“The Irish Fool”

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Undergraduate

The personage of the Fool, also known as the Jester[1] , is a universal phenomenon, that occurs in most cultures, with basic characteristics that transcend circumstantial particularities.[2] Traditional fools played mirthful games with their court's assumptions about reality, happily juggling lightheartedly with all meanings, values and norms of their respective societies. The popularized image of the Fool, one passed down from the medieval and early modern monarchs of Europe, is one of a humorous character with a bell-adorned coxcomb hat. This image may be identified easily today as, "The Joker," who typically finds residence in the common pack of playing cards. Curiously, while elements of this symbol and its legacy play a role that parallels the Fool of Irish tradition, there are distinct differences.

In this essay, I shall describe the dynamic between king and jester, clarifying the distinctly different roles between Jester and poet in Irish tradition, and outlining the Jester's heritage as someone whose role is sacrificial—for all the jesters in the literature culminate in sacrifice for their king. The costume of the Jester shall be seen to have close resemblance to the sacrificial garments of ancient rituals. I shall give two examples of the Fool being sacrificed to represent the folly of his liege, namely Mac Glass in *How Rónán Killed His Son,* and Úa Maigleine in *The Battle of Allen.* Afterwards I will outline how cards themselves are closely linked to the Jester and the action of Jester's sacrifice to save his liege from folly, typically death. Again, two examples will be given, Do Déra in *Cath Maige Mucrama*, and Glasdamh, who was burnt to death in his master's stead. In *The Destruction of Dinn Rígh,* Labraid's Fool sacrifices himself so Labraid may keep his honor and recover his kingdom. To testify to the clairvoyant and magical nature of the Jester, I shall extrapolate on two instances found in the literature, the instance of Do Déra's premonition in *Cath Maige Mucrama,* and Lomna, in *The Destruction of Da Derga's Hall,* then finally returning to the playing cards to show how their use and symbolism has retained much of the essence of the Irish

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[1] The name "Jester" came from Spanish *chistu,* which in turn derived from Chisti, a school of apostolic mystics from Afghanistan, who appeared in Europe in the thirteenth century, attracting crowds with music, drumming, antics, and horseplay.
- Barbara G. Walker, *The Secrets of the Tarot*, (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984): 59.

[2] Many Fools of various types have been employed throughout histories civilizations. The emperors of the Aztecs, the shoguns in ancient Japan, the khalifs in the ancient Near East, all employed fools. Clowns from African and American Indian tribes all had behavior similar to clowns of the Roman festival of Saturnalia. Carl Jung pointed out that The Fool is an Archetypal figure, and one of the most important symbols of the unconscious mind. Similarly, William Shakespeare propounded in his comedy *Twelfth Night*, that, "Foolery, sir, does walk about the orb like the sun: it shines everywhere." Ironically, the image of The Fool seems to trigger philosophical thoughts more readily than the image of the wise person.
- Anton C. Zijderveld, *Reality in a Looking-Glass,* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982): 10.

Fool. In Medieval Irish literature, the clairvoyant and sacrificial aspects of the court Jester are emphasized just as much, if not more so, than the comic value the court Jester provides to the king.

The Irish court Jester had a close rapport with his king, a leader who held the pivotal role in society, politics and the overall scheme of things. Therefore, the jester was an integral part of the court of the king. The king's major function was as a leader in war, presiding over his assembled people, and as judge and lawgiver. So important was the king that in him was attributed a supernatural connection between the divine and human worlds, the prosperity of the land being dependent upon the truth of the sovereign (*fír flatha*).[3] As the king played such a pivotal role in the success and function of the kingdom, he naturally attracts considerable fealty from those around him, including his loyal Jester. As historical fools tended to be fiercely loyal to their patron , so too the Jesters of Irish literature frequently display a touching loyalty to their masters, for whom they were willing to sacrifice their lives.

Generally, Irish Fools were marginal men, who served as entertainment to the wealthy and prosperous in exchange for food, clothes and shelter. Although the Irish poet or *fili* has resemblance to the traditional Fool—for fools often recite—the Irish considered the two distinct and separate. The Irish poet or *fili* was a learned—even academic—personage. For instance, the Irish character Mac-daCherda was considered both a Fool and poet. He was given the name of Mac-daCherda, or the youth of two arts, through folly *and* poetry.[4] Although the Jester was classed among the disreputable, Irish literature does probe more nobel pursuits of the Fool, especially self-sacrifice for his liege, loyalty and second sight.[5]

There are good historical reasons for the closeness between the king and his Fool, as pointed out by Anton C. Zijderveld, in his book *Reality in a Looking-Glass*. Zijderveld reasons that a consequence of absolute power is the necessary social isolation of the monarch. It became risky for the sovereign to confide in those around him, and his subjects' motivations were frequently obscured by the temptation of usurping power. The court Fool was the ideal solution. Being a

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[3] The kingdom's social and natural welfare was intimately bound up with the sovereign's physical, social and mental condition. Good weather, social stability, abundance of crops, healthy livestock and peace were all attributed to the "sovereign's truth" or *fír flatha,* while conversely, consequences such as famine, pestilence, bad weather and strife were thought to result from the *gáu flatha* or "sovereign's lie."
- Kim McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature,* (Ireland: Leinster Leader Ltd, 1990): 180.

[4] Enid Welsford, *The Fool: His Social and Literary History,* (London: Faber and Faber, 1935):101.

[5] Welsford ,109.

marginalized personality, he was isolated from the rest of the court. The Fool has no power autonomous from the king, being dependent solely, subjectively and totally on the monarch, and can safely be allowed to become intimate as a confidant of the king without great fear of a shift in loyalty. Kings have been dethroned by rebellious noblemen, but never by a court Jester. Furthermore, the Jester's foolery, in juxtaposition to the king's power, benefits the king as it is highly effective in demonstrating his power harmlessly.[6] Although treated like a pet for the king (the Fool usually slept with the king's hounds),[7] the Fool served also as the king's trusted spy.

The costume that we associate with the Jester, as found on The Joker card in regular playing cards, the eared hood, bells, bauble stave, and motley green and yellow clothes, show a striking resemblance to the sacrificial garments of ancient ritual. The Jester's clothes were an amalgamation of ancient ritual dress, dating back to ancient Egyptian and Roman times. The typical dunce cap is derived from the apex, a conical hat worn by Rome's ceremonial high priest, the Flamen Dialis.[8] Egyptian tradition contributed to the "ass ears" of the Fool's conical cap, for in Egypt the ass was an animal of ill repute. The ass-god Set was believed to be crucified as a surrogate for the divine king, Osiris-Ra, as his seasonal alter ego. The reed scepter of the crucified Set was similarly adorned with a pair of ass ears, and a similar eared scepter was inherited by the Jester.[9] Frequent ritual association of fools with a mock king suggests that the Fool originated as a sacrificial scapegoat, substituted for a royal victim.[10]

The Fool's motley green costume is also significant, resembling the Green Man, or Green George, who led springtime processions in European folk festivals. Green George's Day was Easter Monday, later Christianized as St. George's Day, on the rather suspicious ground that George symbolized the newly risen Christ embodied in the spring foliage. Tradition accordingly identified Christ with the pagan fertility god sacrificed in spring. Some believed Christ was crucified on the first of April, the Fool's Day, which came at the end of the pagans' regular Holy Week, and was celebrated with jokes, and horseplay at the festival of "foolishness," the Hilaria.[11]

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[6] Zijderveld, 117.

[7] Even such an accomplished and successful Jester as Will Sommer, the Fool of England's Henry VIII, who sat next to the king during dinners, would at night sleep in the kennel among the royal spaniels. - Zijderveld, 94.

[8] Walker, 58.

[9] Walker, 59.

[10] "fool" Encyclopædia *Britannica* . <http://www.britannica.com/>

[11] Walker, 59.

In Irish literature, often the Fool is sacrificed in conjunction with the king as his tragic representation. In such circumstances, where the king is doomed to die, his Fool, unable to excuse the king, performs as an example of his lieges calamity. This may be seen most graphically in the story of *How Rónán Killed His Son,* where the good king Rónán is tricked into slaying his beloved son Mael, due to the artifices and lusts of his young wife. Rónán instructs his champion Aedhán to kill his son Mael, believing that Mael has been propositioning his queen. Mael has his Fool, Mac Glass with him, and as an afterthought, Aedhán kills the Fool also, tearing out his bowels with a spear. While the Fool dies, a raven arrives and begins taking the Fool's entrails from him. The Fool contorts his lips in pain, while various churls stand about laughing at his agony. The grizzly scene causes the dying Mael to become ashamed. He chastises the Fool saying, "Mac Glass, gather your bowels. Why have you no shame? Churls are laughing at you."[12] The Fool should not shame the king, and the frightfulness of the scene summarizes the tragic circumstances around the untimely and unnecessary death of Mael, the prodigal son and anticipated heir; Mael has been distastefully slain on the whims of a skittish girl. Mac Glass's predicament is used to express sorrow and shame.

The disemboweled Fool Mac Glass is a physical representation of the indignity of the crime upon Mael, his liege. Rónán, the king, is guilty of kinslaying, the act of murdering a member of his own family, a crime considered most heinous to the Irish. Moreover, it is his own son whom he has slain. Mac Glass, in desperately gathering his bowls and simultaneously being eaten by a Raven, fulfills a role as purveyor of "the great primal joke of the undignified nature of the human body."[13] The men of the time, the churls, have a robust taste in comedy. To them, the physical functions of the body, or disfunction as in the case of Mac Glass's bowels, provide an inexhaustible source of merriment. The churls laughter echo the laughter of others, who will hear of the pathetic circumstances through which Rónán needlessly killed his great and potentially glorious son.

Another example of the Fool being slain tragically as a means to represent his liege's folly may be found in the *The Battle of Allen,* where the hero and poet (*Fili)* Donn Bó is summoned to a great battle. The night before the battle Donn Bó is called upon to entertain his troops. Donn Bó refuses, and has the royal Fool Úa Maigleine entertain instead.[14] The Fool plays a replacement,

[12] Tomás Ó Cathasaigh, "How Rónán Killed his Son." Copyright © Tomás Ó Cathasaigh. 4.
[13] Welsford, 51.
[14] Tomás Ó Cathasaigh, "The Battle of Allen." Copyright © Tomás Ó Cathasaigh. 2.

speaking for his liege the night before imminent disaster. There is premonition here, for it would be inappropriate for Donn Bó to entertain his assembly the night before their destruction; Donn Bó is excused by the Jester. In the subsequent battle, twenty-one thousand men on the side of Donn Bó are overcome by nine thousand. Donn Bó is beheaded and his Fool, Úa Maigleine is seized and forced to give a Fool's roar. The roar is great and melodious, and the echo of the Fool's roar is said to be "in the air for three full days and nights."[15] Such an almighty roar from the mouth of the royal Fool is representative of the tragic defeat of the king. After his impressive roar, the Fools head is hacked off. Once again, the Fool dies, and in death tragically pays homage to his master.

The powers attributed to the Irish Fool are pagan in origin and associated with magic and clairvoyance. Interestingly, today's standard deck of playing cards are historically derived from 14th century Tarot cards, which are similarly associated with magic and clairvoyance. Included in the Tarot are twenty two trump cards, known as the Major Arcana. The first and foremost of these is The Fool, and it alone is unnumbered, being the "0th" card. The Tarot was used by many, including Fools, as a means of entertainment and later as a means of divining the future. Tarot cards were an ideal tool through which Fools could practice their foolery, the cards themselves being a form of entertainment. The Fool card was represented usually with a Jester in cap and bells, and has for long been called *l'Excuse* by French players of the game Tarot, because its traditional role is to excuse whomever plays it from obligation to follow suit or to play a trump, serving as a wild card.[16] The Fool card essentially pardons the player from folly, in much the same way the Irish Fool sacrificed himself for his liege. Of all the Major Arcana, only one card was allowed to remain in the standard deck of playing cards, The Fool,[17] which became The Joker, and whose purpose is still to trump, rescuing the player from folly.[18] This definition of the function of the Jester in the context of games acquaints us about the role of the Jester as found in literature of the early Middle Ages, when the personality of the medieval Fool was being formed.

As the court Jester has such a close bond and is so indebted to his king, he usually takes his loyalty to an extreme, frequently dying for his master. Enid Welsford, in her book *The Fool*, mentions a specific instance of a jester dying in place of his liege, "the lampooner or household

[15] Tomás Ó Cathasaigh, "The Battle of Allen." Copyright © Tomás Ó Cathasaigh. 3.
[16] Ronald Decker, *A Wicked Pack of Cards: The Origins of the Occult Tarot,* (UK: Duckworth, 1996): 43.
[17] Walker, 58.
[18] Modern card games in which The Joker is typically included are Rummy, Five Hundred, Euchre and Canasta.

buffoon Glasdamh was burnt to death in his master's stead."[19] The jester takes his maters place, excusing him, and thereby saving him. Another striking example of such self-sacrifice is in the story of *Cath Maige Mucrama,* in which Lugaid Mac Con, challenges Éogan, his foster brother and heir to the king, to fight on the field of battle. It is a foolish challenge, and Lugaid Mac Con consults his Jester Do Déra for a solution. The Jester happens to be exactly like Mac Con in form and appearance. When Lugaid Mac Con expresses his fears that he will be challenged to single combat with Éogan and overthrown, the Jester reads that Lugaid Mac Con is "utterly doomed" and offers to go against Éogan in Lugaid Mac Con's place, thereby forfeiting his own life so Lugaid Mac Con might escape.[20] The faithful Jester Do Déra immediately and willfully doubles for his sovereign and is killed in battle.

Consistently throughout medieval Irish literature, the Fool is depicted as a tragic and sacrificial character, rather than in any particularly comic light.[21] Welsford draws attention to Lugaid Mac Con's continued saying after his Jester Dodera dies in his place in battle, "Since Dodera is departed, no laughter is produced; for after Dairine's merry Jester there is desolation."[22] At least here there is some evidence of the merriment of the Irish Fool. The mirth of the Jester seems more implied by his role than actually portrayed in verse, and the Fool emerges a tragic figure constantly destined to perish. This is because sacrifice was constantly stressed more often than amusement in the Jester. In cases were the Jester is in any way humorous it is rather a damning and pathetic humor, as seen when Mac Glass collects his entrails in *How Rónán Killed His Son*.

While in *Cath Maige Mucrama*, the Fool dies in sacrifice instead of the king, in the case of *The Destruction of Dinn Rígh,* the Fool dies in sacrifice for the king and kingdom. This story illustrates both the closeness of the king to his Jester and the inhumane practice of sacrificing the Jester. In this story, the distasteful Cobthach is to be lured into a house to be entertained and then trapped. Building a house for Cobthach is a way of honoring him, but this house is secretly made with iron walls, floor and doors, and is in fact a cage. Cobthach cannot be enticed into the house until Labraid, the hero of the tale, sends his mother and Fool into the house. Labraid's mother

[19] Welsford, 109.
[20] Máirín O Daly, *Cath Maige Mucrama,* (Ireland: Irish Texts Society, 1975): 41.
[21] In none of the assigned readings, nor in any medieval Irish tales I found through my own research, could I find a genuinely humorous Jester, whose humor was not connected in some way to pathetic tragedy.
[22] Welsford, 109.

agrees to die in the trap, and in doing so she saves her son's honor. The Fool chooses his reward, "the blessing of the Leinstermen and freedom for his descendants forever."[23] The Fool and Labraid's mother die in the house with Cobthach, ensuring Labraid's honor and his kingdom. The closeness of the Jester to Labraid is evident here as he is thought to be of equal value to Labraid as his own mother.

In medieval Irish literature lunacy was thought to be a madness that can bring about second-sight sight. Fools were occasionally equated to lunatics, and it is suspected that many fools were indeed insane. Insanity and second-sight were frequently thought supernatural, and magical in origin.[24] Welsford clarifies that it is difficult to determine how far the entertainers at Irish courts can be regarded as real madmen. According to Welsford, the Irish word for Fool, *druth,* may be synonymous with madman, although originally it probably meant a simpleton.[25] The Fool or *druth*, was often associated with insanity, and was thereby connected with the supernatural and accepted as a prophet. The clairvoyant fool, in his capacity as a prophet, was able to provide the king with valuable information, especially with warnings regarding forthcoming battles and conflicts.

In the *Cath Maige Mucrama,* when Mac Con's Jester, Do Déra, offers to fight and die in Mac Con's place, Do Déra also has a premonition for Mac Con, warning him, saying, "Éogan however will be looking for you throughout the battle. Then if he sees the calves of your legs you will be wounded."[26] The Jester's prophesy proves accurate, for Éogan does indeed spot Mac Con's calves, and does wound Mac Con in the calf. Myles Dillon, in his book , The *Cycles of the Kings,* explains that Mac Con's calves (*colptha*) would be of the fair skin of a prince, which would shine in contrast to the swarthy unwashed skin of his soldiers.[27] What is emphasized is that the honorable Jester Do Déra is gifted with second sight. Furthermore, Do Déra foresees that if Mac Con fights he will be "utterly doomed"[28] and takes Mac Con's place himself.

Another Irish Fool with second sight may also be found in *The Destruction of Da Derga's Hall,* where Lomna the Fool, tries to divert tragic catastrophe which he foresees clearly:

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[23] Tomás Ó Cathasaigh, "The Destruction of Dinn Ríg." Copyright © Tomás Ó Cathasaigh. 3.
[24] Welsford, 96.
[25] Welsford, 111.
[26] Máirín O Daly, 43.
[27] Myles Dillon, *The Cycles of the Kings,* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1994): 18.
[28] Máirín O Daly, 41.

> Woe to him who shall wreak this Destruction!... if I could fulfill my counsel, the Destruction would not be attempted... woe is me before every one! woe is me after every one! "Tis my head that will be first tossed about there tonight after an hour among their chariot-shafts, where devilish foes will meet. It will be flung into the Hostel thrice, and thrice will it be flung forth. Woe (to him) that comes! Woe (to him) with whom one goes! Woe (to him) whom one goes!"[29]

Lomna the Fool proves a true prophet, knowing that his head will be the first to be cut off and "tossed about," being flung into the Hostel three times. It is in vain that Lomna tries to avert the Destruction, and his prophesy is proven correct by his death.

There are also instances where Fools are portrayed magically. In *The Battle of Allen,* Donn-bo, is a gifted minstrel, credited with second sight and who magically retains the power of speech even after having his head cut off. This power is not unique, for Welsford points out that, "The head of Lomna, the faithful Fool of Finn Hua Baiscni, held a conversation with his master after having been beheaded by his mistress whose infidelity he had revealed."[30] So, Irish fools are certainly magical, acquiring some of the characteristics of their minstrel/poet brethren as the bodiless head talks.

The image of the Fool, as passed down to us from the middle ages, has collected much of its legacy from Irish tradition, tainted somewhat in that he has also adopted some of the more regal *fili* or poet attributes. Sacrifice is emphasized in the very clothes The Joker is depicted wearing, such as his motley green costume, and in particular, his coxcomb, which is derived from sacrificial ritual. As such, the modern conception of the Fool or The Joker, has maintained many symbols that are resident of the Fool as can be seen in medieval Irish literature. However, this conception should be modified, as Irish literature provides a strikingly different presentation of the Fool, one who is not quite so comic and lyrical, but is rather a sacrificial entity who is second sighted, victimized, and heavily tragic.

[29] Welsford, 106.
[30] Welsford, 109.

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