publicly exposing inmates for entertainment purposes had by then passed. After all, the account of these festivities resembled very much ‘life on the outside’, as a flyer advertising the ‘Great National Xmas Fair’ at New Cross Public Hall, London in 1884 demonstrates.[26] This was a time when the public explored and adapted Christmas traditions, and entertainment in general began to play an active part in people’s lives; holiday allowances, competitive sporting fixtures, establishment of resort towns and general provision of recreational amenities became commonplace. As Walter Houghton points out, ‘Except for “God”, the most popular word in the Victorian vocabulary must have been “work”’, yet ‘allowance was made for recreation’, because according to Macaulay, ‘Man, the machine of machines [...] is repairing and winding up, so that he returns to his labours on the Monday with clearer intellect, with livelier spirits, with renewed corporal vigour’. It is therefore not unexpected to find a concomitant development in the asylum. Often inmates, especially in pauper institutions, found their social life much enhanced in comparison to their ordinary existence.[31] So much so, that accounts of fun and frolics at Broadmoor Criminal Lunatic Asylum caused public disapproval. This patient letter was printed under the headline *Life in a Criminal Lunatic Asylum: Coddling our Murderers*:

We have about five and a half hours in the gardens every day. There is [sic] books to read...billiards...cards, dominoes, chess...and everything that is necessary for our amusement...I am very satisfied with my lot.[33]

To facilitate the domestication of insanity, particular attention was paid to the location and architecture of institutions. Private institutions, often employing a sobriquet such as Sanatorium or Retreat, resembled country estates with individual apartments and servant accommodation, whilst pauper asylums were understandably less luxuriously designed.[34] However, most boasted recreation halls for plays, concerts and balls, extensive grounds for sports, and day rooms for indoor activities like billiards and board games.

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[31] This was particularly lamented by the public in the case of Broadmoor inmates, discussed by Jade Shepherd, ‘Leisure and the Treatment of Criminal Lunatics in Late-Victorian Broadmoor’, *IHR London Seminar*, 23 February 2015, p. 12. With grateful thanks to the author for making this information available.
games. As Jane Hamlett asserts, ‘The nineteenth century saw a growing interest in the use of team games in asylums generally, and there was some recognition of their therapeutic potential’. Singling out billiards, she continues to describe how due to the required motivation and concentration, ‘Activities at the green baize table were monitored for signs of a return to health and normality, and noted in casebooks’.

Music and dance were closely linked and also deemed particularly therapeutic. They were alleged to lift the spirits and promoted social bonding, not just among patients but also extending to staff. Music and movement were instrumental in ‘re-tuning’ body and mind and restoring inner harmony, a belief which Dolly MacKinnon traces back to antiquity and for which she cites first-hand successful accounts. Dancing was the most welcome entertainment of all, according to this patient at Crichton Royal Infirmary, Dumfries:

Of all kinds of amusements, Balls we consider foremost; they not only tend to make us forget our various delusions and fancies, but they contribute to our bodily health, by giving us muscular exercise [...]. The pleasure is intense.

This statement was recorded in the patient magazine The New Moon, only one of the many activities instigated by the visionary W.A.F. Browne. Crichton was not only the first British asylum to stage a play (for which Browne claimed high cure success), it entertained its patients and staff with concerts, soirées, its own museum, carriage rides, excursions into the surrounding towns - to assist with resocialisation - and a full educational programme. Its most lasting legacy however is Browne’s collection of patient art; very much in the shadow of Richard Dadd (of Bethlem, then Broadmoor), this is nonetheless a remarkable array of artworks which Browne even employed for diagnostic purposes.

The question is whether these accounts and images convey a sense of agency or social control. Whilst Michel Foucault condemned asylums under the banner of ‘The Great Confinement’, it must be remembered that, as Hamlett argues, ‘Within an increasingly governed culture, institutions are imagined as beacons of normative behaviour’. The discipline expressed through adherence to rules and routines was not restricted to life in the asylum; the asylum world was after all just ‘a society within a society - busy [and] purposeful’. Embedded in the asylum regime was thus also the formal employment of patients, dependent on gender and condition; for example, women would regularly

35 See the comparative study by Anna Shepherd, Institutionalising the Insane in Nineteenth-Century England (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2014) discussing the pauper asylum Brookwood and nearby private Royal Holloway; Jane Hamlett in At Home in the Institution also juxtaposes activities and spatial adaptations between pauper and private asylums.
36 Hamlett, p. 53.
37 Cross, p. 75; Shepherd, Broadmoor p. 12.
39 Cross, p. 75; Shepherd, Broadmoor p. 12.
42 Maureen Park, Art in Madness: Dr. W.A.F. Browne’s collection of patient Art at Crichton Royal Institution, Dumfries (Dumfries: Dumfries and Galloway Health Board, 2010), p. 22.
43 Park, pp. 13-22.
44 Exhibition Art and the Asylum: Creativity and the Evolution of Psychiatry, Djanogly Art Gallery Nottingham, 7 September until 3 November 2013. <https://www.academia.edu/5768247/Art_in_the_Asylum_an_introduction> [accessed 20 February 2015].
46 Hamlett, p. 12.
47 Jones, p. 22.
engage in needlework whilst men tended to the gardens.\textsuperscript{48} However, recreating domesticity for both private and pauper patients was paramount in most institutions as a means to recovery,\textsuperscript{49} and this ‘ideal of domesticity’ -like the rise in entertainment- was very much in line with developments outside the institution, especially for the middle and upper classes for whom ‘the idea of comfort was often central’.\textsuperscript{50} The decorum witnessed by Dickens and visitors in other institutions must not be judged in isolation; society as a whole relied - and still relies - upon certain behavioural patterns to distinguish the rational from the irrational. More importantly, agency lies in what Judith Butler calls ‘the ongoing performances [...] subverted by the performers’.\textsuperscript{51} Some patients manipulated these discourses to their own advantage; good behaviour brought reward, and reward was often synonymous with discharge, be it permanent or on home leave.\textsuperscript{52} Gender and class issues not unexpectedly reared their heads in this search for agency of the insane, as working class patients had different needs and expectations, and physical exercise was dominated by men.\textsuperscript{53} An ideal of shared, quasi-familial living pervaded the moral management theory,\textsuperscript{54} and although this in turn carried negative implications for those classes which valued privacy,\textsuperscript{55} it must be stressed that these activities also provided rare opportunities for homo- and heterosocial bonding.\textsuperscript{56} The number of patients attending social events was not always representative of the patient body, but bearing in mind the wide range of causes, this is not at all surprising.\textsuperscript{57} It can be concluded then that on the one hand -not unlike the outside world- behaviour was controlled and class and gender identities fortified. On the other hand, although the limitations of patient letters must be given due consideration,\textsuperscript{58} it has been demonstrated that for some inmates the amusements on offer afforded happiness and possibly restored reason. The asylum’s material world acted as a catalyst to encourage agency, and Christmas was just one such occasion where conviviality and domesticity were employed to provide comfort, in line with concurrent developments in the Victorian home.\textsuperscript{59} The environment may have seemed ‘curious’, as Dickens’s title suggests, and entertainment was used as a marketing ploy but at the same time it can be viewed as an important early therapeutic option, empowering patients and negotiating agency in the hope of a permanent cure.

\textsuperscript{48} Digby, p. 63.
\textsuperscript{49} Parry-Jones, p. 184.
\textsuperscript{50} Hamlett, pp. 4; 5; 20.
\textsuperscript{51} Hamlett, p. 12, n68.
\textsuperscript{52} Parry-Jones, p. 184.
\textsuperscript{53} Hide, p. 57.
\textsuperscript{54} Melling and Forsythe, p. 48; Hamlett, p. 19.
\textsuperscript{55} Hamlett, p. 7.
\textsuperscript{56} Hide, p. 55; Shepherd, Broadmoor, p. 8.
\textsuperscript{57} Hamlett, p. 52.
\textsuperscript{58} Leonard Smith, ‘Your very Thankful Inmate’: Discovering the Patients of an Early County Lunatic Asylum’, Social History of Medicine, 21.2 (2008), pp. 237-252.
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