Early Irish *bairdne* 'eulogy, panegyric'

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Abstract: Early Irish *bairdne* is defined in *DIL* as 'bardic craft, bardic composition, bardic metre'. It is argued here that it also has the sense 'eulogy, panegyric', and can be used of the work of the *fili*.

Early Irish *bairdne*, according to *DIL*, *s.v.*, means 'bardic craft, bardic composition, bardic metre'. My interest in this topic centres on the final quatrain in the ninth-century panegyric beginning *Áed oll fri andud n-áne*, which has been edited and translated by Stokes and Strachan (1901–1903, Vol. 2, 295). Their rendering of the first line is, 'Aed great at kindling of brilliance'; I would prefer, 'Áed, a great (subject) for the kindling of splendour', taking it to mean that Áed is an eminently worthy subject for panegyric. In any case, the poem is remarkably self-reflexive, combining, as it does, an act of eulogizing with an exploration of the poet's part in the construction of the lord's identity and fitness for office. The final quatrain, as edited and translated by Stokes and Strachan, is as follows:

> Oc coirm gaibtir *d*úana:
> *d*rengaitir *d*reppa *d***áena**;
> ar*b*eittet *b*airtni *b*INDI
> tri *l*aith *l*INNI *a*inm n*Á***e**da.[1]

> At ale poems are chanted: fine (genealogical) ladders are climbed:
> Melodious bardisms modulate through pools of liquor the name of Aed.

The translation of the second couplet here is attractive, but it is also opaque, leaving us with the question of its actual meaning, and in particular the meaning in this context of *bairtni* (pl. of *bairdne*): what precisely are 'bardisms'?

Flower (1947, 28) made a metrical translation, with seven syllables to the line, and end rime between the first and third lines, and between the second and fourth:

> Songs at the alefeast ringing,
> Scales climbed of comely measures,
> Bards with their heady singing,
> Acclaim Aed and his pleasures.

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1   I follow the conventions established by Murphy (1961), using italic to indicate alliteration, bold for end rime, and small caps for internal rime (*aicill*) between the end word of the third line and an internal word in the fourth. I have added the diacritic in *Áeda*. Finally, it may be noted that *bairdni*, *bairtni* are orthographic variants.

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The indication here is that *bairdne* is something sung by a bard or bards. Moreover, in introducing his translation, Flower describes the original as 'a bardic poem in eulogy of a chief of north Leinster' and says that it 'is among our earliest examples of the panegyrical poetry so inordinately developed by the later bards' (1947, 27). It appears that Flower is using 'bard' to mean 'eulogist', and is not implying that the poem is the work of a *bard* as distinct from a *fili*.

Charles Dunn has also translated the quatrain (Bloomfield and Dunn 1989, 39):

> At the ale-drinking, odes are chanted;
> The fine steps of genealogy are scaled;
> Sweet poems extol,
> Over pools of liquor, the name of Aed.

In the rendering, 'sweet poems […] extol the name of Aed', Dunn follows *DIL* (A 408.68–9); no connection is suggested here with bards, but we have to ask ourselves whether 'poems' is an adequate rendering in this context of *bairtni*.

Let us begin with the basics. *Bairdne* is derived, of course, from *bard*, just as *filidecht* is derived from *fili*. As Murphy (1961, 26) puts it, 'the ordinary word for a learned poet was *fili* (etymologically 'seer')'. The *fili* enjoyed a higher status than the *bard*, the essential difference between them being that the *bard* lacked the academic training required of the *fili* (Breatnach 1987, 97–8). From the eighth century onwards, the *filid* and the *baird* constituted separate hierarchies. The etymological meaning of *fili* is reflected in *imbas forosnai* 'great knowledge which illuminates', which denotes the gift of prophetic knowledge that was one of the qualifications of a *fili*; but it does not come near to comprehending the *fili*'s range of functions. In deriding a tendency to use etymology as a basis for understanding the role of the early Irish *fili*, Liam Breatnach (1996, 76) notes that it ignores 'the elementary principle' that 'the Indo-European etymology of an OIr. word is not the same as a definition of its meaning in OIr.' He reminds us of the distinction drawn by Thurneysen (1921, 66) between the original etymological meaning 'seer', and the actual meaning in the historical period of 'educated and learned poet'.

Etymologically, *bard* has to do with praise, probably with the sense, 'he who makes praises' (Campanile 1970–73, 23–56; Watkins 2000, 34.) Everything that we know about the Gaulish *bardos*, and the Welsh *bardd* is consistent with such an etymology. In *DIL*, *s.v.*, *bard* is defined as '"poet or rhymester" inferior in qualifications and status to the *fili*'. Thus, *bard* too has outgrown its original etymological sense. But it has not entirely lost it, and it is regrettable that *DIL* does not add 'eulogist, panegyrist' as one of the meanings of *bard*. A remarkable example of this meaning is to be found in the Old-Irish May-Day poem, *Cétamon* (Carney 1971, 42, 45):

Labraid tragna, / trén bard, / canaid ess / n-ard n-úa[r];
fáilte dó / [ó] linn té, / tánic lúach / fria lúad.

The corncrake utters—powerful bard! The cool high waterfall sings; there is welcome to him (Summer) from the warm pool; reward has come for their praise.[2]

Carney notes that with his interpretation of this stanza, 'the coming of summer is presented with images drawn from the Irish social scene. The corncrake and the waterfall are poets praising and welcoming summer—they must be paid for their praise' (1971, 49). Elsewhere, he extends the interpretation to the poem as a whole: 'All aspects of nature welcome Summer, who hands out his rewards, enriching a white tree with a gift of golden flag-iris' (Carney 1973, 243). But the essence of the metaphor resides in the notion that the corncrake as *bard* offers praise (*lúad*) to the Summer, for which he is duly given a reward (*lúach*). The lexical pair *lúad*, *lúach* bespeaks the reciprocal nexus of the poet and his patron, and as such will be revisited below.

We have seen that the meanings assigned to *bairdne* in DIL are 'bardic craft, bardic composition, bardic metre', and we may perhaps take 'bardic' in this context in the sense 'of or pertaining to the *bard*'. We know, however, that the *filid* borrowed and adapted the *bairdne* metres (Ó hAodha 1991). What has proved contentious is Murphy's claim that the *filid* also began to practise the craft of the *baird*, which in his view was essentially the composing and reciting of eulogy (1961, 26). He goes on to say: 'At an early period, however, the *fili* began to take on bardic functions and used to compose *bairdne* which was recited by some bard in his retinue' (1961, 26). His argument for these statements was made in an article on 'Bards and Filidh' (Murphy 1940), in which he notes the distinction between the classes known respectively as *filid* and *baird*; considers it 'probable', on the basis of some uses of the Irish words *bard* and *bairdne*, that praise poetry was originally connected with the bardic class; and says (1940, 203) that the *filid* 'from very early times showed themselves ready to borrow and adapt bardic measures and bardic functions to their own purpose'.

Proinsias Mac Cana and Liam Breatnach have rejected Murphy's view that in composing eulogy, the *fili* was taking on the functions of the *bard*. Mac Cana (2004, 34) finds no substantive evidence to support the notion that the association of the *filid* with eulogy was something new and incomplete in the ninth century. Breatnach (2006, 66–79), for his part, adduces evidence, primarily from the law-

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2   In his edition, Murphy (1955) reconstructs the poem to bring it into conformity with the metre known as *lethrannaigecht mór*; this entails drastic emendation of the manuscript text, including the excision of *bard* as being hypermetrical. Meyer (1903, 11) translates *bard trén* as 'strenuous bard', and is followed in this by Jackson (1935, 24).

texts, to prove that the composition of praise-poetry was a primary function of the *fili*.

Murphy adduced two items of evidence that the early Irish *fili* composed *bairdne*. The first of them is a statement in the *Tripartite Life* of St. Patrick concerning Fíacc, 'a man considered worthy of ordination as a bishop, companion of the *fili* Dubthach and perhaps himself a *fili*' (Murphy 1940, 204). I would add to this that in Muirchú's *Life* of Patrick (Bieler 1979, 92, lines 9–11), Fíacc is indeed said to have been a young poet (*adoliscens poeta*), Dubthach being an excellent poet (*poeta optimus*). It is highly probable that *poeta* is the equivalent of *fili* in both instances.[3] Reverting to the *Tripartite Life*, we are told there that Fíacc had left Dubthach to go into Connachta *co mbairtni donaib rígaib* (Mulchrone 1939, 115, line 2225), which Murphy says, 'may mean "with bardic poetry for the kings" or perhaps "with a bardic poem for the kings"'. In this connection he suggests that *bairtni* in *Áed oll fri andud n-áne* is probably to be understood in the sense of 'bardic compositions', 'praise songs'.

His other item of evidence has in fact to do with *bard* rather than *bairdne*. He notes that a ninth-century Irish bishop, Orthanach úa Coílláma, when he wished to honour the king of Leinster in a poem, used his first quatrain to put the main body of the poem artificially into the mouth of a bard':

> Masu de chlaind Echdach aird / ataí, a baird, búaid cech oín, / indid etarlam nach ndúain / de chomram chrúaid Chobthaich Coíl.

> 'If you are interested in the race of lofty Eachaidh, O bard (glory of all men), recite for a while (?) some lay about the hardy prowess of Cobhthach Caol.'[4]

It seems to me that what is in question here is that the poet is either literally or figuratively inviting or instructing a *bard* to recite the *dúan* which the poet goes on to deliver, but I am not sure that that is how Murphy (1940, 204) sees it; he says: 'It is unlikely that any bard […] ever possessed the knowledge of *senchus* and *prímscéla* of which Bishop Orthanach's poem, addressed to Donnchad of Leinster (of the race of Echu Búadach) gives proof. *Bairdne* composed by a *fili* or learned ecclesiastic was doubtless always distinguished from true bardic *bairdne* by such display of knowledge'. The reference to *bairdne* composed by a learned ecclesiastic reflects the identification of Orthanach úa Coílláma with a bishop of Kildare by the name of Orthanach, who died about 840; Carney (1982–83, 183–4) suggests,

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3   *Fili* is used of Latin poets in Sg. 63a14. In a late metrical version of a list of St. Patrick's household, Patrick's bishop Sechnall has been replaced in that capacity by Mac Cailli, and Sechnall is listed as the saint's *fili*, along with Fiac (*sic*) who is said to have been his *bard* (Ó Riain 1985, § 672.23).

4   The poem was edited and translated into German by Meyer (1917); this translation is from Murphy (1940, 204).

however, that 'It is more likely (if he is to be identified with any ecclesiastic) that he is the abbot Orthanach who died in 809 at Fobar in Co. Meath'. We do not know, then, if the author of the poem was an ecclesiastic; while we have instances of ecclesiastics composing in *bairdne* metres (Ó hAodha 1991, 220), the composition of *bairdne* by learned ecclesiastics remains to be definitively established.

Bairdne composed by a *fili* is a different matter, and I now want to adduce some evidence that shows, conclusively I think, that the early Irish *fili* composed *bairdne* on occasion. It occurs in a context that implies formal, legal satire, which, crucially, was the sole prerogative of the *fili* (Breatnach 2006, 63). Breatnach (1987, 139) elucidates the elaborate procedure that the *fili* followed, over three ten-day periods, which preceded the actual satire. First there was the period in which notice was served on the offender; secondly, there was a period of *trefhocal*, in which was uttered a composition of mixed praise and blame naming the offence which serves as a warning; and thirdly, there was a period in which the offender might still give pledges to answer claims against him.

By good fortune, a specimen of *trefhocal* has come down to us. Ascribed to one Fíngen mac Flainn and addressed to the Fir Arddae, it begins, *A mo Comdhiu néll! Cid do-dhén fri Firu Arddae?* 'O my Lord of the clouds! What approach shall I use on the People of Ard?' (Meroney 1953–58, 96, 103). The offence is mentioned in quatrains 44–45 (Meroney 1953–58, 99, 106):

> Nís-len écnach ónǽs chét[l]ach, cruth ron-cúala,
> ar ar ndála, acht ná tucsat dúas ar dúana.

> Do-rónus dóibh dúan mbinn mbair[d]ne, bréithir gléisi,
> gním gin tláisi—ní tardad dúas dar a h-éisi!

> From the choric society (such as I heard it) no carping beset them
> —About our reception: And yet for the poem they still didn't pay.

> A sweet bardic song I composed for them, brilliant in diction, /No petty
> performance: And yet as reward in return it got nothing![5]

The reciprocal relationship between poet and patron in early Ireland is rooted in a system of gift-giving: the poet praises the patron, and in return the patron rewards the poet munificently. The classic lexical expression of this is in the alliterating and assonating pair *dúan*, *dúas*: the poet's gift is the *dúan*; the patron's gift the *dúas* (Watkins 1976). With this we may compare *lúad*, *lúach* in the Mayday poem. In *Áed oll fri andud n-áne* we find the assonantal pair *láedib*, *máenib* (Stokes and Strachan 1901–1903, Vol. 2, 295):

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5   The complaint is reprised in quatrain 68, at the end of the section devoted to praise of the offenders.

A molad maissiu máenaib / lúaidfidir láedib limmsa

His praise is more beautiful than treasures, it will be sung in lays by me.

Fíngen's complaint seems to be both general and particular. The poets (*áes cétlach*) had no reason to satirize the Fir Arddae because of the way in which they were treated, save that they did not give a *dúas* for their *dúana* (plural); but we are of course to understand that failure to reward the poets justifies satire. Fíngen, for his part, was not given a *dúas* for his *dúan binn bairdne*. We cannot be in any doubt that what Fíngen offered the Fir Arddae was a panegyric; *bairdne* is predicative genitive here: *dúan bairdne* must mean 'eulogistic poem', the sense of *bairdne* being 'eulogy, panegyric'. We can reasonably assume, in the light of this, that it was panegyric that Dubthach's pupil Fiacc brought with him to Connacht, as recounted in the *Tripartite Life*, and that it was by means of panegyric that the name and fame of Áed were celebrated, as described in *Áed oll fri andud n-áne*. What remains undetermined is whether in this latter case the panegyrist was a *fili* or a *bard*.[6]

In sum, then, *bard* is etymologically 'a panegyrist', and this survives into Old Irish as one of the meanings of the word. *Bairdne* likewise has 'panegyric' as one of its meanings, and in the historical period this is so, irrespective of whether the panegyric is composed by a *fili* or a *bard*.

(We might compare the semantics of collective *loinges*, derived from *long* 'ship', which developed the abstract meaning 'banishment, exile'. We must assume such 'banishment, exile' was at first envisaged as being over the sea, from which it was generalised to denote exile in general).

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Having established, as I hope, that *bairtni* means 'panegyrics' in our poem, it remains to translate the half-quatrain in which it occurs. A fuller discussion will appear in a forthcoming article on the poem.

It is clear that the context is delivery of panegyric at a feast. The verb *ar-peiti* usually means 'sounds to, plays for, entertains', etc., with subject meaning 'music, entertainment', etc. It is also used with subject meaning 'musician(s)', etc., and object denoting the person or persons entertained. The usage in our poem does not conform to either of these patterns. The subject is *bairtni* and the object

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6   With regard to *Áed oll fri andud n-áne*, however, Breatnach (2006, 82) says: 'Even in the case of this complete poem, however, not to mention the many illustrative verses extracted from others and cited in the metrical tracts, it is difficult to be sure that it was composed by a *fili* rather than a *bard*'.

ainm 'name' (and by extension, 'fame'). Flower's 'acclaim' or *DIL*'s 'extol' may capture the essential meaning. There is some evidence, however, to suggest that the performance of panegyric had a musical component, which might tip the balance in favour of 'modulate', as chosen by Stokes and Strachan. But their translation, as already noted, is rather opaque, and for want of a better word I opt for 'celebrate'.

The phrase *laith linni*, as construed by Stokes and Strachan, shows preposed genitive, which is frequent in early Irish verse: the prose order would be *linni laith*. This is problematic: the genitive singular of *laith* is *latha*, and *laith* would have to be taken as genitive plural here, which would be out of place. In *DIL*, *s.v.*, *laith*, it is suggested that we read the phrase as a single word *laithlinni*. We can reject this on metrical grounds: it would reduce an alliterating pair to one word and eliminate the *aicill* rime between *bindi* and *linni*. Another interpretation is possible: *linni* can be taken to comprise *linn* and *ni*, that is the preposition *la* with the first person plural suffixed pronoun, together with the appropriate suffixed pronominal particle. This exemplifies the agential use of *la* with an active form of a verb that has its own subject.[7] There are then two possibilities: the poet may be using the plural pronoun to refer to himself, or he could be speaking inclusively of a number of eulogists—*áes cétlach*, as they are called in Fíngen mac Flainn's *trefhocal*, or *áes admolta*, as they are called in the tale *Orgain Denna Ríg* (Greene 1955, 19, line 340). The use of the plural *bairtni* favours the second interpretation. In any case, the meaning must be something like, 'Through ale, we celebrate with panegyrics the name of Áed'.

Abbreviations

DIL Dictionary of the Irish Language and Contributions to a Dictionary of the Irish Language. Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1913–76; Compact Edition, 1983.
Sg. Glosses on Priscian, Codex Sangallensis No. 904. In Stokes and Strachan 1901–1903, volume 2, 49–224.

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7   See *DIL* L 6.57, 7.63, Müller 1992, 111–2.

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