



Missing Bodies, Absent Bards: Spenser, Shakespeare and a Crisis in Criticism

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*Missing Bodies, Absent Bards:  
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Native bodies often go missing in Elizabethan accounts of sixteenth-century Ireland. Sir Henry Sidney, for example, recounts that while he was “taking pleasure abroad in the fields in an evening about Allhallowtide,” his prisoner, the “rebel” Sir Edmund Butler, procured “a small cord” and lowered himself over the wall of Dublin Castle. The cord snapped but Butler melted into the night, “leaving behind one of his mittens which he had prepared to slip down the cord, and much blood.”<sup>1</sup> Sir George Carew came within an ace of capturing another insurgent, the Sógán Earl of Desmond but the “Straw” Earl “escaped in such haste, as he left his Shoes behind him.”<sup>2</sup> Everywhere, the enemy was maddeningly deliquescent: “In the night the rebels set the castle on fire and stole away in the smoke” (Brady, p. 90). Like the Faerie Queene of Arthur’s dream—“Nought but pressed gras where she had lyen”<sup>3</sup>—traces of occupancy point only to absence. The troops pursuing Shane O’Neill “felt his couch warm where he lay that night, and yet their luck not [sic] to light on him” (Brady, p. 49). Lord Deputy Mountjoy swooped on Felim Mac Fiach O’Byrne’s house on a snowy December day; he found sufficient provisions “to keep a merry Christmas” but O’Byrne himself “hardly escaped at a back Window, and naked, into the Woods” (Moryson, I. 200).

Henry VIII’s “Act for the English Order, Habite, and Language” (1537) had insisted “that the said English tongue, habite and order, may be from

1. *A Viceroy’s Vindication? Sir Henry Sidney’s Memoir of Service in Ireland, 1556–78*, ed. Ciarán Brady (Cork, 2002), p. 77.

2. Fynes Moryson, *An History of Ireland* (Dublin, 1735) I, 217.

3. Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. A. C. Hamilton (1596; London, 1972), II.ix.15.2.

henceforth continually (and without ceasing or returning at any time to Irish habite or language) used by all . . . true and faithfull subjects."<sup>4</sup> To shed English clothes, therefore, constituted a political as well as a sartorial renunciation. The sons of the Earl of Clanrickard, for example, "joined in actual rebellion; shaking off and cutting in pieces their English garments upon the river of Shannon," before slipping into Connacht (Brady, p. 89). Such effortless costume changes at times allowed the rebel to stage darker masques. The same Edmund Butler who lost his mitten had used English apparel to perform a pantomime of desecration: "he would cause English dead men's bodies to be stripped out of their English garments and their hose and doublets (being stuffed and trussed) he would set up as marks for his kernes to throw their darts at" (p. 62). Straw-Irishmen could be conjured up with equal facility. As Mack Chane,<sup>5</sup> Mackener,<sup>6</sup> Bryan the Footman,<sup>7</sup> Dennise, Donnell, Dermock and Patrick<sup>8</sup> all show, it took "nothing but a lowsie mantle, and a paire of broags"<sup>9</sup> and a /T/ for a /θ/<sup>10</sup> to stuff and truss a stage-Irishman. These tiring-house Irishmen can be seen as the theatrical equivalent of the missing rebel bodies, costumed impersonators ventriloquizing the absent native: "Tou hasht very goot shubshects in Ireland . . . Tat loue ty mayesty heartily."<sup>11</sup>

The incongruous relationship between mimic voice and missing native is unnervingly replayed in the recent critical focus on the colonial, Irish context of English Renaissance literature. Michael Neill salutes Joel Altman, David Baker, and Christopher Highley for using Saidean contrapuntal analysis "to give voice to an Ireland" that is silent or marginal in canonical texts.<sup>12</sup> But the terms of his praise should give us pause.

4. *The Statutes at Large Passed in the Parliaments held in Ireland* (Dublin, 1786), I, 120–21.

5. *The True and Honourable History of the Life of Sir John Oldcastle* (1600), in *The Works of Michael Drayton*, ed. J. W. Hebel, I (Oxford, 1961).

6. *The Famous History of Captain Thomas Stukeley* (1605; Oxford: Malone Society Reprints, 1975).

7. *The Honest Whore*, pt. 2, *The Dramatic Works of Thomas Dekker*, ed. F. Bowers, II (Cambridge, Eng., 1955).

8. Ben Jonson, *The Irish Masque at Court*, in *Ben Jonson*, ed. C. H. Hereford and Percy and Evelyn Simpson (Oxford, 1941), VII 402, ll. 102, 104.

9. Drayton, *Works*, 457, ll. 2344–45.

10. Alan Bliss, *Spoken English in Ireland, 1600–1740* (Dublin: 1979).

11. Jonson, *Masque* ll. 102, 104.

12. Michael Neill, "Broken English and Broken Irish: Nation, Language, and the Optics of Power in Shakespeare's Histories," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 45 (1994), 1–32; Joel Altman, "'Vile Participation': The Amplification of Violence in the Theatre of *Henry V*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 42 (1991), 1–32; David Baker, "'Wildehirissheman': Colonialist Representations of Shakespeare's *Henry V*," *English Literary Renaissance* 22 (1992), 37–61; Christopher Highley, *Shakespeare, Spenser, and the Crisis in Ireland* (Cambridge, Eng., 1997).

“Giving voice” has a worrying ring of ventriloquism. And “canonical texts” circumscribe the project even more narrowly. As far as Ireland goes, the canon seems to amount to little beyond Spenser’s *A View of the Present State of Ireland* and Shakespeare’s *Henry V*.

## II

To define the problem, let us revisit that moment in *A View of the State of Ireland* when Irenius “introduces” a bardic “song.” For commentators committed to replacing colonial absolutes with intimations of contact, this is as close as it gets to a canonical text “giving voice” to the native:

As of a most notorious thiefe and wicket out-law, which had lived all his life-time of spoyles and robberies, one of their Bardes in his praise will say, That he was none of the idle milke-sops that was brought up by the fire side, but that most of his dayes he spent in armes and valiant enterprises, that he did never eat his meat, before he had won it with his sword, that he lay not all night slugging in a cabbin under his mantle, but used commonly to keepe others waking to defend their lives, and did light his candle at the flames of their houses, to leade him in the darknesse; that the day was his night, and the night his day; that he loved not to be long wooing of wenches to yeeld to him, but where he came he tooke by force the spoyle of other mens love, and left but lamentation to their lovers; that his musick was not the harpe, nor layes of love, but the cryes of people, and clashing of armour; and finally, that he died not bewayled of many, but made many waile when he died, that dearly bought his death.<sup>13</sup>

The status of this song shifts with disconcerting ease from hypothetical illustration (“one of their bards . . . will say”) to catalogued fact (“when it was first made and sung to a person of high degree there”). Yet it is treated by critics less as a claim than as a proof. For Andrew Hadfield and Willy Maley, it offers “further evidence that Spenser was interested in Irish culture” (p. 77). For Highley, it represents one of Spenser’s “moments of near-sympathy with Gaelic culture” (p. 20). Baker, too, marvels that Spenser “even summarises one such poem at length” and concludes that the Englishman was finding the distinction between the bards and himself “hard to maintain absolutely.”<sup>14</sup> Richard McCabe, who has

13. Edmund Spenser, *A View of the State of Ireland*, ed. Andrew Hadfield and Willy Maley (Oxford, 1997), pp. 76–77; all subsequent references are to this edition.

14. David Baker, *Between Nations: Shakespeare, Spenser, Marvell and the Question of Britain*, (Stanford, 1997), p. 86.

travelled most recently over this ground, reads Irenius' bardic poem as a "parodic translation," a "paraphrase [that] preserves something of the vigour and energy of the original but only at the level of burlesque." For McCabe, "parody necessitates a fusion of distant voices"; it entails a "dialogical contact" between the original and its send-up.<sup>15</sup>

Here we have all the tropes of the current critical dispensation. What we do not have, however, is an actual bardic poet—and nobody seems to have noticed his absence. The bard holds no real interest for these critics; he enters their discourse only when his identity merges with Spenser's. Highley takes this process furthest, arguing that Spenser himself was engaged in "the appropriation of a bardic persona" (p. 33). "The shepherd-piper," Colin Clout, "Charming his oaten pipe unto his peres,"<sup>16</sup> appears—to Highley's eyes—"distinctly bard-like" (p. 30). But to imagine a bard as a piping swain is to signally mis-recognize that alarmingly hieratic caste.<sup>17</sup> It is also to erase the bards' distinctiveness through an unthinking assumption of interchangeable cultural equivalence.

This notion of interchangeability permits the lax assumption that Spenser indeed "summarises" a bardic poem. Highley even half-heartedly recycles Roland M. Smith's suggestion of a "similarity in tone" between Spenser's poem and the work of Tadhg Dall Ó hUiginn.<sup>18</sup> The wild-goose chase which Smith sets off is worth joining just to discover how far Spenser's "song" is from having a bardic "original." The poem which Smith seems to have in mind is Ó hUiginn's chilling *brostughadh catha* (incitement to battle), "Brian na Murrtha." In it, the poet urges a chieftain, Brian na Murrtha O'Rourke, to drive the Saxons from Ireland.<sup>19</sup> The high formality of Ó hUiginn's poem is worlds away from Spenser's faux encomium to "idle milke-sops . . . slugging in a cabbin." Ó hUiginn turns war into a stylized ritual through his archaic epithets—"gaoibh corcra ceannghlasa," "crimson, blue-headed javelins" (52.2)—and his cool, even-handed evocation of the English dead: "saorchuirp

15. Richard A McCabe, *Spenser's Monstrous Regiment* (Oxford, 2002), pp. 48, 51, 49.

16. *The Yale Edition of the Shorter Poems of Edmund Spenser*, ed. William A. Oram et al. (New Haven, 1989), p. 527.

17. See Eleanor Knott, *Irish Classical Poetry* (Dublin, 1957).

18. Highley, *Crisis*, p. 22; R. M. Smith, "The Irish Background of Spenser's *View*," *Journal of English and German Philology* 42 (1943), 501.

19. *The Bardic Poems of Tadhg Dall Ó Huiginn*, ed. and tr. Eleanor Knott, 2 vols. (London, 1922), I. 108–19; II, 72–79; subsequent references are to quatrain and line numbers. I discuss the poem further in *Language and Conquest in Early Modern Ireland: English Renaissance Literature and Elizabethan Imperial Expansion* (Cambridge, Eng., 2001), pp. 212–16.

áille i n-éagrothaibh” (69.4), “many a noble, comely body in death-throes.” Above all, unlike the unmotivated depredations of Spenser’s arsonist-rapist, the resistance urged by Ó hUiginn is politically purposeful. These Irishmen are “Gaoidhil na gníomh gcatharda,” “Gaels of civil deeds” (3.2), the English “danair loma lérchreachaigh,” “ravenous, destructive barbarians” (32.4). Ó hUiginn’s battle-lines restore the political context to an insurgency that Spenser sought to mystify as pure criminality: “Siad dá gcur i gciomhsaibh Banbha, / buidhne Ghall ’na glémeadhón” (6.1-2); (“[The Gaels] are being thrust on to the outskirts of Banbha [Ireland] while regiments of foreigners are in the centre”).

Spenser’s authority to explore and condemn the bards rests on a claim to special access: “Yea truly, I have caused divers of them to be translated unto me, that I might understand them.” But the limits of his understanding are easy to discern. His assertion that a body of poetry noted or even notorious for stylistic intricacy “savoured of sweet wit and good invention, but skilled not of the goodly ornaments of poetry” (p. 77), has the curious effect of exposing his ignorance. And when we set the limping antitheses of his ersatz bardic “song” against Ó hUiginn’s poetics we get the full measure of his distance from the native tradition.

In short, there is no native voice in Spenser. How then can we have “dialogical contact”? Suddenly the “sweet wit and good invention” of contemporary critics—pledged to opening “dialogue” between the canonical and the colonial—seems like wishful thinking. Highley, for instance, moves on from *A View* to a passage in John Derricke’s *Image of Ireland*. There, the staked skull of Rory Óg O’More condemns, in show-trial fashion, his own rebellion against Derricke’s patron, Lord Deputy Henry Sidney. The rationale for O’More’s resistance, colonial incursion into Laois, is excised in Derricke’s crude fantasy of Irish auto-denunciation.<sup>20</sup> But Highley, too, rides roughshod over that political reality, by greeting “O’More’s” doggerel retraction as “a dialogic impulse in the text”: “The dialogic format invites the reader to apprehend Rory . . . as a speaking subject” (pp. 56–57).

When colonial ventriloquism can be seen as “dialogic,” we should begin to hear alarm-bells ringing for a flawed critical concept. The problem with the concept as currently defined is twofold. The supposed “dialogue” is conducted exclusively within canonical or colonial English texts.

20. John Derricke, *The Image of Irelande*, ed. J. Small (1581) (Edinburgh, 1883), pp. 71–72; Vincent Cavey, “John Derricke’s *Image of Irelande*, Sir Henry Sidney, and The Massacre at Mullaghmast 1578,” *Irish Historical Studies* 31 (1999), 305–27.

Moreover, it is irresponsible for critics to imagine that an English-language text, however polyphonic, can conduct a dialogue across cultures and particularly across languages. To believe so is to put one's faith in the critical equivalent of the mythical South Sea islanders described by Boemus who, he declared robustly, have "this extraordinary priuiledge, that their tongues are naturally so cleft and diuided from the roote to the tip, as they seeme to haue euery one two tongues, by which meanes . . . they will talke and conferre with two seuerall persons, of seuerall matters, at one and the selfe same time, the one part of the tongue speaking and giuing answeve vnto one, and the other part to the other."<sup>21</sup> The colonial text does not have such a tongue. Inattention to the language of the other is particularly inexcusable when the missing language is not one of the countless unwritten languages lost through colonial expansion. The bardic corpus which so exercised Spenser still encodes its dissent.

With what might seem like a similarly motivated dissatisfaction with New Historicism's "chronic and uninterrogated Anglocentrism,"<sup>22</sup> Baker and Maley have recently extended an invitation to literary critics to situate their work instead within the paradigm of the "new British history." "New British history," they argue, offers the possibility of opening "a dialectic or dialogue between centres and margins." But the promise extended by "dialogue" is vitiated almost immediately by the quickly reinstated hierarchy of "centres and margins"—a dichotomy softened but essentially unchallenged by those plurals. It reminds us of why Nicholas Canny so energetically declares himself a "Brito-sceptic," arguing that "much of what appears as 'new British history' is nothing but 'old English history' in Three Kingdoms' clothing."<sup>23</sup> Sure enough, the essays in Baker and Maley's collection offer a very English and therefore oxymoronic "dialogue," one conducted exclusively within canonical or colonial English texts: Holinshed's *Irish Chronicle*, *I Henry IV*, *Henry V*, *Cymbeline*, *Speed*, and *Harriot*, with the inevitable leavening of Spenser. It is troubling enough that most students of English see early-modern Ireland only through the astigmatic "views" of the New English. But it is even more disturbing that the dominant critical practices—postcolonial,

21. J. Boemus, *The Manners, Lawes, and Customes of All Nations* (1611), 461–62.

22. *British Identities and English Renaissance Literature*, Ed. David J. Baker and Willy Maley (Cambridge Eng., 2002), p. 4.

23. Nicholas P. Canny, "Irish, Scottish and Welsh Responses to Centralisation, c. 1530–c. 1640," *Uniting the Kingdom: The Making of British History*, ed. Alexander Grant and Keith J. Stringer (London, 1995), p. 147.



New Historicist, or “New British”—imagine that a dialogue can be opened from within such texts. I would argue that the old colonial monologue is being replicated by a predominantly monophone scholarship armed with the well-meaning but dangerous conviction that by listening with finely-honed scepticism to the colonists’ outpourings—and only to theirs—we can somehow hear the voices of the colonized as well.

To be serious about dialogue, we need to abandon the illusion that a genuine dialogue can be opened up within the master texts of the colonizing nation. Significantly, Jane Ohlmeyer in a challenging afterword to Baker and Maley’s collection argues that “to allow English-language texts to dominate any discussion surrounding ‘the paradigm of British history’ only serves to accentuate further the Anglocentric nature of the discourse” (p. 249). As Claire Carroll cogently puts it, “Even criticism that attempts to oppose the Manichean categories of ethnography can be linguistically trapped within them.”<sup>24</sup> On those grounds Canny declares a truly new British history to be “beyond the reach of most historians, because it is only those with a good reading knowledge of three Celtic languages, as well as English and Latin, who can master all the relevant sources” (p. 148). In short, in a context where a contest of languages was central to the experience of conquest, as it was in Ireland, we cannot have a dialogue in monophone. The canonical texts can be used to prise open all kinds of fissures and dissents internal to the colonial enterprise. But the much mystified Other will not be found speaking in his—much less in her—own voice there. Perhaps the time has finally come to give up on the notion that somewhere deep inside, say, Shakespeare’s *Henry V* is all we need to know about the experience of Tudor expansion into the Celtic “borderlands.” To become acquainted only with the “whingeing” MacMorris<sup>25</sup> is to stay on the far side of a profound incomprehension.

Because *Henry V* has become a central plank in the narrow textual bridgehead by which critics enter early-modern Ireland, I want to use it to find a way through our current impasse. As the top-billing Elizabethan stage-Irishman, MacMorris and his aspirated “s” has given large number of critics a sense of entry into sixteenth-century Ireland. But the pitfalls should be obvious. Beyond the danger of becoming as repetitive as

24. *Circe’s Cup: Cultural Transformations in Early Modern Ireland* (Cork, 2001), p. 2.

25. “MacMorris, gallivanting round the Globe, whinged / to courtier and groundling.” Seamus Heaney, “Traditions,” *Wintering Out* (London, 1972), p. 32.



MacMorris himself—"O, tish ill done, tish ill done, by my hand, tish ill done"—critics that come to Ireland through English canonical texts are always going to end up back in England. So for disciples of containment, *Henry V* stages the erasure of Irish dissent. Dollimore and Sinfield see its MacMorris moment (3.3) as enacting "a displaced, imaginary resolution of the Irish problem."<sup>26</sup> In language disturbingly inflected with colonial tropes, Stephen Greenblatt argues that it "symbolically tames the last wild areas in the British Isles . . . the doomed outposts of a vanishing tribalism."<sup>27</sup> For those of a more deconstructive bent, the play is marked by category confusions, "self—cancelling discourse," "slippages"<sup>28</sup> and the collapse of the difference between Irish and English: the collapse of Irishness into a hybridity that's always peculiarly English.

Christopher Highley's analysis of *Henry V* is the logical culmination of the kind of criticism that operates within the closed circuit of the colonial text. Highley states his position forthrightly. He will focus "mainly upon the canonical figures of Shakespeare and Spenser." He is interested in Ireland as a site of English national self-fashioning. He will explore "the English 'problem' with Ireland in terms of a dynamic of 'internal colonialism'" (p. 8). His adoption of Hechter's paradigm<sup>29</sup> insures that Ireland, even before its (re)conquest is complete, is already internal to Britain. He describes Ireland as "a place seen as a wild backwater by sixteenth-century observers and modern critics alike" (p. 4). And crucially, in a footnote, he tells us that Gaelic writers "remain outside the discourse of Ireland as I define it" (p. 164, n.2). The consequences are inevitable. Not only is his access to any countervailing Irish perspective blocked, but the Irish disappear completely, their identities collapsed into or assumed by the English. He sees Shakespeare performing "imaginative displacements of national and ethnic categories," until the English army in France acquires the characteristics of the wild Irish: cold, hungry, raw, long-suffering and, in the eyes of the French, barbarous (p. 143). Look at

26. "History and Ideology: the Instance of *Henry V*," *Alternative Shakespeares*, ed. John Drakakis (London, 1985), p. 225.

27. *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in the English Renaissance* (Oxford, 1988), p. 56. Joel Altman's reference to Ireland as a "notoriously barbaric neighbor" ("Vile," p. 7) is another instance of a widespread, unreflecting Anglocentrism. For other versions of the containment argument, see David Cairns and Shaun Richards, *Writing Ireland* (Manchester, 1988), p. 10; and Philip Edwards, *Threshold of a Nation* (Cambridge, Eng., 1979), pp. 74–76.

28. Baker, "Wildeheirishsheman," pp. 5, 54.

29. Michael Hechter, *Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National Development* (London, 1975).

Ireland in the canonical texts, Highley seems to be unintentionally warning us, and you'll see only England.

Paradoxically, the most productive recent encounters with *Henry V* are two essays that bring us toward a blank in the text by focusing on its gaps and discontinuities. Patricia Parker's essay in Baker and Maley's collection, "Uncertain unions: Welsh Leeks in *Henry V*," offers a subtle reading of the play's "multiple iterations of breaches, faults and leaks" (p. 82). David Baker's essay homes in on MacMorris's "answer"—"What ish my nation?"—to Fluellen's question and, like MacMorris himself, can articulate his proposition only through a series of interrogatives: "Has he borrowed an English term to denote an Irish synonym (which is?), or is he speaking now as an Englishman, fracturing a language other than his native dialect? . . . Which was this Old Englishman's usage? And if his language cannot be identified, how can his already fractured identity be fixed?" (p. 39). MacMorris, Baker suggests, "implies a category of belonging that no term available to Shakespeare and his audience could quite figure" (pp. 41–42). His presence constitutes an energy of disturbance; "an unseen place of shift, it lies in the gap—the literal white space—between Fluellen's insult and the enraged iterations that interrupt, rephrase, and question it" (p. 41). Parker's essay brings us to the point where the obvious next step for criticism to take is to acknowledge that the gaps it identifies are sometimes the literal markers of an elided language; Baker's essay makes that acknowledgement explicit, recognizing that Shakespeare's Irish character brings English to the point where "its fault lines are exposed" (p. 41). In Baker's own reiterated questions and his sense of "an Irish alien so radically different that it cannot be represented in itself" (p. 41), we meet a critic straining at the bars of language difference.

There is no doubt that some of the aporia of *Henry V* derive from its monophone representation of a polyphonic reality. It is important to recognize that the comedy of Fluellen's and MacMorris' speech is not just a comedy of dialect. Phonetically, syntactically, and idiomatically, their speech is marked by their first languages, by Welsh and Irish. Yet the play manages to shrink down all the complexity of cultural alignment and worldview entailed in linguistic difference to the merely comic status of differences in dialect.<sup>30</sup> But

30. The only—garbled—words of Irish in *Henry V* are spoken by Pistol, who with unintentional gender confusion responds to the French soldier's question about whether he is a "gentilhomme de bonne qualité" by echoing the sound of "qualité" with the title of an Irish song, "Calen o susture me": "Cailín ó Chois tSiuire mé," "I'm the girl from the banks of the Suir."

behind the blathering Fluellen, behind blustering MacMorris, is another language. Out there in those unacknowledged Celtic languages are worlds that the English text can only caricature but never lead us to. Nor, equally importantly, can any amount of deconstructive critical play lead us there either. It can only bring us, yet again, to a vanishing point.

## III

MacMorris can lead us neither to his land nor his language. He is a colonial fantasy, a de-culturated cipher whose much-remarked slippage from the text seems absolutely inevitable. Yet, Shakespeare's choice of "MacMorris" as the name of his wish-fulfillingly compliant, if ultimately ungovernable, Irishman is hardly random. Two Munstermen of that very name had achieved contemporary notoriety in England.<sup>31</sup> Invoking them now, I am not trying to identify the "real" MacMorris, but trying to use writings associated with these historical figures to move into that other culture from which one side of the dialogue we want must come.

MacMorris or Mac Muiris is the gaelicized form of the Anglo-Norman name, FitzMaurice. The shift from Fitz to Mac testifies to the hibernicization of that clan, a process almost inevitable given their long tenure in the southwest, far from the influence of the English Pale. Our first FitzMaurice is James FitzMaurice FitzGerald who rose in rebellion in 1569 under the banner of liberty of conscience. Forced to flee to the continent six years later, he sought to raise support in France, at the court of Philip II and in Rome. He returned to Kerry in 1579 with a contingent of papally-backed Italian and Spanish troops:<sup>32</sup> "that Roman cockatrice, which a long time had set abroad vpon hir eggs, had now hatched hir chickens."<sup>33</sup> An indefatigable campaigner, FitzMaurice shot off letters in all directions, in Irish, English and Latin. His argument takes on a subtly different cast in each language. His Latin *edictum*, "De Justitia eius belli quod in Hybernia pro Fide gerit," argues the case for a just war

31. Both are referred to, almost interchangeably, in the State Papers as "FitzMaurice" or "MacMorrice."

32. Steven Ellis, *Tudor Ireland: Crown, Community and the Conflict of Cultures, 1470–1603* (London, 1985), pp. 257ff.

33. John Hooker, "The Irish Historie Composed and Written by Giraldus Cambrensis, and Translated into English . . . 1587," *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland*, ed. Ralph Holinshed (1586), VI, 405.

against the Protestant Elizabeth.<sup>34</sup> In Irish he launches straight into exhortation. In a pattern of urgent rhetorical antithesis he rallies his followers against the “eiritigidhe is Danar,” the “heretics and barbarians” (p. 362): “sinne ag cosnamh ár g-creidimh is ár ndúthaighe,” “we, defending our faith and our country”; they trying to destroy both; “sinne ar an bhfirinne is iad-san ar an mbréig”; “we on the side of truth and they on the side of falsehood” (p. 303). In English he faces the more complex task of creating a broad coalition of “praelates, princes, lordes, estates, citzizens, and people of Irelande,” united under the banner of Pope Gregory XIII. He summons “my deare countrymen” to defend “this our deere contrye,” “this noble Ireland,” from “all foreyne invasions” and to win “libertie of consciens” and the “enjoying of our owne goodes” (pp. 365, 367). Baker’s question about MacMorris’ use of the word “nation”—“Has he borrowed an English term to denote an Irish synonym?”—is acute. Míchéal Mac Craith has argued that in articulating his revolutionary “faith and fatherland” or “creidimh is dúthaighe” ideals, FitzMaurice may have been the first to use the word “tuatha,” which traditionally meant native district, in the broader national sense of “country.” To the question “What ish my nation?,” this MacMorris gave the answer in three languages.

Not long after arriving in Smerwick, James FitzMaurice was “shotte into the hedde by a good and perfite Hargabozier, and had his hedde stricken of;”<sup>35</sup> head and quarters were set on the town gate of Kilmallock.<sup>36</sup> John Hooker gleefully noted that “the pope’s blessings and warrant, his *Agnus Dei* and his graines had not those vertues to saue him, as an Irish staffe or a bullet had to kill him [and] the great & venemous hydra was thus shortened of one of his heds” (p. 412). Thomas Churchyard dashed off a celebratory squib, gloating “that a rebell liues without loue, wanders with out witte, and lies without graue, as a prey to the wilde wolffe, and foode to the carren Crow, left as a spectacle for many eyes to look into” (B.iii.v). Nevertheless, FitzMaurice’s militancy and his carefully articulated ideology had set the troubled course of the rest of the century.

34. “The Irish Correspondence of James Fitz Maurice of Desmond,” ed. John O’Donovan, *Journal of the Kilkenny Archaeological Society* (1859), p. 368.

35. Thomas Churchyard, *The moste true reporte of Iames Fitz Morrice death* (1579), sig. B3.

36. Hooker, “Historie,” p. 412. The heads of fifty of his followers had already been “put . . . round about the Crosse,” in the town. *The History of Sir John Perrott*, ed. Richard Rawlingson (1728), p. 52.

Our second FitzMaurice is Patrick or Padraigín, later twelfth Baron of Lixnaw and seventeenth Lord Kerry. He was among a group of young gentlemen who travelled with Sidney to court in 1567, “chiefly to behold the high majesty of our sacred Sovereign” and, Sidney remembered to add, to surrender their land, under the policy of “surrender and regrant” (Brady, pp. 57–58). But “notwithstanding he was trained vp in the court of England, sworne seruant vnto hir maiestie, in good fauor and countenance in the court, and apparelled according to his degree, and dailie nurtured and brought vp in all ciuilitie,” his return, as John Hooker fulminated in Holinshed’s *Chronicle*, brought instant reversion: “awaie with his English attires, and on with his brogs, his shirt, and other Irish rags” (p. 417). Like another of the hydra’s heads, he joined James FitzMaurice’s posthumously smouldering rebellion. If Shakespeare’s MacMorris is a neutralized, denationalized hybrid, this Mac Muiris is what the Elizabethans feared and encountered far more often: the native who reverts. For Hooker, he exemplified “that cursed generation . . . an ape is but an ape, albeit he be clothed in purple and velvet.” Jupiter’s cat, Hooker continued, might be transformed “to neuer so faire a ladie, and . . . neuer so well attired . . . yet if the mouse come once in hir sight, she will be a cat and shew hir kind” (p. 417).

As critics, we can not just stand with Hooker and watch FitzMaurice Mac Muiris vanish—as an ape, as a cat—into the obliterating fog of a culture that the English writer does not even venture to imagine. Rather, we must step into his “brogs,” into the blank space left by the colonial text. As a way of trying to do so, I want to look at a praise-poem dedicated to Mac Muiris by the bardic poet, Domhnall Mac Dáire. The poem begins “Ní dúal cairde ar creich ngeimhil,” “it’s wrong to delay a raid for captives.”<sup>37</sup> For a moment, this sounds like a heart-sinking flashback to Irenius’ cod bardic poem, but it is a world away from such travesties. True, the poet begins with talk of raiding; of three poets who have been kept in bondage for a half-year; of spies being dispatched. But this is an elaborate play. Mac Dáire’s central trope is that he and his brother poets are so beholden for the hospitality they have received from Mac Muiris that they who have been held “hostage” by his generosity must “avenge” the favor and take him hostage in turn. Mac Dáire’s troops will be a band of poets, his weapon of choice “sreath iolfáobhair raghlain rann,” “rows of sharp-edged quatrains of praise.” Generosity will be his

37. *Irish Bardic Poetry*, ed. Osborn Bergin (Dublin, 1970), p. 54.

decoy; nobility or *úaisle* his guide. The “enemy,” Padraigín, is depicted in similarly delicate terms: a red-cheeked prince (14.4), a modest gentle nobleman (17.4). Here is quatrain 12:

Ní fras cháoilseagh chailgios neach,  
ní fras ghriobhdha ghlac neimhnoch,  
fras dhúan lé ndingébhthar Goill (1-3).

Not with a shower of stinging spears  
Not with a griffin-like shower from annihilating hands  
But with a shower of poems will the Foreigners<sup>38</sup> be routed.

The poet turns from imagining how, with his “roinn leabhra go lán bfuinnigh,” “smooth stanzas full of vigor” (18.3), he will capture Padraigín to worrying about where to hold him hostage. He surveys all of Ireland but everywhere there are too many Mac Muiris partisans, too many lovely wives and stately daughters, all poised to make off with the poet’s prize. So finally he resolves that nowhere is fitter to keep him than in Mac Muiris’ own “cúirt . . . ghealmhóir ghloin,” his “glistening bright court” in Listowel. And as he goes there imaginatively, the poet is able to evoke a world of gentle wooing, of learned utterances, of horsemanship, of red wine flowing from golden goblets. And, as he sketches imaginary outings with his “captive,” Mac Dáire powerfully conjures up the delight of being in that landscape: following the stag on cool slopes on fine days, riding out, swimming from the bank, walking the strand, idly beach-combing the harvest of its fruitful tide.

Mac Dáire’s is a dazzling performance. He sustains his trope with lightness and wit but this is more than just a clever device. The poem grows quiet toward the end and a work which has so ebulliently asserted the literally captivating power of poetry throughout ends not with another such claim but with the simple sound of a stream, the River Feale: “lór a binni, / mór an t-adhbhar inntinni,” “sufficient its sweetness, a great source of joy” (47.3-4). The shift in intensity at the end is picked up in its switch from what Mac Muiris will do to what he will see, will hear: “do chífé,” “do chluinfi.” And as our field of vision lines up with his, as we hear what he hears, we gain access to the allure of his world: we enter into the perspective of another, the perspective of dialogue.

38. “Goill,” “foreigners,” is not a political reference to the English but a genealogical gesture toward the FitzMaurices’ mythical origins in Greece.

Thereafter, we come across Mac Muiris from time to time in the State Papers. He escapes mysteriously from Limerick Castle.<sup>39</sup> He is in Spain, conspiring (p. 399). Then he is back in Kerry again, wounded in Dingle (p. 422). He is a prisoner in Dublin (p. 502). Then in 1600 his “cúirt ghealmhóir ghloin,” his glistering bright court, is seized by Sir Charles Wilmot. And, as George Carew reported with evident satisfaction, “when he saw his chief house possessed by our forces, [he] took such an inward grief at the same, as the 12<sup>th</sup> of this month he died, leaving behind him his son and heir, as malicious a traitor as himself” (p. 426).

## IV

This journey between cultures is not an easy one to make. While we may endorse the project of recovering the voices of the vanquished, it is much easier to play with English texts and their indeterminacy, to wrestle with Caliban and his “scamels”<sup>40</sup> than with the lost words of real Caribs. There is no denying the difficulty of the task. The inequality that skews the relationship between colonizer and colonized is nowhere more apparent than in the imbalance between the stentorian call of the colonial text and the insubstantiality of the native response. In the Irish context, although roughly 1,000 bardic poems survive from 1560 onwards and there are rich reserves of prose in Irish and Latin,<sup>41</sup> the dialogue can still be hard to open. The recovered texts of the vanquished often lack the resonance we imagine for them. Reared on the conventions of the victors, we confront alien forms and find ourselves far outside their aesthetic traditions and modes of interpretation. The voices we recover can sound strained, archaic, wooden. And that effect is not helped by the fact that they so often reach us translated into English: not only the colonial tongue, but also a language not notably aligned with the syntactical and lexical contours of Irish.<sup>42</sup>

But if these are not voices that travel well through time, the way we engage with them shrinks their domain still further. Two aspects of our

39. *Calendar of State Papers Ireland 1574–1585*, p. 315. In yet another twist on the missing body motif, seven score of his father’s men were killed by the English but the old baron escaped, leaving behind a “store of monie and plate, and massing garments,” Hooker, “Historie,” p. 449.

40. “Sometimes I’ll get thee / Young scamels from the rock,” William Shakespeare, *The Tempest* (2.2.171–72) (London, 1954).

41. Cf. Brian Ó Cuív, “The Irish Language in the Early Modern Period,” *A New History of Ireland: Early Modern Ireland 1534–1691*, ed. T. W. Moody, et al., III (Oxford, 1975).

42. Cf. David Greene, *The Irish Language / An Ghaeilge* (Dublin, 1966), pp. 31–59.



current critical orientation keep such vital unfamiliarity at bay. First, our well-honed deconstructive reflex is programmed to suspect difference and dismantle it, to collapse the “other” into the “self.” There is a commendable inclusiveness about this. But there is also a kind of voracious recuperation at work. What can be brought into dialogue is—and is then dissolved into its opposite. What is radically strange is left aside as archaic or irrecoverably alien. This kind of shrinkage is evident in the way we engage with early-modern Irish material. If we make recourse to it at all, it is often only to use it as a *verso* to the *recto* world of English discourse and perceptions. Literature in Irish becomes interesting only insofar as it directly addresses issues of conquest and colonization.<sup>43</sup> This agenda can reduce it to little more than a reedy-voiced antiphon, an exoticizing dash of native retort. Richard McCabe’s recent *Spenser’s Monstrous Regiment: Elizabethan Ireland and the Poetics of Difference* is to be welcomed for its willingness to engage with Irish-language material. But, puzzlingly, it is dedicated to replacing the “poetics of difference” with a poetics of sameness. Its declared intention is “to reveal [the] underlying similarity” between the bardic poets and Spenser. The cultural autonomy of the *filí*, the radical difference of their poetic forms and their cultural positioning, all slip away as they are collapsed into a similitude with Spenser that is seen as somehow validating. For McCabe, Tadhg Dall Ó hUiginn’s *brostughadh catha* for O’Rourke discussed above, “recalls Spenser’s defence of Grey”;<sup>44</sup> an anonymous eulogy “bears ready comparison with Spenser’s Aprill eclogue in language, tone and imagery”;<sup>45</sup> Eochaidh Ó hEóghusa “like Spenser . . . evoked the goddess Nature” (p. 53). In short, if attended to at all, native writings from Ireland get squeezed in as the minor term within a binary distinction that everybody is committed to dismantling. They are never heard on their own terms, offering a free-standing, countervailing narrative.

The second impediment is much more far-reaching and raises questions about the boundaries of the discipline, about the empire of “English,” and its external relations. All too often, it can seem that the linguistic hegemony of English within literary criticism and its profoundly

43. Marc Caball’s pioneering *Poets and Politics: Reaction and Continuity in Irish Poetry, 1558–1625*, (Cork, 1998) by definition restricts its examination to that response.

44. McCabe, *Monstrous*, p. 48.

45. McCabe, *Monstrous*, pp. 40–41. The comparison holds only with its Victorian translation, where “bhias dá haithris ag lucht aitis / ar feadh fáithche feorghloine” mutates incongruously into “recited on many / A green-swarded fair green by merry folk.”

monophonic orientation disturbingly mirrors the colonial imbalance that it is committed to analyzing. There is a sense of all-sufficiency about English, a conviction that it can do all the voices. When Greenblatt celebrates Caliban's speech, "let me bring thee where crabs grow," for its "opacity,"<sup>46</sup> it is with a feeling that English can do whatever the tongue Sycorax taught her son could do. But English cannot "do" other languages. Perhaps it was precisely the dangerous conviction that it could that resulted in the eclipse of so many of the languages it encountered. The great, raging recorder of the passing of the Gaelic order, Dáibhí Ó Bruadair, registers the silence falling on his world in a post-bardic poem, "Créacht do dháil me," "A fateful wound hath made of me," written as the Cromwellian Plantation took hold. With its native owners dispossessed and exiled, Ireland is "i lámhaibh danar" (3.2),<sup>47</sup> "in the hands of barbarians." Ó Bruadair splenically evokes a world turned upside down: "biaid ár ndúnta ag pruntaibh bathlach"; "All our castles will be held by clownish upstarts" (24.3). His scorn for the incoming "horde"—"buidhean" (25.1)—fixes on the prosaic low-comedy of their names: "geamar Rút is goodman Cabbage, / mistress Cápon Cáit is Anna" (Gammer Ruth and goodman Cabbage, / Mistress Capon, Kate and Anna) (26.3-4). For Ó Bruadair, the offense of the alien presence becomes focused on their language. These "monsters" are "béarlach beárrtha bádhach blasta"; "With shaven jaws and English talk and braggart accent" (23.4); in all of Ireland, he hears nothing but "gliogarnach ghall," "foreign babbling" (51.2).

Ó Bruadair turns from excoriation to elegy. Through the ringing formula "Mar a mbíodh", "Where once there was," he sounds a roll-call for a civilization reaching its end. His valediction salutes the culture heroes of a superseded past. Among the lost are the bards: "Mar a mbíodh dámhscol báird is reacaigh," "where once were learned schools of bards and storytellers" (29.1). Finally, he comes to rest on the desolation of the present: "Och dul na féinne úd fá úir leacaigh / is é do ró bhris Fódla bheannach, / gan éisteacht ceoil acht bróinte scamal" ("The going of those Fianna 'neath the clay of gravestones hath, alas! quite crushed the heart of peak-crowned Fódla [Ireland]. She hears no sound of music, nought but misty moanings) (40.1-3). "Bróinte scamal," "clouds of misery": a play of words across

46. *The Tempest* (2.2.167ff). Stephen J. Greenblatt, "Learning to Curse: Aspects of Linguistic Colonialism in the Sixteenth Century," *First Images of America*, ed. Fredi Chiappelli (Berkeley, 1976), II, 575.

47. *Duanaire Dháibhidh Uí Bhruidair*, ed. and tr. John C. Mac Erlean (London, 1910), I, 28. All subsequent quotations give quatrain and line number.

languages returns us to Greenblatt's argument that "Caliban's world has what we may call *opacity*, and the perfect emblem of that opacity is the fact that we do not to this day know the meaning of the word 'scamel'" (p. 575). One meaning of "scamel," in one language, Irish, is "cloud." I'm not suggesting that Caliban was picking clouds from the rocks, but playing with a verbal echo to say that here is real opacity, framed by Ó Bruadair's stark reminder of the pain of linguistic silencing.

Dialogue requires a comparative practice that is as comfortable with difference as it is with similitude. It requires a practice that respects particularity, that can move from a point of correspondence into the cultural specificity of the native text. In search of such a practice, it is worth returning to the locus of Spenser's bardic "song" and to the disturbances of the Nine Years War which underwrote both it and *Henry V*. But this time, we go in search not of confirmation or similitude but of alterity. Some pages after his "song," Spenser returns to "such outlawes" as it purportedly extolled. For him, these are verminous creatures and excite in him euphemistic fantasies of extermination: "if they bee well followed but one winter, you shall have little worke with them the next summer" (p. 99). He visualizes the wished-for winter campaign of annihilation with extraordinary intensity: "in Ireland the winter yeeldeth best services, for then the trees are bare and naked, which use both to cloath and house the kerne; the ground is cold and wet, which useth to be his bedding; the aire is sharpe and bitter, to blowe thorough his naked sides and legges" (p. 98). Spenser's intense imagining of the wretchedness he describes seems cognate with a kind of empathy. But in countenancing—advocating—the very extremity he so feelingly evokes, Spenser brings us up against the limits not just of empathy but of the colonial text's ability to imagine the other. And yet as the proverb says, "*bíonn dhá insint ar gach scéal*": "there are two tellings to every story" and the conflict that prompted Spenser's night-raider anxieties and winter-campaign fantasies—and also *Henry V*'s choric anticipation of victory—was contemporaneously inspiring bardic responses too. Through one such poem, we can see Spenser's "outlaw," lighting "his candle at the flames of their houses," in the very different light of his own culture.

"Fúar liom an adhaighsi dh'Aodh"<sup>48</sup> was written by Eochaidh Ó hEóghusa, *ollav* to Hugh Maguire, Lord of Fermanagh, when the

48. Bergin, *Bardic Poetry*, pp. 124–27; Bernard O'Donoghue provides a fine translation in *The Penguin Book of Renaissance Verse*, ed. David Norbrook and Henry Woudhuysen (Harmondsworth, 1993), pp. 144–45.

Ulster chieftain was campaigning in Munster in the winter of 1600. Hugh is campaigning but there is no battle here. Instead the poem draws us into climatic extremity, into the physical hardship that assails Maguire and the reciprocal anguish felt by the poet himself. There is an almost baroque extravagance about Ó hEóghusa's depiction of the weather assaulting his hero: "above the breasts of the clouds, the water-doors of the air opened" (3.1-2). His deft observations of the natural world convey the horror of the stormy night: if it were only a wild hare in the forest, or a salmon in the estuary, or a flock of birds, it would be unbearable for them be abroad on such a night (4). And yet, Hugh is out in this. As he depicts Maguire, Ó hEóghusa evokes not a warrior but a delicate lover. He is "ár leannáinne," our darling; and it chills the poet to imagine Hugh's "leacain shubhaigh," his joyful cheek, his "bright limbs"—there is a marked blazoning at work—blasted by furious winds.

Equally unsettling is the characterization of the enemy. For here, there is no glimpse of a human foe—no sighting ever of the English. Put-upon, impassive, Hugh is whipped by the merciless forces of the elements: "do sgé an fhirminnte a hurbhuidh" (3.4), "the firmament unleashed its destruction"; he is pummeled by "confadh úaibhreach aieór," "the arrogant fury of the sky" (6.4) and "síongháoth na reann," "the tempest-winds of the stars" (7.3). This is the enemy that is in arms against him. He is pinned under "the red burning of streaming thunder" (5.3-4), under the fury of bloody, sword-edged clouds. Ó hEóghusa creates not a skirmish against human foes but an elemental assault where Hugh, scourged by this cosmic battery, is never seen to act at all.

Ó hEóghusa's method is all subtlety and indirection. He uses the Irish language's natural preference for nominal over verbal forms to emphasize the sense of impersonal forces at work. He uses datives of disadvantage instead of verbs to suggest consequence without causation. The literal translation of the opening line, "Fúar liom an adhaighsi dh'Aodh," "cold to me the night for Hugh," is characteristically verbless. In the first quatrain alone, the translator Bernard O'Donoghue has to introduce five English verbs where the Irish original has none:

Fúar liom an adhaighsi dh'Aodh,  
 cúis tuirse truime a cíoibhraon;  
 mo thrúai ghe sein dár seise,  
 neimh fhúaire na hoidhcheise;

I *think* this night is cold for Hugh; the heaviness of its downpour is a cause of misery. I *grieve* that this *befalls* our comrade, the poison of this night's cold.<sup>49</sup>

Such verbs as Ó hEóghusa does use are passives or participles or the tight-lipped copula. His elliptical procedure is well illustrated by quatrain 8 where he seems to be describing the slow spread of frostbite when in fact he is gradually revealing the warrior's body to be covered in armor. Ice slowly metamorphoses into steel: "painful to us," the poet says, literally translated, "it wounded our minds, [to think] of Hugh's smooth and tender sides crushed, this savage, sharp night, in a suit of complete-cold iron." The only actor here is the weather and the effect of its action, like a tracery of frost on a window.

And then (quatrains 10–15) there is a lull. The poet imagines the flooded meadows, the tents that never dry out. But in quatrain 16 something extraordinary happens. Flames leap out. Wind-waves of fire billowing from bright, blue-worked castles warm Hugh's brilliant face, melt the film of frost from his eye, thaw the manacles of ice from his smooth brown hands. All Munster is ablaze, its naked courts in suits of embers (18.3). Still we see no enemy. There are no people at all here, only the absent dead: this has become a "críoch gan oighir gan íarmhúa" (19.4), a "land without heir or descendent." The only person here, as bit by bit, backlit by flames, he comes into focus in the now eerie blazon, is Hugh, unveiled as the "airgtheóir fhuinn Gháoidheal," "the destroyer of the land of the Gael" (18.2). This is elemental, too, this destruction: it is pitiless, irresistible. Ó hEóghusa's lethal style, passive, impersonal, unblinking, has brought us somewhere we may never have been before, to the icy heart of all-out war. It has brought us to Munster in the winter of 1600, with rebellion not broached on Essex's sword as the Chorus of *Henry V* had dreamt of a half-year previously (V.l. 32), but with rebellion in full cry; into a Munster where the burnt-out ruins of Spenser's Kilcolman Castle still smoulder.

It has brought us somewhere much stranger and more interesting than simply to the *verso* of the English writers' *recto* world. It brings us to a very different conception of poetry, of poetry as alchemy as much as art. Ó hEóghusa, after all, was not Maguire's court poet but his *ollav*. As James Carney shows, into the early seventeenth century the *ollav* was held

49. My italics; literally "Cold to me the night for Hugh, a cause of sorrow the heaviness of its shower-drops; my pity the fortune of our companion, the poison of the night's cold."

to possess druid-like powers of mediation between his lord and the mysterious forces of nature.<sup>50</sup> Ó hEóghusa's is not a colorful piece about a warrior in a winter storm. It is the anguished art of one who passionately lived out the traditional notion of the *ollav* as mystically united with his patron, as the symbolic spouse of his lord. Anxiety pulses through the poem, created by Ó hEóghusa's dark foreboding: "go ndeach tharainn—ná tí m'olc- / an ní fá ngabhaim gúasacht"; "May the thing that would be my ruin pass by me; may my ill not come" (10.3–4). The poem is his expression of, and struggle against, his own *bua feasa*, his gift of prophecy, his dark divination that the forces of nature have slipped from his lord's command and turned against him. Hence, the utter irrelevance—the non-appearance—of Hugh's ostensible foe, the English. The conflict in this poem is between the unleashed forces of destruction and the poet's attempt to reimagine them into order. Ó hEóghusa's is a performance that weighs up the disjuncture of the world and then attempts to conjure it back into order. He has worked his poem to a point where he has reversed the flow of destruction. From being directed against Hugh, the elements have come to be harnessed by him. (In a valuable analysis Louis de Paor shows how Ó hEóghusa literally plays with fire in this poem, setting up an elemental conflict between the initial firestorms levelled against Hugh and Hugh's—whose name means "fire"—reassertion of his mastery over fire at the end.)<sup>51</sup> With Hugh, like a young fire-god, back in command of the elements, Ó hEóghusa is straining to work his magic in ways far beyond the poetic. But in this winter campaign his poetics brings us on a journey into a sensibility and a worldview that is far beyond the ken of "Irenius' bard"—but which must not be, if we are truly to respect early-modern Ireland, beyond ours.

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50. *The Irish Bardic Poet* (Dublin, 1967), p. 12.

51. "Do chor chúarta ar gcríthe: Léamh ar dhán le hEochaidh Ó hEoghusa," *Saol na hÉigse: Aistí in ómós do Sheán Ó Tuama*, eag. Pádraigín Riggs et al. (Baile Átha Cliath [Dublin], 2000), pp. 35–53.