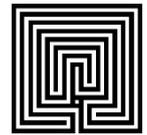


Arthur Machen and the Maze Theme

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References in literature to turf mazes are as difficult to find as the lost sites of the antiquities themselves. Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch's infuriating Cornish novel *Troy Town* proves on closer inspection to have no relevance whatsoever, the author has simply used the name as a picturesque title for a fictional place. Matthews refers to two long-forgotten novels which mention the Shepherd's Race turf maze at Boughton Green, Northampton, England: but he does not allude to any other work of fiction with similar references about other mazes.

I would like to draw attention, therefore, to the presence of the *Caerdroia* theme in two pieces by the Welsh fantasy writer Arthur Machen (1863-1947). These are of interest for two reasons. Firstly, they may be contributory evidence that there was a now vanished turf maze at Caerleon-upon-Usk, Machen's Gwent home town, whose Celtic and Roman history and secret, dreaming countryside was a prime source of inspiration for his work. Secondly, the mystical and symbolic significance which Machen weaves around the maze theme, with its hints of dance rites and entry to the otherworld, give a creative, intuitive image of the deep, primeval meaning of the maze, which now finds echoes in modern scholarly research. Arthur Machen's prose is most likely to be found now in anthologies of 'tales of horror and the supernatural.' Yet he rarely writes of ghosts or of purely human cruelties: his theme is the power of the ancient landscape, and his vision was of the hidden, mysterious nature of even quite everyday places and things. His major works are *The Great God Pan* (1894), *The Three Imposters* (1895), *The House of Souls* (an anthology: 1906) and *The Hill of Dreams* (1907). Machen was for a while a member of the occult Order of the Golden Dawn; he was also a respected essayist writing on religion, old customs, symbolism and much else. In a book of reminiscences and reflections entitled *The London Adventure* (1924), Machen included notes of some unfinished stories. One of these is:

MAZE STORY

Girl who danced in the maze was afterwards beset by the influence she had in that manner invoked...
The maze was constructed on a wild, bare hilltop, with innumerable blocks of limestone. It was called "The Way (or Path) to the City."

In the same book, Machen quotes a fragment written for another work, but never used:

He turned again to the monograph on 'Labyrinths:' he looked at the plates: the various types of mazes (quote passage as to dancing with reference to mazes).

How does all this bear on the "psychology:" what reference to ecstasy: the drama: the lyric of incantation?

It was a book that attracted him in spite of its dry, antiquarian air: he had felt that there was "something there."

Then the question of the pattern, (compare with the whorl, the spiral, Maori decoration).

Why was this form common to all primitive art?

The problem perplexed him. He took it, as was his custom, for a long walk; and in the dreariest, most grey street of a grey, remote suburb, just as the men were coming home from the city, the thought, with a pang of joy, rushed into his mind, that the maze was not only the instrument, but the symbol of ecstasy: it was a pictured "inebriation," the sign of some age-old "process" that gave the secret bliss to men, that was symbolised also by dancing, by lyrics with their recurring burdens, and their repeated musical phrases: a maze, a dance, a song: three symbols pointing to one mystery.

The character designated only as 'he' in this fragment of a story has been prompted to study labyrinths by seeing a country girl – from the Caerleon area of course – "drawing maze-patterns on the sand, or in the garden, or in her copybook." Then Machen gives us a further note to show how the story would have developed with the disappearance of this girl, and the strand of thought this prompts in his character:

He had determined that the maze was a symbol of a “process” and here, the girl who strangely seemed to know the meaning of the occult and antique sign had disappeared. His mind went at once to the marvellous stories of magic transmutation, metamorphosis. He reflected how old the tales must be, of what secular antiquity, since human memory was so long. Persistently, the old stories told of those taken by the fairies, rapt into the underworld.

This theme of the maze as an entrance to an otherworld was to be reiterated by another character:

But it seems... that the country people have superstitions about the place where the girl disappeared. There is some hill or other there that they call - - -, and they have a tale of a woman who went there and never returned...

We may regret that Machen never wrote a story quite like this, that he tantalises us instead with the half-formed plot and the elusive thread of his jotted down ideas. But in fact, the story that emerged from these musings. *The White People* (1899) does still make use of the maze theme. It is uncharacteristically written in the form of an extract from a young girl’s journal. The girl is introduced by her nurse to strange “games,” rhymes and stories, which the reader perceives are really pagan rites and invocations. The format has a convincing childish directness and logic and the tale is consistently as “the finest supernatural story ever written.” The following extract will give a flavour and also show how the maze remains as a lurking theme:

(The girl goes to) a nice turfy hilt by the river... from where I could look down on the town... I remember it was on that hill that nurse taught me to play an old game called ‘Troy Town,’ in which one had to dance, and wind in and out on a pattern in the grass, and then when one had danced and turned long enough, the other person asks you questions, and you can’t help answering whether you want to or not, and whatever you are told to do you feel you have to do it. Nurse said there used to be a lot of games like that, that some people knew of, and there was one by which people could be turned into anything you liked, and an old man her great-grandmother had seen had known a girl who had been turned into a large snake. And there was another very ancient game of dancing and winding and turning, by which you could take a person out of himself and hide him away as long as you liked...

Machen subtly intermeshes legends of secret ceremonies, disappearing travellers, dancing stones and magical earthen enclaves with evocations of natural shrines such as the hills, the sacred well, the stream: his understanding of the fundamental unity of such lore and its landscape is quite remarkable and is alone enough to deserve our attention – for which reason I will reveal no more of the narrative of *The White People* so that you may seek it out for yourself. But we are bound to ask – how much was pure imagination? Plainly Machen drew on his knowledge of folk traditions and mystical symbolism – but did he have a particular hill, above his beloved Caerleon in mind? One where a Troy Town once was? It is in the nature of vanished turf mazes that their sites are hard to rediscover. We are left only with their chance preservation in obscure documentary sources; otherwise, we must rely on what place-name and folk-lore evidence survives. In the case of Caerleon, there are such clues. There is an oral tradition of a maze of some kind on a particular hill above the town, and this is quite distinct from the well-known Roman mosaic labyrinth. And there is an area of the town called St. Julian’s – a public house still bears the name too. In view of these hints, it is tempting indeed to suggest that Machen was making use of a genuine memory of a Troy Town in Caerleon. This would be quite in keeping with his usual practice – other stories use the actual farmhouses, old lanes, woods and streams of his native region. But at the last we may well have to concede that we shall never know for certain, and fall back upon one of Machen’s favourite maxims, which is carved, indeed upon his tombstone:

OMNIA EXEUNT IN MYSTERIUM

Mark Valentine, Clitheroe, England; 1991

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