On the Edge of Madness: The Tricksters of the Ulster Cycle

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As always, none of this would have been possible without Calum, Harley, Xander, and Keith: thank you for facilitating this madness and listening to my late-night rants about people you've never heard of.

A life spent hanging from a thread is not the life for me,
the precipice awaits you and oblivion is free.
—'Hyperion Omniriff', *The Thunderfist Chronicles,* Alestorm (2025)

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Introduction

Across the wide spectrum of storytelling mediums and traditions, there are few classes of character who are quite as engaging or as enduring as the Trickster. In both their most archaic, conservative forms and their modern interpretations, Tricksters are almost universally presented as sly, clever, and highly adaptable—traits which, at times, are too readily translated to villainous manipulation and base dishonesty. They are routinely associated with themes of mockery and madness, either as enablers and instigators or as victims themselves, and some of the most iconic aspects of their myriad tales involve no small amount of comedy, whilst their intimate ties to concepts of liminality and transformation—alongside a tendency towards internal contradictions—can make them difficult characters to appreciate fully.

The realms of medieval Irish literature are no different and, across the broad spectrum of genres and formats that have survived to us, Trickster figures abound. Despite having a great wealth of material to work with, the direct and intentional study of medieval Irish Tricksters is surprisingly sparse and those studies that do tackle the subject often appear to lack any significant engagement with some or any of the broader themes and theories around Tricksters as an international character type. As a result, it is clear to see that some other types of characters—Fools and Madmen in particular—have at times been inappropriately assessed alongside Tricksters as though they serve the same purpose in their texts, whilst less common or more subtle manifestations of Tricksters have been wholly overlooked. This conflation is understandable when these character types share so many significant themes and story markers but thus far the result has been that the Tricksters of medieval Irish literature have been understudied, and their full potential has gone unrealised.

One of the key studies to approach the medieval Irish manifestation of Tricksters is, of course, *The Irish Trickster* by Alan Harrison and it has proven to be a foundational text for this project, even though it demonstrably does not deal with Tricksters as they are defined by broader international theories which will be dealt with in the following chapters. Concerned primarily with the Classical Irish *crosánacht* literary genre of the 13th to 17th centuries, Harrison nevertheless makes an effort to place this later genre within a wider tradition by linking the literary *crosán* figure—a 'buffoon, jester, reviler; poet whose metre is *crosánacht'*[1]—to many of the figures who are assessed here, be they Fools, Madmen, or

[1] eDIL s.v. 1 *crosán*

Tricksters. Although *The Irish Trickster* uses the terms 'fool' and 'trickster' interchangeably, the basic analysis that Harrison undertakes is sound. He neatly captures the often contradictory qualities of these characters without dismissing them as erratic, nonsensical, or inherently malicious and notes of Bricriu mac Carbada in particular that "although he is basically destructive and mischievous, there are positive results to his actions."[2] Aside from being a solid analytic foundation on which to build, Harrisons' clear distinction between 'natural' and 'professional' fools is one that underpins much of this thesis' distinction between Fools and Madmen in comparison to fully realised Tricksters. This binary definition has proven to be far more useful and illustrative than more some more complex attempts to categorise Fools and Tricksters, such as Vicki K. Janik's four categories, each populated with a variety of literary figures who are demonstrably not Fools at all.[3]

Coming to a working definition—and by no means a perfect one—of what constitutes a Trickster in medieval Irish literature is, by and large, a process of marrying existing theoretical foundations to appropriate comparative examples. A great deal of foundational work in what we might hesitantly call 'trickster theory'—though such a term is nebulous at best—is grounded in multidisciplinary approaches that draw together subjects ranging from literary criticism and philology to anthropology and psychoanalysis. Attempting to tackle such wide-ranging scholarship can make for a daunting project but key, unifying features are quick to make themselves apparent. These features align quite neatly with many concepts which are also deeply rooted within monster theory—a branch of literary criticism which has great potential for helping to navigate the innate complexities of trickster figures, focusing on the nature and purpose of monstrosity within media of various types. Alongside this, the nature of most Tricksters and their stories necessitates a grounding in various forms of humour and satire, and it is by balancing humour and monstrosity that we can begin to form a working definition of how a Trickster operates and how these figures differ significantly from Fools and Madmen.
In light of this, another foundational text for this project is *Mythical Trickster Figures*, edited by William J. Hynes and William G. Doty. Whilst none of the chapters in this text deal with Tricksters from the literature of North-West Medieval Europe specifically, it

[2] Alan Harrison, *The Irish Trickster*, (Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), xx, p. 24
[3] See: Vicki K. Janik, *Fools and Jesters in Literature, Art, and History: A Bio-Bibliographical Sourcebook*, (Greenwood Press, 1998), pp. 2-3. Janik's definition is centred around a character's perceptions of their own and other's weaknesses and betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature and function of trickster figures who are subsequently characterised as malicious idiots with little to no understanding of their own weaknesses.

builds critically on the earlier work of Paul Radin[4] and offers examples from both the core literature and mythological traditions of Trickster scholarship—Native American and African—as well as some broader selections from Japanese, Classical, and Biblical figures. Of greatest value is Hynes' chapter 'Mapping the Characteristics of Mythic Tricksters: A Heuristic Guide'[5], which lays out six key characteristics which might be applied to trickster figures from varied contexts, and which are explored in greater detail in a later chapter. This guide manages to capture the most mercurial and complex qualities of Tricksters whilst remaining flexible enough to be applied across a variety of cultures and time periods and, although this work makes little mention of Tricksters from medieval North-West Europe—and no mention at all of Celtic examples—it remains a comprehensive introduction to the subject.

Given the prominence of monster theory in the following assessments, reference must also be made to the work of Jeffrey Jerome Cohen who has written extensively on the subject generally and on medieval concepts of monstrosity more specifically. Cohen's opening chapter in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, 'Monster Culture (Seven Theses)', is a work in a similar vein to Hynes' heuristic guide to Tricksters. Here, Cohen posits seven key features that might be broadly applied to monsters from a variety of cultural and textual contexts in an attempt to offer a scaffolding that can be used to understand and study manifestations of monstrosity in various forms across various contexts. Whilst Cohen's *Seven Theses* make for a comprehensive map for identifying key facets of how monstrosity can present in a variety of texts, the verbiage of this chapter can render it unwieldy for in-depth references in texts not engaging with monster theory on a minute theoretical level. These seven theses have been paraphrased in the following chapter, taking their core message and presenting them in a way which is more accessible and applicable to the work at hand.

Following this grounding in the theory, definitions will be established for both Fools and Madmen respectively, using key examples drawn from the world of medieval Irish literature. The Fool Comgán Mac Da Cherda and the Madman Suibhne Geilt are figures who are often invoked in scholarship where reference is made to Tricksters in medieval Irish literature, but the validity of this association is questionable. By assessing them with regards to the definitions for what makes a Trickster that will be set out below, this misalignment can hopefully begin to be resolved. A working definition for Tricksters will

[4] See: Kerényi, Karl, C. G. Jung, and Paul Radin, *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology*, Book, Whole (Routledge & K. Paul, 1956)

[5] William J. Hynes, 'Mapping the Characteristics of Mythic Tricksters: A Heuristic Guide', in William J. Hynes & William G. Doty [ed.]. *Mythical Trickster Figures*, University of Alabama Press (1999), pp. 33-45

then be laid out with reference to the most iconic Trickster of medieval European literature—the Norse figure of Loki. These comparisons will help to illustrate how such characters function within their own contexts and lay the groundwork for moving forwards into the assessment of a selection of medieval Irish figures.

Setting aside the Fools and Madmen, we turn then to two case studies who offer some vastly helpful insights into how Tricksters function within a medieval Irish context. One, Aniér Mac Conglinne, is such a conscious construct that—despite the fact that he appears only in one text—he cannot be reckoned as anything other than a Trickster, whilst Manannán mac Lir offers a fascinating insight into a figure who we can see developing into a trickster-like figure as his character moves through his medieval manifestations into the Early Modern period.

After this, we turn to the Tricksters of the Ulster Cycle, where Bricriu mac Carbada stands as the Trickster *par excellence* of medieval Irish literature in its entirety. Although a full and detailed reassessment of his character, development and function is desperately needed, it is hoped that this brief review of some of his key appearances will highlight the important role that he plays within the Ulster Cycle far beyond that of a petty miscreant and occasional comic relief. Leborcham, Conchobar's curious messenger, is a character with only fleeting appearances who nevertheless has a significant role to play within the Ulster Cycle, and who may even represent a unique manifestation of a female Trickster in the broader corpus of medieval heroic literature. Finally, I have embarked on an assessment of Ailill mac Máta's actions throughout his appearances in the Ulster Cycle—though not traditionally reckoned as a Trickster, he deserves some reassessment as regards his involvement in some of the key moments in the Ulster Cycle, most prominently in the *Tain Bó Cuailnge* and *Aided Fergusa maic Roich*.

The material selected for inclusion here comes predominantly from the eighth to the fourteenth century, though some later works have been briefly referenced where they have proven particularly illuminating. In addition to looking closely at the nature of comedy and monstrosity, we are dealing here with a corpus which features some tales that are comfortably over 1500 years old, which have been translated and interpreted repeatedly by a range of different people in a range of different contexts, all of which have had some degree of influence on each other for better or for worse. Whilst the overall intention with this work is to look at fresh and variant translations of smaller passages and individual words, it is inevitable that, for larger sections of text especially, we will be reliant on the translation work of others. These translations do not, and cannot, exist in a contextual

vacuum and Maria Tymoczko's *Translation in a Postcolonial Context*[6] stands as a foundational touchstone for dealing with the translation of the Ulster Cycle corpus of material in particular.

Overall, My intention with this thesis is to first untangle the Fools and the Madmen from the complex web of figures which includes Tricksters—and to give them their own space and brief assessment—and then to assess some of the various ways in which Tricksters *do* manifest fully within the literature of medieval Ireland, with an eye on the Tricksters of the Ulster Cycle, which boasts three particularly significant examples of the character type, each of them presenting in unique and interesting ways. Ultimately, the goal of this thesis is not to reject or diminish the vital comic aspects of some of the figures included for study here but, rather, to add a sympathetic view that will hopefully expand and deepen our understanding of how such figures function both inside their narratives as characters, and outwith their narratives as messengers to the audience. Unless otherwise referenced, all translations are my own fresh attempts at presented passages. Where primary texts have used variant spellings, I have changed these in my own translations but, otherwise, have preserved the variations used by other translators unless they had the potential to cause significant confusion.

[6] Maria Tymoczko, *Translation in a Postcolonial Context: Early Irish Literature in English Translation*, (Routledge, 2014),

Theory

Before we can address the Tricksters that are to be found within the literature of medieval Ireland, the question of what a Trickster is—as well as the question of what sets them apart from similar figures such as Fools and Madmen—must first be dealt with. The question is one which has been a topic of discussion across a broad range of disciplines, taking in subjects which range from literary criticism to folklore, to psychoanalysis and beyond, and the resulting answers most often focus on the mercurial nature of such figures, along with the accompanying frustration that they can inspire in those seeking to study them. In establishing a definition of 'Trickster' to work with here, a range of offerings from these varied disciplines will be approached to assess their applicability. One thing that becomes apparent in looking at the three classes of character we are concerned with here is that there are two key thematic strands at play when we find Fools, Madmen and Tricksters manifesting in their various guises—comedy and monstrosity. These two topics may, at first glance, appear to be wholly unrelated but these are the things that will allow us to discern the subtle but vital differences between a Fool or a Madman and a true manifestation of a Trickster.

Theory: Comedy & Humour

It is something of an understatement to say that comedy or humour is an inordinately difficult thing to define with any specificity—this applies even more so when we are working with tales, often in translation, with the kind of antiquity represented by medieval Irish literature. There is, to add to this inherent difficulty, a pervasive bad habit in the Western world of devaluing content that is deemed to be comedic in nature as a somehow 'lesser' form of literature. What Hynes and Doty refer to as "the common assumption that if something is comical or entertaining, it cannot represent socially significant material"[7], is an attitude that can likewise be found in the translation of and even occasionally in the scholarship surrounding medieval Irish literature.

This devaluation, especially as regards the literature that we are concerned with here, does not exist in a vacuum, however, and no small part of it stems from how these texts have been preserved and transmitted over the centuries. Tymoczko's discussion of nineteenth century translation of medieval Irish literature is especially illustrative on this point, highlighting the challenges that were presented by the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* in particular for a

[7] William G. Doty, and William J. Hynes, *Mythical Trickster Figures: Contours, Contexts, and Criticisms*, (University of Alabama Press, 1997), p. 4

nineteenth century audience that was keen to use it as a "document of cultural nationalism" when the tale itself, as with much of the Ulster Cycle, is "clearly sexual, scatological, and undignified."[8] Whilst some of these moments are comedic only to the audience and presented quite seriously within in the text itself—such as Cú Chulainn's adoption of a false beard in his fight with Nadcranntail[9]—others are clear demonstrations of the way in which comedy and laughter hold an important place in the society of the narrative world in this corpus of literature.

The identification of a "persistent record of interference with, shift away from, and suppression of the comic elements of much of early Irish literature, including many of the frankly humorous tales"[10] is crucial when approaching tales which involve Tricksters and their ilk. On account of the vitality of humour and comedy both to these types of characters, but also to early Irish literature—even the heights of dramatic climax in the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* are interspersed with moments of unambiguous comedy—it is imperative that humour is given its proper place within scholarship surrounding these tales.

The Nature of Humour

"Humour," writes Mercier, "though it sometimes achieves considerable subtlety, is intellectually the simplest form of the comic. It springs from the absurd, that which is laughable because it is untrue or irrational or, at the very least, exaggerated."[11] These simple forms of humour are often rooted in the basic and universal facts of life—sexual and scatological mishaps and exaggerations, inversions of everyday situations, and the little things that almost any audience might conceivably be able to relate to. If it is 'simple' then it is only because this form of humour has the greatest chance of being understood and enjoyed by the widest possible audience.

Beyond 'simple' humour—the sexual, the scatological, and the grotesque—we also find more complex varieties of comedy in the realms of satire and parody, two forms of comedy which are particularly abundant in medieval Irish literature and which we find being used to great effect. On the subject of parody in particular, Mercier notes that it "makes even greater demands on the reader: first of all, he must recognize the work or the genre parodied; then he must see the absurdity of the parody by comparison with the original; finally, this absurdity must be reflected back from the parody on to the original,

[8] Maria Tymoczko, *Translation in a Postcolonial Context: Early Irish Literature in English Translation*, (Routledge, 2014), p. 66

[9] Cecile O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúailnge, Recension 1*, (Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1976), p. 165

[10] Tymoczko, *Translation in a Postcolonial Context*, p. 192

[11] Vivian Mercier, *The Irish Comic Tradition*, (Clarendon Press, 1962) p. 1

so that he can see in the latter the inherent tendency to absurdity which made the parody feasible to begin with."[12] I would take this definition one step further to add that any truly masterful parody is also capable of standing as a piece of media on its own; being well crafted enough that it is able to serve its own purpose as a piece of art. The highest form of parody is that which is created by someone who understands, values, and loves the original work deeply, allowing for the absurdities inherent in the original to be showcased to their greatest extent, without dissolving into cheap, insulting mockery.

On account of the unique nature of how the literary tradition developed in Ireland, with the Latin alphabet being adopted relatively early and with an identifiable retention of archaic traits in Irish literature until a relatively late period, it has been possible to "trace these various comic devices back closer to their origins than one can in almost any other literature except the ancient Greek."[13] The specifics of this archaism are less important to us here than the fact that it exists at all—we are not concerned with the quest for the 'perfect' or earliest form of any of our tales but simply with the fact that a good deal of the humour to be found within them is, on some level, intentional and makes up a core aspect of the story.

When we consider the fantastical nature of even the most serious tales in the medieval Irish corpus—most of which deal with gods, demi-gods, magic, and miracles—it is no surprise to find that the fantastic is a key strand of humour in these tales. That which is already fantastic is fertile ground for exaggeration into the realms of absurdity and it is both contrasted and complimented by the visceral nature of the grotesque humour that underpins many of these tales and gives them a compelling grounding in the 'real' world. Parody is also an important feature of several of the tales which we will touch upon in the following chapters and the way in which the composers of these tales have constructed them gives us an insight into how these medieval scribes interacted with the literary tradition that they were working within. These interactions display a complicated relationship with the archaism inherent in the Irish literary tradition wherein the composer "seems to believe in myth and magic with one half of his being, while with the other half he delights in their absurdity"[14], and it is this particular feature of the tradition that has allowed for nuanced and well-crafted works of parody such as *Ailslinge Meic Con Glinne* and *Scéla mucce meic Dathó* to exist.

Satire, of course, is also a prominent feature of medieval Irish literature and it holds a

[12] Mercier, *The Irish Comic Tradition*, p. 2
[13] Mercier, *The Irish Comic Tradition*, pp. 2-3
[14] Mercier, *The Irish Comic Tradition*, p. 8

significance here beyond its modern literary definition. Far more than clever mockery, medieval Irish satire held a particular social function as "a legally controlled practice reserved for poets."[15] Mockery, more generally, in this context was a powerful tool which we see utilised within this corpus of literature even outwith a professional setting to incite action and to drive tales forward—a feature which, as will become apparent over the course of this analysis, is a vital aspect of how Tricksters and their ilk function in these narrative worlds.

Theory: Monstrosity

That the situations that Tricksters and their ilk are involved in are often mocking or humorous in nature can, at times, prove to be a stumbling block to their study—especially in light of the devaluation of comedic material in Western scholarship as discussed above. One way to remedy this is to approach Tricksters (and Fools and Madmen alongside them) from the angle of monster theory and to understand that Tricksters, in particular, can often be seen to act as the ultimate monster of their own stories. Monstrosity, much like humour, can be difficult to define with any specificity and almost all approaches to the topic begin by exploring the etymology of the word. As a result, that is exactly where we will begin here.

The English term 'monster' stems ultimately from the Latin root *moneo*, 'to remind, put in mind of, admonish, advise, warn, instruct, teach.'[16] More colourful definitions of a monster, mutating from this root, mark them as "paradoxical personifications of *otherness within sameness*"[17] and "an embodiment of difference, a breaker of category, and a resistant Other"[18] that operates as "a warning or portent, *demonstrating* what to avoid, and *remonstrating* with anyone who would challenge established social and symbolic boundaries."[19] The specific purpose that a monster—be it a fully-fledged dragon or a monster of a more ephemeral, metaphorical nature—may serve can change from text to text but they are broadly united in functioning as figures which can both repel and entice the reader and the characters at the same time.

Cohen's 'Monster Theory: Seven Theses' outlines the following seven features of monstrosity:

- *The Monster's Body is a Cultural Body*: "The monstrous body is pure culture. A

[15] Elizabeth Boyle, 'The Poetics of Irony in Middle Irish Literature', *North American Journal of Celtic Studies*, 5.2 (2021), p. 195
[16] 'Moneo', *Perseus Digital Library*. Ed. Gregory R. Crane. Tufts University.
[17] Timothy K. Beal, *Religion and Its Monsters*, (ROUTLEDGE, 2022), p. 4
[18] Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, (University of Minnesota Press, 1996) p. x
[19] Beal, *Religion and Its Monsters*, p. 195

construct and a projection, the monster exists only to be read."[20] To understand something as a monster, then, is to understand that it represents something other than itself—be it fear, warning, or enlightenment.

- *The Monster Always Escapes*: Oddly resilient to true defeat, a monster will always return until their purpose is completed, in part due to the way in which "it refuses easy categorization."[21]. As Cohen puts it— "No monster tastes of death but once."[22]
- *The Monster is the Harbinger of Category Crisis*: A "refusal to participate in the classificatory "order of things" is true of monsters generally…and so the monster is dangerous, a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions."[23]
- *The Monster Dwells at the Gates of Difference*: Here, Cohen is dealing directly with those monsters who are consciously and unconsciously crafted from elements of foreign or marginalised identities. Monstrosity as that which is *other* to the accepted norm of the society or story that they are a part of is one of the most defining traits of the concept. Fundamentally, this otherness works to create the tension on which many stories hinge, regardless of whether the monster in question is operating as a protagonist, an antagonist, or even a side character. Ultimately, "the monster threatens to destroy not just individual members of a society, but the very cultural apparatus through which individuality is constituted and allowed."[24]
- *The Monster Polices the Borders of the Possible*: A particularly significant theme that frequently comes up with regards to monsters and monstrosity is that of liminality and borders. They exist within the unknown spaces of human imagination, and this can even be seen in some of the more abstract concepts of monstrosity—physical or mental disabilities render a figure both human but also *other* and social ostracism can make a monster of those who find themselves either willingly or unwillingly set apart from the mainstream, normative society that they are associated with. With this in mind, monsters represent the idea that "to step outside this official geography is to risk attack by some monstrous border patrol or (worse) to become monstrous oneself."[25]
- *Fear of the Monster is Really a Kind of Desire*: The connection between monstrosity as a warden of all kinds of borders and the desire to cross them all the

[20] Cohen, 'Monster Culture (Seven Theses)', *Monster Theory,* p. 4
[21] Cohen, 'Monster Culture (Seven Theses)', *Monster Theory,* p. 6
[22] Cohen, 'Monster Culture (Seven Theses)', *Monster Theory,* p. 5
[23] Cohen, 'Monster Culture (Seven Theses)', *Monster Theory,* p. 6
[24] Cohen, 'Monster Culture (Seven Theses)', *Monster Theory,* p. 12
[25] Cohen, 'Monster Culture (Seven Theses)', *Monster Theory,* p. 12

same is one of the most enticingly contradictory aspects of monsters more generally. Here we see the way in which "the same creatures who terrify and interdict can evoke potent escapist fantasies; the linking of monstrosity with the forbidden make the monster all the more appealing as a temporary egress from constraint."[26]

- *The Monster Stands at the Threshold…of Becoming*: The conclusion of Cohen's theses embodies the principle that a monster serves to warn and enlighten—"Monsters are our children. They can be pushed to the farthest margins of geography and discourse, hidden away at the edges of the world and in the forbidden recesses of our mind, but they always return. And when they come back, they bring not just a fuller knowledge of our place in history and the history of knowing our place, but they bear self-knowledge, *human* knowledge—and a discourse all the more sacred as it arises from the Outside."[27]

It is important to remember that, above all else, calling a character a 'monster' is not any form of moral judgement on their actions and to use the term as such is fundamentally useless. The most well-known hero of the Ulster Cycle, Cú Chulainn, is a monster—he is a child of two fathers, one of them a god, who was conceived three separate times and routinely flies in the face of societal conventions whilst being capable of physically shapeshifting into a terrifying form that renders him a near unstoppable warrior. He is shown on several occasions to be petty, excessively violent, and utterly unreasonable in the face of sound advice and, yet, we are never truly in any doubt that the narrative of his world favours him. His uncle, Conchobar, on the other hand is one of the most physically human characters to feature in the Ulster Cycle and despite his actions throughout his appearances being needlessly cruel, manipulative and, in many cases, utterly horrific to a modern audience, he is simply not a monster—no matter how much we might like to brand him one.

Monsters of many varieties feature heavily in medieval literature, from the mythical and metaphorical, through to the tangible dangers present in a pre-industrial world and the many manifestations of humanity that fall outwith the idea of a normative society. To be a monster is to be something *other*. In this vein, it is possible to tie in themes of disability and queerness to the themes surrounding monstrosity—wherein we find figures who are

[26] Cohen, 'Monster Culture (Seven Theses)', *Monster Theory,* pp. 12 - 13
[27] Cohen, 'Monster Culture (Seven Theses)', *Monster Theory,* p. 20

otherwise human othered and, in essence, *made* into monsters by the societal contexts that we find them in. In many cases a 'monstrous' birth was considered an ill omen, a warning of some misfortune or other[28], and later transgression against the standards of societal normativity could easily result in expulsion from that society. The more traditional ideas of monstrosity—such as dragons, demons and draugr—are not what concern us here. The monstrosity that we are searching for is of a more subtle and, often, metaphorical kind—it is in the rejection of or by the settled, normative society that our characters find themselves in, it is in a loss or refusal of humanity, and it is in social and metaphorical, not physical, death and undeath.

The worlds of medieval Irish and Icelandic literature in particular provide us with many colourful examples of this kind of metaphorical monstrosity and traditions and stories surrounding outlawery—both voluntary and imposed—can provide a helpful vehicle for explaining and understanding this particular concept of boundary-crossing human monsters. Key to both of these interpretations of monstrous outlawry and otherness is a strong connection with wolves and hounds and, though modern ideas about werewolves only began to develop in the Middle Ages, the roots of these iconic monsters stretch back to the Epic of Gilgamesh.[29] Of particular note is that not *all* associations with hounds and wolves in these examples are explicitly negative, with a general theme of strength and martial prowess attached to many of the figures who are associated with them. That being said, there remains a general sense of undesirability attached to shapeshifting across both medieval Icelandic and Irish literature which counterbalances these positive aspects where we find them.

Mary R. Gerstein discusses the concept of the Germanic werewolf as outlaw in great detail, tracing the connection between wolves and outlaws as far as fragmentary Hittite laws which express a similar wording to the earliest Germanic use of the term *warg* in the sixth century *Lex Salica*.[30] This metaphorical continuity shows that the outlaw was "considered a monstrous evildoer who had shown himself to be "not human" as defined by his kin group."[31] In touching on the paradoxical nature of wolves as "the archetypal beast…the crafty howler, death-dealing foe of domestic existence" whilst also being "the animal embodiment of those qualities most desirable in the [Indo-European] warrior:

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[28] For further discussion of monstrous births, see: Stephen T. Asma, *On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears*, (Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 141 -162

[29] Peter Bystrický, 'The Image of the Werewolf in Medieval Literature', *Historický Časopis*, 63.5 (2015), pp. 787 - 788

[30] Mary R. Gerstein, 'Germanic Warg: The Outlaw as Werewolf', in *Myth in Indo-European Antiquity*, ed. by Gerald James Larson (University of California Press, 1974), p. 134

[31] Gerstein, 'Germanic Warg: The Outlaw as Werewolf', p. 155

virility, superhuman strength, and frenzy in battle"[32], Gerstein here identifies the fundamental paradox of monstrosity itself—the admixture of desire and repulsion. Medieval Icelandic literature offers a more black-and-white take on the monstrosity that comes with being cast outside of a settled, normative society compared to that of medieval Irish literature. Here, the connection between social outcasts and wolves is made explicit, with the term *vargr*, (Old Norse, literally 'wolf'[33]) used to denote a violent outlaw, often one convicted of murder. Another associated term is *skóggangsmenn* (*skógr*, 'wood, forest'[34], *ganga*, 'to walk; go'[35] and *mann*, nom/acc pl of *maðr*, 'man, person, human being'[36]) which "refers to their expulsion from society, since they were driven to the forest as if they were wolves."[37] In 'The Werewolf in Medieval Icelandic Literature', Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, following the work of Einar Ól. Sveinsson, identifies two layers to medieval werewolves in Icelandic literature—those which represent a memory of *berserkir* ('bear coats'[38]) and *úlfhéðnar* ('wolf skin/pelt'[39]), wherein the ability to shape-shift is an innate one, often connected with themes of warfare, and a more recent variation on the theme which might be traced back in the first instance first to the French romances which, in turn, may be Celtic in origin. Here, the ability to shape-shift is most often the result of a curse or a spell, as opposed to the innate ability of the earlier shape-shifters.[40] Of these earlier shape-shifters, the *berserkir* are the most well known but the *úlfhéðnar,* who can be considered a subset of *beserkir*[41], are more closely related to the medieval Irish concepts which will be discussed below. These elite warriors, possessed of great martial skill and a totemic association with wolves, cannot fully be called social outlaws, as such, but their skill, ferocity, and capacity for violence must have nevertheless set them apart from the society that they belonged to.

Within medieval Ireland we have a record of deliberate and conscious outlawry built into settled society which adds a layer of complexity to the subject within the context that we are looking at in particular. The tradition that saw young boys leaving settled society to

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[32] Gerstein, 'Germanic Warg: The Outlaw as Werewolf', p. 155
[33] Jesse L. Byock, *Viking Language: Learn Old Norse, Runes, and Icelandic Sagas* (Jules William Press, 2013), i, p. 348
[34] Byock, *Viking Language*, p. 344
[35] Byock, *Viking Language*, p. 329
[36] Byock, *Viking Language*, p. 338
[37] Aðalheiður Guðmundsdóttir, 'The Werewolf in Medieval Icelandic Literature', *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 106 (2007), p. 283
[38] From the singular *berserkr.*
Guðmundsdóttir, 'The Werewolf in Medieval Icelandic Literature', p. 280
[39] From the singular *úlfhé[d]inn.*
Guðmundsdóttir, 'The Werewolf in Medieval Icelandic Literature', p. 280
[40] Guðmundsdóttir, 'The Werewolf in Medieval Icelandic Literature', p. 279
[41] Guðmundsdóttir, 'The Werewolf in Medieval Icelandic Literature', p. 281

join roving *fian*-bands until they were of an age to inherit and return to society is one that, though clearly serving a practical function, came to be particularly demonised by the church—with these bands quite literally being referred to as *maic báis* or 'sons of death'.[42] Although this is most explicitly referencing the violent predations of these bands upon the church, it is also possible to take a more metaphorical interpretation—in being set apart from the settled, normative society they were born into, the members of these bands have undergone a kind of social death that will eventually lead to their 'rebirth' when they leave the *fian* and return to take up their inheritance.

Whilst this phase was clearly intended to be a temporary state of monstrosity, wherein the normal rules of society are suspended, we can see that, in the literature, that this was not always the case. Most prominently, the entire *fiannagecht* corpus deals with Finn mac Cumaill being permanently stuck in this state of transition and living his entire life as a monster on the fringes of society. Also of note are the three types of feasts mentioned in the legal text *Córus Béscnai*, which notes the *fled déoda* (the 'godly feast') and the *fled dóenda* (the 'human feast') for the ecclesiastical establishment and the settled establishment respectively, whilst also making note of the *fled demunda* or 'devilish feast' which is given to "sons of death and bad people, namely buffoons [or, perhaps, 'druids'] and satirists and inferior poets and farters and clowns and bandits and pagans and whores and other bad people."[43] The explicit inclusion here of groups which we might readily include under both Fools and Tricksters as they will be defined in the following chapters is curious—that these groups are included on the same level as explicitly violent marauding warbands who have been set apart from society allows for the suggestion that these are also classes of people who find themselves on the explicit margins of society, reviled but also necessary in some way and, yet, eternally *othered*. It also implies an inherent understanding that if a settled society is to function, there must be sanctioned or, at least, tolerated avenues to exist outwith the 'proper' expectations of that society.

The combination of comedy and monstrosity, as these concepts have been laid out above, offers us a way to balance the difficulties inherent in dealing with the nature of characters such as Fools, Madmen, and Tricksters. By placing these archetypes and the characters associated with them on this spectrum of comedy and monstrosity, we stand a better chance at teasing out the features unique to each of them and allowing each to exist

[42] Kim R. McCone, 'Werewolves, Cyclopes, *Díberga* and *Fíanna*: Juvenile Delinquency in Early Ireland', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies*, 12 (1986), p. 5

[43] *Corpus Iuris Hibernici,* edited by D. A. Binchy, 6 vols (Dublin, 1978), 11, 526, lines 15-19. cf. McCone, 'Werewolves, Cyclopes, *Díberga* and *Fíanna*: Juvenile Delinquency in Early Ireland', p. 5

within their own space. The more metaphorical and intangible concept of monstrosity that was explored in relation to outlaws is just an example of how monstrosity need not necessarily be a literal or physical state of being. How this relates to Tricksters and their ilk will become clear in the following chapters, but already we can see the ways in which alterity in a character's physical or mental state, in their relationship to gender, and their place within society can render them a monster. It is in the relationship between humour and monstrosity, then, that we can assess Fools, Madmen, and Tricksters and gain a greater understanding and appreciation for their place within their respective worlds and come to better appreciate the impact that they each have on their narratives.

Fools

'Fool' is a term which has garnered an umbrella-like quality in scholarship surrounding Tricksters and Trickster-like figures, but this broad approach does a great disservice both to those figures who *are* Fools and to those who more rightly fit under another definition. As we will come to see, Fools serve their own purpose within the narrative, fitting into a niche in which a fully realised Trickster would be noticeably out of place in. When Alan Harrison writes of 'Irish Tricksters' he actually refers almost universally to natural and professional Fools and entertainers, barring a brief assessment of Bricriu mac Carbada and Aniér Mac Conglinne, whilst Vicki K. Janik, in *Fools and Jesters in Literature, Art, and History* misinterprets Tricksters as merely a sub-category of Fool. Despite this mis-categorisation of Tricksters, Janik's summary of Fools is still a particularly useful starting point for understanding their nature and their place within their narratives:

> "Fools, jesters, and clowns entertain and elicit laughter, a pleasant and even restorative function. They respond to and act in the world with surprise, unconventionality, and even absurdity, with their apparent misconceptions, meta-perceptions, or nonperceptions that we would dismiss from our own lives. Although they are apparently human, they are identifiably different from other people in appearance and action, oddly out of focus and sometimes startlingly grotesque."[44]

If we use the relationship between comedy and monstrosity as a guide, then with Fools we generally see the balance weighted more significantly towards comedy and wherever we find Fools in a more sombre setting, they often evoke a sense of pity or sympathy. At their most positive, Fools are a little silly, offering comic relief in their narratives and playing predominantly on baser forms of humour—the slapstick, the scatological, and the gentle mockery of the everyday. Foolishness is, broadly speaking, a harmless thing—it lacks the sharp barb of the satirist's tongue and where they *are* shown to be the cause of serious, lasting harm, we can see them attempting to act in the best interest of their master, or with some degree of innocence or naivety.

The monstrosity of the Fool is—allowing for individual variances in this—of a gentler variety, found predominantly in their physical or mental variance which others them and sets them apart from the normative standards of the society that they exist within. This is true both of 'natural' fools and of those professional fools who adopt a facsimile of these

[44] Janik, *Fools and Jesters in Literature, Art, and History,* p. 1

limitations, in order to deliberately set themselves apart in the name of their professional art. Though Fools, like Tricksters, are able to use their natural or adopted alterity to exempt themselves from the expected social norms, we generally see them using this exemption either unconsciously, or for the explicit and intentional purpose of entertainment. Broadly speaking, they diffuse situations rather than inflaming them, and their actions oftentimes detract from or are used narratively to frame greater horrors.

Within the various narrative worlds of medieval Irish literature, Fools appear in many forms, manifesting in both their 'natural' and 'professional' varieties and connected with a variety of different terms. One of the most straightforward terms that we find in reference to Fools is *óinmit,* 'idiot'[45] which, though it later comes to refer to a generally simple or foolish person, appears to have carried with it some sense of legal standing in the early law tracts. In O'Rahilly's assessment of the term, he traces the etymology back to a compound which amounts to "one who is lamb-witted"[46] and the animalistic, non-human association here aligns neatly with the idea of Fools, especially 'natural' Fools, being branded with a more gentle and sympathetic type of monstrosity. The imagery of the lamb is that of innocence and naivety, contrasting sharply with the wolfish outlaws that were discussed in the previous chapter, but the comparison is no less othering—and still makes a monster out of the Fool in question. There would also appear to be some connection between the term *óinmit* and acquired foolishness, as opposed to a condition that has been present from birth.[47] Other terms, such as the more common *drúth,* hold more complex definitions—whilst we see *drúth* being defined as 'professional jester or buffoon' and also legally as 'imbecile, person not responsible for his actions'[48], another definition relates the term to the state of being 'wanton, unchaste' and also as referring to a 'harlot, courtesan'[49]. Alan Harrison draws on this connection between foolishness and wantonness and pushes it a little further, drawing on a description from the *Yellow Book of Lecan* which notes that "a *crósan* is identified by three things, a stretched mouth, a stretched stomach, and a stretched bag"[50] and elaborating on the connections as "the stretched mouth indicating his tendency to shout abusively and also to be given to gluttony; his stomach signifying the same gluttony and emphasizing his grotesque

[45] eDIL s.v. *óinmit*
[46] T. F. O'Rahilly, 'Notes, Mainly Etymological', *Ériu*, 13 (1942), p. 150
[47] Thomas Owen Clancy, *'Saint and Fool: The Image and Function of Cummíne Fota and Comgán Mac Da Cherda in Early Irish Literature'* (University of Edinburgh, 1991), pp. 14-15
[48] eDIL s.v. 2 *drúth*
[49] eDIL s.v. 1 *drúth*
[50] Harrison, *The Irish Trickster*, p. 45

ungainliness; and the allusion to the sexual organs being common in this kind of entertainment as a source of humour"[51]. Here, then, we see the vitality of grotesque humour to manifestations of Fools both in the literature and in the historical reality of their profession as it developed.

Also of note is the legal position that Fools (both natural and professional) held within medieval Irish society. Although the concern here is with these figures as literary characters, the treatment that their real-world counterparts might expect is of vital relevance to how these characters may have been interpreted and understood by their own contemporary audiences. In general, we see the term *drúth* being applied to those for whom mental incapacity was congenital or acquired early in childhood, with varying levels of fines for neglecting their maintenance, depending both on their gender and on whether or not they were capable of some level of social function.[52] Most curious for our purpose here is a type of Fool, referred to as *cáeptha* ('fool, half-wit'[53]), which appears to indicate foolishness inflicted by social ostracisation, and involved the victim being pelted with clods.[54] Whilst the infliction of madness or mental incapacity in the literature often comes in the form of a curse, this gives us a tangible, real-world legal example with which to compare these instances. On the whole, the laws surrounding Fools and mental incapacity "make it clear that the fool was in society that which he would become in literature: a liminal figure, neither an outcast nor an insider, possessing rights but no rank, protected but unwanted, an unpredictable figure."[55]

Without straying too deeply into the murky waters of attempting to assess literary characters with modern medical terminology, it is still worthwhile contemplating briefly what is meant when a character is designated a 'Fool'—especially in light of the reflection that these characters had against the real-world manifestations of 'foolishness'. For our purposes we might assume that a 'natural' Fool is someone with some form of chronic mental disability, which may have been brought about in myriad ways—whether through a traumatic brain injury or through a congenital condition that we might recognise as a learning disability today. These would all result in varied and highly individual manifestations of symptoms, which would account for the various degrees of legal incapacity found in the medieval Irish law tracts which are noted in the following chapter, in comparison with Madmen. Similarly, a 'professional' Fool would be one who either

[51] Harrison, *The Irish Trickster*, p. 45
[52] Clancy, *'Saint and Fool'*, p. 16
[53] eDIL s.v. *cáeptha*
[54] Clancy, *'Saint and Fool'*, p. 19
[55] Clancy, *'Saint and Fool'*, p. 23

uses their existing limitations to earn a living, or one who adopted the traits of the natural Fool for professional reasons.

The purpose that a Fool might serve in any given text is not always apparent at first glance but there are several instances where we see them take on roles which give them an important place in their narrative beyond that of comic relief. More than anything, and in medieval Irish literature especially, we might view the Fool as a "floating symbol, integrally connected and significant to the interpretation of the individual tales."[56] The Fool is rarely, if ever, a main character but, rather, an accent to the action who carries with them certain implications which reflect onto the central figures in their tales.
One of their more curious functions is to serve as a double or a reflection of the king or hero that they are most frequently associated with. Janik also touched on this function of the Fool, noting how they "mock social structures, individual righteousness, passionate personal relationships, and the mutating and fragile underpinning of human thought—language itself. Fools, then, operate as antirulers, offering society sceptical, unencumbered viewpoints that scorn pride and challenge such concepts as logic, cause, reward, and solution."[57] In a similar vein, Harrison highlights the way in which the Fool "can be the one who emphasizes wrongs through his satire of the social order and he can be the scapegoat who is sacrificed on behalf of that same social order."[58] The Fool stands by the king (or the leader, more generally, when we consider such figures as Finn mac Cumaill) as simultaneously a mark of his station, a check on his ego, and a handy sacrifice in his time of need. This sacrificial function is clearly at play during the events of the *Táin Bó Cuailnge* when, in an effort to avoid being identified by Cú Chulainn, Ailill's crown is placed on the camp jester:

> *And sin ra ráidsetar fir Hérend ri Tamun drúth étgud Ailill & a imscimm n-órda do gabáil immi & techt farin n-áth bad fiadnaissi dóib. Ra gabastar-som 'no étgud nAilella & a immscimm órda immi & tánic barin n-áth bad fiadnaisi dóib. Ra gabsat fir Hérend ac cluchi & ac gredan is ac fochuitbiud imme. 'Is tuige im thamon duit-siu ám, a Thamuin drúith,' bar íat-som, 'étgud nAilella & a imscim n-órda immut.' Corop Tuigi im Thamon and sain. Dachonnaic Cú Chulaind é & indar leis i n-écmais a fessa & a eólais ba sé Ailill baí and fadessin, &bosreóthi cloich assa chrantabaill úad fair co n-art Tamun drúth can anmain barsinn áth i*

[56] Thomas Owen Clancy, 'Fools and Adultery in Some Early Irish Texts', *Ériu*, 44, (1993), p. 106
[57] Janik, *Fools and Jesters in Literature*. p. xiv
[58] Harrison, *The Irish Trickster*, p. 21

rrabi.[59]

"Then the men of Ireland told Tamon the jester to put on Ailill's garments and his golden crown and to go on the ford in front of them. So he put on Ailill's garments and his golden crown and came on the ford in front of them. The men of Ireland began to scoff and shout and jeer at him. 'It is the covering of a stump (tamon) for you, Tamon the jester' said they, 'to put on you Ailill's garments and his golden crown'. So that story is called Tuige in Thamon, the Covering of a Stump. Cú Chulainn saw Tamon, and it seemed to him, in his ignorance and want of information, that it was Ailill himself who was there, and he cast a stone at him from his sling and killed him on the ford where he was."[60]

Another area in which we sometimes see Fools—and predominantly 'natural Fools' at that—operating is in the realm of prophecy. When a character has been separated from their reason, they are often shown to gain remarkable insight into the world around them. They utter statements which are later revealed to be prophetic or, otherwise, they perceive the actions and intentions of those around them with a keenness that they are implied to have lacked before whatever misfortune befell them. On this subject Harrison comments that "the fool in his various manifestations from primitive society, through medieval literature and popular customs to modern slapstick comedy is sometimes nearly divine, sometimes positively sub-human."[61] Fools, as a baser reflection of their kings or lords, are also seen to act as subtle harbingers of doom for their masters—as in the cases of Conchobar's death, the brief scene with Conaire Mor's jester in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, and Lugaid Mac Con.[62] As regards their apparently inherent prophetic ability more specifically, we frequently see these prophecies delivered in a format that is obscured or otherwise unintelligible and either require a translation, of sorts, or the gift of hindsight to fully understand. At times this gift only appears as foresight within the text, whilst the audience might understand it better as an especially keen perception or understanding of the world around them or it is the delivery of earthly but secret knowledge.

Comgan Mac Dá Cherda

[59] Cecile O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúalnge: From the Book of Leinster*, Irish Texts Society (Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1967), p. 68
[60] O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúalnge: From the Book of Leinster,* p. 207
[61] Harrison, *The Irish Trickster*, p. 21
[62] For a fuller discussion of these cases, see: Clancy, *'Saint and Fool'*, pp. 36 - 40

In the above discussion of what makes an archetypal Fool, it was established that these figures are typically presented in a more sympathetic fashion—their tales often tending towards the explicitly comedic or pitiable, as opposed to the monstrous or aggressive. Within the literature of medieval Ireland, it is possible to refine this further and find ourselves with a Medieval Irish Fool who is both connected to this broader definition but also exhibits some unique traits and functions of their own. Fools and foolish characters are abundant in the literature, but many have singular appearances that do not subsequently allow for any true depth of analysis. As a result, the primary Fool that we are concerned with here, who will stand as the major example of the way in which medieval Irish Fools differ from medieval Irish Tricksters, is Comgán Mac Dá Cherda. In him we are presented with a character who, despite being a 'natural' fool afflicted with a mental infirmity, also acts in many ways as a professional fool and, indeed, is reckoned as a master of his art.

One of the struggles of working with Mac Dá Cherda as a character—and, by extension, his counterpart the saintly Cummaine Foda—is that he predominantly features as a background character, whilst the texts which do focus more centrally on him can be awkward to parse and, at times, offer little in the way of particularly strong characterisation. Despite these hurdles, it is still possible to construct an overview of this exemplary medieval Irish Fool when his myriad appearances are gathered together. Owing to the difficult and inaccessible nature of some of the texts which deal with Mac Dá Cherda, only a small selection of his appearances will be taken under consideration here. Since he—and by extension Fools more generally—is not the key focus of this project, the tales which have been considered will suffice to give a general example of his character and of the nature of medieval Irish Fools. Tales which have been included for consideration are as follows:

Three texts translated from the Yellow Book of Lecan by J. G. O'Keeffe, noted simply as I, II, and III[63] but corresponding to *The dialogue of Cummíne and Comgán*,[64] *Scéla Guairi meic Colmáin ocus Meic Teléne*, 'The story of Guaire mac Colmáin and Mac Teléne'[65], and The adventures of Mac Dá Cherda[66] respectively.[67] *Comrac Líadaine ocus Cuirithir*, 'The Meeting of Líadan and Cuirithir', places greater

[63] J. G. O'Keeffe, 'Mac Dá Cherda and Cummaine Foda', *Ériu*, 5 (1911), p. 18
[64] O'Keeffe, 'Mac Dá Cherda and Cummaine Foda', pp. 20 - 27
[65] O'Keeffe, 'Mac Dá Cherda and Cummaine Foda', pp. 26 - 33
[66] O'Keeffe, 'Mac Dá Cherda and Cummaine Foda', pp. 34 - 41
[67] These texts in particular have been covered extensively in Thomas Owen Clancy, *'Saint and Fool: The Image and Function of Cummíne Fota and Comgán Mac Da Cherda in Early Irish Literature'* (University of Edinburgh, 1991) as well as subsequent articles.

prominence on Cummaine Foda than on Comgán Mac Dá Cherda but the two still feature as a pair and the tragic nature of the tale is such that we see a more sombre side to Cummaine's own foolishness, as well as greater emphasis on Comgán's abilities as a professional entertainer. Finally, *Imthechta na dá n-Óinmhideadh,* 'The Adventures of the Two Idiot Saints' is an unfortunately fragmented text which is still lacking a full edition and translation. A section of it was included by Gearóid Mac Eoin in his edition of 'Suithchern and Rónán Dícolla'[68] and despite the broken text and the brief nature of Mac Dá Cherda's appearance, the short excerpt is still valuable evidence for his character and literary function.

What we have with Comgán Mac Dá Cherda is a complex and subtle variation on a Fool who, through the inclusion of the more traditionally foolish Cummaine Foda, becomes a textbook example of the ways in which Fools present in tangibly different ways to both Madmen and Tricksters. Though it is not possible to construct an exact, chronological bibliography for Mac Dá Cherda from birth to death, the texts that he makes an appearance in still allow us to put together a rough outline of his life. Mac Dá Cherda is presented as the son of Mael Ochtraig, himself a king of the Deisi, who is cursed by his father's druid for sleeping with his—that is the druid's—wife, rendering him *óinmit*. From this point on, however, although he is no longer considered "the material of a king"[69], his affliction means that "the grace of God came to him at last."[70] For all that we see Mac Dá Cherda being cursed by his father's druid, it is of particular note that the method of his cursing is remarkably peaceful, especially when compared to the cursing of Suibhne by St Ronan in *Buile Shuibhne* that will be seen in the following chapter. The curse takes the form of a *sop*, 'a wisp, a tuft'[71] on which the druid then "sings an incantation…and casts it in the face of Mac Da Cherda."[72] The cursing is gentle, and results in a generally peaceful foolishness as opposed to a violent madness. Mac Dá Cherda plainly benefits from his new state, as least as far as the narratives surrounding him are concerned, and through foolishness he is then granted remarkable, if not consistently clear, insight into the world around him.

The humour around Mac Dá Cherda is of a similarly gentle sort—it broadly lacks the slapstick and grotesque humour that abounds in archetypal portrayals of Fools (and often

[68] Gearóid Mac Eoin, 'Suithchern and Rónán Dícolla', *Zeitschrift Für Celtische Philologie*, 36 (1978), pp. 63–82.
[69] O'Keeffe, 'Mac Dá Cherda and Cummaine Foda', p. 35
[70] O'Keeffe, 'Mac Dá Cherda and Cummaine Foda', p. 35
[71] eDIL s.v. *sop*
[72] O'Keeffe, 'Mac Dá Cherda and Cummaine Foda', p. page 35

of Tricksters)—but it is still very much present. Indeed, as noted above, it is Cummaine Foda who provides the slapstick comedy when the duo appears, whilst Mac Dá Cherda stands as a more subdued manifestation of a Fool on his own. If anything, Mac Dá Cherda's abilities when his sense has fled him[73] can be read as a gentle parody of some of Christ's best-known miracles. What this does, in essence, is display Mac Dá Cherda's otherness in a more positive light, in order to separate him further from violent instances of madness and to emphasise the holiness of his condition. It renders his differences pitiable rather than fearful, safe and sanctified no matter how discomforting they may also be to those around him.

Mac Dá Cherda's monstrosity may not be immediately apparent but, nevertheless, it is possible to pick out some prominent and compelling themes of monstrosity within his character. His broadly consistent association with the term *óinmit* is the most direct when we accept the lamb-witted etymology of this term that was discussed above. When this is compared to the real-world instance of *cáeptha*, which the passage surrounding Mac Dá Cherda's cursing appears to directly allude to, we can add to this the legal implications of being othered and made a monster through the way in which he has been ousted from his previous social rank. Beyond this, however, one of the most engaging aspects of monstrosity that we can see with Mac Dá Cherda is linked to our relative lack of information of his life before he is cursed by his father's druid. *The adventures of Mac Dá Cherda* relates that he was accused of having committed adultery, but we can surmise almost nothing of his pre-curse personality from his appearances and, indeed, we might find some benefit in treating his cursing as a kind of rebirth or resurrection and, in turn, approaching him as a revenant of sorts.

The dead and undead in medieval literature more broadly are firmly rooted in the concept of divine knowledge and precognition. The death in question need not always be literal either, meaning that it is not so farfetched to consider Mac Dá Cherda's loss of his former life as a type of social death—a concept not dissimilar to outlawery or entry into a *fian* band—and to take his new, enlightened state as his resurrection.

Thus, when we add this state of being a social revenant of sorts to his divinely inspired utterances, Mac Dá Cherda quite comfortable fulfils even the most basic definition of a monster as that which acts as a divine messenger of catastrophe.

If we return, then, to the purpose of a Fool to their narrative, as was discussed in the section above, then we can see already that Mac Dá Cherda is capable of fulfilling

[73] O'Keeffe, 'Mac Dá Cherda and Cummaine Foda', p. 20-21

several of these expected roles. We have here a ‘natural’ Fool who also acts as a professional entertainer, a member of Cummíne Foda’s retinue who acts as a mirror to his saintly counterparts, and a figure capable of making chilling but accurate prophecies. The Fool, then, generally serves as a reflection or counterpart to a specific figure in a given tale or literary corpus, where their apparent exemption from the social norms largely frees them from the repercussions of any critical or mocking reflections on a powerful figure. As will be seen, this differs in important but subtle ways from how Madmen and, most importantly, Tricksters function in their tales.

Madmen

If Fools—both professional and natural—represent a balance that is more heavily weighted towards comedy, then Madmen are their opposite and can be considered to be weighted more towards monstrosity in their presentation. As with Fools, individual characters will inevitably exhibit some variance in this but in medieval literature more generally we find a much greater sense of violence and discomfort surrounding Madmen than there is surrounding Fools. This might show itself through the manner in which they gain their affliction or through their own actions during their madness but where many Fools invoke laughter or pity, Madmen are more likely to invoke a sense of fear or concern.

'Madness' is, at best, a rather nebulous term which likely contributes to the way in which these various character types have been conflated and confused for each other. Without attempting to pin modern diagnoses on medieval literary figures, we might best explain madness as the manifestation of acute or chronic psychological distress that could be caused by many factors. As was noted in the discussion above, the difference between Fools and Madmen—both of whom often exhibit some form of mental incapacity or instability—is that Madmen tend to appear in tales that feature a much more aggressive or violent tone, and we are shown far less, if any, comedy and far more monstrosity in their manifestations. The narrative worlds of medieval Irish literature are astonishingly violent places and, yet, tales of medieval Irish Madmen quite tangibly take this to another level. As a result, the Madmen that are found here in particular are remarkably enigmatic figures and their tales are ones which display some of the most iconic features of this literature. As with Fools, we can identify several terms that deal specifically with Madmen and with madness and the law tracts can offer us some insight into how contemporary (or near-contemporary) audiences may have understood and interpreted these characters.

Of the various terms for madmen, the most evocative is undoubtedly *dásacht* or *dásachtach*, 'madness, fury, panic'. Expanded definitions explicitly link this term with the presentation of rabies in dogs and bulls, with 'wild, ungovernable anger, frenzied rage, fury; warlike anger', and with demonic possession.[74] In legal terms, a *dásachtach* is a "person with manic symptoms who is liable to behave in a violent and destructive manner."[75] The most pertinent term to our exemplary madman below is *geilt*, for which the primary definition is 'one who goes mad from terror; a lunatic'[76], whilst secondary

[74] eDIL s.v. *dásacht*

[75] Fergus Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, (Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1988), p. 92

[76] Of note here is the expanded primary definition, which also offers 'a panic-stricken fugitive from battle; a crazy person living in the woods and supposed to be endowed with the power of levitation' which appears to

definitions of *geilt* also include 'sprite of the glen' and 'of birds and animals'. As we saw with the term *óinmit* for Fools, these secondary definitions tie in explicitly animalistic and even supernatural associations—immediately rendering the term as something de-humanising, othering and, especially in the case of *dásachtach*, demonising. The term *baile* (also rendered as *buile*) likewise denotes a 'vision; frenzy, madness (originally arising out of supernatural revelations)'[77] which ties intimately to the action of *Buile Shuibhne*—though neither this term nor its derivatives are used anywhere within the body of the text.[78]

Legally speaking, we can also identify some real-world distinctions being made between Madmen and Fools, with a greater sense of lenience granted to a person considered to be *drúth* compared to one considered to be *dásachtach*. The gentler form of incapacity is reflected in a general sense of patience with offences committed by someone considered *drúth*—Kelly describes one example whereby "injuries caused by missiles thrown by a *drúth* do not require compensation: it is clearly the responsibility of the passerby to keep out of the way"[79]—whilst the act of "tying up a *dásachtach* is given as a valid excuse for lateness in discharging a legal obligation"[80], suggesting that this form of mental incapacity was considered sufficiently dangerous to require restraint. A key difference between Fools and Madmen in their medieval Irish literary manifestations is that, with the Fool we see an outsider who still exists *within* society to some degree—they may be set apart and identifiably different but it is still possible for them to find some sense of purpose and belonging within a social group and, in the literature especially, their otherness and liminality serve important societal functions. The Madman, however, is a frequently solitary figure, displaying a hostility and sense of paranoia that—along with the violence that is often associated with them—sees them explicitly removed from society entirely, as a figure who "roams the wilds beyond the reach of human ties."[81]

Suibhne Geilt

There is no question that the definitive Madman of medieval Irish literature is Suibhne Geilt. This remarkable figure appears in only one key text but given its length and quality, *Buile Shuibhne* provides a wealth of material to work from and, as such, Suibhne

be a direct reference to the events of *Buile Shuibhne*: eDIL s.v. 1 *geilt*

[77] eDIL s.v. 2 *baile*

[78] Fergal Ó Béarra, 'Buile Shuibhne: Vox Insaniae from Medieval Ireland', in *Mental Health, Spirituality, and Religion in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age,* by Albrecht Classen (De Gruyter, Inc., 2014), p. 264

[79] Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, p. 92

[80] Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, p. 92

[81] Clancy, *'Saint and Fool'*, p. 25

makes for a particularly compelling example of the ways in which Madmen differ from Fools and Tricksters that can be found within the literature of medieval Ireland. When we hold Suibhne Geilt up against the criteria that were laid out above then it is easy to see without question that he is the madman *par excellence* of medieval Irish literature.

In relating specifically to the themes of humour and monstrosity that were outlined as key facets in understanding the nature of Fools, Madmen and Tricksters respectively, it goes rather without saying that Suibhne's tale is an extreme example of the way in which Madmen are weighted far more heavily towards the monstrous end of that spectrum. There is remarkably little humour to be found in *Buile Shuibhne*, save perhaps for the initial image of Suibhne running naked from his fort to confront Ronan in the first instance:

> *Rolonnaigedh & rofergaigedh go mór antí Suibhne & roéirigh go dian deinmneadhach do dhíochar an chléirigh ón chill. Tarraidh a bhainchéile .i. Eorann ingen Chuinn Chiannachta eiti an bhrait chortharaigh chorcra robhúi ime dia fhosdudh, go rosging fón teach an sioball airgid aeinghil co míneagur óir robhaoi san brat ós a bruinne. Lasodhain fágbaidh a bhrat ag an ríogain & dothaod roimhi lomnocht ina réim roiretha do dhíochar an chléirigh ón chill co riacht áit ina raibhe Rónán.*[82]
>
> "Suibhne was greatly angered and enraged, and he set out with the utmost haste to drive the cleric from the church. His wife Eorann, daughter of Conn of Ciannacht, in order to hold him, seized the wing of the fringed, crimson cloak which was around him, so that the fibula of pure white silver, neatly inlaid with gold, which was on his cloak over his breast, sprang through the house. Therewith, leaving his cloak with the queen, he set out stark-naked in his swift career to expel the cleric from the church, until he reached the place where Ronan was."[83]

Even this scene, however, has a darker undercurrent, as we see a clearly wealthy king being stripped, quite literally, of his reason, station and humanity. It is even from this scene that Ronan takes inspiration for the nature of his curse:

> *Lomnocht dodheachaidh sé sonn*
> *dom thochrádh is dom thafonn,*
> *as edh doghéna Día dhe,*
> *bídh lomnocht dogrés Suibhne.*[84]
>
> "Stark-naked he has come here

[82] J. G. O'Keeffe, *Buile Suibhne: The Frenzy of Suibhne. Being the Adventures of Suibhne Geilt: A Middle Irish Romance*, Irish Texts Society (Irish Texts Society, 1913), p. 2
[83] O'Keeffe, *Buile Suibhne*, p. 5
[84] O'Keeffe, *Buile Suibhne*, p. 4

to wring my heart, to chase me;
on that account God will cause
that Suibhne shall ever naked be."[85]

Much like Mac Dá Cherda in the previous section, it is a simple thing to look on Suibhne's transformation from king to madman as a mental and societal death of sorts, just as it is to interpret his wild flights across the country as involving either literal or metaphorical shapeshifting. The difference, of course, with Suibhne is that he *does* regain his sanity on occasion, leaving him in a deeply traumatic, transitional state betwixt "death" and undeath for which the only remedy is his literal, physical death. Torn from one state of being to the other, Suibhne's existence is marked by violence and upheaval which does not seem to grant him any particular prophetic or divine insight as we saw with Fools. In addition to this, Suibhne's multifaceted monstrosity is deeply rooted in his shapeshifting as a result of Ronan's curse, a state which has invited some comparisons to Cú Chulainn's battle-rage or *ríastrad*.[86] We have already seen the inherent monstrosity in shapeshifting and, as with Mac Dá Cherda's lamb-like associations, Suibhne's avian associations tell us much about the flavour of his monstrosity. Given his aggressive manner in the opening of the tale, it is fitting that his transformation is into a flighty, terrified creature that flits from tree to tree and flees from the first sight of chase or conflict.

Another element which makes Suibhne a particularly apt companion to Mac Dá Cherda at their respective ends of the Fool/Madman spectrum is the heavy involvement of saints in both of their tales. These saints serve, perhaps even more than the figures of Mac Dá Cherda and Suibhne themselves, to highlight the stark tonal differences between the two tales and, by association, between Fools and Madmen.

Where Cummíne Foda stands as the 'foolish saint' to balance Mac Dá Cherda's 'saintly fool', Suibhne's saints, Ronan and Moling, serve to highlight the violence inherent in his tale whilst also presenting two starkly different pictures of clerical figures. Without the inclusion of St Moling, the picture of Christian clerics given by *Buile Shuibhne* would be far from favourable. However the inclusion of St Moling in particular warrants deeper investigation—though his characterisation in *Buile Shuibhne* is of a charitable and kindly caretaker, this is only a small part of his story. As with Cummaine's more undignified appearance in *Scéla Guairi meic Colmáin ocus Meic Teléne* and his ultimately ruinous meddling in the relationship between the lovers in *Comrac Líadaine ocus Cuirithir*, Moling's broader tradition marks him as a curious figure who has more in common with

[85] O'Keeffe, *Buile Suibhne*, p. 9
[86] Ó Béarra, 'Buile Shuibhne: Vox Insaniae from Medieval Ireland', pp. 243 - 244

some of the Tricksters that we will see later than with the popular image of a saint[87]. Whilst there is not enough of this content to assess Moling as a fully realised Trickster without a great deal of further work on his character, it is interesting that it is this imperfect and frequently mischievous saint who was chosen as Suibhne's companion and redeemer.

What is the purpose, then, of Suibhne the Madman? We have here a king of the old order, representing a pre-Christian world in the process of change and, importantly, a pre-Christian king who we can comfortably frame as especially resistant to the process of conversion which Ireland is undergoing. We are never told within the text of *Buile Shuibhne* whether Suibhne's issue was with the Church more widely or if his pre-madness hostility was reserved for St. Ronan and his followers especially but regardless of the inner details of his antagonism, it appears to be a personal grievance given that those around him counsel him against rash action. Unlike Tricksters who, as we will see shortly, exert a good deal of power over their fate and the narrative that surrounds them, both Fools and Madmen often find themselves placed as victims of their narrative. Where Fools might stand as an external indicator of a moral or social issue, Madmen may be said to better reflect a case of immediate and personal action and consequence. Unlike the Fool, who acts as a reflection of an authority figure, and the Trickster who, as we will see, can be interpreted as a reflection of a social group as a whole, the Madman is a deeply individual character.

[87] For a selection of other tales about St. Molings, see: Stokes, Whitley. *The Birth and Life of St Mo Ling; Edited from a Manuscript in the Royal Library, Brussels, with a Translation and Glossary.* First, Privately printed by Harrison, 1907.

Tricksters

Moving on to Tricksters more generally now, the examples of Fools and Madmen that we have looked at briefly will serve as reference points for the related but fundamentally different ways in which Tricksters manifest in their tales. Whilst it is clear that Tricksters share some traits with both Fools and Madmen, the ways in which these traits manifest are unique to Tricksters and these characters retain their wits for the most part, possessing a vital intelligence that they may or may not hide behind a mask of irreverence or incompetence.

To my knowledge there are no specialised terms within Old or Middle Irish which denote a Trickster as we will come to understand them. A handful of terms appear to relate to the concept—namely *celgaire*[88] and *clúanaige*[89], both identified as 'deceiver, trickster', but of these options *celgaire* would appear to be a later term, whilst *clúanaige* purportedly appears in The Book of Leinster although I have, thus far, been unable to identify it in context. The term *monach,* which is found in the epithet of Forgall Manach, the father of Cú Chulainn's wife, would appear to denote one who is 'able to perform feats or tricks; dexterous, skilled'[90] and, thus, the interpretation of his epithet to mean 'Forgall the Trickster' might be better rendered 'Forgall the Skilled' since the term seems little concerned with the kinds of Tricksters that we are dealing with here.

This state of affairs is hardly surprising—the English term itself dates only as far as the early eighteenth century according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* which offers nothing more than the barest definition of "one who practices trickery, a rouge, a knave, a cheat."[91] It is only in the twentieth century that it became applied to literary figures as technical term.[92] Where we find these characters in works that predate this use of the term, they are described most frequently by their more general attributes and not collected under any definitive terms as we saw with Fools and Madmen. Given that we have no relevant linguistic term for Tricksters, it should come as no surprise, then, that we will not be able to identify any particular medieval Irish legal standing for them either. Tricksters are not a social class of their own—they can develop at any point of a social hierarchy as well as in any profession and, as we will see, they are best identified by their impact on the world around them and by some key personal traits. Ultimately, Tricksters might be said to be specifically literary and mythological characters who are not defined by the authors or

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[88] eDIL s.v. *celgaire*
[89] eDIL s.v. *clúanaige*
[90] eDIL s.v. *monach*
[91] Oxford English Dictionary, 'Trickster, n.' (Oxford University Press, 2023), Oxford English Dictionary <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/6743303063>
[92] Doty and Hynes, *Mythical Trickster Figures,* p. 14

composers of the tales in which they appear but, rather, by their audiences.
It should come as no surprise that Tricksters have long presented methodological difficulties for those who study them and, from these difficulties, two key positions have emerged on the nature of Tricksters. One, which follows the lead of Jungian psychology, speaks of the Trickster as "a universal archetype to be encountered within each of us and within most belief systems."[93] Whilst, at the other end of the spectrum, scholars opposing this concept have questioned the appropriateness of the term "Trickster" and broadly reject any attempts to draw comparisons between figures in disparate cultural and literary traditions.[94] This all-or-nothing approach cannot help but be extremely limiting and, as such, we will be striking a course between these two polarised positions, wherein many figures across many cultures can be seen to exhibit shared characteristics and a shared sense of narrative purpose, but with individual attributes which are specifically related to their own unique cultural contexts.

A Heuristic Guide

William J. Hynes, in the third chapter of *Mythical Trickster Figures*, maps out six characteristics which are shared by many Trickster figures who are both geographically and temporally diverse. These characteristics are not given as a hard rule for determining whether a character should or should not be counted as a Trickster but, rather, a "modest map, a heuristic guide, and common language for the more complex individual studies"[95] and serve to "invite and anticipate not only the intricacies of the careers of particular tricksters, but emendations from the reader as well as outmaneuverings by that multicultural and multiform figure"[96]. Hynes' characteristics which have been summarised below provide a foundation for thinking about how Tricksters operate in their own worlds, and will give us a guide for building a tentative definition that can be applied to figures from medieval Irish literature.[97]

The Trickster as *Ambiguous and Anomalous*: The first thing that one notices when laying out the shared characteristics of various Tricksters is that they are, more often than not, infuriatingly contradictory. In all of their many manifestations, Tricksters seem to work to defy any firm sense of definition and to break every border and limit that is put upon them. Hynes refers to the Trickster as "visitor everywhere, especially to those places

[93] Doty and Hynes, *Mythical Trickster Figures,* p. 4
[94] Doty and Hynes, *Mythical Trickster Figures,* pp. 4 -5
[95] Doty and Hynes, *Mythical Trickster Figures,* p. 33
[96] Doty and Hynes, *Mythical Trickster Figures,* p. 33
[97] For Hynes' full, unabridged guide, see: Doty and Hynes, *Mythical Trickster Figures,* pp. 34-44

that are off limits, the trickster seems to dwell in no single place but to be in continual transit through all realms marginal and liminal."[98]

The Trickster as *Deceiver and Trick-player*: As might be expected from their very name, we often find Tricksters flourishing in situations where they are able to deceive, manipulate, and play tricks on those around them. The tone of this deception can range broadly from malicious, to playful, to helpful and—as will be seen quite explicitly in the case of Leborcham and Bricriu mac Carbada—need not always involve outright lies. There is, in many cases, a sense of playfulness about Tricksters which may or may not be evident depending on the tone of the tales in which they appear but exists nonetheless.

The Trickster as *Shape-shifter*: Whilst the shape-shifting in question can be taken literally—we see Loki, for example, take on another form on several occasions in the medieval Norse sagas—it is worth bearing in mind that there are also metaphorical forms of shape-shifting which can be equally applicable to the skill set of the Trickster. These characters excel at social shape-shifting, finding themselves equally at home amongst friend or foe—an attribute which we also see with Loki, who treats with both Aesir and Jotun; with the Elven Trickster Solas from the *Dragon Age* video game franchise, who uses his position between the Evanuris and The Forgotten Ones to trick both groups into imprisonment[99]; and even with our own Bricriu mac Carbada, who we see flitting between Ulster and Connacht over the course of his life.

The Trickster as *Situation-Inverter:* The role of 'situation-inverter' relates to the Trickster's "ability to overturn any person, place, or belief, no matter how prestigious."[100] There is a degree of kinship between this aspect and the role of the Trickster as a deceiver/trick-player as it is, at times, the latter which allows them to act as a situation-inverter in the first place. This is the aspect that they share most closely with Fools who, as we saw earlier, demonstrate an ability to likewise turn the expectations of both the audience and their fellow characters on their head. The key difference is, of course, that a Trickster will often do this with some degree of intent—malicious, mischievous or genuinely helpful—in order to achieve a specific result. A pervasive undercurrent to this, however, is that this meddling does not always turn out in their favour—and we frequently see Tricksters becoming victims of their own schemes, even as their plans appear to work out.

The Trickster as *Messenger and Imitator of the Gods*: In this role we see the true, monstrous essence of the Trickster at play and this aspect of their character is tied closely

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[98] Doty and Hynes, *Mythical Trickster Figures,* p. 35
[99] *Dragon Age:Inquisition*, Directed by Mike Laidlaw, BioWare/Electronic Arts, 2014.
[100] Doty and Hynes, *Mythical Trickster Figures,* p. 37

to that of the Trickster as a literal or metaphorical shapeshifter. Hynes summarises it in the following way: "Often of uncertain or impure birth, the trickster can be both a messenger and an imitator of the gods. Admixing both divine and human traits, he can slip back and forth across the border between the sacred and the profane with ease. He may bring something across this line from the gods to humans—be it a message, punishment, an essential cultural power, or even life itself."[101] In addition to this, it is also worth including the way in which we might potentially0 regard the storyteller (whatever form they may take) as a 'divine' source in any given tale. As a result, a character who is a fully realised Trickster also becomes a tool, messenger, or even an imitator of the storyteller, who can be used to indicate moments of stagnation, of upheaval, and of importance. In this way, Tricksters are able to straddle the boundary between the story and the audience, never fully a part of either realm.

The Trickster as *Sacred and Lewd Bricoleur*: In this instance Hynes intends the term *bricoleur* to mean "a tinker or fix-it person, noted for his ingenuity in transforming anything at hand in order to form a creative solution."[102] Here, the Trickster is offered up as a fundamentally creative and transformative entity who "can find the lewd in the sacred and the sacred in the lewd, and new life from both."[103] In practice this means that we will often find the Trickster operating as the creative, driving force behind instances of societal or institutional change—acting as the 'mover of stories' discussed below. Their inherent liminality, their adaptability and willingness to play the villain to achieve their goals, and their apparent disregard for the personal social consequences of their actions means that they are in a unique position that allows them to break taboos and call traditions or societal rules into question.

Where Fools and Madmen display a greater degree of either monstrosity or comedy in their presentation, explicit manifestations of Tricksters tend to find an equilibrium between these two states over the course of their appearances. This is naturally far easier to identify in characters who appear in a wide range of tales but, as will be seen later in the case of Aniér Mac Conglinne, a similar balance can still be identified in more limited manifestations. The comedic or "foolish" aspect of Tricksters is often the most apparent but what sets a Trickster apart from a Fool immediately is the way in which, in most cases[104], a full manifestation of a Trickster is not naturally physically or mentally

[101] Doty and Hynes, *Mythical Trickster Figures,* pp. 39-40
[102] Doty, William G., and William J. Hynes, *Mythical Trickster Figures,* pp. 42
[103] Doty and Hynes, *Mythical Trickster Figures,* p. 42
[104] The most notable exception to this is Leborcham. However, as will be seen in her chapter, her physical

incapacitated, nor do they adopt such incapacity for a strictly professional reason. Whilst they may act foolishly on occasion, or find themselves the victim of their own schemes, there remains at all times a greater purpose for their actions—whether they, as a character, are conscious of it or not. A comparable example of this conscious adoption of foolish behaviour for not-quite professional reasons can be found in the *Skáldskaparmál* when, following the kidnapping and recovering of Idunn and the death of the Jötunn Þjazi, the Æsir make reparations to his daughter, Skaði.

> "Another condition of her settlement was that the Æsir must do something she thought they could not do: make her laugh. Then Loki tied one end of a cord to the beard of a goat and tied the other end around his own testicles. The goat and Loki started pulling back and forth, each squealing loudly until finally Loki fell into Skadi's lap, and then she laughed. With this, the Æsir concluded their part of the settlement with her."[105]

One theme which appears to present strongly where Tricksters are concerned is that of over-indulgence, often with comedic or grotesque results. Hynes comments that Tricksters seem "impelled inwardly to violate all taboos, especially those which are sexual, gastronomic, or scatological"[106] and it is a unique function of their character that they are able to make these violations generally without experiencing severe social repercussions. Whilst Fools can also be seen engaging in these forms of grotesque humour, immunity from repercussions is granted to them only as a result of their mental incapacity or their professional status. For our comparative example, consider the births of Loki's four monstrous children—Sleipnir, who is conceived when Loki takes the form of a mare to interfere with the building of a great wall around Asgard, along with Hel, Fenrir and Jörmungandr who were born to the giantess Angrboða. Despite these things being brought up and cast against them in the *Lokasenna*[107], none of these broken taboos result in Loki's final, definitive expulsion from society and neither does Loki themself appear to show any shame or remorse for them.

Related to the degree of social immunity that they experience, whilst Tricksters are capable of being deeply tragic figures at times, they are not generally possessed of a pitiable innocence or naivety in the way that some Fools are, nor are they entirely without reason as we might expect a Madman to be. Where 'madness' comes to them, it is very often the

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deformities do not appear to limit her in any way and, in fact, serve to highlight her alterity.

[105] Snorri Sturluson, and Jesse Byock [ed.], *The Prose Edda*, (Penguin Books, 2005), p. 83

[106] Doty and Hynes, *Mythical Trickster Figures,* p. 42

[107] Andy Orchard, [ed.], *The Elder Edda: Myths, Gods and Heroes from the Viking World* (Penguin Books, 2013), pp. 87 & 89. See verses 23 and 33 for direct references to Loki's giving birth.

direct result of their own actions and they generally retain their wits and mental faculties, instead displaying a capacity for calculated malice that sees them balancing on the very edge of true madness, whilst retaining at least some degree of self-awareness.

When Loki is finally captured by the Æesir, they are taken with their wife, Sigyn, and their two sons by her, Vali and Narfi to a cave where Vali is turned into a wolf and kills his brother, with Narfi's guts used to bind Loki to three stones. With a poisonous snake secured above their head, dripping poison that causes them convulse violently enough to cause earthquakes whenever Sigyn is not present to catch the poison in a bowl, they are bound until Ragnarök.[108] Such trauma would seem enough to drive any figure to unreasonable madness—the likes of which was seen with Suibhne—but when Loki next appears they are leading the forces of Hel into battle before meeting Heimdall in combat, to their mutual deaths[109]. Though their actions can certainly be read in a malicious light, there is no hint of the frenzied, manic violence that marks tales of Madmen.

Above all else, it is the way in which they act as a 'mover of stories' that truly sets a Trickster like Bricriu mac Carbada apart from the likes of Suibhne Geilt or Comgan Mac Dá Cherda. This phrasing for the defining aspect of the trickster figure is taken from a kenning for Loki, found in the 10th century skaldic poem *Haustlǫng,* ascribed to Þjóðólfr of Hvinir. Here, in a stanza which describes how he is carried off by the Jötun, Þjazi, in the form of an eagle, Loki is described as the *sorggærr sagna hrærir*—the 'pain-maddened mover of stories'.[110]

This phrase—'mover of stories'—goes a significant way to capturing the essence of how true Tricksters function across their various incarnations. As a Mover of Stories, as the narrative fulcrum, a fully realised Trickster is the figure that steers the tale towards its necessary conclusion—sometimes as an instigator of mischief, at other times as a scapegoat or peace offering, and at times even as the voice of caution or common sense. These figures, as a result, exist both within their narratives as a character bound by the laws of their universe and, yet, they also reach beyond the narrative with their very presence indicating some vital piece of information to the audience.

This position both within and outwith the narrative ties into Janik's comment, mentioned earlier, that there is a tangible motivation to the key actions of a Trickster that sets them apart from their literary peers. Whilst the in-text motivation may be simplistic or selfish and the Trickster themself may not express any indication of being aware of their greater function within the story, their choices nonetheless drive the story towards its preordained

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[108] Sturluson, and Byock [ed.], *The Prose Edda*, p. 70

[109] Sturluson, and Byock [ed.], *The Prose Edda*, p. 72-73

[110] William Sayers, 'Norse "Loki" as Praxonym', *Journal of Literary Onomastics*, 5 (2016), p. 22

conclusion. Unsurprisingly, it is our Norse example who displays this most neatly: Following the imprisonment of their three children with Angrboða, Loki disguises themself as an old woman in order to discover what weaknesses remain in Baldr, the son of Odin and Frigg and the shining star of the Æesir. On learning that Frigg has extracted an oath from all things—save the Mistletoe, which she deemed too young to make such an oath—to do her son no harm, Loki then fetches a bolt of mistletoe and deceives the blind god Höðr into casting it at his brother, killing him[111]. Baldr's death and consignment to Hel is the major catalyst for Ragnarök and the oaths secured by Frigg were part of Odin's attempts to escape his own fate and the doom of the gods. Even though Loki's motive appears on paper to be spiteful revenge for the imprisonment of their children, their interference was vital to push the events of the story to its preordained conclusion and to avoid the stagnation that Baldr's indefinitely continued existence would have caused. Baldr's place in Hel during the events of Ragnarök also ensured that he was one of the few Æesir to survive to see the world reborn[112]—something that could not have happened without Loki's interference.

If Fools serve the narrative purpose of lightening the severity of their story and relaying 'divinely' inspired information independent of personal motivation, and Madmen serve as stark warnings about transgressing social and natural boundaries, then Tricksters straddle these two positions. These are characters who appear to serve themselves, be it for material gain or a sense of mischief, but who nevertheless become key figures in the greater action of their tales. They have some degree of freedom to reject or meddle with the normative standards of their society to enlighten those around them to the folly of stagnation and the potential benefits of disobedience, but they often experience personal consequences which equally highlight the dangers inherent in (and thus the bravery or fortitude needed to) push back against the status quo. They can be used as a tool of the storyteller to explain *why* such social boundaries exist, or to signal to the audience that a great upheaval is about to occur. Their actions may, in the end, contribute to the 'natural' or inevitable triumph of their peers but it is just as likely that they might cause great harm. Likewise, where Fools act as a reflection of a singular significant figure, such and as king or a hero, and Madmen represent a much more personal and intimate example of action and consequence, Tricksters offer reflection on the state of their society as a whole. By standing a little apart from it, yet never being fully rejected by it, they force the audience to

[111] Sturluson, and Byock [ed.], *The Prose Edda*, p. 65
[112] Sturluson, and Byock [ed.], *The Prose Edda*, p. 77

question *why* things are the way they are and what would happen if that were to change. As a result, such characters can never be fully trusted by the others in their stories, nor by the audience, but neither can they be easily dismissed or ignored. Thus, when Cohen speaks of how "we distrust and loathe the monster at the same time we envy its freedom, and perhaps its sublime despair,"[113] he may as well also be speaking of Tricksters.

[113] Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome, *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, pp. 17

Outwith the Ulster Cycle

Before turning to the key Tricksters of the Ulster Cycle, let us first take a brief look at two figures who often come up in regard to Tricksters and Trickster-like figures within the broader world of medieval Irish literature. The purpose of this is twofold: first, the characters here demonstrate neatly that the general themes that we see around Tricksters and their ilk are applicable beyond the boundaries of the Ulster Cycle itself and secondly, they serve to demonstrate the ways in which even a character with limited appearances can still satisfactorily meet the requirements of the Trickster archetype. In addition to this, the inclusion of Manannán mac Lir below serves, in particular, to show how it is possible for a character to develop *into* a Trickster, despite not presenting in this way in their earlier appearances. One omission in this chapter is, of course, the figure of Lugh, who displays many of the traits that we might recognise as belonging to other trickster figures from international mythologies as well as those who are mentioned below. The reason for this omission is simple—Lugh is a figure with a vast influence across his appearances and to do his assessment any justice would require far more space than is available here.

Anier Mac Conglinne

An assessment of the myriad Trickster figures present in the literature of medieval Ireland cannot possibly be undertaken without making some reference to the Middle Irish text *Aislinge Meic Con Glinne* ('The Vision of Mac Conglinne') and to its leading character, Aniér Mac Conglinne. *Aislinge Meic Con Glinne* is a masterful work of deliberately crafted parody which allows us a glimpse of a clearly constructed Trickster figure, operating within a—narratively speaking—isolated environment. The value of this text as a tool to help us understand the nature of Tricksters within medieval Irish literature cannot be understated—the characterisation of Aniér Mac Conglinne is constructed from features which link him to more than one comparable figure, allowing us to better understand not only Mac Conglinne himself, but also the earlier characters that his characterisation may have drawn on. In Mac Conglinne we have a character who, despite a comparatively late point of origin, can provide us with a blueprint for how to approach other more prolific but more organically formed and complex Tricksters that can be found in the literature of medieval Ireland.

Called a "parodic tour-de-force"[114], *Aislinge Meic Con Glinne* is a tale which pulls no

[114] William Sayers, 'Diet and Fantasy in Eleventh-century Ireland: The Vision of Mac Con Glinne', *Food and Foodways*, 6.1 (1994), p. 11

punches with regards to the institutions and traditions that it parodies. Subtle and explicit in turns, it is a genuinely funny and deeply entertaining tale which displays a good deal of technical skill. The core narrative of *Aislinge Meic Con Glinne* is reasonably straightforward—especially when compared to the behemoth narrative web of the Ulster Cycle—and the textual history of the tale is likewise relatively uncomplicated by medieval Irish literary standards. It is a singular tale, preserved in two extant manuscripts—a longer version taken from the 15th century *Lebhar Breac,* referred to as the B text, and a shorter but potentially older version which is found in the 16th century Dublin, Trinity College, MS 1337, designated the H text. Whilst there are significant differences between the two—with Kuno Meyer considering the longer B text to be an "extravagantly embroidered production of a minstrel genius who had a special grudge against the church"[115]— the two versions presented by Meyer are united in the fundamental core of their story and, whilst the elaborations found in the *Lebhar Breac* version might be the work of a single enterprising satirist, it is these conscious expansions which concern us the most here since they have developed the figure of Aniér Mac Con Glinne extensively.

On the whole Aniér Mac Conglinne makes for a relatively uncomplicated portrait of a standalone trickster figure, who exhibits several of the traits that are vital to the character type. Many of the details of *Aislinge Meic Con Glinne* relate to wider features of international Trickster mythology whilst some can also be read as potential callbacks to specific figures from other medieval Irish tales.

On Mac Conglinne's introduction, the B text gives an etymology for his name, relating 'Aniér' to *anéra*, 'non-refusal'[116]; the validity of this etymology[117] is not what concerns us here, it is enough for now that this is the *intended* meaning of his name and is given as a representation of his character, as the concept of non-refusal ties him immediately to at least two other significant Trickster figures from the broader corpus of medieval Irish literature—as we will come to see, both Leborcham and Bricriu mac Carbada are described in a similar manner at times, and it is a vital aspect of their characters that allows them to fulfil their narrative roles. This theme of Tricksters being immune in some way or another to refusal, even from their social betters, is also visible in our most apt non-Irish comparison—having been ejected from the feast at Ægir's hall for killing one of the servants, Loki manages to regain entry despite all inside knowing that they will stir up

[115] Kuno Meyer [ed.] [trans.], *Aislinge Meic Conglinne: The Vision of MacConglinne : A Middle-Irish Wonder Tale*, (1892), p. xiii

[116] Meyer [ed.] [trans.], *Aislinge Meic Conglinne*, p. 8

[117] Kenneth Hurlstone Jackson, *Aislinge Meic Con Glinne*, (Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1990) p. 45

trouble by calling on their bond with Odin to ensure they cannot be turned away.[118]
One of the few specific details that we *are* given about Mac Con Glinne, however, is *ba sanntach so-accobrach mbánbíd in scolaige*[119] (greedy [and] desirous of whitemeats (dairy) was the scholar), whilst Mac Conglinne's own statement of *Inbuid ro bá-sa 'com' boith, iss ed do-gnínd, ina-m t[h]oirched co cend cóic tráth nó sé do blogaib, a taiscid co caithind I n-oen adaid*[120] ("when I was in my cell, what I used to do was to hoard what bits might reach me during five or six days, and then eats them in one night"[121]) ties him into the broader international theme of Tricksters being associated with overindulgence and unfulfillment. This personality trait also serves to muddy the waters with regards to his conflict with the monks of Cork—though we are repeatedly given examples of how meagre the hospitality is, can we place our trust in Mac Con Glinne's assessment of them when he is clearly a man who is never fully satisfied with his lot?
When he is introduced, Mac Con Glinne is a clerical student—notably not yet a fully-fledged priest or monk—who has just made up his mind to abandon his studies to take up the life of a poet. If we assume that he has, up until his decision to leave, not been recognised as a poet of any particular grade[122] then this leaves him in an awkward social position as he sets himself up wholly and deliberately as an outsider, detached from any specific hierarchy or institution. There is danger in this liminal state, as he discovers when he crosses the monks of Cork—it seems reasonable to assume that had he presented himself as a fellow cleric or as a recognised grade of poet that the situation may not have escalated quite as drastically as it does. However, despite the dangers of this position, it also affords him a remarkable degree of social freedom, not incomparable to the freedoms granted to itinerant *fían* bands that were discussed in the theory chapter.

There are two possible interpretations of Mac Conglinne's vision while he awaits his death and both serve the image of him as a Trickster well. If we take it as it is given in the text and accept that an angel granted him the vision[123]—which is not a far-fetched situation to accept within the narrative worlds of medieval Irish literature—then we see Mac Conglinne here fulfilling the Trickster's role of acting as a messenger of some form of

[118] Orchard [ed.], *The Elder Edda*, p. 84
[119] Hurlstone Jackson, *Aislinge Meic Con Glinne*, p. 4
[120] Hurlstone Jackson, *Aislinge Meic Con Glinne*, p. 10
[121] Meyer [ed.] [trans.], *Aislinge Meic Conglinne*, p. 24
[122] This assumption may stand on somewhat shaky ground but given that medieval Irish literature often makes a point of being clear on these specifics, it seems significant that we are not given any indication of Mac Con Glinne's official poetic standing.
[123] Hurlstone Jackson, *Aislinge Meic Con Glinne*, p. 11. See also Meyer [ed.] [trans.], *Aislinge Meic Conglinne*, p. 30 for translation.

divinity. This aligns him with other international Tricksters who are noted to act as divine or universal messengers—most significantly the Greek figure of Hermes, who we see acting as the herald of the Olympian gods, as a protector of travellers and newly dead souls, and as a divine Trickster.[124] An alternative interpretation of this sequence, however, is possible—Sayers appears to consider Mac Con Glinne's vision nothing more than the "product of a rare rich meal and comfortable night's sleep"[125] and, though the text and the narrative realities of medieval Irish literature more broadly quite comfortably support the legitimacy of Mac Con Glinne's vision, the idea of it being a particularly clever deception is not at odds with Mac Con Glinne as a masterful example of a Trickster toying with the narrative realities of his world and manipulating them to his advantage.

When Harrison writes of Mac Con Glinne's actions upon meeting with Píchan and Cathal being those of "the fool who is a disruptive, irreverent and obscene individual"[126] he misses the point that Mac Con Glinne is adopting a guise of foolishness not out of natural or inflicted mental incapacity, nor for any legitimately professional reasons, but for entirely tactical ones—it is a conscious and calculated disguise on his part, designed specifically to gain him access to Cathal and, ultimately, to save his own skin, without any apparent sense of shame or care for how he may be perceived. These are the actions of a Trickster, not of a Fool. This quick thinking is also displayed by his drinking from the well using his brooch-pin, which is a small but early display of his particular knack for calculated contrarianism.[127]

Despite this misinterpretation of the nature of Mac Con Glinne's foolishness, the immediately following assessment that Cathal's cure "could not take place by conventional means," and that it was "necessary for one who was outside of the normal boundaries of society"[128] to enact the solution is a perfect reflection of Mac Con Glinne acting in the Trickster's capacity as a divine messenger or gift giver, bestowing an otherwise impossible gift on mankind.

In fact, Mac Con Glinne is an almost textbook example of a Trickster—his gleeful antagonism of the monks of Cork sets him up to face certain death and it is only through his own quick-thinking and clever manipulation of the situation that he manages to

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[124] For a more detailed discussion of Hermes' varied roles, see: Allan, Arlene, and Taylor and Francis. *Hermes.* Routledge, an imprint of Taylor and Francis, 2018

[125] Sayers, 'Diet and Fantasy in Eleventh-century Ireland: The Vision of Mac Con Glinne', p. 9

[126] Harrison, *The Irish Trickster*, p. 25

[127] Meyer [ed.], *Aislinge Meic Conglinne*, pp.24-25: *Rosléic fæn for a lummain, atnaig a mér trīa drol a delci, ocus tummais rind in delgai dar a ais isin tiprait. In céin nobíd banna oc snige a cind in delca sís, nobíd in delc das a anáil./* He let himself down upon his cloak, supine, put his finger through the loop of his brooch, and dipped the point of the pin over his back in the well. And while the drop of water trickled down from the end of the brooch, the brooch was over his breath.

[128] Harrison, *The Irish Trickster*, p. 25

engineer a reprieve. Once he is in the presence of Cathal, he certainly succeeds in banishing the demon of gluttony and saving the province but the culmination of the action is a scene of sheer, unbridled chaos as Píchan's hall is set ablaze and he is left, doubtlessly, no better off in that moment than he would have been had Cathal succeeded in eating him out of house and home—such is the double-edged sword of the Trickster's help.

Manannán mac Lir

One of the most enduring figures in Irish mythology is undoubtedly Manannán mac Lir, a character who appears in tales across the vast corpus of Irish literature, from medieval to modern, and who manages to transcend the boundaries of cycles and genres to present as a wholly fluid and elusive creature, prone to meddling in the affairs of those around him seemingly on a whim. MacQuarrie considers this elusiveness to be one of Manannán's most significant characteristics[129] and, at a surface level, his actions certainly appear to align him with international Trickster figures. However, a deeper look at his appearances marks him out as a singularly complex character, bound up in a narrative history which sees him being adapted to suit a wide variety of purposes. Manannán makes an appearance in all four of the major bodies of medieval Irish literature, as well as featuring in some of the Dindsenchas. In an effort to offer some parity with the other figures included here the assessment of Manannán that follows has been restricted to a selection of his appearances in predominantly prose texts, taken from the four major cycles of medieval Irish literature. His appearances in the Dindsenchas have, for the sake of brevity, been set aside for the time being. The key tales which will be drawn upon are as follows:

We first meet Manannán in *Lebor Gábala Érenn*, 'The Book of the Taking of Ireland', when he arrives in Ireland with the other Tuatha Dé Dannan—Manannán's explicit appearances in this text are extremely fleeting, occurring only in brief mentions of his name and family in verse[130], whilst he does not appear at all in the related *Cath Maige Tuired*, 'The Battle of Mag Tuired' which expands upon the Tuatha Dé Dannan's defeat of the Fomorians. From here, his role within the Tuatha Dé Dannan is catapulted to new heights in *Altram tige dá medar*, 'The nurturing of the house of two milk-vessels'[131]. From a character who was only mentioned in passing in *Lebor Gábala Érenn*, he is now given as

[129] Charles William MacQuarrie, *The Waves of Manannán: A Study of the Literary Representations of Manannán Mac Lir from Immram Brain (c. 700) to Finnegans Wake (1939)*, (UMI Disseration Services, 1997), p. 1

[130] Koch, John T., and John Carey, *The Celtic Heroic Age: Literary Sources for Ancient Celtic Europe & Early Ireland & Wales*, 4th edn (Aberystwyth: Celtic Studies Publications, 2021), p. 262

[131] Duncan, Lilian [ed.], "Altram Tige Dá Medar", *Ériu* 11 (1932): 184–225.

an overking of the Tuatha Dé Dannan following the battle of Mag Tuireadh, responsible for setting the various members of the Tuatha Dé Dannan in their proper places and ensuring that they abide by their own laws.

In the Ulster Cycle, Manannán spends much of *Serglige Con Culainn*, 'The Wasting Sickness of Cú Chulainn', as a shadowy background presence, only appearing at the conclusion of the tale once his wife, Fand, has made the decision to return to him[132]. Whilst in a brief allusion in the epic *Táin Bó Cuailnge*, 'The Cattle Raid of Cooley', Manannán appears predominantly as an Otherworld helper to Cú Chulainn in his lone defence of Ulster against the incursions made by the assembled armies of the rest of Ireland[133].

One of his most iconic appearances, in *Immram Bran*, 'The Voyage of Bran', is layered with curious imagery and presents Manannán in a fascinating light, whilst also offering a great deal of insight into the development of his character[134]. The tale which follows on from this appearance, *Compert Mongáin*, 'The conception and birth of Mongán', is a relatively brief tale which follows Manannán as he fathers Mongán on the wife of Fiachna Lurga and then subsequently assists Fiachna in battle in Scotland and England[135].

In the Middle Irish *Cuach Cormaic*, 'Cormac's Cup', Manannán is once again found as a somewhat shadowy and distant figure, though less so than his appearance in *Serglige Con Culainn*, and as the architect of the curious otherworld that Cormac finds himself visiting on the search for his wife and children[136]. This portrayal of Manannán is, similarly to his role in *Altram tige dá medar*, chiefly concerned with proper kingship and with the bestowal of knowledge but the difference is in its execution. He then makes two fleeting appearances in the thirteenth century *Acallam na Senórach*—in a tale dealing with the Wave of Clidna[137] and in another dealing with the seduction of Manannán's wife.[138] Of these two, it is the latter which offers the most insight into Manannán's character and allows us to draw more connections with themes which relate to international Trickster figures.

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[132] Dillon, Myles [ed.], *Serglige Con Culainn*, Mediaeval and Modern Irish Series, 14, Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1953

[133] Kinsella, Thomas [tr.], *The Tain: translated from the Irish epic Táin Bó Cuailnge*, London: Oxford University Press, 1969, p. 150.

[134] Mac Mathúna, Séamus, *Immram Brain: Bran's Journey to the Land of the Women*, Buchreihe der Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie, 2, Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1985.

[135] John T. Koch, and John Carey (eds), *The Celtic Heroic Age. Literary sources for ancient Celtic Europe and early Ireland & Wales*, 4th ed., 1, Aberystwyth: Celtic Studies Publications, 2003, p. 217 – 218.

[136] John T. Koch, and John Carey (eds), *The Celtic Heroic Age. Literary sources for ancient Celtic Europe and early Ireland & Wales*, p.184 - 187

[137] Ann Dooley, and Harry Roe, *Tales of the Elders of Ireland*, Oxford's World Classics (Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 113-116

[138] Dooley and Roe, *Tales of the Elders of Ireland*, pp. 111-112

Although it is a sixteenth century text and therefore, strictly speaking, falls outwith the scope of this study, it is difficult to discuss Manannán mac Lir's relationship to Trickster figures without at least a passing mention to the Early Modern Irish text *Eachtra cheithearnaigh Uí Dhomhnaill*, 'The adventure of Ó Domhnaill's kern'. In this text we see Manannán (though he is not revealed as such until the conclusion of the tale) acting as a mischievous wanderer, whose temperament is as changeable as the weather[139]. Whilst this text will not be referenced in any great detail, it is worth bearing it in mind as we consider how Manannán's character has developed in the manuscript tradition.

In spite of the long shadow cast by the euhemerisation of the Tuatha Dé Dannan, the picture painted of them is still one of a vastly powerful kindred who are well versed in the magical arts and who produce several mighty warriors. As a member of the Tuatha Dé Dannan, Manannán belongs to a kindred with a significant pedigree and, as such, it is possible to make some generalisations about his character simply from his association with such a group—beginning with his inherent liminality and monstrosity. Whether we understand them as gods, half-fallen angels, or as inordinately powerful (but ultimately mortal) sorcerers, they are plainly a breed apart from the decidedly *human* Mílesians who they lose control of Ireland to in *Lebor Gábala Érenn* and to the Gaels who descend from them, even if we see them most frequently in a human-like guise. This alone would mark them as *other* to the human society that they operate within in the narratively later tales. Manannán's particular associations with the sea/water also serve to further this sense of otherness and liminality, as do some of his other significant attributes within the medieval corpus of texts that we find him in. The way in which he is apparently capable of altering the very perceptions and fates of the people around him—as with his cloak which is waved between Cú Chulainn and Fand to prevent them from meeting again at the conclusion of *Serglige Con Culainn*, or which is worn by Cú Chulainn during the *Táin Bó Cuailnge*—is the mark of an extremely powerful entity, euhemerised or not.

Beyond his inclusion amongst the ranks of the Tuatha Dé Dannan, Manannán's parentage is not as straightforward as his name might suggest. The association with the figure 'Ler' as his father appears relatively late in the literature[140] and, as a result, I would propose that rather than the name 'mac Lir' (literally, *son of the sea*) being intended to denote Manannán's prowess as a sailor, that it may instead refer to a more literal origin—that

[139] O'Grady, Standish Hayes, *Silva Gadelica (I–XXXI): a collection of tales in Irish*, vol. 2: *translation and notes*, London: Williams & Norgate, 1892, p. 311-324

[140] M. A. Williams, *Ireland's Immortals: A History of the Gods of Irish Myth*, Book, Whole (Princeton University Press, 2016), p. 251

Manannán's great power and sense of a being set apart even from the other Tuatha Dé Dannan might be understood to stem from a quite literal elemental 'parentage'. Indeed, reading Manannán as a personification of the sea, or at least as bearing the qualities of the sea in his character, allows us to view him as a remarkably changeable sort—calm and bearing life in abundance but equally capable of turning to stormy rages—and that is reflected across his many appearances. Whilst MacQuarrie notes that the last line of *Immram Brain—mescaid foirci co-mbi fuil /*'he stirs the sea until it is blood'[141]—is the "most mysterious of all"[142], when he is assessed as a Trickster this line begins to be illuminated. Here we see the function of the Trickster as a mover of stories at play in Manannán's character at the most basic level whilst he is revealing to Bran and his party the path to the Otherworld—"creation in terms of revelation"[143] as MacQuarrie calls it. On a deeper level, however, this line might be taken as a reference to the Trickster as an inverter of situations. This visceral imagery of a peaceful sea being churned until it resembles blood calls to mind the inherent strife-stirring abilities of many Trickster figures and also ties into the unpredictable nature of the sea itself.

When Manannán appears, he is frequently associated with the bestowal of certain gifts and items. We have already briefly mentioned the cloak of concealment that Cú Chulainn uses during the events of the *Táin Bó Cuailnge* but Manannán is also associated with the bestowal of more ephemeral gifts—wisdom and knowledge. In *Cuach Cormaic* we find a much more clear-cut association with Manannán and a genuine sense of good kingship, where the lessons that Cormac learns enhance his rule and any trickery on Manannán's part is ultimately rendered harmless with the return of his family. In *Altram tige dá medar*, however, Manannán's advice and counsel is suspect at best. His advice to Oengus can be ungenerously interpreted as direct meddling in the lordship of Brug na Bóinde and, although he gains control of the *síd*, it cannot be said that Oengus ends the tale in a particularly envious position given the loss of his most cherished ward to mortality and death.

Though MacQuarrie posits that "it is possible that part of the "druidry" that Cú Chulainn is conceived of having learned from Manannán is his *riastrad*"[144], I am inclined to disagree—though we see Manannán acting at times as a patron of warriors, this most commonly comes in the form of gifts of armour or concealment. Cú Chulainn's distinctive transformation in battle aesthetically owes much more to his descent from Lugh and, by

[141] MacQuarrie, *The Waves of Manannán,* p. 22
[142] MacQuarrie, *The Waves of Manannán,* p. 25
[143] MacQuarrie, *The Waves of Manannán,* p. 25
[144] MacQuarrie, *The Waves of Manannán,* p. 120

association, the Fomorians and serves as a reminder of his monstrous lineage which sets him apart from the other warriors of Ulster. It is a trait which he has exhibited since childhood and does not appear to have been a druidic skill learned from anyone, least of all Manannán. Although Manannán may possess some shapeshifting abilities, as is implied in stanza 17 of *Immram Brain— In delb é no-fethi-su, ro-icfa it lethi-su: arum-thá echtra[e] día taig, cosin mnái i lLinemaig./* "The shape on which you are looking will come into your land: before me lies a voyage to her house, to the woman in Mag Len."[145]—his shapeshifting shares nothing in common with the visceral and inherently violent image produced by Cú Chulainn's *riastrad.*

Related to his position as one who bestows knowledge, Manannán's appearance in *Immram Brain* with the rising sun invites some particularly interesting comparisons to other figures from international mythologies. Whilst MacQuarrie rightly dismisses the interpretation of Manannán as a Sun God as overly simplistic[146] there is still value to be found in assessing Manannán's role as a bringer of light—and of knowledge—in association with other Trickster figures such as Loki, Hermes, and Lucifer/Satan. Manannán's explicit association with truth and falsehood in *Cuach Cormaic* is likewise related to this occupation as one who bestows knowledge and revelation. Here, he is once again primarily concerned with good kingship, but he leads Cormac through the process of revelation in a way that can be read unambiguously as a form of gentle trickery.

If comparisons may be drawn between Manannán and any other figures then it is not to Loki that we ought to look, but rather to Odin.[147] This does not negate his Trickster-like qualities but, rather, simply serves to muddy the waters a little by also adorning his character with a great many other functions. He is not only the self-serving manipulator and accomplished magician that he has become by his later appearance in *Eachtra cheithearnaigh Uí Dhomhnaill*, but also a paragon of truth, justice, and in many ways the guardian of the other members of the Tuatha Dé Dannan in tales like *Altram tige dá medar*. In this sense, he has taken over spiritually from the image of The Dagda—who himself exhibits some explicit Trickster-like traits in *Cath Maige Tuired*—and his depictions as a traveller/wanderer between realms likewise links him to this function. In personality we are presented with a character who is fundamentally wise and level-headed—though certainly not exclusively so—but this concern with the proper place of things does not appear to extend to himself. On two occasions, in *Serglige Con Chulainn* and in his second

[145] MacQuarrie, *The Waves of Manannán,* p. 34
[146] MacQuarrie, *The Waves of Manannán,* p. 23
[147] Spaan also makes this association: David B. Spaan, 'The Place of Manannan Mac Lir in Irish Mythology', *Folklore*, 76.3 (1965), p. 179

appearance in *Acallam na Senórach* he is apparently content to see his wife with another man, despite the power that he is demonstrably capable of exerting to address such a situation. Whilst it may be possible to attribute this to his own sense of power and security, it also reflects an attitude towards marriage that we can consider ultimately atypical for the period in which these tales were recorded. As a result, it is worth drawing tentative lines between these presentations of Manannán and the sense of sexual and marital freedom that we find in international Trickster figures.

Whilst Manannán clearly acts in a trickster-like fashion on occasion, I am not wholly convinced of his role as a Trickster in the surviving medieval literature. One of the key roles that Tricksters fulfil is to challenge the status quo of the society they are written within or written for, thus allowing for progress and warding off stagnation—and whilst this can be achieved through the bestowal of knowledge or powerful gifts, as we see Manannán doing in several of his appearances, his actions largely serve to explicitly *reinforce* the social or universal status quo in tales where he features and we see him routinely concerned with setting and maintaining the 'proper' order of things. That being said, in his medieval manifestations we *can* begin to see the attributes which allowed him to develop into the Trickster figure that he has become by the time of his appearance in *Eachtra cheithearnaigh Uí Dhomhnaill*.

Bricriu mac Carbada

In a corpus that is populated by fascinating and complex characters, Bricriu mac Carbada stands as one of the most curious personalities that we meet in the Ulster Cycle. Despite this, there is still a conspicuous dearth of scholarship dealing with his involvement and role within these stories and the scholarship that does exist inevitably fails, for the most part, to delve beyond a surface-level assessment of his character. A full and in-depth reassessment of Bricriu's involvement in the Ulster Cycle is desperately needed but for now it will have to suffice to see him set side-by-side with his literary peers, where he emerges as the Trickster *par excellence* of not just the Ulster Cycle but of medieval Irish literature as a whole.

Despite appearing in many of the Ulster Cycle tales, the assessment of Bricriu's character here has been restricted to some of his most notable and key appearances—in part to offer a rough sense of parity with the other figures being assessed but also on account of the fractured nature of some of the texts in which he plays a role. The most notable omission here is *Mesca Ulad*, 'The Intoxication of the Ulstermen', which deserves a complete reassessment before Bricriu's involvement can be fully appreciated, and *Echtra Nerai*, 'The Adventures of Nera', which is here absorbed into the assessment of his death at the end of the *Táin Bó Cuailnge*. Other tales—such as the longer, later version of *Táin Bó Flidhais*, mentioned briefly below—are too late to be of concern to this particular study.

Scéla mucce meic Dathó

Scéla mucce meic Dathó, 'The Tale of Mac Datho's Pig', is preserved in six manuscripts of varying ages and faithfulness, with the earliest copy—from *Lebor Laignech*—dating to c.1160, whilst Thurneysen places the composition of the tale itself to c.800.[148] This tale in particular is frequently looked upon as a deliberately constructed parody of the Ulster Cycle, with scholars generally pointing to the absence of Cú Chulainn and to the neat construction of the narrative which places *Scéla mucce meic Dathó*, as it has survived to us, as one of the best written of all the Ulster Cycle episodes.[149] These assessments, Gantz's introduction to his translation of the tale in particular, often take on an undertone of dismissal[150]—as though the tale's parodic, enduringly funny, and

[148] Rudolf Thurneysen [ed.], *Scéla Mucce Meic Dathó*, Mediaeval and Modern Irish Series (Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1935), p. iv

[149] Thurneysen, *Scéla Mucce Meic Dathó*, p. i

[150] Whilst Gantz's interpretations and translations are lacking, his views here serve to neatly illustrate the problems that interpretations of this tale have faced and, given the popular availability of Gantz's collection, this bias often becomes one of the first critical approaches to these tales that many people will encounter.

entertaining nature in some way diminishes it as a legitimate part of the Ulster Cycle corpus—but this is a woefully reductionist approach to a tale which adds a great deal to the narrative universe that it belongs to, as well as to the characters that we find within it. Indeed, Gantz's introduction boldly questions the antiquity of the tale and invites us to consider that "it is hard to resist the conclusion that 'The Tale of Macc Da Thó's Pig' is at [sic] later story, a parody of the Ulster Cycle in general and of 'The Cattle Raid of Cúailnge' in particular."[151] In this he has hit on something particularly interesting and, yet, run off at quite the wrong angle as we will see. B. K. Martin, on the other hand, initially dismisses *Scéla Mucce Meic Dathó* as a work of parody, considering the early date posited by Thurneysen as "rather early for a *jeu d'espirit*."[152] If Thurneysen's assessment of the age of the tale is accepted—and I see no good reason why it ought not to be—then it places *Scéla mucce meic Dathó* amongst some of the very earliest of the Ulster Cycle tales which have survived to us. An early date of composition does not, in any way, make its deliberate construction as a parody impossible but, rather, lends a great deal more weight to the way in which it might function as a piece of parody and will allow us to interrogate the purpose of its place within the Ulster Cycle a little more closely.

The core narrative of *Scéla Mucce Meic Dathó* sees Connacht and Ulster in a bloody, equally matched contest over an animal which results in devastating violence and great losses on both sides, whilst Ulster's technical victory is decided in the end by the involvement of a single hound. Their victory is an ultimately hollow one, however, given the mass casualties on both sides and the eventual violent loss of the remarkable animal which sparked the initial conflict. In this, *Scéla mucce meic Dathó* is essentially the *Táin Bó Cuailnge* in miniature, rather than an outright mockery of the epic. Buttimer's reappraisal of *Scéla mucce meic Dathó* also begins to touch on this idea when he questions the significance that is often attributed to the contest for the *curadmír*, or the champion's portion, and instead notes of Mac Dathó that "as a Leinsterman, he is delicately poised between the rival concerns of the other provinces."[153] By removing the conflict to a geographically liminal space, in neither Ulster nor Connacht, the tale emphasises how equally matched these two provinces are and neatly sets up the devastating consequences that their continuing conflict will have.

Bricriu's appearance in *Scéla mucce meic Dathó* consists of one spoken line which,

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Jeffrey Gantz, *Early Irish Myths and Sagas* (Penguin, 1981), pp. 179-180.

[151] Gantz, *Early Irish Myths and Sagas* (Penguin, 1981), p. 180

[152] B. K. Martin, 'The Medieval Irish Stories about Bricriu's Feast and Mac Dathó's Pig', *Parergon*, 10.1 (1992), p. 86

[153] Cornelius G. Buttimer, 'Scéla Mucce Meic Dathó: A Reappraisal', *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, 2. (1982), p. 64

nevertheless, becomes the narrative fulcrum on which the entire tale turns.

> *'Cindas rainnfither in mucc, a Chonchobuir?' ol Ailill.*
>
> *'Cīa indas' ol Bricne mac Carbaid anúas ane asind imdai, 'bale i taat láith gaile fer n-Ērenn sund, acht a-rrann ar chomramaib? Ocus do rat cách díb builli dar sróin a chēili riam.'*[154]
>
> 'In what manner will the pig be divided, Conchobar? said Ailill.
>
> 'In what other way,' said Bricriu mac Carbada from the couch above, 'where the valorous warriors of Ireland [are] here [assembled], except [by] dividing on account of a competition? For everyone [here] has dealt a blow across the nose of his companion before.'

From here the drama almost immediately unfolds, with the Connachta and the Ulaid pitting themselves against each other, until it culminates in the final, devastating melee and the ultimate death of the hound that both provinces had been vying for.

Scéla mucce meic Dathó is a tale that deals explicitly in themes of honour, honesty, and duplicity so it comes as no surprise to find Bricriu appearing to deliver his singular, decisive line. He stands as counterbalance to Mac Dathó himself, who "uses the device of silence, as we have seen, to retain his honor and to advance the action of the story."[155] Bricriu, meanwhile, is the one to break that silence and actually drive the story forward to its inevitable conclusion. Whilst it would be hypothetically possible for any other figure to deliver his suggestion, Bricriu's appearance here is particularly significant. If we continue to understand *Scéla mucce meic Dathó* as the *Táin Bó Cuailnge* in miniature, whether it was composed as a deliberate parody or not, then Bricriu's positioning in this tale is a reflection of his later position in the *Táin*—he stands between (or, as in this case, above) both Connacht and Ulster, favouring neither side explicitly, and prompts them to action. His appearance in *Scéla mucce meic Dathó* is also, perhaps, the most clear-cut example that we have of him acting as a "divine" messenger of the narrator, explicitly signposting to the audience that the events which are about to follow are significant.

Fled Bricrenn

We find Bricriu taking on a far more prominent role in *Fled Bricrenn*, 'Bricriu's Feast', wherein he successfully baits Ulster's three most notable heroes—Cú Chulainn, Conall Cernach, and Lóegaire Búadach—into a contest to determine which of them is the true champion of the province. Preserved in five key manuscript sources, with

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[154] Thurneysen, *Scéla Mucce Meic Dathó,* p. 7, lines 6-10.

[155] Buttimer, 'Scéla Mucce Meic Dathó: A Reappraisal', p. 64

the earliest—*Lebor n hUidre*—dating to the twelfth century, *Fled Bricrenn* is amongst the oldest extant Ulster Cycle tales. The various manuscripts each present fragments of the texts and are not without their difficulties, including significant interpolations by the scribe known as H.[156]

We are not given a definitive reason for Bricriu's decision to host this feast within the text of *Fled Bricrenn* but it is possible to come to a few conclusions about his motivations. It is entirely possible to ascribe this scheme to some inherent, reasonless mischief on the part of Bricriu—that perhaps things in Ulster were far too settled and stable for his liking and he simply wished to shake things up a little. However, if we place the events of *Mesca Ulad,* 'The Intoxication of the Ulstermen', directly before those of *Fled Bricrenn*, then another potential motivation reveals itself to us. After the forces of Ulster have blundered drunkenly into Munster, an argument arises on several occasions as to which of them is the best of the warrior of the Ulaid. Although Cú Chulainn is eventually chosen on Senchae's advice on all bar one of these occasions, his advice throughout the tale is proven to be imperfect and, indeed, even results in the Ulaid being trapped in an iron house which is then set aflame. Despite their eventual escape from this adventure, the events of *Mesca Ulad* demonstrate neatly the perils that this lack of a clear champion can pose, most prominently when their best warrior is asked to choose a house and "*ra érig imresun [ ] ac Ultaib immi sin. At-raachtatar cét curad comchalma díb ara n-armaib in n-óenfecht"*[157] (A dispute arose amongst the Ulaid about that. A hundred equally valorous champions rose as one for their weapons), with only the intervention of Senchae, Conchobar's chief adviser, pacifying them for the time being.

With the status quo in Ulster being settled on this state of indecision and stagnation over who their greatest champion is, the province faces a certain amount of risk. It is clear from the nature of society in the Ulster Cycle that the honour of these characters demands that the matter should be settled definitively when it arises, and should that occur as they face invasion from Connacht, as in the *Táin Bó Cualnge*, from another aggressor, or in the midst of another catastrophe then the result has the potential to destroy Ulster in its entirety. Furthermore, *Mesca Ulad* demonstrates early on that Senchae is not always present or necessarily willing to intervene when the Ulaid take up arms against each other, rendering his ability to pacify them wholly unreliable. What Bricriu achieves, then, by

[156] For a fuller discussion on the structure of *Fled Bricrenn* before and after H's interpolations, see: Slotkin, Edgar M., 'The Structure of Fled Bricrenn before and after the Lebor Na hUidre Interpolations', *Ériu*, 29 (1978), pp. 64–77

[157] J. Carmichael Watson, *Mesca Ulad*, Mediaeval and Modern Irish Series (Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1941), p. 38

setting up this feast and quietly winding the heroes and their wives up to a fever pitch is setting that conflict in a place of relative safety, where the matter is resolved with only a handful of deaths and some minor property damage.

Táin Bó Flidais

One of the 'lesser Táins', *Táin Bó Flidais*, 'The Raid of Flidais' Cattle' is preserved in two separate redactions, across several manuscripts, with the longer Early Modern Irish version preserved in the fifteenth century Glenmasan Manuscript greatly expanding on Bricriu's role and character. The older and shorter version, however, still grants us a view of his role within the Ulster Cycle which pairs neatly with how he is presented in the *Táin Bó Cuailnge* in particular.

With the earlier version appearing in *Lebor na hUidre* and *Lebor Laignech*[158], thus making it at least a twelfth century tale, *Táin Bó Flidais* follows Fergus mac Roich and his assortment of Ulster Exiles once they have settled with Ailill and Medb in Connacht as a result of the events of *Longes Mac nUislenn*. It also provides some background as to how Flidhais' herd came to supply the armies of Ireland during the events of the *Táin Bó Cuailnge*, thus allowing Connacht's mass march on the province of Ulster.

Bricriu's involvement in the earlier version of the *Táin Bó Flidais* is, as with many of his other key appearances, remarkably small. Once Fergus and the Ulster Exiles have found themselves entrenched in a siege against Ailill Finn, Bricriu and Ailill mac Máta appear at the edge of the conflict where the Fergus' forces are being roundly humiliated to discuss, apparently quite nonchalantly, how the battle is going.

> *Nírbo sén maith dolodbair ol Bricriu do saigid in duni seo. Adde is fir ci atberthar son or Ailill mac Mata. Olc do inchaib Ulad in fechtas so na tri eclaind do thutim dib & nad tabrat dígail fair. Ba háge immairic cach fer díb seo. nícon torchair cid óenfer lais nách ai díb. It móra ám na tri córaid seo do bith fo sopaib fer in duni seo. Mor in cutbiud in t-óenfer do far nguin for tríur. Uch cena for Bricriu is fota a chubat for lár mo phoba Ferguis ce ro trascair óenfer.*[159]
>
> "It was with no good omen," said Bricriu, "that you came to attack this fort."
>
> "Indeed, it is true what you say," said Ailill mac Máta. "Bad for the honour of the Ulaid this expedition, their three champions fallen and they take no vengeance for

[158] Note that there are still some significant differences between these two texts, though they both retain the fundamental core of the story. Excerpts here are taken predominantly from the *Lebor na hUidre* version, with supplementary readings from the *Lebor Laignech* version where it aids with clarity.

[159] Richard Irvine Best, and Bergin Osborn, *Lebor Na hUidre: Book of the Dun Cow* (Hodges, Figgis, 1929), p. 56.

it. Truly great are these warriors to be under [such] wisps [as] the men of this fort. Great is the shame that one man has wounded the three of you." "Woe indeed!" said Bricriu. "Long is the length on the ground, my *popa* Fergus, since one man laid [you] low."

The goading of the pair is enough to rouse the men of Ulster to action, resulting in the successful storming of the castle and the carrying off of the women and Flidhais' herd. Ailill's involvement in this passage will be dealt with at a later point, but here we see Bricriu fulfilling what must have been his most useful function to the Ulaid and, perhaps, the reason his presence was tolerated. A comparison might be drawn between Bricriu's goading of Fergus here, and Láeg's goading of Cú Chulainn during his fight with Fer Diad in the *Táin Bó Cuailnge*.

Táin Bó Cuailnge

Bricriu appears only three times in the main body of the *Táin Bó Cuailnge*, 'The Cattle Raid of Cooley', but in spite of this, his appearances here go a great way towards helping us understand his character and his function within the Ulster Cycle.

His first appearance is in mention only—when Fergus mac Roich is recounting some of Cú Chulainn's boyhood deeds, he indicates that Bricriu was present for the episode where Cú Chulainn breaks the stone blocks that he is sleeping on when he is woken by the wailing of the defeated Ulstermen.

'Sínithi íarom co mmemdatar in dá liic ro bátár immi. Hi fiadnaise Bricriu ucut dorónad,' ol Fergus.[160]

"Then he stretched himself so that the two flag-stones which were about him smashed. Bricriu yonder witnessed this happening,' said Fergus."[161]

This mention, although made only in passing, cements his presence in Connacht's camp with the other Ulster exiles, and the fact that Fergus—often at odds with Bricriu over the course of the Ulster Cycle and at times one of his most vocal detractors—is comfortable offering his word as a guarantee of Cú Chulainn's prowess at such a vital moment, speaks to the power of his character.

His second appearance is found during the single combat between Cú Chulainn and Lóch at the ford. Following Cú Chulainn's earlier rejection of the Morrígan, she interferes with the fight in the form of an eel, tripping the lone defender of Ulster and leaving him open and vulnerable to a fierce attack from Lóch.

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[160] Cecile O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúailnge, Recension 1*, (Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1976), p. 16, lines 485-487

[161] O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúailnge, Recension 1*, p. 138

‘Olc ón óm,’ ‘for Fergus,’ ‘a n-gním sin h-i fíadnaisi námat! Gressed nech úaib, a firu,’ ‘for sé fria muintir,’ ‘in fer nár tháeth i n-ascid.’ Atraig Bricriu Nemthenga mac Carbatha & gabais for gressacht Con Culaind.‘Ro scáich do nert,’ ol sé,‘in tan is bratán bec dattrascair in tan dofil Ultu asa ces chucut. Dolig duit gním n-erred do gabáil fort h-i fíadnaisi fer n-Érend & láech ansa do dingbáil a gaisciud fón samail sin.[162]

“‘That is indeed a wretched performance in the presence of the enemy’ said Fergus. ‘Let one of you taunt the man, my men,’ said he to his people, ‘lest he fall in vain.’ Bricriu Nemtheanga mac Carbada rose up and began to incite Cú Chulainn. ‘Your strength is exhausted,’ said he, ‘if a puny opponent overthrows you now that the Ulstermen are on their way to you, recovered from their torpor. It is hard for you to undertake a hero’s deed in the presence of the men of Ireland and to ward off a formidable opponent with your weapons in that way.”[163]

This goading of Cú Chulainn is a reflection of his goading of Fergus and the Ulster exiles in *Táin Bó Flidais,* suggesting that this is the function that Bricriu generally may have served when he was on campaign. His words, even—and perhaps especially—when mocking and caustic, are a force of power, despite us being given no sign that he is a magic user of any form. As noted in the previous section, there are parallels to be drawn between this behaviour and that of Láeg in his tactical goading of Cú Chulainn during the fight with Fer Diad. It is clear from these interactions what power words in general hold within the world of the Ulster Cycle and that Bricriu holds a particular talent for engaging with the inherent power that words have in this world.

His final appearance—not just in the *Táin Bó Cualinge*, but in the Ulster Cycle as a whole—comes once the Donn Cualinge has been driven to meet Finnbennach. There are variations on Bricriu’s involvement in the fight between the two bulls, with the longer version also being related in *Echtra Nerai,* ‘The Adventures of Nera’, directly contradicting his earlier appearances with the forces of Connacht. However, despite these variations, the end result is the same.

Is and sain ra ráidsetar fir Hérend cía bud fiadnaisi dona tarbaib. Iss ed ra ráidset uile gombad é Bricriu mac Garbada. - Dáig blíadain résin scél sa Tánad Bó Cúalnge tánic Bricri d'faigde Fergusa assin chóciud i n-araile, & ra fost Fergus ace é ic irnaide ra sétaib & ra maínib. Acus darala eturru ic imbirt fidchilli & Fergus & atrubairt-sium aithis móir ra Fergus. Dabert Fergus béim dá durn dó-

[162] O’Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúailnge, Recension 1*, p. 61, lines 1987-1995
[163] O’Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúailnge, Recension 1*, p. 180

som & dind fir baí 'na láim goro thoilg in fer 'na chind go róebriss cnáim ina chind. In fat ra bátar fir Hérend i slúagiud na Tána, ésium 'gá leiges i Crúachain risin ré sin. Acus in lá tháncatar din tslúagud, is és lá ra érig-sium. -Dáig níra choitchinniu Briccni dá charait andá dá námait. Acus tucad far bernaid i fiadnaisi na ndam é. Atchonnaic cách a chéile dina tarbaib & foclassa búrach dóib and & fócerddetar in n-úir thairsiu. Ra chlaitar in talmain dara formnaib & dara slinneócaib, & ra rúamnaigsetar a rruisc ina cendaib dóib immar cháera tenda tentide. Ra bulgsetar a n-óli & a sróna mar bulgu goband i certchai, & rabert cách díb blascbéim brátha d'indsaigid a chéile. Ra gab cách díb bar tollad & bar tregdad & bar airlech & bar essorgain araile. And sain ra immir in Findbennach meirbflech a astair & a imthechta & na sliged barin Dond Cúalnge, & ra sáid adairc ina tháeb & brissis búrach fair. Iss ed rucsat a rrúathur go hairm i mbáe Bricni goro bertsatar ingni na tarb ferchubat fir i talmain é arna bás. Conid Aided Bricni and sain.[164]

"Then the men of Ireland asked who should be an eye-witness for the bulls, and they all decided that it should be Bricriu mac Garbada [sic].—A year before these events in the Foray of Cúailnge, Bricriu had come from one province to another begging from Fergus, and Fergus had retained him in his service waiting for his chattels and wealth. And a quarrel arose between him and Fergus as they were playing chess, and Bricriu spoke very insultingly to Fergus. Fergus struck him with his fist and with the chessman that he held in his hand and drove the chessman into his head and broke a bone in his skull. While the men of Ireland were on the hosting of the Táin, Bricriu was all that time being cured in Crúachu, and the day they returned from the hosting was the day Bricriu rose from his sickness.—And the reason they chose Bricriu in this manner was because he was no fairer to his friend than to his enemy. So Bricriu was brought to a gap in front of the bulls. Each of the bulls caught sight of the other and they pawed the ground and cast the earth over them. They dug up the ground and threw it over their shoulders and their withers, and their eyes blazed in their heads like distended balls of fire. Their cheeks and nostrils swelled like smith's bellows in a forge. And each collided with the other with a crashing noise. Each of them began to gore and to pierce and to slay and slaughter the other. Then the Findbennach Aí took advantage of the confusion of the Donn Cúailnge's journeying and wandering and travelling, and

[164] Cecile O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúalnge from the Book of Leinster*, (Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1984), 49; pp. 134-135, lines 4860 - 4881

thrust his horn into his side and visited his rage on him. Their violent rush took them to where Bricriu stood and the bulls' hooves trampled him a man's length into the ground after they had killed him.

Hence that is called the Tragical Death of Bricriu."[165]

The account of his death is characteristically straightforward, even strikingly underwhelming, but it has a certain sense of satisfaction about it. Bricriu is a character who has spent his entire life caught between the provinces of Ulster and Connacht and here we see him dying as he lived, ultimately trampled beneath the two.

What we know of Bricriu is, especially when we compare him to the other key figures of the Ulster Cycle, extremely limited. We have his name, including his evocative epithet *Nemthenga*, and we can surmise that he is the son of a man called Carbad. A brief mention of him by Leborcham in *Talland Étair* also gives him eight brothers: Glaine, Gormainech, Maine Milscothach, Ailill, Scel, Toscal, Dures, and Ret.[166] Beyond this, we have no physical descriptions of him, saving one account at the very end of *Scéla Conchobuir maic Nessa,* 'The story of Conchobar mac Nessa', which describes him thusly:

"Dia ṅgabad forsin rúin no bid for a menmain no ássad bolgg corcra assa etun, 7 ba metithir ferdorn."[167]

"If he tried to hold in the secret on his mind, a purple boil would grow out of his forehead, and it was as large as a man's fist."[168]

One thing that is of vital note is that, neither in the small selection of appearances sampled above or in those which have been set aside for now, Bricriu does not lie. He manipulates, certainly, and demonstrates a remarkable ability to wield the *technical* truth as a weapon but I am yet to find an instance where he is seen to directly lie. Indeed, with the Pinnochio-like boil ascribed to him in *Scéla Conchobuir maic Nessa*, it would become glaringly obvious to all around him when he was being untruthful or deliberately concealing some mischief. As a result, it is this manipulative truthfulness that makes him so dangerous and, likely, so infuriating for the Ulaid to deal with. As O'Leary succinctly notes, "verbal deceit

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[165] O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúalnge from the Book of Leinster*, pp. 270-271

[166] Caoimhín Ó Dónaill, *Talland Étair: A Critical Edition with Introduction, Translation, Textual Notes, Bibliography and Vocabulary*, (National University of Ireland, Department of Old and Middle Irish, 2005), iv, pp. 58 Worth noting is that the number and names of Bricriu's brothers seem to vary across different texts—Nina Y. Chekhonadskaya also outlines some other potential members of Bricriu's family, including his connection to Conchobar and a singular mention of a son. As 'The Unheroic Biography of Bricriu mac Cardbada' is a foundational work, collecting what little we know about him, these are rich avenues for future study.

[167] Whitley Stokes, 'Tidings of Conchobar Mac Nessa', *Ériu*, 4 (1910), p. 32

[168] Stokes, 'Tidings of Conchobar Mac Nessa', p. 33

runs throughout the Ulster Cycle and motivates the action in some of its central tales"[169], and as a result, it makes sense for Bricriu to find himself set apart from this tendency towards explicit untruthfulness, adding to his otherness where the Ulaid are concerned. This manipulative truthfulness is best observed in his dealings with Cú Chulainn, Conall Cernach, and Lóegaire Búadach at the beginning of *Fled Bricrenn*[170]—all he does here with the three heroes is describe the champion's portion to them and outline the benefits of being the recipient of it, and they each come to the conclusion that they deserve it on their own—lies are unnecessary when Bricriu knows well how to manipulate the egos of these three heroes who are bound by the honour-based society that they are operating within. Though he asks leading questions and makes ambiguous suggestions and comments, he never directly promises the champion's portion to any of the three. In addition to this, even if he *had* lied directly to the three heroes and explicitly promised them the champion's portion, his deceit would not have ranked particularly highly on the scale of Ulster Cycle social faux pas, purely because he approached all three privately. O'Leary, in his discussion of verbal deceit in the Ulster Cycle, addresses the issue of public versus private promises, and the apparent moral weight that is attached to breaking these, concluding, in essence, that a private lie is no lie at all, whilst "public promises, on the other hand, create an entirely different situation. These must be adhered to at the risk of public disgrace, the most potent social sanction in early Ireland."[171] Bricriu, then, manipulates the social rules of the Ulster Cycle masterfully, often working fully within them to achieve the necessary result. This is likewise reflected in Bricriu's appearance in *Scéla mucce meic Dathó*, where he need not even goad the gathered forces of Connacht and Ulster, but merely state that they will resolve the matter of the champion's portion in the same way that they always do. It is a simple and explicit truth, wielded with brutal efficiency and to devastating effect.

Bricriu's name, however, is a more ready source of illumination on his function. His given name offers some potential avenues of assessment, and is most readily associated with the root *brecc*, 'speckled'[172]. Harrison in particular draws an association between this etymology and the traditional dress of jester figures[173] but, without any descriptions of Bricriu or his clothing, this feels like a speculative dead end. On the other hand, Chekhonadskaya's *'The Unheroic Biography of Bricriu mac Carbada*' offers a more

[169] Philip O'Leary, 'Verbal Deceit in the Ulster Cycle', *Éigse*, 21 (1986), p. 16
[170] Henderson [ed.], *Fled Bricrend*, pp. 9-13
[171] O'Leary, 'Verbal Deceit in the Ulster Cycle', p. 17
[172] eDIL s.v. 1 *brecc*
[173] Harrison, *The Irish Trickster*, p. 23

curious potential etymology, wherein we might trace the Old Irish *brecc* a "a variant of the root **berg*- 'shine, gleam'; cf. English 'bright'"[174] and likewise notes that "the word *brecc* in Old Irish texts does not convey the image of a jester or buffoon or a sense of the sinister" and that "often it means something more like 'sparkling' or 'shimmering'."[175] When we hold up this interpretation of his name to international themes of Tricksters, we might begin to draw some tentative associations with Bricriu and the Trickster as Lightbringer. We saw this earlier with Manannán mac Lir as his character developed over the course of his tradition, and with Bricriu we may have the association baked in, so to speak, to his very name. Certainly, his inveterate and inconvenient truthfulness often serve to enlighten the characters around him as well as the audience, and there is nothing which suggests that the knowledge that the Trickster imparts upon others needs to be pleasant or directly and immediately helpful.

Bricriu's epithet, however, puts us on much more solid ground regarding how he might be viewed. The most common epithet associated with Bricriu is *Nemtheanga,* which is variously interpreted as 'poison-tongue' or 'evil-tongue'. Translating this epithet as 'evil-tongue', in particular, seems to convey an inherent bias on the part of the translator when the root, *neim*, (lit. 'poison') is both unambiguous when taken at face value, but also offers some other exceedingly interesting, if more poetic, interpretations. A more figurative translation of *neim* gives us 'bane, malefic power' as well as 'virulence, keenness, penetrating force', whilst in a more descriptive sense, we find 'sharpness, bitterness, causticity'.[176] Each of these interpretations finds a comfortable home in Bricriu's character—he demonstrates a tendency towards sharp truths; he shows a keenness of mind that sets him apart from his peers; and his words certainly demonstrate a kind of baneful power when he is read as a tool of the narrator, used to incite tension, conflict, and to move the story along.

As regards some of the broad, international themes of Tricksters, we do occasionally see Bricriu fulfilling the role of the comic relief—albeit frequently in a more subtle fashion. The scatological humour that has already been identified as a core feature of international Tricksters is found most easily in Bricriu's ejection from his own hall during *Fled Bricrenn.*

> *Dolleci Cuculaind arrígthech sís iar sudi, co n-dechatar secht ferchubat di fenamain in tige i talmain, co forcroth a n-dún uli ocus cor trascair grían an Bricrend fri lár talmain, co torcair Bricriu fodein ocus a rígan, corrabatar isind*

[174] Chekhonadskaya, 'The Unheroic Biography of Bricriu Mac Carbada', p. 260
[175] Chekhonadskaya, 'The Unheroic Biography of Bricriu Mac Carbada', p. 261
[176] eDIL s.v. *neim*

otruch for lar in lis eter na conaib.[177]

"Thereupon Cuchulainn let the palace down till seven feet of the wattle entered the ground ; the whole *dún* shook ,and Bricriu's balcony was laid flat to the earth, in such wise that Bricriu and his queen toppled down till they fell into the *fosse*[178] in the middle of the courtyard among the dogs."[179]

The episode that deals with his death also relates to this theme, when he is trampled into the mud beneath the hooves of the two warring bulls, even though it is so darkly humorous as to be easily overlooked.

Regarding his liminality and monstrosity, these are equally subtle and require us to look more closely at the nature of his social ostracization and his own explicit awareness and acceptance of his position. Whilst some of the figures who were discussed previously are explicitly itinerant and seen to be wandering from place to place in a clear representation of their liminal status, Bricriu represents this in a far less obvious fashion. Although Bricriu has a 'settled' place within society—his original place in Conchobar's court and, indeed, his own hall—and is no 'natural' fool with much of his liminality being self-made through the force of his personality and reputation for disruption making him an outcast even in his own hall. Yet Bricriu *is* also a wanderer of sorts—caught between Ulster and Connacht as he is, with many of his most definitive Trickster-ish moments taking place outside of both.

Where we see him acting within the boundaries of a traditional settlement, as in *Fled Bricrenn* (in his own purpose-built hall) and *Scéla mucce meic Dathó* (in a hostelry, removed from both of the provinces he is associated with), these moments must be assessed with an understanding of how feasting halls in medieval literature can often be read as explicitly liminal spaces. Whilst a feasting hall *may* be found within an existing settlement, feasts in medieval Irish literature clearly have their own set of rules and hierarchies and they are spaces where the social order may be explicitly challenged and re-set as the tales demand—this is precisely what we see happening both in *Scéla Mucce Meic Datho* and *Fled Bricrenn* with the contests for the champion's portion. The feasting hall or hostel is a space where things change and is, in essence, a Trickster's natural habitat. Even within the feasting hall, already a liminal space within these tales where near anything might potentially happen, we find Bricriu being placed even further apart from

[177] Henderson [ed.], *Fled Bricrend*, p. 30

[178] Note that whilst Henderson renders *otruch* as 'fosse' here, a more direct translation would be 'dung heap': eDIL s.v. *ot(t)rach*

[179] Henderson [ed.], *Fled Bricrend*, p. 31

the rest of the gathered party. In *Scéla mucce meic Dathó* he speaks from a couch 'above', whilst in *Fled Bricrenn*:

> *Dorónad dana gríanán Bricrind fodessin fó chomardus imdai Conchobair ocus inna láth n-gaile. Conrotacht iarom in gróanan sin do imdenmaib ocus cumtaigib sainamraib ocus rosudigthe senistre glainide ass for cach leth. Conrotacht iarom senestre díb uasa imdaid-seom fadéin, co m-bo fodirc dó-som imcissie in tige máir úad assa imdái. déig ro fitir-som, ní léicfitis Ulaid isatech.*[180]
>
> "Then a balcony was made by Bricriu on a level with the couch of Conchobar [and as high as those] of the heroes of valour. The decorations of its fittings were magnificent. Windows of glass were placed on each side of it, and one of these was above Bricriu's couch, so that he could view the hall from his seat, as he knew the Ulster men would not suffer him within."[181]

The term used for Bricriu's apartment here varies from translator to translator with Gantz, using 'bower'[182], whilst Henderson, above, uses 'balcony'. The term being translated here is *gríanán,* given as 'a sunny chamber, a bower, a soller, an open balcony exposed to the sun, an upper room'[183]. Regardless of the exact nature of this space, it is a clear demonstration that Bricriu is keenly aware of his standing within the men of Ulster and, apparently, not ashamed of it. In embracing his otherness he has accepted, in essence, being cast in the role of a societal monster and is adopting the armour of an alienating identity.[184]

When his death at the end of the *Táin Bó Cualinge* is taken alongside both a lifetime of addressing the balance of power between Connacht and Ulster, and his importance as a figure who clearly sees and understands the fragile nature of society in the Ulster Cycle more keenly that his peers, then it gains a deeper significance. Not only is his death fundamentally caused by his being caught between Ulster and Connacht, but his entire narrative purpose—to maintain the balance of power between the two provinces—has been fulfilled. That the tales which follow on from the *Táin Bó Cuailnge* are largely comprised of violent death-tales, with various heroes caught in a vortex of vengeance for the death of their comrades, it is possible to read Bricriu's death as pulling the plug on the social cohesion of the Ulster Cycle as a whole, allowing it to wind down to its natural conclusion.

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[180] Henderson [ed.], *Fled Bricrend*, p. 4
[181] Henderson [ed.], *Fled Bricrend*, p. 5
[182] Gantz, *Early Irish Myths and Sagas* (Penguin, 1981), p. 221
[183] eDIL s.v. *gríanán*
[184] See: Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome and The Members of Interscripta, 'The Armour of an Alienating Identity', *Arthuriana*, 6.4 (1996), pp. 1–24. Dealing with the construction of the medieval heroic identity, much of this paper can also be applied to the construction of a monstrous identity, whereby a figure adopts an identity for themself that is essentially a reflection of how they are perceived by those around them.

In the character of Bricriu mac Carbada we have, in essence, a distillation of the other Trickster and Trickster-like figures who make appearances in the worlds of medieval Irish literature, those that we have already seen as well as those who we will touch on next. With Aniér Mac Conglinne he shares the status of a wanderer of unclear social status caught between one state and another, a clear tool of the narrative and in some ways keenly aware of his position and the power that it affords him. Like Leborcham, who we will see in the next chapter, he is a messenger of kings; like Manannán mac Lir he has a vital awareness of the world around him and, though the methods differ greatly, he uses this knowledge to nudge the world around him into the shape it needs to take and, like Ailill mac Máta, he is a keen manipulator despite standing as a social oddity and a figure open to ridicule and dismissal. Ultimately, Bricriu mac Carbada is a character who has "a keen sense of heroic honor—even if little concerned with his own—a taste for malice, and a good understanding of what makes things happen."[185] What we find with Bricriu mac Carbada is a subtle but powerful manifestation of a Trickster who, when he is understood in the specific narrative context of the Ulster Cycle, can comfortably stand alongside such well-known international characters such as Loki, Hermes and even Lucifer/Satan.

[185] William Sayers, 'Bricriu Nemthenga ('poison-Tongue'): Onomastics and Social Function in Early Irish Literature', *Mediaevistik*, 30 (2017), p. 88

Leborcham

Of all of the characters being addressed here, Leborcham marks perhaps one of the most fascinating. She appears fleetingly in several tales within the Ulster Cycle, operating predominantly as a messenger whilst also displaying remarkable powers of foresight and intuition. Her role is small, especially when compared to those of Bricriu mac Carbada and Ailill mac Máta, but she still makes a lasting impression on the audience and on the narrative. The physically disfigured daughter of two slaves, she is involved in some of the most pivotal moments in the Ulster Cycle as a whole. The tales in which Leborcham features include some of the most narratively important episodes of the Ulster Cycle, and in spite of her restricted 'screen time', she nevertheless has a lasting effect on the overarching narrative. This can be best read and interpreted only when her appearances are brought together in some kind of tentative, chronological order so that her influence begins to show through.

Talland Étair

Dated to the latter part of the Old Irish period and surviving in two manuscripts—*Lebor Laignech* and Harleian 5280—*Talland Étair*, 'The Seige of Howth', sees the men of Ulster besieged at Howth following the depredations of one of their own, Aithirne Áilgesach, in Leinster.[186] Aithirne's selfishness does not stop with the enemies of Ulster, however, and the Ulaid are forced to spend nine days "without drink, without food, unless they had drunk the brine of the sea or unless they had eaten the clay."[187] In the mean time, Aithirne goes on to dump the milk from his own herd—"seven hundred cows, namely white red-eared cows"[188], a colouring which suggests that they have some supernatural or otherworldly properties—over a cliff, refusing sustenance to even his dying comrades and Conchobar. It is here that we are introduced to Leborcham as the only reason that Conchobar is able to eat at all. The description of her within this text is brief but illuminating, offering a good deal of insight into her character.

> *Mug 7 cumal ro:bátar i tig Chonchobair is sí gein rucad etarru .i. ind ingen Leborcham. Ba dochrud danó a delb inna ingine .i. a di thraigid 7 a da nglún inna*

[186] Though his appearances are more limited than even Leborcham's, Aithirne's behaviour also merits some attention. He is a deliberately inflammatory individual, hellbent on causing the most chaos possible, with little regard for whether he is harming friend or foe. His actions suggest some potential Trickster-like traits, but he falls beyond the scope of this study for now.
[187] Caoimhín Ó Dónaill, *Talland Étair: A Critical Edition with Introduction, Translation, Textual Notes, Bibliography and Vocabulary*, (National University of Ireland, Department of Old and Middle Irish, 2005), iv, p. 55
[188] Ó Dónaill, *Talland Étair*, p. 55

deud, a di escait 7 a di ṡáil remi. Is sí do:ḟoichled Érinn i n-óenló. Cech ní di maith 7 di ṡaich do:gníthe i nÉre a-t:ḟéded do Chonchobur isin Chráebrúad deud laí. A tortíne tri fichet mbairgen ara ciunn tened, cenmothá a cuit lasin slúag. Is sí trá do:bered a chuit do Chonchobur fora mmuin óthá Emain co hÉtar.[189]

A slave and slavewoman who were in Conchobar's house, she is the child who was born to them, namely, the girl Leborcham. The girl's figure was misshapen, moreover, that is her two feet and her two knees were behind her, her two haunches and her two heels were before her. It is she who used to travel around Ireland in one day. Everything of good or evil that was done in Ireland, she used to relate it to Conchobar in the Cráebrúad at the end of the day. Her little loaf, which was as big as sixty loaves, was before her at the end of the fire, as well as her share with the host. It is she then, who used to bring Conchobar's share to him upon her back from Emain to Étar.[190]

Following the death of Cú Chulainn's foster son, Mess Dead, we see Leborcham attending the women of Ulster where is asked to relay news of the siege to them. Taking the form of a *célmaine,* 'prophecy'[191], Leborcham relates to the women the fate of some of Ulster's most notable warriors before the narrative shifts once more to follow Conall Cernach's pursuit and defeat of Mess Gegra, and the turning of his brain into the calcified ball which is later the cause of Conchobar's death in *Aided Conchobair*.[192]

Serglige Con Culainn

Leborcham's involvement in *Serglige Con Culainn* is fleeting but striking. When the women of Ulster desire a flock of birds which has settled near Emuin Macha at Samhuin, it is Leborcham who volunteers to go to Cú Chulainn to ask him to catch them. Her request—which is not initially met with any enthusiasm from Cú Chulainn—is the spark to the kindling of the narrative set up, leading to his affair with Fand, the wife of Manannán mac Lir. The interaction between the two is as follows:

'Cid dogénam?' ol na mná. 'Ní h-andsa,' for Leborcham, ingen Óa & Adairce. 'Rigasa úaib do chuinchid Chon Culaind.'

Luid íarom co Coin Culaind, 7 asbert fris: 'Is áil dona mnáib ind éoin ucut úatsiu.' Atetha a chlaideb do imbirt furri. 'Ní fogbat merdrecha Ulad a n-aill acht foraim

[189] Ó Dónaill, *Talland Étair*, p. 46
[190] Ó Dónaill, *Talland Étair*, p. 55
[191] eDIL s.v. *célmaine*
[192] Meyer, Kuno. *The Death-Tales of the Ulster Heroes*. Royal Irish Academy, 1906. Todd Lecture Series. Pp. 2 – 21.

én dóib do thabairt fornd indíu.' 'Ní cóir duit ém,' for Leborcham, 'fúasnad fríu, ár is tríut atá in tres anim fil for mnáib Ulad .i. guille.' [193]

'What will we do?' said the women. 'Not difficult,' said Leborcham, daughter of Óa and Adairce. 'I will go to ask Cú Chulainn.'

Thereafter she went to Cú Chulainn, and she said to him: 'The women desire those birds yonder from you.' He seized his sword for the purpose of using it upon her. 'Have the mad bands[194] of Ulster nothing else save hunting a bird to bestow upon us today?' 'Indeed it is not fitting of you,' said Leborcham moreover, 'to be angry with them, for it is through you [that] the women of Ulster have their third blemish, namely blindness in one eye.'

Narratively speaking, *Serglige Con Culainn* is something of an odd text in that the events of the tale appear to have no further bearing on the Ulster Cycle as a whole, with Cú Chulainn's affair with Fand never mentioned again. However, we still see Leborcham here functioning explicitly as the instigator of the action in taking the women's request to Cú Chulainn and calmly facing down his aggression in order to coax him into hunting the birds.

Mesca Ulad

Mesca Ulad, 'The Intoxication of the Ulstermen*',* is an unfortunately fractured text but Leborcham's appearance is both early and brief, occurring only in the *Lebor Laignech* introduction to the tale. As with *Serglige Con Culainn* she acts as a messenger to Cú Chulainn, this time at the behest of Conchobar, to bring him to Emain Macha so that Conchobur can put his plan to gain control of all Ulster from Cú Chulainn and Findtan in motion. Her function as a messenger in *Mesca Ulad* is paired with Findchad Fer Bend who is likewise sent to summon Findtan to the feast. On her arrival at Dún Delga, Cú Chulainn initially refuses her request for him to join Conchobar until his wife, Emer, advises him to go.

Ro-síacht Leborcham co Dún Delga, 7 at-bert ra Coin Culainn tuidecht d'acallaim a cháemaite cu hEmain Macha. Is amlaid buí Cú Chulainn 7 comfhled mór ace do lucht a chríchi fadessin i nDún Delga, et at-bert na ragad, acht bith oc frithálim lochta a chríchi fodesin. At-rubairt Emer Foltchaín ingen Forgaill Manach, int sessed ben is ferr tárraill Hérinn, na dingned, acht dul d'acallaim a aite

[193] Myles Dillon, *Serglige Con Culainn*, Mediaeval and Modern Irish Series (Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1953), p. 2, lines 31 - 38

[194] Gantz, in *Early Irish Myths and Sagas,* p. 156 translates this word as 'sluts' but it appears to be a compound of *mer*, 'demented, crazy' and *drécht*, 'a band of persons'.

Conchobair.[195]

Leborcham went to Dún Delga and she said to Cú Chulainn to come to speak with his dear guardian at Emain Macha. It was so that Cú Chulainn had a great feast then for himself and the occupants of his own territory at Dún Delga, and he said that he would not go but [he] would be attending to the occupants of his own territory. Emer Foltchaín, daughter of Forgaill Manach, one of the six best women to have reached Ireland, said not to do that, but to go to speak with his foster father Conchobar.

This is not the only occasion on which we see Leborcham paired with another messenger and this instance reflects the appearance of the second Leborcham in one of her later appearances.

Longes mac nUislenn

Even though Leborcham only features once in the earliest version of *Longes mac nUislenn*, 'The Exile of the Sons of Uisliu', her impact on this vital episode of the Ulster Cycle is huge. Once Conchobar has resolved to have Deirdre raised in solitude, it is only her foster-parents and Leborcham who are permitted to see her—and it is here that we are told that this is because "*ní-éta gabáil di ssidi ar ba ban-cháinte"*[196] (she could not be prevented for she was a female-satirist).

Following Leborcham's introduction, Deirdre witnesses her father killing a calf and then delivers the following wish:

Fecht n-and didiu baí a haite na ingine oc fennad loíg fothlai for snechtu i-mmaig issin gaimriuth dia funi di-ssi. Co-n-acca-si ní, in fíach oc ól inna fola forsin t-snechtu. Is and as-bert-si fri Lebarchaim: 'Ro-pad inmain óen-fer forsa-mbetis na tri dath ucut .i. in folt amal in fíach ocus in grúad amal in fuil ocus in corp amal in snechta.'

'Orddan ocus tocad duit!' ar in Lebarcham. 'Ni cían úait. Atá is'taig it arrad .i. Noísi mac Usnig.' 'Ni-pam slán-sa ám,' ol-si, 'conid-n-accur-saide.'[197]

Once, moreover, the foster-father of the girl was flaying a weaning calf upon the snow outside in the winter for the purpose of cooking for her. Then she saw something—the raven drinking of the blood on the snow. Therein she said to

[195] J. Carmichael Watson, *Mesca Ulad*, Mediaeval and Modern Irish Series (Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1941), pp. 2-3

[196] Vernam Hull, *Longes Mac N-Uislenn: The Exile of the Sons of Uisliu*, The Modern Language Association of America (Modern Language Association of America, 1949), p. 45

[197] Hull, *Longes Mac N-Uislenn*, p. 45

> Leborcham: 'Beloved would be the one man on whom might be the three colours yonder—namely, his hair like the raven, his cheeks like the blood, and his body like the snow.' 'Honour and luck to you!' said Leborcham. 'There is one in the house near to you, namely Naoise mac Usnig.' 'Indeed, I shall not be well,' she said, 'until I see him.'

In directing her to Noísiu, we find Leborcham acting as the catalyst for the ensuing deaths, for the exile of some three thousand of Ulster's forces and, ultimately, for the events of the *Táin Bó Cuailnge*.

The early modern version of *Oidheadh Chloinne hUisneach* found in the Glenmasan manuscript includes an extended version of the end of *Longes mac nUislenn* which greatly expands Leborcham's character and also imbues her with greater motivation for setting up Deirdre and Noísiu in the way that she did. Though it falls outwith the period we are particularly concerned with here, it is worth turning briefly to this representation of Leborcham on account of how limited her appearances are.

In this version, Leborcham returns to the tale once Deirdre and the three brothers have returned to Ireland and we are told that "Naisi was dearer to her than any other person on the globe, for she used often to go throughout the regions of the great world to seek for Naisi, and to bring messages to him and from him."[198] This expansion of the relationship between Leborcham and Noísiu adds a layer of complexity to Leborcham's involvement in instigating Deidre's elopement, as does the way in which Leborcham attempts to save the young lovers by directly lying to Conchobar:

> *Agus tanic roimpi a mach as a h-aithle co dubach dobronach droch-mennmach co h-airm a raibhi Conchobar. Agus do fiafraig Conchobar sgela di. Is ann sin adubairt Leabarcham ag a fregra: 'Ata droch sgela agam duit agus deg sgel.' 'Cred iát sin?' ar rí Ulad. 'Is maith na sgela,' ar Leabarcam, 'in triar is ferr delb agus denam, is ferr luth agus lamach, is ferr gnim agus gaisged agus gnath-irgal an Erinn agus an Albain agus is in domun mor uile to techt cugatsa, agus bid imáin enlethe agut festa an agaid b-fer n-Erenn o tait mic Uisnig libh. Agus is e sin sgel is ferr agam duit. Agus is e sin sgel is mesa agam, in ben do b'ferr delb agus denam is in domun ic imtecht uainn a h-Eamain, nach b-fuil a delb fen na denam fuirri.'*[199]
>
> And thereafter she went forth sadly, very sorrowfully, very depressed, to the place where Conchobar was. And Conchobar asked tidings of her. Then said Levarcham in reply: 'I have bad news for you, and good news.' 'What are they?' said the King

[198] Donald Mackinnon, 'The Glenmasan Manuscript [Part 1]', *The Celtic Review*, 1 (1904), p. 123
[199] Mackinnon, 'The Glenmasan Manuscript [Part 1]', p. 124

> of Ulster. 'They are good news,' said Levarcham, 'that the three whose form and build are best, whose vigour and aim are best, whose deed and valour and prowess are best in Ireland, in Scotland, and in all the great world, are come to you; and you will have henceforward the driving of bird-flocks against the men of Ireland, now that the sons of Uisnech are with you. And these are my best news for you. And my worst are that the woman whose form and figure were the best in the world when she went from us out of Emain, has (no longer) her own form and figure.'[200]

Leborcham's actions here are directly at odds with how we see her operating otherwise—most often she, as with Bricriu, wields the truth as her primary weapon without ever resorting to outright lies. That she would do so now raises questions about her loyalties and motivations and, given that she is a character with a great deal of insight, how much she knows of what will happen should Conchobar press forward with his plan for revenge.

Tochmarc Luaine ocus aided Aithirni

Leborcham once again features as a messenger of Conchobar in the twelfth century tale *Tochmarch Luaine ocus aided Aithirni*, 'The Wooing of Luain and the Violent Death of Aithirne', though she also features alongside a second Leborcham, Leborcham Rannach, who also acts as a messenger for Conchobar. This tale rides directly on the heels of *Longes mac nUislenn*, opening with an account of Conchobar's great grief over Deirdre's death and his resolution to find someone *do díchuirfed uad cuma Derdrindi*[201] (to drive away his grief for Deirde) and it is ultimately our Leborcham who finds such a girl in Luaine and convinces her father to agree provisionally to the match.

The physical description of both messengers in this text[202] are lengthy and a translation of the description given to our primary Leborcham is included later in this chapter. Of note, however, is that both descriptive verses, numbering over 100 lines, are relatively united in their descriptions of the two messengers, giving rise to the argument that the compiler of this tale has simply duplicated the Leborcham of *Talland Étair*.[203]

Táin Bó Cuailnge

Leborcham appears only once in in the *Táin Bó Cuailnge*, 'The Cattle Raid of Cooley', in the second and third recensions, where she warns of Cú Chulainn's return to Emain Macha once he has taken up arms for the first time.

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[200] Mackinnon, 'The Glenmasan Manuscript [Part 1]', p. 125
[201] Liam Breatnach, 'Tochmarc Luaine Ocus Aided Athairne'. *Celtica* 13 (1980), p. 6
[202] Breatnach, 'Tochmarc Luaine Ocus Aided Athairne'. *Celtica* 13, pp. 6 - 9
[203] Breatnach, 'Tochmarc Luaine Ocus Aided Athairne'. *Celtica* 13, p. 3

"Is and sin rathaigis in Leborcham íat. Ingen-saide Aí & Adairce. 'Óencharptech sund,' for Leborcham, '& is úathmar thic. Cind a bidbad fordergga 'sin charput aice. Eoin áille óengela ic imuarad aice 'sin charput. Aige altamla anríata i cengul & chrapull & chuibrech & charcair aice. Ocus meni frithálter innocht é, dosfaíthsat óic Ulad leis.'"[204]

"Then Leborcham perceived them. She was the daughter of Aí and Adarc. 'A single chariot-warrior is here' said Leborcham, 'and terribly he comes. He has in the chariot the bloody heads of his enemies. There are beautiful, pure-white birds held (?) by him in the chariot. He has wild, untamed deer bound and tied and fettered. If he be not met tonight, the warriors of Ulster will fall at his hand.'"[205]

The naming of Leborcham over an anonymous watchman adds greatly to the significance of the moment by adding another connection to Cú Chulainn, as well as highlighting her keen perception of the world around her.

Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemni

Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemni, 'The great rout of Murthemne', features Leborcham's most contradictory and curious appearance and, given that this text in particular may have roots as far back as the early eighth century,[206] it also marks her oldest. She gives two speeches to Cú Chulainn before he sets out to face the forces of Munster, the first urging him out to battle—which Cú Chulainn rebukes[207]—and the second to warn him against going, whilst lamenting that he will not heed her warning.[208] The result, of course, is Cú Chulainn's death. Whilst we cannot say that Leborcham *actively* drives the narrative of this tale—she urges but does not goad or otherwise convince Cú Chulainn to leave—her intervention adds a weight to the narrative that cements the sense of inevitability and doom.

Once her myriad brief appearances have been set together, the picture that emerges of Leborcham is one of a vastly complex and multifaceted character. Her humble background as the daughter of two of Conchobar's slaves marks her as a social non-

[204] O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúalnge from the Book of Leinster*, p. 32
[205] O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúalnge from the Book of Leinster*, p. 170
[206] Bettina Kimpton, *The Death of Cú Chulainn. A Critical Edition of the Earliest Version of Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemni*, Maynooth Medieval Irish Texts (School of Celtic Studies, National University of Ireland, 2009), p. 1
[207] Kimpton, *The Death of Cú Chulainn. A Critical Edition of the Earliest Version of Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemni*, p. 36
[208] Kimpton, *The Death of Cú Chulainn. A Critical Edition of the Earliest Version of Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemni*, p. 37

entity—she has nowhere to fall but death should she overstep and, yet, she appears to move and mingle freely with the Ulaid, appearing at many significant moments in the broader narrative.

In appearance, Leborcham is nothing if not striking. In *Talland Étair* we are given this physical description of her:

> *"Ba dochrud danó a delb inna ingine .i. a di thraigid 7 a da nglún inna deud, a di escait 7 a di ṡáil remi."*[209]
>
> "The girl's figure was misshapen, moreoever, that is her two feet and her two knees were behind her, her two haunches and her two heels were before her."[210]

Whilst *Tochmarch Luaine ocus aided Aithirni* goes into great detail as to the physical form of both our Leborcham and her counterpart and of our Leborcham it says:

> "She was a swift, frantic, furious, wretched, vehement, hard, quarrelsome, black-eyed, beetle-browed, with tufted hair (?), dark-hued, with narrow breasts, crooked, big-shanked, quick, bare, tenacious, speckled-shanked, snotty, divisive, very disputations, big-bellied, grey-spotted, thick-lipped, big-kneed, rough-snouted, boisterous, perforated, thin-sided, broad-footed messenger. Feeding her was difficult and tedious, because of the amount required to satisfy her thin groin, as she used to consume (the fill of) the five fists deep cauldron of Conchobar of the thick part of juicy pottage, together with three huge pigs - head and feet, guts (and) entrails. As for that, it did not satisfy her, so that she used to consume the allotted portion of every choice house in the greatly famous province of Ulster, together with huge hornless heads, bones, hips and haunches, so that they stuck in her gullet, so that it was a source of pleasure for abundant mighty warriors to listen to the screams of her grey throat, because of the amount of the large lumps which she used to consume, so that they might be together with every single (other piece) of her ration, so that they used to see her entrails through her dark rough-toothed mouth, when the fierce moth-eaten messenger used to give out accustomed shouts concerning her proper usual ration - tiresome was the fault which clung to her, Lebarcham."[211]

Not only does this description link her intimately to the themes of gluttony and dissatisfaction that we see within international Trickster mythology, but it also highlights

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[209] Ó Dónaill, *Talland Étair*, p. 46

[210] Ó Dónaill, *Talland Étair*, p. 55

[211] Esther Le Mair, 'A Trusted Outsider: Leborcham in the Ulster Cycle', in *Ulidia 3: Proceedings of the Third International Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales, University of Ulster, Coleraine, 22-25 June, 2009 : In Memoriam Patrick Leo Henry*, by Gregory Toner, Séamus Mac Mathúna, and P. L. Henry (Curach Bhán Publications, 2013), iii, pp. 44 - 45

that Leborcham's *physical* monstrosity is clearly a vital aspect of her character. It is important to note, however, that her disfigurement—despite how significant it appears—does not seem to disable her in any way that we might expect and, instead, we are told that she is able to traverse the whole of Ireland in one day. It is unsurprising, then, that she is Conchobar's choice of messenger across several of her appearances in the Ulster Cycle. It would also appear that, in spite of her physical alterity, she is capable of carrying great weights across the whole of Ireland, and her portrayal in *Talland Étair* gives us an idea of her massive appetite. In this we see the connections between international Trickster figures and great appetites, whilst also being presented with an example of how this aspect need not necessarily be presented in a purely humorous fashion, as it is with Fools. Indeed, Leborcham's great appetite is presented in a discomforting way, adding further to her otherness and monstrosity and further setting her apart from other figures within the Ulster Cycle, such as Fergus, who require great appetites to satisfy their heroic stature.

Leborcham's appearance must have set her apart from the rest of the Ulaid from a young age and it feels almost natural that we should find her in a position as an adult which further sets her apart. As a female satirist she occupies an uncomfortable liminal space in society wherein she is not fully respected, but neither can she be safely cast out and ignored. Whilst we certainly see other female characters delivering satires, they often feel—at least to the audience—as off the cuff compositions, made to serve a purpose in the moment—for example, when Noísiu first refuses Deirdre's advances in *Longes mac nUislenn* she threatens to shame him if he doesn't go with her[212]. These women make or threaten to make satires, but they are not *satirists.* By giving this title to Leborcham, it carries with it the implication that she has received some kind of formal training or has, at least, demonstrated her skill beyond that of other women.

Le Mair offers some speculation as to the etymology of Leborcham's name, connecting the first element to *lebar* 'long, tall' and giving two potentially interesting options for the root of the second element. Both of these options—*cám* 'battle, conflict' or *camm* 'crooked, bent'[213]—have the potential to offer us some insight into her character and her role as a Trickster of the Ulster Cycle. The latter can be most readily connected to her physical appearance and, thus, read as a confirmation of her otherness and monstrosity. The former, however, would allow us to explore her narrative function within the Ulster Cycle a little further. By expanding the first element of her name, *lebar*, to include the extra definitions of 'extensive; supple, pliant, flowing'[214], and likewise including Le Mair's note that this is

[212] Hull, *Longes Mac N-Uislenn*, p. 63
[213] Le Mair, 'A Trusted Outsider: Leborcham in the Ulster Cycle', p. 47
[214] eDIL s.v. 1 *cám*

also glossed as *cáinte*[215], 'satirist, lampooner', then Leborcham's name becomes, much like Bricriu's, a signpost to her greater function and her nature.

Leborcham's relationship with Cú Chulainn is particularly interesting—it is nothing short of antagonistic, with Cú Chulainn routinely responding to her messages dismissively or in outright anger, and even raising his sword against her in *Serglige Con Culainn*. For all that we are told that Leborcham cannot be 'prevented' or refused, Cú Chulainn routinely does exactly that—in *Serglige Con Culainn* and *Mesca Ulad* he refuses her initial request, only to relent when, in the first instance, he is rebuked by Leborcham herself, and, in the second, he is counselled by his wife. In the one instance where he refuses her twice, in *Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemni*, the result is his death.[216] Whilst I am not remotely convinced by Toner's suggestion that Leborcham may have been Cú Chulainn's lover[217], their antagonistic relationship does bear some resemblance to that of Fergus mac Roích and Bricriu mac Carbada. The suggestion of an affair between the two stems from an entry given in *Corpus Genealogiarum Hiberniae* which identifies twin sons that Leborcham is supposed to have born to Cú Chulainn[218], but these children appear nowhere outside of this singular mention, which leaves me inclined to dismiss it—unless new evidence should come to light—as a genealogical fabrication by the families who claimed these twins as an ancestor.[219] If we place them, however, alongside Fergus and Bricriu (or even alongside Cú Chulainn's relationship with Láeg) and read their relationship as one where Leborcham's needling is necessary to provoke him to action, then she finds her place quite comfortably with the key and defining Trickster of the Ulster Cycle.

Leborcham's sharp tongue, remarkable insight, and fleeting but influential appearances are features that she shares most significantly with the Ulster Cycle's premier Trickster, Bricriu mac Carbada. Like Bricriu, her appearance within a text heralds that the action which is about to unfold is significant and oftentimes she plays a key role in pushing the events of the narrative along. Given that the texts make a great deal out of emphasising how physically unattractive she is, it is clear that Leborcham's power is rooted firmly in her mind and in her words and this serves to cement her place as the only female Trickster within the Ulster Cycle and, potentially, within the literature of medieval Irish Literature

[215] Le Mair, 'A Trusted Outsider: Leborcham in the Ulster Cycle', p. 47
[216] Kimpton, *The Death of Cú Chulainn. A Critical Edition of the Earliest Version of Brislech Mór Maige Muirthemni*, p. 37
[217] Gregory Toner, 'Desire and Divorce in Serglige Con Culainn', *Ériu*, 66 (2016), p. 138
[218] M. A. O'Brien, *Corpus Genealogiarum Hiberniae* (Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1962) p. 154
[219] Le Mair, 'A Trusted Outsider: Leborcham in the Ulster Cycle', p. 46

more broadly.

Ailill mac Máta

Of the characters who have been included here, all of them have seen some previous acknowledgement of their Trickster-like nature, even if assessments have not gone as far to explicitly name them as Tricksters. The exception to this is Ailill mac Máta, king of Connacht and husband of the indomitable Queen Medb. Ailill is no natural or professional Fool, nor is he demonstrably afflicted with any form of madness, but there is some value in approaching his character as that of a Trickster in light of the role that he plays within the Ulster Cycle. Ailill mac Máta is one of the Ulster Cycle's most prominent figures and despite, at times, being seemingly overshadowed by his vastly more powerful wife, he has a significant effect on the narratives of the tales in which he appears and, despite the fact that he is not traditionally reckoned as a Trickster figure, his actions in some of his most important appearances deserve some reassessment.

Ailill is, undoubtedly, one of the major figures within the Ulster Cycle and appears prominently in many of the tales. He does not, however, act as a Trickster in every single one of these appearances and, as such, this assessment will be restricted to tales in which he does exhibit Trickster-ish traits.

Scéla mucce meic Dathó

Returning to *Scéla mucce meic Dathó*, 'The Tale of Mac Dathó's Pig', we find Ailill in the company of the men of Connacht as they arrive at Mac Dathó's hostelry to collect his prize hound, Ailbe.

Two of the most curious features of *Scéla mucce meic Dathó* are the way in which Cú Chulainn—notably one of the Ulster Cycle's most significant figures—neither appears nor is mentioned, and the way in which Ailill takes a far more prominent and decisive role within the Connachta delegation than Medb does, despite her apparently being present—something which is not generally seen in other texts where both the king and queen of Connacht feature. The lack of Cú Chulainn can be easily explained by placing *Scéla mucce meic Dathó* early in the internal chronology of the Ulster Cycle, either before Cú Chulainn's birth or early in his childhood, which is not contradicted by the placement of other characters within this tale. Ailill's prominence, however, makes the most sense when it is compared with his later driving role in the *Táin Bó Cuailnge*—it is messengers from Connacht who come to Mac Dathó first, it is Ailill who first asks how the pig will be divided, and it is Ailill who agrees with Bricriu's suggestion that it is divided by means of a contest:

'Cindas rainnfither in mucc, a Chonchobuir?' ol Ailill.

'Cīa indas' ol Bricne mac Carbaid anúas ane asind imdai, 'bale i taat láith gaile fer n-Ērenn sund, acht a-rrann ar chomramaib? Ocus do rat cách díb builli dar sróin a chēili riam.'

'Déntar!' ol Aillil. 'Is maith' ol Conchobar; 'atát gillai dún is'taig im·rul<l>atar in cocrích.'[220]

'In what manner will the pig be divided, Conchobar? said Aillil.

'In what other way,' said Bricriu mac Carbada from the couch above, 'where the valorous warriors of Ireland [are] here [assembled], except [by] dividing on account of a competition? For everyone [here] has dealt a blow across the nose of his companion before.'

'Let it be done!' said Ailill.

'It is good [indeed]' said Conchobar, 'we have lads in the house who have gone many times around the border.'

These are small instances but, then, *Scéla mucce meic Dathó* is a very short tale. Following the rout of the Connachta it is Ailill's charioteer who both slays the hound and who manages to briefly take Conchobar hostage in order to win concessions from him in return for his life. It is worthwhile reading Fer Loga's victory over Conchobar as an extension of the conflict—Ulster may have won the ill-fated hound but they did not escape the episode unscathed and Fer Loga's spoils mark a significant loss in wealth and, likely, in honour for Conchobar's province.

Fled Bricrenn

Ailill and Medb occupy only a small role within the text of *Fled Bricrenn*, 'Bricriu's Feast', where they are drawn into the chaos caused by Bricriu's meddling and asked to judge the deeds of Cú Chulainn, Conall Cernach, and Lóegaire Búadach, so as to help settle which of the three heroes are Ulster's greatest champion. Despite their fleeting involvement, it is possible to glean a good deal of information about Ailill's relationship with Medb and his role within the Ulster Cycle from this brief episode.

When the matter of which of the three heroes is the ultimate champion cannot be settled at Bricriu's hall, they embark on a quest to visit with Ailill and Medb in Connacht to seek the judgement of their traditional enemies. Surely there is an element of logic in this decision—in the *Táin Bó Cuailnge* we saw Bricriu selected to judge between the two bulls as he favoured neither friend nor foe and it is possible to see a similar situation here. Ailill and Medb may be considered, on account of their animosity towards Ulster, above any bias

[220] Thurneysen, *Scéla Mucce Meic Dathó,* p. 7

towards one of the three in particular.

Despite being asked to judge the three heroes by Conchobar, Ailill is almost immediately overwhelmed by the task ahead of him:

> *Luid iarom Ailill ina aircul ocus dober a druim fria[ḟ]raigid ocus ní bu sáim a menma ocus ba aingcess laiss in dál didfánic ocus nírchotail ocus ni roloing co cend tri lá ocus teóra n-aidche, conid and asberd Medb: "Is midlacha no tái" ol si. "Mani brethaige-seo, brethaigfet-sa." "Is andso dam-sa ém a m-brethugud," or Ailill, "ocus is mairg cosa tuced." "Ní andsa immorro," ol Medb, "fó dáig" or si "na fil eter créduma ocus findruini, atá eter Loegaire ocus Conall Cernach. A fil dano" or si "eter findruini ocus dergór, ata eter Conall Cernach ocus Coinculainn."*[221]
>
> Thereafter Ailill went into his chamber and put his back against the wall and his mind was not at rest and he was troubled by the meeting and he did not sleep or eat until the end of three days and three nights. Medb said to him: "It is cowardly to be silent" she said, "if you don't make this judgement, I will make [it] myself." "Truly it is difficult for me to judge" he said "and woe betide the one who gives it." In truth it is not difficult," said Medb "for Loegaire and Conall Cernach are as different as bronze and electrum[222] [and] Conall Cernach and Cú Chulainn are as different as electrum and red gold."

Whilst Ailill is not acting directly as a Trickster in *Fled Bricrenn*, his portrayal in this tale is an important insight into his character and one that helps us to look at him in the context of international Trickster attributes, especially in regard to gender related humour.

Táin Bó Flidhas

In a small moment in the beginning of *Táin Bó Flidhais*, preserved only in the Book of Leinster version, we once again see Ailill being sought out—this time by Fergus and his exiles—only for him to defer to Medb. Following this—and the antagonising of Ailill Finn by Fergus—he reappears with Bricriu in the passage that we have already seen:

> *Nírbo sén maith dolodbair ol Bricriu do saigid in duni seo. Adde is fir ci atberthar son or Ailill mac Mata. Olc do inchaib Ulad in fechtas so na tri eclaind do thutim dib & nad tabrat dígail fair. Ba háge immairic cach fer díb seo. nícon torchair cid óenfer lais nách ai díb. It móra ám na tri córaid seo do bith fo sopaib fer in duni seo. Mor in cutbiud in t-óenfer do far nguin for tríur. Uch cena for Bricriu is fota*

[221] Henderson, *Fled Bricrend*, p. 74

[222] Henderson, *Fled Bricrend*, p. 75 translates *findruini* as white metal, but eDIL provides further explanation—associating the term with the alloy that is produced during the smelting of gold and silver.

a chubat for lár mo phoba Ferguis ce ro trascair óenfer.[223]

"It was with no good omen," said Bricriu, "that you came to attack this fort."

"Indeed, it is true what you say," said Ailill mac Máta. "Bad for the honour of the Ulaid this expedition, their three champions fallen and they take no vengeance for it. Truly great are these warriors to be under [such] wisps [as] the men of this fort. Great is the shame that one man has wounded the three of you." "Woe indeed!" said Bricriu. "Long is the length on the ground, my *popa* Fergus, since one man laid [you] low."

That we find Ailill here set side by side with the main Trickster of the Ulster Cycle is significant—he is fulfilling an identical role to Bricriu in this scene, in mocking the Ulster exiles until they rouse themselves to win the battle.

Táin Bó Cuailnge

Despite much of the action of the *Táin Bó Cuailnge*, 'The Cattle Raid of Cooley', focusing on the exploits of Cú Chulainn, it is Ailill who appears as one of the most important driving forces of the story. From the very opening section—the 'Pillow Talk' episode from the Book of Leinster—it is Ailill who brings up the matter of their separate wealth toMedb, thus triggering the quest for Donn Cuailnge, the Brown Bull of Cuailnge.[224]

Later, once the invasion of Ulster is fully underway, Ailill once again changes the course of the tale with one small action. When the Connacht army is split in two in an attempt to avoid Cú Chulainn, Ailill takes one half, whilst Medb and Fergus take the other. Ailill's charioteer is then sent to spy on Medb and Fergus, catching them unawares and slipping away with Fergus' sword which Ailill then orders him to hide.

Is and sin asbert Ailill fria araid Cuillius:

'Finna dam indiu Meidb 7 Fergus. Ní fetur cid rodanuc don choibdin se, 7 bid fó lim donísed comartha n-úait.'

Dotháet Cuillius in tan bátar hi Cluichrib. Ansait ind lánamain fo deóid 7 lotar ind óic remib. Dotháet chucu Cuillius 7 ní forchúalatár in fer forcsi. Ecmaic boí a chlaideb hi farrad Fergusa. Tánísca Cuillius asa thrúail 7 fófácaib in trúaill fás. Dotháet Cuillius co Ailill.

'Ameind,' or Ailill.

'Amne dano,' or Cuillius. 'Undar dait sund comartha.'

[223] Best and Osborn, *Lebor Na hUidre: Book of the Dun Cow*, p. 56.

[224] O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúalnge from the Book of Leinster*, pp. 1-2, trans. pp. 138-139

'Is maith sin trá,' or Ailill.

Tibid cechtar de fria chéle.

'Amal dondruimin-so,' or Cuillius, 'is amlaid fosfairnec-sa hi comlepaid.'

'Is dethbir disi,'or Ailill. 'Is ar chobair ocon táin dorigni. Bá maith bláth in c[h]laidib lat,' or Ailill. 'Atnaig fót ṡuide isin carput 7 anart léined imbi.'[225]

Then Ailill said to Cuillius, his charioteer: 'Spy for me today on Medb and Fergus. I do not know what has brought them thus together. I shall be glad if you can bring me a proof.' Cuillius arrived when they were in Cluichri. The lovers remained behind while the warriors went on ahead. Cuillius came to where they were, but they did not hear the spy. Fergus's sword happened to be beside him and Cuillius drew it out of its scabbard, leaving the scabbard empty.

Then he came back to Ailill. 'Well?' said Ailill. 'Well indeed,' said Cuillius. 'Here is a proof for you.' 'That is well,' said Ailill. They exchanged smiles. 'As you thought,' said Cuillius, 'I found them both lying together.'

'She is right (to behave thus),' said Ailill. 'She did it to help in the cattle-driving. Make sure that the sword remains in good condition. Put it under your seat in the chariot, wrapped in a linen cloth.'[226]

It is this loss of his sword—and its replacement with a wooden fake—which prompts Fergus to yield before Cú Chulainn when they meet at the ford and which, in turn, means that Cú Chulainn yields to him when the pair meet during the final battle. Fergus then quits the field, taking his men with him, which prompts Ailill and Medb's army to all but disintegrate before their eyes. Ailill's small act of rebellion against Medb, presented in the text with all the gravity of a minor practical joke, leads to the destruction of their army and a catastrophic loss for Connacht, despite Medb managing to make off with the Don Cuailnge.

Aided Fergusa maic Roich

Alongside the *Táin Bó Cuailnge*, Ailill's most impactful role is to be found in *Aided Fergusa maic Roich*, 'The Violent Death of Fergus mac Roich'. The older of the two versions is found in the Yellow Book of Lecan and consists of two brief paragraphs which relate only that Fergus was killed by Ailill on a visit to Connacht. The longer version, which was included in Kuno Meyer's *The death-tales of the Ulster heroes,* is taken from NLS Adv. MS 72.1.40. Whilst this later manuscript dates only to the fifteenth to sixteenth

[225] O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúailnge, Recension 1*, p. 33

[226] O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúailnge, Recension 1*, pp. 154-155

century and, therefore, technically falls outwith our period of concern here, the contents of this tale are so significant to Ailill's development as a Trickster as to warrant inclusion. The internal dating of the later version of *Aided Fergusa maic Roich* places it fourteen years after the events of *Longes mac nUislenn*, as well as after the events of the *Táin Bó Cuailnge*. Fergus and three thousand of his men have since remained in exile in Connacht, harassing Ulster in vengeance for Conchobar's betrayal. The tale itself is a short one, doing little more than setting the scene before driving straight into the action. When Ailill witnesses Medb and Fergus together in the lake, he is overcome by jealousy and tricks his blind brother, Lugaid Dalléces, into casting a lance at the pair by telling him that they are two deer.

> *'Erg sīs a Fergus,' ar Ailill '7 bāid na firu!' ' Nīt maith a n-usci,' ar Fergus. Luid-som sīs ar ái sin. Nīr fulaing a cridi do Meidb co ndechaid isin loch. Mur docūaid Fergus isin loch dorala ana mbui do grenaig 7 do clochaib a n-īchtar an loch[a] co raibi for ūachtar uli. Luid Medb didiu co raibi for a bruindi-sium 7 a gabla ime 7 co taircell-som in loch annsin 7 rogab ēt Ailill. Doluid didiu sūas Medb.*
>
> *'Is ālaind a ndognī an dam, a Lugaid, 7 an eilit isin loch,' ar Ailill. 'Cid nach gonatar?' or Lugaid 7 nī tuc urcor n-imraill rīam. 'Teilg-su dūn orchur forru!' ar Ailill. 'Impō m'agaid cuctha,' or Lugaid, '7 tabraid gāi dam.' Robūi Fergus aca nige asic loch 7 a bruinni fria 7 tucad a carpat docum Oilello co mbūi ina farrad 7 do teilc Lugaid urcor don gāi co mbōi triana druim sīar sechtail. ' Doriacht an t-urchur!' ar Lugaid. 'Is fīr on,' ar cāch, 'atāt bruindi Fergusa.'*[227]
>
> 'Go down, Fergus,' said Ailill, 'and drown the men.' 'They are not good in water,' said Fergus. Nevertheless he went down. Medb's heart could not bear that, so that she went into the lake. As Fergus entered the lake, all there was of gravel and of stones at the bottom of the lake came to the surface. Then Medb went till she was on the breast of Fergus, with her legs entwined around him, and then he swam around the lake. And jealousy seized Ailill. Then Medb went up.
>
> 'It is delightful what the hart and the doe are doing in the lake, Lugaid,' said Ailill. 'Why not kill them?' said Lugaid, who had never missed his aim. 'Do thou have a cast at them!' said Ailill. 'Turn my face towards them!' said Lugaid, 'and bring a lance to me!' Fergus was washing himself in the lake, and his breast was towards them. And his chariot is brought to Ailill, so that it was near him; and Lugaid threw

[227] Kuno Meyer, *The Death-Tales of the Ulster Heroes*, Todd Lecture Series (Royal Irish Academy, 1906), pp. 32-34

the lance, so that it passed out through his back behind. 'The cast has gone home!' said Lugaid. 'That is true,' said all; 'it is the end of Fergus.'[228]

The parallels between *Aided Fergus maic Roich* and the death of Baldr as presented by Snorri Sturlusson in the thirteenth century *Gylfaginning* are obvious—where in Loki guides the blind Höðr into casting a mistletoe bolt to kill Baldr.[229] Even as Baldr's death triggers the events of Ragnarök, so Fergus' death triggers a slew of death tales relating to key Ulster Cycle figures as a cycle of revenge is set in motion. There is no space here to delve into the potential real-world implications of the similarities in these tales but the clear similarities between these two instances invite us to view Ailill in direct relation to Loki and, thus, to look closer at his character in the rest of the Ulster Cycle.

Ailill mac Máta's biography is, compared to some of his peers, a relatively easy one to lay out. In the 'Pillow Talk' episode of the *Táin Bó Cuailnge* his pedigree and character is sketched out for us and we are likewise told in this episode that the reason Medb chose him for her husband was because he was *fer cen neóit, cen ét, cen omon*[230] (a man without meanness, without jealousy, without fear) qualities which he begins to lose during the *Táin* and which he has apparently completely abandoned by the time of *Aided Fergusa maic Roig*.

It does not seem accidental that it is Ailill who acts as the voice of Connacht during the early events of *Scéla Mucce Meic Dathó*, though Medb is apparently in attendance. For a story that is reckoned as a work of deliberate parody of other Ulster Cycle tales, it is telling that Ailill is the one both to raise the question of how the pig should be divided, and to agree with Bricriu's suggestion in his singular appearance. If we continue with the idea posited earlier that *Scéla mucce meic Dathó* represents a grim foretelling of what should happen when the balance of power between Connacht and Ulster is tested, as it is in the *Táin Bó Cuailnge*, then Ailill's positioning here—directly beside the true, archetypical Trickster of the Ulster Cycle—is an important indicator of his position as a secondary Trickster of the cycle.

When this position alongside Bricriu in *Scéla mucce meic Dathó* is added to their shared scene in *Táin Bó Flidhais*, it becomes even clearer that Ailill can be comfortably read as being cut from a similar—though certainly not identical—cloth as Bricriu himself.

Of note is one of the smaller discrepancies between the two versions of *Táin Bó Flidhais*—in the *Lebor na hUidre* version translated above, it is Bricriu who speaks first but, in the

[228] Meyer, *The Death-Tales of the Ulster Heroes*, pp. 33-35
[229] Sturlusson and Byock, *The Prose Edda*, pp. 65-66
[230] O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúalnge from the Book of Leinster*, p. 1

Lebor Laignech verion, it is Ailill who opens the conversation:

> *Nibbo do séun maith dodechabair úan a Fergus ol Ailill. Ni gó ém ci asberthar són ol Bricriu cen nech do thutim lind. Ba ágae immaric cech fer dib. nadcon torchair cid oeṅfer la cech n-ae. It móra na tri corthese do bith fo chonaib 7 énaib.*[231]
> "It was not with good omens that you sought assistance, Fergus," said Ailill.
> "Indeed, no lie what is said," said Bricriu, "each man of them [has] fallen. Each of them was a pillar of battle, yet not one man has been felled by their hands. Great are these three warriors to be under wolves and birds."

Whilst the principles of this conversation remain the same, the fact that Bricriu and Ailill's roles can be swapped without seriously impacting the intelligibility of the conversation, suggests that they are, indeed, fulfilling similar roles in this passage.

Much has been made about Medb as the driving, and at times even villainous, force behind the events of the *Táin Bo Cuailnge* in particular but, as has already been noted, it is Ailill who opens the dialogue in the pillow talk episode, it is Ailill who goads and needles Medb over her independent wealth, and it is Ailill, more than any other character, who pushes the events of the *Táin Bó Cuailnge* towards its bloody conclusion, especially as regards his meddling with Fergus.

Despite his position as a king, there is little room for doubt that Ailill is in a very unusual position for a man in the society that is represented by the Ulster Cycle. In this world where a man's value is defined by his prowess in combat, his generosity towards his followers, and his ability to make sound judgements, Ailill is undermined, outmatched and cuckolded repeatedly. The only occasions where he appears to act on his own initiative lead to scenes of unbridled chaos and we rarely see him directly engaging in combat—Medb herself is involved in the fighting towards the end of the *Táin Bó Caulange* and even Bricriu is noted as a combatant in *Talland Étair*, whilst Ailill is most commonly seen at the fringes of the violence or doing his best to avoid outright physical conflict.

On the other hand, though Medb's actions don't always result in flawless success, she nevertheless acts decisively and calculatingly, showing a keen understanding of the world in which she lives and using her knowledge and political power—not to mention her body—to devastating effect. Even through the misogynistic overtones of the *Táin Bó Cualinge*, it is clear to see that Medb had the drive and power to push the invasion all the way to Emain Macha had it not been for Ailill's meddling and the untimely appearance of

[231] R. I. Best, and M. A. O'Brien, [eds.], *Book of Leinster, Formerly Lebar Na Núachongbála*, 1st edn (Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1967), p. 1126

her menstrual cycle. That nature itself, in essence, was the only thing that could truly halt her is remarkably telling.

Dukes-Knight considers *Fled Bricrenn* to "set Medb as a second Bricriu"[232], however, it is her assessment that *Fled Bricrenn* is a consciously constructed comic tale—based largely on its deliberate are repeated subversions of gender roles and of other heroic tropes—that is particularly relevant for the assessment of Ailill as a lesser Trickster of the Ulster Cycle, not Medb. The appearance of Ailill and Medb in *Fled Bricrenn* is one of the clearest and neatest demonstrations of the odd nature of their relationship, with the possible exception of their relationship in the *Táin Bó Cuailnge*. In essence, it is always Medb who we see acting with the social authority of a king—she commands their army, she is shown to be largely firm and decisive and to have a keen grasp on the political situations presented to her—whilst Ailill acts most commonly as her queen. In political terms he is quite explicitly her consort, regardless of whatever personal skills he may possess, he is expected to tolerate her many affairs and is forced to resort to trickery and subterfuge to undermine them. To add to this, a comment from Bricriu himself in the early modern version of *Táin Bó Fidais* explicitly identifies Medb's unique position:

> *Is ann sin adubairt Bricne na briathra-sa:* '[…] *Agus raed eile fos: Ni fuilit da rig ar aon cuiged an Erinn acht ar Connachtaib. Agus fos is as is usa duinn ar crecha agus ar cogad do denam. Agus is ri Erenn ar tothacht Medb,* '[233]
>
> And Bricne further spoke: '[…] And another thing besides: Connaught is the only province in Ireland where there are two kings. And further: from thence we can easier carry on our forays and wars. In real power Meave is king of Ireland'[234]

Whilst we may not see Ailill engaging in any forms of explicitly grotesque humour similar to Bricriu's ejection into the dung heap, this inversion of his and Medb's gender roles can undoubtedly be read as comedic, even if subtly so. As a Trickster Ailill's liminality, then, is borne predominantly of social ostracization. In the same way that Medb is a queen who acts as a king and a husband, Ailill is a king who has been relegated to the narrative and social role of a queen and a wife—he is ultimately powerless to rebuke Medb for her affairs, his advice is repeatedly shown to be lesser than hers is, and even when he is sought out to make a judgement—as we see in *Fled Bricrenn*—he finds himself incapable of finding a solution.

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[232] Jennifer Dukes-Knight, 'Gender and Comedy in the Early Irish Tale Fled Bricrenn', *South Atlantic Review*, 81.2 (2016), p. 15

[233] Mackinnon, 'The Glenmasan Manuscript [Part 1]', p. 218

[234] Mackinnon, 'The Glenmasan Manuscript [Part 1]', p. 219

The links between Ailill and other common Trickster themes are far more subtle but in his argument with Medb over which has the greater wealth, we might tentatively draw a link between him and the themes of overindulgence that we have seen in other manifestations of Tricksters both internationally and within the medieval Irish corpus. The very fact that we are explicitly told by Medb that meanness and jealously are not in his nature, whilst we witness him developing those exact traits in his appearances in the *Táin Bó Cuailnge* and *Aided Fergusa maic Roig*, is particularly curious. In some ways, where Bricriu is coded as a Trickster from his earliest appearances, we are witnessing Ailill being moulded *into* a Trickster by the events of the Ulster Cycle narrative. In a similar vein, although Ailill's subordinate role in his marriage is not outwardly mocked in any way that might read to a modern audience as an explicit joke, it *is* the kind of subversion of social expectations that could allow for mockery and humour to bleed through. Indeed, the scene in *Fled Bricrenn* where Ailill shuts himself in his rooms to fret over the judging of the three heroes has great potential to be rendered in a humorous light, even if the comedic potential in this scene is passed over by translators. Overall, though he may not always appear in the guise of a Trickster, Ailill's presentation within the Ulster Cycle aligns frequently enough with broader themes around Tricksters that assessing him from this angle may prove enlightening.

Conclusion

Now that we have a comfortable assessment of how Tricksters can be seen to manifest in the literature of Medieval Ireland, it is possible to tease out the themes that bind them together, in order to present a blueprint, of sorts, that might be applied to other figures beyond the Ulster Cycle.

Power of Words

The realm of Irish tricksters is undoubtedly a verbal one—the power of speech is one which is well represented in medieval Irish literature, and it is hardly surprising that we see the Tricksters of this corpus making effective use of this already well-established facet of their world. That all three of our key examples here—along with both Aniér Mac Conglinne and Manannán mac Lir—are seen to favour verbal exchanges over physical ones marks the power of speech as one of the key strings in the bow of medieval Irish Tricksters.

Of note in this area is that, save for Mannanán, none of the Tricksters we have assessed here are explicitly magicians, nor is there any indication within the text that there is any magical intent behind their words. The power in their words is something inherent and, quite possibly, something that they are not fully in control of given how often their warnings and manipulations backfire.

Gender

In all of our Ulster Cycle examples, we see our Tricksters presenting with some kind of inversion, variation, or alterity as regards their gender or expected gender roles. Ailill mac Máta was the most obvious example of this with the way in which he functions, narratively speaking, as Medb's queen and wife rather than as a king and husband, but it was also seen with the others. Leborcham exists as an explicitly unattractive woman in a world full of women who are often described first and foremost by their physical beauty and gain social standing through their perceived attractiveness. As a *ban-cháinte* she holds a professional title that is cause for explicit revulsion and appears to be almost belligerently either unaware of or unbothered by how she must be perceived. That this title is also connected to the explicit power that her words hold and is the reason that she cannot be prevented from accessing Deirdre in *Longes mac nUislenn* or successfully denied by Cú Chulainn throughout their various interactions.

Bricriu's subversion of his expected gender roles are far more subtle, requiring us to read between the lines rather than being handed to us in the texts. He is cited as a combatant on

only one occasion in the texts that were assessed here, in a single line of Leborcham's prophecy in *Talland Étair.* From this we can make the assumption that, though he is a capable warrior when the need arises, he actively *chooses* to hold back from using brute force to get his way and opts instead for verbal cajoling and careful manipulation. This alone sets him apart from his peers, all of whom are explicitly concerned with their heroic standing and with being able to prove their status through feats of arms. Bricriu's apparent lack of concern for his place within this heroic masculine system is an aberration in and of itself and leaves him adrift in the heavily gendered world in which he exists.

Narrative Vanishing Act

One particularly curious feature of medieval Irish Tricksters is a tendency for them to vanish from the narrative once their purpose has been fulfilled, which is seen most prominently with Bricriu mac Carbada and Leborcham. We don't, of course, see this aspect with Ailill mac Máta very clearly but that is mostly likely on account of his particular narrative significance in many of the tales that were assessed here and also likely has much to do with the way in which he slowly develops into a more explicit Trickster figure over the course of the Ulster Cycle.

Leborcham and Bricriu, however, are serial perpetrators of this most frustrating habit, often disappearing entirely once they have delivered their significant lines. Were this unique to only one of them or to a singular tale in particular it may be worth dismissing but that we see it so frequently with both of them marks it as significant. We find an inversion of this trait in tales which feature Mannanán Mac Lír, wherein his involvement is frequently covert until the conclusion of the tale, but it reflects the same pattern.

Subtlety

It is a concept that has come up repeatedly in this chapter already but if there is anything that sets the Tricksters of medieval Irish literature apart from their international peers then it is the significant degree of subtlety that we find in their presentations. Once this small selection of key manifestations has been brought together, it becomes clear why many of them have gone unstudied or understudied *as* Tricksters for so long.

Overall it is evident that manifestations of Tricksters within medieval Irish literature display an elegance and subtlety that sets them apart from many of their international peers. In light of the fact that it is nearly impossible to speak of any deliberate narrative cohesion with the Ulster Cycle it is remarkable that we can still identify such neat and consistent characterisation in tales and figures which have passed through so many hands

and minds.

As regards the further work that this topic would benefit from—it has already been noted that a full and in-depth reassessment of Bricriu mac Carbada's appearances in the Ulster Cycle, including tales which have not been touched on here, would go a great way to expanding our understanding of the corpus as a whole, as well as opening new avenues of appreciation for both Bricriu and the characters that he associates most frequently with. The inverse gender roles of Ailill and Medb would similarly benefit from an independent study which focuses on a broader range of their appearances, and which is able to draw more deeply on some of the existing scholarship surrounding reinterpretations of Medb's character than this study allowed for. Beyond the key figures who were assessed here, some other figures—most especially The Dagda, Aithirne Áilgesach and St Moling—would benefit from some direct assessment as Trickster figures.

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