This chapter uses a wide range of qualitative and quantitative sources from eighteenth-century Scotland to ask whether identifying someone as mad was an arbitrary means of exerting power over them. Separate sections analyse the effect of gender and class on the constructions of mental disability. The conclusion is that rather than providing evidence of a crude bourgeois and/or male conspiracy, understandings of mental incapacity reveal in a subtle and nuanced way the nature and extent of distinctions between people based on their social status, age, occupation and sex.

I
This chapter seeks to test some enduring and strongly held beliefs about what it meant to call someone mad, and about how the mentally incapable were identified in the past. Most of these assumptions come out of the so-called ‘anti-psychiatry’ movement of the 1960s, and are manifested more in ‘historically informed’ literary and sociological studies rather than in the discipline of history itself. They include the idea that what is called insanity is just a cultural artefact rather than at least partly a physical syndrome. Thus, being classed as insane was an arbitrary act perpetrated on men and women who simply failed to conform. Women in particular were the victims of repressive doctors and asylums; the way men and women alike were defined as mentally disabled imposed the standards of one sex and/or class on another; and living in an unequal society placed a unique strain upon the lives of those in subordinate positions.

Other chapters in the book will address these issues in whole or in part. The aim of this one is to ask in what sense, if any, was madness ‘a female malady’ and to what extent was its definition a ‘bourgeois’ or ‘élite’ one? Most of the analysis is qualitative, including
an assessment of the language used to describe mental incapacity. It is clear that, by almost all quantitative measures, males were more likely than females to be classified as mentally disabled and to be institutionalised on that account. Unfortunately, there is no unbiased eighteenth-century evidence that would allow quantification of the chances of different social groups experiencing mental problems. Yet there is now abundant evidence that the institutionalised insane were treated differently according to their wealth and social origins. And a family’s economic and demographic circumstances affected a person’s chances of being institutionalised. Historians are therefore justified in asking whether similar gender- and class-related influences operated in identifying mental problems.

II

Conventional histories of psychiatry have relied largely or entirely on institutional sources: asylum admission records (specifically completed questionnaires), case books and annual reports. While this chapter deploys such material, it focuses more on identifications of madness outside the asylum. Public asylums contained a majority of paupers, but most licensed private asylums were for the better-off middling and upper ranks whose families also resorted to the second source used here. That is civil court inquests known as ‘cognitions’, which resembled proceedings before Chancery in eighteenth-century England. If people were allegedly unable to manage their own affairs, their relatives could ask for a formal legal procedure to test whether they were ‘fatuous’ (idiotic or melancholic) or ‘furious’ (manic). Relatives purchased a ‘brieve’ or writ from Chancery ordering a judge to hold inquest by a jury of fifteen laymen into the questions raised in it, and to return or ‘reout’ the answers. Proof depended on witness statements, and (normally) a personal interrogation of the subject of the inquest by the jury. A curator or tutor, usually an adult male relative, was nominated to watch over the idiot or lunatic – the equivalent of an English ‘committee of the person/estate’.

Between 1701 and 1818 a total of 164 individuals (thirty-three of them women) became the subject of tutories and curatories on the grounds of idiocy or furiosity, producing 500 often lengthy depositions. Those described as ‘of’ a place (indicating they owned land there), or who had a title, comprised forty-seven per cent of subjects (men and women together). The next largest category comprised merchants and craftsmen (twenty-seven per cent), followed by sixteen per cent who were professionals (including army and navy officers); the remaining ten per cent were made up of