Introduction

Charles of Blois, Duke of Brittany (1319–64), was a descendant of the French royal family via his mother, Margaret of Valois, sister to King Philip IV “The Fair.” Though remembered by associates for his deep Christian devotion, Charles spent the majority of his adult life defending his claim to the duchy of Brittany (with the support of the crown) in the War of the Breton Succession (1341–65). This conflict eventually claimed his life in the Battle of Auray in September of 1364. Charles was buried at the Franciscan monastery in Guingamp, where, by 1366, pilgrims had begun to appear at his tomb seeking miracles. By 1368, a canonization inquest began hearing testimony related to Charles’ life and deeds, and to the claims of miraculous events at his shrine. The following is an excerpt from the Latin records of that investigation, which were themselves transcribed from the oral, vernacular legal proceedings.

The vast majority of miraculous narratives that appear in medieval European canonization proceedings and miracle collections relate the healing of an illness, injury, or disability. In these excerpts, two different Franciscan friars from Guingamp give their recollections about an anonymous woman’s miraculous recovery from a condition that we would categorize as mental illness. The friars each claim this miracle to have taken place in the summer of 1368, about two years before they gave testimony before the canonization inquest. The woman, they testified, had survived a rape, which distressed her so much that she became furiosa (mad) or demoniaca (possessed). While the testimony offered by the friars is largely similar, there are narrative differences in the way they describe the woman’s recovery which are worthy of our consideration. In particular, one set of testimony would seem to recount a much more abrupt recovery, while the second offers details of incremental improvement in health status which uses the woman’s reaction to contact with holy water as the measure.

The text is particularly compelling because it offers a glimpse of medieval people—including clerical observers, family members, and a person with a disability herself—as they attempted to come to grips with an invisible disability (i.e., one which does not mark the surface of the body.) The goal of canonization inquests such as the one in which this testimony was preserved was to discern the truth about a miraculous claim. Investigators sought to discount as miracle any recovery of health that could be explained by natural causes. Invisible disabilities—here, a problem of mens (mind) or modum (manner, bearing, or behavior)—posed a special kind of problem in this context. In the absence of some pre-extant externally verifiable mark upon a body, it was difficult to verify whether the purported recipients of miracles had experienced an impairment at all, much less experienced a miraculous cure. As such, both witnesses were pressed to explain how they knew that the woman was genuinely impaired. Their answers offer us insight into the contemporary social coding of amentia (loss of mind), but also into contemporary norms.
about the etiology of amentia and about trauma. However, it appears, based on this testimony, that the inquest was not the only source of doubt about the anonymous woman’s disability. After her recovery, the woman herself sought written documents to bring to her husband that would offer support of her claims about her former condition. This is particularly interesting in light of the fact that the woman had arrived at the shrine “without a guide.” Her solitary appearance sets her apart from the majority of the “mad” or “possessed” recipients of miracles, who were typically conducted to shrines—often by force—by the same people who had consigned them to ropes, chains, or other forms of restraint. This woman, however, interpreted and publicly performed her experience of disability without participation from her family or home community. The friars’ letters subsequently provided an authoritative interpretation of her invisible disability that she could use to alleviate doubt from her family.

Bibliography


Witness 120

Father Paganus de Kelen, priest of the order of Friars Minor of the convent of Guingamp, Diocese of Trecor, of the age of fifty-six years or thereabouts...

...Next, asked about other miracles of the Lord Charles, he said that once a certain mad or possessed woman who was bound in iron manacles, just as demoniacs are accustomed to be bound or chained, came to the church of the said Friars Minor of Guingamp in which the body of the said Lord Charles rested; that woman approached the grave of the said Lord Charles, and a certain friar minor of the said convent sprinkled holy water over her, and at once the said iron manacles or chains fell from the hands of that woman, and she, as if stunned, began to say that she had not been able to tolerate holy water for a great span of time; and accordingly it appeared to him, and it appeared to other bystanders, that she began to regain her sanity.

Asked how he knew this,

He said because he saw it and heard it.

He said that he did not remember; it seemed to him, however, that this was in the year of our Lord 1368, after the feast of Pentecost of Our Lord.

Asked from what homeland the said woman was, and what she was called,

He said this, that this woman, as she began thus to recover, said to bystanders that she was from France, and that he did not recall her name.

Asked what words the said woman uttered, when she thus began to recover and was liberated from the chains,

He said that he did not recall, except in accord with the testimony above.

Asked how infirmity befell the said woman, and how the woman had come to the said church,

He said that he had heard it said, and that it was confirmed by that woman after she began to recover her sanity, that she, while married, had been raped by some man of high rank; after which she was so disturbed, and also fearful lest her husband have hate for her because of this thing, that she was made out of her mind and possessed; and that seeing this same woman, some of her neighbors said that she ought to go to Lord Charles and that she would regain her sanity; which she said she did not know how to do, but that it seemed to her that she proceeded day and night by roads, fields and woodlands, and traveled without a guide, until she found her way to the aforesaid church, and she held firmly that she achieved this by the merits of the same Lord Charles.

Asked if he had seen her before this,

He said no. He said, however, that he saw her in the aforesaid church for nine continuous days after the time when she was freed from the bindings or iron manacles; and that the said woman heard Mass in the said church each day, and approached the tomb of the said Lord Charles and kissed it devoutly; and so it seemed to this witness that at the end of the said nine days the said woman was totally healed, such that this could be seen. And then this woman sought testimonial letters from the brothers of the said house to show to her husband, as to how she had been there, and how she had also been healed. Some of the brothers gave this woman the aforesaid letters, which she took, and left that place, and afterwards this witness says he has not seen her.

Asked who was present, when the said woman began to recover her health/sanity,

He said Brother Derianus Parvi of the said convent and many other brothers of the convent, and many laypeople whose names he does not remember.

Asked if the woman was truly out of her mind and mad, or possessed, or pretended to be mad or possessed,

He said that he believed by his oath that the said woman was truly and not falsely possessed or mad. He also believed that she came miraculously to the said place and was healed by the merits of the Lord Charles.

Asked why he believed that she was truly possessed or mad,
He said, because she was thusly tied up, and because of her manner, and her deeds, and because she was pale of face, and had her hair loose over her arms, and because of the other things to which he testified above. And because all who beheld her held her to be possessed and mad. And they reported and honored all of the above by public voice and fame in the village of Guingamp, and in neighboring areas in which it was discussed.

**Witness 125**

Father Derianus Parvi, Order of the Friars Minor of the convent of Guingamp in the diocese of Trecor, of the age of fifty-six years or thereabouts...

...Also he said that he saw a certain demented and mad woman; this woman was bound in iron chains, with her hair hanging down around her neck to her shoulders, and she alone, without a guide, inclined herself to come directly to the grave of the said Lord Charles, and stretched out her hands towards the said grave, and as it seemed to that witness, slept for a little while; and roused afterwards, the said woman rose up freed from the said chains; and then one of the said brothers, whose name he did not recall, sprinkled her with holy water, and the said woman said, “holy water does harm to me;” and after a small interval this witness sought from her if at that time it did harm to her? To which the woman responded, “Not so great as before.” Afterwards, holy water was given to her again, and she said it did no harm to her. He said also that the said woman stayed for nine days in the said village of Guingamp, visiting the shrine of the said Lord Charles each day, and by the merits of the said Lord Charles was healed, and cured, and freed from madness and infirmity.

**Asked how he knew that she was mad,**

He said because this woman appeared to be to him by her manner and deeds; and because she was tied up, and all who saw her judged her to be out of her mind.

**Asked how the said woman fell into this infirmity,**

He said that he did not know, except according to what he heard said about her, which is to say that she was raped and violently assaulted by someone of high rank.

**Asked in what year, what month, what day, and who was present when she was thus healed,**

He said that two years ago from the present twenty-sixth of the month of September in the year of our Lord 1371, and of the year, month, and day he does not recall anything else. Brother Paolo Quintini, Brother Alanno Guezonesii, Philippo de Vigou and someone called Colober were present for this, and many others whose names he does not recall.

**Asked about the name of the said mad person,**

He said he did not know her name.

**Asked whether he knew her after this,**

He said no, nor did he see her after this incident, except for the nine days mentioned above.

**Asked for how long the said women was held in the said infirmity,**

He said that he did not know, but he heard from her that it was for about three months.

**Asked in what place she was born,**

He said that according to what he heard her say, she was from the part of France near the diocese or facing the diocese of Le Mans.
Endnotes


2 Furiosa, a general, non-etiological term for loss of mind (comparable to “crazy” in modern English usage) that carries a connotation of active and aggressive behaviors.

3 Demoniaca, literally “devilish” or “demonic.”

4 Sanitatem, a word meaning both soundness of mind (sanity) and soundness of body (health).

5 Turbata fuit, literally translating as “she was stirred up.”

6 Demens, literally “out of one’s mind,” and the root of the English word “demented.”

7 Modum, also meaning “mannerisms” or “bearing.”

8 Malum, also meaning “evil” or “badness,” a word that is nonspecific in connotation and was used across medical, magical, and religious contexts.