A journey into the Elizabethan mind

The Elizabethans were desperate to untangle the mystery of their "inward selves". **Helen Hackett** reveals how they used ancient teachings, Christian doctrine and new scientific discoveries to make sense of themind

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Full of ideas
A woodcut of the brain from Andreas Vesalius' groundbreaking 1543 treatise *The Fabric of the Human Body*. The Elizabethans subscribed to both new scientific theories and ancient beliefs about the workings of the mind

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"For him that hath lost his mind", the best-selling Elizabethan physician and writer Thomas Moulton recommended shaving the top of the patient's head, then applying a mat of plant fibre to the bald patch. After a sleep, he reassured, "he shall be right weak, and sober enough". While this treatment seems bizarre today, it reveals a crucial element of Elizabethan beliefs about mental wellbeing: the mind and body were intrinsically connected, so any disorders of the brain could be treated via remedies that were applied to the body.

As well as consulting medical books like Moulton's, many Elizabethans sought the advice of Simon Forman, a popular London physician. Forman, too, sometimes prescribed physiological remedies for mental afflictions. But his chief diagnostic method was – to our eyes – decidedly unusual. He always began by casting a patient's astrological chart, reflecting the contemporary belief that both mind and body were affected by the movements of the stars and planets.

These practices exemplify the co-existence of diverse explanations for mental conditions in this period. They could be caused by internal factors, especially wayward humours – bodily fluids whose proportions and balance determined character and mood – or by external forces such as astral influences.

And other examples from Forman's casebooks reveal yet more competing theories about the mind. One woman brought him a urine sample for analysis, but Forman "found no other disease in her body, but only in her head". He told her that "the diseases of the mind are not seen in a piss-pot", and that what she needed was "good counsel".

Another patient, Susan Crosbe, whom he described as suffering from a "desperate melancholy disease", engaged in what we would call self-harm. She "could abide no knives nor pins nor shears nor needles nor nails, but she must cut herself or thrust the pins into her flesh", and she was tormented by suicidal thoughts. Yet in her case Forman diagnosed supernatural intervention, saying "the devil would speak oftentimes within her", inciting her to self-destruction.

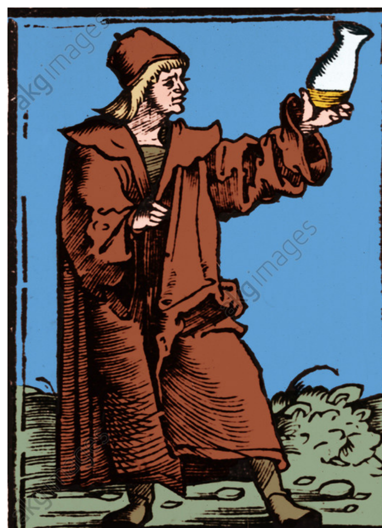
Print revolution

The Elizabethans were keen to understand the "inward self". Much as today many of us seek to manage our minds by reading books on self-help and mindfulness, in a similar way the burgeoning print industry of the Elizabethan era produced a host of works concerned with the inner workings of the mind. Titles such as Thomas Rogers' 1576 *The Anatomy of the Mind*, and *The Passions of the Mind* by Thomas Wright (1601) flooded the market. These texts contained an intense and tumultuous ferment of ideas drawn from disparate intellectual frameworks, making this a fascinating period in the history of ideas about the mind. Medieval medical theories vied with revived classical philosophies; new religious practices jostled against emerging scientific discoveries.

Take the Elizabethans' understanding of brain anatomy, for instance. The traditional model divided the brain into three ventricles or chambers, with Imagination at the front, Reason in the middle, and Memory at the back. That classical system was still widely taught in the period, but in 1543 it was upended when Vesalius published his anatomical discoveries based on human dissections. These included a radically new, more accurate account of brain structure, identifying two large ventricles to the left and right, another two below them in the centre, and, controversially, no "special cavity" for reason to distinguish human brains from those of animals. These conflicting theories co-existed in Tudor England: in 1553, Vesalius' ground-breaking illustrations were published alongside incompatible text from medieval anatomy books that subscribed to the classical three-chamber model.

Out of balance Sixteenth-century personifications of the four humours (L–R): yellow bile, associated with ambition; blood, linked to pleasure-seeking; phlegm, linked to relaxation; and black bile, associated with the intellect. Too much of one humour was thought to result in disease, with black bile causing melancholy

> **Mental conditions were thought to be caused by wayward humours and the position of the stars**



Sample study
A doctor examines a patient's urine in this 1519 woodcut. The physician Simon Forman said "the diseases of the mind are not seen in a piss-pot"

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The feminine mind

While juggling divergent ideas about the mind, the Elizabethans also attributed different types of mind to different categories of people. Women in general were thought to have a humoral constitution that was cold and moist, or phlegmatic. This was good for fertility, but bad for the intellect. Disparagement of the female mind was commonplace: in 1597, for instance, a work named *The Haven of Pleasure* deplored "the weakness of [women's] minds, and the imbecility of their understandings and judgements". This seems astonishing in view of the impressive accomplishments of female scholars of the period, such as Anne Cooke Bacon, who translated from Latin John Jewel's *Apology of the Church of England*, a major theological work.

Because the humours were connected to temperature and moisture, it was also believed that geographical origin affected mental disposition. Many authorities, including the French natural philosopher Jean Bodin, asserted that the hot climate of Africa had an evaporating effect on its people, leaving them cold and dry, and hence melancholic: not only inclined to sadness, but also endowed with acute intellect. On stage this produced characters like Aaron the Moor in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* (1592) and Eleazar in *The Spanish Moor's Tragedy* (1600), each of them by far the cleverest character in their play. The abhor-

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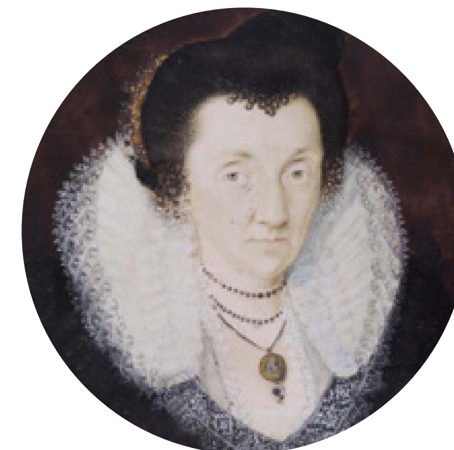


Way with words
Anne Cooke Bacon in a c1600 painting. Although she was a talented translator, Elizabethans believed women generally were too phlegmatic to be intelligent

rent forms of racism associated with the trans-Atlantic slave trade had not yet fully emerged, but the Elizabethans were not free of racial prejudice: these stage-Moors were ruthless villains, using their intellectual gifts to devise torments for their enemies. Nevertheless, they were among the most compelling characters on the Elizabethan stage.

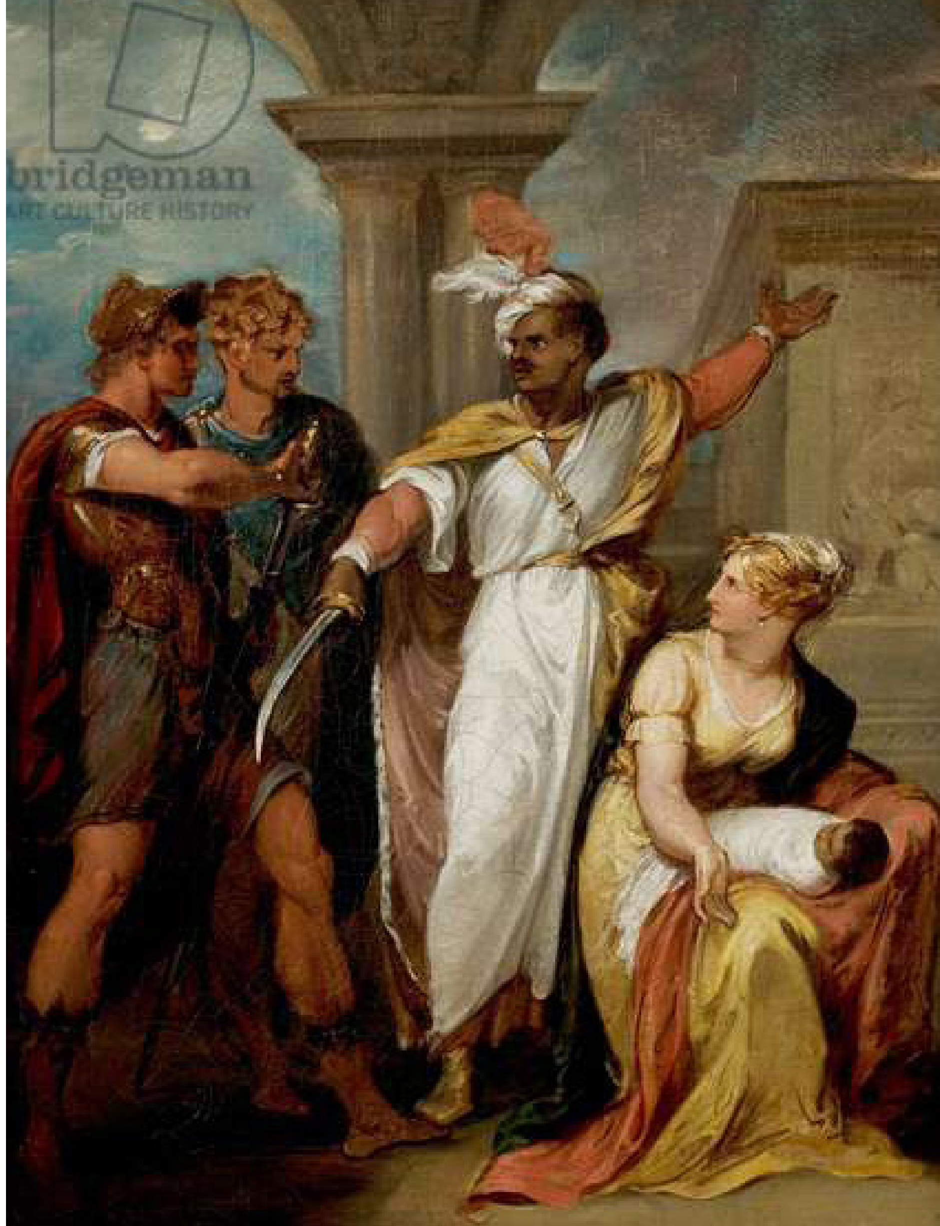
Frenzies of rage

The Elizabethans also had many anxieties about the mind's potential to go wrong. They felt the passions must be strenuously governed by reason: *The Castle of Health* by Sir Thomas Elyot, one of the most popular medical books of the period, warned of the "apoplexies, or privation of senses, trembling palsies… frenzies, [and] deformity of visage" arising from rage. The reader could avoid these if "before he speak or do anything in anger, he do recite in order, all the letters of the A. B. C., and remove somewhat out of the place that he is in, and seek occasion to be otherwise occupied".

The imagination, too, was thought to be a destabilising force. Today we celebrate the imagination as an exciting creative power, but 16th-century belief in the link between mind and body meant that it could have alarming effects. If a woman saw a striking image at the moment of conceiving a child, or during pregnancy, the force of her imagination would imprint this on the infant. Many medical books attributed the case of "a maid, rough and covered with hair like a bear" to her mother's eyes having fallen, during sex, on a picture at the foot of her bed of St John the Baptist "clothed with a beast's skin".

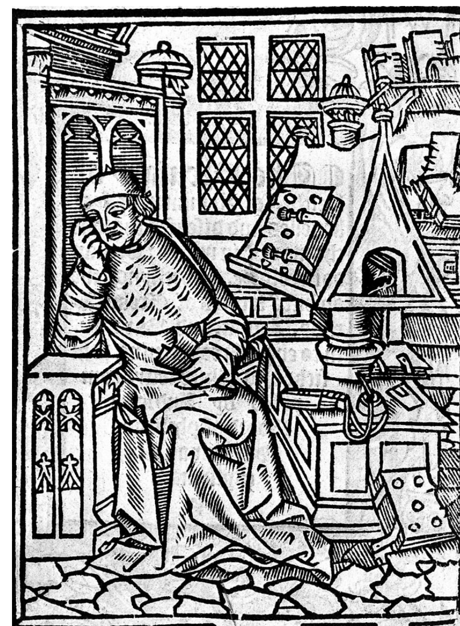
The Elizabethans followed the Bible's teaching that "the imagination of man's heart is evil, even from his youth" – it was unruly, deceptive and a provocation to sin. This was especially so in dreams: in waking hours the imagination formed mental images from sense-impressions of the real world; but in sleep it became "fantasy" or "fancy", drawing on its own resources to produce images which were false and bizarre. According to Thomas Nashe in *The Terrors of the Night* (1594): "A dream is nothing else but a bubbling scum or froth of the fancy, which the day hath left undigested; or an after-feast made of the fragments of idle imaginations."

Meanwhile, other Elizabethans persisted in ancient beliefs that some special dreams could be prophetic messages from God, making Thomas Hill's 1571 manual *The Interpretation of Dreams* a best-seller. According to Hill, to dream of drinking mustard meant that one was about to be accused of murder; to dream of a white ox "signifieth honour or advancement"; but to dream of elephants "signifieth sorrow". However, even



Complex character Aaron the Moor brandishes a knife in *Titus Andronicus*. Shakespeare and other Elizabethan playwrights often presented Africans as ruthless and intelligent villains

The Elizabethans devoutly followed the Bible's teaching that "the imagination of man's heart is evil, even from his youth"



Devil's work An illustration from *Breviary of Health*, which detailed cases of demonic possession

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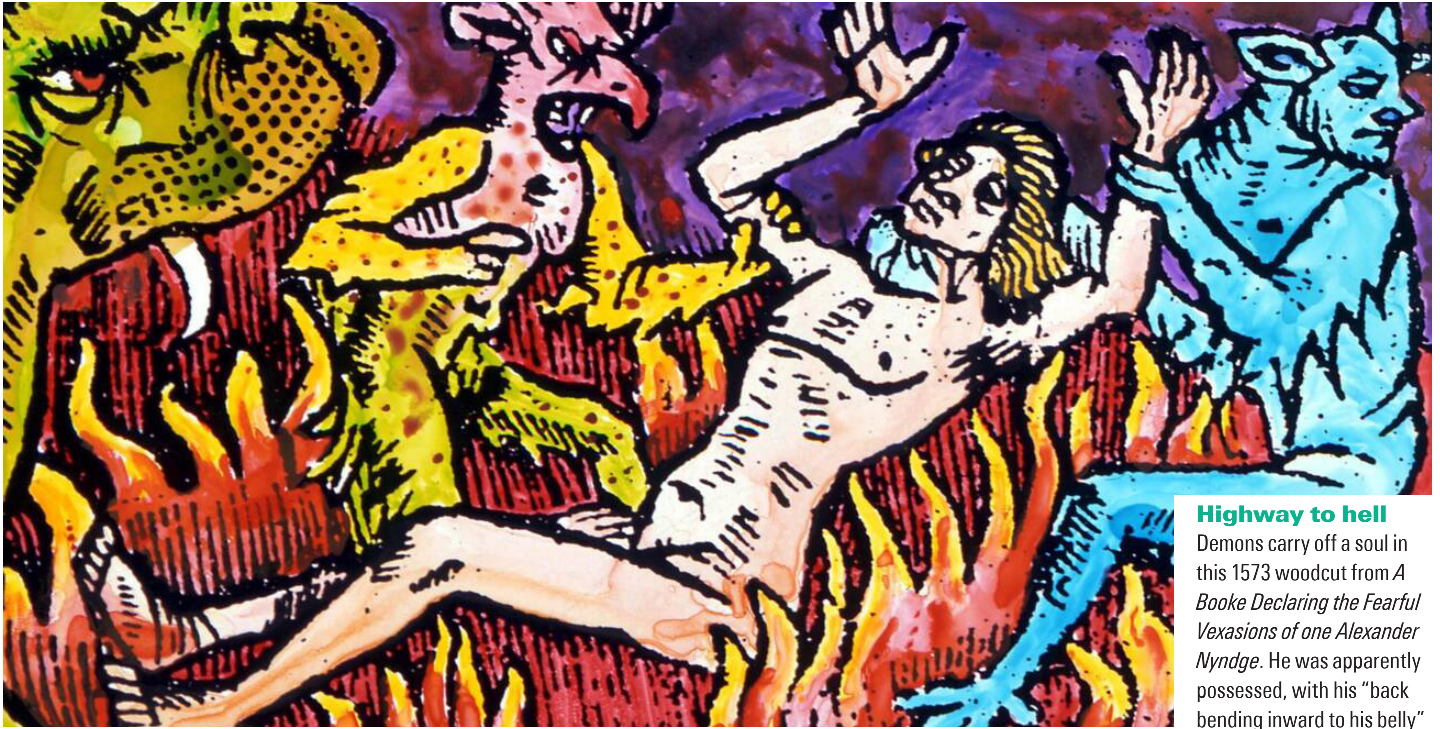
Star signs A woodcut from 1512 showing which body parts the zodiac signs are connected to, with Aries (the ram) being linked to the mind. The Elizabethans set much store in the movement of the stars, with Simon Forman casting his patients' astrological charts to help diagnose them



Highway to hell
Demons carry off a soul in this 1573 woodcut from *A Booke Declaring the Fearful Vexasions of one Alexander Nyndge*. He was apparently possessed, with his "back bending inward to his belly"

dream-interpreters like Hill acknowledged the difficulty of determining whether any particular dream was of the meaningful or meaningless type.

The imagination was thought to be especially over-active and uncontrolled in those whose reason was weak, such as melancholics and women. Medical works eagerly recounted the delusions of melancholics: according to *The Touchstone of Complexions* (1576), one "thought himself to have a nose so big, and of such a prodigious length, that he thought he carried about with him the snout or muzzle of an elephant". Another patient "thought his buttocks were made of glass, insomuch that he durst not do anything but standing, for fear lest if he should sit, he should break his rump, and the glass fly into pieces".

Meanwhile Reginald Scot, author of *The Discovery of Witchcraft* (1584), dismissed supposed witches as "poor melancholic women" suffering foolish fantasies of magical powers; "the stopping of their monthly melancholic flux or issue of blood" (in other words, the menopause) had made them cold and dry, hence melancholic, and vulnerable to disordered imaginations.

Scot was on the sceptical side of a raging debate about the role of supernatural factors in mental disorders. Also on this side was Edward Jorden, a physician who tried to exonerate Elizabeth Jackson, a woman on trial for witchcraft, by proposing a medical explanation for the strange symptoms of her supposed victim Mary Glover. Jorden argued that "suffocation of the mother" – the supposed volatility and mobility of the womb within the body – affected the mind, causing "frenzies, convulsions, hiccups, laughing, singing, weeping, crying, etc". (This would later be called "hysteria".) Sadly his defence of Jackson failed.

One author dismissed supposed witches as "poor melancholic women" suffering foolish fantasies of magical powers

In thrall to demons

Many other Elizabethans attributed mental instability to the devil. A discussion of madness in Andrew Boorde's frequently reprinted *Breviary of Health* distinguished between "maniac persons", whose condition "cometh of infirmities of the body", and "demoniac persons", who were "possessed of some evil spirit". Among a growing number of victims of demonic possession was one Alexander Nyndge, who in 1573 was apparently terrifyingly transformed, "his chest and body swelling, with his eyes staring, and his back bending inward to his belly". A hollow voice intoned from deep within him: "I come for his soul."

Sceptics questioned the reality of demonic possession, and indeed some supposed demoniacs confessed to faking their symptoms. Yet there was general assent that all minds were vulnerable to incursions by Satan, for whom black bile – the substance in the body which caused melancholy – was thought to provide a congenial habitat. *The Touchstone of Complexions* explained how evil spirits could "slyly and secretly glide into the body of man" like a "fulsome stench" or "a noisome and ill air", then interfere with the "inward dispositions and thoughts of the mind", introducing sinful and criminal intentions. One of the chief reasons for the Elizabethans' intense interest in the mind was the need for everyone to be on constant guard against evil thoughts implanted by the devil, by looking within and assiduously monitoring their own mental and spiritual state.

Elizabethan beliefs about supernatural influences on the mind, as well as their medical theories, can seem remote from our modern age of psychology and neuroscience. Yet they were wrestling with many questions about the relations between mind, body and selfhood which continue to perplex us today. Poised at the intersection between classical, medieval and emerging scientific systems of thought, this is a momentous period in the history of ideas about the mind. H

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