'Woe is he Who Does Not Praise the Mother Of God':
Another Poem Beginning *Mairg Nach Molann Máthair Dé*

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ABSTRACT

In 1919 Lambert McKenna published a poem beginning *Mairg nach molann máthair Dé* in a collection entitled *Dánta do chum Aonghus Fionn Ó Dálaigh*. The poem edited here, which survives in TCD 1340 (H. 3. 19), begins with the same first line and as a result has been overlooked up to now. Unlike the poem published by McKenna, in which the author emphasises the difficulty in finding original praise for the Virgin Mary, our poem is straightforward in its direct and immediate praise of her.

INTRODUCTION

A poem beginning *Mairg nach molann máthair Dé* was published by Lambert McKenna in the collection of verse entitled *Dánta do chum Aonghus Fionn Ó Dálaigh* (1919). It contains eleven quatrains in *deibhidhe* metre and appears in at least thirteen manuscripts dating from the eighteenth and nineteenth century. The poem edited below begins with the same first line and, owing to this fact, has hitherto been overlooked. It consists of thirteen quatrains in *rannaigheacht mhór* metre and survives in one manuscript: TCD 1340 (H. 3. 19), also known as the Tinnakill *duanaire*.[1] The entire poem appears on page 54 of the manuscript, in a section that includes poems by various authors.

The first line, 'Woe is he who does not praise the mother of God', is an argument for much of what is contained within our poem, namely praise of the Virgin Mary. It differs from the poem published by McKenna, in which the poet, in the context of praising Mary, devotes several quatrains to the difficulty of finding original ways to do so. In contrast, our poet's ample praise of the Virgin in the first nine quatrains includes reference to her power, her voice, her lack of arrogance, her honesty, her clean living, her beauty, her grace, her forgiveness and her love. In quatrain 10,

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the poet intimates that he is offering his composition in exchange for salvation: he tells us that he praises 'the nurse of the King' because she will, in requital, 'negate the pain of the breast[-wound of Christ]'.[2] The poet's hope, it seems, is that Christ, with Mary as intercessor, will be prepared to forgive humanity for its role in the Crucifixion. He shifts the focus from Mary to God in the following quatrain, and in the final two quatrains, both beginning with *Mairg*, the poet returns to the cautionary tone of the opening line by criticising those who do not seek God and who have crucified Christ.

Given that *Mairg nach molann máthair Dé* is an opening line, the author of one of the poems may have been consciously imitating the other. On the other hand, in light of the fact that poems beginning with the word *Mairg* are not uncommon, the structure of the following clause is simple and the sentiment of the line is unremarkable, it is possible that two authors may have come up with the same first line independently.[3]

There is no ascription for our poem in the Tinnakill *duanaire*. As for a date, we know for sure that the manuscript was written before 1615.[4] As the metre is *rannaigheacht mhór* (*dán díreach*), however, the period of the poem's composition may be narrowed down by assessing the quality of the internal rhymes in the first couplet of each verse.[5] Every stressed internal word in line *b* has an internal rhyming partner in line *a*. Two or three such pairs occur in each first couplet, amounting to a total of 33 pairs over the thirteen quatrains of the poem. Of the 33 pairs, sixteen (or 48%) have perfect rhyme (*comhardadh slán*) and the rest have looser forms of correspondence (mostly *comhardadh briste*). If minor textual emendations are made (see notes on 1b and 5ab), the figure for perfect rhymes rises to eighteen (or 55%). Overall, this profile would place the composition of the poem in the latter part of the Bardic period, but perhaps as early as the late-fifteenth or early-sixteenth century.[6] Of note in quatrain 3 is a minor linguistic feature that became common in the second half of the

[2] Here the intercessory power of Mary's breast (by nursing Christ) undoes the punishment due to humanity for having inflicted the breast-wound on Christ. For the intercessory significance of Mary's breast in Bardic poetry, see Ryan (2002–3).

[3] For literary imitation in Classical Irish poetry, see Breatnach (1997, 1–63); this study includes a section on poems that begin with the same first line. Another instance of this phenomenon is seen in the two poems beginning *Gearr go laibheóra an Lia Fáil*, one of which is found in the Book of the O'Conor Don, 283r (= *ABM* 269), the other in RIA 1134 (23 E 29), 149.

[4] O'Sullivan (1976, 214).

[5] On this, see Breatnach (2017).

[6] Further metrical issues are dealt with in the notes following the text.

sixteenth century (see note on 3cd). In addition, the fact that an unusual
genitive form *cíogh* (see note on 10cd) does not occur in the Grammat-
ical Tracts, even to condemn it, may also point to a date later than the
early sixteenth century. It is possible that our poem was composed some-
what earlier than that published by McKenna, whose putative author
flourished *c*. 1600, but more evidence is required to achieve certainty
around this.[7]

EDITORIAL METHOD

Abbreviations are expanded in italics; the letter 'h' does not appear in italics
when representing MS *punctum delens* or *spiritus asper*, however, unless
expanded in conjunction with a suspension stroke. Tall *e* is italicised also,
whether appearing as *e*, as in 7d (MS), or expanded as *ea*, as in 8d and 13a.
Word spacing, capitalisation and punctuation are editorial, as is the posi-
tioning of length marks within syllables. Macrons are used for length marks
not in the manuscript. Square brackets are used for letters or words not in
the manuscript. Other departures from the manuscript are deducible from
the manuscript readings.

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[7] It should also be borne in mind that there is doubt over whether the poems in McKenna
(1919) are all by the same author (see McGrath, 1946).

Text

1. Mairg nach molan*n* m*āt*h*air* Dé,
    m*āt*[h]*air* nī fhoghui*m* m*ar* í,
    ar mearb[h]al don chruinne c[h]é
    buime Dhé go nde*ar*nadh dí.

2. Ar mhīorbhul, *ar* mhallghuth mhín,
    an rīog[h]an amlach, *ar* uai*m*,
    dā mb*eith* nach béaradh Dia dháibh
    cia a-mhāin do bhéaradh a buaidh.

3. Tea*m*poll coduil an Tē is t*r*iar,
    ealchuing shoch*air* Dhé na ndūl,
    sás fóiridhne a glas *ar* ghaol,
    bas shaor as róirighne rūn.

4. Glōr ainteann nī bhī *ar* a béal,
    nī chanan*n* sí gó re a gaol,
    maith sē[a]n na slaite nach fiar,
    m*ar* nach biadh t*r*ē[a]n aice *ar* ao*n*.

5. Nī[o]r fhē[a]ch sin cluiche nā ceōl,
    gē[a]g *ar* sliocht na s*r*uithe b[h]fial,
    nī thug a gclī aire dh'ōl,
    ōgh m*ar* í ní raibhe riamh.

6. Bean dealb[h]g[h]lan gan antoil d'uaill,
    a teacht do thairngir gach fáidh,
    nī[o]rbh aobhdha re nām[h]uid naoi*mh*,
    tánaig dā taoib[h] cao*mh*na cáigh.

7. Cean*n* síodhaighthe na sē n-aos,
    gnē mhíonshnoighthe as f[h]earr d*ār* fhás,
    fu*air* gach tréan do nimh a-nuas,
    fréamh gan c[h]*r*uas ōr ghin an g*r*ás.

8. Earla fion*n*g[h]lan fa geal gnaoi,
    de*ar*bhtha an teach ler hiomc[h]*r*adh é,
    do c[h]aith seal dā sīorc[h]*ur* faoi,
    mo-ch*ea*n do b[h]aoi ag dīothludh Dé.

Manuscript readings
1b. hí; 1c. c*r*uinde; 1d. co
2c. beur*adh*, día; 2d. beur*adh*, búaidh
3c. foiridhini; 3d. sháor, foiridhni (*for* róirighne)
4a. ain*n*tean*n*, beul; 4b. ré a; 4c. slaitti, fíar; 4d. bíadh

Translation

1. Woe is he who does not praise the mother of God, I know of no mother like her, this world was adrift until she was made God's nurse.

2. [Even] had she not given birth to God for them, is there any one person who could surpass the comely queen for wondrousness, for gentle noble voice, for uniting [people with God (?)]?

3. Temple where the One who is three slept, rack for the well-being of God of the elements, one fit to assist [her] kindred out of bondage (?), a noble hand whose love is most steadfast.

4. An arrogant sound does not pass her lips, she does not lie to her kin, good is the fortune of the honest maiden, [she acts] as though she did not have power over anyone.

5. She did not engage in sport or music, a maiden of the line of the noble sages, she never when incarnate considered carousal, never was there a virgin like her.

6. A beautiful woman without an obsession with vainglory, every prophet foretold her coming, she was not kindly to the enemy of a saint [i.e. the Devil], the salvation of all came from her body.

7. Chief pacifier of the Six Ages [of the World], the most finely wrought countenance there ever was, she got every strength from Heaven above, gentle source from which grace sprang.

8. Put to the test was the house by which [He of the] fair pure hair of bright beauty was carried, she spent a while growing exhausted from carrying Him, blessed the one who was sheltering God.

5a. cluithe; 5b. shliochd; 5d. hí, ríamh
6b. teachd, t*air*ng*eir*; 6d. tanuicc
7a. síoghuidhthi; 7b. mionshnoighthi; 7c. t*r*eun; 7d. f*r*eum, gh*ein*
8a. glan (*for* geal); 8b. hé

9. Maith a hait[h]*ri*ghe 's a hiūl,
   m*a*it[h] a maithmhighe 's a niamh,
   mōr a hion*mh*uine *ar* [gach] n-aon,
   craobh don phōr fhion*n*b[h]uidhe fhial.

10. Fāth mo mholta *ar* mhuime an Rīogh—
    an uile dh'oba nī hāl—
    cuirfidh neimh an c[h]īogh ar gcūl;
    ag s[e]in dú*n* a dīol am dhán.

11. Craobh go n-u*mhlacht* go mbuaidh mbéas,
    buan a gaol, is cumhra a cnuas,
    meadh a c*r*oidhe ag aon níor fhás
    acht saor g*r*ās an toig[h]e thuas.

12. M*air*g f*ear* nach t*r*iallan*n* dā t[h]uar,
    m*air*g is-teagh nach iarran*n* iúl—
    go dtí mo riaghladh do*m* rún—
    go múr nia*mh*ghl*an* an Tí as triúr.

13. Mairg do ch*ea*nguil a chorp nua
    go docht ar cean*n*uibh na gcló,
    as m*air*g nach dā thuar a-tá—
    mo-nuar, thrā, gá m*air*g is mō.

9b. maithmhidhe, ní*a*mh; 9d. craoph
10a. bhuime; 10b. dh(?) *smudged or rubbed away after* dhoba
11a. cco, co, mbéus; 11b. cu*mh*radh; 11c. áon; 11d. achd, thúas

9. Good is the penance she does [on others' behalf], good the guid-
    ance she gives, good her forgiveness and her splendour, great her
    love for all, offspring of the noble fair-haired stock.

10. The reason I praise the nurse of the King—it is not pleasing
    [to her] to refuse all [supplicants]—is that she will negate the
    pain of the breast[-wound of Christ]; that is her payment to me
    for my poem.

11. A humble branch of pre-eminent conduct, lasting is her love, fra-
    grant is her [womb's] fruit, never had anyone a heart like hers
    except for the gracious Creator of Heaven above.

12. Woe is the man who does not set out to deserve [to go] to the
    shining dwelling of Him who is three, woe is he who does not seek
    guidance to enter it—may I be guided by my desire [to go there].

13. Woe is he who has bound His young body tightly on the ends of the
    nails, woe is he who seeks not to make himself worthy of Him—
    alas, indeed, what woe is greater!

12a. nách; 12b. t*r*iall *deleted between* is *and* teagh, nách; 12c. cco tti, ríaghl*adh*; 12d. cco
13a. nuadh; 13b. co dochd, gclódh; 13d. r *in* thrā *appears above the line with insertion marks
    indicating its intended position*, cco (*for* gá)

Notes

1. Perfect end-rhyme between lines *a* and *c*, as we have here, as opposed to consonance (*uaithne*), is a flaw, *rudhrach uaithne* (cf. *IGT* V §§100–105), and is normally avoided. When it does occur, it appears to be rhetorical and is associated with *breacadh*; it is not uncommonly found in opening quatrains in *rannaigheacht* (cf. Breatnach 2017, 296–7 and 333). Likewise, the repetition of the word *máthair* in the opening couplet should perhaps be regarded as rhetorical (cf. Breatnach 2017, 297 n. 23 and 306 n. 53). Cf. notes on quatrain 8 and quatrain 12ab.

1b. Emending MS *fhoghui*m to *fhogham* would give perfect rhyme (: *molann*) without altering the sense. I have emended MS *hí* to *í* both here and in 5d (likewise, *hé* to *é* in 8b), taking MS *h* to be orthographical, and without phonetic value, in these instances.

2a. *Ar mhīorbhul*: more literally, 'for a miracle' or 'for a wonder'.

3a. The image of Mary as temple of the Trinity was a common one in the Middle Ages. The French theologian Richard of Saint-Laurent (d. *c*. 1250) described Mary as the 'tabernacle and *triclinium* of the whole Trinity'. See Fulton Brown (2018, 77). I am grateful to Salvador Ryan for this reference.

3b. *ealchuing shoch*air: the sense of *ealchuing* here seems to be 'protector' or 'support'. Emending *shochair* to *shocair* would seem to make sense also: 'a steady support for God of the elements'. Another alternative might be to take *sochar* to mean 'contract', taking the line to mean 'a support for God's contract [with humanity]'.

3c. The translation is tentative. I take *gaol* here to refer to Mary's kinship with humanity, this being key to humanity's salvation.

3cd. The emendation of MS *foiridhini* to *fóiridhne* is for syllable-count and sense; the emendation of MS *foiridhni* to *róirighne* is for alliteration, rhyme (: *fóiridhne*) and sense. The use of *ró* instead of *ro-*/*ra-* became more common in poetry from the second half of the sixteenth century on (cf. Mac Cárthaigh 2002, 105).

4acd. There is superfluous rhyme here between *béal* in line *a* and the rhyming pair *séan* : *tréan* in lines *cd*. Cf. note on 10acd.

4d. *m*ar *nach biadh* (: *fiar*): note the use of the conditional mood here. Cf. past subjunctive in the following: *Ar Dhia nír dhiultadar coinnmheadh / cách ar an iul is eadh rug / a mbrígh mar nach beath 'n-a sgaradh / neach dhíbh i ngach talamh tug* 'In love of God none of them refused the billeting assigned him in any land; 'twas as though he cared naught for his separation; this saved the world' (McKenna 1931, poem 26, 36c).

5ab. Emending *fhē[a]ch* to the by-form *fhéag* would give perfect rhyme (: *gē[a]g*). Note also the inferiority of the correspondence in *sin* : *sliocht*.

5b. The emendation of *shl-* to *sl-* provides alliteration. The *sruithe* here are perhaps to be equated with *sruthi na fetarlaice*, that is, the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob), from whom the Virgin Mary is thought to have descended. Cf. *DIL*, s.vv. *fetarlaic* and *sruith*. The genitive plural of *sruith* is normally *sruitheadh*, and perhaps this should be read, as perfect rhyme is

not a requirement in the first couplet; however, cf. *Tig an sluagh dá lá 'sa lios / gan bhiadh gan ól gan aoibhneas /* [*féimdheadh na sruithe nír saoileadh*] */ gan chluiche do chommaoidheamh* 'The host spent two days in the dwelling, without food, drink, or merry-making, and without a game being finished (*lit.* won); the refusal of those distinguished ones was an unexpected thing' (Carney 1954, quatrain 29).

6ab. While *teacht* in line *b* makes imperfect rhyme (*comhardadh briste*) with *Bean* in line *a*, it must be paired with *dealb*[*h*]*g*[*h*]*lan* owing to where the latter occurs in line *a*, namely after *Bean*. This leaves a rather loose *amas*-type correspondence, however, since *teacht* is a short syllable and *dealbh-* has middle quantity.

6c. *nām*[*h*]*uid naoi*mh: the phrase *námha naoimh* might perhaps be understood as an appositional genitive construction, as in 'a saint-enemy/angel-enemy', that is, the Devil (the fallen angel). Cf. the phrase *cara naoimh* in the following examples: *Nī budh foláir d'fhior m*h'*fhaladh / cara naoimh dhā neartoghadh; / giodh don taobh thíos do Mhuire / bhīos gach naomh dā neartm*huire 'One with sins like mine will need a saint-friend to support him; albeit every saint, no matter how powerful, is inferior to Mary' (Mhág Craith 1967–80, poem 17, quatrain 10); *A dtug laoch Lacha Gile / liaide dá lucht impidhe / iomdha ar a chionn cara naoimh / dá bhfagha dá chionn comaoin* 'There awaits the hero of Loch Gile many a saint-friend to repay him; his gifts will have won him many a prayer from his folk' (McKenna 1939–40, poem 10, quatrain 39). On the appositional genitive in Classical Irish, see McManus (2016, 123ff).

6d. Here we have the familiar Ave–Eva parallelism, or, more fundamentally, the patristic idea of Mary as the Second Eve. Just as Eve is the 'mother of all who live' (Gen. 3:20), Mary is identified as the one who affords humanity a second birth (salvation) from her body. My thanks to Salvador Ryan for this explanation.

7a. Past generations of humanity are often referred to in Bardic poetry by reference to the *Sex Aetates Mundi*.

8. I have emended MS *glan* to *geal* in line *a* on the basis (a) that the preceding stressed word ends in *-g*[*h*]*lan*, which possibly resulted in *glan* being written through scribal dittography, (b) that it provides rhyme (*comhardadh briste*) with *teach* in line *b*, and (c) that it provides *breacadh* (*geal* : *seal* : *-chean*), which may be intended to offset the metrical fault of perfect rhyme between the finals of *a* and *c* (*gnaoi* : *faoi*) instead of expected consonance (*uaithne*). Cf. note on quatrain 1.

9ab. The *breacadh* here (*Maith* : *hait*[*h*]*righe* : *mait*[*h*] : *maithmhighe*) is perhaps compensating for the *caoiche* (*maith* : *maith*).

9c. I have added *gach* for sense and to correct the syllabic count of the line.

10a. Alliteration is served by emending to the by-form *mhuime* (cf. *IGT* II §3).

10acd. There is superfluous rhyme here between *Rīogh* in line *a* and the rhyming pair *c*[*h*]*īogh* : *dīol* in lines *cd*. Cf. note on 4acd.

10cd. According to *IGT*, *cíoch*/*cíogh* can be feminine with genitive singular *-e* (*IGT* II §39) or masculine with genitive singular *cígh*, *-e* or *-a* (*IGT* II §46); genitive singular *cíogh* is not listed. I have found one other example of genitive singular *cíogh*, however, and it too is fixed by metre, end-word perfect consonance in this case and *aicill* perfect rhyme with *bríogh*: *Leis an Mac*(-*sa*) *na roinn-si róm / gomad soillsi damh 'na dhún / ma tá fala a gcrann an **chíogh** / **bríogh** na rann da chara ar **ccúl*** (*ABM* 353.4), 'These quatrains before me are for the Son [of God], may there be light for me in Heaven, if there is grievance over the spear in the breast [of Christ], the effect of the quatrains is to blot it out'. It should be borne in mind that, metrically, the poem from which this example is taken appears to be a late one. The earliest copy occurs in the Book of the O'Conor Don (1631).

11d. On translating the genitive plural *grás* with the adjective 'gracious', cf. *Liaigh grás do chách é ar an aindligheadh* 'He is a gracious Physician, curing all men of wickedness' (McKenna 1939–40, poem 76, 15a).

12ab. On the repetition of *mairg*, cf. note on quatrain 1.

13ab. The emendation of MS *nuadh* to the correct classical form *nua* (cf. *IGT* II §§139, 206 and 206) provides consonance with the other finals. Likewise, the change from MS *gclódh* to the classical form *gcló* (cf. *IGT* II §108) provides consonance with the finals of lines *a* and *c*, and perfect rhyme with the final of line *d*.

13acd. The *breacadh* here (*mairg* : *mairg* : *mairg*) is perhaps compensating for *caoiche* between the latter two.

13d. I have emended MS *cco* to *gá* for sense. Metrical closure (*dúnadh*) is doubtful. If ***mairg is mó*** is a closure on ***Mairg nach mo**lann*, then it would seem that either *is* and *nach* are to be ignored, or *is*/*nach* is a play on forms of the copula: while *nach* here is not an instance of the copula but rather a negative relative verbal particle, it is *in form* the same as the negative relative of the copula.

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