

A Grain of Justice, a Grain of Truth: An Analysis of Obscurity in an Early Medieval Irish Text

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Immacallam in Dá Thuarad or *The Colloquy of the Two Sages* is a ninth-century text preserved in whole or part in eleven manuscripts dating between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries (Carey, 2014, p. 630), in which two poets Néde and Ferchertne engage in a verbal sparring contest which is often obscure, in an attempt to define their identity and status and exact the claim of head poet. This paper focuses on §236, Neglect of Crops; i.e., without cultivating them, or without their growing although they are cultivated; or [neglect] of judgements, and §237, Perjuries (2014, p. 637), from John Carey's edition of the eschatological section of Ferchertne's speech. It seeks to demonstrate how these phrases illustrate the complexity of the learning of the medieval Irish poet who delivers an eschatological vision of last days, informed by metaphoric and allegorical references which were employed by a 'small intellectual elite' (Boyle, 2016, p. 13), and derived from a combination of poetic, historical, legal, and exegetical erudition.

The obscurity and 'darkness' of the poets' speech is noted in 'The Pseudo-Historical Prologue to the *Senchas Már*' which states that the poets were deprived of the power to judge on account of the 'unintelligibility of their diction and judgement' (McCone, 1986, p. 3), and their ability to conceal their meaning from those who did not have access to learning. However, obscurity was an important poetic feature in *Auraicept na nÉces* or 'The Scholars' Primer', whose earliest core text is dateable to the seventh-century. It formed part of the curriculum of the poet and is found in numerous manuscripts, often alongside legal texts indicating the significant learning of medieval scholars which combined legal and linguistic matters (Alquist, 2000, pp. 86-86), and explicates how 'every obscure sound that existed in every speech and in every language was put into Gaelic so for this reason it is more comprehensive than any language' (Calder, 1917, reprint 1995, p. 3), thus denoting the language as naturally obscure. The speech of the poets, or *Bérta na Filed*, formed part of the sixth year of the curriculum of the poet and featured the use of arcane vocabulary (Breatnach, 2009, p. 113), while 'The Caldron of Posey', which employs the metaphoric use of cauldrons as sources of poetic ability, also regards the 'darkening of speech' (Breatnach, 1981, p. 69) as a poetic faculty, thus deeming that obscurity was not only an attribute but a requirement of the learned profession.

The neglect of crops when placed within the context of Ferchertne's eschatological speech would correspond with the pessimistic prophecy which echoes the prophecy of Christian Doomsday, as found in the translation of the text of 'The Apocalypse of Thomas', preserved in Vat. Pal. Lat.220, where Thomas hears those things which must come about such as 'famine, wars, plagues and a great many dissensions of the people' (Carey, et al., 2014, pp. 570, 575), evoking a gloomy future prophecy concerning the state of weather, crops, and society. Although a commentary on the legal text *Corpus Iuris Hibernici* considers the compensation due to crops for damage by human agency, stating the penalty of two ounces of silver must be paid for either cutting it or walking through it (Kelly, 1997, p. 236), the reference to judgements in the gloss indicates that there may be further allusions present. *Bretha Déin Chécht*, a law tract forming part of the legal handbook *Senchas Már*, employs grades of corn metaphorically to illustrate the grades in society and the relevant compensation due them for a range of physical

injuries. Dian Cécht, the mythical physician of the *Tutha Dé Danann*, and one of the nine in the pseudo-historical prologue to the *Senchas Már* assigned judgement due to the darkness of Fercherne and Néde's speech, provides a mythical exemplar of the scale of payments for injuries through the killing of his own son Míach (McLeod, 2000, pp. 381, 386). As Neil McLeod points out, *Míach* also means sack (of grain), and Dian's daughters name *Airmed* refers to a unit for the measure of grain, which relates to the measurement in grains for payment of honour-price or *eneclann* or *lóg n-enech*, for different injuries to the various grades in society (2000, p. 386). Each rank or grade in society was assigned its own grain, §1: 'Classification of persons is obtained from (on the basis of) nine grains. And [such] classifications of persons exists inasmuch as there are nine grains for the [different classes of] persons', from a grain of wheat for a supreme king, bishop, and master poet, to a bean for a *fer midboth* (Binchy, 1966, pp. 9-10, 23), demonstrating emphasis on rank and honour with corresponding compensation, the largest grains were ascribed to the lower grades with lesser wergild (the compensation paid based on relevant rank), while the higher grades were allocated smaller grains, ensuring higher wergild. As society is stratified, not all grades are equal and the primary concern is with compensation and restoration of order, most notably the honour of the king.

The pastoral imagery of cultivation and ripe crops reflects the fecundity of the just ruler as in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, where cosmic imagery of summery weather, wealth, and natural abundance reflect a period of ideal kingship, for in Conaire's reign there are 'three crowns on Ériu, namely a crown of corn ears, a crown of flowers, and a crown of oak mast' (Cross & Slover, 1996, p. 109). Conversely, the metaphorical use of corn also replicates the retribution from the otherworld for his unjust judgement and broken *gessai* when Conaire laments: *coll etha galand*, 'the destruction of corn by foes' (Charles-Edwards, 1999, p. 51). The links between royal justice, fine weather, fertility, and peace is a popular theme in both Biblical and Continental king tracts and corresponds with Isidorean ideology of merging the importance of kings and their territories operating under God's providence, and the concept that a bad king is not a king at all (Fulton, 2014, p. 47). The king must provide for and maintain his people as set out in the wisdom text *Senbriathra Fithail*, 'Be liberal that you may be illustrious. Be generous that you may be honourable' (O'Leary, 1986, p. 3), focusing on the reciprocal relationship between a king and his people and the benefits of a ruler who embodies the concept of *fír flathemon*, or a peaceful rule with prosperity.

Perjurers, or anyone who swears a false oath or *éthach*, are not entitled to give testimony about anyone (Kelly, 2011, p. 201). The utterance of truth or true judgement will preserve the king, as *Audacht Morainn* states in §6: 'Let him preserve justice, it will preserve him' (Kelly, 1976, p. 5). A king who remains in rule after a false judgement brings about cosmic upheaval as in the case of Lugaid Mac Con in *Cath Maige Mucrama*, when 'after that he was a year in the kingship of Tara and no grass came through the earth, nor leaf on a tree, nor grain in corn' (Fogarty, 2016, p. 212), resulting in his expulsion as king. Prevention of the utterance of an incorrect judgement is illustrated by the interdiction placed upon Conchobar mac Nessa by the Ulaid; they would not allow him to give judgement so that he might not give a false one, so that the crops would not be worse for it (Ó Cathasaigh, 2014, p. 139), stressing the importance of preventing cosmic upheaval as a result of a false judgement and focusing on the important aspect of uttering a truth resulting in a positive effect or outcome as epitomised by the ideal reign of Cormac mac Airt. For as *Uraicecht Becc* comments:

for roscadaib 7 fasaigib 7 teistemnaib fíraib, ‘truth is based upon maxims and precedents and true scriptural testimonies’. Any judgement of a cleric that exists is based on the truth and entitlement of Scripture. A poet’s judgement however is based on maxims, a ruler’s judgement is based on them all, maxims, precedents and scriptural testimonies (McCone, 1990, p. 24).

The ruler or king must embody truth, which is illustrated by his ability to preserve his rule preventing disorder reflected metaphorically through the medium of natural disasters via his utterance of true judgements, avoiding the consequences of perjury.

The king exercised power through clientship, with the relationship between a king and his clients being reciprocal (Kelly, 2011, p. 29), as illustrated by The *Airgíalla* Charter poem, dating to no earlier than AD 800, which demonstrates the status and rights and obligations in the contract or clientship between the Airgíalla and the Uí Néill king (Charles-Edwards, 2005, p. 100). Contracts are formally witnessed and bound by sureties. *Senchas Már* states that there are, in §7, ‘three occasions when the world becomes chaotic: an epidemic of plagues, a deluge of warfare, a dissolution of contracts’ (Breatnach, 2011, p.7), and notes the breakdown of order is a consequence of unfulfilled contracts for there are, in §11, ‘four eminences of a kingdom who debase themselves through petty things: a falsely judging king, a stumbling bishop, a fraudulent poet, an unworthy noble. Those who do not fulfil their obligations are not entitled to honour-price’ (Breatnach, 2011, p. 7). The failure of the king is a broken oath or contract, a form of perjury which results in a breakdown of political, social, and cosmic order.

Therefore, negligence of crops and perjuries may allude to concern for truth, true judgements and justice which is symbolised in the reign of the king whose actions are reflected by the cosmos. This in turn has social repercussions, for without truth and justice, there is no order and the learned elite may not flourish for, as stated in *Audacht Morainn* §24, ‘It is through the justice of the ruler that every great man of art attains the crown of knowledge’ (Kelly, 1976, p. 9), for as a result of a golden age of rule, there will be ‘inspiration of truth - darkening of every utterance’ (Fogarty, 2016, p. 213). The medieval Irish poet seeks to cultivate poetic speech which may become more obscure or darkened in peaceful times, for as in §54a, ‘Darkness yields to light’ (Kelly, 1976, p. 15), seeking as listed in the Triads, §201, *trí caindle forosnat cach ndorcha: fír, aicned, ecna*, or ‘the three candles that illumine every darkness, truth, nature, knowledge’ (Meyer, 1906, pp. 26-27). Just as modern scholars of Joyce contemplate the symbolic and elusive nature of his writing, and the complex wordplay which carries much meaning, the obscurity of this text is intentionally ambiguous. It reflects the comprehensive learning of Christian tradition combined with the secular poetic and narrative tradition, exemplifying the wisdom of the elite minority capable of recognising and interpreting allegorical and metaphoric allusions. The practice of deliberate ambiguity demonstrates the extensive ability of the learned poet who employs this process to illuminate the learned elite who can glean the grain of truth concealed therein.

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