
The volume under review explores how knowledge of classical literature informed the literary culture of medieval Ireland. Was the Táin Bó Cúailnge influenced by the Aeneid? Or, to put it more broadly, was knowledge of classical literature a necessary precondition for the composition of extended prose narrative in Irish? These questions have been given new prominence by the recent work of Brent Miles, especially in his 2011 book Heroic Saga and Classical Epic in Medieval Ireland (reviewed by Raymond Cormier in Óenach 3.2), which makes the case that both the Táin and Togail Troí, an Irish version of the Troy-tale, draw stylistic and narrative features from Latin literature. The present volume, the proceedings of a workshop held at the University of Aberdeen, is the first book-length publication to respond to Miles’s work. The contributions range from focused studies of individual works to more wide-ranging essays, and the volume as a whole will have to be consulted by anyone interested in the subject of classical reception in medieval Ireland.

O’Connor opens with a masterful overview of the state of scholarship in the field, and provides an extremely convenient chronology of all known Irish versions of classical tales. In addition, he sets out some methodological issues, particularly regarding the question of whether to view the Irish classical tales as translations or adaptations, or as history or literature (17–22). Although he signposts that he does not expect universal agreement with every detail in this chapter (3), his introduction is admirably measured, and while it is true that some might quibble with individual details (particularly surrounding the ever-controversial issue of dating), it is hard to believe that many (if any) would disagree with the overall thrust of his narrative. The truly great
virtue of this chapter, however, is the way in which it sets the Irish tradition in the context of similar patterns in Norman French, Anglo-Saxon, and Icelandic literary traditions. This is a useful corrective to the occasional tendency to overstate the case for Irish exceptionalism in the field of vernacular translations of the classics. The chapter should be required reading for anyone with even a passing interest in the subject; it is certainly the most convenient and up-to-date summary of the field now in print.

Chapter Two, by Erich Poppe, notes the shift from the inner world of the *Aeneid* to the outer world of the *Togail Troí* and the *Imtheachta Aeniasa*, texts with a greater focus on descriptions of exteriors and of physical beauty, but with less of the psychological depth of the *Aeneid*. He builds on Miles’s analysis of the *Togail Troí* and seeks to extend the latter’s findings to the *Imtheachta Aeniasa*, in an attempt to understand the extent to which ‘classicizing imitation’ (39) informs the literary strategies of the author of that text. Poppe acknowledges that in such a short essay his observations can only be preliminary, and calls for further study of the stylistic practices employed by Irish redactors of classical texts. I would caution, however, that any such study should take into account the role played by late antique literature: not only the grammarians and rhetoricians discussed by Miles, but also the late Latin poets. For example, a marked shift towards ekphrasis and ornamentation can be seen in the works of Claudian and Prudentius, amongst others.

Chapter Three, by Helen Fulton, examines Welsh and Irish versions of the matter of Troy from the point of view of *historia* (‘history’, as opposed to *fabula*, ‘story/fable’). After discussing the development of two distinct models of historiography in late antiquity (the linear, teleological approach of Church history, to be contrasted with the cyclical approach of Boethius), Fulton examines the Irish *Togail Troí* and the Welsh *Ystorya Dared* in turn, concluding that both ‘exemplify the new
styles of [late antique] Christian historiography’ (56). The virtue of this chapter is its showcasing of the complexity of medieval genre and the blurring of the boundaries between *historia* and *fabula*, or between linear and cyclical.

Chapters Four and Five provide a rare opportunity to see how two scholars approach the same text from very different directions. Robert Crampton and Barbara Hillers both examine the *Merugud Uilixis Meic Leirtis* ('The Wanderings of Ulysses'), though Crampton also treats the *Fingal Chlainne Tanntail* ('The Kin-Slaying of the Family of Tantalus'). The two differ on the key question of whether the author of the *Merugud Uilixis* knew Homer. Crampton argues for some degree of familiarity with ‘the underlying Homeric narrative’ (80), while Hillers points to the text’s affinities with oral-tradition literature and its moralising tone, both of which mark it out, in her view, as different from the other Irish classical tales. A middle ground may perhaps be found in the wealth of commentaries, scholia, and mythographic literature of late antiquity, which could help to explain, for instance, how the Irish redactor could have known that Greek ἀργός (also the name of Odysseus’s dog) means ‘shining’ (66, 91) — this is exactly the sort of detail that gets transmitted in Latin scholia. To read both contributions together is to be reminded constantly of the difficulty of distinguishing between imitation and coincidence, especially when working in cross-cultural contexts.

Michael Clarke’s two Chapters (Six and Seven) are perhaps the most adventurous in the volume. In the first, on ‘Demonology, allegory and translation: the Furies and the Morrígan’, he opens with an emphasis on his desire to move away from questions of *imitatio* and *aemulatio* towards ‘mapping between languages’ (101). His focus on glossing as a way of marking equivalences between languages and linguistic cultures is a timely reminder of the importance of materially-engaged readings of classical and medieval texts, and his demonstration
of how Allecto and the Morrígan are identified in the Táin is a clear exemplification of how late antique scholarship helped to shape the literary approaches of medieval Irish authors. Clarke demonstrates that the allegorical approach to literature enabled these authors and scholars to identify the underlying figures of differing texts as being the same (as, in this case, the Furies and the Morrígan). This in turn facilitated the movement of figures from one tradition into another.

Clarke’s second contribution, ‘Reconstructing the medieval Irish bookshelf’, is even more ambitious. Beginning by reminding us that the Aeneid, for medieval audiences, was both a major literary accomplishment and a vast store-house of information about antiquity (both in itself, and in the extensive scholarly apparatus with which it travelled in medieval manuscripts), he explores two difficult cases: the Fingal Rónáin (‘The Slaying of Ronan’) and the tale of Labraid Loingsech. The former shows clear similarities to the tale of Hippolytus, particularly the version provided in Seneca’s Phaedra, while the latter, the tale of a horse-eared king, has clear parallels both in folklore and in the classical literary tradition (Midas). Clarke demonstrates in the case of Labraid Loingsech how both traditions can coexist — the learned composer of a version of the horse-eared king narrative (in RIA MS D IV 2) combining both folkloric elements and classical learning to highlight the link between the indigenous Irish and classical traditions. As in the previous chapter, allegory (and the allegorical approach of Fulgentius in particular) provides a way of understanding the approach taken by the Irish authors.

Chapter Eight, by Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, examines the depiction of Murchad mac Bríain in the Cogadh Gáedhel re Gallaibh. Ní Mhaonaigh addresses the extended comparison between Murchad and Hector in the work. This is a detailed study of a specific instance of the types of imitation and emulation that exemplify the broader issues discussed in
the book, and a fine demonstration of what can be done with even well-known and well-studied texts when the extended patchwork of their source-history is unravelled. It would be interesting to know, given Ni Mhaonaigh’s focus on the more encomiastic moments in the work, the extent to which medieval Irish authors had access to rhetorical treatises and handbooks, which frequently provide detailed guidelines for the right way to praise by comparison.

Chapter Nine, by the editor, is the longest in the volume. O’Connor discusses the ‘watchman device’, a narrative feature in which an individual sees a large group of people in the distance and asks a companion to identify them (analogous to the *teichoscopia* of classical epic, e.g., that of Helen and Priam in *Iliad* 3). Yet the larger question is whether knowledge of classical literature (and imitation of the same) was a necessary precondition for the composition of extended Irish-language sagas, with O’Connor rejecting what he sees as ‘either-or’ approaches to the origins of saga (165). He counters Hildegard Tristram’s hypothesis that the *Táin* could not have existed in a large-scale version before the tenth century. In particular, he notes that the absence of classical models would not necessarily have meant an absence of ‘extended discourse models’ (168, quoting Máire Ní Mhaonaigh), given the presence of the Bible (O’Connor here cites Ní Mhaonaigh’s discussion of *Saltair na Rann*). Additionally, O’Connor’s discussion of the perils of dating on linguistic grounds is a valuable reminder of the problems inherent in this approach, which continues to underlie much criticism of medieval Irish texts. Instead, he suggests an examination of specific cases and topoi, addressing in particular the borrowing of motifs or narrative patterns (171–72). This of course raises the much larger issue of intertextuality and generic tropes, which I feel could have been pressed a little harder—Patrick Sims-Williams’s important study on the watchman-device is mentioned briefly, but deserves to be considered at greater length.
O’Connor then moves to Miles’s argument that ‘the most ambitious artistic techniques of the saga-authors were Classical rather than "native" in inspiration’ (182, O’Connor’s emphasis). Resisting this reading, O’Connor adds additional argumentation in favour of Máire Ní Mhaonaigh’s view that the Irish classical tales were a product of a new vogue for long-form narrative (188). In this regard, he concludes that the watchman device exemplifies a process by which a ‘common narrative template’ (189) gradually adopts some of the elements from an analogous classical form.

The final contribution, by Abigail Burnyeat, explores ‘Classical models for medieval Irish compilatio’. This short piece contains some exciting ideas but lacks the space to give them the detail they deserve. The issue here is the extent to which medieval authors saw Virgil as a compiler as much as an author. Yet what is most striking about the examples quoted is that they always focus on Virgil’s relationship to Homer alone, rather than presenting Virgil as a compiler per se who draws from a wide range of materials. This is in contrast to the description of Flann Mainistrech and Eochaid Eolach hua Cérin (204), who are both specifically identified as individuals drawing from a wide range of sources. That is unfortunate not least because it is clear that this perception of Virgil was prominent in antiquity. For instance, Macrobius (discussed on p. 199, quoting Satires 5.3.16) elsewhere has Albinus say that Virgil ‘extracted flowers from all earlier authors’ (antiquorum...ex omnibus flores...libaverit, Sat 6.1.2), and then go on to discuss in detail many examples of these imitations. While Burnyeat is surely right to explore the classical origins for medieval compilatio, a more fruitful approach (though one that would require lengthy study) would be to investigate the broader question of how literary creativity and imitation operated in Latin antiquity, and how that was mediated into the medieval period via late antique scholarship.
The studies in this publication are diverse, but some recurring themes are worth noting. As was the case with Miles’s volume, the book emphasises the key intermediary role played by late antique literature and scholarship in the medieval reception of classical antiquity, although, in my view, this is not always taken quite as far as it could be. In Classics, study of scholia and other forms of ancient scholarship is enjoying something of a renaissance (see the recent special issue of *Trends in Classics*, 6.1 (2014), for just one set of examples), and it would be good if future research on medieval Irish literature could take into account some of this exciting work.

Perhaps a more unexpected outcome of the collection is the sense one gets of the particular prominence given to Statius. He was, of course, extremely popular throughout the middle ages, but even allowing for this, the frequency with which he appears in this book is striking. It would be profitable to investigate this further: is this because Statius is the major Latin poet known to the Irish who deals primarily with Greek material (and hence important for, e.g., the author of the *Togail Troí*)? Does it speak rather to any particular regard given to Lactantius Placidus, the commentator on Statius? Or is it simply an accident of what survives to us, both from antiquity and from medieval Ireland?

The book is produced to a high standard, with hardly any typographical errors. It is odd to see the text of the *Aeneid* occasionally rendered as though it were prose (e.g., on pp. 26, 33), and also to see (in O’Connor’s second chapter) the verse of Statius cited by the page numbers of Shackleton Bailey’s edition, rather than by book and line number as is standard. Some typesetting errors have resulted in cross-references to ‘000’ in several places (e.g., pp. 25n3, 83n1, 92n36). The index is clear and comprehensive, and includes an index of manuscripts. One further minor criticism is that there is some repetition between chapters of basic information about the texts and their place in
literature. This is to be expected to an extent in an edited volume, but it is particularly unnecessary given the fine summary of all of this material provided at the outset.

But these quibbles should not detract from the fact that this is an excellent collection of ambitious essays, and a timely response to some of the questions raised by Brent Miles. The editor and contributors have provided us with a wide range of approaches to the Irish classical tales, and they have revealed exciting paths for future research in the field.

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