

Origin of the Phrase “You’re Mad as a Hatter”

Have you ever heard the phrase “You’re Mad as a Hatter?!” Images of Lewis Carroll’s Mad Hatter from “Alice in Wonderland” probably appear in your mind, but the phrase existed long before the character. Although no one knows the exact origin of the phrase it is believed to have generated in the mid 17th century with the Felt Hat Industry. No one is quite sure how mercury first started being used to process felt, but eventually mercuric nitrate was used throughout the felt industry to soften the fibers and hairs used in the felting process. The fumes created by this process were breathed in by the hatters in large doses due to the poor ventilation in most workshops. As mercury accumulated in the hat makers systems they began to contract symptoms such as trembling, also known as hatter’s shakes, loss of coordination, slurred speech, memory loss, depression, irritability, and anxiety. These symptoms led people to believe the hatters had become mad. Hence the phrase “you’re mad as a hatter.” These symptoms eventually became known as Mad Hatter’s Syndrome. Interestingly enough, Lewis Carroll’s Mad Hatter character was not based on a hat maker with mercury poisoning but, an eccentric furniture salesman.

For an animation describing the origin of the phrase “You’re Mad as a Hatter” click here <http://www.voki.com/pickup.php?scid=3621755&height=267&width=200>

Transcript of Voki

“Have you ever heard the phrase “You’re mad as a hatter?” Images of Lewis Carroll’s Mad Hatter probably appear in your mind, but the phrase existed long before the character. It is believed to have originated in the seventeenth century with the felt hat industry. Mercuric nitrate was used throughout the felt industry to soften the fur used in the felting process. The hatters breathed in the fumes and they began to have symptoms such as trembling, known as hatter’s shakes, and slurred speech. People believed the hatters to be mad, hence the phrase.”

Interesting Facts

- According to a tale passed around in the hat making industry, mercury started being utilized in the hat making process in Turkey. Camel hair was used for felt materials and it was somehow discovered that the felting process was sped up if the fibers were moistened with camel urine. In France, it was said workers used their own urine. One workman had the best felt and it was found he was being treated with a mercury compound. Thus an association was made between mercury treatment of the fibers and an improved felt.
- The felt hat industry has been traced to the mid 17th century in France and was introduced into England around 1830.
- Even in America mercuric nitrate was used in the hat making industry. Danbury, Connecticut was the center of America's hat making industry until men's hats were no longer stylish (around 1960). The reputation for madness among hat makers was known as the Danbury Shakes in the U.S.
- In December 1941 the United States Public Health Service banned the use of mercury in the felt industry in the United States.
- No one is quite sure of the exact origins of the phrase "you're mad as a hatter" so it is possible it had other origins.

Resources

- As Mad as A Hatter <http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/mad-as-a-hatter.html>
- Flu Vaccines and Mad Hatter's Disease <http://doctordusty.com/index.php/flu-vaccines-and-mad-hatters-disease/>

- In Search of the Real Mad Hatter
<http://chuckstraub.com/Letterboxing/madhatter.htm>
- The Mad Hatter Syndrome: Mercury and Biological Toxicity
<http://www.naturalnews.com/016544.html>
- The Straight Dope: What Caused the Mad Hatter to Go Mad?
<http://www.straightdope.com/columns/read/1897/what-caused-the-mad-hatter-to-go-mad>
- World Wide Words: Mad as a Hatter
<http://www.worldwidewords.org/qa/qa-mad2.htm>