Madness in Medieval Arthurian Literature

The label 'mad' is one which has since time immemorial been ascribed to those who do not conform to the current norms of a society; who display 'abnormal' behaviour. Its scope goes far beyond the realm of the affliction of mental illness implied to embrace a range of characteristics which we today would probably no longer label 'mad'; subnormal intelligence, post-traumatic stress disorder, manic depression, self-imposed eremitic lifestyle, eccentric personalities, all involve behaviour likely to have been perceived as mad. Arthurian literature of the Middle Ages is indeed not unfamiliar with the depiction of characters answering this description. Obvious examples include Chrétien de Troyes' Yvain, the Knight with the Lion, whose *episode* roaming the woods as a madman is precipitated by rejection by his wife Lunete upon his failure to return to her from his knightly adventures within the agreed time limit. It is only when a fair lady takes pity on the wretch as he sleeps in the woods and applies her ointment that a cure is effected. Lancelot too undergoes a well-documented episode of insanity when he is banished by Guinevere after she finds him in the arms of Elaine: as a result of this liaison Galahad is born. Even Tristan, famed lover of Queen Iseult of Cornwall, has two surviving poems dedicated to his episode of madness. The *Folie Tristan de Berne* and *Folie Tristan d'Oxford* recount the hero's attempt to make himself known to the Queen at court after a long period of absence. The debate as to whether his mad behaviour is a true reflection of his state of mind or an elaborate ploy to enable entry to court still continues.

But these and other well-known examples, which are taken up again and again by romancers, are almost all episodes of love-madness: simply put, a man falls in love, is rejected by his lady and thus loses his reason. The victims display characteristics already long associated with the affliction of madness — withdrawal from society, refuge sought in the woods, acquisition of an animal-like appearance including nakedness, wild behaviour, eating wild plants. A certain homogeneity is preserved as each character reappears in new versions: their story is retold, the episode of madness is transferred, not developed, and taken on, unchanging, as an aspect of their character.

I would like to demonstrate how two very different Arthurian characters turn this on its head. As we follow them through their appearances in various texts, we do not find simple reproductions of episodes of a certain type of insanity: instead, the natural development of the characters during their passage through literature is mirrored by the development of the way in which their madness is portrayed. Whereas in the examples we have seen insanity is an obstacle to be overcome on the journey through life, for Daguenet le Fol and Merlin madness becomes the vehicle which carries them, and is constantly adapted according to need.

Of the two, it is Merlin in his later incarnation as magician and soothsayer at Arthur's court who is by far the most famous character of the two. However, this sophisticated personality is the product of an evolutionary process which began in tales of the madness of Merlin. There are many Celtic traditions which speak of madness, but perhaps the most important influence on the genesis of our magician was the tradition of the Wild Man of the Woods. This describes a human-like creature who is outside of society, living in the forest and assuming much of the behaviour and appearance of the animals with which he shares his home. Richard Bernheimer describes this character as he appears the Middle Ages:

> The picture drawn by medieval authors of the appearance and life of the wild man is thus very largely a negative one, dominated by the loss or absence of faculties which make of human beings what they are. The wild man may be without the faculty of human speech, the power to recognise or conceive of the Divinity, or the usual meaningful processes of mind. What remains, after losses of this kind and magnitude, is a creature human only in overall physical appearance, but so degenerate that to call him a beast were more than an empty metaphor. For these deficiencies the wild man is compensated by the growth in him of powers which fully conscious and responsible human beings cannot boast, since such powers arise only when all usual controls have lapsed.[1]

[1] Richard Bernheimer, *Wild Men in the Middle Ages: a study in art, sentiment and demonology* (New York: Octagon, 1970), 9.

Irish, Scottish and Welsh tales exist detailing the exploits of a man who loses his sanity as a result of his experiences in battle, and subsequently retreats to a life segregated from civilisation. This basic, instinctual madness, a regression to a state of nature, is gradually refined through a number of stories, undergoing influences from the Welsh saints tradition and acquiring other religious overtones until, in the *Vita Merlini* of Geoffrey of Monmouth, we are presented with a character, who, whilst nominally still 'mad', in fact transposes this condition onto the sanity of society itself. The conclusion to the tale affirms the validity of Merlin's choice to 'opt out' from a society which he regards as morally dubious, and leaves us with the suggestion that it is only our prejudice which labels him as 'mad'. Apparently cured of his madness and having his previously respected wisdom restored to him, he is asked to return to lead his people:

> I have lived long, then, and by now the weight of my years has told on me. While I remain under the green leaves of Calidon, its riches shall be my delight — a greater delight than the gems that India produces, or all the gold men say is found along the banks of the Tagus, or the corn of Sicily, or the grapes of pleasant Methis — more pleasing than the high towers or wall-girt cities or clothes redolent of Tyrian scents. Nothing can please me so, nothing can tear me from my Calidon, ever dear to me, I feel. Here I will be while I live, happy with fruit and herbs: and I will purify my flesh with pious fasting , to enable me to enjoy endless everlasting life.[2]

It is only first in Geoffrey of Monmouth's innovative and influential *Historia Regum Britanniae*, a work which is indeed credited with the genesis of the Arthurian legend as we know it, that the figure Merlin is linked to King Arthur in the way which we would now find familiar. It is here that Merlin's role in the legend is defined. In the *Historia*, he is very much a magical facilitator: Geoffrey exploits the supernatural abilities implied by his gift of prophecy, a relic of his previous madness, to predict and propel the events of his tale. Having established his credentials as a magician with feats such as moving the Giant's Ring, Merlin foretells the birth of Arthur and uses his magic to bring

[2] Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Life of Merlin (Vita Merlini)*, trans. by Basil Clarke (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1973), 121–3.

about the conception of the future king, 'Arthur, the most famous of men, who subsequently won great renown by his outstanding bravery'.[3]

But as I noted earlier, this Merlin is himself the product of an evolutionary process which takes him from a soldier traumatised by battle, and driven mad by guilt, via the influence of Celtic Wild Man traditions and Christianity to a figure who questions the sanity of civilisation itself. It is generally accepted that tales found in Welsh, Irish and Scottish literatures all contain the beginnings of this process. All three contain versions which tell of the central character, variously called Myrddin (Welsh), Lailoken (Scottish) and Suibhne (Irish), who is involved in a battle of some sort, loses his reason and exiles himself from society in a fit of madness. The life he then leads reflects the Celtic Wild Man tradition, as he removes himself from society to live in the woods amongst the animals, adopting their appearance and way of living.

Whilst this basic outline underlies all three versions, its diverse interpretation is evidenced in the differences between them. The Welsh poems which talk of Myrddin describe his life in the forest as the epitome of this Wild Man figure: 'Snow up to my hips among the forest wolves / Icicles in my hair'.[4] It is grief and guilt which have driven him into this state of madness and physical exile: grief at the hideous loss of life in the battle where his people were defeated, guilt at his responsibility for the death of his sister's son in this slaughter.

Such descriptions are also found of Lailoken: 'a naked madman, hairy and completely destitute … wander(ing) alone in this lonely place and keep(ing) company with the beasts of the wood'.[5] He is a fugitive from battle. As with Myrrdin, guilt is noted as the cause of his madness: 'For I was the cause of the slaughter of all the dead who fell in that battle.'[6] Here, however, we find a religious element is introduced in the form of St Kentigern, a local holy man who takes pity on this wretch when he disrupts his services. He attempts, without total success, to cure Lailoken of his madness through confession and

3 Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, trans. by Lewis Thorpe (Harmondsworth : Penguin, 1966), p. 207.

4 *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages*, edited by R.S. Loomis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), 22.

5 *Life of Merlin*, (see note 2 above), 227.

6 *Ibid*.

absolution. An important aspect attached in this story to Lailoken's madness, which is picked up in the later Merlin story, is the ability to prophesy: in the Scottish tale it is apparently accepted without question that one who has lost his reason should as consequence acquire clairvoyant abilities.

We find much more overt religious symbolism in the last of the three stories, *The Frenzy of Suibhne*.[7] The frenzied madness of Suibhne is tied not just to the negative results of a battle, but to a curse placed upon him by one of two saints who figure in the story, as a punishment for his evil deeds. As a result, his exile in the wilderness acquires a spiritual as well as a physical significance. The extent of his privation and suffering during these years is described in detail alongside his adventures, which are not positive experiences. Having lost his reason following a hideous vision during a battle, Suibhne never actually recovers his senses, but is taken pity upon by a second saint, who tries to help him. This aid proves to be fruitless in the face of the conclusion of the curse, which is that he should be killed, and Suibhne is fatally wounded by a spear. Fortunately, he is found by his new saint friend in time to absolve him and ensure his passage to heaven. This rather obvious 'saintly resolution' is designed to add a stamp of spiritual authority to the end of the tale.

It is in Geoffrey of Monmouth's less well known work, the *Vita Merlini*, that we find a character whose roots are still in the above mentioned tales, but whose role is virtually reversed. Although Geoffrey wrote his *Vita* over ten years after his *Historia*, in terms of the development of the character himself it is possible to see an almost regressive step, as I shall discuss later. The most prominent divergence from the previous tales is the attitude towards madness: the condition is not seen simply — if at all — as pathological, but as providing the key to accessing supernatural gifts. This is far more positive than in the other versions, where the mental state is a punishment or curse. Merlin no longer suffers the guilt of responsibility for the deaths he witnesses in battle, and his flight from the aftermath becomes a reaction against the scene of man's inhumanity to man. His actions are transformed from involuntary flight into voluntary exile. All aspects of Merlin's

[7] *Buile Suibhne (The Frenzy of Suibhne)*, trans. by J.G. O'Keefe (London: Nutt, 1913).

madness are portrayed positively: he discovers a closeness to nature, a nature which has changed from the harsh wilderness of the previous tales into an inspirational world of wonders:

> Into the forest he went, glad to lie hidden beneath the ash trees. He watched the wild creatures grazing on the pasture of the glades. Sometimes he would follow them, sometimes pass them in his course. He made use of the roots of plants and of grasses, of fruit from trees and of blackberries in the thicket. He became a Man of the Woods, dedicated to the woods.[8]

Merlin's ultimate decision is consciously to reject the society of which he had once been a part: his madness and his gift of prophecy leave him, yet his choice does not change. Rational reflection leads to concordance with the instinctive path he took under pressure, thus exposing the essential issue at the root of the tale: the irony of society's relationship to nature. On the one side is a society which calls itself and its ways civilised, contrasting its 'sanity' with the 'insanity' of untamed and mysterious nature. Yet here we have an example of a respected member of such a society whose considered opinion chooses what he sees as the 'sanity' of nature over the 'insanity' of an immoral society. Following the opening assumption of the tale that society is sane and rational, it follows that Merlin must be mad to leave it: by the end, we are left with the conclusion that maybe the opposite is true.

From these brief considerations of different versions of the Merlin legend, it is possible to derive an idea of the development and manipulation which the character and his associated madness undergo to fulfil different requirements. Madness as a punishment illustrates the wages of sin; isolation from society through guilt destroys the individual. Yet the same isolation provides the distance needed for an individual to see the guilt and sin of society itself.

Jean-Marie Fritz encapsulates what, for me, is the essential interest of the other character I would like to consider, a very different victim of madness, Daguenet le Fol.

> Un fait, cependant, demeure: aucun roman ne réécrit la folie d'un personnage… on ne réécrit pas une '*folie Yvain'*, mais on écrit une *'folie*

[8] *Life of Merlin* (see note 2 above), 57.

> *Lancelot'* à la lumière de *la 'folie Yvain'*. Un seul personnage fait exception: Daguenet, dont, il est vrai, l'identité est la folie. Sa folie s'écrit peu à peu au cours du XIII[e] siècle du *Lancelot* aux *Prophecies Merlin*.[9]

In terms of 'mad' Arthurian characters, Daguenet is unique in his development in a series of different romances. Whilst we can apparently rely on the constant nature of the madness of two other well-known victims, Lancelot and Yvain, whose experiences, as Fritz suggests above, may well be developments of each other, Daguenet undergoes changes in character and role as we follow him through the relatively small number of romances in which he appears.

Daguenet, whose role is that of 'fou' to King Arthur, appears relatively late in Arthurian literature, and his career appears to span little more than fifty years. In his *Index*[10] of Arthurian prose romance West lists references to him in the *Vulgate Merlin Continuation*, the *Galehaut*, *Le Livre d'Arthus*, *Guiron le Courtois*, *Les Prophecies de Merlin* and the *Prose Tristan*. In terms of the Arthurian canon and in comparison with knights such as Yvain, Lancelot, Gauvain, who occupy permanent places at the Round Table, Daguenet is indeed only a minor character; his role in the romances is nonetheless interesting for its illustration of medieval attitudes towards madness, both in Daguenet and the characters with whom he interacts, and towards the condition itself.

It is in the *Lancelot en Prose* that Daguenet makes his first appearance. Whilst there is here a comic element to Arthur's 'fou', his role in this tale seems to be, through analogy and association with his own madness, to indicate this tendency in others. Here, Daguenet is a 'fou naturel', born mad, and his encounter with Lancelot at the river, Daguenet prevents him from entering fully armed, leads to the recognition of this knight as a 'fol par amour' both to Guenevere and Yvain and also to the reader:

9 Jean-Marie Fritz, *Le Discours du fou au moyen âge, XII[e]- XIII[e] siècles: étude comparée des discours littéraire, médical, juridique et théologique de la folie, Perspectives littéraires* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1992), 264.

10 G.D. West, *An Index of Proper Names in French Arthurian Prose Romances*, University of Toronto Romance Series, 35 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), 88–9.

> Et messires Yvains l'an prisa mains, car il cuida que il fust de mal affaire … Et il lo maine au gué et passe outre. Et lors commence a regarder a la reine, et ses chevaus l'am porte tot contreval la riviere. N'ot gaires alé qu'il encontra Daguenet lo fol, qui li demande o il vait. Et il pense, si ne dit rien. Et Daguenez dit: "Ge vos praig". Si l'an ramaigne, si que li chevaliers n'i met deffanse…
>
> "Daguenet, fait il (Yvain), par la foi que vos devez monseignor lo roi, comment lo preïstes vos?"
>
> "Ge l'encontrai, fait il, lonc cele riviere, si ne me vost dire mot"…
>
> Et la reine s'en rist mout, et tuit cil qui l'oent…Cil Daguenez estoit chevaliers sans faille, mais il estoit fox naïs et la plus coarde piece de char que l'an saüst.[11]

This role as 'indice'[12] is perhaps summed up in the expression 'it takes one to know one'.

We find Daguenet in a similar position in the *Tristan en Prose*; he meets the raging Tristan by a fountain, and a battle ensues between Daguenet and his men and Tristan and the shepherds who suspect him of having stolen their horses.[13] Taking refuge at Marc's court, Daguenet is instrumental in the identification of Tristan with Matan, who was also 'fol par amour'. As to the comic aspect of his character, Fritz identifies the development of this humour: 'Dans le *Tristan en Prose*, on ne rit plus de Daguenet, mais on rit à travers lui.'[14] He is no longer the object of amusement, but the catalyst by which amusement is provoked. Arthur, for instance, uses Daguenet to humiliate Marc, when he sends him to challenge Marc in a joust, dressed in the armour of the injured Mordret:

> Gifflet fait part à ses compagnons d'un projet: on donnera le lendemain à Daguenet les armes de l'un d'entre eux, et on partira avant le chevalier de Cornouaille; lorsqu'il les aura atteints, on le montrera à Daguenet, qui est assez *joli* pour attaquer n'importe qui; le chevalier s'enfuira sans aucun

[11] *Lancelot do Lac:The Non-Cyclic Old French Prose Romance*, edited by Elspeth Kennedy (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980), 267–8.

[12] See Fritz, *op. cit.,* 264 ff.

[13] *Le Roman de Tristan en Prose*, edited by Philippe Ménard (Geneva: Droz, 1987), I, 248-9.

[14] Fritz, *op. cit.*, 265–6.

> doute, et comme cela ils n'auront pas besoin de le toucher eux-mêmes. On accepte avec plaisir : il serait bien plaisant que Daguenet menât en prison, chez Arthur, ce chevalier de Cornouaille; Tristan s'en réjouirait, et Arthur encore davantage, et toute la cour s'en amuserait.[15]

Dinadan introduces Daguenet to the king as Lancelot, prompting Marc to turn in terror and flee; in flight, Marc meets Palamède, who offers to fight the supposed 'Lancelot' and save him, a feat which he then accomplishes single-handed and to the chagrin of Marc.

L'Estoire de Merlin continues in the same vein, with Daguenet as the instrument of joy. We are also given a picture of Arthur's 'fou' not as an afflicted incomer to the court, but as one who shares the chivalric heritage of his companions; his madness cannot be isolated from the society of which he is a member. Indeed, in the *Prophecies de Merlin*, it is not just the madness of the individual which is in question, but that of the whole Arthurian world; the reflection of Daguenet's madness in those round him becomes the illumination of an ailing court, emphasised by an episode where Daguenet has been given control of Arthur's court in the king's absence:

> Sagremor le Desrée, cured of his illness, unavailingly reproaches Arthur for his changed habits of life and for the decline of his court, which he has given into the hands of Daguenet le fou.[16]

With *Guiron le Courtois* Daguenet gains a depth not present in previous incarnations. Firstly, he is no longer a 'fol naïs', whose essential being is madness. Instead, we are given an account of a knight 'biez sinz fale uns des plus sages chevaliers qi fust en tout le roiaume de logres'[17] who has lost his sanity through the loss of his beloved. Having married the daughter of the lord of the Chastel Apparent, Daguenet is betrayed by his best friend, Hélior, who kidnaps Daguenet's wife. Thus Daguenet becomes that which he has been used to indicate in other

15 *Le Roman en prose de Tristan: le roman de Palamède et la compilation de Rusticien de Pise. Analyse critique d'après les manuscrits de Paris*, edited by E. Löseth (New York: Franklin, 1891: repr. 1970), 158.

16 *Les Prophecies de Merlin,* edited by Lucy Ann Paton, Modern Language Series of America Monograph Series, 2 vols (London: OUP, 1926), I, 389.

17 Fritz, *op. cit.*, 278.

tales, the 'fol par amour'. Nevertheless, Daguenet remains separated from others in a similar position — Lancelot, Yvain, Tristan — by the permanency of the condition which elsewhere is a transient aberration. This linking of his madness with that of other respectable knights does however lend it a depth and significance which had previously been absent. His own insight into his plight achieves a new profundity, epitomised by his lucid recognition of the cause of his situation : 'Se ge sui fol, ce fist amor; ge ne puis nul autre blasmer de ma folie fors qe amors tant soulement'.

This sense of another level to Daguenet's personality is hinted at elsewhere. In one version of the *Guiron*, Hervi de Rivel comes across Daguenet by a fountain in a classic state of frenzy, comparable with those of Tristan and Yvain in the woods, and reminiscent of the age-old Wild Man legends. However, it is again his apparent susceptibility to the intervention of rational thought which distinguishes Daguenet in his wild state from the usual depiction of wildness: in preparing to attack Hervi, he hesitates and 'comanca a penser si estrangement qe vos ne veroiz home penser einsint cum il pensoit adonc'.[18] The same opponent is later heard to comment that Daguenet was 'le plus fol chevalier del monde',[19] having witnessed Daguenet's broadly smiling reaction to having fought and killed a knight. This is a gesture indeed often associated with madness, but the conclusion is perhaps too simplistic, almost prejudiced. Considering the tragic background to the knight which has been revealed, could it not be that this was not the unthinking reaction of a crazed mind, but that Daguenet had satisfied some desire for revenge for the grievous wrong done to him by a just such a knight — the loss of his lady?

Whereas we often find that madness is like a suit of clothes, to be taken out and worn for a specific occasion, before being put back until the next time, for Merlin and Daguenet, madness is a style which influences their whole wardrobe. Whatever they don bears witness to a greater or lesser extent to their roots in insanity.

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[18] *Ibid*., 268.
[19] *Ibid*., 345.