

Psychiatry in pictures

CHOSEN BY ROBERT HOWARD

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Sketches to Illustrate the Passions, *Hatred* (1853) and *Insignificance or Self Contempt* (1854), Richard Dadd.

Dadd began to produce his series of Sketches to Illustrate the Passions 9 years after his admission to Bethlem Hospital in 1844. About 30 have survived, mostly dating from 1853 and 1854. They take the form of a scene or 'sketch', dominated by figures taken from literature or history. Visually these pictures are indistinguishable from Dadd's other watercolour paintings and it is the titles alone which indicate those included in the series. We do not know why he chose this theme or whether it was suggested to him by a staff member at the hospital. He would have been aware of contemporary theories associating the passions with mental illness but of course they have always been traditional subjects for poetry and painting. *Hatred*, one of the earliest of the series, shows a scene from Shakespeare's *Henry VI Part 3*. It is inscribed "Murder of Henry 6th by Richard Duke of Gloster See how my sword weeps the poor king's death". Dadd had stabbed his father to death in a chillingly premeditated act, motivated by the delusion that he was the devil in disguise. The clear self-portraiture and his decision to depict a murderer named Richard in the picture probably indicate an element of reminiscence. Whatever the personal significance of the subject matter, Dadd appears to have approached it with some relish. Having begun his series with some of the more obvious passions of Love, Hatred and Jealousy, Dadd moved on to more obscure and abstract themes that he wished to illustrate such as Senility, Idleness and Want. *Insignificance or Self Contempt* is one of these later subjects. The figure is the painter J. M. W. Turner whom Dadd would have seen during his student days at the Royal Academy Schools. Why Dadd should have portrayed Turner as a baggy little figure who, with his portfolio under his arm, wipes something apparently distasteful from the sole of his shoe is unclear. Is Turner Mr Crayon the Drawing Master? If the house is his, then why is he too small to reach the door knocker and why would such a successful artist have to give drawing lessons and take in single gentlemen lodgers? An interpretation is that the negative cognitions and insecurities of a melancholy artist are expressed in the Turner figure. The great artist, dwarfed by his everyday surroundings, returns home depressed and miserable having trodden in animal excrement. His arms support a portfolio of rejected pictures, which like his trousers, seems not to be able to completely contain the shameful things that lie within. In the picture's inscription, Dadd's usual neat script gives way to a rapid cursive hand as strong personal feeling takes over ". . . Mortification – Disgusted with the world – he sinks into himself and Insignificance" before he reverts to his normal style for the date and signature. These pictures, together with many others by Richard Dadd, are in the collection of the Bethlem Royal Hospital Archives and Museum, Monks Orchard Road, Beckenham, Kent BR3 3BX. The Museum is open Monday to Friday 9.30am to 5.00pm and it is always advisable to telephone first (020 8776 4537) in case a particular picture is out on loan to an exhibition elsewhere. With thanks to Patricia Allderidge, Archivist and Curator at the Museum, for information about Dadd.