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

To cite this version:

HAL Id: halshs-02439301
https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-02439301
Submitted on 22 Jan 2020
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. His study was reprinted

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’,

3. Challenging the long-held view that Buile Shuibhe 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 Shuibhe: 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 Shuibhe, the manuscript witnesses of which do not predate 1629, see BERG'HOLM, Alexandra, 2014, “The Authorship and Transmission of Buile Shuibhe: A Re-Appraisal”, in: Carey, ed., op. cit., pp. 93-110.
5. Ó RIAIN, P., op. cit., p. 184.
also termed the ‘novitiate’. 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.

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 Ríain 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 Ríain 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 Ríain’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.’ We are

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 Riaín 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.  

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. 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

---

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.\textsuperscript{11} In short, the search for static literary types in medieval literature is now increasingly recognized as a perilously futile endeavour.

\textbf{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 Breathnach 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.\textsuperscript{12} A compromise has since been reached


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. 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

---

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

characteristics were changed, and hairs grew on my whole body until it was made heavy by them.\textsuperscript{16}

That the fur grew by grace of God is also made clear in the Greek text \textit{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, ‘\textit{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.’}\textsuperscript{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 \textit{Lailoken A}, the Irish Suibne Geilt in the aforementioned 12th- or 13th-century \textit{Buile Shuibne}, and, to a lesser extent, Merlin in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s \textit{Vita Merlini}.\textsuperscript{18}

The acknowledged Coptic influence on analogous tales of purgative wanderers, the clerics who seek a desert in the ocean in the \textit{immrama} (tales depicting allegorical sea voyages), lends support to this line of inquiry.\textsuperscript{19}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{16} \textit{De S. Marco Atheniensi} 1.8; \textit{Acta SS} 3 Mar.: appendix 34A for Greek; trans. Williams, 1926: 66.
\item \textsuperscript{17} \textit{De canonica nuda} ll. 51-55; Wortley, John, ed. and trans., 1987, \textit{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.
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). 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.

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. 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. 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

---

The brash king Suibne is similarly humbled when cursed by St Rónán to live in the wild like a bird. 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. 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.’

25. BS §10 stanza 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

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 distills 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 Wissenschaften, at p. 92, ll. 10-12; Bertram, Jerome, trans., 1999, The Monastic Institutes, London: Saint Austin, at p. 77).
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

---

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.  

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. 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. 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, on certain narrative details in Buile Shuibne’s extant plotline, and on posited intertextuality with Fled Dún 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 Roth.

---

Roth – a tradition that, according to her study, is not evidenced before Fled Dūin na nGēd, 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 Dūin na nGēd 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

42. Ó Béarra F., op. cit., pp. 269-77.
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.\footnote{Carney, J. \textit{op. cit.}, p. 132.}

For this reason, Ó Riaín’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 Riaín 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 Riata or Cumbric Strathclyde.\footnote{Ó Riaín, Pádraig 1973/4, “The Materials and Provenance of \textit{Buile Shuibhne},” \textit{Éigse}, 15, pp. 173-88, at pp. 185; 1972: 181. Note that Ó Riaín does draw on a less contentious Welsh figure: Kyledyr mab Nwython from the 11th-century \textit{Kulhwch ac Olwen} (\textit{op. cit.}, p. 191).}

**Distinction between Fools and Madmen**

Fergus Kelly’s cursory discussion in his \textit{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 (\textit{drúth, óinmit}) and that of the madman (\textit{mer, dásachtach}).\footnote{Kelly F., \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 91-92; Clancy Th. O., \textit{op. cit.}, 1991, pp. 9-26; Matheson A. M., \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 38-53.} This is illustrated in, for instance, the 9th-century \textit{Teccosa 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’).\footnote{\textit{Teccosa Cormaic} §19; Meyer, Kuno, ed., 1909, \textit{The Instructions of King Cormac Mac Airt}, Todd Lecture Series 15, Dublin: Hodges, Figgis, at p. 36, ll. 20-21; translation mine.}

By not distinguishing between literary depictions of fools and madmen, Ó Riaín’s tabulation of the characteristic traits of madness is inaccurate in feature B3 ‘the madman collects firewood’.\footnote{Ó Riaín P., \textit{op. cit.}, 1972, p. 183 and 200.} The two
characters upon which this statement is based (Cuanna mac Ultáin in *Cath Maige Rath* ‘The Battle of Mag Roth’, and Comgán Mac Dá Cherta 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

---


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.

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 Chérda. 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


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’.  

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 ōninmit 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 Ríain 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.  

This inclusion of figures like Niall of the Nine Hostages, who underwent a test for kingship in the wilderness, made Ó Ríain 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’, 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 Finán Cam (Beatha Naomh Fiondin Locha Laoi, a 17th-century Irish translation of an earlier Latin Life of St Finán), which Ó Ríain 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 Ríain and others writing during the heyday

54. Ibid., p. 184. Ó Ríain describes his methodology at pp. 180-81.

55. Ibid., pp. 184-204.

56. Ibid., p. 185.
of nativist scholarship. Nechtán, like Nebuchadnezzar, is a proud king (rí úaibrech) 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 Fiónán, adeirim re heach an righ imtheacht uaidh [...] 7 biaidh sé go ceann seacht mbliaghan gan righe aige agus bad éigion do connaigh do tharang do dhaoineibh eile air amhuin féin chum teine dóibh [...] Air na tuigsíin do Neachtain go tánaig gach nídh do tháirngair Fíonán do chum crich do ionpaigh tarais dá thír 7 dá dhúthaig féin, 7 tánaig abhfhaghnaise Fíonán 7 do leig aghluin faoi 7 diar maithfeachas an dearnag déagcóir air Dhia 7 air Fíonán, 7 ód connaire Fíonán aithríge 7 úmhla Neachtain, do ghuidh tar achaenn, 7 do haisigheadh 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.

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 Diarmaid mac Cerbaill, where he spends a season of poverty). 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

60. Beatha Naomh Fionán 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. 

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*. 

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’). 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:


63. Both are discussed by Ó Riain at pp. 195-96.
Luid didiu Derc Corra for loinges 7 arfoët caill 7 imthigeid for luirgnib oss n-alta (si uerum est) ar a ëtromu. Laa n-aill didiu do Find isin caill oc a cuingidh-som co n-acu Find in fer i n-ùachtar in craind 7 lon for a gâulainn ndeis 7 find-lestur n-uma for a lâimh cli, osē co n-usce 7 hē brecc bedcach and 7 dam allaith fo bun in craind 7 ba hē abras ind fr teinm cnô 7 dobered leth n-airne na cnō don lun nobith for a gâulaind ndeis, no-ithed feisin al-leth n-aill 7 doiced a uball asin lestar n-uma būi for a lâimh cli 7 noranda[d] i ndē 7 docuireth a leth don dam allaid būi fo bun in craind. No-ithad som iarom in leth n-aill 7 no-ibed loim fair den uisce asin lestar huma būi for a lâim co mbo comol dò frisin n-iich 7 a n-oss 7 in lon. Friscomarcar didiu a muinter do Finn ci bo hē hisin crunn, ar ní nathgēntar som dăigh celtair didlithe 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

---

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

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 (see) and ejaculating while ‘perving’ on a maiden below:

Boethíne mac findaig, óinis boethíne iniarthar laigen. ocus créd ingen ronai rig laigen máthair boethíne mic findaig. ocus isamlaíd rogenair boethín. i. Findach fóglaid dorala ambala sciach osintibraid fortū merli forscincl laa nand. Cotánic cred dindmad álám dontiprít. Ochonnaírc finnach hi. sanntaigis inóg corothuitt toil achuirp uad forsinngas mboiroir boi inafiadnaise. Ithid iarum aningen ingass forsamboi inchoimpert. conid desin rogenair boethín. ut dixit [poeta]

Cred robo maith in beningen ronain rig laigen cona coemchill gnathaig glain. máthair boethín mic findaig

Finnach fóglaid robuí aggain. isinsciaích osintiprít diandechedaid dinmmad álám. créd rindbálc ingen ronán.

Orosill infoglaid féig. for ingin ronáin roréid snígis ní do thoil a chuirp. forsinngas mboiroir mblathguirt

Ithid aningen ingass. forsambí inchoimpert choimpdés conid desin sár in gleo. rogenair boethín bithbeo.

Boethíne, son of Findach of Inis Boethíne in the west of Leinster, and Cred, daughter of Ronan, King of Leinster, was mother of Boethín 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.

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.

---

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.  

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.’

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.

---