

# The Pride of Heroes and the Problems of Readers of Medieval Celtic Literature

Anders Ahlqvist Lecture, 2016

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It is both an honor and a pleasure, not to mention a reassuring change of pace, to be invited to give a lecture named in honor of someone who not only is still very much alive but is a distinguished presence in the audience. I thank Katja, Alexandra, Ilona, and all the members of the Society for this opportunity and for all they have done to make Scandinavia a site of stimulating and ground-breaking Celtic studies.

Returning to the scholar who is honored in this lecture, I am sure I speak for everyone in the profession in offering praise to Professor Emeritus Ahlqvist for all he has done for the study of Celtic languages and literatures, for all he has taught us, and for all the solutions he has offered to some of the most difficult problems one can encounter in the field. Compared to him, we are all, or at least I am, merely on the level of the white cat with the Welsh name chasing mice in the famous Old Irish poem that is the subject of Professor Ahlqvist's contribution to a recent *Festschrift*.<sup>1</sup> He of course would be the 'I' of the poem, the scholar who, viewing the cat and its hunting with sympathetic bemusement, approaches his tasks with zest and vigor, on a level of insight all his own.

The first time Professor Ahlqvist visited my then-university to lecture (in Los Angeles), the topic of his illuminating paper was the gender-switching of certain Irish and Latin nouns. It is my hope that what I am about to say carries some trace of what he taught his audience then and on many other occasions since, in many other places, about ambiguity, nuance, and the ability of language and literature to adapt to changing subjects, audiences, and circumstances.

Doubtless many of us as teachers of and proselytizers for medieval Celtic literature have experienced what I am about to describe. For an audience of students, colleagues, or general public interested enough to sample more of what they have only heard about or what they have already tentatively tried, the lecturer assigns or recommends readings of Irish or Welsh texts (in translation of course) that do not require too much of a specialized knowledge and that will, it could be assumed, ably represent the corpus we know and love so well. Then, as the neophytes start to read the texts—particularly texts that we might characterize as heroic tales or sagas—troubling, very basic questions about interpretation start to arise, especially from the more perceptive readers (as good as the translations

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1 Ahlqvist 2016.

might be). Questions such as: ‘What just happened?’ ‘Who is the main character in this story?’ ‘Isn’t there a contradiction between what happened or was said in episode X and what happened or was said in episode Y?’ ‘Didn’t the story go off the rails (or get lost on a tangent)?’ ‘Is there something wrong with the text, or did something terrible happen to it on the way to us in the present?’

Needless to say, questions from beginning readers are always welcome, and these in particular can lead to illuminating discussions with our initiands about the material in question. In fact, these questions are ones that scholars in the field of medieval Celtic studies are still posing to our texts and to one another, albeit in perhaps a more sophisticated and particularized fashion. And the answers with which we come up are not that different from what we usually give those students and other novice readers who are asking those questions I listed before—queries that are often redolent with frustration and even resentment at the material.

One kind of response accords with the oft-used line of L. P. Hartley’s, ‘The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there’:<sup>2</sup> that to expect medieval texts to be readable with modern eyes is hoping for too much; that they told, read, and wrote things differently ‘there’; and that we somehow have to steer our reading competence around that difference onto the other side of it. ‘Their’ aesthetics, their sense of balance and literary accomplishment, ‘their’ critical agenda were all, bluntly put, ‘other’ than ours.

A variant of this approach would urge us as modern readers to shift our critical priorities from what we would consider in art to be pleasing, successfully executed, artfully embedded, and hence ‘timeless’ to an aesthetic where the whole point of preserving an old text or story—‘old’ from the perspective of the medieval author—is to plug it into his contemporary circumstances and make it work for current purposes. Once, according to this guide to reading medieval Celtic literature, we are sufficiently apprised of that erstwhile relevance and appreciate its centrality to our reading of the text in question, all its peculiarities will fade in their significance, approximating how these were, supposedly, of lesser import to the author himself and his intended readership than they are to detail-obsessed scholars of a later age. This approach sometimes ends up viewing text as first and foremost a social charter having to do with claims of ownership and privilege, or a *roman à clef* with a heavily political agenda.

A more concrete strategy in the apologetics we have devised for defending medieval Celtic literature from unsympathetic readings is one that, instead of blaming us for being myopic denizens of our own time and place, highlights the logistical difficulties involved in conveying a text from ‘then/there’ to ‘now/here’. Taking this tack, we can point to the vicissitudes of transmission—including

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2 These are the opening words of his novel *The Go-Between* (1953, 9).

changes in language, the inevitable instances of human error, and unfavorable historical circumstances, all of which can act in concert to degrade the quality of a text that originally might have been much more coherent and integrated.

A related excuse for the purportedly poor or defective quality of our texts, one that was more popular in the last century than it is now, focuses on the vicissitudes surrounding the birthing of a text, particularly heroic sagas, in the assumption that these are or at least begin as transcriptions of oral performances—attempts to translate oral into written that are taxed by the sheer practical difficulty of doing so in an era long before electronic recording devices: a time burdened by the incompatibility of oral and written media, and perhaps marred by the failure of the transcriber to carry through with the project to what for us would be a satisfying degree. We also encounter in earlier scholarship the argument that proposes a variant of the previous scenario—that what we find and struggle with in the early vernacular narrative corpus are more like sketchy ‘crib’ notes, jotted down in anticipation of spoken performance, rather than the hastily compiled field notes imagined by the previously described argument.

These various hermeneutic models for understanding why the literature or at least some of our surviving texts are the way they are, may not solve all of our problems as readers and critics, and there is the dangerous assumption of *defect* in each of them. Let us look at some particular texts and at the particular problems they pose—cruces that, while we may just have organized them into different types, often converge, upon closer inspection.

The Middle-Irish saga text from the Ulster cycle, *Mesca Ulad*, ‘The Drunkenness of the Ulstermen’<sup>3</sup> gives us a prime example of what seems to be a **narrative non sequitur**, a deviating turn in the story arc that takes us in a direction we did not expect to be taking. Of course, the designating title assigned in manuscripts to this text, indexing inebriation and confusion, already hints at an impending difficulty for us in trying to follow the text or even in assuming its underlying coherence. The ‘indirection’ here abruptly jerks us away from a narrative that has to do with a contention among three characters of the Ulster cycle for the kingship of the province, and for their right to offer the most regal feast to the Ulstermen.<sup>4</sup> This internal discord, once resolved (at least temporarily), leads to a careening ride fueled by too much drink and guided by the hero Cú Chulainn, who usually proves to be a much better guide, down into the province of Munster and the home of that perennial ‘other’ in the Ulster cycle, the warrior-king Cú Roí, who happens to be hosting Ailill and Medb, the king and queen of Connacht, characters well known

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3 Watson 1941.

4 Determining the centers and areas of control associated with these three figures (Conchobar, Cú Chulainn, and particularly Fintan mac Néill Niamglonnaig) in the province is undertaken in MacErlean 2013, 4-8.

to be no more amicably disposed toward the Ulstermen than is their host. The story ends with the hard-won escape of the Ulster heroes from this detour-turned-deadly trap, and with some details of the aftermath.

Another text from the Ulster cycle that has become virtually a poster boy for a certain kind of narratological problem vexing modern readers both beginning and seasoned, is *Táin Bó Fraích*, ‘The Cattle Raid of Fráech’ (Meid 2015), a late-Old-Irish text that, while featuring a ‘friendly appearance’ by a genuine Ulster hero, Conall Cernach, primarily works with a Connacht cast of characters—Ailill and Medb again, and the local hero Fráech. The casting, however, is not what occasions the reader’s problems. Rather, this text vexes insofar as it features, indeed pivots on, **narrative inconsistency**. Fráech is introduced by the text as an eligible bachelor—a fact that provides the text with the premise for Findabair’s (Ailill and Medb’s daughter’s) falling in love with him on the basis of what she has heard about Fráech. His desire for a (suitable) mate motivates his decision to go forth and woo her with impressive possessions and gifts given to him for the purpose of wooing by his mother and aunt, both women of the *síd* ‘otherworld’.

Well more than halfway through the text, Fráech, having with considerable difficulty won Findabair and overcome the obstacles placed in his way by her father Ailill, returns home only to learn—along with the surprised reader—that his wife, children, and cattle have been stolen in his absence by marauders from Lombardy. While we are not surprised to learn that someone so noble and desirable possessed a herd, we are more than a little shocked by the revelation that there were a wife and children to whom Fráech was returning. The hero’s mother, who conveys the bad news of the abduction to him, seems equally discomfited by this revelation of previous marital commitment—the twist in the story not only that Fráech already had a family when he set out to woo Findabair, but that the story itself has tricked us into believing that he did not. Specifically, Fráech’s mother actually tries to discourage her son from going forth to recover his kidnapped wife, children, and cows—saying that the mission is far too risky, and besides she can easily supply him with more cattle.<sup>5</sup> (It is as if she were saying to Fráech, ‘Do not take the story off course and spoil what you have able to bring about in it, no small thanks to my assistance and also to my having brought about your healing from a mortal wound’—the latter detail one that we will examine shortly.)

Fráech, however, ignores his mother and sets out on a new adventure—in effect a ‘rebooting’ of his story, which, in addition to bringing Conall Cernach into the mix, comes closer to the *táin* genre highlighted in the title assigned to the text. Nevertheless, the latter is still playing tricks on us, for, as Vincent Dunn has

5 ‘Do-génae nephthecht dia cuindchid. Ni-tibérae th’anmain forru’, *olsi*. ‘Rot-biat bai lem-sa cenae Ni-rogebthar’, *ol a máthair*, ‘a con-daigi’ (Meid 2015, 48).

pointed out,<sup>6</sup> the main character is not about to commence a raid of someone else's cattle, as is the case in most *tána*, but a quest to recover his own.

*Táin Bó Fraích* perhaps prepares us for this striking inconsistency about Fráech's marital status or alludes to its centrality in our reception of the text by means of feinting gestures subtly incorporated into the flow of events, both those leading up to and those subsequent to this disruptive revelation that the hero and we receive back home. Back in the 'wooing' part of the narrative, in his climactic speech to the Connacht court, when Fráech is called upon to explain how he had come into possession of the precious thumb-ring Ailill had entrusted to his daughter, and how he had recovered it from the depths of the pond into which Ailill had thrown it with malicious intent, Fráech actually *lies*. He says he found it fallen on the floor—this is not true, according to the narrative: he received it from Findabair as a token of her love. Making this scene all the more worthy of inclusion in an appendix to Philip O'Leary's survey of verbal deceit in Ulster-Cycle tales,<sup>7</sup> what Fráech receives in response to his explanation, a public fabrication, is, says our text, the approval and admiration of all those who heard it. Heroes may deceive in private, as O'Leary points out, but they rarely lie when asseverating in front of an audience, as does the hero of *Táin Bó Fraích*.

Such deceit also occurs earlier in the text, when Fráech swims in the pond at Crúacháin to obtain the especially tasty and beautiful rowan berries for his potential father-in-law Ailill at the latter's request. Of course, there is mendacity underlying Ailill's asking for the fruit. When Fráech is about to set forth into the water to demonstrate the truth of what Ailill has heard, that he is good in the water, he asks Ailill whether there is anything in the pond he should be warned about. No, says Ailill, it is eminently safe for swimming<sup>8</sup>—a lie, since Fráech (whose reputation as a good swimmer receives confirmation in this episode) is being sent into the pond to encounter a deadly monster that Ailill clearly knows is there, a creature that it would seem is guarding the rowan tree and its berries. With Findabair's aid, Fráech survives and triumphs in the encounter with the beast, but he emerges from the pond very badly wounded. He seems to be at death's door when a band of otherworldly women approach Crúacháin, performing a *golgaire*, a lament or keen. Knowing that these women have been dispatched by his supernatural mother and aunt (who may be in the band themselves), Fráech asks that he be entrusted to them, and he is

6 Dunn 1989, 82-91.

7 O'Leary 1986.

8 '*Ad fiadar dam*', *ol Ailill*, '*at maith i n-uscui. Tair issin lindi se co-naccamar do shnámh*'. '*Cindas na linde se?*' *olse*. '*Ni-fetammar nach ndodaing indi*', *ol Ailill*, *ocus is comtig fothrucud indi*' (Meid 2015, 45); 'They tell me', said Ailill, 'you are good in water. Get into this pool so that we may see your swimming'. 'What kind of a pool is this?' [Fráech] asked. 'We do not know of anything dangerous in it', said Ailill, 'and it is customary to bathe in it'" (Meid 2015, 69).

taken away, only to be returned the next day fully healed and as good as new. But the women of the *síd* who return him and were presumably responsible for his cure *are still singing their gol*—a repeat performance seemingly even more affecting than before, which literally knocks the hearers down, according to the text, and becomes, it claims, the template for the ‘otherworldly women’s lament music’, the *golgaire ban side*, that mortal musicians thenceforth perform.<sup>9</sup>

One can understand why the female troop would be lamenting on their way to collect the dying Fráech—but why the encore? Is their mournful reprise sending out a message that is meant to contradict what appears to be the outcome of this episode? Or is it anticipating Fráech’s demise at the hands of Cú Chulainn in the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*?—after all, the *Táin Bó Fraích* starts out by characterizing its hero as not only unmarried but short-lived, *acht níba suthain*.<sup>10</sup> Or, I would argue what is the most likely possibility, perhaps the text is cross-referring to the alternative tradition attested in later ballad poetry according to which Fráech died as a result of his battle with the pond monster.<sup>11</sup> In any event, it is as if the text were training us to be on the alert for ambiguity at best, deception at worst, not just in the words of the characters and details of the story but in the text’s own narrative authority.

Further ambiguation happens beyond Fráech’s sly speech about the ring. When on the search for his family and cattle in the Lombard Alps, the hero and his recently acquired companion Conall encounter a female shepherd whose mother was Irish, and then an Ulsterwoman herding the cattle of the reivers whose track Fráech has been following. In each of the heroes’ two conversations, with first the one and then the other female, there is a designation of who is *tairisse* ‘reliable, trustworthy, a known quantity’.<sup>12</sup> The women the heroes encounter on their quest they deem to be *tairisse*, not least because they are fellow countrymen, while Fráech expresses considerable doubt about whether his wife is *tairisse* now that she has been abducted. Is he doubtful on account of a suspicion that she actually eloped with the Lombards? Does he fear that the unnamed wife has fallen prey to a medieval Irish version of the ‘Stockholm Syndrome’? Or is he referring to the instability of this wife as a member of the cast, which was missing her at the beginning of the drama? In any case, the two women he encounters on his quest seem indeed to be trustworthy—they provide good directions, good advice, and even assistance: the cowherd leaves the gates of the fort open, enabling our heroes to launch a surprise attack. But in one respect the *tairisiu*, the trustworthiness of

9 *Ad-agat a ngol oc dul úad co-corastar na doini bátar issind liss tar cenn. Is de atá golgaire mban side la háes ciuil Erenn* (Meid 2015, 46)

10 Meid 2015, 41.

11 Ross 1939, 198-206; see Meek 1984 [1], 6.

12 Meid 2015, 49.

what is said, particularly by the second female, is rendered highly suspect in light of what actually happens. The cowherd emphatically warns the heroes about the *naithir* ‘snake’ that is guarding the fortress, a monster that, she says, will give them more trouble than anything or anyone else in their planned attack on the reivers.<sup>13</sup> Yet once the assault commences, the serpent turns out to be pet more than *péist*, jumping into Conall’s belt, staying there docilely until the fight is over, and then leaving peacefully with, the text says, neither hero nor serpent having harmed the other.<sup>14</sup> Whatever the reason for this surprising anti-climax’s taking place, once again an assertion has been made (this time, by the supposedly trustworthy cowherd) that has proven to be wrong, false, and/or a case of exaggeration. In contrast to the danger lurking in the pond, which Ailill had underplayed with malicious intent, the snake’s ferocity is overestimated by the cowherd, or Conall’s ability to control such creatures is underestimated. Amidst all these instances of indirection in *Táin Bó Fraích*, the most flagrant of all—that Fráech actually was married—starts to seem almost insignificant or at least of a piece with the rest of what happens in the story as told here.

A text with too many *dramatis personae* (though while Findabair is a presence, we must admit that the ‘other’ consort of Fráech’s is not), *Táin Bó Fraích* presents a contrast to the third text to be considered in this paper. In all of its surviving recensions, *Scéla Muicce Meic Dathó* ‘Account of Mac Dathó’s Pig’<sup>15</sup> tells a story that in the context of the Ulster Cycle, where it clearly belongs, is pointedly missing a character we would most expect to see under the given narrative circumstances. I characterize this narratological trait apparent here and elsewhere as **intentional omission**. It is not just essential characters, story details, or elements of background that our texts sometimes omit—we also struggle in our reading of medieval Celtic texts with the phenomenon of the text that leaves a story unfinished. This is the case, for example, with a text that has given scholars many opportunities for critical reading, research, and puzzlement over the years, the picaresque *Acallam na Senórach* ‘Dialogue of the Old Ones’.<sup>16</sup> Arguably, this late-Middle-Irish Fenian text was designed from the beginning of its existence to lack an ending, because this is supposed to be a never-ending story, centering on characters whose store of

13 ‘*Ansu dúib cach ré?, olsi, ‘ind nathir fil oc imdegail ind liss*’ (Meid 2015, 49).

14 As the heroes’ attack on the fortress commences: *Fo-ceird ind nathir bedg i criss Conaill Chernaig*. . . . [After the fort has been sacked, and Fráech’s family rescued,] *ocus léicid Conall in nathir assa chriss, ocus ní dergéni nechtar n-aí oic fria chéile* (Meid 2015, 49-50); ‘The serpent makes a dart into the belt of Conall Cernach. . . . And Conall lets the serpent out of his belt, and neither of them had done any harm towards the other’ [Meid 2015, 74].

15 Thurneysen 1935.

16 Stokes 1900.

lore they are eager to share is clearly inexhaustible, their protestations of age and weariness notwithstanding.

Returning to *Scéla Muicce Meic Dathó*, we confront a title that signals a switch in the narrative focus of the text. The problem it sets out at the beginning has nothing to do with the titular pig but centers on the wealthy Leinsterman Mac Dathó's dog, the best of canines and the guardian of the whole province, which is requested by both the king of Ulster and the king and queen of Connacht. Each side promises to reward Mac Dathó more than handsomely for the gift. That such warrior-like competitors are striving for possession of the famous hound makes symbolic sense, as Gregory Toner has pointed out, since the dog of medieval Celtic tradition often serves as an icon of martial character and accomplishment.<sup>17</sup> Diverging from the usual interpretation of the text's depiction of Mac Dathó's wife as misogynistic and misguided, Toner opines that the solution she offers to her husband's dilemma makes more sense than it is usually accorded, given that either side would probably take terrible revenge if their request were refused. Namely, she proposes that he grant both requests, invite everyone to a feast, and then let the two factions vie with each other for the dog, or let the dog decide with whom it would want to leave. Thus, in fighting for possession of the dog, each side will have the chance to demonstrate the validity of their claim to what, Toner proposes, is a symbol of martial superiority: Mac Dathó's dog, a paradigmatic specimen of an animal that the Irish literary imagination regularly aligns with the human warrior.

And yet the tale is not titled *Scéla Con Meic Dathó*—rather, it is the massive pig served up by Mac Dathó to his hostilely-inclined dinner-guests that is the titular mascot of the piece. And the main event that plays out in the story, the contest between the outstanding members of the Ulster and Connacht contingents, is not centered on the issue of who will own the dog but on the privilege of dividing the pig, and on the related matter of which side should receive the bigger and better portions. So why, we may well ask, does the pig replace the dog as the focus of attention and contest? Further, we are left wondering whether the (domesticated) pig carries symbolic weight in this drama comparable to the iconic heft of the dog.

We will return to these questions shortly. I just note now in passing that the seemingly arbitrary backgrounding of the dog and the ominous interprovincial tension centered on it that the narrative effects, and its concomitant foregrounding of a pig contended over in the confines of a Leinster feast, present to our following the story a challenge similar to the disorientation we encounter in the *Mesca Ulad*. There, a provincial squabble gives way to (yet another) interprovincial incident of grave proportions. Here, in *Scéla Muicce Meic Dathó*, the dog at least does return to the story, unleashed by Mac Dathó after a battle commences in and spills out

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17 Toner 2010, 267.



of his hostel, after the pig is divided by Conall Cernach, the winner of the contest, who of course favors his fellow Ulstermen in his carving-up of the pig. So, at least in the end, the prized dog is not forgotten about, although it is killed in the end, frustrating the kings of both provinces in their rival attempts to own it.

There remains, however, a telling absence from the story the *Scéla* tells. The main hero of the Ulster cycle, Cú Chulainn, the most likely contender for the top-warrior spot in this cast of characters and for the privilege of dividing the pig, is conspicuously left out of the proceedings. It has been proposed by way of explanation that this absence is more an indication of the story's belonging to a stratum of the Ulster cycle where Cú Chulainn did not yet figure—an argument that goes hand in hand with the surmise that he is a later-introduced member of or even an interloper in the cycle's heroic ensemble. Another approach to explaining the omission is to see it as an authorial assertion that stories about these particular heroes do not *have* to depend upon Cú Chulainn's presence and participation—an intentional demotion along the lines of the inclusion of Cú Chulainn seemingly only as an after-thought in the great battle fought at the end of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*.

There are, though, possible hints that Cú Chulainn is present *sub rosa* in *Scéla Muicce Meic Dathó* despite his not being accounted for, a presence-in-absence similar to the way that the alternative, grimmer ending to Fráech's fight with the lake-beast lies under the surface of *Táin Bó Fraich*. I would not be the first to suggest that the Connacht charioteer Fer Loga who slays the dog, hijacks Conchobar and his chariot, and ends up receiving the forced adulation of the women of Ulster is a distorting-mirror image of Cú Chulainn, another 'man of Lug' (his secret supernatural father according to a strand of the tradition),<sup>18</sup> and also, famously, the slayer of a ferocious guard-dog, whose function he actually assumes.<sup>19</sup> After all, like the wily charioteer, Cú Chulainn is another manipulator of Conchobar and usurper of his chariot, and another recipient of the collective love of the Ulsterwomen, although in Cú Chulainn's case, they really do love him.<sup>20</sup>

The possible mention of Lug in *Scéla*, the clear implication that the dog Ailbe, the initial bone of contention among Mac Dathó's guests, came to its owner via divine agency, whether Christian or pre-Christian (*Ailbe do-roid dia; nicon fescia o tu cad*), and the awesome proportions of Mac Dathó's pig, fed on a sinisterly mixed diet of the milk of sixty cows laced with poison—these details point to another hurdle that stands in the way of our reading and understanding of medieval Irish saga, an impediment to which one can grow used, but that, like

18 O'Rahilly 1976, 65 (the stranger says to Cú Chulainn: *Iss messe do athair a ssidib .i. Lug mac Ethlend* 'I am your father from the side, Lug son of Ethliu').

19 This assumption of function and name occurs in a famous *macgnim(rad)*: O'Rahilly 1976, 19.

20 This love connection, crucial to its plot, is mentioned in the *Serglige Con Culainn* 'Wasting Sickness of Cú Chulainn' (Dillon 1953, 2).

the other obstruction we have discussed, keeps us guessing as to whether it is just a distraction or a recondite clue to how our texts are constructed and what or how they ‘mean’. This problem confronts the reader right away in the previously discussed *Mesca Ulad*, where the text opens with the clear implication that what is about to happen in the story results not from any internal tension among the heroic characters featured, but from an external influence: the troublemaking efforts of the subterranean Túatha Dé Danann among the descendants of the sons of Míl. (The latter, the ancestors of the Irish, banished the Túatha Dé, Ireland’s previous occupants, from the surface of the island.)<sup>21</sup> Similarly widening the ‘big picture’ behind a story is the emphasis placed in *Táin Bó Fraích* on Fráech’s supernatural relations, his mother Bé Find and her sister Bóand. Does the text invite us to trace a subtextual link between the vital contribution these otherworldly denizens make to the progress of our hero and the obstacles he faces from two mysterious monsters, the first appearing in ‘Part One’ and the second in ‘Part Two’, and to assume a continuation of this supernatural strain in the strange affinity between Conall Cernach and the monstrous snake?

These surfacings of deeper structures point to a **mythological substratum** evident in many other medieval Irish saga texts beyond those we have considered. It consists of embedded characters, motifs, and patterns that arguably pre-date Christianity and the coming of literacy, and that adhere to a world-view co-existing uncomfortably with the perspective of the literary culture that emerges in early medieval Ireland. The presence of this substratum constitutes a problem in that the reader is tempted to see it as offering the key to understanding a story when in fact, at least in some instances, it is probably not a *substratum* but really a *superstratum*, added by the literary author to invest the text with some sort of cachet or to have a desired effect on its reader or audience. Leading questions to be asked about the presence of ‘myth’ in any given text are: is the author-storyteller ‘compelled’ by the mythological elements to include them, because they would be deemed necessary to any telling of this particular story by the storyteller and/or the audience? And, to what extent can the author tweak or even shape those obligatory elements to suit his own purposes?

There is a ‘mythological’ component in *Scéla Muicce Meic Dathó* that has received scant if any attention in scholarly readings of the text. When taken into account, however, it helps us understand the previously mentioned sudden shift from dog to pig and gives a good example of how such components, while coming with their own deep-seated agenda, are flexible enough to serve authorial purposes. This submerged component is the widespread myth of the hunt for a formidable boar. Comparing what transpires in the *Scéla* with the sequence of events and

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21 This arrangement is cited in the prologue to the *Mesca Ulad*, which seems to set up a primeval motivation for what will transpire in the story (Watson 1941, 1).

outcomes in various Celtic and other instantiations of this story pattern, which is widely attested in various Indo-European traditions, is to appreciate all the more the inevitability of the pandemonium that ultimately breaks out in the story.<sup>22</sup> The mythological boar-hunt, as we shall see, leads to temporary triumph followed by discord and social disintegration. And just because the mythological pig is already dead in the *Scéla* from the moment it is introduced does not mean that conflicts resulting from the killing of the pig (in this case a domestic one) do not emerge, or that an imperative to distribute the portions of the pig, or the heroic credit for slaying it, does not come into play. Even the cooked pork of a domesticated swine, such as the meat of Mac Dathó's pig, can be as deadly, and as poisonous, as the most ferocious living boar encountered by hunters in the wild.

Two well-known examples from the world of traditional tale demonstrate that, as successful as the chase itself might prove to be, the outcome of a boar-hunt can be as devastating as what happens at the end of *Scéla Muicce*. In the Classical story of the Calydonian boar hunt, as told in full by the Latin poet Ovid in *Metamorphoses*, Book 8,<sup>23</sup> and already attested in the *Iliad*, the huge ravaging beast sent by the goddess Artemis to punish the Calydonians for having ignored her is duly slain by the heroes gathered for the task. The real danger unfolds in the subsequent argument over the distribution of the spoils and over the awarding of credit for having actually killed the boar (different levels of credit symbolized by different pig parts): a process mishandled by the hero Meleager and leading to his slaying his mother's brothers, and ultimately to his own death at the hands of his mother.

In Phoenix's retelling of the story of Meleager in Book 9 of the *Iliad*,<sup>24</sup> where he is being called upon to save his city from invaders who were provoked into attacking it by the botched aftermath of the boar hunt, we find Meleager with his wife Cleopatra, who pleads with him to put family feuding aside, leave the bedroom, and drive away this new threat, just as he previously saved the city of Calydon from the destructively uprooting boar. In Ovid, however, a new love interest is introduced earlier on in the story, possibly imported, according to the late Charles Segal, from a lost play by Euripides about Meleager.<sup>25</sup> The Amazonian Atalanta is part of the all-star hunting team in this version of the story, and Meleager, who takes a fancy to her, wants Atalanta to be awarded the boar's head in acknowledgment of her having drawn the boar's blood first, with her arrow. The

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22 On the venerable pedigree of the mythical boar-hunt, see Ford 1990 and Bromwich and Evans 1992, lxiv-lxx.

23 Lines 270-541. Segal 1992 traces the history of the story in extant Classical sources, including the fifth-century Greek poet Bacchylides' Fifth Epinician Ode (lines 75-154).

24 Lines 527-99.

25 Segal 1999, 302, n. 4.

men assembled for the hunt, including Meleager's uncles, will not stand for this judgment, and murderous chaos ensues.

Another well-known example of a boar hunted by heroes that ultimately leads to more of a loss for them than a gain in prestige, is the much closer-to-home medieval Welsh text *Culhwch ac Olwen*.<sup>26</sup> Here too, as in Ovid, *cherchez la femme*—the whole point of Arthur and company's hunt for the mega-boar and erstwhile king Twrch Trwyth is to win the giant's daughter Olwen as a wife for Arthur's cousin Culhwch (a young man whose name paradoxically means 'Pig-Pen', according to the text, or 'Pig-Pig', according to a proposed etymology of the first and the given meaning of the second name-element).<sup>27</sup> The goal of this hunt, however, is not necessarily to slay the boar but to fetch the shaving implements on its head, which Olwen's father demands and needs for his own proper presentation at the wedding.

True, the implements are snatched off Twrch Trwyth's head, though at great cost of life to Arthur's hunting party, Ysbaddaden receives his shave, and Culhwch wins the girl, but the 'collateral damage' is even more grievous (in the context of this heroic milieu) than the many lives lost. Returning proudly from a mission accomplished, with a leash made out of the whiskers of another giant, an implement that will be necessary for employing the right dog to hunt the boar, Arthur's right-hand man Cei is insulted by Arthur, who on the spot unexpectedly composes a poetic quip satirizing Cei. Arthur mockingly claims in the verse that in a fair fight the giant would have killed Cei. The up-until-now ever-reliable companion of Arthur's takes such offense that he leaves the retinue, never to help Arthur again, and so he does not participate in the hunt for Twrch Trwyth, yet to come in the story. Who knows how useful Cei would have been had he stayed, and how much more smoothly the pursuit might have gone?

Not all pig-hunts end on a note of irreparable damage. The hunt for the wild boar can serve as a rite of passage for the young hero with no immediate harm done except to the boar. In the early middle-Irish *Macgnímrada Finn* 'Boyhood Deeds of Finn' the boar ravaging the countryside is slain by the young hero after he obtains both the daughter and his weapons from a Munster *flaithgobann* 'royal smith' named Lochan, who warns him about the dangerous ravaging pig on the road up ahead. Finn returns with the head of this beast and gives it as *coibche* 'bride-price' to the smith, his encounter with the monster serving as the occasion for the attachment of the name *Sliab Muic(c)e* to the place where it happened.<sup>28</sup> I note here the presence of the motifs of the involvement of a female in the proceedings, and of the dividing of the pig, neither of which, in this case, leads to controversy.

26 Bromwich and Evans 1992.

27 Bromwich and Evans 1992, 1; Hamp 1986.

28 Meyer 1882, 200-1; Nagy 1985, 150-1.

A memorable detail from this episode is the slain pig's name, which Lochan the smith says, is *Béo* 'Living'. Given the parallels between the two texts, both powered by essentially the same mythological narrative pattern, the argument can be made that something similar is going on in the episode of the *Macgnimráda Con Culainn* 'Boyhood Deeds of Cú Chulainn' as embedded in the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* 'Cattle Raid of Cúailnge', where Conchobar, badly wounded and found on the battlefield by the young Cú Chulainn, says that if the latter could produce a *mucc f(h)onaithe* 'cooked pig' for Conchobar to consume, he would be *béo* (*Díanom thisad mucc fonaithe robadam béo*). Having been given this test to prove his resourcefulness on the battlefield, Cú Chulainn finds what he is looking for. He comes across a stranger cooking a *torc* 'boar', which, being dead, is not formidable, although the cook is: *Ba mór a úathmaire ind fhir* 'Great was the fearsomeness of the man'. Undaunted, the young hero slays him and returns to Conchobar with a (human) head for a trophy, and with the boar ready to eat.

We return from this excursion into the world of multiforms of the boar-hunt story pattern with plenty to apply to *Scéla Muicce Meic Dathó*. We now see that a pig, whether alive or dead, wild or domestic, raw or cooked, can carry as much symbolic valence for a hero as a dog can. Deciding who has the privilege to 'divide' the pig can be as contentious an affair as deciding who should own a fabulous dog, and who thereby will proudly possess its symbolic cachet. We also find that the introduction of a 'pig in contention' can resolve or complicate issues between men and women—as in the pillow-talk between Mac Dathó and his wife at the beginning of the *Scéla*, and the forced musical tribute (*gabáil chepóce*) paid by the Ulstermen's women to the charioteer Fer Loga.<sup>29</sup> These themes enter into the story on the back of the pig substituted for or supplementing the dog, but they do not seem alien to the author's original agenda. Indeed, he makes myth work for him and for the story he wants to tell.

*Non sequiturs*, inconsistencies, omissions, and seemingly distracting substrata—these are the traits that we have examined as they present themselves in particular texts, to see whether they are mere scars of survival, insuperable signs of otherness standing in the way of modern critical understanding, or reflexive clues pointing to unsuspected complexities and depths to be found in old texts. Viewing these traits as 'clues' allowed, implanted, and cultivated in the textual space by the medieval author does open up interpretive vistas offered by the tales we have examined, but they still present roadblocks to reading and to any sense we might be presumptuous enough to have of mastering the texts or understanding the semiotic

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29 Thurneysen 1935, 3-4, 19-20. On the connotations of this *cepóc*, see Martin 2008, 130-1. Curiously, in the Middle and Early Modern Irish versions of the text, Fer Loga is said not to have received the adulation in song from the Ulster womenfolk after all (Thurneysen 1935, 20, Breatnach 1996, 88).

systems underlying them. Perhaps, though, this humbling of the reader and of our confidence in the power of language to communicate clearly is another service these traits were designed to produce.

For when we read medieval Celtic literature, our latter-day pride in assessing the past often takes a beating, as did the pride of the boasting heroes in the *Scéla Muicce Meic Dathó*. In that text's climactic encounter between the Connacht champion Cet and Conall Cernach, the former admits defeat but expresses the wish that his fellow provincial champion Anlúan were present, to carry on the war of words with Cet's Ulster nemesis and to best him at boasting. To everyone's surprise, Conall, announcing that Anlúan is in fact present, produces his freshly severed head from his belt and casts it violently at Cet, whose mouth is bloodied by the projectile and silenced for the rest of the story.<sup>30</sup> A vestige of a singing head but one that no longer sings or talks;<sup>31</sup> a blunt instrument that brings a sudden end to prideful bluster; a not-at-all subtle reminder of the insubstantiality of the talk of warriors (and of storytellers and readers as well?), especially when compared to the inescapable evidence of a gruesome severed head; and a fleshly monument almost cannibalistically carved that encapsulates what has happened in the story, not unlike the 'carved' textual artefact itself: Anlúan's dead head, which is all these things and more, is as appropriate a 'mascot' of the tale and the literary project that transmitted it to posterity as are Ailbe the doomed hound and the cooked pig of Mac Dathó.<sup>32</sup>

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30 Thurneysen 1935, 16: *ocus do-léici do Chet dara bruinne co-rroemid a loim fola fora bēolu*.

31 On more lively heads in Celtic and other Indo-European traditions, see Nagy 2014, 209-31.

32 Compare Künzler 2016 concerning what Anlúan's head adds to the story: 'Therefore, one may see the head as the ultimate hero's portion as it is an equally symbolic piece of meat that stems not from a (dead) pig but from a possible fellow contestant' (276).

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