

[Editor's note: The diacritical marks of the Early Irish in the following article are beyond the technical capacity of *Disability Studies Quarterly* reproduction methods at this time. Regretfully they were not included.]

**Kingship and the Hero's Flaw:
Disfigurement as Ideological Vehicle in Early Irish Narrative**

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Our picture of early medieval Ireland emerges from a story-telling tradition that took on relatively firm contours in the centuries preceding the year 1000 CE and then found literate expression in the Irish vernacular (not Latin) in succeeding centuries. It shows Ireland composed of some 150 small tribal kingdoms whose economy was based on cattle-raising and was sufficiently successful to permit the development of a stratified, rank-conscious society. In the aristocratic hero tales of the Ulster Cycle, named for the legendary northeastern kingdom ruled by Conchobar, the defence of land and stock assumes primary importance, and the everyday duties of the herdsman are magnified and glorified in stories of warriors equipped with spear, shield and sword meeting in single combat on the territorial border. The name of the paramount tale in the cycle, *The Cattle-raid of Cooley (Tain bo Cuailnge)*, neatly summarizes this dimension of the tradition.

Social hierarchy and valorization of the warrior class produce an honor-sensitive behavioral environment, in which members are continuously engaged in stylized contention with each other over prestige as well as occupied in defensive and offensive activity against the neighboring kingdom that supplies the raw material— other young warriors — from which the hero's reputation is extracted and elaborated. Under such circumstances, and even when much conflict might be conducted in verbal form, e.g., ritual public abuse of an opponent, real blows are struck and real wounds received. Thus we have a society — or at a minimum a story-telling tradition — in which physical injury is commonplace, even anticipated. But in investigating the social consequences, it is difficult to assign an exact and correct valence to the evidence of injury. Which term might best reflect the effects of physical trauma under these early conditions: disability, impairment, handicap, disfigurement, heroic scars? For present purposes, 'disfigurement' will best serve as working taxeme, since it confines itself to external appearance. Yet in a society that must accommodate frequent disfigurement, domesticate it, martial injury is, in cognitive terms, 'available' as a vehicle for the exploration of ideological issues and for the promotion of specific social, economic and political agendas.

A brief excerpt from *The Story of Mac Datho's Pig (Scela Mucce Meic Datho)* will exemplify these tense situations of confrontation over precedence and honor, and the role of wounds and scars in the wars of words that either set up or set

aside actual armed combat. The warrior forces of the provinces of Connacht and Ulster, collective arch-enemies, have met in the banquet hall of a king of Leinster (south of both territories), Mac Datho, each in the hope of pressuring him into surrendering a wonderful guard-dog. In the uneasy truce in the hall, the warriors still compete for the right to the champion's portion (Old Irish *curad mir*), that is, the right to carve for himself the prime cut from the huge pig that has been served. Cet mac Magach of Connacht lays claim to the carving, and successfully meets the objections and counter-claims of the Ulstermen in a series of episodes that culminates as follows:

“On with the contest!” said Cet. “You will have that!” said Cuscraid Mend Machae son of Conchobuir. “Who is this?” asked Cet. “Cuscraid,” said everyone, “and he has the look of a king.” “No thanks to you, Cet,” said the lad. “Right that is,” answered Cet. “You came to Connachta for your first feat of arms, and we met at the border. You abandoned one third of your retinue and left with a spear through your neck, so that today you have not a proper word in your head - the spear injured the cords in your throat. Since then you have been called Cuscraid Mend [stammering].” Cet thus brought shame upon the entire province of Ulaid [Ulster].

Cet would seem to have carried the day, but the Ulster hero Conall Cernach enters. In the now renewed verbal contention still based on past deeds, he gains the upper hand and, at last, Cet must back down and yield the right to carve the pig. But as he does, he mutters, “If only my brother Anluan were here.” “‘Oh, but he is,’ said Conall, and taking Anluan’s head from his wallet he threw it at Cet’s breast so that a mouthful of blood splattered over the lips.”

These incidents suggest that, while prior physical injury might prove an inconvenience on the battlefield, it could also function as a social impediment. Both the scar and the story behind it followed the warrior and determined his relative position in every new social configuration, such as this meeting in a foreign banquet hall. From the above episode, the following are isolated for further discussion: kingship and the appearance appropriate to it in the textual environment of the Ulster Cycle (“the look of a king”); head injuries affecting basic senses and faculties; tensions among warrior peers and their relation to kings; and the specific figure of Conall Cernach.

Conall is one of the paramount heroes of Ulster, although the better known Cu Chulainn dominates other warriors socially, as he does the entire narrative tradition of Ulster Cycle tales. In one tale devoted to this champion, *The Wasting Sickness of Cu Chulainn* (*Serglige Con Culaind*), three heroes are described as follows in the prefatory material that sets up this story of the infatuation of an

Otherworld woman for the hero:

The women of Ulaid suffered three blemishes: every woman who loved Conall had a crooked neck; every woman who loved Cuscraid Mend Machae son of Conchobar stammered; and every woman who loved Cu Chulaind blinded one eye in his likeness. It was Cu Chulaind's gift when he was angry, that he could withdraw one eye so far into his head that a heron could not reach it, whereas the other eye he could protrude until it was as large as a cauldron for a yearling calf.

Cu Chulainn's 'squint,' as it is elsewhere described, seems congenital, and is compensated for not only by the fearsome battlefield appearance to which it contributes but also by his ability to count the numbers of large, distant enemy forces. Cuscraid's injury, as we saw above, was adventitious, and suffered on his initiatory foray against the Connacht enemy. A separate anecdote tells how Conall received his wry neck and his nickname *Cernach*, when trampled on by an irate uncle. Another, fuller tale, *Bricriu's Feast (Fled Bricrend)*, shows the troublemaker Bricriu trying to stir up dissension among the chief warriors of Ulster by insisting that each is the foremost: here the constellation is Cu Chulainn, Conall, and Loegaire, called *Buadach* or 'the Victorious,' although it seems legitimate to inquire whether this nickname might also originally have referred to some battlefield injury or comparable disfigurement (possibly deafness, but see below).

It will be seen in the above that all the relevant defects are head-related: anomalous vision, speech, and cranial alignment. Before pursuing the ideological and possibly pagan religious significance of head injury or its absence, Conall's wry neck may be further scrutinized. In the tale *The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel (Togail Bruidne Da Derga)*, Conall is described as follows:

I saw a man in an ornamented apartment . . . and he is the handsomest of the heroes of Eriu [Ireland]. He had a fleecy crimson cloak about him. As bright as snow one cheek, as speckled red as foxglove the other; as blue as hyacinth one eye, as black as a beetle's back the other. His fair yellow hair would fill a reaping basket, and it was as fleecy as the wool of a ram. If a sackful of red nuts were emptied over his head, not a single nut would reach the ground.

This description of one blue and one black eye prompted Heidi Lazar-Meyn to speculate whether Conall's appearance might not "represent Waardenburg's syndrome, a dominant inherited condition associated with partial or complete hypopigmentation of one or both eyes, a white forelock, and deafness." I had earlier identified several points of similarity between Conall and the Norse guardian god

Heimdallr, among whose attributes loss of hearing is a price paid for an enhancement of this faculty in a preternatural dimension, and am encouraged to future inquiry whether Conall's 'original' defect may have been in a faculty such as hearing (the white blaze perhaps suggestive of a blow).

Yet another Ulster Cycle tale, *The Intoxication of the Ulstermen* (*Mesca Ulad*), deals with a drunken chariot course across Ireland, but mentions in the material that frames the narrative that Cu Chulainn had originally been an independent king but ceded his position to his maternal uncle Conchobar in the interest of a larger, more secure kingdom. This introduces not only the motif of tension between the warrior class and the rulers who were drawn from it, but also the larger theme of the qualities appropriate to the king.

In the early Irish conception, one of the king's principal duties was the maintenance of positive relations with supernatural forces; another was to govern justly, with *fír* or 'truth.' Unjust judgments or directives are characterized in Irish by words such as *claen* 'crooked' or 'biased', the very term used of Conall's wry neck. To assure the integrity of the justice system, the king must be honest; to permit effective contact with the divine, he must be physically integral. Just as later European history such as that of the Franks shows kings or candidates for the kingship being forcibly tonsured and sent to monasteries, disfigurement to the head was an effective barrier to the rulership, in a head:head-of-state homology. This might take the form of full or partial blindness, tonsure or hair loss, or the removal of an ear. In Irish story-telling, head injury or impairment often accompanies the last hours of a king due for replacement as a consequence of old age and infertility, military ineffectiveness, violation of tabu, or unjust rule. Thus we find such motifs as asphyxiation (choking on a fishbone), a fatal thirst, or even hanging in conjunction with wounding by weapons and drowning in a threefold death of the king. In the case of King Conchobar, he suffers a skull injury in battle when a slung stone is embedded in his forehead. This disfigurement is accommodated in practical and ideological terms by sewing the stone in place with valuable gold thread, and Conchobar continues to rule. But when he learns of the death of Christ in far-off Palestine, his anger against the Jews causes the buried missile to burst forth and he dies — an effective means of closure to the story and his long rule, one that makes him a proto-Christian long before the age of Patrick and the first missionary efforts on the island.

To return to the heroes Cu Chulainn, Conall, Cuscraid, and Loegaire, it seems legitimate to speculate whether capital disfigurement, which seems not to have impeded their battlefield effectiveness, is not being presented as a disqualifier to the kingship. Thus, just as Bricriu's fomenting of competition among the warriors over the champion's portion serves the interest of the kingship by keeping warrior power either squabbling internally or in combat on the frontier, so the motif of the

hero's flaw in more abstract fashion precludes all but the physically perfect few from aspiring to the throne. Since the flawed hero cannot communicate with the divine, energy is directed not upwards but outwards in territorial defence and cattle-rustling.

In conclusion we may note how the motifs of integrity and ability, incompleteness/violation and disability, can be applied to an entire cultural tradition. In the story *Tromdamh Guaire* (*The Great or Burdensome Visit to Guaire*), it is discovered that none among a body of professional poets can remember *The Cattle-raid of Cooley* in its entirety. To fulfil obligations towards their host, they must somehow recover the tale and to do this must recall the dead Fergus, another Ulster hero and one of Cu Chulainn's foster-fathers. The revived Fergus dictates the tale in which he figured, and it is carefully transcribed. In this story, oral tradition has been inserted into a 'medical model' by the new literacy that came with Christianization. The Irish story-telling repertoire is the patient and the ailment it suffers from is the innate deficiencies of oral transmission and human memory. The physicians, the new Irish *literati*, save the patient from death (to our greater benefit), legitimating their practice by reference to the authority figure Fergus.

In Celtic tradition, a poet or seer might surrender a physical faculty for the supernatural enhancement of its spiritual counterpart, eloquence or second sight. The warrior might suffer wounds whose consequences affected his performance in battle, but these could be either assets or liabilities in social settings where honor was at stake. In Irish story-telling, stylized or actual physical impairment also becomes a factor in politics, whether as a means of keeping the warrior class in its place or as a screening criterion for prospective candidates for the kingship. Finally, even cultural transmission could be viewed as a physical and generational process subject to impairment and cure. We cannot recover the full social and political implications of the deployment of motifs like these in the tales briefly reviewed above, that is, whose and what ends, political, dynastic, social, were served by giving the stories the form they have, but there can be no doubt that early medieval Ireland was a society no less complex than our own, and we may speculate that, then as now, the necessary recognition of physical injury or congenital aberrancy was accommodated in ways intended to serve the common, rather than the individual, good.

Note: This brief essay was written during the pleasant and productive period of my wife's sabbatical year in rural upstate New York. Since most libraries do not have extensive holdings in Celtic languages and literatures, the article relies heavily on memory and a few books that accompanied us. Excerpts in English are from Jeffrey Gantz, *Early Irish Myths and Sagas* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981). I would be happy to provide fuller bibliographical references to readers interested in pursuing these topics in translation, in the scholarly literature, or to the original medieval Irish texts.