# *Tromdámh Guaire* and *Obscuritas* in late-medieval Irish Bardic Poetry

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The later-medieval Irish-language prose text *Tromdámh Guaire* ('Guaire's burdensome company') arguably provides us with some oblique commentary on the twelfth-century emergence and subsequent dominance of 'bardic' poetry[1]. The proposed dating for *Tromdámh Guaire* of post-1300 situates its composition during the Gaelic Irish fourteenth- and fifteenth-century literary revival[2]. The text offers negative comment on the 'bardic order' and their output and, as will be shown here, a particular critique of intentional obscurity of language and metaphor which may reflect contemporaneous European debates on those topics. It will also be shown, however, that obscure registers for poetry, and commentary thereon were a feature of early-medieval Irish literature and therefore also inform the text.

The first episode of *Tromdámh Guaire* centres on interaction between the blind chief-poet of Ireland Dallán Forgaill and a seemingly fictional king, Aodh mac Duach Dhuibh, of the northern Irish kingdom of Airghialla (later anglicised as 'Oriel')[3]. Dallán was an early medieval poet (sixth/seventh century) to whom is attributed the 'Amra Choluim Chille' ('The Elegy of Saint Columba') composed, it is thought, shortly after the death of Saint Columba of Iona (597)[4]. As a character in later Irish fictional and pseudo-historical narrative he was represented as 'a conservative guardian of a faded literary tradition and its élite'[5]. In this first episode the poet is persuaded by a rival king to go to Aodh and

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[1] O. CONNELLAN (ed. and tr.), *Imtheacht na Tromdhaimhe, or, The Proceedings of the Great Bardic Institution,* Dublin, John O' Daly, 1860, (*Transactions of the Ossianic Society* 5). For a more recent edition see M. JOYNT (ed.), *Tromdámh Guaire*, Dublin, The Stationery Office, 1941. For a recent English translation see P. K. FORD, *The Celtic Poets*, Boston, Ford and Bailie, 1999, p. 77-111. All excerpts from the text in this chapter are taken from JOYNT and the English translation (slightly adapted and expanded in places) is from FORD.

[2] For the dating of the text see: S. Ó COILEÁIN, 'The Making of Tromdám Guaire', *Ériu* 28 (1977), p. 32-70, p. 66; F. Ó BÉARRA, 'Tromdhámh Guaire: a Context for Laughter and Audience in Early Modern Ireland', A. CLASSEN (ed.), *Laughter in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times*, Berlin, De Gruyter, 2010, p. 413-27; J. F. NAGY, *Conversing with Angels and Ancients: Literary Myths of Medieval Ireland* , New York, Cornell University Press, 1997, p. 307. On the literary revival see J. CARNEY, 'Literature in Irish, 1169-1534', A. COSGROVE (ed.), *A New History of Ireland: Volume II, Medieval Ireland*, Oxford, OUP, 2008, p.688-707; M. CABALL and K. HOLLO, 'The literature of medieval Ireland, 1200-1600: from the Normans to the Tudors', M. KELLEHER and P. O' LEARY (eds), *The Cambridge History of Irish Literature: Volume 1 to 1890*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 74-139.

[3] D. M. WILEY, 'An introduction to the early Irish king tales', D. M. WILEY (ed.), *Essays on the Early Irish King Tales*, Dublin, Four Courts Press, 2008, p.13-67, p. 46-47. Earlier orthographic practice would represent his name as *Áed mac Duach Duib*.

[4] T. O. CLANCY and G. MÁRKUS, *Iona: The Earliest Poetry of a Celtic Monastery*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1995, p. 97-100.

[5] T.O. CLANCY, 'Dallán Forgaill', J. T. KOCH (ed.), *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encylopedia*, Santa Barbara, ABC Clio, 2006, p. 557.

request, as payment for poetry, the king's magical shield. The poet recites a number of poems but the king will not part with the shield, leading to the poet unjustly satirising the king. As the saints have predicted, we are told, poets who unjustly satirize will be punished and Dallán dies.

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

LATER-MEDIEVAL IRISH LITERATURE AND BARDIC POETRY

In 1974 Proinsias Mac Cana wrote that for late-medieval Gaelic Scotland and Ireland 'literature and poetry became synonymous'[6]. It is worth sounding something of a note of caution, however, since the late-medieval and early-modern Gaelic prose output of Ireland and Scotland is substantial, yet hugely understudied[7]. Scholars have, perhaps understandably, been more attracted to the unusually expansive and rich early-medieval vernacular prose tradition and for the most part our late-medieval and early-modern prose is quite neglected. This has a direct impact on our ability to make decisions about medieval Gaelic views on relationships between prose and poetry, given that so much of the corpus of prose awaits our attention.

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

[6] P. MAC CANA, 'The Rise of the Later Schools of Filidheacht', *Ériu* 25 (1974), p.126-46, p.142.
[7] C. BREATNACH, 'Early Modern Irish Prose Reconsidered: The Case of Ceasacht Inghine Guile', *Ériu* 42 (1991), p. 119-138.

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

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

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[8] See C. BREATNACH, *Patronage, Politics and Prose*, Maynooth, An Sagart, 1996.

[9] CARNEY, 'Literature in Irish', *art. cit*., p. 701-02; J. F. NAGY, 'In Defence of Rómánsaíocht', *Ériu* 38 (1987), p. 9-26;

[10] A. BYRNE, 'A Lost Insular Version of the Romance of Octavian', *Medium Aevum LXXXIII* (2014), p.288-302; N. NÍ SHEAGHDHA, 'Translations and Adaptations into Irish', *Celtica* 16 (1984), p. 107-24.

[11] E. POPPE, 'Narrative Structure of medieval Irish adaptations: the case of Guy and Beues', H. FULTON (ed.), *Medieval Celtic Literature and Society*, Dublin, Four Courts Press, 2005, p. 205-229, p. 208.

[12] POPPE, 'Narrative Structure', *art. cit*., p. 209. See also T. O. CLANCY, 'Before the ballad: Gaelic narrative verse before 1200', *Scottish Gaelic Studies* 24 (2008), p. 115–136.

[13] POPPE, 'Narrative Structure', *art. cit*., p. 210-17. See also E. POPPE and R. RECK, 'Rewriting Bevis in Wales and Ireland', J. FELLOWS and I. DJORDJEVIĆ (eds), *Sir Bevis of Hampton in Literary Tradition*, Woodbridge, D. S. Brewer, 2008, p. 37-50.

[14] For overviews see: E. KNOTT (ed.), *The Bardic Poems of Tadhg Dall Ó hUiginn*, 2 vols., London, Irish Texts Society, 1922, Vol. I, p. xxxiii-lxiv; W. GILLIES, 'Gaelic: the Classical Tradition', R.D.S. JACK *et al.* (eds), *The History of Scottish Literature: Volume 1 Origins to 1660*, Aberdeen, Aberdeen University Press, 1988), p. 245-61; W. GILLIES, 'The Classical Irish Poetic Tradition', D. E. EVANS *et al.* (eds), *Proceedings of the Seventh International Congress of Celtic Studies*, Oxford, Oxbow Books, 1986, p. 108-120. On the relationship between the praise and reality see K. SIMMS, 'Bardic Poetry as a Historical Source', T. DUNNE (ed.), *The Writer as Witness*, Cork, Cork University Press, 1987, p. 58-75.

[15] On amateur bardic poets see W. GILLIES, 'The Book of the Dean of Lismore: The Literary Perspective', J. H. WILLIAMS and J. D. MCCLURE (eds), *Fresche fontanis: Studies in the Culture of Medieval and Early Modern Scotland,* Newcastle, Cambridge Scholars, 2013, p. 79-216, p.199-200.

personal right to rule and his adherence to Gaelic lordly traits more generally[16]. One of the earliest panegyric poems belonging to the bardic tradition is 'Baile suthach síth Emhna' ('A fruitful place is the fairy mound of Emhainn') dated to the end of the twelfth century[17]. The poet is unknown but the poem addresses Raghnall/ Ragnvald, King of the Isle of Man and the Isles, who died in 1229. This important king of the Irish Sea zone was incredibly well connected. His sister Affreca was married to John de Courcy, the Anglo-Norman noble who had conquered lands in Ulster. A daughter was married to Rhodri ab Owain Gwynedd, another to a son of Alan of Galloway. He was granted lands in Caithness by William the Lion, King of Scotland and lands in both Ireland and England by King John of Ireland[18]. King Raghnall was clearly an important patron of literature since we also know that he had the Matière de France/Charlemagne cycle of medieval romances translated from French into Latin[19]. Thus, Raghnall's literary and familial connections link him to Irish, Scottish, Scandinavian, Welsh and Anglo-Norman networks.

Bardic panegyric is often described as a poetry of convention. The conventions span the *c*.1150-1650 period and the patron's beauty, generosity, martial ability and so on are described in customary and often unlikely and extravagant fashion. A cursory examination of the late twelfth-century poem for Raghnall will illustrate the nature of some of these conventions. The poem begins with 7 stanzas in praise of the *síth* ('fairy mound') of *Emhain Abhlach*, the mythical home of the sea god Manannán mac Lír which is often associated with the Isle of Man[20]. This is essentially praise of the home of the chief. We learn that this dwelling surpasses all others and it is also referred to as *Teamair Mhanann* ('the Tara of Man'); 'Tara' being used to suggest the residence of a high king, i.e. over-king of all other Irish kingdoms. The tenth stanza goes further and asserts that this king will indeed be proclaimed high king. This stanza also names him:

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[16] M. P. COIRA, *By Poetic Authority: The Rhetoric of Panegyric in Gaelic Poetry of Scotland to c.1700*, Edinburgh, Dunedin, 2012.

[17] D. MCMANUS, 'An Nua-Ghaeilge Chlasaiceach', C. Ó HÁINLE *et al*. (eds), *Stair na Gaeilge*, Maigh Nuad, Coláiste Phádraig, 1994, p. 335-445, p. 339. For an edition and translation see B. Ó CUÍV, 'A Poem in Praise of Raghnall, King of Man', *Éigse* 8 (1956-57), p. 283-301, in this chapter excerpts from the poem and an adapted translation are taken from this. Ó CUÍV dates it to 1187x1208. The earliest manuscript source for the poem is a fifteenth-century Irish manuscript, the Book of Fermoy (Dublin, RIA, MS 23 E 29).

[18] Biographical information from S. DUFFY, 'Ragnvald (*d.* 1229)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/50617, accessed 5 March 2016 and also from A. BEAM *et al*., *The People of Medieval Scotland, 1093* – 1314, Glasgow and London, 2012), www.poms.ac.uk. [accessed 5 March 2016]. See also R. A. MCDONALD, *Manx Kingship in its Irish Sea Setting, 1187–1229: King Rögnvaldr and the Crovan Dynasty*, Dublin, Four Courts Press, 2007.

[19] T. O. CLANCY, 'Scottish Literature before Scottish Literature', G. CARRUTHERS and L. MCILVANNEY (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Scottish Literature*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012, p. 13-26, p. 22-23.

[20] J. MCKILLOP, *Oxford Dictionary of Celtic Mythology*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 180-81.

A Raghnaill, a rí in dingna,
        Radruim Dá Thí ar thí h' errla,
do-ghébha, a meic shaeir Shadhbha,
        labra ón leic a taeib Themra

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

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

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

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

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

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

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[21] On the Lia Fáil as a *leac* see T. O. CLANCY, 'King-making and images of Kingship in Medieval Gaelic Literature', R. WELANDER *et al.* (eds), *The Stone of Destiny: Artefact and Icon*, Edinburgh, Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, 2003, p. 85-115, p.92-93.
[22] Ó CUÍV, 'A Poem', *art. cit.*, p. 287 for this suggestion.
[23] GILLIES, 'The Classical Irish Poetic Tradition', *art. cit*, p. 110.

manuals for poets in the vernacular on issues of correct grammatical and metrical usage. However, we have less explicit comment in the manuals and tracts on poetics itself, nor do we have, to my knowledge, direct comment on the relative merits of prose versus poetry[24]. Therefore, we must look to late-medieval Gaelic prose and poetry itself for clues. Erich Poppe has written of attempting to 'reconstruct medieval Irish literary theory' from one early eleventh-century tale about an Irish poet Iorard Mac Coise and his interaction with a king[25]. This prose metatext, 'Airec Menman Uraird Maic Coisse' ('The Stratagem of Iorard Mac Coise') refers to a whole host of genres and tales from early medieval Gaelic literature[26]. Poppe concluded that the tale provides

> A rare opportunity to reconstruct the use and meaning of (pseudo-)historical narrative in performance. The description it gives of this situation suggests that such texts' presentation of the past was intended to be understood by their audiences… as allegories for the present[27].

Therefore, we might fruitfully examine *Tromdámh Guaire* in the same fashion, for its critique of the bardic tradition to which the poem 'Baile suthach síth Emhna' belongs.

## *TROMDÁMH GUAIRE* AS ALLEGORY

*Tromdámh Guaire* offers something of a voice of dissent on the talents and purpose of later bardic poets if we accept that that the presentation of the imagined seventh-century past might be read as an allegory for the time of composition (post-1300). This notion has been mooted on a number of occasions[28]. For instance, James Carney wrote that *Tromdámh Guaire* 'represents a contemporary idea of the Fili'[29]. Scholars, to my knowledge, have mostly paid attention to the place of poetic satire in the second larger episode and its comment on the rediscovery of *Táin Bó Cuailgne*[30]. The second and much longer episode has

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[24] For an apparent exception see 'Sé hernailí deg na filideachta' discussed in P. A. BREATNACH, 'Poetics and the Bardic Imagination', *Celtica* 27 (2013), p. 95-113.
[25] Erich POPPE, 'Reconstructing Medieval Irish Literary Theory: The Lesson of Airec Menman Uraird maic Coise', *CMCS* 37 (1999), p. 33-54. On the poet in question see A. O'LEARY, 'The Identities of the Poet(s) Mac Coisi: A Reinvestigation', *CMCS* 38 (1999), p. 53-72.
[26] For the text see M. E. BYRNE (ed.), 'Airec Menman Uraird maic Coisse', O. J. BERGIN *et al.* (eds) *Anecdota from Irish Manuscripts* II, Dublin : Hodges, Figgis, 1908, p.42-76.
[27] POPPE, 'Reconstructing', *art. cit.*, p. 53.
[28] Ó BÉARRA, 'Tromdhámh' *art. cit.*; Ó COILEÁIN, 'The Making', *art. cit.*; FORD, *Celtic Poets*, p. 77; A. J. MCMULLEN, 'Improper Requests and Unjust Satire: Problems with the Field of Cultural Production in Tromdám Guaire', *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 32 (2012), p. 198-213, p. 211.
[29] J. CARNEY, 'A Poem in Bérla na bFiled', *Éigse* 1 (1939–1940), p. 85-89, p. 85.
[30] S. Ó COILEÁIN, 'Tromdhámh Ghuaire: An Aoir agus an Insint', P. Ó FIANNACHTA (ed.), *An Aoir, Léachtaí Cholm Cille* XVIII, Maigh Nuad, An Sagart, 1988, p. 20-38; W. J. WATSON, 'Cliar Sheanchain', *The Celtic Review* 4 (1907-08), p. 80-88;. E.M. SLOTKIN, 'Maelgwn Gwynedd: Speculations on a Common Celtic

Senchán Torpéist, also a sixth-/seventh-century poet, become the new chief-poet of Ireland and the decision is made to undertake a poetic tour of Ireland. The first stop is to King Guaire Aidne mac Colmáin of Connacht. Thus, *Tromdámh Guaire* contains two distinct episodes about two different chief-poets and two different kings. In this second very funny episode Senchán and his large retinue and the other regional chief-poets and their large retinues descend on Guaire who does his best to meet their increasingly outlandish and ridiculous demands. Poor King Guaire, fearing satire, is at times quite desperate and is given assistance by a swine-herd ascetic holy man Marbán (St Cummíne Fota). Marbán turns the tables and challenges the poet band to entertain him in various ways. They fail to impress with crooning, learning, riddles, love-making, and finally the storyteller ('scelaidhi') among them, Fis mac Fochmhairc, is challenged by Marbán on his knowledge of the principal tales of Ireland ('fis prímhscel Eireann').  Marbán asks for *Táin Bó Cuailgne* but neither Fis mac Fochmhairc nor any others from the poet-band have even heard of it[31]. Marbán puts them under taboo ('fa gheasaibh') that restricts their poetic ability until they can tell the tale. He leaves, addressing them as 'a cliar udmhall ainbhfeasach! ('stupid feckless bards'). Following a pointless journey to Scotland in search of the *Táin* they return to Ireland and with the help of St Caillín bring one of the Ulster Cycle heroes Fergus mac Róich back from the grave in order that he tell the *Táin*. The poets are made to swear at the end of the tale to end the practice of *tromdámh* ('burdensome company') and are all sent home. With this the poets promise not to be such a burden on the hospitality of their hosts in the future.

The ignorance of the poet-band on the *Táin* is intriguing given recent scholarly commentary on the relationship between bardic poetry and narrative traditions known to us from manuscript tradition. Tomás Ó Cathasaigh notes that while the *Táin* and other Ulster Cycle texts crop up often as analogies, 'we would have a poor enough knowledge of the Ulster Cycle if we were dependent on the material in the surviving corpus of bardic poetry'[32]. Furthermore, we often find references in bardic poetry to otherwise unknown episodes, or we see well-known narratives presented in an unusual way. Editors of bardic poetry often accompany their editions with notes such as the following, from the edition of a fourteenth-century bardic elegy, 'I know of no other references to the death of Cathbhaidh through grief

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Legend Pattern', J. F. NAGY and L. E. JONES (eds), *Heroic Poets and Poetic Heroes in Celtic Tradition*, Dublin, Four Courts Press, 2005, p. 327-35.

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

[32] T. Ó CATHASAIGH, 'Cú Chulainn, the Poets and Giolla Brighde Mac Con Midhe', J. F. NAGY and L. E. JONES (eds), *Heroic Poets and Poetic Heroes in Celtic Tradition*, Dublin,  Four Courts Press, 2005, p. 291-302, p. 302.

for his son Geanann, or to the recalling to life of Cearmaid by his father the Daghda'[33]. This is seen so often that the unusual or unconventional appears to have been a feature of this very conventional form of poetry. This literary 'desire to be different' has led some scholars to situate bardic poetry within oral rather than literate culture[34]. However, the linking of obscurity of narrative in bardic poetry to orality rather than literacy does not fit with what is known to us about the requirements of bardic training[35]. Therefore, if we follow Poppe's example of reading pseudo-historical narrative as an allegory for the present then it is striking that the *c*. fourteenth-century criticism in *Tromdámh Guaire* of bardic poetry's relationship to well-known prose narrative appears to accord with some present-day observations of the surviving bardic poetry corpus. *Tromdámh Guaire* was current in manuscript tradition throughout the late-medieval and early modern periods. The earliest source for the tale is the late fifteenth-century Leabhar Mhic Cárthaigh Riabhaigh/ The Book of Lismore, compiled in the south of Ireland for secular noble patrons[36]. The manuscript context here may also be significant since the Book of Lismore contains mostly prose tales, and was compiled, it is thought, in a Franciscan setting and with this text we have the inclusion of a satirical tale with some quite particular views on secular poets and poetry.[37] Having considered the conventions of bardic poetry and the possibility that *Tromdámh Guaire* may be read as allegorical critique thereon we can now return to the first episode and the assertion by King Aodh that Dallán's poem is incomprehensible.

*TROMDÁMH GUAIRE* AND DEBATES ON *OBSCURITAS*

[33] L. MCKENNA, 'Historical Poems of Gofraidh Fionn Ó Dálaigh', *The Irish Monthly* 47 (1919), p. 622-26, p. 622.

[34] S. A. MEIGS, *The Reformations in Ireland: Tradition and Confessionalism 1400-1690*, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1997, p. 23. See also Liam P. Ó Caithnia, *Apalóga na bhFilí 1200-1650,* Baile Átha Cliath, An Clochomhar, 1984, p. 30; L. MCKENNA (ed.), *Dán Dé: The Poems of Donnchadh Mór Ó Dálaigh, and the Religious Poems in the Duanaire of the Yellow Book of Lecan,* Dublin, Educational Company of Ireland, 1922, p. xi.

[35] K. SIMMS, 'Foreign Apologues in Bardic Poetry', S. DUFFY and S. FORAN (eds), *The English Isles: Cultural Transmission and Political Conflict in Britain and Ireland, 1100-1500* , Dublin, Four Courts Press, 2013, p. 139-50, p.139.

[36] The manuscript is held at Chatsworth House, Derbyshire but digitized images are available at https://www.isos.dias.ie/. For the patrons see T. O' NEILL, *The Irish Hand*, Portlaoise, Dolmen Press, 1984, p. 46.There are a number of later manuscript sources for the tale also. For reference to a lost MS version from Scotland see A. BRUFORD, 'A Lost MacMhuirich Manuscript', *Scottish Gaelic Studies* 10 (1965), p. 158-61. The tale, or at least sections of the tale, also pops up in a handful of later bardic poems; a search of the Bardic Poetry Database https://bardic.celt.dias.ie/ brings up five poems ranging in date from the 15th to 17th centuries. It was perhaps understandably not the most productive of apologues due to the criticism of the poets, yet it shows that the tale was known.  It has also been noted that a section of the tale was found to be among the repertoire of a Canadian Scottish Gaelic *seanchaidh* ('oral tradition bearer') in the twentieth century: J. SHAW (ed.), *Tales until Dawn: The World of a Cape Breton Gaelic Story-Teller Joe Neil MacNeil*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1987, p. 90-97 and p. 457-58.

[37] Alan John Fletcher, *Drama and the Performing Arts in Pre-Cromwellian Ireland*, Woodbridge, D.S. Brewer, 2001, p. 40.

The introductory episode of the text appears to have garnered less scholarly attention and yet it arguably provides us with a number of insights into debates on poetics in the later middle ages[38]. When Dallán meets King Aodh in order to procure the shield he recites two panegyrics for the king, and another for the shield itself. The first poem consists of three stanzas as follows:

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|---|---|
| A err ada, a Aedh, | Aodh! hero of hubris |
| A dhaig dana dúr, | O venom valor-hard! |
| a mhaith mur mhuir mhoir, | Gifts from great seas |
| maith cuirfe for cúl. | Given to appease. |
| | |
| Concuirfe for cúl, | Strongly appeasing, |
| A Aed meic Duach Duibh | O Aodh son of Duach |
| is maith mor do maein, | Great and good is your treasure |
| gan aeir is gan oil. | without satire without reproach |
| | |
| A grian d'aithle a renn, | Star vacant sun |
| isad uathmar leam | That stuns me; |
| a chláir fith-cheall finn, | You game-board of brilliance, |
| conthuilfeam a err. | We well up, o warrior![39] |

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

"Fir duid," or Dallán, "& gidh cia dogena in fordheargadh file, is dó fein is coir a minugad: is meisi dorinne an duan & is me mhineochus hi. 'A err ada a Aed', adubart frit-sa .i. mar err einigh & gaiscidh Eirenn tusa. 'A dhaig dana dhur' .i. a dhaig is ainm do neimh & is neim dana tu isna cathaib. 'A mhaith mur mhuir mor' .i. damad lat main & [maitheas na mara, do dailfea he do aes eicsi & ealadhan. 'A grian d'aithle a renn' .i. in grian tar eis a renn d'facbail, as i sin uar is ferr a dealb & ni ferr a dealb ina do dhealbh-sa. 'A clar fithcheall finn' .i. da mbedis secht foirne fithchle oc aen-duini, ni budh ferdi do he & gan clar aigi; is tusa clar cothaigthi & conmhala bhfer nEirenn."

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

[38] Exceptions would be: J. MINAHANE, *The Christian Druids: On the Filid or Philosopher-Poets of Ireland* (1993), from p. 57; H. FOGARTY, "'Dubad nach innsci": Cultivation of Obscurity in Medieval Irish Literature', in M. BOYD (ed.), *Ollam: Studies in Gaelic and Related Traditions in Honor of Tomás Ó Cathasaigh*, Madison, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2016, p. 211-36.
[39] This English translation is an expanded version of that given by FORD, *Celtic Poets*, *art. cit.*, p. 80, and is somewhat conjectural in places.

possessed all the wealth of the world's seas, you would give it all away to poets and minstrels. 'Star vacant sun'; that refers to the sun after the stars have gone out, for that's when it appears best, though not better than your own form. "You board of brilliance!'; that is, though a man have seven sets of chessmen they would do him no good if he didn't have a board. You are the board on which the men of Ireland stand.

Thus, this rather striking dialogue has the king refer to the poem's opaqueness. We then have the poet state that common practice would be for the poet to explain the poem to the patron. There appear to be two types of explanation given by the poet: exegesis of metaphor and elucidation of obscure vocabulary. It is noteworthy that these two barriers to the king's understanding accord with Martin Irvine's observation that medieval *grammatica* (*enarratio*) was based on an inheritance which saw both unusual vocabulary and metaphor as *vitia* ('faults'), at least of correct prose discourse[40].

As regards metaphor we might note that there is some debate about the extent to which secular praise poetry might be something of a newer phenomenon for Irish literature during the later middle ages[41]. Therefore, *Tromdámh Guaire* could conceivably be poking fun at the relatively new, and often baroque and overblown, uses of metaphor to praise Gaelic lords from the late twelfth century. One doesn't have to look very far to find contemporaneous bardic poetry which is reminiscent of Dallán's praise poem. For instance, the reference to the king as *fithcheall* board brings to mind uses of *branán*, the word for principal board-game piece[42]. In the bardic poem 'Tomhais cia mise, a Mhurchaidh' ('Guess who I am o Murchadh') by Muireadhach Albanach O Dálaigh for Murchadh na nEach Ó Briain, son of Brian Dall, dated to around 1224, we have the poet address Murchadh as 'A bhranáin ghil ghormrosgaigh' ('o chess-king bright and blue-eyed')[43]. The metaphor involving the sun and the stars in Dallán's poem reminds of the thirteenth-century poem 'Bean ós mhnáibh cáich Cailleach Dé' ('Woman beyond all women of the world is Cailleach Dé') where the Cailleach Dé in question is referred to as 'an ghrian ard ós fhiodh' ('the sun high above the wood').

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[40] M. IRVINE, *The Making of Textual Culture*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. 104-05. For comment on the influence of the *enarratio poetarum* on medieval Irish literature see B. MILES, *Heroic Saga and Classical Epic in Medieval Ireland*, Cambridge, D. S. Brewer, 2011.

[41] A. WOOLF, 'The court poet in early Ireland', S. DUFFY (ed.), *Princes, Prelates and Poets in Medieval Ireland: Essays in Honour of Katharine Simms*, Dublin, Four Courts Press, 2013, p. 377-88; L. BREATNACH, 'Satire, praise and the early Irish poet', *Ériu* 56 (2006), p. 63-84.

[42] On this medieval Irish board-game see P.S. HELLMUTH, 'Fidchell', J. T. KOCH (ed.), *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia*, Santa Barbara, ABC Clio, 2006, p. 746-47.

[43] For the poem and translation see O. BERGIN, *Irish Bardic Poetry*, ed. D. GREENE and F. KELLY, Dublin, DIAS, 1970, poem 24. For another translation and the date of 1224 see T. O. CLANCY (ed.), *The Triumph Tree: Scotland's Earliest Poetry, AD 550-1350,* Edinburgh, Canongate, 1998, p. 271-74. For Murchadh na nEach see M. NÍ ÚRDAIL, 'Two Poems Attributed to Muireadhach Albanach Ó Dálaigh', *Ériu* 53 (2003), p.19 note 3.

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

The second type of explanation in *Tromdámh Guaire*, involving intentionally obscure vocabulary is also relevant to a critique of bardic poetry: when we see in Dallán's explanation that the king must be told that *dáigh* means poison[44]. Indeed, the editor of the text underlines the difficulty in dealing with the verses which she notes contain 'spurious' intentionally obscure words and phrases[45]. There are a number of contexts for the critique of obscurity of poetic language in *Tromdámh Guaire* which will each be explored below: the early-medieval Irish tradition of 'Bérla na Filed'; the later-medieval creation of a codified poetic register for bardic poetry; Latin *ars poetica* and other debates on intentional obscurity.

EARLY-MEDIEVAL IRISH OBSCURE POETIC LANGUAGE

The early-medieval setting of *Tromdámh Guaire* and the opaque language of poetry reflects the predilection of many early-medieval Irish poets for the difficult and the obscure. Liam Breatnach has noted that for the early-medieval period the poets 'had no hesitation in coining nonce-formations or drawing on other languages in their search for the rare and arcane… the use of unusual vocabulary continued well after the Old Irish Period, the variety of language used being termed Bérla na Filed'[46]. Breatnach's work shows examples of early medieval prose texts turned into poetry written in this intentionally archaic poetic register[47]. Hugh Fogarty, building on the work of John Carey and others, also points to a number of examples of the 'intentional cultivation of obscurity as a stylistic ideal' in medieval Irish poetics[48]. Indeed, the notion of poets being linked to the obscuration of language appears at the beginning of the early-medieval tract on language *Auraicept na nÉces* ('The Scholars' Primer'). There we learn that the Gaelic language was created to be the best of languages by

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[44] see *dáig* in eDIL http://www.dil.ie/

[45] JOYNT, *Tromdámh Guaire*, *art*. *cit*., p. 41.

[46] Liam BREATNACH, 'Poets and Poetry', K. MCCONE and K. SIMMS (eds), *Progress in Medieval Irish Studies*, Maynooth, St Patrick's College, 1996, p. 65-90, p. 73.

[47] L. BREATNACH, 'Canon Law and Secular Law in Early Ireland: The Significance of *BrethaNemed*', *Peritia* 3 (1984), p. 439-59. See also R. CHAPMAN STACEY, *Dark Speech: The Performance of Law in Early Ireland*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007.

[48] FOGARTY, *art. cit*, p. 216 ; J. CAREY, 'Obscure styles in medieval Ireland'. *Mediaevalia*, 19 (1996), p. 23-39.

Fénus Farsaid, from all other human languages at Babel[49]. The text clarifies that he created the whole of the Gaelic language, '*genmotha inni rothormachtatar filid tria fordorchadh iar torrachtain gu Fenius* ('except what poets added by way of obscuration after it had reached Fenius')[50]. *Fordorchadh* means darkening/obscuring. The linking of Dallán to obscure poetry in *Tromdámh Guaire* is apposite since his most famous poem, the 'Amra Choluim Chille' is indeed exceptionally difficult and the later Preface to the poem contains an in-depth discussion of types of obscuration[51]. In *Tromdámh Guaire* Dallán refers to the poem he has just delivered, which afterwards must be explained, as a *fordheargadh file* ('cryptic poem'?). *Fordheargadh* is the verbal noun of *fordergaid* meaning to make something red, wound, bleed. *Tromdámh Guaire*'s most recent editor wondered if *fordheargadh* was a mistake for *fordorchadh*, as seen in *Auraicept na nÉces*, i.e. that the author of *Tromdámh Guaire* meant to use *fordorchadh* ('darkening/obscuring') but accidentally used *fordheargadh* ('reddening').[52]

However, *fordorchad indsce* 'the making cryptic of language' does actually gloss 'rómnae roiscni' ('the darkening of speech') in the Old Irish (eighth-century?) tract on poetic inspiration known as the *Caldron of Poesy*, and *rómnae* or *rúamna* also means 'to redden'[53]. Thus, perhaps when used figuratively of language, it seems that to redden or to darken can both mean to obscure or make cryptic[54]. To my knowledge, though, *fordheargadh* isn't used in this manner elsewhere and perhaps here the author is again poking fun by intentionally forgoing *fordorchadh* for a word meaning reddening; choosing a word with a semantic range that includes 'bloodying' and perhaps even 'disgracing', safe in the knowledge that the audience would understand the joke.[55]

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

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[49] T. M. CHARLES-EDWARDS, 'The context and uses of literacy in early Christian Ireland', H. PRYCE (ed.), *Literacy in Medieval Celtic Societies*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 62-82, p. 76.

[50] G. CALDER (ed.), *Auraicept na n-Éces*, Edinburgh, John Grant, 1917, p.2

[51] W. STOKES, (ed. and trans.), 'The Bodleian Amra Choluimb Chille', *Revue Celtique* 20 (1899), 31–55, 132–183, 248–289, 400–437 at p. 149-53.

[52] JOYNT, *Tromdámh Guaire*, art. cit., p.41

[53] L. BREATNACH, 'The Caldron of Poesy', *Ériu* 32 (1981), p.45-93, p. 68-71; Fogarty, 'Dubhad', *art. cit.*, p. 220.

[54] We might note the particular association between the colours red and black and learning in the middle ages, see C. DE HAMMEL, *Scribes and Illuminators*, London, British Museum Press, 1992, p.33.

[55] For *fordheargadh* as 'blushing'/ 'disgracing' see R. I. BEST, 'Prognostications from the Raven and the Wren', *Ériu* 8 (1916), p.120-26, p. 124, note 5.

to read *Tromdámh Guaire* as veiled comment on contemporary post-1300 practice then we must investigate how this related to bardic poetry.

OBSCURE POETIC LANGUAGE AND BARDIC POETRY

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

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[56] B. Ó CUÍV, 'A Medieval Exercise in Language Planning: Classical Early Modern Irish', E.F.K. KOERNER, (ed.), *Progress in Linguistic Historiography*, Amsterdam, Benjamins, 1980, p. 23–34. For more on the language see B. Ó CUÍV, 'The Linguistic Training of the Mediaeval Irish Poet', *Celtica* 10 (1973), p. 114-40; D. MCMANUS, 'An Nua-Ghaeilge Chlasaiceach', *art. cit..* D. MCMANUS, 'Teanga an Dána agus Teanga an Phróis', P. Ó FIANNACHTA (ed.), *An Dán Díreach/ Léachtaí Cholm Cille XXIV*, Maigh Nuad, An Sagart, 1994, p. 114-35. BREATNACH, 'Poetics', *art. cit.*, p. 95 presents this somewhat differently, 'As is well known bardic poetry is the product of a twofold process of standardisation. For pronunciation and grammar it is based mainly on the second half of the twelfth century, with a jettisoning of most of the archaic and artificial features that are the mark of Middle Irish.'

[57] P. Ó MACHÁIN, 'The Early Modern Irish Prosodic Tracts and the Editing of 'Bardic Verse'', H. L. C. TRISTRAM (ed.), *Metrik und Medienwechsel/ Metrics and Media* , Tübingen, Gunter Narr Verlag, 1991, p. 273-87; P. SIMS-WILLIAMS and E. POPPE, 'Medieval Irish literary theory and criticism', A. MINNIS and I. JOHNSON (eds), *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism, Volume 2 The Middle Ages*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 291-307, p. 300-01; B. Ó CUÍV, 'The concepts of 'correct' and 'faulty' in medieval Irish bardic tradition.', R. BIELMEIER and R. STEMPEL (eds), *Indogermanica et Caucasia*, Berlin, Walter de Gruyter, 1994, p. 395-406; D. MCMANUS, 'The Bardic Poet as Teacher, Student and Critic: A Context for the Grammatical Tracts', C. G. Ó HÁINLE and D. E. MEEK (eds), *Unity in Diversity: Studies in Irish and Scottish Gaelic Language, Literature, and History*, Dublin, Trinity College, 2004, p. 97-123.

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

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

> Níorbh í gnáthchanúint duine ar bith, ná áit ar bith ná fiú tréimhse ar bith i stair na Gaeilge í. Caighdeán léannta tacair a bhí ann a bhí i bhfeidhm ar fud na tíre agus i nGaeltacht na hAlban agus a leagadh amach do chúram ar leith, cumadh an Dáin Dhírigh; b'éigean don té ar theastaigh uaidh dul i mbun an chúraim sin é a fhoghlaim agus cloí leis go beacht. Mar chainteoir dúchais, ar ndóigh, thabharfadh an t-ábhar file cuid mhaith den chaighdeán sin leis gan stró[60].

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

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

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

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[58] D. MCMANUS, 'Classical Modern Irish', K. MCCONE and K. SIMMS (eds), *Progress in Medieval Irish Studies*, Maynooth, St Patrick's College, 1996, p. 165-87, p.186.
[59] KNOTT, *The Bardic Poems*, *art. cit.*, Vol. 1, p. LXV.
[60] MCMANUS, 'An Nua-Ghaeilge Chlasaiceach', *art. cit.*, p. 335. English translation my own.
[61] Ó CUÍV, 'A Poem', *art. cit.*, p. 299-30.

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

## IRISH BARDIC POETRY AND OTHER EUROPEAN DEBATES ON *OBSCURITAS*

In recent years work has been done in particular by Pádraig A. Breatnach and Michelle O Riordan to situate the emergence of bardic poetry within trends impacting on literatures in Latin and in some other European vernaculars[62]. Thus, both Breatnach and O Riordan have made links to twelfth- and thirteenth-century texts such as the *Poetria Nova* by Geoffrey of Vinsauf, the *Ars Versificatoria* by Matthew of Vendôme, John of Garland's *Parisiana Poetria de Arte Prosaica, Metrica, et Rithmica*. Breatnach wrote that the emergence of bardic poetry in the twelfth century 'has much in common with- and may owe something to' the movement which produced *ars poetica* manuals[63]. It is of course unsurprising that the literary endeavours of the Gaelic world may evidence the influence of the Latin manuals given the literary and familial connections of some of the Gaelic nobility, as seen earlier with Raghnall of Man.

The Latin manuals do not recommend obscurity of language although do concede that metaphorical usage can be used successfully[64]. For instance, Geoffrey of Vinsauf notes of metaphor that

| | |
|---|---|
| Quando venit tali sententia culta paratu, | When meaning comes clad in such apparel, |
| Ille sonus vocum laetam dulcescit ad aurem, | the sound of words is pleasant to the happy |
| Et fricat interius nova delectatio mentem. | ear, and delight in what is unusual stimulates the mind[65]. |

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

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[62] M. O RIORDAN, *Irish Bardic Poetry and Rhetorical Reality* , Cork, Cork University Press, 2007, xxiv; P. A. Breatnach, 'The Aesthetics of Bardic Composition: An Analysis of Fuaras iongnadh, a fhir chumainn by Fearghal Ó Mac an Bhaird', *CMCS* 42 (Winter 2001), p. 51-72;
[63] BREATNACH, 'Poetics', *art. cit.*, p.98.
[64] For more on medieval *obscuritas* see: the various articles in a special issue of *Mediaevalia* 19 (1993) edited by J. ZIOLKOWSKI; P.MEHTONEN, *Obscure Language, Unclear Literature: Theory and Practice from Quintilian to the Enlightenment,* trans. by Robert MacGilleon**,** Helsinki, Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 2003.
[65] Lines 949-51, taken from E. FARAL (ed.), *Les Arts Poétiques du XII*[E] *et du XLLL*[E] *siècle*, Paris, Librairie Ancienne Honoré Champion, 1924; M. F. NIMS (ed.), *Poetria Nova of Geoffrey of Vinsauf*, Toronto, Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1967.

Of exotic or unusual vocabulary Vinsauf says the following:

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

If, therefore, you introduce any words that are strange or recondite, you are displaying your own virtuosity thereby and not observing the rules of discourse. The straying tongue must draw back from this fault and set up barriers against obscure words. Take counsel: it may be you know all things – you are greater than others in this – still, in your mode of expression be one of those others. Be of average, not lofty, eloquence. The precept of the ancients is clear: speak as the many, think as the few[66].

However, despite the recommendations of the *artes poeticae* obscure styles of poetry were cultivated in a number of other European vernaculars when bardic poetry was taking shape and becoming established in the Gaelic world. We have noted that our first evidence for Irish bardic poetry comes from the late twelfth century. It is therefore roughly contemporary with a number of debates and treatises on obscure poetic styles from other European vernacular traditions: the Occitan *trobar clos/clus* poetry and debates associated with Peire d'Alvernhe and others[67]; Scandinavian skaldic verse and the creation of Snorri Sturluson's early thirteenth-century *Skáldskaparmál*[68]. Indeed, a number of other vernacular prose texts present similar vignettes of kings struggling to understand intricate vernacular poetry. For instance, the Welsh prose text *Breuddwyd Rhonabwy* (Dream of Rhonabwy), perhaps of a similar date to *Tromdám Guaire*, also has incomprehensible poetry presented to a king[69]. This has analogues also in a number of Scandinavian sagas[70].

It is also noteworthy that despite the recommendations of the *artes poeticae* a number of well-known late-medieval poets and commentators defend the importance of obscurity and difficulty[71]. Petrarca's well-known Latin texts, known as the *Invective contra medicum*

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[66] Lines 1074-80, from FARAL, *Les Arts*, *art. cit.*; NIMS, *Poetria Nova*, *art. cit.*. For related comment by Mattew of Vendôme and John of Garland see FARAL, *Les Arts*, *art. cit.*, p. 106-193; E. GALLO, 'Introductory Treatise on the Art of Poetry', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 118 (1974), p. 51-92 and Matthew of Vendôme, *The Art of Versification*, trans. by A. E. GALYON, Ames, Iowa State University Press, 1980, see 1: 32. T. LAWLER (ed. and trans.), *The Parisiana Poetria*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1974, see Chapter 5.

[67] M.-A. BOSSY, 'The Trobar Clus of Raimbaut d'Aurenga, Giraut de Bornelh, and Arnaut Daniel', *Mediaevalia* 19 (1996), p. 203-19.

[68] M. CLUNIES ROSS, *A History of Old Norse Poetry and Poetics*, Cambridge, D. S. Brewer, 2005.

[69] FOGARTY, 'Dubad', *art. cit.*, p. 216-17.

[70] K. E. GADE, *The Structure of Old Norse Dróttkvætt Poetry*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1995, p.24.

[71] M. CARRUTHERS, *The Experience of Beauty in the Middle Ages*, Oxford, OUP, 2013, from p. 61.

('Invectives against a physician'), from around 1352, assert that whereas physicians use difficult language to deceive and cheat, poets on the other hand do so since the practice 'serves as a stimulus for more intense reflection and as an opportunity for nobler studies' (*intentioris animi stimulus, et exercitii nobilioris occasio*) and indeed that poetic language is devoted to adorning the truth with beautiful veils (*studium est veritatem rerum pulcris velaminibus adornare*)[72]. Boccaccio's *Tratatello in laude di Dante* similarly asserts that poets must work up the easily forgettable and unenjoyable 'verità piana' ('bare truth').[73]

Therefore, in the absence of *ars poetica* comment dealing with *obscuritas* in Irish bardic poetry, *Tromdámh Guaire* evidences participation in debate on the place of what the Russian formalists would later call *ostranenie* or 'defamiliarization'[74], ongoing in a number of other European cultures during the later middle ages.

CONCLUSION

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

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[72] S. CRACOLICI, 'The Art of Invective: Invective contra medicum', V. KIRKHAM and A. MAGGI (eds), *Petrarch: A Critical Guide to the Complete Works*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2009, p. 255-62, p. 256; A. LEE, *Petrarch and St Augustine: Classical Scholarship, Christian Theology and the Origins of the Renaissance in Italy*, Leiden, Brill, 2012, p. 312; J. SINGER, *Blindness and Therapy in Late Medieval French and Italian Poetry*, Cambridge, D. S. Brewer, 2011, p. 68
[73] For discussion and sources see M. EISNER, *Boccaccio and the Invention of Italian Literature*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013, p. 42 and 149.
[74] M. TYMOCZKO, 'What questions should we ask in Celtic Studies in the new millenium', J. F. NAGY (ed.), *Identifying the Celtic: CSANA Yearbook 2*, Dublin, Four Courts Press, 2002, p. 10-29, p. 25 for a summary.

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