
There may be differences between this version and the published version. You are advised to consult the publisher’s version if you wish to cite from it.

http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/142023/

Deposited on: 6 June 2017

Enlighten – Research publications by members of the University of Glasgow
http://eprints.gla.ac.uk
Tromdámh Guaire and Obscuritas in late-medieval Irish Bardic Poetry

Dr Sim Innes, University of Glasgow

The later-medieval Irish-language prose text Tromdámh Guaire (‘Guaire’s burdensome company’) arguably provides us with some oblique commentary on the twelfth-century emergence and subsequent dominance of ‘bardic’ poetry. The proposed dating for Tromdámh Guaire of post-1300 situates its composition during the Gaelic Irish fourteenth- and fifteenth-century literary revival. The text offers negative comment on the ‘bardic order’ and their output and, as will be shown here, a particular critique of intentional obscurity of language and metaphor which may reflect contemporaneous European debates on those topics. It will also be shown, however, that obscure registers for poetry, and commentary thereon were a feature of early-medieval Irish literature and therefore also inform the text.

The first episode of Tromdámh Guaire centres on interaction between the blind chief-poet of Ireland Dallán Forgaill and a seemingly fictional king, Aodh mac Duach Dhuibh, of the northern Irish kingdom of Airghialla (later anglicised as ‘Oriel’). Dallán was an early medieval poet (sixth/seventh century) to whom is attributed the ‘Amra Choluis Chille’ (‘The Elegy of Saint Columba’) composed, it is thought, shortly after the death of Saint Columba of Iona (597). As a character in later Irish fictional and pseudo-historical narrative he was represented as ‘a conservative guardian of a faded literary tradition and its élite’. In this first episode the poet is persuaded by a rival king to go to Aodh and

---

1 O. CONNELLAN (ed. and tr.), Imtheacht na Tromdhaimhe, or, The Proceedings of the Great Bardic Institution, Dublin, John O’Daly, 1860, (Transactions of the Ossianic Society 5). For a more recent edition see M. JOYNT (ed.), Tromdámh Guaire, Dublin, The Stationery Office, 1941. For a recent English translation see P. K. FORD, The Celtic Poets, Boston, Ford and Baille, 1999, p. 77-111. All excerpts from the text in this chapter are taken from JOYNT and the English translation (slightly adapted and expanded in places) is from FORD.
request, as payment for poetry, the king’s magical shield. The poet recites a number of poems but the king will not part with the shield, leading to the poet unjustly satirising the king. As the saints have predicted, we are told, poets who unjustly satirize will be punished and Dallán dies.

Following the recitation of the first panegyric poem the king states, ‘Is maith in duan gibe do tuicfedh hi.’ (‘A fine poem for whoever could understand it’). Indeed, after the satire the king has to admit that he can’t tell if it is better or worse than the first poem recited. Dallán replies, ‘Ni hingnad fer h’aithne-si da rád sin’ (‘It is not surprising to hear that said by a man of your wits’). Thus, here either criticism is levelled at the royal patron of poetry or at the poet himself for producing impenetrable poetry where both praise and satire must be explained; perhaps we should understand that Tromdámh Guaire mocks both poet and patron for their involvement in the production and consumption of this particular poetic product. Despite the seventh-century setting it will be argued here that Tromdámh Guaire can also be read as satire of the later (i.e. post c.1150) bardic poetic tradition and the ability of Gaelic lords to appreciate it. The tale will be examined in further detail below but we must first consider some of the norms of bardic poetry which this episode may parody. We will below investigate the salient features of an early bardic praise poem in order to allow us to gain insights into Tromdámh Guaire’s critiques.

LATER-MEDIEVAL IRISH LITERATURE AND BARDIC POETRY

In 1974 Proinsias Mac Cana wrote that for late-medieval Gaelic Scotland and Ireland ‘literature and poetry became synonymous’.

It is worth sounding something of a note of caution, however, since the late-medieval and early-modern Gaelic prose output of Ireland and Scotland is substantial, yet hugely understudied. Scholars have, perhaps understandably, been more attracted to the unusually expansive and rich early-medieval vernacular prose tradition and for the most part our late-medieval and early-modern prose is quite neglected. This has a direct impact on our ability to make decisions about medieval Gaelic views on relationships between prose and poetry, given that so much of the corpus of prose awaits our attention.

The early-medieval prose or prosimetrical ‘principal’ tales such as Táin Bó Cuailgne (‘The Cattle Raid of Cooley’), from the corpus of tales known as the Ulster Cycle, continued to

---

circulate in manuscript during the late-medieval period. A number of early-medieval tales, including the Táin itself, were also refashioned or repurposed\(^8\). Furthermore, new prose ‘romance’ narratives were composed\(^9\). The period c.1450-c.1510 is noted as having witnessed much translation of foreign prose narratives\(^10\). The language register used for prose tales in the later medieval period is ‘the highly ornamented, florid style… with alliterating phrases and strings of (near-) synonyms’\(^11\). It is something of a commonplace in the field that in the medieval Gaelic world poetry was not used for narrative and indeed Erich Poppe has pointed to a number of Irish prose narratives which are translations from poetry in other languages\(^12\). Thus, we see a preference for narrative to be expressed in prose, or at least prosimetrum rather than in poetry, and also a highly subdued narrator’s voice within that prose\(^13\).

Nonetheless, Mac Cana is doubtless correct to draw our attention to the prestige attached to poetry in our period. Bardic poetry, in a Gaelic codified high literary register and in highly ornamented syllabic metres, is seen to have become the nobility’s literary medium of choice from the late twelfth century until around 1650; produced by the secular poetic schools and professional poetic lineages and also by non-professional members of Gaelic ruling families\(^14\). Indeed, the existence of a number of ‘amateur’ poets among the Gaelic nobility suggests that, despite the insinuation of Tromdâin Guaire, the poetry had a discerning audience\(^15\). The main, although not sole, output of the bardic poets was panegyric for secular rulers and indeed the poetry is seen to have served an important societal function. Maintenance of poets and the commissioning of Gaelic panegyric provided a ruler with important validation of his

---

\(^8\) See C. Breatnach, Patronage, Politics and Prose, Maynooth, An Sagart, 1996.
personal right to rule and his adherence to Gaelic lordly traits more generally. One of the earliest panegyric poems belonging to the bardic tradition is ‘Baile suthach síth Emhna’ (‘A fruitful place is the fairy mound of Emhain’) dated to the end of the twelfth century. The poet is unknown but the poem addresses Raghnall/ Ragnvald, King of the Isle of Man and the Isles, who died in 1229. This important king of the Irish Sea zone was incredibly well connected. His sister Affreca was married to John de Courcy, the Anglo-Norman noble who had conquered lands in Ulster. A daughter was married to Rhodri ab Owain Gwynedd, another to a son of Alan of Galloway. He was granted lands in Caithness by William the Lion, King of Scotland and lands in both Ireland and England by King John of Ireland. King Raghnall was clearly an important patron of literature since we also know that he had the Matière de France/Charlemagne cycle of medieval romances translated from French into Latin. Thus, Raghnall’s literary and familial connections link him to Irish, Scottish, Scandinavian, Welsh and Anglo-Norman networks.

Bardic panegyric is often described as a poetry of convention. The conventions span the c.1150-1650 period and the patron’s beauty, generosity, martial ability and so on are described in customary and often unlikely and extravagant fashion. A cursory examination of the late twelfth-century poem for Raghnall will illustrate the nature of some of these conventions. The poem begins with 7 stanzas in praise of the síth (‘fairy mound’) of Emhain Abhlach, the mythical home of the sea god Manannán mac Lír which is often associated with the Isle of Man. This is essentially praise of the home of the chief. We learn that this dwelling surpasses all others and it is also referred to as Teamair Mhanann (‘the Tara of Man’); ‘Tara’ being used to suggest the residence of a high king, i.e. over-king of all other Irish kingdoms. The tenth stanza goes further and asserts that this king will indeed be proclaimed high king. This stanza also names him:

17 D. MCMANUS, ‘An Nua-Ghaeilge Chlasaiceach’, C. Ó HÁINLE et al. (eds), Stair na Gaeilge, Maigh Nuad, Coláiste Phádraig, 1994, p. 335-445, p. 339. For an edition and translation see B. Ó CUÍV, ‘A Poem in Praise of Raghnall, King of Man’, Éigse 8 (1956-57), p. 283-301, in this chapter excerpts from the poem and an adapted translation are taken from this. Ó CUÍV dates it to 1187-1208. The earliest manuscript source for the poem is a fifteenth-century Irish manuscript, the Book of Fermoy (Dublin, RIA, MS 23 E 29).
A Raghnaill, a rí in dingna,
Radruim Dá Thí ar thí h’ errla,
do-ghébha, a meic shaeir Shadbha,
labra ón leic a taeib Themra

(‘O Raghnall, king of the dwelling, Dá Thí’s great ridge awaits the hair [of your head]. You will receive, o noble son of Sadhbh, speech from the flagstone on the side of Tara’).

Thus, the poet here refers to a legend common in Gaelic literature concerning the Lia Fáil stone, said to call out in order to recognize the true king\(^{21}\). Therefore, here we see a rather fanciful, perhaps aspirational, conceit that this king might come to post Anglo-Norman conquest Ireland and become high king. In stanza 19 the poet imagines a time when Raghnall will conquer Dublin and begs that he be granted a home there once this has been completed:

Airgfe Áth Cliath in chomlaind
’s do sciath ar scáth do glanbhuinn;
áit toighi ar thocht cu Duibhlind
cuingham ort roime, a Raghnaill.

(‘You will plunder Ath Cliath of the contest with your shield protecting your fair body (lit. sole); I seek from you in advance, o Raghnall, a site for a house on [your] coming to Dublin.’)

The poet does not skimp on the praise, Raghnall is ‘a rí in domnán’ (‘o king of the world’), nir uaisli inaí rí Rómhán (‘not nobler was a king of the Romans’). The praise continues to consider his appearance, martial ability, heritage, relations and generosity. The poet devotes much attention to dense praise of King Raghnall’s eyes. For instance, ‘réalta ghlas mhall fat mhalaig samhail bharr na ngass ngedhair’ (‘a languid blue star under your brow like the tops of sprouting corn’). The poem ends with the poet lamenting that the king does not, as yet, have possession of various legendary animals, such as a horse known to us from the Ulster Cycle, which might signify his attainment of the high kingship\(^{22}\).

This early bardic panegyric contains many of the conventions which become characteristic of the wider corpus of bardic praise poetry. Yet in order to understand those conventions, which appear to be quite closely adhered to for centuries after, we are faced with only an ‘implicit *ars poetica*’\(^{23}\). For the later-medieval Gaelic world we have extensive and extremely detailed

---


\(^{22}\) Ó CUÍV, ‘A Poem’, *art. cit.*, p. 287 for this suggestion.

manuals for poets in the vernacular on issues of correct grammatical and metrical usage. However, we have less explicit comment in the manuals and tracts on poetics itself, nor do we have, to my knowledge, direct comment on the relative merits of prose versus poetry. Therefore, we must look to late-medieval Gaelic prose and poetry itself for clues. Erich Poppe has written of attempting to ‘reconstruct medieval Irish literary theory’ from one early eleventh-century tale about an Irish poet Iorard Mac Coise and his interaction with a king. This prose metatext, ‘Airec Menman Uraird Maic Coisse’ (‘The Stratagem of Iorard Mac Coise’) refers to a whole host of genres and tales from early medieval Gaelic literature. Poppe concluded that the tale provides

A rare opportunity to reconstruct the use and meaning of (pseudo-)historical narrative in performance. The description it gives of this situation suggests that such texts’ presentation of the past was intended to be understood by their audiences... as allegories for the present.

Therefore, we might fruitfully examine Tromdámh Guaire in the same fashion, for its critique of the bardic tradition to which the poem ‘Baile suthach sith Embna’ belongs.

TROMDÁMH GUIARE AS ALLEGORY

Tromdámh Guaire offers something of a voice of dissent on the talents and purpose of later bardic poets if we accept that the presentation of the imagined seventh-century past might be read as an allegory for the time of composition (post-1300). This notion has been mooted on a number of occasions. For instance, James Carney wrote that Tromdámh Guaire ‘represents a contemporary idea of the Fili’. Scholars, to my knowledge, have mostly paid attention to the place of poetic satire in the second larger episode and its comment on the rediscovery of Táin Bó Cuailgne. The second and much longer episode has

---

Senchán Torpéist, also a sixth-/seventh-century poet, become the new chief-poet of Ireland and the decision is made to undertake a poetic tour of Ireland. The first stop is to King Guaire Aidne mac Colmáin of Connacht. Thus, Tromdámh Guaire contains two distinct episodes about two different chief-poets and two different kings. In this second very funny episode Senchán and his large retinue and the other regional chief-poets and their large retinues descend on Guaire who does his best to meet their increasingly outlandish and ridiculous demands. Poor King Guaire, fearing satire, is at times quite desperate and is given assistance by a swine-herd ascetic holy man Marbán (St Cummín Fota). Marbán turns the tables and challenges the poet band to entertain him in various ways. They fail to impress with crooning, learning, riddles, love-making, and finally the storyteller (‘scelaidhi’) among them, Fis mac Fochmhairc, is challenged by Marbán on his knowledge of the principal tales of Ireland (‘fis prímhscel Eireann’). Marbán asks for Táin Bó Cuailgne but neither Fis mac Fochmhairc nor any others from the poet-band have even heard of it. Marbán puts them under taboo (‘fá gheasaihb’) that restricts their poetic ability until they can tell the tale. He leaves, addressing them as ‘a cliar ud mhall ainbhfeasach! (‘stupid feckless bards’). Following a pointless journey to Scotland in search of the Táin they return to Ireland and with the help of St Caillín bring one of the Ulster Cycle heroes Fergus mac Róich back from the grave in order that he tell the Táin. The poets are made to swear at the end of the tale to end the practice of tromdámh (‘burdensome company’) and are all sent home. With this the poets promise not to be such a burden on the hospitality of their hosts in the future.

The ignorance of the poet-band on the Táin is intriguing given recent scholarly commentary on the relationship between bardic poetry and narrative traditions known to us from manuscript tradition. Tomás Ó Cathasaigh notes that while the Táin and other Ulster Cycle texts crop up often as analogies, ‘we would have a poor enough knowledge of the Ulster Cycle if we were dependent on the material in the surviving corpus of bardic poetry’. Furthermore, we often find references in bardic poetry to otherwise unknown episodes, or we see well-known narratives presented in an unusual way. Editors of bardic poetry often accompany their editions with notes such as the following, from the edition of a fourteenth-century bardic elegy, ‘I know of no other references to the death of Cathbhaidh through grief


31 For the Old Irish tale of Senchán and the rediscovery of the Táin see K. MURRAY, ‘The Finding of the Táin’, CMCS 41 (2001), p. 17-23. For more on Senchán see the chapter by G. PARSONS in this collection.

for his son Geannann, or to the recalling to life of Cearmaid by his father the Daghdha. This is seen so often that the unusual or unconventional appears to have been a feature of this very conventional form of poetry. This literary ‘desire to be different’ has led some scholars to situate bardic poetry within oral rather than literate culture. However, the linking of obscurity of narrative in bardic poetry to orality rather than literacy does not fit with what is known to us about the requirements of bardic training. Therefore, if we follow Poppe’s example of reading pseudo-historical narrative as an allegory for the present then it is striking that the c. fourteenth-century criticism in Tromdámh Guaire of bardic poetry’s relationship to well-known prose narrative appears to accord with some present-day observations of the surviving bardic poetry corpus. Tromdámh Guaire was current in manuscript tradition throughout the late-medieval and early modern periods. The earliest source for the tale is the late fifteenth-century Leabhar Mhic Cáithaigh Riabhaigh/ The Book of Lismore, compiled in the south of Ireland for secular noble patrons. The manuscript context here may also be significant since the Book of Lismore contains mostly prose tales, and was compiled, it is thought, in a Franciscan setting and with this text we have the inclusion of a satirical tale with some quite particular views on secular poets and poetry. Having considered the conventions of bardic poetry and the possibility that Tromdámh Guaire may be read as allegorical critique thereon we can now return to the first episode and the assertion by King Aodh that Dallán’s poem is incomprehensible.

TROMDÁMH GUAIRE AND DEBATES ON OBSCURITAS

36 The manuscript is held at Chatsworth House, Derbyshire but digitized images are available at https://www.isos.dias.ie/. For the patrons see T. O’ NEILL, The Irish Hand, Portlaoise, Dolmen Press, 1984, p. 46. There are a number of later manuscript sources for the tale also. For reference to a lost MS version from Scotland see A. BRUFORD, ‘A Lost MacMhuirich Manuscript’, Scottish Gaelic Studies 10 (1965), p. 158-61. The tale, or at least sections of the tale, also pops up in a handful of later bardic poems; a search of the Bardic Poetry Database https://bardic.celt.dias.ie/ brings up five poems ranging in date from the 15th to 17th centuries. It was perhaps understandably not the most productive of apologies due to the criticism of the poets, yet it shows that the tale was known. It has also been noted that a section of the tale was found to be among the repertoire of a Canadian Scottish Gaelic seanchaidh (‘oral tradition bearer’) in the twentieth century: J. SHAW (ed.), Tales until Dawn: The World of a Cape Breton Gaelic Story-Teller Joe Neil MacNeil, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1987, p. 90-97 and p. 457-58.
37 Alan John Fletcher, Drama and the Performing Arts in Pre-Cromwellian Ireland, Woodbridge, D.S. Brewer, 2001, p. 40.
The introductory episode of the text appears to have garnered less scholarly attention and yet it arguably provides us with a number of insights into debates on poetics in the later middle ages. When Dallán meets King Aodh in order to procure the shield he recites two panegyrics for the king, and another for the shield itself. The first poem consists of three stanzas as follows:

A err ada, a Aedh,  
A dhaig dana dúr,  
a mhaith mur mhuir mhoir,  
maith cuirfe for cúl.  

Aodh! hero of hubris  
O venom valor-hard!  
Gifts from great seas  
Given to appease.

Concuirfe for cúl,  
A Aed meic Duach Duibh  
is maith mor do maein,  
gan aeir is gan oil.  

Strongly appeasing,  
O Aodh son of Duach  
Great and good is your treasure  
without satire without reproach.

A grian d’aithle a renn,  
isad uathmar leam  
a chlár fith-cheall finn,  
conthuilfeam a err.  

Star vacant sun  
That stuns me;  
You game-board of brilliance,  
We well up, o warrior!

The king is immediately complimentary but, as noted previously, asserts that he does not understand it. The poet responds as follows:

“You’re right,” said Dallán, “and whoever composes a fordheargadh file (‘cryptic poem’?), it is he who must explain it. As I made the poem, I shall explain it. “Aodh! hero of hubris!” – that means you are the honourable and valorous hero of Ireland. Venom valour-hard! Venom means poison, and your valour is like a poison to opponents in battle. ‘Gifts from seas’; that is if you


39 This English translation is an expanded version of that given by FORD, Celtic Poets, art. cit., p. 80, and is somewhat conjectural in places.
possessed all the wealth of the world’s seas, you would give it all away to poets and minstrels. ‘Star vacant sun’; that refers to the sun after the stars have gone out, for that’s when it appears best, though not better than your own form. ‘You board of brilliance!’; that is, though a man have seven sets of chessmen they would do him no good if he didn’t have a board. You are the board on which the men of Ireland stand.

Thus, this rather striking dialogue has the king refer to the poem’s opaqueness. We then have the poet state that common practice would be for the poet to explain the poem to the patron. There appear to be two types of explanation given by the poet: exegesis of metaphor and elucidation of obscure vocabulary. It is noteworthy that these two barriers to the king’s understanding accord with Martin Irvine’s observation that medieval grammatica (enarratio) was based on an inheritance which saw both unusual vocabulary and metaphor as vitia (‘faults’), at least of correct prose discourse

As regards metaphor we might note that there is some debate about the extent to which secular praise poetry might be something of a newer phenomenon for Irish literature during the later middle ages. Therefore, Tromdámh Guaire could conceivably be poking fun at the relatively new, and often baroque and overblown, uses of metaphor to praise Gaelic lords from the late twelfth century. One doesn’t have to look very far to find contemporaneous bardic poetry which is reminiscent of Dallán’s praise poem. For instance, the reference to the king as fitheall board brings to mind uses of branán, the word for principal board-game piece. In the bardic poem ‘Tomhais cia mise, a Mhurchaidh’ (‘Guess who I am o Murchadh’) by Muireadhach Albanach Ó Dálaigh for Murchadh na nEach Ó Briain, son of Brian Dall, dated to around 1224, we have the poet address Murchadh as ‘A bhranáin ghil ghormrosgaigh’ (‘o chess-king bright and blue-eyed’). The metaphor involving the sun and the stars in Dallán’s poem reminds of the thirteenth-century poem ‘Bean ós mhnaíbh cáich Cailleach Dé’ (‘Woman beyond all women of the world is Cailleach Dé’) where the Cailleach Dé in question is referred to as ‘an ghrian ard ós fhiodh’ (‘the sun high above the wood’).

---

Dallán’s second panegyric also contains many features reminiscent of bardic panegyric: the king is referred to as ‘hawk’ and there is a reference to an Ulster Cycle character. Thus, Tromdámh Guaire’s close attention to the use of metaphor appears designed to satirize both the norms and prominence of panegyric for secular lords. That particular criticism may also provide echoes of medieval literary theory and teaching practice to be discussed below.

The second type of explanation in Tromdámh Guaire, involving intentionally obscure vocabulary is also relevant to a critique of bardic poetry: when we see in Dallán’s explanation that the king must be told that dáigh means poison. Indeed, the editor of the text underlines the difficulty in dealing with the verses which she notes contain ‘spurious’ intentionally obscure words and phrases. There are a number of contexts for the critique of obscurity of poetic language in Tromdámh Guaire which will each be explored below: the early-medieval Irish tradition of ‘Bérla na Filed’; the later-medieval creation of a codified poetic register for bardic poetry; Latin ars poetica and other debates on intentional obscurity.

EARLY-MEDIEVAL IRISH OBSCURE POETIC LANGUAGE

The early-medieval setting of Tromdámh Guaire and the opaque language of poetry reflects the predilection of many early-medieval Irish poets for the difficult and the obscure. Liam Breatnach has noted that for the early-medieval period the poets ‘had no hesitation in coining nonce-formations or drawing on other languages in their search for the rare and arcane… the use of unusual vocabulary continued well after the Old Irish Period, the variety of language used being termed Bérla na Filed’. Breatnach’s work shows examples of early medieval prose texts turned into poetry written in this intentionally archaic poetic register. Hugh Fogarty, building on the work of John Carey and others, also points to a number of examples of the ‘intentional cultivation of obscurity as a stylistic ideal’ in medieval Irish poetics.

Indeed, the notion of poets being linked to the obscuration of language appears at the beginning of the early-medieval tract on language Auraicept na nÉces (‘The Scholars’ Primer’). There we learn that the Gaelic language was created to be the best of languages by

44 see dáigh in eDIL http://www.dil.ie/
45 JOYNT, Tromdámh Guaire, art. cit., p. 41.
Fénus Farsaid, from all other human languages at Babel. The text clarifies that he created the whole of the Gaelic language, ‘genmotha inni rothormachtatar filid tria fordorchadh iar torrachtain gu Fenius’ (‘except what poets added by way of obscuration after it had reached Fenius’). Fordorchadh means darkening/obscuring. The linking of Dallán to obscure poetry in Tromdámh Guaire is apposite since his most famous poem, the ‘Amra Choluim Chille’ is indeed exceptionally difficult and the later Preface to the poem contains an in-depth discussion of types of obscurcation. In Tromdámh Guaire Dallán refers to the poem he has just delivered, which afterwards must be explained, as a fordheargadh file (‘cryptic poem’?). Fordheargadh is the verbal noun of fordergaid meaning to make something red, wound, bleed. Tromdámh Guaire’s most recent editor wondered if fordheargadh was a mistake for fordorchadh, as seen in Auraicept na nÉces, i.e. that the author of Tromdámh Guaire meant to use fordorchadh (‘darkening/obscuring’) but accidentally used fordheargadh (‘reddening’).

However, fordorchad indsce ‘the making cryptic of language’ does actually gloss ‘róimnae roiscni’ (‘the darkening of speech’) in the Old Irish (eighth-century?) tract on poetic inspiration known as the Caldron of Poesy, and rómnae or rúamna also means ‘to redden’. Thus, perhaps when used figuratively of language, it seems that to redden or to darken can both mean to obscure or make cryptic. To my knowledge, though, fordheargadh isn’t used in this manner elsewhere and perhaps here the author is again poking fun by intentionally foregoing fordorchadh for a word meaning reddening; choosing a word with a semantic range that includes ‘bloodying’ and perhaps even ‘disgracing’, safe in the knowledge that the audience would understand the joke.

Thus, Dallán’s intentionally obscure poetry, referred to as fordheargadh file is informed by, and directly refers to an early-medieval Irish tradition of such poetic practice. Yet, if we are

---

50 G. CALDER (ed.), Auraicept na n-Éces, Edinburgh, John Grant, 1917, p.2
52 JOYNT, Tromdámh Guaire, art. cit., p.41
54 We might note the particular association between the colours red and black and learning in the middle ages, see C. DE HAMMEL, Scribes and Illuminators, London, British Museum Press, 1992, p.33.
to read *Tromdámh Guaire* as veiled comment on contemporary post-1300 practice then we must investigate how this related to bardic poetry.

**OBSCURE POETIC LANGUAGE AND BARDIC POETRY**

It could certainly be argued that Dallán having to explain specific obscure vocabulary in *Tromdámh Guaire* acts as comment on the poetic linguistic register used for bardic poetry. We see from the end of the twelfth century the emergence of a somewhat artificial codified register of language for bardic poetry. This is variously called Classical Common Gaelic or Classical Early Modern Irish. Brian Ó Cuív referred to the emergence of such a prescriptive grammar and register as ‘a medieval exercise in language planning’. It was to become a *lingua franca* for poetic enterprise in Scotland and Ireland into the seventeenth century. This artificial register is now seen to encompass a mix of features of the language as spoken in the twelfth century as well as some already obsolete and archaic structures and vocabulary.\(^{56}\) As the spoken language changed over the years the poets would have needed increased teaching on the language forms as set down in the twelfth century. Manuals for poets detailing correct and incorrect forms of language exist from the fourteenth century onwards.\(^{57}\) The language register used for prose during the same later-medieval period did not adhere to such high standards. However, study of the register of prose is complicated by the fact that the appearance of conservative/archaic forms of language is not necessarily dependent on date. Damian McManus draws our attention to the contrast between the ‘progressive and


modernizing’ *Gaelic Maundeville* (fifteenth-century) and the ‘conservative or archaizing’ *Beatha Aodha Ruaidh Uí Dhomhnaill* (seventeenth-century).58

The extent to which bardic poetry engages with intentionally obscure vocabulary can be difficult to quantify. Eleanor Knott’s magisterial description of bardic poetry conventions notes that the language register used for bardic poetry, ‘is not an artificial dialect, sprinkled with monstrous pseudo-archaisms’.59 On the other hand McManus writes:

Nhíorbh í gnáthchانúint duine ar bith, ná áit ar bith ná fiú tréimhse ar bith i stair na Gaeilge í. Caighdeán léannta taicair a bhí ann a bhí i bhfeidhm ar fud agus i nGaeltacht na hAlban agus a leagadh amach do chuíram ar leith, cumadh an Dáin Dhírigh; b’éigean don té ar theastaigh uaidh dul i mbun an chuíraim sin é a fhoghlaim agus cloí leis go beadh. Mar chainteoir dúchais, ar ndóigh, thabharfadh an t-ábhar file cuid mhaith den chaighdeán sin leis gan stró.60

[‘It was not the vernacular of any person or any place or even any particular period in the history of the language. It was an artificial scholarly standard used all over the country and in the Scottish Highlands which was designed for one purpose, the composition of syllabic bardic poetry; the person who intended to embark on that project had to learn it and gain a precise knowledge of it. As a native speaker, of course, the prospective poet would understand a great deal of that standard without effort.’]

Therefore, while the language register may not be full of archaisms or intentionally obscure language it was still a codified register requiring a period of study. We have also seen a predilection for obscure or otherwise unusual analogues or motifs in bardic poetry and it would perhaps be expected that this delight in the obscure might extend, at least to some extent, to intentional obscurity of language. Thus, later medieval bardic poetry is not, as noted by Knott, a completely artificial code. Yet, we can still recognise as others have done that it was nonetheless a codified literary register which does on occasion include unusual vocabulary. To illustrate this, the early bardic poem for Raghnall of Man, introduced at the beginning of this chapter provides a number of examples of rare and unusual vocabulary. For instance, it includes *gráin* meaning ‘spearpoint’, and *lothraigid* with the meaning ‘to fail’ (otherwise normally ‘destroy’), both apparently very rare.61

Therefore, the presentation of intentionally opaque poetic language in *Tromdámh Guaire* is undoubtedly relevant to the contemporaneous somewhat artificial register of language

codified for the use of bardic poetry. Such, albeit allegorical, commentary would also place Tromdámh Guaire within a context of widespread European debates on this very issue as we will see below.

IRISH BARDIC POETRY AND OTHER EUROPEAN DEBATES ON OBSCURITAS

In recent years work has been done in particular by Pádraig A. Breathnach and Michelle O Riordan to situate the emergence of bardic poetry within trends impacting on literatures in Latin and in some other European vernaculars. Thus, both Breathnach and O Riordan have made links to twelfth- and thirteenth-century texts such as the Poetria Nova by Geoffrey of Vinsauf, the Ars Versificatoria by Matthew of Vendôme, John of Garland’s Parisiana Poetria de Arte Prosaica, Metrica, et Rithmica. Breathnach wrote that the emergence of bardic poetry in the twelfth century ‘has much in common with- and may owe something to’ the movement which produced ars poetica manuals. It is of course unsurprising that the literary endeavours of the Gaelic world may evidence the influence of the Latin manuals given the literary and familial connections of some of the Gaelic nobility, as seen earlier with Raghnall of Man.

The Latin manuals do not recommend obscurity of language although do concede that metaphorical usage can be used successfully. For instance, Geoffrey of Vinsauf notes of metaphor that

Quando venit tali sententia culta paratu,
Ille sonus vocum laetam dulcescit ad aurem,
Et fricat interius nova delectatio mentem.

When meaning comes clad in such apparel,
the sound of words is pleasant to the happy ear, and delight in what is unusual stimulates the mind.

Dallán’s exegesis of his poetry to King Aodh in Tromdámh Guaire is largely concerned with metaphor, some of which are particularly outlandish and worthy of further attention, perhaps with a view to the influence of the Latin manuals.

---

Of exotic or unusual vocabulary Vinsauf says the following:

Si qua feras igitur peregrina vel abdita verba,  
Quid possis ex hoc ostendis jusque loquendi  
Non attendis. Ab hac macula se retrahat error  
Oris et obscurs oppone repagula verbis.  
Utare consilio; licet omnia noveris, unus  
Major in hoc aliis: in verbis sis tamen unus  
Ex aliis, nec sis elati, sed socialis  
Eloquii. Veterum clamat doctrina: loquaris  
Ut plures, sapias ut pauci.

If, therefore, you introduce any words that are strange or recondite, you are displaying your own virtuosity thereby and not observing the rules of discourse. The straying tongue must draw back from this fault and set up barriers against obscure words. Take counsel: it may be you know all things – you are greater than others in this – still, in your mode of expression be one of those others. Be of average, not lofty, eloquence. The precept of the ancients is clear: speak as the many, think as the few.

However, despite the recommendations of the *artes poeticae* obscure styles of poetry were cultivated in a number of other European vernaculars when bardic poetry was taking shape and becoming established in the Gaelic world. We have noted that our first evidence for Irish bardic poetry comes from the late twelfth century. It is therefore roughly contemporary with a number of debates and treatises on obscure poetic styles from other European vernacular traditions: the Occitan *trobar clos/clus* poetry and debates associated with Peire d'Alvernhe and others; Scandinavian skaldic verse and the creation of Snorri Sturluson's early thirteenth-century *Skáldskaparmál*. Indeed, a number of other vernacular prose texts present similar vignettes of kings struggling to understand intricate vernacular poetry. For instance, the Welsh prose text *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* (Dream of Rhonabwy), perhaps of a similar date to *Tromdám Guaire*, also has incomprehensible poetry presented to a king. This has analogues also in a number of Scandinavian sagas.

It is also noteworthy that despite the recommendations of the *artes poeticae* a number of well-known late-medieval poets and commentators defend the importance of obscurity and difficulty. Petrarca’s well-known Latin texts, known as the *Invective contra medicum*

---


‘Invectives against a physician’), from around 1352, assert that whereas physicians use difficult language to deceive and cheat, poets on the other hand do so since the practice ‘serves as a stimulus for more intense reflection and as an opportunity for nobler studies’ (intentioris animi stimulus, et exercitii nobilioris occasio) and indeed that poetic language is devoted to adorning the truth with beautiful veils (studium est veritatem rerum pulcris velaminibus adornare). Boccaccio’s Tratatello in laude di Dante similarly asserts that poets must work up the easily forgettable and unenjoyable ‘verità piana’ (‘bare truth”).

Therefore, in the absence of ars poetica comment dealing with obscuritas in Irish bardic poetry, Tromdámh Guaire evidences participation in debate on the place of what the Russian formalists would later call ostranenie or ‘defamiliarization’, ongoing in a number of other European cultures during the later middle ages.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Tromdámh Guaire comes to us from the era of later-medieval Irish bardic poetry and presents us with a tableau in which sixth- or seventh-century poets and their royal patrons are at odds. King Aodh is mocked by the poet for his inability to appreciate the meaning of the poetry and the poet must explain both obscure language and his use of metaphor. An allegorical reading of the text shows that these issues, presented to us in relation to the purported in-text early-medieval poetry, accord well with a number of current scholarly observations of the corpus of later-medieval bardic poetry. While we lack a late-medieval ars poetica for bardic poetry, an allegorical reading of Tromdámh Guaire suggests that intentional poetic obscurity, either as a result of poetic techniques or as a result of impenetrable vocabulary, was a matter of some debate for those involved in literary production and consumption. This should come as no surprise given that the issue of obscure language and metaphor in poetry were also contested in a number of other European cultures at the time, with pronouncements thereon deemed necessary in a number of artes poeticae. Tromdámh Guaire could also draw on and manipulate native

---


73 For discussion and sources see M. EISNER, Boccaccio and the Invention of Italian Literature, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013, p. 42 and 149.

Irish early-medieval obscure poetic styles and their attendant terminology resulting in a very clever *fordheargadh* of the noses of the later Gaelic bardic poets.\textsuperscript{75}

\textsuperscript{75} Thanks are due to Prof. Thomas Owen Clancy and Dr Geraldine Parsons for their comments and suggestions and to the organizers and participants of the Rencontres du Vers et de la Prose: Conscience Poétique et Mise en Texte, Université Sorbonne Nouvelle and the 15\textsuperscript{th} International Congress of Celtic Studies at the University of Glasgow for discussion.