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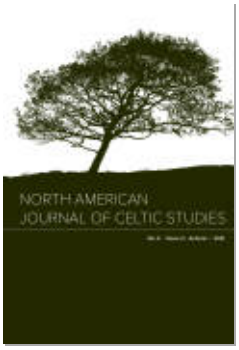

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ABSTRACT: This article seeks to establish a poetics of irony in Early Middle Irish literature centring on anticlerical irreverence, misogyny, and ethnic stereotyping. Using a cluster of tenth-century narratives in the Book of Leinster, this study reads within and between texts to attempt to delineate conventions of genre and style which can be used to make the case for ironic readings of these and other texts. It is tentatively suggested that such anecdote-length humorous texts may have been used for pedagogical purposes, and the relationship between anticlerical texts and those which critique poets is briefly explored.

KEYWORDS: Book of Leinster, humour, irony, Middle Irish, narrative, satire, tenth century

IRONY IS A RHETORICAL TECHNIQUE which constructs a situation whereby how things seem on the surface, or how one might expect things to be, is deliberately different from how things actually are. It is, to employ the definition in *The Oxford dictionary of literary terms,* 'a subtly humorous perception of inconsistency' (Baldick 2015 s.v. *irony*). Ironic speech or, more specifically, verbal irony, involves saying one thing and meaning another, which makes it incredibly difficult to identify conclusively in historic contexts.

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A distance of a millennium from our sources means that the identification of irony in medieval Irish literature is something that is likely to be regarded as subjective. Indeed, arguments for comic readings of medieval texts more broadly have often proved controversial, particularly given that humour is so frequently culturally contingent (Critchley 2002; Beard 2014; Derrin 2020). This essay seeks to propose a genre of texts surviving from medieval Ireland which, it is argued, are deeply ironic, subversive, and deliberately humorous, to delineate the features and conventions of that genre, and, therefore, to begin to work towards establishing a poetics of irony in Middle Irish literature which could be used to identify—or, at least, strongly argue for the presence of—irony in other medieval Irish texts. The essay takes as its focus a case study comprising a cluster of texts in the twelfth-century Book of Leinster (Dublin, Trinity College MS 1339), before briefly broadening out to look at other texts in the same manuscript, and some of the wider implications for medieval Irish literature more generally. I begin with an overview of previous approaches to humour in medieval Irish literature.

Finding reasons to laugh

Approaches to humour in medieval Irish texts have been largely haphazard and unsystematic, but there have been some important interventions, which it is useful to draw together here in guiding some of our thinking. One area which has been subject to relatively extensive scholarly attention is early Irish satire (Breatnach 2004 & 2009; McLaughlin 2008). Not to be confused with modern definitions of satire, early Irish satire had the specific social function of shaming an individual; it is perhaps best characterised as 'anti-praise poetry' and was a legally-controlled practice reserved for poets. One could not simply produce a satire; legal texts delineate the process by which a poet had to give notice of the threat of satire against an individual who could then take action to prevent a satire being composed against them (Breatnach, forthcoming). Although we might, as modern readers, laugh in dark appreciation at the rude and witty insults that poets concocted to satirise the targets of their wrath, the specific shaming function of early Irish satire, along with its limited and closely-regulated practice, do not necessarily provide us with the most productive basis for examining broader ideas of humour.

Saga narratives, intended as many of them surely were for the purposes of entertainment as much as for any other function they might have had (such as moral instruction, social criticism, and the articulation of cultural memory), are more fertile ground for a study of humour in medieval Ireland. But even here we must be careful. One important contribution on the topic is that of Philip O'Leary in his study of laughter in medieval Irish literature. His analysis leads us to establish a distinction between 'laughter' and 'humour', since, as O'Leary 1991 demonstrates, laughter in medieval Irish texts almost always had a shaming function. Actions which evoke the laughter of an in-text audience, such as a crowd or retinue, are not necessarily the starting point for us to look for things that might be regarded by a medieval Irish audience as funny.

Laughter, particularly when directed at an individual, seems more closely related to derision than to irony and, while there is a rich and interesting body of literature on the relationship between derision and humour (and, indeed, derision as humour), it falls beyond the scope of the present discussion (see Beard 2014 and references therein).

Many medieval Irish saga texts have been described by one critic or another as 'parodic', with greater or lesser degrees of rigour and precision in defining what they mean by parody. Vivian Mercier's groundbreaking, but now outdated, 1962 book, *The Irish comic tradition,* describes much of the humour of medieval Irish saga literature as 'parody'.[1] *Scéla mucce Meic Da Thó,* which McCone 1990: 32 characterises as a 'moral satire', has been described by Clancy 2001: 21 as 'blackly humorous'. Clancy delineates two strands of humour in medieval Irish narrative literature: he argues that *Scéla mucce* belongs to the first, chronologically earlier, strand, that is, parodic takes on the Ulster Cycle, and along with *Scéla mucce* he places *Mesca Ulad* into that category. He suggests that, while these texts certainly treat their characters irreverently, they are not wholly comedic (Clancy 2001: 21). He seems to characterise such narratives as gesturing towards humour rather than fully embracing it. A second, chronologically later, corpus of texts, he argues, is holistically comedic, complete parodies both of social conventions and of the textual sources on which they draw. In this group, he places texts such as *Tromdám Guaire, Fled Dúin na nGéd* (on which see Herbert 1989), and *Aislinge Meic Con Glinne* (Clancy 2001: 21–22). The earliest of these is probably the Middle Irish *Aislinge Meic Con Glinne* 'Vision of Mac Con Glinne', which is, indeed, an extraordinarily sophisticated and funny tale, a virtuosic performance by a writer possessed of comic genius. However, there is surprisingly little scholarship on it, and what discussion there is tends to read the tale only in reference to itself, rather than situating it within previously-established conventions of genre.[2] There are some very astute analyses of the tale, reading it as political allegory (Herbert 2005), in relation to monastic thought (Gwara 1988), or in light of speech-act theory (McKenna 2005), but they are more concerned with the internal workings of the tale itself than its position within a genre. There is little that sheds light on what establishes the story as funny and how its humour may have been read and understood by medieval audiences.

I would like to thank all the students who have taken my 'Humour in medieval Celtic literature' module and, thereby, helped me to develop and refine some of the arguments presented here. An earlier version of this paper was presented at a Maynooth University Early Irish and Celtic Studies Research Seminar and I am grateful to everyone who attended for their comments and feedback, particularly Anna Chacko (University of Cambridge), with whom I subsequently had a very productive dialogue. Thanks also to Sarah Brazil, Nicole Graham, Niamh Kehoe, James Warren, and the anonymous readers for useful bibliographical references.

[1] Two other useful studies are Tymoczko 1999, dealing specifically with the issues of medieval Irish humour and translation, and Ní Mhaoldomhnaigh 2007. For medieval Latin context, see Bayless 1996.

[2] The same can be said of later texts such as *Tromdám Guaire.* Ó Coileáin 1977: 66 claims that *Tromdám Guaire* is 'completely untypical of medieval Irish literature in general in the attitudes it adopts towards earlier tradition', but in fact it is clearly situated within a genre comprising texts such as *Aislinge Meic Con Glinne* and established by their antecedents, which are discussed below, p. 198–208.

One important exception is the aforementioned article by Thomas Clancy. In his study, Clancy analyses a tale which, he says, falls between the two comedic strands he had identified. He suggests that the short, late Old Irish or early Middle Irish story of the trial of Mac Teléne may have been an 'early attempt' at the kind of extended humorous writing represented by *Aislinge Meic Con Glinne* and later humorous narratives (Clancy 2001: 22). The story analysed by Clancy, which is set in the house of Guaire Aidne, is described by him as 'a medieval-Irish Marx Brothers routine' with Cummíne as Groucho, Mac Da Cherda as Chico, and Mo-Rónóc as Harpo. But the humour has a hard-hitting social edge, he argues, and, thus, 'the fourth Marx Brother looks less like Zeppo and more like Karl' (25). Clancy identifies role reversal and anti-clerical irreverence as features of the tale (34–38), and he draws some tentative connections with continental Goliardic literature (42–43). I think Clancy's analysis is correct and, more significantly, I intend to demonstrate that that tale is but one of a much larger corpus of late Old Irish/early Middle Irish anecdote-length humorous texts which has not been recognised hitherto. Before we move to a consideration of the evidence, it is important to say something about the role and attitude of the Church in the creation of humorous literature.

Some earlier critics established a dichotomy between po-faced churchmen on the one hand, with their moralising and preaching and disapproval of anything remotely fun; and humour, on the other hand, as a secular phenomenon, the preserve of buffoons and jesters, and a peasantry whose social delight in the carnivalesque represented a subversive force to counter the repressive powers of the Catholic Church.[3] The reality is, of course, more complex than that. It is true that some medieval monastic thinkers emphasised the importance of regulating the emotions: in that context, laughter could be seen as a symptom of excessive happiness or excessive delight, and, thus, an undesirable physical act. The idea of a medieval monastic ambivalence towards laughter was most famously fictionalised in Umberto Eco's 1980 novel, *The name of the rose,* in which the librarian, Jorge, destroys first the readers and eventually the manuscript itself of the sole surviving copy of the mythical second book of Aristotle's *Poetics,* which deals with comedy and laughter. However, the existence of discourse on ways that laughter could be problematic should not lead us to the conclusion that ecclesiastical writers were all humourless: far from it.

As more recent critics have shown, ecclesiastical humour was widespread across medieval Europe, being found in sources ranging from sermons to Saints' Lives. Indeed, one eleventh-century cleric, Anselm of Besate, wrote a treatise on rhetoric which was itself, he wrote, a *iocosus sermo* 'joking discourse', which combined serious discussion of the features of rhetoric with insults and jokes (Bayless 2020: 260). Burde 2010: 216 has described Christianity as 'famously unable over the centuries to speak in one voice on the topic' of humour, and this complex dialectical relationship between culturally contingent religious behaviours and the universal human tendency to laugh offers us

[3] One of the best-known and most influential works on medieval humour is Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and his world,* originally published in Russian in 1965, which established the concept of the 'carnivalesque' (Bakhtin 1984); for a response to the idea of the 'carnivalesque' in *Mesca Ulad* and *Aislinge Meic Con Glinne,* see Poppe 2012.

a more nuanced starting point for understanding ecclesiastical humour. An important consideration in what follows is the powerful medieval conception of using humour to speak truth to power. We can see one of the earliest articulations of this idea in the *Satires* of the classical poet Horace, who wrote (Sat. 1.1.23–27, cited in Bayless 2020: 259; my emphasis):

> praeterea ne sic ut qui iocularia ridens
> percurram; quamquam **ridentem dicere verum**
> quid vetat? Ut pueris olim dant crustula blandi
> doctores, elementa velint ut discere prima
> sed tamen amoto quaeramus seria ludo.
>
> In addition, lest I rush through these things laughing, like a joker—what prevents me from **telling the truth while laughing,** just as beguiling teachers used to give tidbits to boys so that they would learn the basics?—but nevertheless, putting play aside, let us seek after serious matters.

This idea of 'telling the truth while laughing' is a thread running through medieval literature, and we can pick out another example from John of Salisbury's *Policraticus* (VIII.XI), written around the same time that the Book of Leinster was compiled, where he writes (cited in Bayless 2020: 259–260):

> In muliebrem leuitatem ab auctoribus passim multa scribuntur. Fortasse falso interdum figuntur plurima; nichil tamen impedit **ridentem dicere uerum** et fabulosis narrationibus . . .
>
> About the shallowness of women, many things are written in various places by the authors. Perhaps a great many things are depicted falsely; but nothing keeps **laughter from telling the truth,** and likewise by means of fantastical stories . . .

These quotations also evoke two other themes that will be important for our discussion: the first, found in Horace, is the role of humour in pedagogy.[4] Using humour to keep students awake and entertained in class is a classroom strategy that stretches back for millennia, and I will suggest that this might provide us with an audience and function for our early Middle Irish texts. And the other theme, found in John of Salisbury, is misogyny, for, as we shall see, jokes told at the expense of women is another common phenomenon of texts that were designed to make men laugh.

Foreign kings, corrupt clerics, and sinful women

The section of the Book of Leinster that I wish to focus on is from p. 278[a]37 to p. 283[b]13. It contains a series of short early Middle Irish narratives, roughly datable on linguistic

[4.] For illuminating comments on humour in the pedagogy of one of medieval Ireland's nearest neighbours, see Dumitrescu 2018: 41 & 65–66.

grounds to the tenth century (bibliographical references to editions and translations of each tale can be found at the start of each plot summary below). In 2013, I published an article in *Studia Hibernica* in which I edited and translated two of the narratives and argued that both of them were subversive and humorous. I gave them the titles, based on their opening words, 'Four junior clerics' and 'A bishop of the Gaels', respectively. In my recent monograph, *History and salvation in medieval Ireland,* I published the text and translation of two others of the narratives, one, 'The king who never smiled', and the other 'Three junior clerics'. I also discuss in the same monograph some of the other narratives in the cluster: 'Salmoneus, king of the Greeks' (Boyle 2021: 147–148), which was translated by Máire Herbert and Martin McNamara at face value as an item of *Irish Biblical apocrypha*; and 'Two junior clerics' (Boyle 2021: 106–107), which was recently edited and translated by John Carey, who also read that text at face value and did not advert to any possible humour or subversion in the tale. McCoy 2017 has commented on the cluster as a whole, but followed Schlüter 2010: 206 in characterising them as 'normative' exempla. As far as I am aware, then, I am, thus far, the only scholar to characterise them as subversive and my aim here is to present my arguments for doing so in a more systematic way.

The last text in the manuscript before this cluster begins is the poem beginning *A ben bennach,* attributed to Daniel úa Liathaide (Murphy 1956: 6–9). The cluster then proceeds as follows:

1. 'Two junior clerics' (ed. & trans. Carey 2014):
Two clerical students make a bargain that the first to die will come back and tell the other about the afterlife. The one who dies first comes back as a ghost, but the other cannot see or hear him and gets increasingly annoyed at his friend for breaking their agreement. When the second one dies by smacking his head on the lintel of his monastic cell while performing genuflections, he berates his dead friend for failing to live up to the bargain. The latter tells him that he did try to communicate with him, and that his friend urgently needs to get back to his body and start praying the psalm known as the *Beati* to get the first student out of hell and ensure his own salvation. The second student returns to his body, comes back to life and prays the *Beati* daily to win salvation for them both.

2. 'The king who never smiled' (ed. & trans. Boyle 2021: 71–73):
A Greek king is asked by his bishop why, unlike his father who preceded him as king, he does not give the bishop a payment every time he has a drink. The king replies that God prefers praise to gold. The bishop then asks why the king never smiles, but the king refuses to tell him. Later, the king's sons ask the same question. The king orders that the boys be taken out and executed, horrifying the people at his court. He asks the boys whether they want to be hanged or beheaded; they opt for beheading. While the swords are raised above their heads, he asks the boys how they are feeling and they say that they are not feeling too great. The king replies that he never smiles because he always has the hand of God above him just as the boys have swords above their heads now. Lesson learned, the boys are let go.

3. 'The fate of the sinful Greek girl' (ed. LL v 1223; trans. Ní Dhonnchadha 2002):

A Greek princess, who has been betrothed at birth to a vassal lord of her father, is raised away from society and becomes her father's advisor. She begins having an affair with a young man in her father's court. One day, the father comes to talk to his daughter, so she hides the young man under her duvet, which the king sits on, smothering the young man to death. The girl engages a brawny herdsman to dispose of the body and pushes the herdsman himself off a cliff to eliminate the witness. Her betrothed arrives for the wedding and she needs to cover up her loss of virginity, so gets her maid to switch places with her. The maid then refuses to leave the marriage bed; the princess sets fire to the room and drowns the maid while she is fetching water to put out the fire. She goes away with her husband, who subsequently dies. She returns to her father's kingdom, which has a new king, whose priest tries to solicit the princess during confession. She rejects him and the confessor betrays her to the king, reporting her earlier sins. The king encloses her in a doorless house for seven years, where she is fed scraps by passers-by. After her penance, the king offers to marry her, but she asks instead for him to build a church and hermitage for her, and she requests that the king's duplicitous confessor be installed as priest there. When they die, the princess and the priest are sanctified and go directly to heaven.

4. 'Four junior clerics' (ed. & trans. Boyle 2013: 11–21):

Four Irish clerical students head off on pilgrimage to Rome. En route, they encounter a Frankish king, who welcomes them with wheat-bread and wine. They decide that they want to stay there, so they head off to Rome and on their way back stop at the Frankish hermitage, which the king has granted them in return for their prayers—after the king evicts its current occupant. The young clerics remark upon their 'good luck', which the king regards as a heathen exclamation. He banishes the clerical students from his kingdom and says that they shall not have the water of his kingdom (let alone wine). As they are travelling, a chest of ingots, floating against the current of the river, washes up on the river bank. They take it to the king, who asks if they understand the significance of the fact that there are six silver ingots and one gold one and yet they all weigh the same. The clerics do not have any explanation, but the king explains that the silver bars represent the weekdays and the gold one Sundays: the fact that none weighs more than the other shows that no day is 'luckier' than another. He permits the clerical students to remain in his kingdom, as long as they never mention 'luck' again.

5. 'A bishop of the Gaels' (ed. & trans. Boyle 2013: 21–41):

An Irish bishop travels on pilgrimage to Rome and decides that he does not want to return to Ireland, so he travels on towards the Holy Land. On the way, he encounters a king who is need of a confessor and the Irish bishop agrees to take on the role, so a church and residence is built for him. The queen starts going to confession regularly while the king is away on a circuit of his kingdom, and the queen and the bishop begin an affair. Eventually the king hears about this. He besieges his own palace where the

queen and bishop are trapped inside. The bishop begins praying and genuflecting and the exertion causes him to pass out. God, however, intervenes and angels rescue the bishop and carry him to his church, where he is overheard saying prayers. The king believes that he has wrongly accused his wife and the bishop so he pays compensation for slander to his wife and goes on his knees to ask for forgiveness from the bishop, which the bishop magnanimously agrees to give before leaving to continue his journey to the Holy Land.

6. 'Salmoneus, king of the Greeks' (ed. Best et al. 1954–1983: v 1231; trans. Herbert & McNamara 1989: 169–170):

A Greek king, Salmoneus, is visiting one of his vassal kingdoms for a feast and is fearful for his life, so he asks his bodyguard, comprising a Roman, a Greek and a Jew, to protect him overnight. While guarding him, they get a large quantity of wine, put their feet up, and start talking about what constitutes the greatest power in the world: the Roman says wine, the Greek says kings, the Jew says women. The next day, the king is sitting on his throne with his wife beside him and the bodyguards repeat their conversation. The king's wife knocks the king's helmet from his head. The court is shocked and people exclaim that she should be executed, but she smiles flirtatiously at her husband and the king smiles back and states that she should not be harmed. The king explains that women are accompanied by their 'guardian demons' who are the cause of their misdeeds.

7. 'The Greeks against the Hebrews' (ed. & trans. McCoy 2017):

A great army of Greeks has besieged a Jewish city for a month. The Greeks say that they will withdraw if the Jewish inhabitants hand over 30 of their best warriors as hostages. The Jewish inhabitants consider the offer and one of their wise men tells a parable: a group of shepherds were guarding their sheep from vicious wolves. The wolves came to the shepherds with an offer that, if the shepherds give their sheepdogs to the wolves, they would promise not to attack the sheep. The shepherds agree to the offer and hand over their dogs, which the wolves kill. Then the wolves return and kill all the sheep because they no longer have any dogs to defend them. The Jewish people realise that it is better to hold onto their warriors and defend their city, which they do. Battle rages for three days and the Jews defeat the army of the Greeks. The author characterises the Greeks' offer to the Jews as the first famous 'lie' or 'deception' in history.[5]

8. 'Three junior clerics' (ed. &and trans. Boyle 2021: 110–113):

Three clerical students decide to head off overseas in exile for the sake of God. At the last minute, one of them decides to bring his kitten with him. They set off in a boat and allow God to guide them. They arrive on an island and begin building a church. Unfortunately, the kitten starts catching enormous quantities of salmon and they worry

[5] McCoy 2017: 216 translates the concluding sentence, *Is ed asberat-som trá conid hí cétna gó da·ronad ríam in sin,* as 'It is that they may then say that it is the same deception which had been done before'. However, when *cétna* precedes the noun that it qualifies it means 'first' not 'same', and the sentence would perhaps be better translated as 'What they say is that that was the first deception that was ever made'.

that their ascetic exercise will be sabotaged by an abundance of food. They refuse to eat the salmon and petition God to provide for them. He provides them loaves of bread and small portions of fish. Each has a different prayer responsibility: one saying the Psalms every day, one saying prayers every day, one saying the *Hymnam dicat* 50 times every day, and each of them saying Mass and observing the Divine Office. The one just saying the Psalms dies, and his prayers are shared out between the other two. Then the man saying prayers every day also dies, and the last man is left to say the Psalms, the prayers, the *Hymnam dicat,* the Mass and the Divine Office. He makes a complaint to God, and an angel comes to address him saying that, far from being burdened with onerous prayer, he is being blessed with long life as result of the sheer salvific power of the *Hymnam dicat.* Eventually, St. Brendan turns up in his boat, gives the man communion and he dies.

This cluster of stories is immediately followed in the manuscript by an anecdote about St. Brigit and a junior cleric, and then a series of stories about St. Moling. I argue that the placement of these narratives within the manuscript is significant and reveals something about the cognitive associations within and between thematic clusters, but first let us look at the generic features of the narratives themselves. If we begin to outline the features that these texts hold in common, we can identify three major themes: foreign kings and settings; corrupt clerics; and sinful women. In addition, many of the tales also conclude with some sort of 'moral of the story', which in most cases is, in fact, somewhat morally ambiguous (Boyle 2013: 10 & 21).

Anecdote	Foreign king/ setting	Corrupt cleric(s)	Sinful woman	'Moral'
Two junior clerics		X		X
The king who never smiled	X	X		X
The fate of the sinful Greek girl	X	X	X	
Four junior clerics	X	X		X
A bishop of the Gaels	X	X	X	X
Salmoneus, king of the Greeks	X		X	X
The Greeks against the Hebrews	X			X
Three junior clerics	X	X		X

As we can see, each narrative contains at least two of the common features; five of them contain three. The story of 'A bishop of the Gaels' is the only one to contain all of the common features. It contains an additional motif, that of a besieged fortress, which is also found in the story of 'The Greeks against the Hebrews'. The stories, thus, all intersect and overlap thematically, whilst also having their own distinct coherence as self-contained anecdotes. We can use three of the anecdotes as case studies for exploring in detail the mechanics and conventions of their use of irony.

It's all Greek to me

One common feature of this cluster of ironic narratives, I suggest, is a foreign setting. Royal characters are described as being kings of kingdoms en route to Rome ('Four junior clerics'), or somewhere between Rome and Jerusalem ('The bishop of the Gaels'), or, most frequently, 'of the Greeks'. We can explore in more detail the humour of one such narrative, namely 'The king who never smiled'. At its heart is an adaptation of the story, popularised by Cicero, of the 'sword of Damocles', in which a courtier asks why Dionysius II does not seem to enjoy the pleasures and luxuries of his exalted status. Dionysius invites the courtier, Damocles, to try living as Dionysius for a time, but Dionysius arranges for a sword to be hung from the ceiling by a single horsehair directly over Damocles' head, which causes Damocles to lose his enthusiasm for fine foods and treasures. In this tenth-century Irish retelling, the 'Dionysius' character becomes a Christian king 'of the Greeks', and first a bishop and then subsequently the king's own children stand in the role of Damocles. The bishop says to the king (Boyle 2021: 71 & 73):

> 'Is duit', ar in clerech, is lia cach coemna ⁊ cach airfitiud forsin talmain. Is ingnad lenni nac accamar gen gári fordu déti ríam'.
>
> 'Ní beraso dano din chursa', or se.

> 'It is you', said the cleric, 'who has more luxury and more entertainment than anyone else on earth. We think it strange that we have not ever seen a smile of laughter on your face'.
>
> 'You won't this time either', he said.

If the story were a straightforward adaptation of the 'sword of Damocles', the bishop would be the recipient of the moral lesson about the figurative sword that hangs over the king's head, but in the Irish story the bishop is denied this wisdom. This accords with the fact that, just a few lines earlier, the same bishop had been trying to extract money from the king, thereby filling the role of the corrupt cleric, as we shall discuss shortly. Instead, the wisdom is imparted to the king's sons, but again in a conversation that is dripping with irony. The boys ask their father why he does not smile. He orders their execution. The author tells us that 'two swords were brought above their heads'. And then the king says to his sons (Boyle 2021: 72 & 73):

> 'Maith a gillu in maith far menma lib innossa?'
> 'Ni maith', or in gillai.
> 'Cid na tibid innossa?'
> 'Ní accor lend', or na gillai.

> 'Well, lads, is your mental state good now in your opinion?'
> 'It is not good', said the boys.
> 'Why are you not smiling now?'
> 'We don't want to', said the boys.

Two important theoretical approaches to humour can help us to understand what our author is doing. The first is so-called 'incongruity theory' (Critchley 2002: 2–3). This is the idea that the heart of humour is the incongruous, something that deviates from norms or reasonable expectation. There are many reasonable or 'normal' responses to the question 'Daddy, why do you never smile?', such as 'because I am sad that your mother died', or, as our author eventually leads us to, 'because I am burdened by the feeling that God will judge me for my every decision'. But responding to the question 'Daddy, why do you never smile?' by ordering the execution of his children is such a violation of the norm, so unexpected, as to create space for humour. However, we also need to draw on another theory of humour, which is that of so-called 'benign violation', because something that violates norms or expectations is not necessarily funny. If, for example, the king had actually gone ahead and killed his children, that would be very definitely not funny. It is because the children do not die that the violation can be understood as humour. The implication of the theory of 'benign violation', in the words of Derrin 2020: 8, 'is that when people laugh together at the same thing, they are sharing both the norm that is violated *as well as* a sense of the violation's relative benignity, a sense of psychological distance'. The king does not actually kill his children, so the violation is a benign one and can be laughed at. I would argue that the theory of 'benign violation' also helps to explain why so many of these stories are set in foreign kingdoms. Using a foreign setting further allows the audience to appraise any given violation as benign; narratives about bishops having sexual affairs with queens, or kings being manipulated and undermined by their sinful wives, might be a little too sharp as social critique—violations not of the benign variety—if they were set in Ireland. Thus their foreign setting is one factor which precisely permits ironic situations to be understood as irony.

'The king who never smiled' also reminds us of the monastic discourse on the moral ambiguity of laughter. Within the text, the bishop asks the king why he has never laughed. The king asks his sons, swords above their heads, why they do not feel like laughing. Laughing appears to be an expected and normal human behaviour for a king and a father. The king's virtue as someone who regulates his emotions because of fear of divine justice, while the greedy, money-seeking bishop is perplexed by the king's seriousness, inverts norms and expectations in a more fundamental way, in a society where one might reasonably expect the king to be rich and happy and the bishop to be virtuous and unconcerned with financial gain. It is necessary, then, to explore further the theme of clerical corruption in the narrative cluster.

Clerical incontinence

A common feature of medieval European comic tales, such as those surviving from Germany, Spain, France, England, Italy, and the Netherlands, whether in Latin or their

respective vernaculars, is a tendency to feature corrupt clerical characters, whether their sins relate to sexual incontinence, greed, financial wrongdoing, or a general willingness to make pacts with the devil. In Derek Brewer's influential collection of *Medieval comic tales* (1996), for example, we see priests extorting their parishioners, succumbing to lust, and occasionally being fooled by cunning farmers.[6] These tales date in extant written collections from the late eleventh century onwards, so, in the case of our Irish narratives, we should not be surprised by their inclusion in the twelfth-century Book of Leinster, even though their original date of composition may predate their continental comparanda by at least a century or more. We see from the story of 'The king who never smiled' how its Irish author also characterises the bishop as both acquisitive and inquisitive, and this is a common feature across much of our narrative cluster.

A closer reading of 'The bishop of the Gaels' narrative can help to illustrate this. The narrative is predicated, in the first instance, on the idea of a bishop neglecting his episcopal duties by first heading to Rome on pilgrimage and, then, once he gets there, deciding that he would rather continue on to the Holy Land than head back to Ireland. This idea of a life in another kingdom being preferable to attending to one's duties at home is also seen in the 'Four junior clerics' narrative, and will later become fundamental to the plot of *Aislinge Meic Con Glinne.* Our bishop is encouraged by a foreign king to remain at his court as his confessor. Again we see the author's use of irony as he tells us (Boyle 2013: 24 & 26):

> Ní theiged in rí immach nach i tech co ndechsad chucaiseom ⁊ ind rigan do thabairt coibsen dó. I ndúnadaib ata menciu na rríg thair. I fos immurgu bíte na rígna. Ba menciu dano ind rigan do thabairt a coibsen dó. Dorala tra dóib comtar oentadaig in t-epscop ⁊ ind rigan. Bátar amalaidsin ri ré cían cen fhis.
>
> The king used to go neither out nor inside without going to him—and his queen also—to make confession to him. It is in encampments that the eastern kings most frequently are. It is at home, indeed, that the queens are. It was more frequently, then, that the queen gave her confession to him. It happened to them, then, that the bishop and the queen were united. They were thus for a long time without it being known.

The understated ironic swerve is highly effective. The king is so devout that he has requested this Irish bishop to stay and be his confessor. He is so devout, indeed, that he does not go anywhere without first going to confession: the author casually drops in that the same is true for the queen. But then he observes that eastern kings are frequently away on royal circuits of their fortresses, so it is actually the queen who is most

[6] Central features of Old French fabliaux which are also key to our Irish tales include power reversal, irony, misogyny, and 'comic manipulation through narrative over-determination' (Jost 2010: 432–433).

often going to the bishop for 'confession', by which, of course, the author reveals that he means that they begin an on-going affair without the king's knowledge.[7]

The king finds out about the affair and, at first, he refuses to believe it, but he eventually brings his army to his palace and besieges it with the queen and bishop inside. We are told, then, that the bishop begins to pray and to genuflect 300 times until he passes out. The irony here lies in the fact that elsewhere the author describes this bishop as a *céle Dé* 'client of God' (Boyle 2013: 40–41), that is, a member of the self-identified spiritual élite of medieval Ireland who were, first of all, supposed to observe the principle of *stabilitas* and not go travelling, secondly, supposed to observe vows of chastity, and finally, the root of the physical comedy here, supposed to engage in hundreds of daily genuflections as part of their spiritual practice (Follett 2006). Our travelling, lustful bishop is so unaccustomed to genuflections that he faints from the exertion.[8] Angels intervene, however, because, as the author tells us, God looks after his own when they are in dire straits.

Thanks to this instance of divine intervention, our poor king, who, again, as with 'The king who never smiled', is actually the *locus* of morality in the story, albeit one who is made to look rather naive and foolish, goes on his knees to beg forgiveness of this corrupt cleric for the apparently 'false' accusation of sexual impropriety. To add insult to injury, the king also pays compensation to his unfaithful wife because he believes he has slandered her. The king acts appropriately and morally throughout. Again, the foreign setting allows this to be humour in the form of 'benign violation', rather than what would be a damning indictment of the manhood of an Irish king if it were set closer to home. The violation of the expected behaviour of a bishop—particularly one identified as a *céle Dé*—is where the irony is played out and where we see 'incongruity theory' in action. God intervening to save his unworthy ambassador is audaciously irreverent, as it is also in the story of the 'Four junior clerics', where God intervenes to save the greedy, lazy, superstitious clerical students, or in the story of the 'Three junior clerics' and their kitten, where God sends an angel to deal with an official complaint to him regarding burdensome prayer. But this richly ironic narrative of the Bishop of the Gaels also centres on another key theme of our narrative cluster, that is, the sinful and deceitful queen, who cheats on her husband, lies about it, and comes out of the narrative financially rewarded for her lust in the form of the compensation paid by her cuckolded husband for slander. Before moving to consider our final case study, let us just take a moment to consider the fraught relationship between misogyny and humour.

[7] Cf. 'The fate of the sinful Greek girl', where the potential intimacy of confession is also used, in this case for a predatory priest to proposition a woman who rejects him. I suggest that, in his juxtaposition of texts, the scribe might have been associating these subversive confessors with the normative, non-ironic text which proceeds the cluster, namely the poem attributed to Daniel úa Laithaide (Murphy 1956: 6–9) in which he rebuffs the advances of an amorous woman.

[8] Cf. 'The two clerical students' narrative, where daily genuflections are again deployed as a source of physical comedy, when the second clerical student dies after cracking his head on the lintel of his monastic cell while performing his: again, this is a 'benign violation' because his death is only temporary.

Humour and misogyny

The theoretical framework of 'benign violation', which I have suggested can be used to understand the workings of what I argue are ironic narratives, requires the audience to regard violations as benign, thus allowing a shared experience of humour. Of course, not all people are going to regard any given violation as benign (Derrin 2020: 8). The most dangerous structural inequality in modern western societies is arguably racism: those who are not actively harmed by racism, for the most part white people, can appraise a verbal violation as benign—because it does not harm them personally—and, therefore, laugh at it: hence the widespread proliferation of racist jokes, particularly, say, in the television programmes and stand-up comedy of the 1970s and 1980s. But to a great many people, the violation is not benign at all; it is an instrument of active harm, physical, political, economic, and psychological, and not remotely funny. Therefore, people can and should appraise racist jokes as malign violations rather than benign ones, violations which seek to uphold inequalities and to oppress the subject of the supposed joke. Similarly, systemic misogyny was a feature of medieval Irish society and, therefore, we need to understand that a misogynistic statement might be appraised by a modern woman as a malign violation, but it can also be appraised by historians as something that to a medieval Irish, probably male, audience would be understood as a benign violation and, therefore, funny.

I suggest that the depiction of the lustful queen who cheats on her husband, and subsequently cheats him out of his money, too, would be understood by its medieval Irish audience in ironic, humorous terms. The same, I would argue, is true of 'The sinful Greek girl' who is responsible for the death of three separate characters in her story of Tarantino-esque violence. Let us look in detail, then, at a final example, the story of Salmoneus, king of the Greeks. Like the king in the story of 'The bishop of the Gaels', one gets the sense that Salmoneus is not altogether in control of his circumstances since, although he is at a feast hosted by one of his own tributary sub-kings, he fears for his life and requests a bodyguard from among his own household. But we are told that the manner in which they engage in their watch is with their feet up and glasses of wine in hand: little wonder that the king feels unsafe if this is how he is protected by his friends. The three guards engage in conversation amongst themselves about what is the greatest power on earth and, in giving their answers, the author reveals that one is a Roman, another Greek, and the third Jewish. In its structure, then, this story employs what is known as the 'comic triple'. This is a common feature of jokes up to the present day that a first thing happens, then a second, and the punchline follows on the third. We have already seen this technique deployed in the story of the 'Three junior clerics' and their kitten where the first clerical student dies, and then the second, leaving the third to lodge his complaint with God.

In the story of Salmoneus, the comic triple is deployed with a side order of ethnic stereotyping,[9] and the Roman advocates for wine as the strongest power, because wine,

[9] For the dialectic in humour between *ethos* and *ethnos,* see Critchley 2002: 68.

which ironically he himself is drinking, is what has left their hosts 'dementedly drunk, cast into sleep, and at the mercy of their enemies'. The Greek advocates for kingship, because—again ironically—it is the power of the king that enables the three of them to stay sober and awake, even though they are drinking. The Jewish guard advocates that the power of women is strongest and suggests that this is what all three will remember in the morning. The comic triple is deployed emphatically in the way that the author portrays the scene the following morning. The men report that they had been discussing what constitutes the greatest power (LL v 1231; I have added punctuation and capitalisation for clarity; the translation is my own to emphasise the author's use of the comic triple, which is less prominent in the translation by Herbert & McNamara 1989: 24):

> 'Asrubartsa', or in laech do Romanchaib, 'cumachta fina'. 'Asrubartsa', or in laech do Grecaib, 'cumachta ríg'. 'Asrubartsa', ar in tEbraide 'cumachta mná'. Ro baí ind rigan for lethlaim ind ríg. A mind óir ar cind in ríg. 'Is tressiu in fín', ar indara fer. 'Is tressiu cumachta in rig', ar araile. 'Cid ane cen chumachta limsa?' or ind rigan la tabairt béimme dia baiss fora chathbarr ind ríg, co mboí for lár . . .
>
> 'I said', said the Roman warrior, 'the power of wine'. 'I said', said the Greek warrior, 'the power of a king'. 'I said', said the Hebrew, 'the power of women'. The queen was at the king's side. The king's golden crown was on his head. 'Wine is the stronger', said one of the men; 'the power of the king is the stronger', said the other. 'Is it the case that I am without power?' asked the queen, striking the king's headgear with the palm of her hand, so that it fell on the floor . . .

At this point the crowd is horrified and 'everyone' (*cách*) says that she should be put to death, but she merely smiles (*tibid*), the king smiles back, and he declares that 'no harm will be done to the woman' (*ni lotfidir in ben*). The king confirms that the power of women is strongest because, he says, on a woman's brow is her 'accompanying devil' (*Satan comaitechta*) who impels women's actions.[10] Women are powerful because they are possessed by the evil that accompanies them through life. Again, in this story, the emasculating of the king and the ease with which his wife manipulates him recalls the characterisation of women in the other narratives, and, as I have suggested, we are meant to be amused by its misogynistic conclusion.

[10.] An anonymous reader suggests that one could argue against a misogynistic reading of the tale on the account of the complicity between the king and his wife in their exchange of smiles: the king is not emasculated per se because he chooses to indulge his wife. This is a valid reading, but I would counter that the trope of a woman deploying her sexual wiles to manipulate a man is inherently misogynistic, as is the concept of the 'guardian demon' impelling women to sin, with its recalling of Eve as the foundational cause of the fall of man (itself an example of theologically-enshrined misogyny).

Comic reworking in the Book of Leinster

A great deal more could be said about all of these narratives, since each deserves dedicated individual study. For present purposes, though, we can move now to consider some of the wider implications of my argument within and beyond the Book of Leinster. I have suggested some of the theories of humour, such as 'incongruity theory' and 'benign violation', as well as recognised rhetorical techniques such as the 'comic triple', are used in various ways by the author or authors of these stories to create a series of deeply ironic narratives. I think that the humour of the narratives stands in its own right, but we can bring in one further theory of humour in considering the mechanics of how some of these stories work. The theory of 'script opposition' involves holding two opposing scripts in your mind simultaneously, with the humour lying in the way that one script deviates from the other (Derrin 2020: 6). I have already argued, for example, that 'The king who never smiled' is an adaptation of the anecdote of 'The sword of Damocles' and, if one holds the two scripts simultaneously in one's mind, the way in which the Irish story deviates from the classical story can add another layer of humour.

The same is true for the story set at the court of Salmoneus. The use of ethnic stereotyping, misogyny, and the structure of the comic triple was enough for the irony to land on its own, but, for the informed reader, 'script opposition' would reveal a further layer of irony, because this story is an adaptation of a narrative set at the court of Darius the Great.[11] In that story, found in the apocryphal book of Esdras, Darius has gathered his officials from the furthest reaches of his empire to his court for a feast. There is, indeed, a debate about what constitutes the greatest power, and the participants argue for wine, kingship, and women, respectively, but there is no misogynistic punchline. Rather, the wise Zerubbabel, who had begun by arguing the case for women, switches his argument and proceeds to demonstrate at length that Truth is the greatest and most powerful of all things. The story becomes about the transcendent power of Truth, an ethics lesson that the Irish story is notably lacking. Thus, the deviation from the original 'script' is itself a source of comedy.[12]

I argue elsewhere (Boyle, forthcoming) that the story of Amairgen son of Eccet Salach, likewise preserved in the Book of Leinster, similarly subverts norms or narrative expectations, and was a deliberately 'disrespectful iteration' of another source text,

[11] Meyer 1893: 217 describes the text as a 'curiously distorted' version of the Darius story. The point of my argument is that this 'distortion' is deliberate.

[12] McCoy 2017: 205 resists the idea that the 'Greeks against the Hebrews' text might have the Siege of Masada as its referent because the Jewish army suffered a great loss there, unlike in the Irish narrative, where they are victorious. However, if we accept that these texts invert their referents, the inversions of the 'script' become integral to the process of composition. I agree that the Siege of Masada is unlikely to be the referent in this case, but I suggest that a different Jewish defeat, namely the betrayal of Jonathan Apphus and Simon Thessi by Diodotus Tryphon may be the (subverted) referent for this narrative, since it also involved an offer of Greek retreat if the Jewish army handed over their best warriors as hostages (1 Macc. 12:33–38 & 41–53; 1 Macc. 13:12–30). The story-within-the-story adds a further layer of script-opposition, since it appears to be adapted from Aesop's fable of the wolves and the sheep, which exemplifies the moral that a foolish peace can prove more deadly than war.

perhaps the different version of the story which is found in *Sanas Cormaic* 'Cormac's glossary'. Again, 'script opposition' could come into play in that instance: if one knew the story as it is told in *Sanas Cormaic,* the way that the Book of Leinster author deviates from it could be a source of humour for its audience. The same is arguably true of other Book of Leinster texts, and, in that regard, it is worth also noting that the two texts that Thomas Clancy argues are early texts gesturing towards comedic composition—*Scéla mucce Meic Dathó* and *Mesca Ulad*—are both also preserved in the same manuscript. Dagmar Schlüter characterises the Book of Leinster as a whole as a document of 'cultural memory', and she has argued persuasively for 'thematic connection', or what she calls an 'associative chain', between tales in the Book of Leinster, 'in the sense that tales connected by a common theme or by shared narrative personnel are transmitted in close vicinity in the manuscript' (Schlüter 2010: 110).

I agree that this is the case, even where I have argued for ironic or subversive readings of texts which, by contrast, Schlüter reads at face value as what she called 'normative' texts which offer moral 'guidelines' (2010: 210). I think these texts do offer moral guidelines, but in ways that are subversive rather than normative, that use irony to expose and critique hypocrisy, immorality, and corruption. I suggest that these anecdotes might have been instances of pedagogical humour designed perhaps for someone like a *macclérech* 'clerical student', a character that we have seen recur in many of the narratives, or even a young royal male, like the sons of 'The king who never smiled', perhaps teaching them, through humour and subversion, the right moral path and how not to be fooled by the immoral women and clerics who might try to cheat or corrupt them. At our current state of knowledge, we can probably say little more concrete than that the use of learned, heavily ecclesiastical, in-group humour to critique immorality points to clerical authorship and a clerical and/or aristocratic audience. The texts that I have used as case studies here are concerned with clerical students, bishops, kings, and queens. However, in the course of this study, I have alluded in passing to various comic texts which critique another social group: poets. Into that corpus, we can place the Book of Leinster stories of Athairne, including the story regarding his encounter with Amairgen son of Eccet Salach (Boyle, forthcoming), as well as the 'Trial of Mac Teléne', analysed in Clancy 2001, and *Tromdám Guaire.* The story which blends the critique of poets, clerics, and kings to the most sophisticated degree is perhaps *Aislinge Meic Con Glinne*—no-one is safe from that author's sharp social commentary. I hope that my arguments here regarding the comic clerical tales will provide some tools for thinking about the critique of poets in those other sources.[13]

Beneath their many layers of irony, these stories do have moral hearts, just not necessarily in the self-declared moral of the story with which so many of them end (although we have to accept that the moral framework that they represent endorses sys-

[13.] Anna Chacko, a doctoral student at the University of Cambridge, is currently working on the critiques of poets in these and related texts. I am grateful to an anonymous reader for the observation that the *Leabhar Breac* version of *Aislinge Meic Con Glinne,* with its sharper bite than the TCD MS 1337 version, could provide another illuminating instance of script opposition: its manuscript context could itself be seen as a monastic in-joke. This is a point which would repay further study.

temic misogyny and ethnic stereotyping). They are clever ethical puzzles, which work the reader hard to find the real didactic messages. The underlying seriousness of the tales, that is, the moral critique within and beneath the irony, is what allows them to sit in the Book of Leinster between the very normative religious texts that they subvert. Daniel úa Liathaide's poem berates a lustful and sinful woman for having attempted to seduce him, without a hint of irony. This is a normative text about the immorality of women. The cluster is followed immediately by an anecdote featuring St. Brigit and a clerical student: again, the story is not ironic, but we can see what Schlüter calls the 'associative chain' in action. And finally, what I have disregarded until now, is that the cluster is itself interrupted by another text which, I suggest, has no ironic features: *Dá brón flatha nime* 'Two sorrows of the kingdom of heaven' (ed. & trans. Carey 2019), sits between 'The fate of the sinful Greek girl' and the 'Four junior clerics'. *Da brón flatha nime* is a serious religious text, but one which features, amongst other things, the concept of the 'accompanying devil' or 'guardian demon', which, as we have seen, is linked explicitly to women in the story of Salmoneus, king of the Greeks.[14] Again the scribes' 'associative chain' is clear. I would argue that there is no conflict or antagonism in having serious and ironic texts sitting side by side in the manuscript because I hope that I have shown that one of the key features of the poetics of irony in early Middle Irish literature is that it is a mechanism for 'speaking the truth while laughing'. These deeply subversive, ironic and irreverent texts, like all good comedy, speak truth to power, expose corruption and possess a profound moral core. However, like their medieval Continental counterparts, these stories also work to reinforce the very moral framework that they subvert. The implications of my analysis for other medieval Irish (potentially) humorous texts are, I suggest, significant. For now, I simply hope that I have demonstrated that medieval Irish clerical authors writing in the tenth century could be just as funny about human failings as their later counterparts were, both in Ireland and abroad.

ABBREVIATION

LL = Best, Bergin, O'Brien, & O'Sullivan 1954–1983

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[14] The author of *Dá brón flatha nime* uses the phrase *demon comaitechta* 'guardian demon' (Carey 2019: 188–189); cf. the discussion of the Salmoneus story above at p. 208.

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