

The name of the heroine in *Tochmarc Ferbe*



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THE NAME OF THE HEROINE IN *TOCHMARC FERBE*¹

ABSTRACT

The Middle Irish tale *Tochmarc Ferbe* is counted among the *remscéla* to the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* in the Book of Leinster (TCD MS H 2. 18 (1339)). Drawing on the metrical evidence available from the Book of Leinster text, a new interpretation of the name of the titular heroine *Ferb* is offered, which, in turn, may offer further insight into the tale's thematic relationship with the *Táin*.

THE tale commonly referred to as *Tochmarc Ferbe* 'Ferb's Courtship' has survived, incompletely, in prosimetric form in the Book of Leinster (TCD MS H 2. 18 (1339); hereafter L), pp. 253–59b, and in a shorter but complete prose version in British Library Egerton MS 1782 fol. 69v–70r (hereafter Eg.). The first challenge for anyone wishing to study this tale consists in addressing the discrepancy between the title commonly assigned to this text, *Tochmarc Ferbe*, which is found in one of the major medieval Irish tale lists, and the complete absence of a title in both of the manuscripts which contain the story: in L, the beginning of the story is missing; in Eg. the tale bears no title. Of the tale lists (edited Mac Cana 1980: 41–9, 51–63), list A gives '*Tochmarc Feirbe*' as the sixth *tochmarc* in that section, while the section on *tochmarca* in list B is much shorter and does not include Ferb's courtship. The list of the *remscéla Tána Bó Cúailnge* which, in L, concludes the short prose text *Do fáillsigud Tána Bó Cúailnge* (= *DFTBC*; ed. and trans. Murray 2001: 21–3) lists an item *de thochmurc* between the *comperta* of Conchobor and Cú Chulainn respectively. This list of *remscéla* contains the following items:²

1. *De Gabáil in tísíd.*
2. *De Aslingi in Meic Óic.*
3. *De chophur na da Muccida.*
4. *De Tháin Bó Regamain.*
5. *De Echtra Nerai.*
6. *De Chompirt Chonchobuir.*
7. *De Thochmurc < >*³
8. *De Chompirt Con Culaind.*

¹My thanks to Christina Cleary, to the editors of *Celtica*, as well as to the anonymous reader, for their comments and criticism on an earlier draft of this article. Any errors that remain are entirely my own.

²I follow the spelling of Bergin and Best's edition of *LL* (ll. 32901–5) as I am primarily concerned with this manuscript. Cf. Murray 2001: 22 for variant spellings.

³Even though only the words '*de thochmurc*' are visible, it is generally accepted that *Tochmarc Ferbe* is meant here. For Thurneysen (1921: 351) this was 'ohne Zweifel'. See also *LL* l. 32904; Murray 2001: 22.

9. *De Thain Bó Flidais.*
10. *De Thochmurc Emiri.*

DFTBC is then itself followed by a number of *remscéla* (some are different from the tales listed above), including *Tochmarc Ferbe*:⁴

1. *De Gabáil in tSída*
2. *De Chophur in da Muccida*
3. *Táin Bó Flidaisi*
4. *Táin Bó Fraích*
5. *Fochond Loingse Fergusa meic Roig*
6. tale beg. [...] *airgit oengil friu. [Tochmarc Ferbae]*
7. [*Longes mac nUisnig*]
8. *Mesca Ulad*

As Windisch remarked in the first edition of *Tochmarc Ferbe*, the title had already been accepted as applying to the story by O'Curry (1873: 307), Atkinson (1887: 58–9), and de Jubainville (1883: 229), and I will be using *Tochmarc Ferbe* to designate the texts in L and Eg. in line with previous scholarship.⁵ I will be returning to the relationship between title and text below, but I am primarily concerned here with the name of the story's heroine, *Ferb*.

With the help of the metrical sections of *Tochmarc Ferbe* as contained in L, I would like to suggest that *Ferb* is not just to be seen as a proper name, but also as a common noun, which may provide further insight into the story's relationship to *Táin Bó Cúailnge*. There are twelve poems contained in *Tochmarc Ferbe* which are tabulated on page 3.

The name *Ferb* occurs six times in the metrical sections of the text, as follows: once in the dialogue poem between *Ferb* and the Connacht warrior *Fiannamail*, *Fiannamail-seo chucun-ni* (q. 6):

- (1) *Eolas dam ram forraig ferg,*
ma ra fétar, a glanFerb,
apair rim, cia bail i tá
Mani mór mac Ailella.

I know that anger has overcome me;
if you know it, o pure Ferb,
tell me, where is the place in which is
great Maine son of Ailill.

⁴In the list, I once more follow the *LL* spelling; see *LL* ll. 32910; 32930; 33043; 33101; 33424; 33452; 34306; 34590.

⁵I am using the spelling *Tochmarc Ferbe* throughout unless I am quoting from another source. I am using Windisch's edition for the text unless otherwise specified, but all English translations are my own. Note also the discussion on the relationship between *Tochmarc Ferbe* and the item in the tale lists known as *Fis Chonchobuir* 'Conchobor's Vision'. See Mac Cana (1980: 89). As Christina Cleary points out to me, there is also an item *De aislingthi conchobair* in the version of the list of *remscéla* to *Táin Bó Cúailnge* which is found in RIA MS D iv 2, fol. 49b. This list has been edited from D iv 2 in Meyer (1883–5: 191).

Poem	No. of stanzas	Metre	Speaker(s)
<i>Deilm in gáeth</i>	5	<i>rannaigeacht</i> ? ⁶	Ollgáeth
<i>Finna lat, a Chathbaid chain</i>	5	<i>deibide</i>	Conchobor/Cathbad
<i>Dubnél nemi</i>	(13 ll.)	<i>retoiric</i>	Imrinn mac Cathbad
<i>All amae</i>	(12 ll.)	[<i>retoiric</i>]	Ollgáeth
<i>Is sé Gerg so ina ligi</i>	10	<i>deibide</i>	Nuagel wife of Gerg
<i>A Medb ca cotlud do-gní</i>	7	<i>deibide</i>	Badb/Medb
<i>A gillai, is derg do lepaid</i>	19	<i>deibide</i>	Ferb
<i>Fiannamail-seo chucun-ni</i>	15	<i>deibide</i>	Ferb/Fiannamail
<i>Truag sin a gillu Connacht</i>	9	<i>rannaigeacht</i> ?	Ferb
<i>A Domnaill meic Dubain dil</i>	9	<i>deibide</i>	Ferb/Domnall Derg
<i>Trúag ám sin, a maic Medba</i>	9	<i>deibide</i>	Ferb
<i>Aislinge Conchobair chóir</i>	39	<i>deibide</i>	Ferchertne, Conchobor's <i>ollam</i>

The twelve poems contained in Tochmarc Ferbe

twice in the dialogue poem between Ferb and Domnall Derg, *A Domnaill maic Dubain dil* (qqs. 6, 7):

- (2) Conchobar, cid mór a blad,
 7 Niall is Feradach,
 i ndígail Mani **rocherb**,⁷
 nos línfea mo lám, a **Ferb**

*Conchobar, though great his fame,
 and Níall and Feradach;*

⁶The third Middle Irish metrical tract describes this metre as *cro cumaisc etir rannaigeacht móir ocus sruth di aill* with a syllabic structure of 7¹3¹7¹3¹ (Thurneysen 1891: 81–2; Murphy 1961: 56, 153), but the structure of *Deilm in gáeth* does not correspond exactly to the metre described. In fact, it shares some traits with *dechnad cummaisc* (Thurneysen 1891: 8; Murphy 1961: 50) in that the last stressed word before the *caesura* (rather than the penultimate word as described in *cro cumaisc*) makes *aicill* rhyme with a word after the *caesura*. This trait is present in both long lines. For *Deilm in gáeth*, see *gríth*: bíth; *fer*: sleg; *ríg*: gním; *bailc*: glaic(c); *chairn*: mairb; *borb*: tolg; *slúag*: trúag, etc.

⁷Contrast *rocerb* in Windisch (1897: 510). Lenition after the intensifying prefix *ro-* is expected here.

*in revenge for great cutting wounds inflicted on Maine,⁸
my hand will overcome⁹ them, o Ferb.*

- (3) Da mbad tussu, a Domnaill **Deirg**
no marbtais Ulaíd tri **Feirb**,
ropad bladach a dígail
for scéol Mani mórgnímaig

*If it were you, o Domnall Derg
whom the Ulaíd should kill for Ferb's sake,
revenge for that deed would be famous
because of the account of Maine of great deeds.*

twice in Ferb's lament for Maine, *Trúag ám sin, a maic Medba* (qq. 3, 8):

- (4) Is triut do-géntar mór d'olc¹⁰
at-gén arin gné fil ort;¹¹
is mór d'ulc bias **de**
d'óes Mani 7 **Feirbe**

*Because of you great evil will be done
I recognize it from your appearance;
Great is the evil which will come from it
over the people of Maine and of Ferb.*

- (5) Olc in scél bérthair síar
co Finnabair na nglangíall
tasc a brathar di co **feirg**
is a esbaid ar **glanFeirb**.

*Bad the news which will be born west
to Finnabair of the pure hostages
news of her brother's death in anger
and his loss for pure Ferb.*

⁸It seems to have been the interpretation of the editors of the Book of Leinster (LL 1. 34049) to take the form as *ro cerb*, the 3rd sg. past tense of *cerb(b)aid* 'cuts, strikes', and take Conchobor as the only logical antecedent, i.e. 'Conchobor ... whom he cut down'. While possible, this interpretation seems to add unnecessary syntactical complexity to the quatrain. Note further that this poem mostly contains rhyme of the *rinn: ardrinn* type with the exception of q. 6ab, see under (6) below, which has *gulbnech* rhyme between *Feirb: Geirg*. But *gulbnech* only ever occurs in lines ab in this poem, not however in lines cd. Like Windisch (1897: 511, 'ein scharfes Zerhauen'), I take *rocherb* to be the substantivised adjective *cerb* 'keen, sharp' preceded by the intensifying prefix *ro-*. Metrically, this means that *rinn: ardrinn* are reversed in this example. It is not possible to take *rocherb* as co-referential with either dat. *dígail* or gen. *Maine*, since both would require the palatal form of the adjective *ceirb*, and would no longer rhyme with voc. sg. *Ferb*. We can therefore only interpret *rocherb* as nom. sg. in a *cheville* (as Windisch seems to have done), or, as Christina Cleary suggests to me, as gen. pl. 'of great cuttings, smittings' in reference to Maine's battle prowess. A better translation, as suggested by Barry Lewis, would then be to take *Maine* as the objective genitive (see above).

⁹The verb *línaid* is here used in the extended sense of 'fills, consumes', hence 'overcomes'.

¹⁰MS *ulc*

¹¹MS *orut*.

and once in Ferchertne's summary of the events in *Aislinge Conchobair chóir* (q. 10):

- (6) Do-dechaid do feis la **Feirb**
la ingin Geirg do Glind **Geirg**
tri cóicdaib láech, lathar fír
ed a llín, ní immarrím

*He came to sleep with Ferb,
with the daughter of Gerg, to Glenn Geirg;
with thrice fifty warriors, a true arrangement
this is their number, not an exaggeration.*

In each of these six instances, Ferb's name occurs in rhyming position, and with the exception of example (4) which has *rinn*: *ardrinn* rhyme, the heroine's name rhymes with a word which ends in consonant cluster containing an unlenited stop, e.g. *ferg*, *derg*, *cerb*, and the name of her father *Gerg*, which itself rhymes with a compound of *derg*, and with *ferg* (Windisch 1897: 482, ll. 261–2, 265–6). These examples suggest, then, that the name of the heroine ends in unlenited /b/, rather than lenited /v/. In addition to the metrical evidence, we may cite the following quatrain from a poem on the death of the seven Maines (sons of Ailill and Medb), contained in Eg., fol. 44a1, §2, which gives the spelling of the heroine's name with <bb>, i.e. unlenited /b/:

- (7) Maine Mórgar mórdais rúin¹²
tuc **Fe[i]rbb** ingin Gerga guír
marbais Conchobur gan chess
a nGlend Gerg don chaladhces¹³

*Maine Mórgar, whom mysteries used to extol,
took [as wife] Ferbb the daughter of keen Gerg;
Conchobar killed [him]¹⁴ without debility[?]
in Glend Gerg with the sharp spear.¹⁵*

eDIL s.v. *ferb* records three homonyms: 1 *ferb(b)*, a poetic word for 'cow', as explained by various glossaries; 2 *ferb* 'blister [caused by satire]'; and 3 *ferb* 'word, utterance'. Of these three, 1 *ferb(b)* and 2 *ferb* are given as *ā*-stem feminine nouns, and 3 *ferb* as a neuter *o*-stem, with later attestations as a feminine *ā*-stem.¹⁶ In a short article on the practice known as *Ferbb Chluiche* 'Word of the Contest', John Carey (1999: 67) has argued *contra* Calvert Watkins (1963: 233 n. 1) that 3 *ferb* represents the borrowing of Latin

¹²As noted in *eDIL* s.v. 1 *rún*, in Middle Irish *rún* is sometimes treated as an *o*-stem masculine (here nom. pl. *rúin*); earlier *ā*-stem feminine *rūn*, gen. sg. *rūnae*. The palatal ending is fixed by rhyme with : *guír* (gen. sg.), and the verb is Impf. 3rd pl. (*mórdais* = *mórtais*).

¹³*Sic MS.* Lenition is not indicated over the *c*, but we would expect *caladhchess*.

¹⁴I.e. Gerg.

¹⁵The poem was edited in Meyer (1913: 175). No translation has been published to date.

¹⁶See *eDIL* s.v. *ferb* at <http://dil.ie/search?q=ferb&search.in=headword> [accessed 4 June 2018].

verbum (a neuter noun) as a feminine *ā*-stem into Irish, under the influence of the native homonyms 1 *ferb* and 2 *ferb*, both *ā*-stems, although he later adds that 3 *ferb* might have been inflected in both genders: 'neuter following the example of its Latin source, feminine by analogy with its Irish homonyms' (Carey 1999: 167 n. 14).

That the medieval Irish *literati* were themselves pre-occupied with the various meanings of *ferb* is evident from the commentary to the *Amra Coluimb Chille* and glossaries such as *Sanas Cormaic* or the glosses to *Cethairslicht Athgabálae*.¹⁷ Whatever the original declension of 3 *ferb*,¹⁸ its connection to 2 *ferb* deserves scrutiny beyond the question of paradigmatic levelling. It may be possible to postulate a relationship of cause-and-effect between 3 *ferb* 'word, utterance' and 2 *ferb* 'blister', since the *ferb* 'blister' is the result of *ferba filed* 'poets' utterances', that is, satire.¹⁹ But this does not mean that 2 *ferb* and 3 *ferb* were originally one lexeme.²⁰ If 3 *ferb* is a borrowing from Latin *verbum* rather than a native word, it is unlikely that 2 *ferb* is simply an extended meaning of it, given that the latter seems to have a cognate in Middle Breton *guerp* (gl. *stigmat*), which survives into Modern Breton as *gwerpl* 'bubon' (Loth 1887: 497–8).²¹ If both homonyms do not in fact share the same etymological origin, then the declension of 2 *ferb* 'blister' as an *ā*-stem may also be queried. For example, there are no orthographically conclusive examples of lenition after the nominative: the citation given from *The Irish Monthly* in *eDIL* s.v. 2 *ferb* gives *ghaoithe* as one of the *variae lectiones*; but no such variant is actually recorded in the edition (see McKenna 1923: 645). There are no examples of a palatal form *feirb* in the accusative or dative, and the plural *ferba* would be compatible with other declensions. If it is not a feminine *ā*-stem, then the attestations of the word given in *eDIL* would allow us to take it as a neuter *o*-stem of the type *scél*, *scéla* with a long plural ending in *-a*.²²

¹⁷The complex textual connections which exist between these sources are discussed in Russell 2014.

¹⁸In his forthcoming edition of *Amra Coluimb Chille*, Jacopo Bisagni takes 3 *ferb* to be an *ā*-stem in the line *Fáig feirb fithir* 'The teacher wove the word' (Bisagni 2018: 328 l. 13; 397 n. 118). My thanks to Dr Bisagni for making his edition available to me in advance of publication.

¹⁹See the example from *Sanas Cormaic* s.v. *ferb*, most recently edited and translated in Russell (2014: 83): *Ferb .i. bolg doc[h]uirethar in duine for a grúadaibh iar n-áir nō iar ngúbreith*, 'Ferb, i.e. a blister that the person produces on his cheeks after a satire or after a false judgment.'

²⁰As the anonymous reader points out to me, Moroney (1958: 114) suggested that *ferb* 'boil, blister' was a word-play on *ferb* 'word'.

²¹I could not find any attestation of this word in Welsh.

²²It is noteworthy, however, that the commentary to the line *fáig feirb fithir* (see footnote 18 above) in the *Amra Coluimb Chille* from Bodleian Library Rawlinson MS B 502 (text and translation from Russell 2014: 81–2) gives the line *teora ferbba foluchta turcbat fort gruaidib iar cilbrethaib* '[add. three] hidden blisters rise upon your cheeks after false judgement', that is, with the feminine form of the numeral *teora*. This would lend support to taking 2 *ferb* as an *ā*-stem. As Russell points out in his chapter, however, the commentaries to *ACC* are heavily indebted to the legal commentary on *Cetharslicht Athgabálae* in which it is 1 *ferb* 'cow' in the phrase *teora ferba fira* 'three white cows' which is discussed. The line *teora ferba foluchta* in reference to 2 *ferb* 'blister' may simply have been modelled on the discussion of 1 *ferb* 'cow' which draws on the legal commentary. If 2 *ferb* was indeed a neuter *o*-stem in origin, then the gradual absorption of neuter nouns into either masculine or feminine paradigms from the late-Old-Irish period onwards could also explain the reading in the Bodl. commentary above. The Modern Irish form *fearb*,

Just like its homonyms, 1 *ferb(b)* ‘cow’ has an unlenited /b/,²³ as can be seen from the early spelling of gen. sg. *ferbba* in *LU* 1. 562 (*Amra Choluim Chille*), and from the rhyming example *ferb: lerg* (both also make *úaitne* with *meirg* and *buirb* in that stanza) in a tenth-century poem on the creation of Adam, ascribed to Airbertach Mac Cosse (Meyer 1901: 23, 1.18). While the declensions of 2 *ferb* and 3 *ferb* may be queried, the declension of 1 *ferb(b)* as an *ā*-stem is established through the gen. *ferbba* in the aforementioned example from *LU* and forms such as *teora ferba* ‘three cows’ with the feminine form of the numeral. All of this suggests that Irish did not have a word **ferb* ending in lenited /v/.²⁴

Returning to the issue of our heroine *Ferb*, her name also follows the *ā*-declension, as can be seen from acc. sg. *tri Feirb* (3), *la Feirb* (6); dat. sg. *ar glanFeirb* (5); and gen. sg. *Feirbe* (4). Rather than simply taking *Ferb* as a female first name, it is therefore also possible to translate these examples as common nouns, namely as either 1 *ferb* ‘cow’, or as ‘word, utterance’ (if 3 *ferb* is to be taken as an *ā*-stem). I do not think that 2 *ferb* ‘blister’ would fit the context here, unless we stipulate that she is blamed for Maine’s death and is therefore to be seen as a ‘blemish’.²⁵

In the context of the *remscéla* to the *Táin*, it seems that a name meaning ‘cow’ would give better sense than a name meaning ‘word, utterance’, given that animal metaphors are well attested elsewhere in Irish literature, and in the Ulster Cycle in particular.²⁶ Indeed, the foray by a royal company of Connachta into Ulster territory to take a ‘cow’ is particularly symbolic in that it echoes the basic plot of *Táin Bó Cúailnge*. Although the Donn Cúailnge falls into Connacht hands for a brief time, both incursions into Ulster, that of the *Táin* and that of *Tochmarc Ferbe*, ultimately fail, and both end in the death of some of the principal characters, and more specifically in the death of the bulls and the ‘cow’.²⁷ That the union between the Connacht prince Maine and the Ulsterwoman *Ferb* is thwarted by a supernatural herald of doom, who appears

gen. *feirbe* ‘blister on face’ could therefore have arisen through analogy with *fearb*, *feirbe* ‘cow’ (and both are confined to literary usage at any rate). Cf. German *die Bulle* ‘papal bull’ (< Latin *bullā*) and *der Bulle* ‘the bull [a male cow]’, a word of Germanic origin.

²³Pokorny (1928: 305) addressed this difficulty by suggesting that Old Irish *ferb* ‘cow’ and Latin *vervex* ‘wether’ were cognates.

²⁴In *eDIL* s.v. 1 *ferb(b)*, note the citation from Stokes (1893: 12, gl. 26) which gives *ferbh* with a lenited *bh*; likewise the citation on p. 11, gl. 14. The latter has a variant *ferb*, however (Stokes 1893: 11 n. 19). It is not uncommon in Early Modern manuscripts that *bh* (either written as *b* or with a spiritus asper) can also stand for an unlenited *b*. See the example from RIA MS D ii 1 (Book of Uí Mhaine), fol. 114ra48 (last word): *abad*. Here the *b* with punctum stands for *bb* (or *p*) in the word *ap*, gen. pl. *abbad* ‘abbot(s)’.

²⁵My thanks to the anonymous reader for this suggestion. It would appear, however, that *ferb* ‘blister’ is not attested as referring to people.

²⁶As the reader points out to me, it is also possible to take *Ferb* as meaning ‘deer, hind’, and that there may be some confusion or overlap with *erp* ‘she-goat, doe’ here as well (cf. *eDIL* s.v. *erp*).

²⁷A similar idea was brought forward by Patricia Kelly (1992: 76) who has suggested that ‘the driving off of cattle goes hand in hand with the acquisition of a woman. I suggest that these two narrative strands are figuratively linked, via a metaphor which equates cattle with humans, and particularly women with cows’.

to both Conchobor and later to Medb, also echoes the role of the Mórrígain in the *Táin* itself as well as in other *remscéla* such as *Echtrae Nerai* and *Táin Bó Regamain*. In these tales, it is the Mórrígain herself who engineers the conflict between the two bulls by having the Donn Cúailnge bull the cow of a Connachman, the offspring of which union is killed by the Finnbennach, thereby lending motive to the *Táin*. While not too much importance can be ascribed to the title *tochmarc* in combination with *Ferb*, the tale represented by that title certainly deserves further literary scrutiny as a text which provides a unique insight into the events which led to *Táin Bó Cúailnge*.

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