Bibliotherapy: Patient Libraries and Reading Programs, One Component of the Moral Treatment Revolution

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“Books, papers, games and amusements are invaluable in this [curative] respect…”
- Isaac Ray, 1850

“I insanity is a much more curable disease under proper treatment than is generally believed.”
- John M. Galt, 1846

What Did the Patients Read?

NOVELS – YES OR NO? Benjamin Rush, a leading Philadelphia physician, called for patients to be exposed to fictional fare. “In those cases in which the body cannot be employed, the mind should be kept constantly busy.” He advised that reading novels would serve as a needed diversion to those suffering with mental illness. “Cheap novels and trashy newspapers [are] more a cause than a cure of insanity” wrote Isaac Ray. He and other contemporaries felt that while reading was important, the material read by patients should not “overly excite” the mind. “Travel books, histories and biographies” were recommended by Ray and his peers.

SCRIPTURES – YES OR NO? “Religious excitement” was a common diagnosis in the 1800s. Persons that adhered to “Millerism” or other “fundamental/renovational” beliefs were often considered insane and were sent to asylums. As a result, the Bible was kept away from these patients “whose disease [might] lead them to make an improper use of [the Scriptures]” stated George Chandler of the New Hampshire Asylum. On the other hand, John Galt, superintendent at Eastern Virginia, claimed that the Bible is “the book most desired and read” by his patients. He considered daily reading of counseling Psalms and New Testament passages a must for those patients suffering from melancholia.

“What Was Moral Treatment?”

“Moral treatment” for the mentally ill was first applied in Europe in the 18th Century. The idea spread to the US, and was practiced predominantly in the period 1830-1855. Before then, those with mental illness were often considered “possessed” and were either hidden away in family homes or were incarcerated in prisons. The moral therapists believed that mental illness was curable, especially if the patient was removed to a secluded place; an “asylum,” where they could convalesce and be exposed to certain morally-based treatments. Many of these treatments were occupational in nature and included gardening and carpentry for men and sewing for women. One of the foundational treatments used in moral curative treatment was “bibliotherapy”— that of encouraging patients to read or be read to. Long before Anna Freud coined this term in the early 20th Century, using the written word as treatment was a standard practice in early American asylums.

Thomas Kirkbride, Superintendent of the Pennsylvania Hospital for the Insane, was a 19th Century pioneer in American asylum architecture. His plans were designed to incorporate the aspects of the moral therapy movement into the physical environment. He called for patient wards to be built in a “staggered” manner thus allowing for better ventilation and patient privacy. On his architectural renderings, Kirkbride indicated locations (see circles) for “museums and libraries— one for males, one for females,” highlighting the importance of bibliography as an institutional mission.