New Developments in the Study of the Wild Man in Medieval Irish Literature

Anna Matheson

New Developments in the Study of the Wild Man in Medieval Irish Literature

ANNA MATHESON

The aim of most essays in this edited collection being the re-examination of pioneering works of our respective fields, the following pages will focus on a seminal study in the domain of medieval Irish literature: Pádraig Ó Riain's 'A Study of the Irish Legend of the Wild Man', which, since its original publication in 1972 in the journal *Éigse*, has remained the most comprehensive published examination of the theme of madness in Irish narrative texts.[1] His study was reprinted

1. Ó Riain, Pádraig, 1972, "A Study of the Irish Legend of the Wild Man", *Éigse*, 14.3, pp. 179-206. References to Ó Riain's study throughout this chapter are to this original edition. Other published studies on the themes of madness and/or folly in medieval Irish sources include Joyce, Patrick Weston, 1913, *A Social History of Ancient Ireland*, 3rd edn, 2 vols, London: Longmans, Green, at 1: pp. 224-27 and 2: pp. 481-82; Robins, Joseph, 1986, *Fools and Mad: A History of the Insane in Ireland*, Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, at pp. 3-17; and Clancy, Thomas Owen, 1993, "Fools and Adultery in Some Early Irish Texts", *Ériu*, 44, pp. 105-24. Discussions specific to the vernacular legal material include Smith, Roland M., 1932, "The Advice to Doidin", *Ériu*, 11, 67-85, at pp. 80-82; and Kelly, Fergus, 1988, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, Early Irish Law Series 3, Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, at pp. 91-94. Clancy's unpublished doctoral dissertation has advanced our understanding of the depiction of fools in Irish literature: 1991, "Saint and Fool: The Image and Function of Cummíne Fota and Comgán Mac Da Cherda in Early Irish Literature", Diss. University of Edinburgh. My own study has revised Ó Riain's statements regarding the madwomen Mis and Mór (Ó Riain, P., *op. cit.*, pp. 202-03): Matheson, Anna-Maria Machado, 2011, "Madness as Penance in Medieval Gaelic Sources: A Study of Biblical and Hagiographical Influences on the

Extrait de : *Histoires des Bretagnes – 6. Quel Moyen Âge ? La recherche en question*, Hélène Bouget et Magali Coumert (dir.), Brest, Éditions du CRBC, 2019.

without modification in 2014, in volume 26 of the Irish Texts Society's Subsidiary Series.[2] This volume, entitled *'Buile Suibhne': Perspectives and Reassessments*, is the proceedings publication of a seminar on *Buile Shuibne* ('The Frenzy of Suibne'), a 12th- or early 13th-century compilation of earlier material concerning the adventures of the mad wild man Suibne (anglicised as Sweeney).[3] The book's editor, John Carey, writes in the Foreword that it is not common procedure to include reprinted material in this series.[4] The inclusion of Ó Riain's article – already 42 years old at the time – was thus, in part, done to honour the influence it bore on subsequent studies of the wild man in Irish literature.

What Ó Riain does in this article is focus on a particular literary figure, the wild man of the woods. He sets out to look at thematic correspondences in a large corpus of medieval Irish texts depicting what he considers to be wild persons (whether they are sane or insane, and whether their experience in the wilderness is temporary or permanent). Focussing first on the tales within his corpus that depict persons of unsound mind, he tabulates literary motifs associated with madness, and from this tabulation he establishes paradigms of common traits in the tales. He then argues that the unifying theme in all the texts involving madmen is that of separation from 'wonted or due social status'.[5] He next shows that several of the motifs established in relation to the theme of madness recur in the context of another literary figure, the 'novice',

---

Depiction of Suibne, Lailoken, and Mór of Munster", Diss. University of Cambridge, at pp. 215-16.

2. Ó Riain, Pádraig, 2014, "A Study of the Irish Legend of the Wild Man", in: Carey, ed., *'Buile Suibhne': Perspectives and Reassessments*, Irish Texts Society Subsidiary Series 26, London: Irish Texts Society, pp. 172-201.

3. Challenging the long-held view that *Buile Shuibne* was compiled in the latter half of the 12th century, Feargal Ó Béarra has recently argued, based on linguistic evidence, that it is a compilation of earlier material that was done in the first quarter of the 13th century: 2014, "*Buile Shuibhne*: *vox insaniae* from Medieval Ireland", in: Classen, ed., *Mental Health, Spirituality, and Religion in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age*, Fundamentals of Medieval and Early Modern Culture 15, Berlin: De Gruyter, pp. 242-89, at p. 277. On the difficulties in dating *Buile Shuibne*, the manuscript witnesses of which do not predate 1629, see Bergholm, Alexandra, 2014, "The Authorship and Transmission of *Buile Shuibhne*: A Re-Appraisal", in: Carey, ed., *op. cit.*, pp. 93-110.

4. Carey, John, 2014, Foreword, in: Carey, ed., *op. cit.*, ix-xiii, at p. xii.

5. Ó Riain, P., *op. cit.*, p. 184.

also termed the 'novitiate'.[6] He defines the novice as 'a person separated from wonted or due status'. And his ultimate conclusion is that the literary madman – the *geilt* (the 'mad wild man of the woods', pl. *gelta*) in particular – is a subtype of the literary novice.[7]

Both the ethos of this work and the methodology it employs are reflective of the reductionist, comparative thematic approach that was in vogue at the time Ó Riain was writing: it was not uncommon for scholars to take disparate sources, look for common features in them, construct paradigms based on common content, and make sweeping conclusions about a rather varied and expansive corpus of texts. However, since 1972, scholarship has made considerable advancements in terms of our knowledge of common medieval authorial techniques. We also know more about the literary sources that were to hand in the British Isles and the cultural and literary exchanges between Ireland, Britain, and the Continent. These findings have undermined the critical practice of thematic analysis used by Ó Riain and his contemporaries by highlighting the unsuitability of this approach for the study of medieval literature. The present paper will therefore endeavour to revise a number of Ó Riain's conclusions by taking into account some of the key developments in scholarship witnessed over the past four decades. Beginning first with a brief survey of the main findings that have impacted his conclusions, we will then turn to a re-evaluation of his sources, methodology, and final argument.

Common Trends in Medieval Authorial Practice

Paramount among the recent developments, we now have a deeper appreciation of medieval authorial technique and, in particular, of the practice of adapting and reinventing older tales. To the medieval mind, as Elizabeth Ann Matter has phrased it, 'Originality is the *process* of borrowing, re-working, using old material in new ways to show the imagination and talents of a given author [...] True creativity was often seen in the *way* disparate sources were conceived to fit together.'[8] We are

6. *Ibid.*, p. 185.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 204-05.
8. Matter, E. Ann, 1990, *The Voice of My Beloved: The Song of Songs in Western Medieval Christianity*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, at p. 6. The above is by no

thus aware of the mobility of stock narrative motifs and of the potential mutability of their meaning in each new context. These factors were not entirely unknown at the time Ó Riain was writing, but they were brought to the fore in Irish studies through later works such as Jean-Michel Picard's 1996 study on Irish hagiography. As Picard writes:

> By way of weaving recognisable sources into his text, the Irish hagiographer provides us with a good deal more than a list of borrowings and parallels. He invites the reader to go beyond the mere text before his eyes and to open his mind to the whole range of ideas which underlie the text [...] Because of their training in exegesis, or perhaps because of their chosen medium which was writing rather than oral transmission, they would have been aware of the range of possible levels of interpretation, depending on the education of their readers.[9]

Doubtless, Picard's statements regarding the dextrous use of code and the need for the reader to consider different levels of interpretation extend beyond hagiographical works and can be applied to medieval literature in general.

The Importance of Close Textual Analysis

As modern scholarship has witnessed a greater appreciation of the individuality of each tale and of the artistry exhibited by medieval authors in reusing and adapting pre-existing models, the pitfalls of thematic literary criticism and the generalizations it entails have become more widely acknowledged.[10] The preferred methodology is now that of close textual and historical analysis, reading and interpreting each narrative as a separate textual entity.

Further, recognition of the complex, dynamic process involved in the creation and transmission of medieval texts has led critics to question the concepts of authorship, authenticity, and the general textual integrity

---

means an exhaustive synopsis of post-1972 scholarship on the wild man; I have limited my discussion to studies that have impacted Ó Riain's conclusions.

9. Picard, Jean-Michel, 1996, "Tailoring the Sources: The Irish Hagiographer at Work", in: Ní Chatháin and Richter, eds, *Ireland and Europe in the Early Middle Ages*, Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, pp. 261-74, at p. 262.

10. The edited collection of essays in Sollors, Werner, ed., 1993, *The Return of Thematic Criticism*, Harvard English Studies 18, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, an apology for comparative thematic analysis, shows that this method, even when applied to modern literature, was well in disregard by 1993.

of a work whose manuscript witnesses present a considerable temporal remove from its original date of composition. We acknowledge that medieval narratives cannot easily be treated as freestanding literary artefacts, and we accept that, often times, the best that the textual critic can do is provide us with an approximation of what an original text would have looked like.[11] In short, the search for static literary types in medieval literature is now increasingly recognized as a perilously futile endeavour.

The 'Paradigm-Shift' in the Debate between Nativists and Revisionists

The debate between nativists and revisionists is known to have borne considerable impact on scholarship in the 60s, 70s, 80s, and 90s. The debate opposed two methods of interpretation. The traditionalist or nativist view, dominant from the 1940s until the 80s, argued that pagan Irish societies withstood cultural extirpation upon the coming of Christianity and early literary tales can thus be interpreted as containing the voice of pagan Ireland. Revisionists argued that the Christianization of Ireland had a significant impact on its literature, such that many of the themes traditionalists view as 'pagan' either are of biblical origin or have been adapted from hypothetical pagan sources or influences to suit a Christian message.

James Carney, in 1955, was one of the first to publish against nativist ideology. He was generally alone in the anti-nativist camp until 1984, when a ground-breaking study on Brehon law by Donnchadh Ó Corráin, Liam Breatnach and Aiden Breen showed that certain passages from Irish legal texts that had formerly been viewed as archaic and as the product of age-old oral tradition in fact contain various calques of Latin Canon Law.[12] A compromise has since been reached

---

11. Spiegel, Gabrielle M.,1990, "History, Historicism, and the Social Logic of the Text in the Middle Ages", *Speculum*, 65.1, pp. 59-86; the essays in Minnis, A. J., and Charlotte Brewer, eds, 1992, *Crux and Controversy in Middle English Textual Criticism*, Woodbridge: Brewer; and Hanna, Ralph III, 1996, *Pursuing History: Middle English Manuscripts and Their Texts*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

12. Carney, James, 1955, *Studies in Irish Literature and History*, Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies; Ó Corráin, Donnchadh, et al., 1984, "The Laws of the Irish", *Peritia*, 3, pp. 382-438. A synopsis of the history of the debate, including a

that leans favourably on the revisionist side, at least in the ethos of scholarship produced today in Ireland and the British Isles. But Ó Riain was writing at a time when the nativist opinion was popular, and, as shall be seen below, this mainstream nativist ideology has tainted some of his conclusions.

Hagiographic and Biblical Models Noted in Depictions of Wild Men

Revisionist momentum has since enabled a number of young scholars to identify hagiographic, biblical, and exegetical models used by medieval authors in their depictions of wild men, whether the wild man is sane or insane. These scholars build on the work of Nora K. Chadwick and P. L. Henry, and they especially draw upon an early study by Charles Allyn Williams that focussed on early Coptic hagiography. [13] Williams showed that the Coptic lives of desert saints had a profound influence on late medieval and early modern German depictions of sanctity and of hairy recluses. The following is an abridged version of Williams's summary of the typical storyline of these Coptic tales:

> An ascetic (the visitant) sets out into the desert, often after receiving a vision that urges him to seek a remote Christian recluse (the anchorite), without any knowledge of where the anchorite may be. Through some form of divine guidance, and often after overcoming great suffering and various obstacles, he finds the anchorite, who will typically be either naked or scantily clad with palm leaves and covered by long white hair (a token of

summary of Porter's discussion of the political circumstances that contributed to the rise of nativist ideology, is provided in Wooding, Jonathan M., 2009, "Reapproaching the Pagan Celtic Past – Anti-Nativism, Asterisk Reality and the Late-Antiquity Paradigm", *Studia Celtica Fennica*, 6, pp. 61-74. For a full survey of scholarship, including nativist and revisionist, on *Buile Shuibne*, see Bergholm, Alexandra, 2012, *From Shaman to Saint: Interpretive Strategies in the Study of 'Buile Shuibhne'*, Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica.

13. Chadwick, Nora K., 1942, "Geilt", *Scottish Gaelic Studies*, 5, pp. 106-53; Chadwick, Nora K., 1961, *The Age of the Saints in the Early Celtic Church*, London: Oxford University Press, at pp. 105-11; Henry, Patrick Leo, 1966, *The Early English and Celtic Lyric*, London: Allen, Unwin, at pp. 25-60 and 235; Williams, Charles Allyn, 1925-1926, "Oriental Affinities of the Legend of the Hairy Anchorite: The Theme of the Hairy Solitary in Its Early Forms with Reference to *Die Lügend von Sanct Johanne Chrysostomo", University of Illinois Studies in Language and Literature*, 10, pp. 3-56; 11, pp. 53-139.

> sanctity). Sometimes the anchorite's body is covered with fur like a beast. The anchorite is a complete solitary who, through his trials in the desert, has mortified all his passions and attained spiritual perfection and gnosis (he has preternatural knowledge and addresses the visitant by name). His only companions (if any) are beasts. He lives on an ascetic diet of roots and grass. He is sometimes fed by an animal, like the raven that brings bread from heaven in the Life of Paul the Hermit. The anchorite has had no contact with the world for decades, so a briefing ensues on current affairs. The anchorite is aware that he will die shortly after the visit, and so one divine reason for the encounter is typically to give the anchorite a Christian burial.[14]

In late antique tales such as Athanasius's Life of St Antony, Rufinus's *Historia monachorum* ('History of the Monks'), or Jerome's Life of Paul the First Hermit, the saint will often have taken to the desert to expiate original sin in imitation of Elijah and John the Baptist, and in imitation of Christ; the narratives describe how holy men attained spiritual perfection through ascetic mortification. The later, medieval tales more frequently describe sinners retreating to expiate their *own* sins. An axiomatic example would be Mary's flight to expiate her lechery in the late 6th- or 7th-century Life of St Mary of Egypt (*BHO* 683-87). Additional examples include the expiation of murder in the Life of St James the Penitent (*BHG* 770), or of fornication in the Life of Macarius the Roman (*BHO* 580).[15] Such later narratives highlight the power of penitence: through penance in the wild, even the worst sinners are purged and eventually attain spiritual perfection.

Also important regarding the later Coptic lives, the anchorite often grows a coat of hair that is described as symbolic of the grace of God. It is given to alleviate the penitent's suffering from the elements and, as the anchorite explains in the Life of Mark the Athenian, it only grows once the penitent has completed a sufficient amount of penance in the wild:

> Having persevered in much patience the thirty years in hunger and thirst, in nakedness, and in many conflicts with the demons, from that time the power of God continually visited me and by His ordinance my bodily

14. Abridged from *ibid.*, pp. 61-62.

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 101-03, pp. 107-10, and pp. 111-16; Doob, Penelope B. R., 1974, *Nebuchadnezzar's Children: Conventions of Madness in Middle English Literature*, New Haven: Yale University Press, at pp. 161-62.

> characteristics were changed, and hairs grew on my whole body until it was made heavy by them. [16]

That the fur grew by grace of God is also made clear in the Greek text *De canonica nuda* ('The Naked Nun'), tentatively dated to the 10th century and in which a penitent nun describes her ordeals in the wild, stating, 'A la longue mes habits se sont usés, mais ma chevelure ayant poussé, je m'enveloppe dedans en guise de vêtement, de telle manière que ni le froid ni la chaleur ne me font souffrir, par la grâce du Christ.' [17]

J. E. E. Chandler and Brian Frykenberg have shown how such lives of Coptic desert saints are drawn upon in depictions of certain wild men, namely the 'Scottish' mad wild man Lailoken in a 12th- or 13th-century Insular Latin text known as *Lailoken A*, the Irish Suibne Geilt in the aforementioned 12th- or 13th-century *Buile Shuibne*, and, to a lesser extent, Merlin in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Vita Merlini*. [18] The acknowledged Coptic influence on analogous tales of purgative wanderers, the clerics who seek a desert in the ocean in the *immrama* (tales depicting allegorical sea voyages), lends support to this line of inquiry. [19]

---

16. *De S. Marco Atheniensi* 1.8; *Acta SS 3* Mar.: appendix 34A for Greek; trans. Williams, 1926: 66.

17. *De canonica nuda* ll. 51-55; Wortley, John, ed. and trans., 1987, *Les récits édifiants de Paul, évêque de Monembasie, et d'autres auteurs*, Paris: Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, p. 120, l. 52-55, trans. p. 121. The date of this text is discussed by Wortley, at pp. 23-25.

18. Chandler, J. E. E., 1979, "Some Aspects of the Legend of Merlinus as Represented by Celtic Sources and in the Works of the Early Chroniclers (Geoffrey of Monmouth, Giraldus Cambrensis, Lazamon, and Wace) with Reference to the Welsh Bruts", Bach. Lett. Diss. Somerville College, Oxford; Frykenberg, Brian, 1984, "The Wild-Man in Celtic Ecclesiastical Legend and Tradition", MLitt thesis, University of Edinburgh; Frykenberg, Brian, 2006, "Wild Man in Celtic Legend", in: Koch, ed., *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia*, 5 vols, Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, pp. 1790-99. *Lailoken A* is edited and translated in Macqueen, Winifred, and John Macqueen, 1989, "Vita Merlini Silvestris", *Scottish Studies*, 29, pp. 77-93; *Buile Shuibne* (hereafter *BS*) is edited in O'Keefe, J. G., 1931, *Buile Śuibhne*, Medieval and Modern Irish Series 1, Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies.

19. Bray, Dorothy Ann, 1995, "Allegory in the *Navigatio Sancti Brendani*", *Viator*, 26, pp. 1-10; Fagnoni, Anna Maria, 2006, "Oriental Motifs in the *Navigatio Sancti Brendani*", in: Burgess and Strijbosch, eds, *The Brendan Legend: Texts and Versions*,

Certain issues with Frykenberg's arguments have since been refined. Subsequent research has looked more closely at the Coptic sources and at additional instances of code that were used in the depictions of Suibne and Lailoken to present their involuntary exile as purgative, penitential, and analogous to the tradition of voluntary ascetic exile known as *peregrinatio pro Christo* ('peregrination for Christ's sake'). In doing so, I myself have shown that, in their interactions with Moling and Kentigern, these solitary wild men do not correspond to the role of the visitant in Williams's typical storyline of Coptic hagiographic tales as Frykenberg suggests (to be precise, he states that the division of roles is often ambiguous).[20] Rather, they more closely suit the model of the hairy desert anchorite, and the depictions of the saints they befriend (the coenobites Moling and Kentigern respectively) neatly correspond to that of the visitant – a point which will illumine the discussion below.[21]

With specific reference to *Buile Shuibne*, William Sayers and Bridgette Slavin have described how the biblical model of Nebuchadnezzar has been drawn upon in the depiction of Suibne's purgative punishment.[22] Their studies have been aided by what is arguably the most important contribution to scholarship on the subject of madness in medieval literature: Penelope Doob's monograph on the influence of the biblical tale of Nebuchadnezzar on early depictions of insanity.[23] This overly proud Babylonian king is humbled by God through a period of penitential madness that lasts for seven years. During this time, he lives like a beast in the wild and acquires avian characteristics:

> … a voice came from heaven, 'This is what is decreed for you, King Nebuchadnezzar: your royal authority has been taken from you. You will be driven away from people and will live with the animals; you will eat grass like cattle. Seven times will pass by for you until you acknowledge that

Leiden: Brill, pp. 53-80; Wooding, Jonathan M., 2011, "The Date of *Navigatio S. Brendani Abbatis*", *Studia Hibernica*, 37, pp. 9-26.

20. Frykenberg B., 1984, *op. cit.*, pp. 34-67; Frykenberg, B., 2006, *op. cit.*, pp. 1793-94.

21. Matheson, A. M., *op. cit.*, pp. 122-84.

22. Sayers, William, 1992, "The Deficient Ruler as Avian Exile: Nebuchadnezzar and Suibhne Geilt (Varia 7)", *Ériu*, 43, pp. 217-19; Slavin, Bridgette, 2007, "The Irish Birdman: Kingship and Liminality in *Buile Suibhne*", in: Bishop, ed., *Text and Transmission in Medieval Europe*, Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, pp. 17-45.

23. Doob, P., *op. cit.*

> the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes.' Immediately what had been said about Nebuchadnezzar was fulfilled. He was driven away from people and ate grass like cattle. His body was drenched with the dew of heaven until his hair grew like the feathers of an eagle and his nails like the claws of a bird. [24]

The brash king Suibne is similarly humbled when cursed by St Rónán to live in the wild like a bird. [25] During this time, he lives an ascetic lifestyle, grows talons and *clúm* ('feathers, down, fur'), recognizes his sins, experiences compunction, and ultimately becomes a saintly madman who is graced with divine knowledge and who befriends St Moling. [26] Nebuchadnezzar's punishment evidences a conceptual link between the phenomena of madness and exile, a link that is also seen in the New Testament descriptions of demoniacs who flee to the woods when overcome with madness. But Nebuchadnezzar's madness is special because it proves purgative: it involves a temporary loss of status, after which the king regains his kingdom, once he has been humbled, purged of his sin, and once he recognizes the true Creator. The *topos* of a humbling temporary loss of status featured here will be key when we come to consider textual influences on Nechtán, Ó Riain's archetypal novice.

Also key, Doob has shown that Nebuchadnezzar's tale of purgative exile played a role in the development of the Coptic literary tradition of hairy desert anchorites, who voluntarily undertook similar penance in the wild. Tertullianic expositions of the Babylonian king's *exomologesis* describe Nebuchadnezzar as having nails like the claws of a lion rather than like the talons of an eagle: 'For a long time indeed he had offered the Lord his repentance, his exomologesis having been performed through a seven-year period of squalor, during which his nails grew wildly like a lion's and his neglected hair became ruffled like an eagle's.' [27]

---

24. Translation of Daniel 4: 31-33 (New International Version).
25. *BS* §10 stanzas 2-3.
26. *BS* §§27 stanza 6, 75 stanza 2, and 80 stanza 1. Reference to the *clúm* that grows on Suibne's body is found at *BS* §§60; 61 stanza 3, l. 1; and 40 stanza 40, l. 40. His talon-like nails are described at *BS* §§23 stanza 1, l. 2; and 45 stanza 16, l. 1.
27. Tertullian, *De paenitentia* xii.7; Munier, Charles, ed., 1984, *Tertullien, La pénitence*, Sources Chrétiennes, 316, Paris: Éditions du Cerf, at p. 188, ll. 25-190, l. 28; translation mine.

An alternative tradition, likely derived from the Septuagint's account of Daniel 4:33, describes the inverse: Nebuchadnezzar is covered with bristly hair like a lion and has claws like an eagle.[28] This same coat of hair or feathers that grows on Nebuchadnezzar once he has been drenched with heaven's dew (Daniel 4:30) is easily interpreted as a mark of atonement, heaven's dew being understood by most Church Fathers as symbolic of the grace of God.[29] It is thus analogous to the hairy anchorite's coat of hair. We will return to the diffused influence of the Nebuchadnezzar model on literary depictions of wildness and penance below.

Again with reference to *Buile Shuibne*, Alexandra Bergholm has contributed further discussion on the subject of folly for Christ's sake, and Jan Erik Rekdal has described the narrative as a cautionary tale warning the secular nobility not to challenge the Church (as Suibne challenged Rónán) and presenting Suibne's madness and ultimate death as an allegory of redemption.[30] Rekdal builds on Máire Ní Mhaonaigh's

---

28. Attested in, among other sources, St Pacian's treatise on Tertullian, *De Paenitentibus* ix.5; Anfruns, Angel Anglada, ed., 2012, *Paciani Barcinonensis Opera Quae Extant*, Corpus Christianorum Series Latina 69B, Turnhout: Brepols, pp. 9-37, at pp. 27-28, ll. 254-59; in Paulinus of Nola, *Severo fratri Paulinus* (Epist. 23) xix; Hartel, Wilhelm von, ed., 1894, *Sancti Pontii Meropii Paulini Nolani Epistulae*, Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum 29, Prague: Tempsky, 157-201, at p. 177, ll. 8-16; and in the 16th-century printed editions of Tertullian's *De paenitentia* used by Oehler in his early critical edition (*editio maior*): Oehler, Franz, 1853, *Quinti Septimii Florentis Tertulliani Opera Omnia*, vol. 1, Leipzig: Weigel, pp. 641-65, at p. 664 ll. 9-14.

29. Doob, P., *op. cit.*, p. 72 and 161. See also John Cassian's *De institutis coenobiorum* v.14, which describes how, once one acknowledges his sins, embraces compunction, and resists the desires of the flesh: 'Then God's grace, which the Holy Spirit distils like a dew into our hearts, is able to soothe and quench the heats of carnal longing' (Petchenig, Michael, ed., (1888) 2004, *De Institutis Coenobiorum*, Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum 17, Vienna: Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenscahften, at p. 92, ll. 10-12; Bertram, Jerome, trans., 1999, *The Monastic Institutes*, London: Saint Austin, at p. 77).

30. Bergholm, Alexandra, 2007, "Folly for Christ's Sake in Early Irish Literature: The Case of Suibhne Geilt Reconsidered", *Studia Celtica Fennica*, 4, pp. 7-14; Bergholm, Alexandra (forthcoming), "Saints and Fools in Early Medieval Ireland", in: Ivanov and Berger, eds, *Holy Fools and Divine Madmen: Sacred Insanity Through Ages and Cultures*, Munich: Münchner Arbeiten zur Byzantinistik; Rekdal, Jan Erik, 2011, "From Wine in a Goblet to Milk in Cowdung: The Transformation of Early Christian Kings in

consideration of *Buile Shuibne* as a literary manifestation of 12th-century Church reform. [31] Ó Béarra, who would place the date of *Buile Shuibne*'s composition in the first quarter of the 13th century rather than the 12th, yet who agrees that the compiler was working with earlier material that may have dated to the 12th century, argues that the conflict between Church and kings manifested therein need not pertain specifically to the Gregorian reforms. [32] In reviewing such conflicting expositions on the aim of the 12th- or 13th-century compiler of *Buile Shuibne*, one is reminded of Bergholm's recent remarks about O'Keefe's edition – which is based on his handling of three independent 17th- and 18th-century manuscript witnesses – and how little we know about its proximity in form to the original *Buile Shuibne*. [33] What is clear, however, is that scholars are now concentrating on the Christian significance of Suibne's purgative madness.

The Welsh Merlin, the 'Scottish' Lailoken, and the Irish Suibne Geilt: Cognate Wild Men?

Since 1972, Alfred Jarman and Oliver Padel have argued that the Welsh Merlin, the 'Scottish' (or rather Strathclyde Cumbric) Lailoken, and the Irish Suibne Geilt, whose traditions bear many striking similarities, are quasi-cognate descendants of an earlier tale that is believed to have arisen among the Strathclyde Britons in the late 6th or early 7th century. Textual evidence suggests that this tale, at an early stage, made reference to the battle of Arfderydd, fought in AD 573 in modern-day Arthuret, Cumbria. [34] James Carney had earlier argued a

---

Three Post-Viking Tales from Ireland", in: Gro et *al.*, eds, *Ideology and Power in the Viking and Middle Ages: Scandinavia, Iceland, Ireland, Orkney and the Faeroes*, Leiden: Brill, pp. 211-67.

31. Ní Mhaonaigh, Máire, 2006, "Pagans and Holy Men: Literary Manifestations of Twelfth-Century Reform", in: Bracken and Ó Riain-Raedel, eds, *Reform and Renewal: Ireland and Twelfth-Century Reform*, Dublin: Four Courts Press, pp. 143-61, at pp. 147-49.

32. Ó Béarra, F., *op. cit.*, pp. 282-87.

33. Bergholm, A., 2014, *op. cit.*; see also Ó Béarra, F., *op. cit.*, pp. 247-59.

34. The putative trajectory by which the tradition of the northern wild man became merged with that of the south-Welsh prophet Myrddin in Geoffrey Monmouth's *Vita Merlini* has been described by Padel. See Jarman, A. O. H., 1978, "Early Stages in the Development of the Myrddin Legend", in: Bromwich and Brinley Jones, eds, *Studies*

somewhat similar view, seeing the Suibne legend as a borrowing from a northern-British tale of a wild man, and arguing that the northern wild man became associated with the historic battle of Mag Roth (AD 637) instead of that of Arfderydd when his tale was adapted to an Irish context.[35]

Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha has recently cast her doubts on this theory regarding Suibne's origin, arguing instead that the Suibne legend originated independently in Leinster rather than as a borrowing in north-eastern Ireland.[36] She builds on Carney's remark that *Buile Shuibne* contains two separate strands of tradition – one involving Suibne's association with the battle of Mag Roth, and one involving Suibne's relations with St Moling.[37] Basing her argument largely on the ascription of the poem beginning 'M'airiuclán hi Túaim Inbir' ('My little oratory in Túaim Inbir') to Suibne in the 9th-century Codex Sancti Pauli, where it immediately precedes a poem ascribed to Saint Moling,[38] on certain narrative details in *Buile Shuibne*'s extant plotline, and on posited intertextuality with *Fled Dúin na nGéd* ('The Banquet of Dún na nGéd'), she submits that Suibne's association with Moling may predate the tradition associating his madness with the battle of Mag

---

in Old Welsh Poetry, Cardiff: Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru, pp. 326-49; Padel, O. J., 2006, "Geoffrey of Monmouth and the Development of the Merlin Legend", *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies*, 51, pp. 37-65; Fulton, Helen, 2009, "Arthur and Merlin in Early Welsh Literature: Fantasy and Magic Naturalism", in: Fulton, ed., *A Companion to Arthurian Literature*, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, pp. 84-101, at pp. 96-99; and Lawrence-Mathers, Anne, 2014, *The True History of Merlin the Magician*, New Haven: Yale University Press.

35. Carney, James, 1955, '"Suibne Geilt" and "The Children of Lir"', in *Studies in Irish Literature and History*, Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, pp. 128-64, at pp. 131-32 [reprinted with revisions from *Éigse*, 6.2 (1948/52), pp. 83-110]. On the spellings Mag Roth and Mag Rath, see Muhr, Kay, 1996, *Place-Names of Northern Ireland*, vol. 6, Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies, Queen's University of Belfast, at pp. 271-77 s.v. Moira.

36. Ní Dhonnchadha, Máirín, 2014, "The Cult of St Moling and the Making of *Buile Shuibne*", in: Carey, ed. *'Buile Suibhne': Perspectives and Reassessments*, pp. 1-42.

37. Carney, J., *op. cit.*, p. 133.

38. Sankt Paul im Lavanttal, Stiftsbibliothek, ms 86a/1, fol. 8v; Strachan, John, and Whitley Stokes, eds, 1903, *Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus*, vol. 2, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, at p. 294.

Roth – a tradition that, according to her study, is not evidenced before *Fled Dúin na nGéd*, an early 12th-century tale.

Ní Dhonnchadha has shared her preliminary findings, but her argument, as it presently stands, remains inconclusive. Bergholm has outlined the methodological difficulties faced by the textual critic attempting to decipher and comment on the original form of *Buile Shuibne*, a compilation made in the 12th or 13th century but surviving in manuscripts dating three or four centuries later, a work whose textual history she describes as a 'dynamic process of production and reproduction, in which every moment in the text's historical existence can be seen as reflecting particular cultural conditions', and a text that has thus witnessed 'various modes of existence after that perceived originary moment'.[39] Her discussion must be borne in mind in any analysis of *Buile Shuibne*'s plot details the anachronisms therein.[40] Ruth Lehmann's linguistic analysis of *Buile Shuibne* that describes Rónán's curse at §6 as pre-12th century and as one of the earliest poems in the text (alongside the account of Suibne's actions at Mag Roth at §27) has yet to be addressed in relation to Ní Dhonnchadha's statement that Suibne's association with Rónán and Mag Roth, as developed in *Buile Shuibne*, is a later accretion to his tradition and is derived from the early 12th-century *Fled Dúin na nGéd* or a lost precursor.[41] However, Feargal Ó Béarra's own recent linguistic study has indicated that it may well be time for a reappraisal of Lehmann's conclusions.[42]

Bergholm has remarked that 'Few topics in the textual history of *Buile Shuibhne* have attracted as much attention, or generated as much scholarly disagreement, as the question of the role of Saint Moling in the evolution of the Suibne tradition.'[43] Without indisputable evidence that the Mag Roth strand of tradition was a later accretion that affixed itself to a native literary character named Suibne who was associated with Moling, one cannot yet assuredly dismiss Carney's argument that

39. Bergholm, A., 2014, *op. cit.*, p. 95 and 106.
40. Anachronisms are discussed by Ní Dhonnchadha, M., *op. cit.*, pp. 12-13.
41. Lehmann, Ruth Preston, 1953/4-1955/6, "A Study of the *Buile Shuibhne*", *Études celtiques*, 6: pp. 289-311; 7: pp. 115-38, at 1955/56: 119; Ní Dhonnchadha, M., *op. cit.*, p. 12 and pp. 26-31.
42. Ó Béarra F., *op. cit.*, pp. 269-77.
43. Bergholm, A., 2014, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

the narrative kernel of the Suibne tradition is, like that of Lailoken and, in a more convolute way, that of Merlin, associated with the historic battle of Arfderydd. [44]

For this reason, Ó Riain's decision to limit his analysis to Irish texts depicting wild men, and the consequential omission of Myrddin/Merlin and Lailoken from his study (not to mention analogous figures like the French Yvain, the Welsh Owein, or even the Middle English Sir Orfeo) might strike us today as a methodological error. Yet this seeming error would have been less obvious at the time he was writing and may indeed have been intentional: though Ó Riain did subscribe to the idea that Suibne was a 'monkish borrowing' from Britain, the omission of Brittonic material allowed his study to remain relatively neutral in the wake of Carney and Jackson's rigorous debate over whether Suibne's origins were from Scottish Dál Ríata or Cumbric Strathclyde. [45]

Distinction between Fools and Madmen

Fergus Kelly's cursory discussion in his *Guide to Early Irish Law* has shown, as have more detailed subsequent analyses, that a clear distinction is often made in Irish sources between the malady of the fool (*drúth, óinmit*) and that of the madman (*mer, dásachtach*). [46] This is illustrated in, for instance, the 9th-century *Tecosca Cormaic* ('The Instructions of Cormac'), which presents the fool and the madman as separate figures when advising, 'ní cria di [...] drúth, di dásachtach' ('do not buy from [...] a fool, from a madman'). [47]

By not distinguishing between literary depictions of fools and madmen, Ó Riain's tabulation of the characteristic traits of madness is inaccurate in feature B3 'the madman collects firewood'. [48] The two

---

44. Carney, J. *op. cit.*, p. 132.
45. Ó Riain, Pádraig 1973/4, "The Materials and Provenance of *Buile Shuibhne*", *Éigse*, 15, pp. 173-88, at pp. 185; 1972: 181. Note that Ó Riain does draw on a less contentious Welsh figure: Kyledyr mab Nwython from the 11th-century *Kulhwch ac Olwen* (*op. cit.*, p. 191).
46. Kelly F., *op. cit.*, pp. 91-92; Clancy Th. O., *op. cit.*, 1991, pp. 9-26; Matheson A. M., *op. cit.*, pp. 38-53.
47. *Tecosca Cormaic* §19; Meyer, Kuno, ed., 1909, *The Instructions of King Cormac Mac Airt*, Todd Lecture Series 15, Dublin: Hodges, Figgis, at p. 36, ll. 20-21; translation mine.
48. Ó Riain P., *op. cit.*, 1972, p. 183 and 200.

characters upon which this statement is based (Cuanna mac Ultáin in *Cath Maighe Rath* 'The Battle of Mag Roth', and Comgán Mac Dá Cherda in *Imtheachta na nÓinmhideadh* 'The Adventures of the Fools') are not madmen but *óinmiti* ('fools'),[49] and Thomas Clancy has used these same two examples to show that literary depictions of *óinmiti* who are not employed as entertainers often involve them performing tasks typically reserved for menials.[50] It is now clear that there are in fact no instances of madmen collecting firewood in Irish literature.

Ó Riain's Sources, Methodology, and Conclusions

It is essential to state at the offset, before looking more closely at Ó Riain's sources, his methodology, and his conclusions, that the following critique is not of Ó Riain's work *per se* but of what is now generally regarded as an outmoded scientific method. Using Ó Riain's article as a case study, the aim of the remainder of this paper is to highlight the methodological problems that one faces when applying a comparative thematic approach to medieval literature, as was typically done at the time, and to update some of Ó Riain's conclusions.

Turning first to the body of sources that were chosen for the tabulation of the characteristics of madness, we note, on the positive, that there is little disparity in the genres represented (mainly narrative literature, with one hagiographic tale). But by limiting his analysis to literary texts, in order to obtain a sizeable enough corpus of Irish narrative sources containing the very specific theme of madness, he is forced to stretch the chronological range of texts in his dataset. As a result, the texts range in date from the late Middle Irish recension of *Serglige Con Culainn* ('The Wasting Sickness of Cú Chulainn', dated by Thurneysen to the 11th century) to at least the 15th century (*Cath Finntrágha* 'The Battle of Ventry') if not later (the Early Modern Irish *Deargruathar Chonall Chearnaigh* 'The Red Rampage of Conall

49. O'Donovan, John, ed., 1842, "*'The Banquet of Dun na n-Gedh' and 'The Battle of Magh Rath'*", *Dublin:* Irish Archaeological Society, at p. 276, ll. 1-6; O'Keeffe, J. G., ed., 1911, "Mac Dá Cherda and Cummaine Foda", *Ériu*, 5, pp. 18-44, at p. 30, ll. 19-25.
50. Clancy Th. O., *op. cit.*, 1991, pp. 15, 20, and 130-31.

Cearnach'). [51] The date range represented by these sources is rather large and thus introduces a number of variables.

A similar issue arises with the aforementioned disparity in the types of persons of unsound mind presented in these tales. He has admitted fools into his taxonomy alongside madmen, and one of the characters figuring in the list is arguably not of unsound mind (Muirchertach mac Erca, who is bewitched by a magic potion and loses his strength). The study employs too fluid an understanding of madness – a concept for which no working definition is given. Also problematic is his inclusive handling of what he considers to be *gelta*, a term which he also does not define, though the reader can gather that he intends mad wild men within the tradition of Suibne Geilt. In fact, *geilt* is a purely literary term; it does not occur in legal contexts except in reference to the above-named literary character, Suibne. And in the few instances of literature and poetry where it is found, the actions of *gelta* conform in the sense that the *geilt* is typically depicted either as a weak-hearted individual cowering at the tip of a branch, as a *homo silvaticus* and wanderer of the wilds, or as an innocent purged of temptation. [52] In his discussion of perceived typological parallels between the novitiate and the *geilt*, representatives selected for the latter include the aforementioned Muirchertach mac Erca and the fool Mac Dá Cherda. [53] By not applying strict selection criteria – by including the bewitched, fools, and mad literary figures who are not specifically described by use of the term *geilt* in his discussion of the Irish *geilt* – it is inevitable that he should be led to certain inaccurate conclusions regarding the behaviour of *gelta.*

Ó Riain's methodology requires that he decipher a 'unifying thread' in all of the tales selected for his tabulation of the characteristics of

---

51. Thurneysen, Rudolf, 1921, *Die irische Helden und Königsage*, Halle, Saale: Niemeyer, at pp. 413-16; Dillon, Myles, ed., 1953, *Serglige Con Culainn*, Mediaeval and Modern Irish Series 14, Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, at pp. xi-xvi.

52. In *Acallam Finn ocus Oisín* (known in English as 'The Quarrel between Finn and Oisín') edited in Meyer, Kuno, 1910, *Fianaigecht,* Todd Lecture Series 16, Dublin: Hodges, Figgis, pp. 22-27, at p. 26, ll. 9-10; and in the poem "A Chrínóc" by Máel Ísu Ua Brolcháin (d. 1086), edited in Ní Bhrolcháin, Muireann, 1986, *Maol Ísa Ó Brolcháin*, Maynooth: An Sagart, at p. 80 stanza 3. See discussion in Matheson, A. M., *op. cit.*, p. 52 and pp. 104-06 and Ó Béarra F., *op. cit.*, pp. 266-69.

53. Ó Riain P., *op. cit.*, 1972, pp. 186-204, especially pp. 186, 188, and 191.

madness, and as a result, he concludes that they all have the 'commonly shared characteristic of separation, whether temporary or otherwise, from wonted societal status'.[54] This statement is acceptable in reference to most instances of madness, where it is divinely inflicted as punishment or results from fear in battle or grief over overwhelming loss, but the tale of the *óinmit* Cuanna, the aforementioned congenital fool affected from birth but manifesting his illness in late childhood, involves no separation from wonted status – at least not within the framework that Ó Riain is looking at.

Likewise, the perceived typological affinity between the *geilt* and the novitiate only applies to the novitiate who suffers a temporary, punitive loss of status. The study employs an overly inclusive definition of the novice: unrelated tales depicting outlaws and marauders, contenders for kingship, and persons on royal circuits have been included simply because they involve a scene in the woods.[55] This inclusion of figures like Niall of the Nine Hostages, who underwent a test for kingship in the wilderness, made Ó Riain have to expand his definition of the novice to accommodate such instances of what he termed 'separation from due status'. One can thus observe how the parameters of the study became obscured.

The aim of his study was to show that 'several of the motifs established in relation to the theme of madness recur in the context of the novitiate',[56] but we have seen above that scholarship has since advanced new understandings of many of his source texts, and it can now be said that many of the thematic parallels he discusses can be attributed to the shared influence of the same literary models. This is best illustrated in the tale of Nechtán in the Irish Life of St Fínán Cam (*Beatha Naomh Fíonáin Locha Laoi*, a 17th-century Irish translation of an earlier Latin Life of St Fínán), which Ó Riain discusses in depth as an exemplary tale of a novice, and which Macalister had previously noted to be 'no doubt a reminiscence of the story of Nebuchadnezzar' – an observation that received little notice from Ó Riain and others writing during the heyday

54. *Ibid.*, p. 184. Ó Riain describes his methodology at pp. 180-81.
55. *Ibid.*, pp. 184-204.
56. *Ibid.*, p. 185.

of nativist scholarship.[57] Nechtán, like Nebuchadnezzar, is a proud king (*rí úaibrech*)[58] who is exiled from his kingdom for seven years until he repents and is abased, at which point his kingdom is restored to him:

> adúbhairt Fíonán, adeirim re heach an rígh imthea*cht* uaidh [...] 7 biaidh sé go cean*n* sea*cht* mbliaghan gan ríghe aige ag*us* bad éigion do con*n*aigh do tharang do dhaoinibh eile air amhuin féin chum teine dhóibh [...] Air na tuigsin do Nea*cht*ain go ttáinig gach nídh do thairngair Fíonán do chu*m* críche do iompaig t*ar*ais dá thír 7 dá dhúthaig féin, 7 táinig abhfiaghnaise Fionán 7 do leig aghluin faoí 7 diar maithfeachas an dearnaig déagcóir air Dhia 7 air Fíonán, 7 ód con*nairc* Fíonán aithríge 7 úmhla Nea*ch*tain, do ghuidh tar ach*ean*n, 7 do haisígheadh aríghe féin arís dó.
>
> Said St. Finan 'I bid the king's horse go from him [...] and let him be without kingdom till seven years be completed; and let him be forced to draw firewood for others on his own back to the fire for them' [...] When Nechtan perceived that everything Finan had prophesied to him was come to pass, he returned to his own land and country and came into Finan's presence and knelt down and besought pardon for the wrong he had done of God and of Finan: and when Finan saw Nechtan's repentance and abasement, he prayed for him and his kingdom was given back again to him.[59]

Both Nechtán and Nebuchadnezzar are humbled through the loss of royal status: Nebuchadnezzar is sent to live as a beast in the wild; Nechtán is sent to live as a menial in another man's house (the house of Diarmait mac Cerbaill, where he spends a season of poverty).[60] We witness here in Nechtán's plight the influence of the biblical tale of Nebuchadnezzar's punishment, and the mobility of conventions associated with it: namely, the motif of the purgative loss of status.

In short, we now know that the typological and thematic parallels between the *geilt* and what Ó Riain calls the 'novice' can be attributed

---

57. Macalister, R. A. Stewart, ed. and trans., 1899, "The Life of Saint Finan", *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie*, 2, pp. 545-65, at p. 547; also noted in Henry, P. L., *op. cit.*, p. 235; Ó Riain, P., *op. cit.*, 1972, pp. 185-86; Kenney, James F., (1929) 1966, *The Sources for the Early History of Ireland: Ecclesiastical*, New York: Octagon Books, at pp. 421-22.

58. *Beatha Naomh Fíonáin Locha Laoi* §6; R. A. S. Macalister, 1899: 556, l. 39.

59. *Beatha Naomh Fíonáin Locha Laoi* §§6 -7; *ibid.*, pp. 556, ll. 40-558, l. 20; trans. pp. 557-59.

60. *Beatha Naomh Fíonáin Locha Laoi* §6; *ibid.*, p. 558, ll. 6-7.

to the shared influence of motifs associated with the legend of Nebuchadnezzar. The similarity only applies to madmen who take to the woods and become hermits (*gelta*); contrary to what Ó Riain argues, it does not apply to all of the madmen in his corpus.[61] And as noted above, the typological parallel between Nechtán and the fools Cuanna and Mac Dá Cherda, all gatherers of firewood, is likely coincidental since Nechtán's punishment was to assume the role of a menial, as does the literary fool when not employed as a performer.

Other dated epistemological trends are also witnessed in the study, such as the application of modern theories to medieval literature. Ó Riain tries to make *fianna* and *gelta* (!) conform to modern anthropological theory concerning the initiation of tribal warriors through the perceived link of the novice – an inherently flawed initiative, especially in view of what we now know about Christian influences on the literary construct of the *geilt*.[62]

But ultimately, the error of this comprehensive thematic analysis of the putative 'Irish legend of the wild man' was that it required looking for a literary type and scanning a wide corpus of texts depicting this type for information on it, all based on the underlying presumptions that a motif will carry the same meaning in each context of its use and that a literary type will embody the same signification in all its varying depictions. This disregards what we mentioned earlier about the mobility of motifs and the ingenuity of medieval authors in subverting and reinventing old motifs so that they by no means carry the same significance. Consider, in this regard, two of the texts used by Ó Riain in his study: the anecdote involving Finn and Derc Corra in the Old Irish scholia on the term *imbas forosnai* ('knowledge which illuminates') in the introduction to the *Senchas Már* collection of law tracts, and marginalia concerning the conception of St Báethíne mac Findach in some manuscript copies of *Félire Óengusso* ('The Calendar of Oengus').[63] Both scenes involve a man in a tree, but the former depicts the man using Eucharistic symbolism that suggests he is celebrating Mass with animals of the wild:

61. Ó Riain P., *op. cit.*, p. 184.
62. *Ibid.*, pp. 205-06.
63. Both are discussed by Ó Riain at pp. 195-96.

> Luid di*diu* Derc Corra for loinges 7 arfoēt caill 7 imthiged for luirgnib oss n-allta (si uerum est) ar a ētrumai. Laa n-aill di*diu* do Find isin caill oc a cuingidh-som co n-aca Find in fer i n-ūachtar in craind 7 lon for a gūalainn ndeis 7 find-lestur n-uma for a lāimh clī, osē co n-usce 7 hē brecc bedcach and 7 dam allaith fo bun in craind 7 ba hē abras ind fir teinm cnō 7 dob*er*ed leth n-airne na cnō don lun nobīth for a gūalaind ndeis, no-ithed feisin al-leth n-aill 7 doicsed a uball asin lestar n-uma būi for a lāimh clī 7 noranda[d] i ndē 7 docuireth a I*eth* don dam all*aid* būi fo bun in craind. No-ithad som iarom in l*eth* n-aill 7 no-ibed loim fair den uisce asin lest*ur* huma būi for a lāim co mbo comōl dō frisin n-iich 7 a n-oss 7 in Ion. Friscomarcar di*diu* a muinter do Finn cia bo hē hisin crunn, ar nī nathgēntar som dāigh celtair dīclithe būi imbe.
>
> Then Derc Corra went into exile and took up his abode in a wood and used to go about on shanks of deer (si uerum est) for his lightness. One day as Finn was in the wood seeking him he saw a man in the top of a tree, a blackbird on his right shoulder and in his left hand a white vessel of bronze, filled with water, in which [there] was a skittish trout, and a stag at the foot of the tree. And this was the practice of the man, cracking nuts; and he would give half the kernel of a nut to the blackbird that was on his right shoulder while he would himself eat the other half; and he would take an apple out of the bronze vessel that was in his left hand, divide it in two, throw one half to the stag that was at the foot of the tree, and then eat the other half himself. And on it he would drink a sip of the water in the bronze vessel that was in his hand, so that he and the trout and the stag and the blackbird drank together. Then his followers asked of Finn who he in the tree was, for they did not recognise him on account of the hood of disguise which he wore. [64]

The religious connotations in this scene have been discussed by Kaarina Hollo, who highlights the use of Eucharistic imagery in the Cross/tree; the chalice; the shared consumption of the Body of Christ, which is here the apple and nuts; and the fact that they all drink together. Also present is the Christological motif of the Cross surrounded by representatives of the three generations of animals (the *tria genera animantium*): in this

64. "Finn and the Man in the Tree" §3; Meyer, Kuno, ed. and trans., 1904, "Finn and the Man in the Tree", *Revue Celtique*, 25, pp. 344-49, at pp. 346-48; trans. pp. 347-49; with some emendations taken from Hollo (see below) and Carey, John, 2005, 'Two Notes on Names', *Éigse*, 35, pp. 116-24.

case, the blackbird, a creature of air; the trout, a creature of water; the stag, a creature of earth.[65]

In contrast to the devotional overtones of the former scene involving a man at the top of a tree (*crann*), the marginalia on Báethíne depicts a bandit hiding in a thorn bush (*scé*) and ejaculating while 'perving' on a maiden below:

> Boethine m*ac* findaig. óinis boethine iniarth*ar* laigen. oc*us* créd ingen ronain rig laigen máthair boethine m*ic* findaig. oc*us* isaml*aid* rogenair boethín. .i. Findach foglaid dorala ambarr sciach osintibraid f*or*tíi merli f*or*sincill laa nand. Cotánic cred dindmad alám dontip*ra*it. Otchonnairc finnach hi. sanntaigis inóg corothuitt toil achuirp uad forsinngas mbiroir boi inafiadnaise. Ithid iarum aningen ingass f*or*samboi inchoimp*er*t . *con*id desin rogenair boethín . ut dixit [poeta]
>
> Cred robo maith in ben . ingen ronain rig laigen
> *con*a coemchill gnathaig glain . máthair boethín m*ic* findaig
>
> Finnach fóglaid robui aggait . isinsciaich osintiprait
> diandech*aid* dinnmad alam . créd rindbalc ingen ronán.
>
> Oroṡill infoglaid féig . for ingin ronáin roréid
> snigis ní do thoil a chuirp . f*or*sin ngas mbiroir mblathguirt
>
> Ithid aningen ingass . forsambí inchoimp*er*t choimdess
> *con*id desin sær in gleo . rogénair boethin bithbeo.
>
> Boethíne, son of Findach of Inis Boethíne in the west of Leinster, and Cred, daughter of Ronan, King of Leinster, was mother of Boethíne son of Findach; and thus was Boethíne born, to wit – Findach, a robber, chanced to be at the top of a thorn tree over the well designing (?) a robbery on the church one day, and Créd came to the well to wash her hands. When Findach beheld her, [he lusted after the girl so that semen fell from him onto a shoot of watercress that was in front of her. The girl then ate the shoot upon which was the semen], and thence was Boethíne born. *ut dixit poeta*:
>
> Cred, good was the woman, daughter of Ronán, king of Leinster,
> with her lovable church, constant, pure, mother of Boethín son of Findach.
>
> Findach, a robber, was stealing in the thorn tree over the well,
> when to wash her hands went Créd, the star-strong daughter of Ronán.

65. Hollo, Kaarina, 2012, '"Finn and the Man in the Tree' As Verbal Icon", in: Arbuthnot and Parsons, eds, *The Gaelic Finn Tradition*, Dublin: Four Courts Press, pp. 50-61.

> When the keen robber looked on the daughter of Ronán the smooth,
> [some of his semen dripped onto a shoot of bitter watercress.
>
> The girl ate the shoot upon which was the semen],
> and thence, noble the decision, was born Boethín the Everliving. [66]

The dexterity with which stock narrative motifs were adapted to suit different contexts and meanings, as evidenced in these two examples, thwarts any endeavour to decipher common significance out of typological parallels.

The concerted purpose of the papers collected in this volume is to critically analyse past epistemologies that have marked our fields of research, and the present study has thus contributed a re-evaluation of Ó Riain's thematic analysis of Irish literary texts depicting wild men. His article has been used to demonstrate the stumbling blocks of the formerly popular comparative method, especially when the latter is applied to medieval literature. As was seen, Ó Riain was forced to blur the parameters of his study by including chronologically disparate sources and by skirting strict definitions of madness and wildness in order to acquire a large enough dataset to undertake a thematic comparison and devise paradigms – paradigms being essential to his qualitative critical method. Yet by using typological parallels as selection criteria, and by stretching dates and definitions when selecting sources for his examination of the 'Irish Legend of the Wild Man', a number of compromising variables were introduced into his calculations, and these have skewed the results of his tabulation of the characteristic traits of madness.

---

66. Stokes, Whitley, ed. and trans., 1880, *On the Calendar of Oengus*, Transactions of the Royal Irish Academy, Irish Manuscript Series 1.1, Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, at p. lxxxix. I have used Stokes's 1880 edition from the *Leabhar Breac* rather than his 1905 critical edition because the latter (p. 134) does not present the crude pun witnessed in the *Leabhar Breac* version (*birar bláthgoirt* in the third stanza, which, as rhyme with 'chuirp' suggests, is a reading superior to the 'mbiruir mbarrbuig' of the 1905 edition). Stokes's punctuation and his use of italics, capitalization, and accents have been replicated above. The quatrains are presented here in two lines rather than four, and capitalization in the English translation of the poetry has thus been affected. Square brackets denote my translation into English of Stokes's use of Latin in his own translation of the saltier passages.

Among Ó Riain's findings were the noted typological parallels between the *geilt* and what he considered to be a recurrent literary type, the novice, defined by him as 'one separated from wonted or due social status': both figures, according to his study, exhibit separation from said wonted or due status. It is now clear that the typological parallels detected by Ó Riain can be attributed to the use of shared literary models in the depictions of Suibne Geilt and Nechtán, Ó Riain's archetypal novice.

Studies of medieval authorial technique have highlighted the fact that authors typically drew from a common pot of stock motifs but adapted them in different ways to take on different meanings in each new literary creation. This practice renders moot the application of thematic literary criticism to medieval texts, and it especially undermines the hunt for literary types and paradigms. We have thus moved away from the methodology evinced in Ó Riain's study in favour of the critical practice of close textual analysis, of examining texts as separate entities to gain an understanding of their individual meaning.

Ó Riain himself admitted in 1972 that Irish literature is repetitious in thematic terms and that authors introduced 'thematic variables', but he negated the significance of this observation by saying of the thematic parallels, 'I take them to reflect particular societal attitudes or patterns of behaviour, each with its share of identificatory characteristics.' [67] He was analysing medieval Irish literature from an anthropological perspective, yet another outmoded critical method that was popular at the time he was writing.

There is no doubt that Ó Riain's study of the wild man presented a significant contribution to scholarship. Among its many merits, it provides a useful catalogue of Irish tales depicting persons *non compotes mentis*, and it allowed academics to push past the debate regarding the origins of Suibne Geilt and continue examining the figure of the wild man. It is the natural course of scholarship that any great study will become dated with time. For this reason, in the pages above, by taking into account research conducted in the 45 years since they were originally published, I have endeavoured to revise and thereby renew Ó Riain's fundamental conclusions.

67. Ó Riain, P., *op. cit.*, 1972, p. 181.