Medieval Communities and the Mad

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Conclusions

A set of four remission letters all dealing with the same crime appear in the chancery records for 1424 and 1425.\(^1\) It is not a story about madness itself, but one that offers insight into how the discourse of madness was deployed and how multiple levels of community were constructed. In these four letters sent to the king, a number of residents of a town in the diocese of Bayeux explained to the English government of France how it came to pass that they had banded together to attack two English men in November of 1417, shortly after Henry V’s army had overtaken Caen. No one could understand these strangers, who had decided to lodge at Guillaume le Paumier’s hôtel. When the two men started to gather together the Paumiers’s goods, Alips, Guillaume le Paumier’s wife, left the hôtel seeking help, and a group of townspeople returned with her and killed the two men.

Their requests for remission were written against the background of national events. In the seven years between 1417, when the act was committed, and 1424, when remission was sought, the political landscape in France had shifted, in part due to repercussions from the king’s madness. Charles VI had died in 1422, leaving political confusion and civil war dividing the realm. The dead king’s son, Charles, had been officially disinherited, and controlled only southern France. His grandson, Henry, the heir according to the Treaty of Troyes, was just a baby, and with the aid of an English regent and the duke of Burgundy, held Paris and northern France. In such a divisive moment, fundamental questions about the very constitution of the French realm, French identity, and the relationship between the French and the English were at stake. The political situation was so complex in part because of the king’s madness, which had left his legacy, shaped through the Treaty of Troyes, open to question.

As these four remission letters demonstrate, this confusion of loyalties on the level of the realm had repercussions in local communities. With an English king on the throne, actions that might in other contexts have appeared simply as a

\(^1\) AN JJ 173 fo 22v no 44; AN JJ 173 fo 88 no 170; AN JJ 173 fo 88v no 171; and AN JJ 173 fo 89v no 172.

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commendable and heroic defense of the village against enemies of the realm, were suddenly construed as the murder of loyal soldiers and subjects of the king. These conflicts over changing identities and shifting boundaries between enemy and friend were relatively common in this period, and a number of remission letters reflect discomfort and uncertainty on a local level, caused by political events. This series of letters moves beyond the general acknowledgement of alternating loyalties, however, considering problems of linguistic differences, communal defense, and the long-term fears that such shifts engender.

Robert le Panomer’s letter was recorded in the chancery in December of 1424, and was the first remission letter sought by members of this community in reference to the death of the two strangers. The three other letters relating to this crime were all recorded consecutively in June of 1425, and appear to have been composed in consultation with each other. Indeed, these three letters are practically word for word exact replicas of each other. The first of these was composed on behalf of Guillaume and Alips le Paumier, who were pardoned together as a married couple. The two others were for Robin Germain and Jehan Germain, perhaps brothers or a father and son, though their relationship to each other was not specified in the letters. These three identical letters with slight alterations in reference to the particular supplicant involved reveal the careful construction that went into these crime narratives. In the essentials they do not diverge significantly from Robert le Panomer’s earlier version, but their narrative is more cautious and considered.

It is tempting to speculate about the exchange of information once Robert le Panomer returned to Normandy with his letter of remission. Guillaume and Alips le Paumier and Robin and Jehan Germain all claimed they had been hiding ‘secretly’, supported by their neighbors and relatives in the area, for the past seven years. Two possibilities can be imagined. One is that, with Robert le Panomer’s letter of remission, the horizon opened for these four fugitives. Here was proof that the English occupiers would not execute them for their crime, but that Henry, like the King of France he claimed to be, would, of his grace and mercy, pardon them. Alternatively, Robert le Panomer’s return with a royal pardon might have initiated a legal case against his accomplices, since remission for one participant in a crime did not guarantee remission for the others. Regardless, it is likely that Robert le Panomer’s remission

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2 AN JJ 173 fo 22v no 44.
3 AN JJ 173 fo 88 no 170.
4 AN JJ 173 fo 88v no 171.
5 AN JJ 173 fo 89v no 172.
6 Esther Cohen notes this, although the case she discusses involves people who received remission for crimes for which their accomplices had already been executed. Cohen 1993.
letter for this case spurred the others to seek their own. The distance from Paris to the diocese of Bayeux, where their village was located, is around 260 kilometers (160 miles). There was plenty of time between Robert le Panomer’s return, probably some time in late December or early January, and the trip to Paris in May or June by the other four remission seekers. They could get the story straight, ensure that the details matched and that nothing they said had the potential to backfire once they acquired remission.

The first letter, written on behalf of Robert le Panomer, claimed that two strangers arrived in town, ‘speaking a strange language that they had never heard and they did not know whether they were Bretons, English, Scottish or other peoples’\(^7\). The letter is a narrative constructing Robert le Panomer’s innocence. The men were speaking an incomprehensible language, so no one knew they were English, and, perhaps more significantly, no one knew what they were doing. They were the first aggressors. According to Robert le Panomer’s letter, the strangers had threatened the Paumiers by hitting them both several times with the flat of their swords, and gathered all the Paumier’s goods together, planning to steal them in the morning. As if that was not enough to exonerate him, even Alips’s decision to call on her neighbors for aid was not done with the intention of attacking the two strangers, but only in a state of temporary madness brought on by fear, loss, and possibly pain, since she had already been beaten by the strangers’ swords. According to Robert le Panomer’s version of events, Alips ‘was as if completely out of her good sense and memory because she saw that they wanted to take away their said goods’\(^8\). Thus, her decision to round up the locals to help her prevent these two strangers from stealing from her was not premeditated, but was the result of a temporary insanity brought on by her fear of the loss of their property.

In choosing to claim that Alips was mad, Robert le Panomer’s letter drew on a wider understanding of the depredations of war as a potential catalyst for mental distress.\(^9\) These letters were the despairing cry of a population affected by wars they were unable to avoid. The period under study includes some of the most serious fighting of the Hundred Years War in France, and letters about peasants who, according to their families, were driven mad by the destruction of their livelihood at the hands of the soldiers indicate that war was viewed as a traumatic event for the population at large. The French countryside provided

\(\text{footnotes:}
\begin{align*}
7 & \text{AN JJ 173 fo 22v no 44: ‘parlans langage estrange que on ne entendoit point et ne savoit ou se cestoient bretons anglois escocoys ou autres gens’}. \\
8 & \text{AN JJ 173 fo 22v no 44: ‘fut comme toute hors de son bon sens et memoire pour ce quelle veoit quilz vouloit emport leurs diz biens’}. \\
9 & \text{For more on these cases, see Pfau 2013b.}
\end{align*}
\)
provisions for the armies that moved through their lands, whether those provisions were sought under the guise of payment for protection or as more direct looting. France was often in a state of turmoil and, in the imaginations of the general public, the pillaging and brigandage surrounding the war with England and the civil wars among the French nobility was detrimental to the livelihoods as well as to the mental stability of the people.\(^\text{10}\)

Letters mentioning madness as a result of pillaging appeared most regularly during the period of English rule and civil war,\(^\text{11}\) and most were written to explain suicides. In the summer months of 1424, in fact, three different women were granted remission for committing suicide because of madness brought on by the wars being fought in their neighborhood. Although some men committed suicide due to losses caused by war, in

\(^10\) It is clearly beyond the scope of this study to enter into the continuing debate over whether the French peasants were the greatest sufferers in the Hundred Years War, and whether their sufferings contributed to the peasant uprisings of the period, but it is worth noting the ways remission letters have been used in support of this argument and what that means for any reading of these particular narratives. Jules Michelet’s *Histoire de France* was the first book to posit the thesis, and there have been many other proponents and opponents since. Michelet 1876, vol. 4, p. 287: ‘Les souffrances du paysan avaient passé la mesure; tous avaient frappé dessus, comme une bête tombée sous la charge; la bête se releva enragée, et elle mordit […]. Dans cette guerre chevaleresque que se faisaient à armes courtoises les nobles de France et d’Angleterre, il n’y avait au fond qu’un ennemi, une victime des maux de la guerre; c’était le paysan’. Christopher Allmand has carried on Michelet’s argument, although he focuses on peasant suffering, making use of the term ‘non-combatants’ to refer to the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century peasants, and relying on sermon literature and supplications to the papal court by French churches to show that these peasants’ livelihoods were affected by the war. Allmand first proposed this terminology, which he took from contemporary discussion of the Vietnam War, in Allmand 1971, but it can also be found in Allmand 1988 and Allmand 1999. Nicholas Wright, though he does not deny that peasants did indeed suffer, insists the combatants suffered as well. He notes that the wholesale destruction of peasant property would not have been in the best interest of the nobility, which depended on peasant land cultivation for food, and points out the acknowledged differences between the noble armies and the brigands and pillagers who took advantage of the war to wreak havoc in the countryside. He also suggests that the peasants were willing and able to fight back, using remission letters as evidence of brigandage and peasant resistance. See Wright 1983a; Wright 1998; Wright 1998b; and Wright 1991.

\(^11\) France’s political situation was particularly messy during and after Charles VI’s reign. Through the Treaty of Troyes, arranged in 1420, Charles VI disinherited his son, Charles, in favor of the English king, Henry V, who married Charles VI’s daughter Catherine. Henry V became regent of France until Charles VI’s death, but Henry died in 1422, mere months before Charles, who left his newborn grandson, Henry VI of England, as king of France. Charles VII set himself up as an alternative monarch in the Loire valley, but was unable to retake Paris and the north until Joan of Arc came to his aid in 1429. Indeed, even with her help, it was not until 1438 that Charles VII finally replaced the English rule. For more on all of this, see Allmand 1988; Autrand 1986; Famiglietti 1986; and Guenée 2004.
these cases madness was not mentioned as an ancillary reason. While suicide does not seem to have been considered a gendered response to war, madness leading to suicide appears to have been. Indeed, the only references to the madness of men related to war was to the ‘youthful folly’ of those men seeking remission for fighting for the ‘enemy’ or becoming a brigand, and the ‘lack of sense’ that caused a man who had lost his livelihood during the war to violate trade sanctions by selling food to the enemy, or in enemy-occupied territory.

One war-related case appeared in a letter from May of 1424, when Henriette, wife of Jehan Charnel, committed suicide in the town of Montagny-Sainte-Félicité near Senlis. According to her family and relatives, a company of soldiers had come to Montagny looking for provisions while Jehan Charnel was away in Picardy selling apples. The soldiers found Jehan Charnel’s mare and appropriated it and two robes from Charnel’s house. Henriette attempted to prevent them, but was so badly beaten for her pains that she lay bedridden for fifteen days afterwards. Eight days later, the soldiers returned and found their second horse. This time Jehan Charnel, who had returned home, tried to prevent them, but he was no more successful than his wife. When the bedridden Henriette was told that their second horse was gone, as well, she was so angered and displeased that she became ‘troubled in her good sense and memory’, saying several times each day that they had lost everything by losing their horses. This narrative suggested that Henriette’s anger at losing everything provided sufficient cause for her to go out of her mind and hang herself. The idea that the loss of goods could lead to madness appears in several letters. Perrote de Courcelles, another woman who went mad due to the depredations of war had, according to the letter composed by her family and relatives, ‘lost her family and goods such that from anger and displeasure about it she was made to fall into a

12 See AN JJ 130 fo 152v no 269 (in 1387) and AN JJ 166 fo 213 no 317 (in 1412).
13 Despite the concentration on the tangible negative effects of war on peasants in the French countryside, none of the many articles and books on the topic have considered psychological aspects. One recent study on women’s roles during the Hundred Years War uses chronicle accounts and some letters to valorize the women in question, without addressing the ways in which these narratives of strong women or of entire communities, including women, joining in to help with the defense of a town may reflect the desires and goals of the chronicler or letter-writer. See Gilbert 2005.
14 For the ‘folie et jeunesse’ leading to joining the enemy’s army or brigandage, see AN JJ 172 fo 66 no 131 (in 1422); AN JJ 174 fo 101 no 228 (in 1428). For the ‘non sens’ or ‘folie et ignorance’ that caused people to sell flour or other foods to the enemy or in enemy-occupied lands, see AN JJ 172 fo 261 no 465 (in 1424); AN JJ 172 fo 310 no 558 (in 1423); and AN JJ 175 fo 133 no 369 (in 1434).
15 AN JJ 172 fo 266 no 474: ‘troublee en son bon sens et memoire’. 
sickness which held her for the space of four or five months from which she was totally idiotic without having true understanding. Here the loss described included not only goods but also people, without whom Perrote fell into an illness that led her to become mad and finally use a knife to cut her own throat. Thus, remission letters demonstrate the psychological as well as the material devastation of war.

However, despite the wider understanding of warfare as a cause of mental distress, the version of the narrative agreed upon by Guillaume and Alips le Paumier, Robin Germain, and Jehan Germain departed from Robert le Panomer’s in multiple ways, and particularly in their choice not to attribute Alips’ behavior to madness. The supplicants declared that they ‘had no memory’ of the exact date, just that it was around Saint Martin’s day and after the conquest of Caen by the English. By declaring their uncertainty about the date, the composers of these three letters established the uncertain nature of memory. Despite four witnesses who were able to agree on the details to the extent that they presented their cases in almost identical ways, no one could recall the exact date on which these events took place. This reminder of the fragility of human memories, particularly after the passage of time, could have been an effort to legitimize their own version of events as opposed to Robert le Panomer’s.

The composers of the new narrative of events, unlike Robert, did not choose to provide a list of possible languages the two men might have been speaking, instead stating it was ‘English or another language’. This version of events also avoided representing the two men with drawn swords during their early interactions with Guillaume and Alips le Paumier. Instead, their threatening actions were directed towards the couple’s goods, which they gathered together and seemed to plan to carry away. Indeed, it was because they could not understand these strangers, not because the strangers threatened them with bodily harm, that Guillaume and Alips became frightened and angry. According to their letter, Guillaume went to bed and Alips (without consulting her husband) left the house to complain to the neighbors about these two strangers. Significantly, these three letters did

16 AN JJ 172 fo 340 no 614: ‘perdu ses amis et biens dont par courrouz et desplaisir de ce elle feust cheute en maladie laquelle la tenue par lespace de iiiij a v mois dont elle estoit tout ediotte sans avoir vray entendement’.
17 AN JJ 173 fo 88 no 170, AN JJ 173 fo 88v no 171, and AN JJ 173 fo 89v no 172: ‘dont lesdis suppliant ne sont recors’.
18 AN JJ 173 fo 88 no 170; AN JJ 173 fo 88v no 171; and AN JJ 173 fo 89v no 172: ‘parlans anglois ou autre langage’.
not mention temporary madness as a mitigating factor for Alips's actions.\textsuperscript{19} Madness could be a complicated claim to make, since it could lead to a mandate in the letter of remission forcing the family to keep the mad person locked up or under guard.\textsuperscript{20} This was particularly true in Normandy where the law codes called for the restraint of the mad to prevent them from causing fires.\textsuperscript{21} Clearly, Robert le Panomer did not find it problematic to refer to the temporary madness of his neighbor who called for his aid, whereas Guillaume and Alips le Paumier were hesitant to ascribe her behavior to madness. Instead, they presented her call for help as an understandable response to the threat of theft that the two strangers represented.

Robert le Panomer, the Paumiers, and the Germains were caught in an awkward moment of transition between political rivals, where alliances shifted and enemies became putative friends. On the ground, in local villages, these shifts engendered confusion, anger, and fear. Caen had fallen to the English forces, but residents of small towns in the countryside could not know in that moment how changes in policies at the level of kings and princes would color their own actions, reframing them in unexpected ways. From their perspective they had banded together as neighbors to defend their community from strangers with whom they were unable to communicate. Within three years, those strangers had, through the Treaty of Troyes, become allies. Within five years, the kingdoms of France and England were joined under a single king. As the first remission seeker, Robert le Panomer sought to emphasize the fear and confusion brought on by the unexplained actions of these two strangers, explaining that the men had drawn their swords and beaten the Palmiers. He described Alips le Paumier as out of her senses in an attempt to recapture the emotional tenor of the moment and explain why her neighbors were so quick to come to her aid. The later letters were more balanced in their portrayal of the two strangers and in their depiction of Alips's actions.

This book has sought to explore the multiple levels on which medieval conceptions of madness interacted with constructions of kinship and community. The madness of ordinary people was imagined as a threat to the community as a result of their inability to understand basic human interactions, and sometimes because of their unintended violent actions

\textsuperscript{19} AN JJ 173 fo 88 no 170; AN JJ 173 fo 88v no 171; and AN JJ 173 fo 89 no 172.
\textsuperscript{20} For example, the letter for Jehan de Moustier in AN JJ 114 fo 106v no 212 (in 1378) and one for Jehannecte Troppé in AN JJ 173 fo 33v no 63 (in 1425). Edited in Le Cacheux 1907–1908, vol. 1, pp. 181–183.
\textsuperscript{21} Gruchy 1881, p. 184.
against themselves or others. Nevertheless, the narratives written around these figures sought to reconstruct the kin and communal ties fractured by these mad people, reimagining local communities. Communities are constantly in the process of construction through the creation of boundaries and the affirmation of ties. Rather than being expelled, the mad were integrated, often through the use of surveillance or chains, into the bosom of their kin and communal relationships. Nevertheless, the use of the language of madness in these letters points to the instability of the very systems remission narratives sought to uphold.