

Folly for Christ's Sake in Early Irish Literature: the Case of Suibhne Geilt Reconsidered¹

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I. Introduction

'Madness and Christianity go hand in hand' (Screech 1985, 25). This claim can be considered quite accurate, at least when one examines the variety of spiritual behaviour demonstrated during the history of the Christian faith. One interesting example of holy madness in Christianity is folly for Christ's sake, a particular ascetic practice that is most developed in the Eastern Orthodox Church. In the Byzantine tradition the holy person feigning insanity was called *salos*, meaning 'mentally deranged'. In Russian the term used is *iurodivy*, derived from the word meaning 'ugly, crippled, an individual with congenital defects' (Kobets 2006).

Martin Buber describes the fool for God as 'a human being who, because of his undamaged direct relationship with God, has quitted the rules and regulations of the social order, though he continues to participate in the life of his fellow men' (cited in Saward 1980, 1-2). In both Byzantine and later Russian tradition, where holy fools are recognised as a hagiographic category in their own right, the figure's eccentric conduct is marked most notably by the feigning of madness, but also by other characteristics such as wandering about naked, uttering riddles and prophecies, and making oneself a spectacle by publicly displaying disruptive behaviour and violating accepted norms. The controversial appearance, speech and actions are all part of a conscious exploit, which aims at providing spiritual guidance to the people while concealing the true sanctity of the holy fool (Kobets 2006; Ivanov 2006). Thus by abandoning the secluded lifestyle of a monastery, the fools in Christ choose to make their asceticism part of the secular sphere in order to promote the laymen's understanding of God. This 'altruistic folly', as it has sometimes been called (Syrkin 1982, 166, 50n.), is what sets the holy fool apart from real madmen as well as from other forms of unruly or provocative behaviour.

In the history of the phenomenon of saintly madness, the theme of subversive sanctity has often been seen to originate in the actions of the Jewish prophets and

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the Syrian and Egyptian desert-dwellers of the early centuries A.D. (Kobets 2006; Saward 1980, 1). In the Christian tradition, the most direct biblical examples are found in the writings of apostle Paul and the Gospels, where the Passion of Christ sets the paradigm for the imitation of Christ's suffering of humiliation, mockery and physical pain.² Although a more detailed treatment of the topic is beyond the scope of the present paper, it is necessary to mention in passing that the concept of foolish wisdom or the figure of a saintly fool is by no means restricted to Christian religious life, but forms a part of other traditions as well (see for example Feuerstein 1992). The *Encyclopaedia of Religion* (Eliade 1987) does not include an entry for the holy fools as such, but refers the reader to articles under the headings of *clowns* and *humor and satire*. This treatment of the topic in the *Encyclopaedia* is based on the similar nature of clowns and fools as trickster-like figures, whose ambiguity and paradoxical character encompasses a notion of liminality and mediation between established cultural categories, such as madness and wisdom, normal and abnormal, or sacred and profane.³

While holy foolishness never became established in Western spirituality in the form it took in the East, it still constituted part of Western Christianity. However, 'these two religious traditions perceived, endorsed and validated this phenomenon in very different ways' (Kobets 2000a). The aim of the present article is to examine the idea of folly for Christ's sake in the context of early Irish literature by looking at one particular text, which in the past has attracted interest as the primary example of foolishness in Christ as an identifiable feature of early Irish Christianity. The 12th century Middle Irish tale *Buile Shuibhne* or 'The Frenzy of Suibhne'⁴ has prompted several scholars to argue that the wild madness, or *geltacht*, of its main protagonist Suibhne Geilt can be treated as historical evidence for the practice of a specific form of asceticism in 7th century Ireland. Thus John Saward, for instance, in his study *Perfect Fools* takes the figure of Suibhne as an example of 'a fool with a tendency towards asceticism' whose 'fervent resistance to conformity to the wisdom of the world' may be compared with that of the Eastern holy fools (1980, 34-42). Kobets in turn refers to the Irish wild men or *gelta* collectively as a historical monastic order that had a reputation as 'wild, mad monks' (2000a),⁵

2 The articles by Špidlík and Vandenbroucke in *Dictionnaire de spiritualité* 5 (1964), s.v. *Fous pour le Christ* include a list of biblical references and a discussion of the characteristics of folly for Christ. For comprehensive treatments of the phenomenon in Catholic and Eastern Orthodox spirituality see also Saward 1980 and Kobets 2000a.

3 For trickster figures in the Irish context in particular see the study by Alan Harrison (1989).

4 I have been using O'Keeffe's edition and English translation of *Buile Shuibhne*, first published in 1913 and reprinted in 1996. In the following the numbers in brackets refer to the passages in O'Keeffe's edition.

5 In her endnotes Kobets refers to Kathleen Hughes' work *The Church in Early Irish Society* (1966) as her source (32n.).

and Sergey Ivanov, although dismissing the link to folly for Christ, still presents *geltacht* as 'a special type of ancient Irish sainthood' (2006, 382).⁶

In this paper I wish to reassess these assumptions by considering certain dominant elements of Suibhne's story, and comparing some of the characteristics of the *geilt* and what could perhaps be seen as the typological figure of the holy fool. Instead of attempting a detailed analysis of the material concerning the saintly fools in Eastern Orthodoxy, I will be concentrating on the aspects that have initially led scholars to detect similarities between *Buile Shuibhne* and the paradigm of folly for Christ's sake, in order to re-evaluate whether the identification of Suibhne as a holy fool in this sense is indeed a valid one.⁷

2. Suibhne – the madman

In the text *Buile Shuibhne*, king Suibhne is cursed by Saint Rónán after his repeated unprovoked attacks against the saint. Following Rónán's curse, in which he beseeches God that the arrogant king would 'ever be naked, wandering and flying throughout the world' (§ 5), Suibhne loses his wits during the historical battle of Mag Rath in 637 and flees from the battlefield. He becomes a wild, animal-like madman, who wanders restlessly in the woods, lives in trees and shies away from people. As a result of his madness, Suibhne gains supernatural capacities, such as the ability to travel great distances by levitating or leaping, and composes eloquent poetry praising the surrounding nature as well as describing his hardships. In his poems the madman repeatedly addresses God and Christ directly in a way that conveys devotion and repentance, but also anguish, bitterness and even anger. Eventually, another saint called Moling befriends Suibhne and writes down his story. The madman's life finally comes to an end when he is killed by saint Moling's swineherd, who wrongly accuses him of adultery with his wife. Before dying, Suibhne receives communion from Moling. He is buried in holy ground and his blessed soul goes to heaven.

While this short summary of the plot does not do justice to the subtleties of the text, it nevertheless helps to illustrate some of the apparent similarities between the figure of the *geilt* and that of the holy fool. It should be noted that on two different occasions at the end of the story Suibhne, whose death is greatly mourned

6 Referring to a study by Tatyana Mikhailova, Ivanov states that 'the so called *geiltah* [sic] has nothing in common with holy foolery, since it was merely an extreme form of penitence' (footnote 32).

7 I have to acknowledge that unfortunately I have been unable to familiarise myself with the conclusions reached by Professor Mikhailova in her comparative study of the Russian and Irish materials, as this article has only been published in Russian. For full details of Mikhailova's article see Ivanov 2006.

by Moling and his clerics, is eulogised by them as *náóimhgheilt*, or ‘the saintly madman’ (§ 80, 85). This seems to indicate that the contemporary audience of the tale attached some notion of sanctity to Suibhne’s madness and wild existence. To discuss how this saintliness bears resemblance to folly for Christ’s sake, I will first consider some individual elements before proceeding to the possible ideological content of the tale.

3. Characteristics of holy folly

John Saward has identified several central aspects that constitute the tradition of holy folly in Eastern and Western Christianity alike. In addition to the characteristics already outlined in the very beginning of the present article, Saward notes that the holy fool’s feigned madness is marked by an eschatological quest, which makes him a perpetual wanderer and an outsider. The deliberately restless and even aggressive behaviour of the fool aims to draw attention to the hypocrisy of false piety, but at the same time it represents an unstable element in society that also endows him with special power and status (Saward 1980).

It is evident that the theme of madness is the most dominant and curious feature linking Suibhne Geilt to holy foolishness. But what exactly is the nature of Suibhne’s folly? *Buile Shuibhne* is clear in stating that Suibhne’s loss of sanity is due to Rónán’s curse, which itself was brought about by Suibhne’s repeated aggression against the saint and the Church. Not only does he cast the saint’s psalter into a lake, but he also kills one of Rónán’s followers, attempts to kill the saint himself and violates his truce in the battle of Mag Rath (§ 4-9). When the battle begins, Suibhne is suddenly alarmed by the cries of the two hosts, and the incident is depicted as follows:

—he looked up, whereupon turbulence, and darkness, and fury, and giddiness, and frenzy, and flight, unsteadiness, restlessness, and unquiet filled him, likewise disgust with every place in which he used to be and desire for every place which he had not reached. His fingers were palsied, his feet trembled, his heart beat quick, his senses were overcome, his sight was distorted, his weapons fell naked from his hands, so that through Ronan’s curse he went, like any bird of the air, in madness and imbecility. (§ 11).

This vivid description gives little reason to presume that Suibhne’s loss of sanity is feigned, or that his escape from the battle is voluntary. In my opinion, the text as we have it does not support the claim that Suibhne’s transition from a king to a wild man happens of his own accord. However, throughout the tale we are reminded that Suibhne brought the fate of madness upon himself by his own actions and that his life is determined by God’s will. When in the course of the tale Suibhne goes through two passing periods of sanity, his relapse into madness on both occasions is

attributed to the actions of Christ and St. Rónán respectively, and taken by Suibhne himself as a deserved punishment 'because of the many to whom I myself have done harm' (§ 66). This penitential aspect of course does not compromise the fact that the characteristics of Suibhne's mad state such as conspicuous appearance, wandering in the wilderness, ascetic lifestyle and the uttering of spiritually inspired poetry correspond to those of the holy fool. But it does raise the question to what extent we may assign the same notion of simulation and theatrical play to the madness of the *geilt* as we do to folly for Christ's sake.

Another important aspect that appears to be missing in *Buile Shuibhne* is the social dimension of the holy fool's actions. Although valuable observations have been made concerning the importance of Suibhne's poetry and supernatural knowledge to society (Nagy 1996), it is problematic to consider his madness in terms of conscious spiritual guidance. Scholars have often stressed that the ascetic practice of Eastern Orthodox fools for Christ is marked by unconventional profanity and even urbanism (Kobets 2006). This means that their vocation to edify laymen requires promoting their spiritual message in the secular sphere instead of withdrawing from the world:

"The holy fool" is always defined by his relationship to a particular community, leaving the ascetic life of the deserts and wilderness to play the fool in the wider community of the cities of the Eastern Empire, "aiming at the mortification of one's social being", by living in society, yet not of society itself, as the ascetics in the desert were in the world, yet not of it. (Conrad 2006)⁸

Suibhne, on the other hand, is constantly driven to flight by a fear of people. Although he is repeatedly in contact with other men, he also states that the curse of Rónán has condemned him to a state of terror, where he 'would equally go into madness at seeing the united hosts of the universe threatening [him] as at the flight of a single wren' (§ 70). For him, then, leading a restless and secluded lifestyle appears to be the only option and a means of survival. Moreover, it is a commonplace in Eastern fools' Lives that their exemplary sanctity is only acknowledged after their death, and this applies to Suibhne as well. But despite the deeply spiritual nature of his wild lifestyle, the text does not imply that during

8 In the early Eastern monastic tradition, those leading a solitary ascetic life in the desert were called βουσχοί, meaning 'grazers'. Evagrius Scholasticus, writing in the 6th century, described the lifestyle of a βουσχός in the following manner: 'Taking themselves to the burning desert...men and women both, covering only those parts which must be covered, leave the rest of their bodies exposed to the discomforts of the weather and burning rays, despising heat and cold alike. They utterly reject human food and graze on the earth...providing themselves with just enough to live on so that sometimes they begin to look like wild beasts. Their appearance changes and their mind loses its facility for conversing with humankind. They flee at the sight of humans and, when they are pursued, they escape either by their fleetness of foot or the inaccessibility of the terrain' (cited in Wortley 2001, 43-44). The possible parallels between βουσχός and the *geilt* have been pointed out in Chadwick 1960, 109-111 and Saward 1980, 34. On the phenomenon see also Caner 2002, 50-53.

his lifetime Suibhne's ascetic endeavours would be deemed beneficial for the community by either himself or by others.

Svitlana Kobets has claimed that in studies concerning folly for Christ's sake scholars often disregard the plurality of the phenomenon and assume that the paradigm would be more or less uniform in different cultural contexts (2000b). I would argue that in the case of Suibhne Geilt for instance it would perhaps be more useful not to search for an early Irish example of a fully developed hagiographical category, but rather to approach the topic on a more general level by considering the ideological background of Christian holy foolishness and its possible influence on the description of Suibhne's madness.

4. Biblical precedence

The earliest biblical examples of holy foolish behaviour come from the deeds of the Old Testament prophets, but it was in the teaching of apostle Paul that the ideal of folly and the term 'fool for Christ's sake' were first defined. In his Letters to the Corinthians Paul uses foolishness and other negative abstract images to challenge the elitist superiority of the Corinthian church. His style of writing has been described as 'bitterly ironical' (Spencer 1981, 351), and it has been convincingly argued by Spencer that Paul was employing a variety of rhetorical devices to communicate his true message indirectly. In portraying Christians as foolish, weak and dishonoured, Paul's intention was to create an opposition between worldly wisdom and the true wisdom of God. To attain God's higher wisdom one must humble oneself and have 'the mind of Christ' (1 Cor. 2:16), as he states in 1 Cor. 3:18: 'If any of you thinks he is wise by the standards of this age, he should become a fool so that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight.' By enduring persecution, slander and mockery those who follow the example of Christ reveal the real madness of worldly wisdom. This teaching is crystallised in 2 Cor. 12:8-10:

Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

If Suibhne Geilt's madness is considered in terms of a voluntary ascetic practice that has been undertaken to attain perfection, this biblical framework makes it perfectly plausible to approach his insanity without the need to confine him to the typological model of the holy fool. It could then be argued that Suibhne's life in the wilderness only appears mad in the eyes of the outsiders who fail to understand his

true spirituality. This interpretation does not need to deny the penitential element in Suibhne's story either. As a quote from Emperor Leo VI illustrates, the idea of 'penitential holy foolishness' was already recognised in 10th century Byzantium: 'If a man's cleverness instil him in pride and pretension, let him clothe himself in foolishness for Christ's sake. He who has grown arrogant because of his feats, by himself or by the praise of others, let him heal by means of a light and feigned insanity' (cited in Ivanov 2006, 141-142).

This viewpoint, of course, brings us back again to the nature of Suibhne's madness, and more importantly, to the issue of whether the initial decision of becoming a madman is made by Suibhne himself. As stated before, I am personally more inclined to see Suibhne's madness in terms of divine punishment, which is inflicted on him as a consequence of his wrongdoings. However, whether the tribulations are self-induced or brought about by God, it is worth noting that his perceived insanity is nevertheless ultimately a blessing that leads to redemption and salvation. Thus from a spiritual perspective, the different meanings attributed to Suibhne's loss of sanity need not be mutually exclusive.

5. Conclusion

Interpreting Suibhne's madness in terms of the biblical ideal of folly for Christ's sake provides an interesting framework which is further supported by the similar features found in *Buile Shuibhne* and Russian and Byzantine lives of holy fools. However, in the case of the latter material in particular, it may be asked whether a preoccupation with these parallels has obscured the wider picture of the cultural context and function of the holy foolish persons within their social surroundings.

As far as the figure of the *geilt* is concerned, I believe that the example of Suibhne on its own does not justify generalisations where *geltacht* is seen as a specific form of actual spiritual practice. Apart from this intriguing text other early Irish sources do not attribute any notion of spirituality to the state of *geltacht*, which according to the *Dictionary of the Irish Language* is generally simply understood to convey meanings of terror, panic and insanity (DIL s.v. *geltacht*). Moreover, it should also be remembered that drawing conclusions about the historical reality of the 7th century from much later narrative sources raises in itself a methodological problem that deserves to be more carefully considered.

The purpose of this article has been to re-examine some of the evidence that has led scholars to argue that Suibhne Geilt could be taken as a representative of the holy foolish paradigm in early Christian Ireland. As an elaborate literary work *Buile Shuibhne* portrays its main character in a way that offers possibilities for a wide range of interpretations. From a Christian point of view, the elements of asceticism, sin, penitence and redemption are undeniably present in Suibhne's mad

career; but in order to appreciate the complexity of the tale I would suggest that ‘the saintly madman’ of *Buile Shuibhne* is most productively approached without attempts to reduce his sanctity to a single paradigm.

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