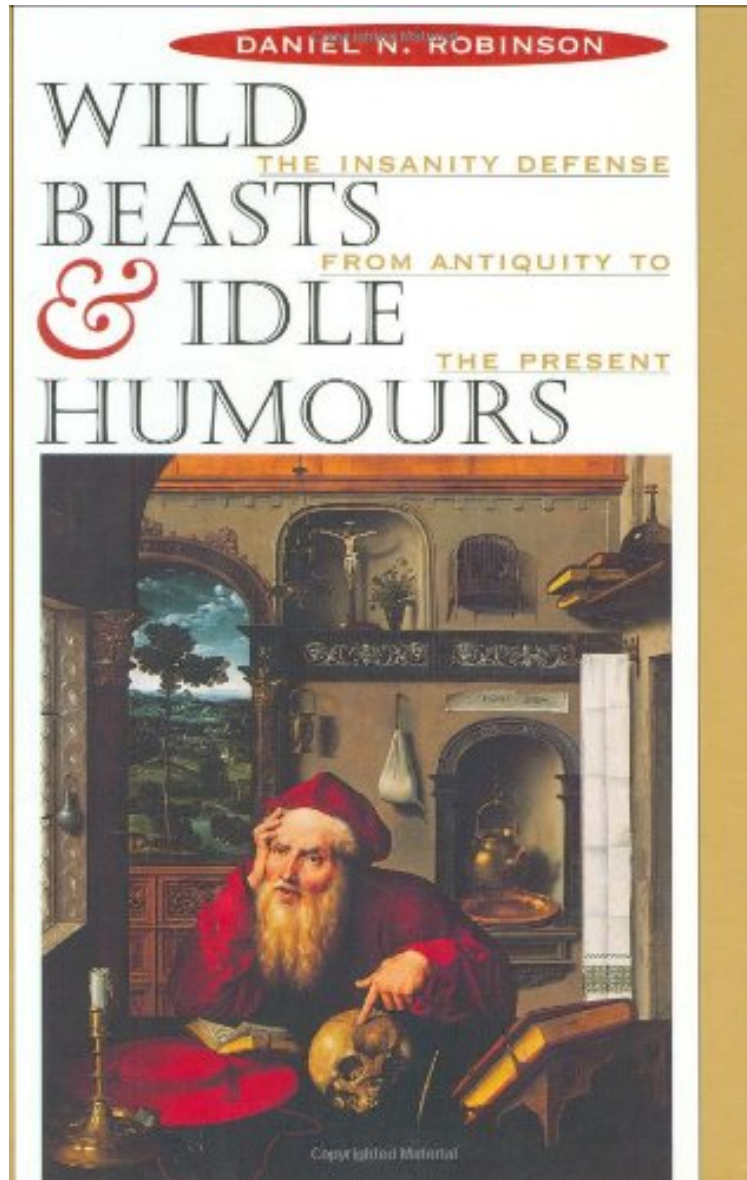


# Wild Beasts and Idle Humors: The Insanity Defense from Antiquity to the Present

*Daniel Robinson*

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**Daniel Robinson : Wild Beasts and Idle Humors: The Insanity Defense from Antiquity to the Present** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Wild Beasts and Idle Humors: The Insanity Defense from Antiquity to the Present:

How does the law regard and define mental incompetence, when faced with the problem of meting out justice? To what extent has the law relied on extra-legal authorities--be they religious or scientific--to frame its own categories of mental incompetence and madness? *Wild Beasts and Idle Humours* takes us on an illuminating journey through the changing historical landscape of human nature and offers an unprecedented look at the legal conceptions of insanity from the pre-classical Greek world to the present. Although actual trial records are either totally lacking or incomplete until the eighteenth century, there are other sources from which the insanity defenses can be constructed. In this book Daniel Robinson, a distinguished historian of psychology, pores over centuries of written law, statements by legal commentators, summaries of crimes, and punishments, to glean from these sources an understanding of epochal views of responsibility and competence. From the Greek phrenesis to the Roman notions of *furiosus* and *non compos mentis*, from the seventeenth-century witch trials to today's interpretation of *mens rea*, Robinson takes us through history and provides the intricate story of how the insanity defense has been construed as a meeting point of the law and those professions that chart human behavior and conduct: namely religion, medicine, and psychology. The result is a rare historical account of "insanity" within western civilization. *Wild Beasts and Idle Humours* will be essential reading for anyone interested in the evolution of thinking not merely about legal insanity but about such core concepts as responsibility, fitness for the rule of law, competence to enter into contracts and covenants, the role of punishments, and the place of experts within the overall juridical context.

From Library Journal A flurry of books dealing with the insanity defense appeared in the mid-Eighties following the controversial verdict in the trial of John Hinckley for attempting to assassinate President Reagan. Not much has been published since. Robinson's (*An Intellectual History of Psychology*, LJ 8/95) work is a welcome addition to the literature and a valuable book for readers with an interest in either law or psychology. An intellectual history of the interplay of psychology and law within the narrow context of insanity as a legal defense in criminal or civil actions, this book carefully examines the views of human nature prevalent in classical Greece and Rome, the early and later Middle Ages, the Enlightenment, and the era of modern science. It then traces the influences of these ideas on the development of the concepts and structures of the law. The book is scholarly in tone and methodology (there are over 40 pages of endnotes) but clear and readable. The legal issues are not presented in an overly technical manner; both lawyer and lay reader can read this book with benefit. Highly recommended for academic libraries with collections in either law or psychology. ?Patrick Petit, Catholic Univ. Law Lib., Washington, D.C. Copyright 1996 Reed Business Information, Inc. An American psychologist, Daniel N. Robinson, traces the development of the insanity plea...[He offers] an assured historical survey. (Roy Porter *The Times* [UK]) Daniel N. Robinson has written a graceful history of insanity and the law stretching from Homer to Hinckley. He attempts no final theory as to how the law should cope with the insane; he seeks, rather, to use the shifting notions of when madness exculpates criminal activity to illuminate the core self-perceptions of the cultures developing ever-evolving resolutions of the problem...[T]he grandeur of the theme--starting with Agamemnon's crazed humiliation of Achilles and ending yesterday--commands attention and respect. (Neal Johnston *The Nation*) Anyone interested in the nature, meaning, and justification of an insanity defense will profit from Robinson's book, whether beginning an examination of that defense or seeking a deeper understanding of it...Highly recommended. (Choice) Professor Robinson's interesting and scholarly book is the first to deal with the history of legal insanity from Ancient Greece and Rome to modern times...Most of the book, dealing with a topic so little known, is fascinating. (Radmila May *Contemporary* [UK]) [This] work is a welcome addition to the literature and a valuable book for readers with an interest in either law or psychology. An intellectual history of the interplay of psychology and law within the narrow context of insanity as a legal defense in criminal or civil actions, this book carefully examines the views of human nature prevalent in classical Greece and Rome, the early and later Middle Ages, the Enlightenment, and the era of modern science. It then traces the influences of these ideas on the development of the concepts and structures of the law...Both lawyer and lay reader can read this book with benefit. (Library Journal) [A] wonderful book...This work ultimately stands as a treatise on Western law's ongoing struggle to contend with a hodge-podge of mental illnesses, unfortunate coincidences, and other unexplained phenomena, dealt with until recently under the rubric of 'magic.' It would be a shame for psychologists, psychiatrists, and legal scholars to miss out on this book...No comprehensive collection of works in this area would be complete without a copy of *Wild Beasts and Idle Humours*. (Eric Drogin *The Federal Lawyer*) This book is a unique study. It is of great value because of the diversity, richness, and depth of intelligence which is brought to bear on its subject. The author is extremely well-read. He makes deft use of the history of ideas, theology, religious history, medicine and its history, political theory, jurisprudence, literary history, and the rules of evidence as they pertain to expert testimony. He is familiar with the resources of these many disciplines and demonstrates a remarkable ability to have them 'play' together, the way a philharmonic conductor leads the different sections of an orchestra. This is an intellectual symphony of a book. (Dennis Owens *Appellate Practice Journal and Update*) *Wild Beasts and Idle Humours* is truly unique. It synthesizes material that I do not believe has ever been considered in this context, and links up the historical past with contemporaneous values and politics. Robinson effortlessly weaves religious history, literary history, medical history, and political history, and demonstrates how the insanity defense cannot be fully understood without

consideration of all these sources. (Michael L. Perlin, New York Law School)