

# The Role of Shame: Mental Illness in Fifteenth and Sixteenth Century English Narratives

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This article aims to support that mental illness was perceived as shameful in fifteenth and sixteenth century England by analyzing various textual sources from the time which center King Henry VI of England, historically known to have had mental illness episodes, as a narrative figure. The textual sources range will be analyzed by their wording, tone, and context, from governmental to common-folk perspectives and uncover how people felt about Henry VI's fits of madness. First, the *Rotuli Parliamentorum* reveals how the lack of information about Henry VI's mental state implies the authors intentionally omitted details to make Henry VI seem more fit to rule. Second, the language used in "*Bale's Chronicles*" demonstrates how contemporary perspectives were consistent with the negative stereotypes circulating around mental illness. Third, John Stodeley's newsletter includes an anecdote of a civilian framing Henry VI to be the antagonist of the story when suffering an episode. Finally, the absence of Henry VI's mental illness in Shakespeare's trilogy, *Henry VI*, supports the notion that Shakespeare protected Henry VI's reputation out of loyalty to his patrons, the royal family. Through analyzing these four sources, this article provides important historical context around fifteen and sixteenth century England's social norms and perspectives on mental illness which support the idea that mental illness was considered shameful. When comparing the findings to contemporary mental health resources, it helps underscore how far modern-day society has come in treating mental illness stigma.

## Introduction

For as long as there have been humans, there has been mental illness. Despite this, many are reluctant to discuss the possibility of leaders having mental illness. Mental illness is defined in this article as "health conditions involving changes in emotion, thinking or behavior (or a combination of these)."<sup>1</sup> According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, it is estimated that 18 of the 37 U.S. presidents from 1776 to 1974 met the qualifications to be considered mentally ill.<sup>2</sup> Europe has also had a history of unstable leaders, such as King Charles VI of France from 1380- 1422<sup>3</sup> who was often referred to as the "Mad King", and had suffered numerous psychotic episodes throughout his reign. King Charles VI's family is proof that the apple does not fall far from its tree - his grandson, Henry VI of England from 1422-1461 and 1470-1371, was also widely known to have struggled with bouts of mental illness. However, while mental illness today is treated with importance and compassion in developed societies around the world, this was not always the case. As evidenced by how fifteenth and sixteenth century English texts write about mental illness in either a bleak, antagonistic way or omit details of it entirely, there was an early modern tendency to characterize mental illness as shameful.

The article arrives at this claim by analyzing a variety of different primary sources and studying how mental illness was illustrated via language, undertones, context, and bias using

Henry VI as the narrative thread. By examining how people at the time responded to Henry's mental illness, it will become clear how the English in the fifteenth and sixteenth century thought of the mentally ill. That said, these accounts are most likely from English people with social status given the general population was largely illiterate.<sup>4</sup> Thus, it is not known if this perspective will carry into the general population. Moreover, this analysis will be done by investigating if the authors purposely left out key pieces of information that might hint at mental illness or how they change details to protect the king's image.

This research article was written about mental illness in the fifteenth and sixteenth century because there has recently been an abundance of mental health positivity movements around the United States. For example, virtually every New York City public school<sup>5</sup> is equipped with resources to help those struggling. This begged the question: Did these resources always exist? Was mental illness always perceived this way? If not, how was it treated within society? When starting to research this question, the period was chosen to be the early modern era because of a previous interest in this period. However, when looking into the different rulers, it was noticed that there was minimal information on Henry VI's mental illness while focusing on late medieval sources.<sup>6</sup> Taking this into consideration, it was concluded that this article could attempt to debunk this research gap while also investigating how mental illness was treated in the fifteenth and sixteenth century.

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The earliest records of mental illness have been dated back to 1300 BCE in China, where bones with carvings indicative of different forms of head injuries were found, which included certain types of mental illness.<sup>7</sup> Plato, the Greek philosopher from around 400 BCE also thought and wrote about mental illness.<sup>8</sup> He believed people with mental illness should not be held responsible for any trouble they might cause, insinuating that they did not possess any malicious intent.<sup>9</sup> 1000 years later, this belief would still persist, as evidenced by its mention in Bracton's fourth volume of the famous *De Legibus et consuetudinibus Angliae* (On the Laws and Customs of England). This was a series of laws and lawful opinions from late 13th century Britain and covered a variety of different topics from a judicial perspective. The book was written by an author who was widely accepted as Henry Bracton<sup>10</sup>, who according to the Harvard Law School Library was a "judge of court" and therefore had stern, logical opinions on issues at the time, which in theory means that his perspectives upon the topic of mental illness were unbiased and considered the default.<sup>11</sup>

Although mental illness might not have held the utmost prominence during its era, it still existed within medieval England, which will bear relevance in subsequent discussions. Bracton explored topics such as the allocation of blame in the event a mentally ill individual found themselves in trouble, as well as the protocols in place for their legal treatment during their succession.<sup>12</sup> One common factor seems to remain prominent in all his writing: the idea that mental health was a disease of the mind. Bracton states that the mentally ill lack reason, are without a sound mind, and undergo numerous lucid intervals.<sup>13</sup> He goes in depth describing the drastic effects of mental illness, even mentioning how they are essentially in a state of alienation. Connecting back to Plato, Bracton states that if an "insane" person is brought to court, they cannot be punished for they have "no understanding at all, for such men are not far removed from brute beasts which lack reason. . ."<sup>14</sup>

These ideas changed by fifteenth and sixteenth century England. Given the central time, it is now possible to start approaching the question: How did people in fifteenth and sixteenth century England view people with mental illness? Sources detailing King Henry VI's "madness" will be indispensable for this analysis, as they provide a glimpse into the ways mental illness was viewed at the time. As such more context on Henry VI is provided.

From 1422-1461 as well as 1470-1471, Henry VI was the King of England.<sup>15</sup> At the young age of just 9 months old, Henry succeeded to the English throne after both his grandfather, Charles VI and father, Henry V had both passed. Since he was so young, he had a regency assist him with important decisions up until 1437 at the age of 16, where he started to take part in government, declaring the end of his years of minority much earlier than most other English royals.<sup>16</sup> However, it quickly became apparent that he did not have a solid backbone,

as he was easily influenced by the councilmen surrounding him from the very beginning, especially when an English chronicler from the time described Henry as "simple and lad by courteous counseyle".<sup>17</sup> Henry married Margaret of Anjou in 1445, an ambitious French woman who mainly made the political decisions for him later on.<sup>18</sup> Henry was stricken with a mental illness in the later years of his reign. In fact, it heavily contributed to the War of Roses, where two houses— the Yorks and Lancasters— would fight over control of Lancastrian Henry and therefore power over the English throne.<sup>19</sup> In 1452, Henry experienced his first wave of madness and Richard of York was proclaimed Protector of England for the time being. Henry returned in 1455 and was captured by York in an attempt to take control of the throne but was rescued in 1461. He was then captured again in 1470 and passed in 1471— which some believe was due to Edward VI, York's son, killing him.<sup>20</sup>

Knowing this information, it is possible to look deeper into how mental illness in fifteenth and sixteenth century England was perceived as shameful. However, it is important to acknowledge how Henry's experience with mental illness compares with other people's at the time. Henry was a king, and therefore had to keep his composure even in times of trouble, including his fits of madness. This means that he was probably less likely to address his mental issues than a normal person in the fifteenth or sixteenth century, which will be supported in subsequent sections. In the following pages, this article will analyze texts including the 5th volume of the *Rotuli Parliamentorum* (henceforth, *Rotuli*), an entry from Robert Bale's chronicles, a relevant section from John Stodeley's newsletter, and Shakespeare's trilogy of plays, *Henry VI*. In this order, the article will introduce each source while having all the information needed to fully understand the next. The *Rotuli* will be mentioned throughout since it is one of the only official governmental descriptions of Henry's mental illness. Critically reading the language used to describe Henry VI's episode in "Bale's Chronicles" further suggests how textual sources can be used to assess contemporary attitudes toward mental illness. John Stodeley's newsletter provides an alternative perspective to the situation of Henry VI's mental illness. Finally, noticing the lack of mention of Henry VI's mental health in the trilogy *Henry VI* reveals how the absence of information may contribute to a bigger perspective on mental illness. Read altogether, these four works demonstrate how fifteenth and sixteenth century narratives surrounding mental illness tend to portray it as shameful.

## Rotuli Parliamentorum

The *Rotuli Parliamentorum* (lit. wheel of parliament) typically refers to a roll of paper that serves as the official records of parliament, including all the meetings and rulings, written by the parliamentary members.<sup>21</sup> Given the premises, it is reasonable to expect the contents of the writing to frame its country as

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powerful. The 5th English *Rotuli* also presents England as powerful even though it might not seem like it at first glance. Published in 1483, the documents go over numerous situations, even being one of the few at the time to acknowledge King Henry VI's mental illness. It is important to highlight that though this source most likely provides a holistic view because it briefly addressed a problematic situation that occurred, even when it required showing poor times for the king, the lords writing the section were probably favor of Henry. However, this bias will help develop the argument by making the absence of the full story substantially more significant. The *Rotuli* recalls a situation on March 25th, 1454, in which the lords wanted to discuss an important problem in parliament with Henry, but he was unresponsive and neglectful to acknowledge the fact that they were even talking to him. "... *they cowede gete noo anfwere ne figne, for no prayer ne defire, lamentable chere ne exhortation, ne eny thyng they or eny of theim cowede do or fey...*"<sup>22</sup> [...They could get no answer, nothing, for no prayer, no desire, lamentable cheer nor exhortation, anything they or any of them could do or say... ] After exhausting their first try, the lords went to dinner and later tried to get Henry's attention two separate times, including moving him into another chamber yet still to no avail. According to the lords, Henry was still unresponsive to their attempts.

While this might initially suggest that the text portrays England as disorganized and lacking in strength, a closer examination reveals that this is not the case. From the start, the lords made sure to emphasize how they did everything they could to make Henry listen to their ideas. The first time they tried to communicate with him was mentioned above, but the second and third times follow a similar format to the first "...*by all the waies and meanes that they cowede thynk...*"<sup>23</sup> This phrase was used both in the second and third time in trying to get Henry to acknowledge their ideas— to make it more apparent that they genuinely cared about what he had to say and make the lords look better to the public eye. This portrayal highlights their reliability and organized approach, suggesting to the public that they were a dependable group capable of making decisions when the king could not. This could potentially increase the elite people's trust in the government. The lords also made themselves seem like considerate people by expressing their "grete forowe and difcomfort" as well as their "forowefull hartes".<sup>23</sup>

Observing this perspective, in which the lords are making it seem like they were not at fault for failing to get an answer out of the king, individuals might begin to assume that they are blaming Henry. However, this assumption is not necessarily supported when considering the context. Even though they are addressing his mental illness (indirectly, they do not necessarily say he is sick in the head, but rather only describing his symptoms), they almost make it seem like the king is physically ill instead of mentally. This approach differs from previously mentioned Plato's, who identified mental illness by its mentality rather

than physicality. The lords included a specific detail, "...he was ledden betwene 11 men into the [other] Chamber where he lieth..."<sup>23</sup> As mentioned prior, this information makes it seem as though the king were physically ill since he had to be escorted and be laid down to hear the information. When someone gets sick, it is only common sense that their reactions are slowed and thoughts are less cohesive, so in this case it excuses the unusual behavior the lords referred to. This presents Henry as a king who is not unable to make cohesive decisions thereby protecting his image. The portrayal of Henry's mental illness may have been affected by a political motive. But the fact that it was influenced by a political motive, that was protecting the king's public image, supports the idea that mental illness was considered shameful. The *Rotuli* goes out of its way to make it seem as though the king was physically sick instead of mentally sick, and if everything written was to uphold the king's image, then having a mental illness must have been considered a sign of weakness. What is especially interesting about this segment from the *Rotuli* is that most of the sections prior to this one are in Latin, but this one was published in the vernacular instead, which was more accessible. Why would the lords purposely make this section about Henry's sugar-coated mental illness more accessible? To ensure and protect the king's image is a reasonable guess.

## Bale's Chronicles

The years of 1453 and 1454 held many important events in English history such as the Battle of Castillon which marked the end of the Hundred Year's War and resulted in a French victory against the English, as well as Richard of York being appointed as Protector, or head of state<sup>24</sup>. The basis for this appointment originates from a separate circumstance that was concurrent at the time—the series of mental breakdowns experienced by Henry VI. These concerning episodes eventually led officials to conclude that he was unfit to carry out the duties of the king, prompting the decision to have Richard assume the role in his stead. Henry's fits of insanity are not a frequently touched upon subject in English texts; however, the sources that do mention these events each provide valuable information on how mental illness was treated in early modern times. A chronicler from the fifteenth century known as Robert Bale was one of the few people to acknowledge the king's illness and publish it for the public to read. His assortment of chronicles, known as "Bale's Chronicles", covered a variety of different topics at the time. However, before diving into the analysis, it is important to acknowledge that the following quote is one from a person with unknown biases that could have influenced the account since there is no historical record of the author. But these chronicles are primary sources from the time and give the perspective of a presumably regular person in England, so it is nevertheless valuable to this argument.

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In his chronicle, Bale states that sometime in March of 1453 “... [the] king being at Clarendon indispost sodenly was take and a smytten w<sup>t</sup> a ffransy and his wit and reson w<sup>t</sup> drawn. . . the parliament was proroged and began a gein at Reding atte Eve of seint michell.”<sup>25</sup> [...the king at Clarendon, suddenly unwell was taken and smitten with a period of wild behavior and his wit and reason was withdrawn. . . the parliament was prorogued and began again at the [?] Eve of Saint Michael.] This quote describes a parliamentary meeting where Henry was afflicted with a mental breakdown and was unreachable for the lords. During this meeting, King Henry was suddenly hit with a wave of madness causing him to be withdrawn of any wit or reason and the parliament to temporarily discontinue the session without finishing the matter at hand. When Bale describes Henry’s encounters with his mental illness, he presents it in a way that is almost savage underneath the formality of the style of chronicling, using words that could be used to entail a horrific encounter with a rabid animal. Such words include “ffransy”, referring to frenzy, which by definition is a state of delirious fury or rage, and “sodenly”, or suddenly in modern English, hinting at the fact that Henry’s behavior was alarmingly unpredictable.<sup>26</sup> When employing these words and their connotations, along with other descriptions such as loss of wit or reason, it becomes quite natural to immediately envision a madman, or really, the exact opposite of what a regal royal is supposed to be. In fact, Bracton actually describes the mentally ill with similar wording in his book, *De Legibus et consuetudinibus Angliae* with descriptions such as “lack of sound mind” as well as sometimes going through “lucid intervals” — both of which can be linked to the unpredictable behavior of Henry VI.

However, when comparing Bale’s description of Henry’s fit of madness to an official document recording his experiences, there are significant differences. The *Rotuli* has a paragraph dedicated to Henry’s fit of madness, presenting it as periods of not responding nor communicating. When the members of parliament tried to get Henry’s opinions on a parliamentary matter, they claim “...to eny theime they cowede gete noo anfwere. . .”<sup>27</sup> Bale presented Henry in a manner in which the servant thought of the mentally ill— as threatening, instead of how he was according to parliament: simply unresponsive. The *Rotuli* mainly focuses on the physicality (unresponsiveness) of mental illness within his descriptions while both Bracton and Bale use harsh illustrations of the mentality of it.

Bale serves as a representative of his group in society, which is a higher status civilian. Taking this into consideration, why would the chronicle and the *Rotuli* have such different descriptions of the same person’s fits of madness, one describing the physicality of mental illness and one the mental aspects? The lords writing the *Rotuli* knew the king, opposed to Bale and Bracton, and therefore were more loyal and obliged to make the king look better. The lords are focusing on the physical effects on the king rather than the mental symptoms presented in

the chronicle. By strategically avoiding the discussion of vivid symptoms of Henry’s episode, they were most likely trying to make the king look better. This speaks significance to how the lords thought of mental illness— detrimental to Henry’s reputation— which allows for the conclusion that they believed mental illness was shameful. Bale most likely included Henry’s mental illness within his paper because he was not obligated to cushion Henry’s reputation, while the lords did not include it because they were.

Yet another example of the cautious approach to Henry’s mental illness is prominent in series of chronicles titled “Eulogium”, except this time, the topic is completely ignored. Written before the year of 1471, the chronicles mention numerous significant events throughout the years of Henry’s reign including the dilemma of Richard of York being proclaimed protector,<sup>28</sup> but similar to Shakespeare, neglected to say why. This may have been because York was mainly appointed proctor since Henry was mentally unfit to rule. Henry’s mental illness played a significant role in his reign, and the fact that neither Shakespeare nor the author of “Eulogium” mention it leads to the conclusion that they believed announcing this information would put the king in an ‘unsophisticated’ fashion.

### John Stodeley’s Newsletter

A section of John’s Stodeley’s newsletter contains valuable information on the fits of insanity of Henry VI. This section of the letter was released around the year of 1454, one of the two years when Henry’s illness was most prominent. However, it was also released at a time when those with mental illnesses did not receive substantial assistance, even when there were rules established to do just that — such as being excused if they caused trouble as mentioned in the introduction. As Stodeley was a servant, there is not much known about him; in fact, apparently many people contributed to his newsletter, so it is difficult to verify that he was the sole author.<sup>29</sup> However, Stodeley claims that his published accounts are quite reliable, stating that “And as for the tydynges as ben contended in the lettre sent home by John Sumpterman, I can nat hiderto here [hear] the contrarie of any of them. . .”<sup>29</sup> It is also known that this anecdote was still published within the collection of *The Paston Letters*<sup>30</sup>, and the Paston family were Yorkists, so this person might have some opposing beliefs with Henry VI which could have influenced the narrative. But it is unlikely that it affected the narration too much because there are no characteristic descriptions mentioned, only a retelling of what happened without excessive details, making the letter a relatively neutral description.

The newsletter goes on to recall a time when Henry seems unresponsive to his surroundings, not even paying attention to his own newborn son:

“...at the Princes comyng to Wyndesore, the Duc of Buk’ toke hym in his armes and presented hym to the Kyng in godely wise,

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besechyng the Kyng to blisse hym; and the Kyng yave no maner answer. Natheless the Duk abode stille with the Prince by the Kyng; and whan he coulede no maner answer have, the Queene come in, and toke the Prince in hir armes and presented hym in like forme as the Duke had done, desiryng that he shuld blisse it; but alle their labour was in veyne, for they departed thens without any answer or countenance sayng only that ones he looked on the Prince and caste doune his eyene ayen, without any more.”<sup>31</sup>

The servant’s narration places emphasis on both Queen Margaret and the Duke trying their hardest to respectfully get an answer out of Henry, which ended up being for naught since he remained unbothered, similar to the anecdote in the *Rotuli*. Both sources make Henry VI’s mental illness seem like the problem while everyone else is depicted as blameless. In fact, since the location in which this story takes place, Windsor, and the date is the same as the anecdote told in the *Rotuli*, these two situations may have been about the same event, in which case there are two sources both putting everyone but Henry in a victimized role. This may have been because some people in late medieval times perceived the mentally ill with disdain. An example of this would be in late medieval Germany, where according to Michael Foucault, the author of *Madness and Civilization: A history of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, people used barred windows so people outside could make fun of the insane in the buildings.<sup>32</sup> Though this did not take place in England, it still provides a case of poor treatment towards the insane. Here, regular people purposely degraded the mentally ill even though they had not done anything wrong— they were just making fun of them for the sake of making fun of them. This may have been why the servant chose to make Henry seem like the antagonist in the story.

The most likely reason why Stodeley felt comfortable putting Henry at fault here while making the other parties seem like they did everything they could was most likely because he did not have any strong ties to the king. As he was just a Lord’s helper, his loyalty was not as high. This could have a relation to the War of Roses since the people of England were extremely divided on which groups to support to rule— the Lancasters which included Henry VI or the Yorks.

## Shakespeare’s Henry VI

Unlike the sources above which briefly addressed Henry’s mental illness, some sources seem to eliminate it from their contents completely. Shakespeare, the famous English playwright, has a prime example of this. Presumably born in Warwickshire 1564 in a Catholic household, Shakespeare would go on to become an extremely influential dramatist— in fact— even the best, according to some.<sup>33</sup> His career as a playwright started from around 1594 and has written numerous plays such as the trilogy of Henry VI: the series of plays in question. *Henry VI* was com-

posed between the years of 1589 and 1593 and takes place at the time of his reign, or the mid 1400s.<sup>33</sup> The play covers the English political conflicts at the time centered around the War of Roses such as the conflicts with York, rebellions, and Edward IV with Henry in the midst of it all.

Since the play basically covers Henry VI’s entire time at the head of the English throne, one would expect that such a crucial aspect, that is Henry’s mental illness would be mentioned in one of these three parts. However, despite this staggering dedication to retelling his story, not once throughout the plays did Shakespeare mention him being affected by a mental illness. As mentioned previously, Henry’s fits of insanity were what led to him taking a leave of absence and York becoming protector. If a play whose point of being is to show the history of England, then this absence of information must have been intentional. Especially since Shakespeare was not against mentioning mental illness in his plays. In fact, in the article “Shakespeare on Old Age and Disability” written by Herbert Covey, it is noted that two characters, Ophelia and Lady Macbeth, in his famous plays *The Tragedy of Hamlet and Macbeth* contain references to mental illness.<sup>34</sup> The failure to mention Henry’s mental illness was most likely not an artistic choice since it was included in previous plays. The Tragedy of Hamlet actually centers its storyline around the fact that the main character is experiencing some form of mental illness, insinuating that Shakespeare explored the topic of insanity quite a bit.<sup>35</sup> The absence of mental illness in this play while openly mentioning it in his other plays implies a deliberate exclusion. This begs the question, why would Shakespeare purposely leave out the fact that Henry was mentally ill?

It can be argued that Shakespeare was protecting Henry’s image by not bringing up his mental illness. Often, there is a negative context when Shakespeare brings up mental illness in the play. An example of this is when a character tries to discharge himself from any accusations of murder by stating that it was his madness that drove him to do it and therefore, he could not take any agency over that action.<sup>36</sup> Mental illness was an attempted justification of the inexcusable act of murder. Indeed, the fact that mental illness was the “motive” behind the crime presents it as a cynical thing to possess. Plus, though it is unknown what religion or political opinions he held, it can be assumed that Shakespeare and the majority of the English population was slightly biased in favor of the Tudor family since the queen at the time, Elizabeth I, was a Tudor.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, it would have been in his best interest not to say anything degrading or possibly offensive about the Tudors. Henry VI was part of the house of Lancaster, however in the fifteenth century the Lancastrians turned into the Tudors, meaning Henry VI belonged to the Tudor family line<sup>38</sup>. It may be thus argued that Shakespeare was protecting Henry’s image. According to Cindy Chopoidaló’s article “...among Lancastrian supporters in general, Henry’s behavior is summarized as extreme piety,

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whereas the Yorkist supporters tended to regard it as madness, and both ends of this spectrum are present in many of the historical chronicles Shakespeare used as sources”.<sup>39</sup> The reference of Henry’s behavior as madness in Shakespeare’s sources hint at the fact that Henry was mentally ill, therefore, he must have had an idea of Henry’s mental illness. Not to mention, since he was literate there was a chance he could have read a source from the fifteenth century depicting Henry’s mental illness— such as John Stodeley’s newsletter and “Bale’s Chronicles”.

The previous section of this article dedicated to the *Rotuli* discusses how the lords who wrote the anecdote intentionally made Henry seem physically ill instead of mentally ill by leaving out any information that would have given it away. It was concluded at the end of the analysis that the absence of detail was because mental illness was thought to be shameful. The lords in this situation were biased in Henry’s favor since they worked closely with him, and it was their job to make him and his government respectable. Using the same logic here, knowing Shakespeare was biased towards the Tudor family and therefore Henry, it seems reasonable to make the assumption that Shakespeare purposely did not include any mention of Henry’s mental illness because he thought that it would harm his image. As previously mentioned, Chopoidaló brings up how Henry’s rivals, the Yorks, directly confronted the topic of Henry’s mental illness while Henry’s supporters tend to downplay it— similar to what Shakespeare is doing by not acknowledging this illness at all. The Yorks opposed Henry’s reign, so the fact that they were mainly the ones to bring up mental illness suggests the idea that it was a shameful thing to have.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, many different English texts have been analyzed throughout the article, and together they start to show why mental illness was seen as shameful in the fifteenth and sixteenth century. Looking at the absence of mental illness in Shakespeare’s trilogy of *Henry VI* suggests that Shakespeare believed that this label would degrade Henry. In the *Rotuli*, there is another example of the avoidance of direct confrontation by presenting Henry as almost physically ill instead. In “Bale’s Chronicles” Henry is captured in the “insane” connotations that supposedly portrayed mental illness when in reality he was supposedly quite calm. Not to mention, in John Stodeley’s newsletter, the use of descriptions within the texts reveals how people seemed to have been quick to accuse someone with mental illness.

It is important to remember that the English’ perspectives of mental illness in the fifteenth and sixteenth century are not what the current society perceives it to be. The renowned book *The Body and Society* written by Peter Brown that altered the way people approached the study of sexual renunciation takes on this idea as well. Brown states that “the preoccupations of the Early Christians were not necessarily our own.” when studying

Christians’ behavior in the past.<sup>40</sup> In fact, this article addresses how mental illness was perceived in fifteenth century England by looking at administrative, historical, legal, and firsthand encounters, but there are many more additional perspectives to be covered. After reading this article, such historians could branch out into different sources to find out more about how people felt about mental illness in fifteenth and sixteenth century England, or throughout history in general. Perhaps it would be interesting to look at texts such as religious writing since religion played an important role in how mental illness was perceived potentially by researching why religions promoted a specific opinion against mental illness and the treatment people endured as a result. Other potential genres could include poetry, folktales, or diaries, all of which could reveal extremely valuable information. One could also look at turning points in the perception of mental illness and determine which factor leads people to shift their perspectives on the topic such as a new leader or religion—some ways this could be done are analyzing how frequently the shifts in perspectives occur when the event happens or ranking their significance.

Not to mention, this information also helps people understand a small portion of the general mentality of the elite, literate English in the fifteenth and sixteenth century, which was heavily affected by religious influences and the events circulating around the time. In the present, historians could benefit from the information summarized because they will learn more about an elite member of English society’s opinions concerning the less respected and compare them to the person’s equivalent in modern times to see how people accumulate their biases and ideas. In addition, they enable historians to discern societal norms from different time periods thereby allowing for a richer understanding of how societies function. Overall, historical perceptions of mental illness are relevant to modern-day society because they provide context on how misconceptions about mental illness are formed that can be used to better understand why people still hold a negative stigma when it comes to mental health. Despite the amount of mental health positivity in today’s culture, there are still people who treat the mentally ill with disdain. Understanding how these bleak mindsets manifest will help society debunk these emotions and make the world a more inclusive environment.

This article has argued mental illness in fifteenth and sixteenth century England was viewed as shameful. However, shame is only a figurative label, not a defining feature. Despite the fact that Henry VI had episodes, he also accomplished many outstanding acts including founding multiple colleges such as Eton college to provide others with the opportunity of education he had.<sup>41</sup> Henry’s mental illness does not come close to defining him and is certainly not his lasting legacy. In fact, there is the possibility that Shakespeare was not even aware of the fact that he had a mental illness. This is significant because even though mental illness surely marked Henry’s reign, just 100

years later, despite stories being published about his mental illness, some had no knowledge of this event. In a similar vein, the U.S. presidents previously mentioned have gone on to make impactful changes to the world around them, even with the possibility of mental illness lingering above them. In fact, Dr. Ghaemi goes so far as to suggest mental illnesses could even be beneficial for leaders as it can help with qualities such as creativity, resilience, empathy, and realism.<sup>42</sup> Mental illness was perceived as shameful in fifteenth and sixteenth century England, but to what extent does shame dictate society?

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