

Review: *The Case of the Abbot of Drimnagh:
A Medieval Irish Story of Sex-Change*
(Ó Síocháin)



Roan Runge

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layered nature of the work as pointing to these glossaries as being the work of groups, and so he uses ‘author’ as a reference to the point of composition rather than implying an single individual (p. 15). Moreover, while no one can work her/his way through a glossary without an occasional good laugh at some of the links made, Moran respects their endeavour and shows just how close they were in method to modern etymologists (pp. 35–43). Third, Moran has done his work as an editor, and a palaeographer, meticulously. This has allowed him to see that our four extant manuscripts represent two textual families – and he has nailed his colours to the mast by producing a stemma (p. 24). One family is represented by a single manuscript (TCD 1317, pp. 41–2 = Moran’s OM²), to which the second glossary, *Irsan*, is ‘closely’ related (pp. 12, 23, 51–3) – and this conclusion about the relationships marks a departure from the received position. The other family is represented by three manuscripts (one of which has no independent value as a witness); and when all are taken together we have an indication of just how popular were such glossaries. Lastly, it is fascinating to see how Moran’s far more extensive investigation has vindicated the arguments put forward by MacNeill in a 16-page article. The more detailed work allows Moran to date the first stratum of O’Mulconry to the seventh century and the second stratum to the ninth (p. 97).

Pádraic Moran is to be congratulated on an excellent piece of work. This new edition with its copious notes will, I hope, lead medievalists other than those working on history of the Irish language to discover the value of O’Mulconry. It is pleasing also to see that it is published in an international series which will bring it to the notice of a wider circle of scholars than Celticists: O’Mulconry’s compilers were engaged in their particular part of a Europe-wide endeavour. The one drawback is the price! At €230 it will rely on libraries to make it available to all but a handful of scholars; but it deserves a place in every library which makes a claim to support Celtic studies or medieval studies.

THOMAS O’LOUGHLIN

University of Nottingham

The Case of the Abbot of Drimnagh: A Medieval Irish Story of Sex-Change. Tadhg Ó Siócháin. Cork Studies in Celtic Literatures, Cork, 2017. iii + 73 pp. ISBN 978-0-9955469-1-2. €12.00.

This volume, the second in the Cork Studies in Celtic Literatures series, is a semi-diplomatic edition, translation, and discussion of the text edited by Kuno Meyer in 1907 under the title ‘Story of the Abbot of Druimenaig who was changed into a Woman’. The story is about an abbot of Drimnagh who falls asleep on a hill, wakes up to discover he has become a woman, marries a man and has seven children over seven years, falls asleep on the same hill and wakes up to find he is in his original body, and finally returns to Drimnagh on

the same day he first left it, proving his experiences with the presence of his seven children.¹ In addition to the text and translation, Ó Siocháin provides discussion on a number of the themes in the story, including gender and gendered bodies, femininity, clothing, Otherworldly time and figures, and marriage. In his preface, Ó Siocháin states that the ‘main aim of this publication is to present an analysis’ of the tale (p. ii), and that ‘if my opinions help to create an interest in this unusual tale, even for those who cannot accept my analysis, I will consider the enterprise to have been worthwhile’ (p. iii).

Following the text and translation, there are five chapters of analysis. Chapter 2 endeavours to contextualise the tale with reference to two pre-modern, non-Irish stories which feature a change in gender from man to woman and back to man, as well as discussing the role of the ‘author’. Chapter 3 discusses some historical aspects of the story, including the particular roles of the abbot and the *erenagh*, and what these might have meant to medieval readers of the tale. It also considers the Otherworld aspects of the story. In chapter 4, Ó Siocháin considers the abbot’s metamorphosis and femininity in the context of the tale. He discusses how the abbot’s internal identity interacts with his social identity when transformed into a woman, concluding that there seems to be a sustained internal sense of identity – excluding gender – for the abbot across the metamorphoses. Chapter 5 includes the greater part of the discussion about the abbot’s sexuality and how that interacts with gender and the abbot’s two marriages. Finally, chapter 6 is a discussion of medieval reading practices and the relation of the story to the oral folklore tradition. The book ends with a short conclusion in which Ó Siocháin reasserts a thesis that the tale is, at its heart, concerned with ‘shifting perspectives, ambivalence and confusion’ (p. 62).

The text, Ó Siocháin tells us, has four manuscript witnesses. However, as Erich Poppe has pointed out (2018: 121), there are, in fact, two further witnesses: Dublin, Royal Irish Academy B.iv.1, a paper manuscript from the seventeenth century; and Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland Advocates 72.1.6, a late-sixteenth-century manuscript, which contains a mostly illegible copy of the text.² The semi-diplomatic edition and translation that comprises the first chapter is based on the text also used by Meyer, London, BL Additional 30512, fols 10v10–11r35. Ó Siocháin states his intention to publish a volume with semi-diplomatic editions of ‘all four manuscript witnesses’ (p. 5). The volume at hand has no glossary or translation notes, with only one instance of variant manuscript readings. This might be taken to suggest that the other manuscripts give readings fairly similar to Add. 30512; however, this is not the case. The text in Add. 30512 is longer than the others, and

¹I use he/him pronouns for the abbot throughout, for consistency, clarity, and brevity, although I would have welcomed a more nuanced discussion in the volume about the pronouns used for the abbot at various points in the tale – Ó Siocháin’s own use is inconsistent, and he makes no comments about the text’s use of pronouns.

²For the dates of the manuscripts see respectively Mulchrone, O’Rahilly, Fitzpatrick, and Pearson 1926: 586 and Mackinnon 1912: 110. I have also consulted Sarah Lackner’s unpublished PhD (2016) for transcriptions of five of the witnesses.

contains more descriptive passages: for example, of the abbot's clothes prior to his transformation, and of the hag who appears to the abbot after his transformation (for further discussion, see Lackner 2016: 149, and her transcriptions 52–9). Ó Síocháin highlights the significance of the abbot's clothes in the text (pp. 25; 49), so the fact that most of the witnesses depict these clothes differently seems relevant to his argument.

In as far as his intent is to 'create an interest' (iii) in the tale, Ó Síocháin has been successful. Unfortunately, there are several points in the volume in which his analysis falls short. Ó Síocháin attempts to prove, through comparison with two other stories, that the story under discussion 'has ancient roots external to Ireland' (p. 42), which influence the tale. The stories used for comparison are the Classical Greek story of Tiresias, and a portion of 'The Rose of Bakáwalí', 'a short episode from a summary in French ... of a ninth-century Urduish [*sic*] work ... based on an earlier story' (p. 15). Both stories are mediated by summaries, rather than direct quotations; and the episode from 'The Rose of Bakáwalí' is not contextualised in its place in the larger work.³ As Ó Síocháin reads them, these stories each contain a narrative of a man changing into a woman, who, while in this changed form, has sex with a man, and is later changed back into his original shape. Ó Síocháin adds a fourth criterion for comparison: that 'a supernatural force is involved' (p. 14). Outside of these criteria, the stories are quite different: in the Tiresias story, the transformation occurs as retribution for a particular action, and in some variants of it, explicit comparison is made between the two gendered bodies Tiresias has inhabited.⁴ Nowhere in the abbot story does the abbot reflect on the differences in his gendered bodies, and the reason for his transformation is unclear. In 'The Rose of Bakáwalí', the protagonist undergoes transformation into two different bodies, not just one, with the principal character changing first into a woman, and then into a man of a different race. In view of these differences, the claim that these three stories share an ancient common source seems unlikely: the question of what it is like to inhabit a different body – particularly when that body is associated with a different social role or status – is a point of fascination in many contexts. I am unconvinced that the stories are related, as the common elements are not specific enough to prove their connection. However, Ó Síocháin returns to the idea of the linked stories repeatedly across the volume and attempts to use it to prove further points, meaning that these points, in turn, are unconvincing.

In particular, Ó Síocháin's treatment of the hag who appears to the abbot after his transformation into a woman leaves something to be desired. Citing Robin Flower and Henri Gaidoz, he compares her to a hideous woman in 'The Rose of Bakáwalí', who also appears to the changed person after his

³For a French summary of the story, see de Tassy 1835; he in turn is drawing on an eighteenth-century Urdu source.

⁴Ó Síocháin describes several of the major variants of the Tiresias story; further discussion may be found in Brisson 1976. Tiresias is referenced across eighteen classical Greek and Roman sources, from a variety of dates.

transformation, but who otherwise has a very different role.⁵ From there, Ó Siocháin suggests that the hideous woman is ‘a later manifestation of the pre-Christian goddess’ who ‘directs all that happens’ (p. 29). While it seems possible that the hag is supernatural, granted her similarity to supernatural hags in other medieval Irish texts, the claim that she is a goddess is both unsupported and unlikely. Discussing another hideous hag in *Echtra mac nEchach Muigmedóin*, Amy Mulligan states that the hag – who in this case is acting as a personification of Sovereignty – exists in a source ‘composed within a highly learned and self-consciously literary Christian milieu’ and that the hag’s ‘significance is most clearly understood when she is read in that context’ (2006: 1015). Similarly, the tale in question in this volume – which Ó Siocháin dates to the late twelfth or early thirteenth century, over a hundred years later than the one discussed in Mulligan’s article (p. 4) – was produced in this Christian literary environment, and features two ecclesiastical figures as main characters. Both of the abbot’s transformations occur in advance of an Easter celebration. It is in this context that the hag’s appearance must be read. There may be an argument that this text, like *Echtra mac nEchach Muigmedóin*, manipulates the idea of a pre-Christian goddess in order to achieve a particular point, but this argument is not present in the volume.

Ó Siocháin rightly sees ‘identity’ as one of the major themes of this story, asking ‘can essence persist where a major transformation takes place?’ (p. 34). This identity seems to have multiple aspects to it, encompassing the abbot’s internal sense of personhood as well as external markers like gender and family. The volume discusses both how the abbot ‘seems to retain his original identity and consciousness’ (p. 34) and how the abbot has ‘fear for the loss of identity’ (p. 35), which is bound up with his new status as a woman without family. Distinction is not made between these senses of identity, which at times leads to difficulties in the argument. It is true that the abbot lives in the social role of a woman for seven years, but it does not necessarily follow that because he does so, he ‘assume[s] enthusiastically’ (p. 26) this role. Ó Siocháin makes a point of showing how for the erenagh, marriage contains both ‘romance and practicality’ (p. 27), but he does not discuss how the abbot’s decision to marry the erenagh might be motivated by practical concerns deriving from his new appearance as a woman, such as his sudden loss of legal status or his subjection to compulsory heterosexuality.⁶ This text raises a number of questions about embodied gender in medieval Ireland – for example, if we agree with Ó Siocháin that the abbot identifies with womanhood after his transformation, while also maintaining his initial internal identity, what might this suggest about gendered bodies and the possibility of gender non-conformity? Alternatively, if the abbot does not have an internal sense of womanhood after his transformation,

⁵Where the hideous woman in ‘The Abbot of Drimnagh’ questions the transformed abbot and then disappears, the woman in ‘The Rose of Bakáwali’ makes the transforming character her husband and forces him to work for her and her family.

⁶This term was coined by Adrienne Rich (1980: 632) to describe how the possibility of lesbianism is structurally denied to women by the heteropatriarchy.

what might this suggest about gendered identity-formation? Questions such as these are not explored, because of unsupported assumptions made about the abbot's internal sense of self.

Likewise, there are issues in the treatment of gender and sexuality as a whole, particularly in chapters 4 and 5 of the volume. One problem is that Ó Síocháin spends more time comparing views of marriage in the text to Greek and Latin sources (pp. 42–4) than he does to Irish sources, again relying on the analogy with other tales, in this case the Tiresias legend. The volume might have benefited from a fuller discussion of how marriage is presented in Irish legal and literary texts, and what that means for the *erenagh* and abbot. Ó Síocháin points out, for example, that both aforementioned ecclesiastical roles could be hereditary, but does not elaborate on the impact of hereditary roles on the children of the abbot and the *erenagh*. There is also an extended comparison between the abbot's discovery of his new body and Vivienne C. Cass's explanation of the psychological process of coming to terms with one's own sexuality (pp. 45–8). While there are some interesting similarities between the two, the association of the abbot with homosexuality – which is repeatedly asserted throughout the chapter – is confusing. If, as Ó Síocháin suggests, the abbot 'has the affective life ... of a woman' (p. 26) after his transformation, then his potential attraction to the *erenagh* is not a homosexual desire (again, it is unclear whether the sex and marriage between the abbot and *erenagh* has an 'affective' element (p. 26) on the abbot's part, or whether it is driven primarily by practicality); rather, the abbot's change in sexuality is a movement from heterosexual to heterosexual. There is some discussion of bisexuality in the volume, which of course may be the case for the abbot, who does marry both a man and a woman, but it receives far less attention from Ó Síocháin than does homosexuality. As the primary expression of sexuality is between two couples of different genders, the insistence on discussing homosexuality is, at times, disruptive to the argument, especially granted the lack of consideration given to the practical reasons for which the abbot marries the *erenagh*.

Likewise, Ó Síocháin contextualises the abbot's gender change with medieval and modern instances of 'cross-dressing', and while examples of historical gender non-conforming behaviour and clothing might illuminate new aspects of this story, the justification provided for the focus on cross-dressing is 'because of the emphasis on male and female clothing' (p. 49). As in the case of the abbot's sexuality, at no point does the abbot, in fact, dress in clothes that are variant to his gendered social role. His clothes change as spontaneously as his body, and there is no intention on the abbot's part to participate in gender or sexual non-conforming behaviour. This is, again, particularly true if the abbot's sense of gender changes with his body and clothes.

Furthermore, Ó Síocháin's discussion of gender and sexuality is couched in outdated language. He quotes from Richard F. Docter (1988) 'five heterosexual behaviour patterns with which ... cross-dressing is associated', and 'four homosexual behaviour patterns' (p. 49). Almost all of these 'behaviour patterns' may be read as drawing on homophobic/transphobic stereotypes, and

while I understand the point Ó Siócháin is hoping to make – that mainstream culture struggles to differentiate between gender non-conformity and queer sexuality – the inclusion of this language is jarring and distracts from his argument. The use of the terms ‘transvestite’ (p. 49), along with ‘transgenderism’ (p. 49), ‘transsexualism’ (p. 49), and, indeed, ‘sex-change’ – although I read no malice in these usages – is deeply uncomfortable. The GLAAD Transgender Glossary of Terms states that ‘transgenderism’ and ‘sex-change’ are terms to avoid, and that ‘transvestite’ should not be used ‘at all’ (see GLAAD). These terms, although they were once more commonly used, reduce gender and/or sex to a concrete and binary system. Besides being inaccurate, and potentially offensive to trans and intersex individuals, this reduction of gender and sex to a binary undercuts Ó Siócháin’s own argument, namely that there is a ‘central image of liminality’ (p. 51) in the tale, including in regards to the abbot’s gender. Updating this language and citing trans scholars in analysis would vastly improve this section’s discussion of gender.⁷ Similarly, the author uncritically quotes Flower’s comments and translation of a German summary of ‘The Rose of Bakáwalf’, which refers to the woman who forces the protagonist to be her husband as a ‘Negress’ (14–15). This is language which, when it is repeated unchallenged, reinforces racist paradigms.

Despite my criticisms of some of the arguments presented in this volume, I appreciated Ó Siócháin’s justification for using modern critical theory to examine medieval texts. His discussion of authorship highlights the uncertainty in discussing an anonymous text like this, and the use of Foucault in differentiating the author from the narrative voice(s) that may be represented in the text helps to bring nuance to contradictory elements in the tale. Ó Siócháin’s assertion that ‘we need to draw ... on our historical understanding of the writer and of the age s/he lived in without attempting to set aside our modern mindset’ (p. 22) is a helpful one, especially for those hoping to use more recent theoretical perspectives. Ó Siócháin is right, as well, to locate ‘liminality’ (p. 51) and ‘uncertainty’ (p. 62) as central themes of this story, and draws discussion back to these repeatedly, even if his exploration of the themes is lacking.

As stated above, if Ó Siócháin’s intent is to draw attention to this story, he has succeeded. The volume highlights a number of interesting themes within the text, as well as providing a good theoretical framework for using modern criticism. In its discussion of gender, sexuality, and the supernatural, it relies too heavily on comparison with non-Irish stories which share the feature of a man becoming a woman, while not proving substantially that these stories are connected. There is also some confusion in the semi-diplomatic edition and translation, particularly where the author seems to conflate manuscript witnesses. However, I look forward to Ó Siócháin’s forthcoming edition of the text, as this story is certainly one that deserves more attention from scholars.

⁷For a more recent glossary of terms, which is specifically designed for academic medievalists, see Spencer-Hall and Gutt, forthcoming.

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ROAN RUNGE

University of Cambridge

Arthur in Early Welsh Poetry. Edited by Nerys Ann Jones. MHRA Library of Medieval Welsh Literature 4. Cambridge: Modern Humanities Research Association. 2019. 248 pp. ISBN: 978-1-781889-08-4 (hardback), 978-1-781889-09-1 (paperback). £24.99 (hardback), £12.99 (paperback).

This new volume, published by the MHRA, is an excellent contribution to Arthurian studies and to the study of early Welsh poetry. This is a book which, above all, foregrounds the sources in their surviving manuscript contexts, and in doing so, provides an up-to-date, reliable introduction to the Welsh poems containing references to Arthur dated before 1300.

The format is somewhat different from that found in other books in the same series. Rather than a discrete introduction, edition, glossary, and notes, this book mixes editions and discussions of texts or extracts from texts. Manuscript images are generously and comprehensively provided and are in almost all cases legible (except on p. 187 where the poor condition of