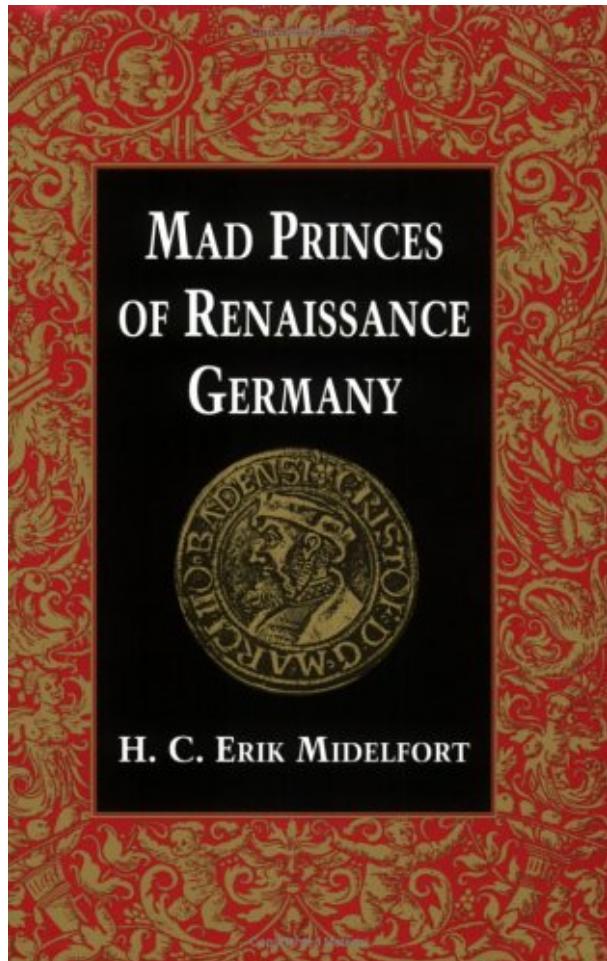


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From Publishers Weekly

With Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilization* in 1961, the study of madness became an ever more popular lens through which to view societal norms. In his short but well-researched and entertaining book, *Midelfort*, a professor of history at the University of Virginia, focuses on princes because they are better documented than other folk; Germany because it had many princes; and the Renaissance because new, more centralized governments were increasingly dependent on the person of the hereditary ruler for legitimacy. At the beginning of the 16th century, a mad prince like Landgrave Wilhelm I of Hesse might simply be locked away in a castle with little or no treatment. But by the mid-16th century, treatment was becoming common--not that it seemed likely to help. Most medical practitioners treated madness by trying to balance the proportion of black bile associated with melancholy. The initial protocol was fairly benign--sleep, fresh air, sunlight, exercise, cheerful servants--but thereafter livelier measures could include applying the entrails of a freshly killed snow-white dog to the head or administering a drink of powdered pearls. Reluctantly, a follower of Paracelsus (1493-1541) might be allowed to try his hand with various chemicals, or, very rarely, an exorcist called in. In anecdote and analysis, *Midelfort* cunningly cooks up a heady brew of medicine, religion, psychiatry, power, sex and pathos. Illustrations.

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During the sixteenth century close to thirty German dukes, landgraves, and counts, plus one Holy Roman emperor, were known as mad- so mentally disordered that serious steps had to be taken to remove them from office or to obtain medical care for them. This book is the first study these princes, and a few princesses, as a group in context. The result is a flood of new light on the history of Renaissance medicine and of psychiatry, on German politics and in the century of Reformation, and on the shifting Renaissance definitions of madness.

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5 of 7 people found the following review helpful.

Frivolous title; scholarly data

By Virginia E. Demarce

The piece de resistance of this book has to be the theological memorandum concerning the mental condition of the Duke of Prussia which begins with the unfortunate Osiandrian sympathies displayed by his parents prior to his birth and their possible contribution to the current situation. The majority of the recommendations, however, came from physicians and were medical rather than theological.

It's solidly researched -- if anything, one would have wished more detail on some of the episodes, such as that of the Duke of Saxe-Weimar in the bath house.

10 of 10 people found the following review helpful.

Unusual and thought-provoking

By A Customer

Although the title initially almost seems like a parody of historical research on incredibly arcane topics (and, as Midelfort points out, there is no particular reason to believe that Renaissance German royalty were more prone to insanity than anyone else, inbreeding notwithstanding), the book in fact uses the unusually high levels of documentation available on these individuals to create a fascinating and detailed study, not only of the medical and religious treatment of insanity during this period, but also of the political implications when a monarch or his heir became "unfit" to rule.

6 of 6 people found the following review helpful.

A detailed book about an hitherto unexplored subject

By J. N. W. Bos

This is the book that inspired me for starting my Mad Monarchs Series [...] Before I found this book, I had often seen references to "the last mad Duke of Cleves, married to a sister of the last mad Duke of Prussia". This book has finally shed some light on that odd pair of Dukes.

The first part of the book focuses on the early 16th century, when mental problems was not regarded as an illness and melancholic Princes were locked up and often neglected. Sometimes they were exorcised. The cases described are, among others, Princes of Hesse, Saxony and Baden. William the Younger of Brunswick is the 1st Prince whose mental state is described in more detail, because unique reports have survived: "He ran out into the streets of Celle half-dressed, [...] spoke unintelligibly and gestured weirdly". He was actually treated by doctors.

The second part of the book describes Albrecht Friedrich of Prussia, Rudolf II of Austria and the last Dukes of Cleves in more detail. Midelfort describes detailed accounts of their mental and medical conditions and the doctor's crude attempts to cure them.

The book is a serious and detailed study of 16th century Princes that were described by their contemporaries as "melancholic" or locked up as being "mad". Black and white images of most of the described mad Princes and Princesses are included. An unique book about an unique subject!

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