

Unless their symptoms were violent or dangerous, the insane in those days joined in the daily life of the world, and so afforded opportunities for a quick observer, such as are unknown nowadays.

The treatment of lunatics in the 16th century is reflected in the plays:—

Not mad, but bound more than a madman is;  
Shut up in prison, kept without my food,  
Whipp'd and tormented.

*Romeo and Juliet*, i, 2.

Love is merely a madness, and, I tell you, deserves as well a dark house and a whip as madmen do.

*As You Like It*, iii, 2.

From the pitiful, and sometimes ludicrous, references to it, it would seem that Shakespeare felt the cruelty and folly of the treatment meted out to lunatics in his time, and in *Much Ado About Nothing* he even appears to have a vision of our modern humane methods when he proposes to—

Fetter strong madness in a silken thread,  
Charm ache with air, and agony with words.

*Much Ado About Nothing*, v, 1.

I am indebted to my friend Dr. Claye Shaw for calling my attention to the fact that Shakespeare, 300 years ago, recognised the characteristics of *general paralysis of the insane*. When Achilles was sulking in his tent—in *Troilus and Cressida*, ii, 3—Ajax said it was due to his being “sick of proud heart”, and Agamemnon thought him—

Over-proud

And under-honest; in self-assumption greater  
Than in the note of judgment.

But Ulysses said “he is not sick”, and then gives the following wonderful description of the symptoms of general paralysis—

Things small as nothing, for request's sake only,  
He makes important, possess'd he is with greatness:  
And speaks not to himself, but with a pride  
That quarrels at self-breath: imagin'd worth  
Holds in his blood such swoln and hot discourse,  
That, 'twixt his mental and his active parts,  
Kingdom'd Achilles in commotion rages,  
And batters down himself: what should I say?  
He is so plaguy proud, that the death-tokens of it  
Cry—“No recovery.”

Syphilis, as I have already said, was evidently very common in Elizabethan times, and there would be plentiful opportunities for an observing genius like Shakespeare to note the mental characters of the general paralytic, although, of course, the association of the disease with syphilis was not established until our own days.

*Epilepsy*.—The correct and vivid description which Shakespeare gives of epileptic attacks is quite astonishing. The genius of a poet might observe and record the physical signs of a fit such as he may often