

A Hero's Lament: Aithbhreac inghean Coirceadail's Lament for Niall Óg mac Néill¹

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In recent years, the lament of Aithbhreac inghean Coirceadail has not been without interest to scholars of Scottish Gaelic— and indeed to the wider field of Celtic Literature, after a long period of neglect. Some of this delay may have been Protestant religious hesitation due to the domination of the poem by the image of a rosary; in the first printed edition of it, The Rev. Thomas McLauchlan translated the unequivocal *paidrín* as 'jewel', only informing the reader that it was indeed a rosary in a deliberately ambiguous footnote: 'The word "paidrein", derived from "Paidir", *The Lord's Prayer*, really means a *rosary*' (McLauchlan: 126). More recent neglect has probably been because of the notorious difficulty of the manuscript in which it is preserved rather than the nature of the text.

It should suffice to begin with a brief summary of the poem's background and preservation. The poem is an elegy in the Early Modern Gaelic shared by Scotland and Ireland, lamenting the decease of Niall Óg mac Néill of Gigha, the hereditary keeper of Castle Sween. It is preserved solely in that most fascinating of manuscripts, the *Book of the Dean of Lismore* (hereafter, *BDL*), an early sixteenth-century compendium of everything from the *Chronicle of Fortingall* to a shopping list, with much verse filling the literary distance between these genres. The Gaelic in it is written in an orthography based on Middle Scots and far removed from the conventions of Gaelic spelling. Although attempts to interpret sections of the manuscript are still ongoing, the text of the poem with which this paper is concerned has been less problematic than some, and there are no ongoing debates about the readings of it. The discussion which follows will be based on the normalised edition in the standard orthography of Early Modern Gaelic by W.J. Watson. Because this text has been reprinted in a number of anthologies with different translations, this paper will cite the poem by numbering its quatrains, and quotations will be accompanied the by recent translation by Bateman.²

The poem is sixteen quatrains in length and follows a close structure. It opens with an apostrophe of the dead man's rosary in the first line. The narrator proceeds to a series of expressions of her own grief and that of the poets, the clan, and its land. She then returns to address the rosary again in the three final stanzas. This first-person narrator is clearly identified as the wife of the deceased in q. 14, and the manuscript heading reads 'Auctor Huius Aithbhreac Inghean Coirceadail'. Despite the caution of Donald Meek, who observed that 'auctor' in *BDL* may also be interpreted in the Latin sense 'source, authority' (one often retained in its loaned Gaelic form *ughdhar*), rather than as 'author', the feminine name to which the elegy is attributed and the feminine narrative voice, compounded with its unusual contents, do suggest that *BDL* has preserved the name of the earliest known Scottish Gaelic poetess (Meek 1988: 55-8, 65-7; Meek 1989: 137-42).

The poem's frame of reference has long been considered as bardic, following the approach of Derick Thomson, who used it as an example of how 'poets, both professional and amateur but more often perhaps amateur, used the bardic language and metres for personal utterance'. Although he also opined that 'the simplicity and emotional surge of this poem may be seen as a foretaste of the many vernacular songs by women which survive from succeeding

centuries' (Thomson: 53, 55), it is notable that he points towards emotional force, not structure, imagery, or technique, as the link to traditional genres of women's poetry in Scottish Gaelic.

In recent years, several scholars have commented further on unique aspects of the contents of this poem. Meg Bateman considers Aithbhreac's poem a learned, aristocratic imitation of bardic verse that

...draws heavily on the panegyric code in praising his influence and generosity, but departs from conventional expressions of grief in the opening stanza where one of her husband's personal possessions— his rosary— evokes the memory of him and the sadness she feels at his death. (Qtd. in Kerrigan: 13).³

Thomas Clancy's brief treatment of the poem for the purpose of comparison with mediæval Irish verse attributed to women is along similar lines, calling it a poem that is

as fine a lament on the death of a chieftain as one is likely to find, and one which despite its personal elements... maintains both the structure and imagery of aristocratic verse... The attribution to Níall Óg's widow is almost certainly genuine, and the style, restraint, and professionalism of it should be instructive in looking at laments in the voice of lovers and widows in Ireland in both the early and later middle ages (Clancy: 56).

Comparisons to the *caoineadh*, the traditional genre of women's laments, or even to the vernacular tradition of elegy— such as the poems of Mary MacLeod, who composed a century later— are not made by any of these scholars; similarities in form and technique to these traditions of women's or popular verse are conspicuous by their absence. The structures and conventions of these other forms of non-bardic Gaelic lament do not present themselves as sources or parallels for this unique poem.⁴ In form, the poem is in the syllabic *rannaigheacht mhór* metre, but written in accordance with the conventions of *óglachas*, a more simple form of the metre than is usual in bardic elegy.⁵ Bateman's suggestion that the writer had learnt to copy the forms of court poetry has not been contested (Kerrigan: 13). Bardic poetry was certainly present in aristocratic Scottish Gaelic households to be heard, and one surviving bardic poem associated with the same house from the previous century, the Castle Sween poem, is also preserved in *BDL*.⁶ But the move of a woman's lament into a bardic form would give rise to competition with the bardic poets, who often presented themselves within their poems as the symbolic spouses of their patrons, even to the point of the writing of graveside competitions of grief with the keening women of the family; such images were especially common in poetry of the fifteenth century (Breatnach: 54-61). Yet, surprisingly, the strong personal closeness and physicality of so much bardic verse is surprisingly restrained in a poem where the wife can make the claim deeper and truer in contrast to a bardic poet, whose use of those images is conventional rather than personal. The absence of these motifs suggests that models other than the current fashions for bardic verse were being followed.

The most detailed analysis of this poem's literary features is to be found in Wilson McLeod's *Divided Gaels* (McLeod: 154-7). McLeod finds the poem unique in its portrayal of the land, for Irish place names are almost always given descriptive tags, as much as the metre permits, but Scottish ones almost never are:

Interestingly, it is very much the exception for the Scottish placenames

given in... kennings to be embellished with any kind of adjective or descriptive phrase, as happens more often than not in similar Irish poetry. The effect, once again, is that Ireland appears as a land saturated with associations, Scotland as a relatively unimagined landscape in comparison, about which there is not a great deal to say. The only Scottish poem where this device is used with any intensity is Aithbhreac inghean Coirceadail's elegy for Niall Óg Mac Néill (fl. 1455) beginning 'A phaidrín do dhúisg mo dhéar' ('O rosary that has roused my tear'), in which she labels Niall Óg 'leómhan Muile na múr ngeal', 'seabhag Íle na magh mín', 'dreagan Leódhuis na learg ngeal', and 'éigne Sanais na sreabh séimh' ('lion of white-walled Mull', 'hawk of Islay of smooth plains', 'dragon of Lewis of bright slopes', 'salmon of Sanas of quiet streams'), and laments the plight of 'Giodha an fhuinn mhín' ('smooth-soiled Gigha') after Niall Óg's death. Styling like this would not be remotely unusual in Irish bardic poetry— it would certainly be reckless to attribute its presence here to female authorship— but this kind of decoration stands out starkly in the Scottish context, even in the work of other amateurs. Also striking is the contrast between the underdevelopment of Scottish bardic poetry and the vivid imagined landscape of later Scottish vernacular verse, with its dense use of placenames and adjectival phrasing (McLeod: 154-5).

There is, however, a possible reason for both the mode of expression of grief and for the unusual descriptions of the terrain that also explains some of the other features of the poem's construction. Aithbhreac inghean Coirceadail was perhaps not only using formal bardic models for elegy to express her grief, but also the other great corpus of syllabic verse (and one which also consistently favoured the *óglachas* forms of metres like the one used in Aithbhreac's elegy): the Ossianic tradition. There are several textual points that support the hypothesis of an heroic model: the use of a frame focusing on an object; the opening formula of the frame; the formulae of the closing, including a treble *dínadh* ('closing') and an invocation of the Virgin for her own salvation; the geographical concerns of the poem; and the compressed account of Niall's noble qualities.

The presentation of the poem as an apostrophe to the rosary is a motif associated with heroic verse rather than with bardic elegies. Bardic poems focusing upon objects (not including animals) are quite rare, although not unknown in the bardic tradition.⁷ Apostrophe as a framing device used in both opening and closing to create a frame is extremely rare; the author's search through hundreds of published poems in the bardic corpus yielded only three such poems.⁸ None of these is an elegy, and their structural relation to the elegy on Niall mac Néill is slight. The author is aware of only a single elegy in the bardic corpus of Ireland and Scotland that both addresses and praises an object in more than a passing mention in order to recall its deceased owner; it is a praise of the harp, the most frequently praised object in the bardic corpus.⁹ In heroic poetry there is, however, a group of lays that use this device in a manner identical to the way that Aithbhreac's elegy does. Among the Ossianic lays in the Irish manuscript *Duanaire Finn* (Killiney MS A20, now deposited in the archives of University College, Dublin), there are five which focus on an object to provide a frame for an in-tale, characterised by a strong elegiac element in gazing upon Fenian objects and recalling the men who bore them; these lays may be judged on linguistic grounds to date as early as the late twelfth or the thirteenth century. These poems are '*Ceisd agam ort, a Cháoilte*' (known as '*An Corr-Bholg*', i.e. 'The Crane-Bag'), '*Uchán a sgiéth mo ríogh réil*' ('*Sgiath Finn*'), i.e. 'Fionn's Shield'), '*Siothal Chaálta, cíá ros fuair*' ('*Síothal*

Chaoilte, i.e. 'Caoilte's Dipper'), 'A *chlóidhimh chléircín in chluig*' ('*Cloidheamh Osgair*', i.e. 'Oscar's Sword'), 'Iss é súd colg in laoich láin' ('*Colg Chaoilte*', i.e. 'Caoilte's Sword'). The poems 'Sgiath Finn' and 'Colg Caoilte' are also preserved in RIA MS D.ii.1, called the *Book of Uí Maine* (or Hy Many), a fourteenth-century MS.¹⁰ As a group, these poems all open with the address to an object or discussion of it followed by a few quatrains on its owner's qualities, and all close with a return to the object and a lament for its owner, usually with a religious invocation.¹¹ The structural closeness of this group of Ossianic lays to the elegy, in the use of a frame employing an apostrophe to remember one deceased through an object associated with him, is much greater than the resemblance of the elegy to bardic or vernacular poems. It is not unreasonable to expect that these Ossianic ballads (or lost ballads of the same structure) are the template for the type of elegy that Aithbhreac composed, or at least that the operation of an awareness of laments in heroic ballads influenced her style.

Each of the Ossianic poems opens with the introduction of an object belonging to a departed warrior. The first quatrain of the poem on Fionn's shield turns from the shield to grief at the loss of Fionn:

Uchán a sgiéith mo ríogh réil
ionnsa do beth fó mísgéimh
dogra nach mair do triath tenn,
a chomla sgiéith na hÉireann (Mac Neill: 34 [equiv. to Meyer: 146, except réidh
'graceful, even-tempered' in place of réil 'rightful']).

(Alas, O shield of my rightful king,
[it is] hard, thy being in a disfigured state,
a misery that thy powerful master lives not,
O gate of the shields of Erin!) .

Aithbhreac's elegy similarly opens with the apostrophe that turns into grief-bearing memory:

A phaidrín do dhúisg mo dhéar,
ionmhain méar do bhithheadh ort;
ionmhain cridhe fáilteach fial,
'gá raibhe gus a nocht.

(Oh rosary that woke my tears,
beloved the finger that on you did lie,
beloved the kindly generous heart
that you belonged to till tonight) (q. 1).

The opening leads into a broader discussion of loss in both the elegy and the heroic laments. It is notable that quatrains opening with the adjective *ionmhain*, 'dear', or describing someone or something as *caomh*, are devices of introduction in Ossianic verse, e.g. the mention of Caoilte as *ionmhain* in q. 4 of '*Síothal Chaoilte*' (MacNeill: 38) that begins the description of his character. However, it is not in the brief opening frame, but in the more substantial closing, that the Ossianic formulæ are most apparent.

The closing of Aithbhreac's elegy has three quatrains, each using the entire initial line of the poem as a *dúnadh*:

An rogha fá deireadh díbh

's é thug gan mo bhrígh an sgéal:
do sgar ríom mo leathchuing rúin,
a phaidrín do dhúisg mo dhéar.

Is briste mo chridhe im chlí,
agus bídh nó go dtí m'éag,
ar éis an abhradh dhuibh úir,
a phaidrín do dhúisg mo dhéar.

Muire mháthair, muime an Ríogh,
go robh 'gam dhíon ar gach séad,
's a Mac do chruthuigh gach dúil,
a phaidrín do dhúisg mo dhéar.

(The most recent, finest of them all,
the tale of him has cost me dear,
my beloved yokefellow has parted from me,
Oh rosary that woke my tears.

Broken is my heart within my breast,
and will remain so until my death,
longing for the fresh dark-lashed man,
Oh rosary that woke my tears.

Mary, mother, nurse of the King,
may she protect me far and near,
and also her Son who created every beast,
Oh rosary that woke my tears) (qq. 14-16).

Of the four complete Ossianic poems with the apostrophe frame, two of them, '*Sgiath Finn*' and '*Síothal Chaoilte*', employ the same triple closure. There are a number of more specific reflexions of the motifs that close the Ossianic lays which are also found in the elegy. In '*Sgiath Finn*', the final quatrain is a plea for personal salvation that invokes Christ and makes mention of the Virgin Mary:

Go rum sáora rí neimhe
mac maith Muire inghene
ar iffreann go ngeire ngádh
fa ndearnadh éighme is uchán (Mac Neill: 38).

(The King of Heaven save me,
Son of the Virgin Mary,
from Hell so sharply perilous
whereby has been made weeping and woe.)

The frequent complaint of the aged Oisean in the lays, *Brisde mo chroidhe is mo corp* ('Broken is my heart and my body') (Mac Neill: 37) is reflected almost verbatim by Aithbhreac in her closing also: '*Is briste mo chroidhe im chlí*' ('Broken is my heart within my breast') (q. 15a). The

line 14b in the elegy, '*s é thug gan mo bhrígh an sgéal* ('the tale of him has cost me dear', more literally 'the tale of him has sapped my strength'), which reflects the uselessness of mourning in pursuit of salvation, forms the first of the three closing quatrains and is mirrored in the line '*nochán fhuil mo mhaoinse dhe*' ('my benefit is not from it') (Mac Neill: 45) at the conclusion of '*Síothal Chaoilte*'. Also of note among the poem closings, is that '*Colg Chaoilte*' in its final quatrain also speaks of tears raised by the sight of the sword around which the poem is composed (Mac Neill: 140). It is clear that the closing formulæ of these texts share closely in a common model.

It is notable that Aithbhreac, in the final quatrain quoted above, prays for her own protection—just as Oisean does in the poem on Fionn's shield—rather than for the salvation of her husband, as would be expected within the pre-Reformation practice of her time, when prayer for the dead was considered a duty, though one which was only rarely expressed in verse before the Counter-Reformation (Simms: 400, 410 n. 12).¹² A number of other heroic ballads surviving in Scotland which do not share in the apostrophe frame sub-genre, have closing religious invocations for the protection of Oisean the narrator, even when he is lamenting Osgar, Fionn, or the *fian* in general. In *BDL*, lays III, IV, VI, and XII (by Ross' numbering) all have invocations of Mary, Christ or the Apostles. Invocations are also common in later Irish lays, though absent in later Scottish ones, such as those printed by Campbell in *Leabhar na Féinne* (apart from those taken from *BDL*); this discrepancy is almost certainly due to the changing theology of Protestant Scotland causing change in the texts. It suffices to show through the preservation of such closing prayers in *BDL* that such forms were also current in late mediæval Scotland.

As has been discussed above, McLeod finds the development of the Scottish landscape in the elegy to be unparalleled in bardic verse and found in the later vernacular tradition. But additionally, the description of the Scottish landscape occurs in heroic verse. Because such description is common in the vernacular tradition in the Early Modern era, one cannot look to later Ossianic texts for an answer, due to the possibility of modification of the heroic poems through interaction with other genres of verse at a later period. The only source which is old enough to provide a clue is again *BDL*. In it, Ossianic texts demonstrate a love of description of places of uncertain location, some of which may be Scottish, although their true location is often ambiguous. Poem IX, 'The Death of Diarmaid', is attributed to an *ughdhar*, Ailéin Mac Ruaidhrí, bearing a name which is likely Scottish. The lay should be regarded as naturalised to a Perthshire context, as Donald Meek has argued in his recent edition (Meek: 1990: 343-5). The places mentioned are Gleann Síodh and Beinn Ghulbainn (q. 1: '*Gleann Síodh an gleann-so rém thaoibh / a[m] binn faoidh éan agus lon*' 'Glen Shee is this glen beside me, where songbird and blackbird sweetly sing'). Adjectives are also applied to the places; in q. 2, Beinn Ghulbainn is '*gorm*'; in q. 8, it is '*glas*' (Meek 1990: 352-3). There is no sign in the text in *BDL* that it would have been perceived by either author or audience as being set in Ireland, and Ross observed that there is no Gleann Síodh in Ireland, associated with Beinn Ghulbainn or not (Ross: 304). The toponyms in the 'Lay of Fraoch' (poem XXIX in Ross), which also receive description, may similarly be regarded as nativised to several Scottish sites; the lay itself, despite its connections to an Old-Irish tale in the Ulster cycle and the *dinnshenchas* of Carnfree in Co. Roscommon, is only known in Scotland, and likely Scottish in origin (Meek 1984: *passim*).

These points suggest that Ossianic verse may again be an influence in Aithbhreac inghean Coirceadail's style, although it cannot be ruled out that she simply extended the imagery of the Irish bardic landscape to Scotland. Most of the other ballads in *BDL*, many of which are of likely Irish origin, bear Irish toponyms or have no specific geography at all, but the case of 'The Death of Diarmaid' suggests that the extension of geographical description had occurred within heroic verse in Scotland before the opening of the sixteenth century, early enough to be an

influence on the lament for Niall Óg Mac Néill. The descriptions of Scottish terrain may be a heroic influence; nevertheless, due to the lack of conclusive evidence the question must remain open.

In contrast to the usual thirty or forty quatrains of a bardic lament, the elegy for Niall Óg is only sixteen quatrains. Of these, the first three are the introductory frame. The body of the poem only extends from the fourth to the eleventh quatrains; an invocation of Christ and a return to personal expressions of grief at the grave for her own loss begins the return to the frame at quatrain twelve, and the final three quatrains are addressed to the rosary directly. The quatrain of the grave which precedes them, moreover, is something that is common to all poetry of lamentation, popular or bardic, keen or epic lament.

There are only eight quatrains in the main body of the elegy (qq. 4-11), which may be seen as a rapid progression of motifs: a quatrain on Niall's noble speech, two on his patronage to poets, one on his patronage to the Church, and four on the joylessness of life without him: a quatrain on personal effects of the loss, and three on the court, lands, and people of the clan. These motifs are, of course, key points in the panegyric code and are thus to be expected. However, it is within Ossianic laments that such summarised progressions of the highlights are to be found. For example, in Oisean's lament for Fionn in the *BDL* poem XXVII (incipit '*Sé lá gus andé*'), Oisean gives twenty quatrains on Fionn's qualities followed by ten primarily concerned with his own personal loss. The progression of motifs describing Fionn is: eloquence, bravery, generosity to poets, lordship over his lands, and the protection of Ireland. Other Ossianic laments in *BDL* and elsewhere share this outline: a short lament on the qualities of the one lamented and a section, often as long, on personal ruin. Perhaps more important than the similarities to the general form of the Ossianic lament is the fact that two of the poems in *Duanaire Finn* that contain the object-focused framework also contain a section of several quatrains lamenting the loss of such a noble warrior once had the object, before proceeding to the in-tale. A lament of this type for Fionn is made in qq. 2-5 of '*Sgiath Finn*' (Mac Neill: 34); and a similar one for Caoilte is located in qq. 7-11 of '*Stiothal Chaoilte*' (Mac Neill: I, 38). A different type of grief, not dissimilar from that expressed regarding the land bereft of good lordship in the elegy (q. 10), is found immediately preceding the closing frame of '*Colg Chaoilte*' in qq. 53-8 (Murphy: II, 138-40).

To probe deeper into the motivation for choosing an Ossianic model for a very real lament is speculative by its nature. Perhaps there was a desire to avoid direct competition with a court poet who certainly would have composed an elegy on the decease of his patron. Perhaps the less strict metrical form was easier, or the ubiquitousness of Ossianic poetry provided models of greater familiarity than more rarefied bardic verse.¹³ Nevertheless, there is one possibility for which there is more concrete evidence. Within the vernacular heroic verse of the Ulster Cycle, the poem '*Clann Uisneach nan each geala*', first printed in the Gillies collection (260-7) and later by Campbell (22-4), often called 'The Lament of Deirdre', lists Dún Suibhne as one of the places in Scotland to which Deirdre must bid adieu; the same quatrain, number 40 (Campbell: 23; Gillies: 265) is also found in one of the short poems in Early Modern Irish prose versions of the tale of Deirdre.¹⁴ The heroic associations of Niall mac Néill's hereditary seat are also seen in the Castle Sween poem: it describes the singing of Ossianic lays as customary in the castle and as a fitting welcome to its ruler by the *aos dána* :

Teagathair [d'] aos eal[adh]an Alban
 fearaid fáilte ar onchoin Mís;
 lucht cáinte <[ó] Mhuir Mhanainn>
 do chuir fáilte ó rannaibh ris.

Gnáthach bhí a n-iomarbháidh áine,
eachtra féine Fhinn a [g]ceóil;
aithnigh[id] an duasach deithbhir,
mar tá dualach [d'] einigh Eóin.

(There is a coming of the men of art of Scotland, [and] they bid welcome to the warrior-dog of Mis; satirists <from the sea of Man> gave him a welcome by means of verses.

Customary was their pleasurable contention; the adventure of the Fian of Fionn [fills] their songs; they recognize the lawful bestower, as is proper to a man of John's generosity) (Meek 1997: 35, 38, qq. 21-2).

Thus the literary contexts of Castle Sween in both other references in verse are heroic in nature.

In addition to the associations of Castle Sween and the Ossianic cycle, Pádraig Ó Macháin, in his 1989 thesis on Fearghal Óg Mac an Bhaird, found another connexion. He observed that the poetry of the Mac Suibhne family, who had been the previous keepers of Castle Sween, had an unusually large number of references to the *fiana*. For example, the poem '*Cia a-deir gur imthigh Éamonn*', a lament for Éamonn mac Maol Mhuire mhic Dhonnchaidh Mhic Shuibhne, the poem is primarily a long comparison between Éamonn and Fionn, stressing the similarity of the gallowglass' position to Fionn's: Éamonn was *athbhuanna mar Fionn* ('a mercenary like Fionn'; Ó Macháin: 217). Other poets also tended to use Ossianic allusions when writing of the Mac Suibhne family; poems by Tadhg Dall and Eochaidh Ó hEoghusa actually stress the superiority of various Mac Suibhne men to Fionn, on the grounds that although their careers were similar, the Mac Suibhne family was also blessed with a superior lineage (Ó Macháin: 218-9).¹⁵ Katherine Simms' database of the corpus of bardic poetry has enabled a thorough search for poems for the Mac Suibhne family which have sections comparing members of that family to Ossianic warriors. This search identified five more poems with extended Fenian conceits, demonstrating that this motif was a frequent means of praising that family.¹⁶

Finally, it is worthy of note that the hall is silenced in Aithbhreac's elegy:

Mar thá Giodha an fhuinn mhín,
Dún Suibhne do-chím gan cheól,
faithche longphuir na bhfear bhfial:
aithmhéala na Niall a n-eól.

(Sad is Gigha of the smooth soils,
I see Dùn Suibhne standing on its green,
fort of the men now without a tune,
they know the sorrow of Clan MacNeill) (q. 10).

The death of music is a natural motif of grief, but it is not unlikely that Aithbhreac had in mind the scene in the Castle Sween poem which specifically associates it with the recitation of *laoithe fianaigheachta* when she composed the quatrain, or at least drew on a pre-existing connexion of the castle with heroic verse. She therefore may have thought it appropriate to mourn a keeper of Castle Sween in Ossianic terms because the castle itself had similar heroic associations.

In conclusion, Aithbhreac inghean Coirceadail's elegy for Niall Óg appears to have Ossianic models in form and in content. The relationship is strongest with those early lays

focused on the Fenian *reliquiae* which are found in *Duanaire Finn* (and other manuscripts containing the poem '*Síothal Chaoilte*'). It appears that she took the model of the frame and lament, simply removing the extended history or in-tale of more lengthy heroic models. This may also explain why this poem is preserved in *BDL*, which preserves it in the context of a large collection of Ossianic laments, and vernacular poems. (This natural context is somewhat obscured to the modern reader by the artificial separation of the published poems from that manuscript by genre in the most widely available editions, the thematic volumes in the Scottish Gaelic Texts Society series published as *Scottish Verse* and *Heroic Poetry*.) The poem occurs in the manuscript immediately following the Ossianic poems '*Rosg Ghull*' ('Goll's War-Song') and then the death-tale lay '*Bàs Dhiarmaid*' ('The Death of Diarmaid'). A Scottish vernacular poem by Duncan Mac Cailein follows (Mackechnie: I, 185). One might summarise the position of the poem as surrounded by the distinctly Scottish, the Ossianic, and the elegiac: a triad that would epitomise the taste of Duncan MacGregor, the Dean of Lismore. The thematic similarities of this elegy with the heroic elegies would have recommended this poem to the dean on the grounds of his literary tastes and provide good reason for its preservation in the manuscript in which it is found, among texts of the sort which inspired it. To read the elegy '*A phaidrín do dhúisg mo dhéar*' in the context of the tradition of heroic verse not only suggests a wider distribution of a rare and early sub-genre of Ossianic lays, but also provides a fascinating case-study of how branches of the Gaelic tradition could interweave to create new and unique works in different genres.

NOTES

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² The original edition of the text is in Watson 60-5. It is reprinted with Bateman's translation in Kerrigan: 52-5. The text is also reprinted in Crawford & Imlah: 78-83 with a verse translation by Derick Thomson previously published without the Gaelic text in Thomson: 53-4. There is one minor change in the later printings: Watson printed the author's name as Aithbhreac Inghean Coirceadail, but the reprints spell the name Corcadail.

³ The 'panegyric code' is the stock of traditional images used in poetry, usually to indicate nobility (or lack of it). A description of these images as used in professional bardic poetry is given in Knott 1922-6: I, li-lxiv. The use of these images in Scottish verse is explored at length in MacInnes.

⁴ The conventions of the *caoineadh* ('keen'), regarding form, content and performance, are summarised by Bromwich in her analysis of the Irish 'Keen for Art O'Leary' (Bromwich: 242-3). Her list of conventions of the keen, in summarised form, includes: (a) direct address to the corpse; (b) arrangement in short lines of 2 or 3 stresses, arranged in irregular stanzas; (c) each stanza opens with a term of endearment (*Mo ghrádh*, &c.); items (d) through (h) of her list are conventional images such as warning dreams and themes from the panegyric code.

⁵ *Rannaigheacht mhór* consists of quatrains in which lines of seven syllables end in monosyllabic words, and lines b and d rhyme. The final word in c also rhymes with a word in the interior of d, and there are additional internal rhymes within the couplets. Further metrical ornaments are required in stricter forms of the metre. A full technical description of the metre as

used in Classical verse can be found in Knott 1928: 13-16, and an outline of the of the rules for rhyme is found in Knott 1928: 5-9.

⁶ The poem on Castle Sween has been printed and edited several times. The edition of the Castle Sween poem in Watson: 6-13 has been entirely superseded by Meek 1997. In the poem, the MacSweeney family in Ireland is urged to recapture the Scottish castle to which they claimed ancestral right. The poet describes the glory of the planned fleet and expedition, then MacSweeney hearing poetry and heroic lays at the recovered castle.

⁷ Katherine Simms' database of bardic poetry now posted on the website of the Dublin Institute of Advanced Studies (www.dias.ie) lists only twelve poems in the category of praises of objects; half of these are praises of steeds or hounds. The more common type of object-poems, such as the praise of the bowl of the king of Connaught, 'Cuach ríogh Connacht cuanna séad', (McKenna 1939-40: I, 33-5; II, 20-1) are a simple secondary praise of a person through his possession, or a request for the object through praising it; such poems are linear in form and do not serve as a frame for in-tales.

⁸ The poems are: '*Mo chean doir, a Ghráinne gharbh*' (ed. & trans. in Knott 1922-6: I, 243-5; II, 160-1), in which Tadhg Dall Ó hUiginn praises and obtains a dagger; the poem '*A chláirsíoch Chnuic Í Chosgair*', in which Gofraidh Fionn Ó Dálaigh praises the harp of O'Conor: this circulated in Scotland and is preserved in the *Book of the Dean of Lismore* (an edition of it based on other manuscripts is printed in Bergin: 66-9); the dagger-praise '*Gur mheala an t-armsa a Éamúinn*', (ed. & trans. in Knott 1922-6: I, 138-40; II, 91-2); and the late Irish example of '*An tú m'aithne, a fhalluing donn?*' in the Book of the O'Conor Don, (ed. in Bergin: 157-8). The last of these poems now appears to be of a different character than had been previously thought: Prof. Roibeard Ó Maolalaigh's paper at Rannsachadh na Gàidhlig III, August 2004, yet unpublished, has unmasked it as a bawdy double entendre, and removed it far from the serious bardic corpus. Of these, only the second predates Aithbhreac's elegy. One more poem is worthy of mention, 'Tabhraidh chugam cruit mo riogh' by Giolla Brighde Albanach (ed. in O'Curry: III, 271-3 and Walsh: 113-5). It is a praise of O'Brien's harp, which he has been sent to buy back from Scotland. He failed in his mission and praises the harp and O'Brien, whilst lamenting that it will not return to its home. The image of the harp opens and closes the poem, though he addresses it only at the beginning. Cf. Flahive: 117-20.

⁹ 'Aithne charad clairseach Bhriain' is a five-quatrain address to the harp of Brian Mag Shamhradhain (ob. 1298). It is a poem of a single conventional image with no development: four quatrains describe the past merriment in the hall; the final quatrain praises Brian as generous to poets. The poem is preserved in the Book of Magauran, from which it has been edited and translated in McKenna 1947: 59, 311-12.

¹⁰ All quotations of *Duanaire Finn* have been cited from the edition of MacNeill, continued by Murphy. Unpublished editions of these poems have been included in Flahive: 224-62, 295-328, on which the translations given are based. Regarding the dates of composition of these poems, vid. Murphy: III, cvii-cxvii and the introductions to the commentaries on the individual poems; the critique of Murphy's methods in Carey: 1-18; and in Flahive: ch. IV. The texts of the two poems in the *Book of Uí Maine*, found on fol. 203-4, remain unpublished, apart from two opening quatrains of 'Sgiath Finn' in Meyer: 146, but the texts match quatrain by quatrain to those in *Duanaire Finn*.

¹¹ The poem 'Ceisd agam ort, a Chaoilte' ('The Crane-Bag') appears to fit the pattern from its opening, but is fragmentary and lacks its *dúnadh*.

¹² Cf. the corpus of religious verse in McKenna, much of which is taken from the Yellow Book of Lecan *duanaire* dated to 1473, and therefore unquestionably earlier than Aithbhreac inghean

Coirceadail's elegy. Pleadings for the speaker's salvation, often by invocation to the Virgin or another saint, are usual. Similarly, lines of prayer for the salvation of the deceased are frequent in elegies. None of these poems, nor others of which the author is aware, are about the death of another climaxing with a plea for *one's own* salvation, excepting only Aithbhreac's elegy.

¹³Use of an Ossianic model in Scottish vernacular verse is not unique to this poem; Anja Gunderloch demonstrates a later example of a rather different type in 'Donnchadh bán MacIntyre's "Marbhrann do Chù" and the Gaelic Ballad Tradition'.

¹⁴The quatrain is printed in Mac Giolla Léith: 98, line 206, and in O'Flanagan: 44-5.

¹⁵The poems are Ó hUiginn's '*Leithéid Almhan i nUltaibh*', poem 27 in Knott 1922-6: I, 195-201; II, 130-4, and Ó hEoghusa's unpublished poem '*Roinn leithe ar anbhúain Éireann*' to Eoghan Óg Mac Suibhne na dTuath in RIA MS 23.F.16, p. 47, equivalent to British Library Egerton MS 111, p. 107.

¹⁶Many thanks are due to Katherine Simms for her kindness for searching her database for the author prior to its publication on the website of the Dublin Institute of Advanced Studies (www.dias.ie) to provide further examples. None of these poems not located by Ó Macháin are published. Four are found in RIA 24.P.25: '*Da uaithni fulaing fa Fhainid*', fol. 73r; '*Fada Fanaid re rath ríogh*', fol. 72v; '*Geall re hinbhe oighreacht Finn*', fol. 73r; and '*Cia chosnas buanacht Banbha*', fol. 79r. One more, '*Triar do thogas ós iath Mogha*', is found in Maynooth MS B.6, p. 4.

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