
The madness of Suibhne has long been a topic of interest and discussion among scholars of early Irish literature. In this book based on her doctoral thesis, Alexandra Bergholm makes a thorough survey of the different interpretations which have been applied to this tale, and the effect each has had on the related ongoing scholarship.

In the first chapter, Bergholm begins by making clear that the purpose of her work is to study the interpretative methods of the scholars who have written on *Buile Shuibhne (BS)*, rather than the text itself. Because of the impossibility, as she says, of ‘imposing modern expectations of structure, coherence, authorship or textual autonomy’ (15) on the text, she chooses to use a reader-oriented approach and looks at the scholarly discourse on *BS* from the beginning of the twentieth century. Over time, this has changed from scholars primarily interested in the possible historical origins of the tale to those focusing on the reasons and nature of Suibhne's madness. The latter have primarily involved looking at the tale as a religious allegory, though not always from the perspective of the same religion. Bergholm then recounts previous scholarship on *BS*, from J.G. O'Keeffe's 1913 edition to the present.

The second chapter covers theories of interpretation where the author examines theories of authorial intention, but then rejects them on the basis that the separation of time and culture makes this impossible to know, saying that, in fact, this is true of any text. This leads her to discuss reception theory and reader-response criticism. These, she says, focus on socially determined strategies of interpretation based on interpretative communities which share strategies for understanding and
assigning meaning to texts. Scholarly discourse would be one example of such an interpretative community.

Bergholm approaches the text of BS itself in her third chapter. Following a brief synopsis and history of the manuscript tradition, she outlines the extant references to it in other early Irish literature. Most of these are found in the hagiographic traditions of Saints Rónán and Moling.

Next Bergholm examines the theme of madness in early Irish literature. She enumerates Pádraig Ó Riain's list of motifs relating to madness in his 1972 study of the Irish 'Legend of the Wild Man' (Éigse 14, 179–206), including occasions of madness, the state of madness, and the moment of restoration to sanity. She then addresses themes of madness with supernatural knowledge, cowardice in battle, and connection to the wilderness and wildness in general. She briefly discusses women and madness, echoing previous scholars in the opinion that this last involves instances of the sacred marriage between king and goddess, but also exploring the theme of wildness as expressed through their characters, primarily those such as Lí Ban and Muirgeilt. She then goes on to compare these early Irish examples with those from other cultures, such as Old Norse, where it seems to be connected with both cowardice and foreigners – particularly in the case of the Irish, which suggests to Bergholm that the concept was borrowed into Norse saga from Irish.

Part II analyzes the four main strains of interpretation that Bergholm has discerned in the scholarly history of the text: a) historical; b) pre-Christian (including Shamanic and Indo-European interpretations); c) Christian (with reference to both eastern and western forms of Christianity); and d) anthropological. She meticulously explains the background to each line of thought before detailing how it has been applied to the case of BS in particular.
First she addresses the earliest scholarship regarding BS, which looks at its possible historical antecedents. In the first instance this involves tracing the 'Celtic Wildman tradition' and its beginnings to how and why it might have influenced BS. She traces the tales of Lailoken and Merlin, as the early scholars did, as well as pointing out how BS diverges in significant ways from these tales. She then moves on to examine the question of the historicity of the events described therein, coming to the conclusion that while certain aspects of the story – such as the fact of the Battle of Mag Rath — are valid, others are adapted around the kernel of the Celtic Wildman legend.

Bergholm then addresses the first group of scholars who relate Suibhne's madness to religious fervour and oriented their discussion around pre-Christian sources, varying in their interpretations from shamanism, Celtic nature deities and Indo-European tripartite ideology. Those concentrating on shamanism relate Suibhne's levitation/high leaps to the soul flight of the shaman to the celestial realms and underworld, and his mad utterances to the prophecies and wisdom they offer on their return. She then looks at those scholars analyzing the nature deity angle, who focus on both the nature poetry Suibhne recites in opposition to Saint Moling's praise of monastic life (both of which are presented in a positive light) and his apparent connection to the learned classes of pagan Ireland.

At the end of the chapter on pre-Christian allegories, she examines Indo-European tripartite ideology which divides society into sacred, military and fertility functions. For society to run effectively, each class must fulfil the duties of its own station and refrain from interfering with the duties of the others. According to the scholars pleading this case, Suibhne, as a warrior, has sinned against all three functions — the
sacred, by his acts against Saint Rónán; the military, by fleeing from the battle; and fertility, by the accusation of adultery (though he did not actually commit it) — and his madness is the price he must pay. This is also the reason for the three-fold death theme at the close of the tale, though again it is not Suibhne who suffers it.

In the next chapter Bergholm examines the scholarship claiming BS as a Christian allegory. The earliest of these focus on the ascetic *perigrinus* popular in early Christianity. They point out the similarities of life in the wilderness and the assuming of an almost bestial appearance, covered in hair or 'feathers', in hagiography both in Ireland and elsewhere. Other scholars focus on biblical figures such as Nebuchadnezzar, whose arrogance puts him at odds with God, who then causes him to fall into madness. This comparison would bring him closer to the 'Mad Sinner' or Unholy Wild Man'. Here, the period of madness purges the Wild Man of his sin, and his healing brings him closer to God. She points out, however, that the problem is that Suibhne is never healed of his madness. Also examined here is the figure of the 'Holy Wild Man' — one who willingly undergoes a spiritual retreat into wilderness. This may or may not be to atone for a perceived sin. But this would mark Suibhne as voluntary and holy in his 'madness', which Bergholm notes does not tally with the tale as we have it. Finally she looks at the concept of being a 'fool for God', one whose close connection with God causes him to live outside of societal boundaries. This fool's madness, however, is feigned, though often accompanied by prophecy and spiritual guidance, as well as flouting social norms.

The final set of scholars Bergholm examines are those espousing an anthropological interpretation. These academics do not set Suibhne's madness in the framework of a specific religion; rather, they see it as an expression of sacred ritual transition: the madman as a liminal figure, who by virtue of his betwixt and between status, is able to perceive the
sacred, and then communicate it to society.

In the first chapter of Part III Bergholm elegantly brings the information presented in Part II together with her own thoughts and conclusions on each approach, all without dismissing the value of the various cases which have been made. She then returns to Part I and the interpretative theories delineated there, although she concentrates on the 'ideal of the authorial original', both its origin and its limitations — including the issues arising from the use of modern critical editions, which are themselves constructions. In the end she appears to conclude that rather than approaching the text as a document stemming from a particular point in time, we must understand our own struggles in interpretation as the most recent in a chain of literary events constituting the text.

It is in this final section that Bergholm really comes into her own. The first two parts of the book are largely descriptive in nature. This is of course necessary in order to inform the reader as to the nature of the material under discussion. She examines carefully the pros and cons of each approach, weighing its usefulness to the interpretation of BS. In addition, she manages to do so without privileging or dismissing any given interpretation without sufficient consideration, which even more experienced academics can sometimes find difficult. She then argues that the theories of authorship need to be revisited — that ‘the notion of authorship must be redescribed as a metatheoretical problem, and examined from the viewpoint of agency rather than identities’, pointing out that ‘[o]nly this shift in perspective allows for a full reconsideration of the ongoing development of the Middle-Irish text in its various forms’ (179). Her point is well taken, not only in respect to BS but for early Irish literature in general.
Bergholm’s work is thoroughly researched and thoughtfully written. It is also organised in such a way as to maximise understanding, each section of a given chapter building upon the last. I believe this book will be of lasting value as an aid not only to understanding the text of *Buile Shuibhne* itself, but also to enlightening scholars in general — and medievalists in particular — to the importance of understanding and accounting for our own assumptions and unspoken traditions in interpretation.

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