

## Transmission of Kings and Texts in Medieval Irish Tradition

The Irish king is a vexed issue which, for a long time, was chiefly discussed by historians. The bulk of mediaeval king-tales in the Irish tradition have traditionally been named ‘the Historical cycle’, which reveals the perception of them as historical documents. More recently, however, the king has been approached by other disciplines also, such as literary historians. It is high time now to ask how these tales, as well as the praise poems, were conditioned by those who composed them.

When the king was presented in public, it was not the actual king who was presented but the ideal of a king. This becomes clear from the literary representation of a king. In all genres where he occurs, his ideal is held up

before him like a mask (*persona*) for the audience. This observation raises a series of questions about how and by whom the king was presented.

### Professor Jan Erik Rekdal

Department of Linguistics and  
Scandinavian Studies (ILN),  
University of Oslo, Norway  
j.e.rekdal@iln.uio.no  
CAS Fellow 2007/2008



### The mute king

The Irish king never spoke for himself. At his inauguration, he was identified and presented by druids, or later, by

clerics. At the court, his legal authority was presented by the lawyers, his martial career (*‘caithréim’*) was presented by his court-poet, so also his birth, marriage and death, his reign and his conduct were presented by the learned elite, whether a *fili* or a *cleric*. The *filid* offered panegyrics which heightened reputation in the same manner as satire attacked it. They were in many ways both the patrons/suppliers and protectors of the honour of the laity. But the *filid* also delivered knowledge of legal precedents, stories (*scéla*) and other lore (*senchas*).

In other words, the king never represented himself in early Mediaeval Irish literature. The king represented his ideal through either fulfilment or deviation. The king was spoken *of*, not *to*. Even in much of the praise of early pre-Norman date, he was described in the 3rd person<sup>1</sup>. (The exceptions seem to be the poems where the poet plays a lover’s part, addressing the king in sensual wording in the 2nd person – representing the king as an object of love and desire. There is a question of whether these poems approached the king in public – but appear or, more likely, were meant to appear as part of private communication.) Praise-poems and early tales were exchanged in public and were thus intended to be part of the official normative and formative discourse. Thus, I would claim that this is the result of seeing the ideal king/the ideal of a king in much the same way as a canon (text).<sup>2</sup> Addressing the king in the 3rd person could then be seen

1: K. Meyer, *Bruchstücke der älteren lyrik Irlands* Gesammelt und mit übersetzung herausgegeben, erster teil Berlin 1919.

2: Jan Assmann: Religion and Cultural memory: 64ff.

as a commentary to the ideal of the king rather than as a speech to the actual king. If, however, a speech was made to someone, it would address the society upheld by the king's sovereignty. The actual king was the problem because he would tend to deviate from this ideal as only a dead person can be canonized. The actual king was cocooned in silky words. Our futile question, then, is who was that king who was so wrapped in words?

### The representation of the king

The representation of the king was always taken care of by others, all of them specialists in history, law, genealogy, etc., and they also had special training in the technique of representation: rhetoric, style and genre – the entire medium. The king would not be part of these various specialities, even if he may have been trained in law.<sup>3</sup> When writing was introduced, the king appears to have remained, in most cases, illiterate, thus leaving the *talking* to the learned classes while keeping the *acting* to himself and his warriors, that is, the king was to *live* what the learned *put into words*. Only by means of the words of the learned could the king act as the physical representation of the ideal king. The actual king had to be recognised as the fulfilment of the ideal king, and this recognition was taken care of by the learned elite. At the same time, the king's sovereignty and kingship were the *raison-d'être* for the same learned elite. The learned elite acted as commentators of the canon of the ideal king, with its absolutely normative validity represented by the king's exemplum.

It was when the king did not act according to his own example that the critique of the king cropped up in form of legitimate satire.<sup>4</sup> When the authority of the canon was threatened, the elite were also threatened since their foundation rested on the validity of the norm. This was why, in their effort to retain the canon, they would criticise the king rather than reformulate the canon. After all, the king was temporary whereas the ideal of him was to be eternal. Legitimate satire placed effective pressure on people of high rank to obey the law. When the poet turned his satire against the king, it was the king's face that was ruined, not the ideal. Satire was the other side of praise. There were seven grades of satire, one for each rank of the hierarchy. (Kelly:137 n.90)

### The three equal hierarchies

The learned elite of *filid* were ranked by seven grades and three sub-grades, exactly like the lay nobility, so a chief poet (*ollam*) would praise a king, a minor poet a minor king or lord, etc.<sup>5</sup> The Church had a similar scheme of hierarchy – from bishop to doorkeeper. In a law, a king and an *ollam* were juxtaposed as the protectors of a *túath* – the petty kingdom.<sup>6</sup> The chief poet (*ollam*) may have been engaged by the *túath* itself or by the king. The ecclesiastical scholar did not have a similar hierarchy but he belonged to the same stratum as the others. However, we see how representatives of the four groups are juxtaposed in the following formulation from the law *Bretha Nemed* (a law on the status of the *filid*):

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3: Ó Cróinín, D. 1995:76.

4: Cf. McLaughlin 2008.

5: See more about the grades of the *filid* in *Uraicecht na Ríar*; Breatnach 1987.

6: Charles-Edwards 2000: 127 n.13.

‘A *túath* is not a *túath* without an ecclesiastical scholar, a churchman, a poet (*fili*), a king by whom contracts and treaties are extended to (other) *túatha*. (*Uraicecht na Ríar*, p. 90)

### King and warrior

The king was usually depicted as deviating from his example when he acted violently, i.e. more in the manner of a warrior. Enacting protection and peace – vital components of his example – took personal strength, courage, weapons and warriors. The warrior also represented the king – the king in action – an action in which the warrior played a central part. The warrior resembled the king more than the learned but was not part of the aristocracy. However, he had more features in common with the king as they both acted within the same semio-sphere<sup>7</sup> of action and, consequently, with different semiotics than those of the learned elites. This semio-sphere of acting, combat and battle was also described and interpreted by others, i.e. by the learned elite. The actual dialogue of mutual agreement between the king and his warrior seldom surfaced in texts unless they expressed disagreement or contention between the two, but even then we hardly hear them speak. In his praise-poems, however, the king was always praised for his martial deeds as *the* heroic warrior but not together with his warriors. In the literature, the warrior appeared as the greatest obstacle between the king and his royal ideal. The warrior ethos, with its stark features of paganism, was a threat not only to the ideal of a king but no less to the learned elite and their hierarchy whose *raison d’être* it was to act as custodians of that ideal. I suggest that there was constant fear among the learned elite underlying their praise and critique of the king, i.e. a fear that the warrior champion intrinsic to the king as protector would gain the upper hand on the king. This may explain why they did not speak directly to the king in the texts they produced about him.

### Face and façade

Dallán Forgaill was the name of the alleged poet of the elegy on the Irish apostle Colum Cille composed shortly after Colum Cille’s death in 597. His name means ‘the little blind man of superior testimony.’ It is, however, not a name but a title referring to his function. *Forgaill* means ‘superior testimony, overriding testimony (of one of higher rank)’ and is the verbal noun of *for gall/for gell* ‘testifies.’ Dallán Forgaill belonged to that category of learned men called *fílid* (‘seers’) – *fili* (sing.). Etymologically, *fili* could be translated ‘a seer’ – related as it is with the word to ‘see’ in Welsh: *gwyled*. The poet testifying often described himself as a witness (*fiadu*<sup>8</sup>). *Fíad* (related to Welsh *gwydd* ‘presence’) means ‘presence’ and ‘front’, although it usually translates ‘in front of, before’. The term *fili* may refer to the fact that the poet claimed to have been an eye witness and to have seen what he would relate. One could also say that what he had seen was imprinted not only in his eyes but also on his face. Could *fili* refer not only to a ‘seer’, but also to one who, by his face, could act as a witness, by showing his face as proof?

In early society, the transmitter and transmitting not only took place in the public space but the terms the elite used on themselves and their

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7: A sphere of semiotics or signs – a term coined by Jurij Lotman.

8: Thurneysen Grammar: 212.

acts point very much towards face and façade, presence and presentation. This word for presence or countenance makes the main component of the verb ‘to tell’ and ‘to show’<sup>9</sup>. The words for satirizing in Irish *áerad* and *rindad* both share the meaning of ‘to strike, to cut’.<sup>10</sup> When we consider how seriously verbal assaults were treated, we suspect how much praise was valued to retain a person’s honour. This is illustrated by one of the laws where the honour of a satirized king may be restored if the satire is overruled by a praise-poem<sup>11</sup>. Honour was the axis upholding the nobility and the axis around which the entire aristocratic society evolved. Honour was measured according to rank and the person’s honour-price (*lóg n-enech*) means literally ‘the price of a person’s face’- honour-price. That the word for honour (*enech*) also meant ‘face’ implies public space. Honour was sustained by words of praise – words pertaining to the learned poets. An insult to the face was to be compensated by the fixed honour-price according to rank. A face could easily be harmed or blemished. It was all a matter of public appearance which the poet guarded by his praise and the king by his warrior. We can see from this how the poet and the warrior both presented the face of the king. The poet acted as a witness when he spoke of the king – and would, accordingly, bind his witness, i.e. his face (*fiadnaise*<sup>12</sup>) to his representation of the king.

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9: Pedersen :.363, Thurneysen 36, 356.

10: Idem. 137.

11: Kelly 1998:138.

12: Compound of *fiad* and *nass* perf. pass. av *naiscid* ‘binds’.