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The representation of the feminine: Some evidence from Irish-language sources

MEIDHBHÍN NÍ ÚRDAIL

Introduction

Cúirt an Mheán Oíche (henceforth CMO) by Brian Merriman (d. 1805) is arguably the most renowned example of a literary text in Irish which points not only to an understanding of the different needs of men and women in society, but also to an awareness of social injustice in eighteenth-century Ireland.[1] Merriman's court is an imaginary gathering of women who hear the testimony from two witnesses, a handsome young woman and an embittered old man, on women's and men's expectations of marriage, the plight of unmarried pregnant young women, the stigma of illegitimacy and the unnatural doctrine of clerical celibacy which disallows women from marrying fine, strapping young men. Imaginary though it may be, however, the image of a courtroom as *mise en scène* allows for robust claim and counterclaim by its main protagonists.

When the first scholarly edition of CMO was published in 1905, its editor, Ludwig Christian Stern, was not entirely at ease with the poem's candour of expression.[2] Thus, we find Stern praising Merriman's virtuosity on the one hand, and delighting in the fact that the poet 'did not waste his strength on the banal, but arrives on the scene with original poetry'.[3] On the other hand, however, the editor was clearly unhappy with Merriman's repeated, albeit articulate use of bawdy passages which were 'here and there too much with some crude words from the street being better withheld', so that 'an effort was made to excuse such promiscuous language'.[4] Stern's editorial *Versuch* or effort resulted, in fact, in excluding an accompanying German translation of ninety-six lines of the text in Irish.[5] In addition, although he included a glossary, some of the archaic translations do not quite capture the vernacular tone of the original, thereby suggesting Stern's unfamiliarity with German slang. In other instances, it is difficult to decide whether it was linguistic prudishness or an insufficient competence in the Irish language

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[1] Quotations from the original poem derive from *Cúirt an Mheon-Oíche le Brian Merríman*, ed. by Liam P. Ó Murchú (Baile Átha Cliath, 1982), while accompanying English translations are those of Ciarán Carson, *The Midnight Court* (Meath, 2005). All other translations of the material under discussion here are my own.

[2] 'Brian Merrimans Cúirt an Mheadhóin Oidhche', ed. by Ludwig Christian Stern, *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie*, 5 (1905), 193-415.

[3] ... 'da er seine Kraft nicht an das Abgenutzte verschwendet hat, sondern mit einer eigenartigen Poesie auf dem Plane erscheint' (ibid., p. 195).

[4] '... [die] Schimpfreden, in denen er sich so sprachgewant zeigt, ist hier und dort zu viel, und manch rohes Wort von der Gasse, das er wiederholt, hätte er uns besser verschwiegen. Man hat versucht eine so zügellose Sprache zu entschuldigen' (ibid., p. 199).

[5] i.e. ll. 209-22, ll. 241-6, ll. 339-46, ll. 615-8, ll. 623-8, ll. 689-720, ll. 735-42, ll. 751-4, ll. 761-4, ll. 769-72, ll. 877-82 = Stern, 'Brian Merrimans Cúirt an Mheadhóin Oidhche', pp. 210, 211, 213, 220-1, 222-3, 224, 227; cf. *Cúirt an Mheon-Oíche*, ed. by Ó Murchú, pp. 24-5, 28, 35-6, 37-9, 42.

on his part which resulted in inaccurate explanations. We may note, for example, that the words *tairne tiarpa*, '*membrum virile*', have separate entries in his glossary, i.e. *Nagel*, *Pflock*, 'nail' and *Hinterteil* 'backside', respectively, both of which miss the thrust of *is cheileann go táir an tairne tiarpa* 'to avail of the service of Mickey the Nail' (CMO, l. 878). Similarly, a hair-grooming implement, Stern's '*Splitter*, *Urholz*', is hardly what a young woman resorts to when striving to arouse her impotent elderly husband in *is chuimil a brush ó chrios go glún de*, 'and rubbing her brush from his waist to his knee' (CMO, l. 708).[6]

It was the lack of general availability of Stern's publication which prompted Risteárd Ó Foghludha (al. 'Fiachra Éilgeach') to produce a second edition of CMO in 1912, which edition was dedicated to Stern who had died the year before and which included an introductory essay by Piaras Béaslaí entitled 'Merriman's Secret: An Interpretation'.[7] The edition itself was coolly reviewed by T. F. O'Rahilly, but it was the latter's response to Béaslaí's enthusiastic interpretation of Brian Merriman and his poem which is of particular interest. Béaslaí's contention, like that of Stern of course, was that Merriman composed an exceptional poetic composition. Indeed, Stern conceded that it was possible that Merriman was inspired by some English poets — Alexander Pope and Richard Savage being cases in point — but he concluded that Merriman fortunately copied these average poets in a few passages only, i.e. at the beginning of CMO.[8] Béaslaí, however, went further, stating that 'Brian alone seems to have been in contact with the world movement', and that he 'is rather a Greek than a Gael in his attitude towards life'.[9] Merriman's, then, was not an innate genius, but rather one which was enriched and sustained by his contact with an intellectual *milieu* beyond his native Thomond:

> We have no record to show that Brian ever travelled very far, nor is it necessary to believe that he was ever outside of Thomond. None the less it is curious to find him so closely in contact with the most advanced ideas of the latter half of the eighteenth century. It was in the same year that Brian wrote the 'Cúirt' and young Schiller voiced in 'Die Räuber' the revolt of youth against human laws and institutions.
> One feels that Merriman's entrance into the homes of the gentry must have brought him into contact with men who had read Voltaire and Rousseau and either affected in their talk the mocking scepticism of the one or quoted and discussed the lyric revolt of the other. ...
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> It is clear, however, that Brian came in contact with minds that the other Gaelic poets never encountered. It is generally to be found that the external circumstances of writers'

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[6] *Cúirt an Mheon-Oíche*, ed. by Ó Murchú, pp. 42, 38 and Carson, *The Midnight Court*, pp. 55, 47, respectively.

[7] *Cúirt an Mheadhon Oidhche. Bryan Merryman cct.*, ed. by Risteárd Ó Foghludha, (Baile Átha Cliath, 1912).

[8] 'Es ist wahrscheinlich, daß Brian auch aus der englischen Poesie Anregungen empfangen hat. Popes 'Lockenraub', der sich ja freilich in ganz andern Kreisen bewegt, galt als das Muster eines komischen Epos. Sodann hat [Standish H.] O'Grady (Catalogue p. 493) auf das Gedicht 'The wanderer, a vision' von Richard Savage hingewiesen. Glücklicherweise hat Brian diesen mittelmäßigen Poeten nur an ein paar Stellen nachgeahmt, namentlich zu Anfang' (Stern, 'Brian Merrimans Cúirt an Mheadhóin Oidhche', p. 201).

[9] Piaras Béaslaí, 'Merriman's Secret: an Interpretation', in *Cúirt an Mheadhon Oidhche*, ed. by Ó Foghludha, pp. 1-19 (pp. 10, 11).

> lives tend to form their minds and the exceptional intellect requires a fair opportunity of developing itself. The average Gaelic poet certainly got very little chance of intellectual development. I am convinced that Brian's chances were at least far better than the ordinary.[10]

This cosmopolitan interpretation found no favour with T.F. O'Rahilly who saw nothing thematically exceptional in Merriman's poem in the context of compositions by his eighteenth-century confrères:

> Too much, I think, has been made of the singularity of Merriman's attitude towards life, as seen in the *Cúirt*. Merriman's 'revolt', as such, had nothing unique about it; the uncommon thing was that he had not only the desire but the ability — the courage, perhaps, too — to record his ideas in verse in the striking way he did. But the ideas themselves were not peculiar to Merriman: they were — not to go outside his own day or country — shared by a number of contemporary Irishmen, both literate and illiterate. Not only so, but several of his contemporaries had already written verses on themes similar to that treated in the *Cúirt*.[11]

These opposing views regarding Brian Merriman and his poem form part of the overall debate throughout the Irish Literary Revival, in fact, about what actually constituted Irish literature:[12] Béaslaí highlighted a cosmopolitan Brian Merriman whose poem reflected Enlightenment ideas gleaned by him in the houses of the gentry, while O'Rahilly dismissed as speculation such continental influence, preferring instead to regard CMO as reflecting part of a greater thematic content native to eighteenth-century Irish verse.

Thus, once it appeared in print, CMO challenged its reader, be it linguistically as in the case of its first editor, Stern, or thematically, as evidenced by the variant interpretations of O'Rahilly and Béaslaí. Ironically, the poem's biggest challenge of all was in translation when a puritanical, nationalist readership saw fit to ban Frank O'Connor's *The Midnight Court* in 1946 under the Censorship of Publications Act, passed in 1929, on the grounds that it was indecent and obscene.[13] Yet the same narrow-minded censorship board of five allowed the Irish original to remain on sale in Hodges and Figgis booksellers — evidently because the erotic passages of Merriman's original were lost on them. Controversy surrounding this translation continued into the 1960s when its inclusion by O'Connor in his anthology *Kings, Lords and Commons* (1959) resulted in the book being banned in 1961.[14] In effect, then, the English translation of CMO became

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[10] Ibid., pp. 16, 17. Over twenty years later the same author expressed similar ideas as part of a special study of eighteenth-century poets (*Éigse Nua-Ghaedhilge. Tráchtas ar Fhilíbh agus ar Fhilidheacht na Gaedhilge ó 1600 go dtí 1850*, 2 vols; (Baile Átha Cliath, [1933-4]), II, pp. 203, 215).

[11] T.F. O'Rahilly, '*Cúirt an Mheadhon Oidhche*, Bryan Merriman cct. Risteárd Ó Foghludha .i. Fiachra Éilgeach, do chuir in eagar. Aiste ann ó Phiaras Béaslaí', *Gadelica* 1 (1912-13), 190-204 (p. 191).

[12] For which see Philip O'Leary, *The Prose Literature of the Gaelic Revival, 1881–1921: Ideology and Innovation* (Pennsylvania, 1994), pp. 19-90.

[13] Frank O'Connor, *The Midnight Court. A Rhythmical Bacchanalia from the Irish of Bryan Merryman translated by Frank O'Conn*or (London, 1945). *Indecent* was defined as 'suggestive of, or inciting to sexual immorality or unnatural vice or likely in any other similar way to corrupt or deprave' while *obscene* was left undefined; cf. Donal Ó Drisceoil, ''The Best Banned in the Land': Censorship and Irish Writing since 1950', *Yearbook of English Studies*, 35 (2005), 146-60 (p. 147).

[14] Ibid., p. 153.

'an ally in the war against sexual repression and a censorship obsessed with sexual morality'.[15] Accordingly, the author of the original text in Irish acquired a particular status outside the Irish-language community.

It will emerge from below that Brian Merriman was not alone in voicing the particular grievances of women as an oppressed class in eighteenth-century society, nor was he unusual in his openness to highlighting differences between the sexes in general. Thus, like CMO, the poems under review here are concerned in the main with men's and women's expectations of marriage, focusing in particular on the physical and psychological imprisonment of women, which imprisonment is presented through an uninhibited, and often earthy, use of language. In some cases, however, prudish predilections resulted in the suppression of the force of a scribal original, so that editors published the bare lineaments — if at all — of a text's more complete representation of the feminine in a manuscript source. It is true, of course, that as products of their time and place, such editors were prompted to suppress what they regarded as pernicious reading matter.[16] Nevertheless, the examples referred to below are a salutary reminder that editions of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century poetry in Irish published during the first half of the last century are not always entirely reliable, and may reproduce but a garbled version of a scribal original.

Expectaions of Marriage

The theme which connects the testimonies of both protagonists in CMO is that of the expectations of marriage by men and women. So disillusioned is the old man by his own unhappy marriage to a woman much younger than he, for example, that he calls for the right to have loveless marriages dissolved:

> Athraigh an dlí seo, cuing na cléire,
> Is ainic an bhuíon nár fríodh sa ngéibheann.
> Má lagaigh an síolrach díonmhar daonna
> I dtalamh dath-aoibhinn fhíorghlas Éireann,
> Is furus an tír d'athlíonadh 'o laochaibh
> D'uireasa a nguí gan bhrí gan éifeacht.
> Ca bhfuil an gá le gáir na bainse,
> Cartadh biotáille is pá lucht sainte,
> Sumaigh ar bord go fóiseach taibhseach,
> Glugar is gleo acu is ól dá shaighdeadh
> Ó d'aibigh an t-abhar do bhronn Mac Dé
> Gan sagart ar domhan dá dtabhairt dá chéile?
>
> 'Abolish this law of the clerical reign,
> That condemns all those fathered outside of its chains!
> The birth-rate is falling, the land is devoid

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[15] Seamus Heaney, 'Orpheus in Ireland: On Brian Merriman's The Midnight Court', in idem, *The Redress of Poetry* (London, 1995), pp. 38-62 (p. 53); cf. Alan Titley, 'An Breithiúnas ar *Cúirt an Mheán Oíche*', *Studia Hibernica*, 25 (1989-90), 105-33 (pp. 114-8).

[16] On which see O'Leary, *The Prose Literature of the Gaelic Revival*, pp. 32-5, and idem, *Gaelic Prose in the Irish Free State 1922–1939* (Dublin, 2004), pp. 58-63.

> Of the laughter of budding young colleens and boys;
> Yet we'd raise up a nation of heroes once more
> Were we free of the yoke that all people deplore!
> And where is the need for extravagant sprees,
> For gallons of whiskey, musicianers' fees,
> And buckos sprawled out with their boots on the table,
> Befuddled and boozed in a bibulous Babel,
> When laid in a manger, no crib for His head,
> Our Saviour was born to an unmarried maid?'[17]

The same speaker insists that he and other unfortunates like him in society are the real victims — well-to-do farmers who are duped into marriage by young opportunistic girls of lower social standing. By the end of his tirade, the old man calls on the court's judge, Aoibheall, to excercise her power in abolishing this ineffectual law or *riail gan éifeacht*[18] which denies freedom to an individual.

Similar sentiments are found elsewhere in Irish-language sources. We may note, for example, that in an extensive collection of epigrammatic quatrains on various aspects of life and living, one eighteenth-century example urges the legal dissolution of empty marriages:

> Ar ghrádh Dé gnóthuigh ón Róimh
> Deispionsóid chóir agus cheart,
> Bean mhaith dá bhfaghthá ag daoi,
> Í dá fhágbháil, maith an bheart.
>
> Deaghail fós, a chinn na gcliar,
> Gach fear fial is gach bean leamh;
> Pós re chéile an dá shaoi,
> Ní beag an dá dhaoi do mheath.[19]
>
> 'For the love of God procure from Rome a fair and correct dispensation: should you discover a good woman paired with a lout, it were a good thing if she left him.
>
> Divorce, moreover, o head of the clergy, every noble man and every dull woman [paired together]; marry two of a kind to each other, it is [bad] enough that two dunces should fail.'

One of the earliest extant copies for these quatrains, Egerton MS 209 (folio 95r) now housed in the British Library, was penned in 1767 by Seán Ó Cinnéide (fl. 1737–c. 1780) from County Clare.[20] Interestingly, our scribe revisits the theme of liberation by including

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[17] CMO ll. 587-98 = *Cúirt an Mheon-Oíche*, ed. by Ó Murchú, pp. 34-5, and Carson, *The Midnight Court*, pp. 39-40, respectively.
[18] CMO l. 630 = *Cúirt an Mheon-Oíche*, ed. by Ó Murchú, p. 36.
[19] *Dánfhocail*. *Irish Epigrams in Verse*, ed. by T.F. O'Rahilly (Dublin, 1921), p. 52, no. 260.
[20] This volume and its contents are described by Standish H. O'Grady, *Catalogue of Irish Manuscripts in the British Museum* (3 vols, London, 1926-53), I, pp. 589-97; Ó Cinnéide, a schoolmaster at Ballyket, near Kilrush, and his manuscripts are discussed by Eilís Ní Dheá, 'Saothrú an Léinn Ghaelaigh i gContae an

in the same volume a transcript of a text commonly known as *Comhairle Mhic Clamha ó Achadh na Muileann* or 'McClave's Advice from Aughnamullen' which, according to its editor, was first composed about 1680.[21]

Much of this text's contents comprises an *exemplum* mocking the pretensions of the peasantry in wishing their sons to become priests, but the advice itself occurs in an opening poem, beginning *A Arsaigh chroidhe gheanamhail ruaidh*, 'Dear Arsaigh, loveable and redhaired', which contrasts the easy life of the cleric with that of the layman.[22] The Mac Clamha in question is one Fr John McClave, parish priest of Aughnamullen in the diocese of Clogher, who counsels a certain Arsaigh Ruadh to leave his wife and family for the comforts of the priesthood. Rather than suffer a miserable life surrounded by a nagging wife and screeching brats, Arsaigh Ruadh could savour a comfortable life as a cleric instead:

> Iar dteacht don bhothán tráthnóna
> Lán d'ochán 's do bhrón croidhe
> Gheabhaidh roimhe sgreadfach ghárlach
> Is ní lugha cátharlach mhná an tighe.
>
> Luidhfidh síos ar nós cnúidín
> Nó mar ghaoidín go fuar fann;
> Ní bhiaidh do thumhultas acht lag,
> Is ní bhiaidh a dheoch go bríoghmhar teann.
>
> Tóg do mheanma, deirim leat,
> Ná bí feasta i ngad mar atá;
> Gabh chugat an riaghail cheart
> Naisgeas ort bail is bláth.
>
> Cleacht proinn do bhiadhuibh blasta,
> Tombac dubh, cruaidh, casta, sáimh;
> I ndiaigh altaigh, más mian leatsa,
> Glac do dhram go prab do láimh.[23]
>
> 'On returning to the hovel in the evening, full of woe and sorrow of heart, the screeching of brats greet him and no less the wheezing of the woman of the house.

Chláir 1700–1900' (unpublished PhD thesis, University College Cork, 2003), pp. 71-3, a reference I owe to the author.

[21] Egerton MS 209, folios 110r-116r. Duffy's edition ('Comhairle Mhic Clamha ó Achadh na Muileann', *Clogher Record*, 5 (1963-5), 307-47) is based on the undated Royal Irish Academy MS 126 (23 I 1) which was penned by Richard Tipper, while passages of the text were also printed by Douglas Hyde, *Abhráin Diadha Chúige Connacht. The Religious Songs of Connacht* (2 vols; London, 1906), I, pp. 171-91); for critical commentary, see N.J.A. Williams, 'Irish Satire and its Sources', *Studia Celtica*, 12-13 (1977-8), 217-46 (pp. 241-6) and idem, 'Scoggin in Éirinn', *Éigse*, 18 (1980-1), 182.

[22] Twenty-five quatrains in *óglách*as or a freer form of *rannaíocht mhór*, edited with an accompanying, although unreliable, translation by Duffy, 'Comhairle Mhic Clamha', pp. 320-6.

[23] Quatrains six, seven, thirteen and fifteen, respectively, from Duffy, 'Comhairle Mhic Clamha', pp. 320, 322.

> He will lie down like a wizened person, or coldly and feebly like a listless wretch; his food will be insipid, and his drink tasteless and thin.
>
> Raise your spirits I tell you: don't ever be tied down as you are; take to yourself the proper rule which binds to you prosperity and abundance.
>
> Get used to a meal of tasty foods, black and hard tobacco, twisted and soothing; after grace, if you so wish, take your dram readily in hand.'

Notwithstanding this rather exaggerated simplification of the life of priest and pauper as captured in such slapstick fashion, *do mheanma*, *gabh chugat*, *más mian leatsa* and *glac do dhram go prab* above focus on an individual's needs and the importance of choice.

The prose narrative which follows the opening poem in *Comhairle Mhic Clamha* is principally a satire on the corrupt state of the clergy. While corrupt clerics are also criticised in CMO, just priests too are praised for empathising with female sexual desires. Such priests, in Merriman's scheme of things, are *tuilte le grá is le grásta féile*, i.e. 'touched by the love from which charity flows', whereby *féile* in this context signifies sexual charity or generosity.[24] Indeed, *féile* is the central theme of a short poem, beginning *Do ghoirfinn tú ó uail slua sleachta aoibhinn Máighe*, 'From the Maigue's wonderful numerous offspring I would acclaim you', by Fr Uilliam Mac Gearailt (fl. 1780–1824), a contemporary of Merriman and also from County Clare.

The poet describes the plight of a beautiful young woman, trapped in an unhappy marriage to an impotent elderly spouse who is ignorant of her mental and physical frustration:

> I ndáil oídhche is crádh croídhe liom do leaba i gcúinne
> Is do dhá chíoch gheala ag síorphreabadh cheal a mbrúidhte,
> Do lámha sínte is gan ní ar bith le tabhairt iontu
> Is gan acht fás síos ar an ní úd do reachadh chúdsa.
>
> Mo dhíomása an leannánsa dod chur in éaglaigh
> Is gan fáil ar do shásamh ná an oiread éille
> ' chuirfeadh ard beag fád shála ar an mbuille déanach,
> Is mo lámh dhuit go mb'fhearrde thu do chur fám éide.[25]
>
> 'Your bed in the corner is a torment to me by night and your two fair breasts ever quivering for lack of fondling; your hands outstretched without anything to place into them and an organ withered rather than surging towards you.
>
> Shame on this lover who is failing to ignite you, when you don't get satisfaction or the size of a member that would lift your heels [i.e. make you sit up] at the very last moment, and I promise you you'd be the better for getting under my habit.'

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[24] CMO l. 794 = *Cúirt an Mheon-Oíche*, ed. by Ó Murchú, p. 40, and Carson, *The Midnight Court*, p. 49; on the semantics of *féile* in CMO, see Ó Murchú's discussion, *Cúirt an Mheon-Oíche*, p. 60, n. 733-4.

[25] Five verses in all edited by Liam P. Ó Murchú, *Merriman: I bhFábhar Béithe* (Baile Átha Cliath, 2005), p. 72.

Not only does Mac Gearailt express *féile* with remarkable candour here, but his familiarity with the female's physical needs is particularly striking. Indeed, Liam P. Ó Murchú has argued that it is difficult to imagine how this priest could have composed such a poem yet observe his vow of celibacy.[26]

The Power of Language

A more shocking perspective on marriage is presented by the Clare poet Seon Ó hUaithnín (b. 1688) who, in the name of one Peigí Turraí, curses the practice of the arranged marriage:

> Mo mhallachtsa dom mhúdar do cheangail mé le stumpa
> De scraiste mharbh brúite gan lúth gan aird,
> Is go bhfuil mo mhama brúite ó thuargaint fhada an chliútaigh
> Is gur troime a chorp ná long ar an linn gan snámh.
> Níl faic aige ach orlach de spadalach chum spóirt dom
> Is níorbh annamh fear an tomhais sin á dheighilt óna mhnaoi;
> Smaoin seal gur tú an spreas a bhrúigh marbh fút mé
> Is do-bheirim duit mo chontracht is adharc tríd mhaoil.[27]
>
> 'A curse on my mother who tied me to an old stump, a listless, shrivelled bum, debilitated and dumpy; my breast is bruised from the scoundrel's constant mauling and his body is heavier than a ship grounded in shallow water. He has nothing to show but a soggy inch for my pleasure, a man of that measure being oft separated (i.e. divorced) from his wife; remember you are but the worthless thing who crushed me to death beneath you: my curse be upon you and a prong through your bald head.'

The references to *brúite* and *tuargaint fhada* point to a darker aspect of marriage which, as Angela Bourke has shown, also finds expression in oral lament poetry.[28] Thus, the wailing of a *bean chaointe* may, and indeed must at times, transform into the unrelenting censure of a *bean cháinte* who uses the public forum of the lament to voice and transmit women's fears. In this connection, we may note a particularly striking example from the Ballingeary Gaeltacht:

> Mo chara 'gus mo chiall tu,
> Agus do tógtaí siar thu
> Go rúimín iata,
> Agus go ngabhtí 'en tsrian ort
> Agus d'fhuip naoi n-iallach,
> Agus ní raibh d'ainm ar iarraidh

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[26] Ibid., p. 73.
[27] The first of three verses, edited by Eoghan Ó hAnluain, *Seon Ó hUaithnín* (Baile Átha Cliath, 1973), p. 54.
[28] Angela Bourke, 'The Irish Traditional Lament and the Grieving Process', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 11/4 (1988), 287-91 (p. 289); idem, 'More in Anger than in Sorrow: Irish Women's Lament Poetry', in Joan Newlon Radner (ed.), *Feminist Messages: Coding Strategies in Women's Folk Culture* (Chicago, 1993), pp. 160-82 (pp. 170-4).

Ach *bitch* nú striapach.[29]

'My friend and my all, how you used to be dragged back into a closed-up little room, how you were tortured by the leather strap and a nine-thonged whip, and there was no name sought [for you] but bitch or whore.'

We find the more sinister consequences of marriage for women echoed elsewhere in Irish verse. Recent manuscript research has yielded an interesting modification of the eighteenth-century genre known as the *dearbhú* or literary asseveration.[30] Briefly, the context of this type of composition is a public one in which a speaker, usually male, swears fidelity in marriage and refutes what is commonly believed in his local community, i.e. that he has committed adultery. A series of three poems has come to light, two of which were composed by Tomás Ó Míocháin (d. 1804) and one by Séamas Mac Consaidín (fl. 1780) from County Clare, which present the case of a married couple and a third party who swears he is innocent of having a liaison with the married woman.[31] In one of Ó Míocháin's compositions, however, that beginning *Mo bhreo 'gus mo chumha-chreach mar pósadh ar dtúis me*,[32] 'My torment and my utter woe how I was married first of all', a community hears the sworn testimony of the wife, one Murainn Ní Aodha. While the formulaic interjection *mo* which occurs twice in this opening line is reminiscent of Irish lament poetry, there are functional parallels here too in that Ó Míocháin's *dearbhú* follows the *caoineadh* in voicing and transmitting a woman's anxieties publicly:

Cidh feoite me súite d'éis deolchreimeadh cúigir
Go deorach san gcúinne le hanacra plé,
I gcóngar na cúlach an chófra ná an chrúthaigh
Gan ordaithe an bhrútaigh dob eagal dom théacht;
An borreaspag Brúnach inar mbóthar dá siúladh
Níor dhóigh go bhfaigheadh rumpa ná carbad gé;
'S a chomharsain na muirne nú an brón libh mo chúrsa
Bheith beochaite brúite ag an seanchoc maol?[33]

'Though I am sear and sapless after breast-feeding five children, crying in the corner because of [yet another] fight, cowering in the hidey-hole near the press or in the milking place, only for the brute's orders I'd fear stirring out; were the great Bishop Browne to grace our road, he'd hardly get a rump or a taste of a goose; and o my dear neighbours does my lot not trouble you, utterly drained [as I am] and crushed by old baldy?'

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[29] Mícheál Ó Cuileanáin, 'Blúire de Chaoine', *Éigse*, 4 (1943-5), 127-8 (p. 127).
[30] An overview of which is given by Liam P. Ó Murchú, 'The Literary Asseveration in Irish', *Études Celtiques*, 29 (1992), 327-32.
[31] Liam P. Ó Murchú, 'Dearbhaithe ó Chontae an Chláir', *Éigse*, 17 (1977-8), 237-64.
[32] Nine + one stanzas edited by Ó Murchú, 'Dearbhaithe ó Chontae an Chláir', pp. 252-4, and subsequently by Diarmaid Ó Muirithe, *Tomás Ó Míocháin: Filíocht* (Baile Átha Cliath, 1988), pp. 58-60.
[33] Ó Murchú, 'Dearbhaithe ó Chontae an Chláir', p. 252; cf. Ó Muirithe, *Tomás Ó Míocháin*, p. 58. Neither editor explains to whom *an borreaspag Brúnach* refers here; we may note that one Eustace Browne was Roman Catholic Bishop in the diocese of Killaloe between 1713 and 1724 while Jemmett Browne was Church of Ireland Bishop in the same diocese between 1743 and 1745.

Part of the woman's avowal of her integrity in this poem lies in defaming her spouse. Thus, her verbal assaults on him include *gósta glas giúnnach nár aibigh i gcéill, / lómach gan lúthchleas gan sórt ar bith subhachai*s, 'a meaningless, green, bald, immature individual, / an ungraceful, clumsy clod without a measure of merriness', and the final damning flourish *beirthear go tapa ar bhod barraig na mbréag mbuartha / is ón gcloigeann de stracthar treasleathar a mhaolchluasa*, 'may the boor who is entirely responsible for the destructive lies be speedily caught / and the very skin of his bare ears be torn from his skull'.

The latter curse recalls part of Brian Merriman's own punishment towards the end of CMO for remaining unmarried: *gearraigí doimhin, níor thuill sé fábhar, / bainigí an leadhb ó rinn go sáil de*, 'so apply yourselves freely to legs, back and bum, / cut him deep, cut him dearly, and let the blood come!'.[34] Plying a sharp blade yields a strip of human flesh (*leadhb*), a form of torture which the young woman in Seon Ó hUaithnín's aforementioned poem also dearly wishes on the geriatric to whom she is bound: *is deacair duitse gnóthchan is mo mhallachtsa lem ló agat / is go mbaine sin gan rómhoille leadhb ód dhroim*,[35] 'you can hardly work and my curse stay upon you during my lifetime, / and may that quickly tear a strip of skin from your back'. Both examples, as Eoghan Ó hAnluain has argued, recall the spell of the spancel of death — *an bhuarach bhaithise* / *an bhuarach bháis* — whereby a person would insert an incision with a sharp blade at the head of a fresh corpse, lift the skin and continue down to the sole of the foot.[36] Superstition dictated that this dermal lasso would ensnare a partner successfully for its swinger. Thus, the young woman's curse in Ó hUaithnín's poem incorporates a defiant hope of capturing a fitting lover. In this connection, it is tempting to speculate that therein lies the wicked subtlety of *stracthar treasleathar a mhaolchluasa* by the female speaker in Ó Míocháin's *dearbhú*, which subtlety an eighteenth-century listener would appreciate. The effect of such a conclusion to her defence is all the more ferocious, of course, because the woman publicly desires committing the very crime for which her husband holds her responsible!

An invigorating way with language is a particular feature of these examples. Rhetorical force is, in some cases at least, a response to the physical and psychological force to which women are subjected. Thus, langauge itself functions both as a metaphorical weapon and a liberating force. This is most evident in the case of the young woman in Merriman's CMO where her dexterity demolishes the old man's arguments entirely. The power of the feminine voice also resonated, as we have heard, in the poems by Ó hUaithnín and Ó Míocháin, as well as in the Irish oral lament. Similarly, in *Sean-duine Chill Chotáin*, 'The old man from Cill Chotáin', by Diarmuid 'na Bolgaí' Ó Sé (d. 1846) of Tuosist, County Kerry, this *Streitgedicht* between an elderly spouse and his younger wife sees the woman levelling the male speaker with her superior turn-of-

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[34] CMO ll. 1011-2 = *Cúirt an Mheon-Oíche*, ed. by Ó Murchú, p. 46, and Carson, *The Midnight Court*, p. 59, respectively.
[35] Ó hAnluain, *Seon Ó hUaithnín*, p. 54.
[36] Eoghan Ó hAnluain, 'Cuirfidh mé Faghairt i bhFeidhm más Cruaidh dom. Draíocht chun Drúise in 'Cúirt an Mheon-Oíche'', in Pádraigín Riggs, Breandán Ó Conchúir and Seán Ó Coileáin (eds), *Saoi na hÉigse. Aistí in Ómós do Sheán Ó Tuama* (Baile Átha Cliath, 2000), pp. 153-67 (pp. 154-7).

phrase.[37] Thus, his claims of securing material comforts (a bright-coloured shawl, neat shoes, a silk hat, a cushion beneath her bottom, stiff punch and many servants to please) provoke the following riposte:

> Bhéarfainnse an cíos is é dhíol ar an dtairnge
> D'éinne beó ghlacfadh an gnó so ar láimh,
> Do chuirfeadh dá chraoibh an clíodhna seanduine
> Nó thiocfadh i nganfhios air i gcómhair é lámhach!
> Nó chuirfeadh á bhá é i lár na fairrge,
> Nó chuirfeadh sa díg é is an claí do leagadh air,
> Níor bhfearra mar shlí é ná an phíob a chnagadh dhe
> Is é fháil tachtaithe uair roimh lá![38]
>
> 'I would take the rent and pay it on the nail to any living person who would take this matter in hand, who would drive this sickly geriatric from his home or would steal up on him in order to shoot him! Or drown him in the middle of the ocean, or would place in him the dyke and knock the ditch on top of him — no better way than to smash off his neck and find him choked to death just before daybreak!'

Rather than interpreting this verse as humorous — the poem's editor refers to it as a *bhéarsa magaidh*[39] — we have, I suggest, once again a melding here of emotional and rhetorical energy by the female speaker.

Locating the Discourse

As the corpus of Irish manuscripts is well accounted for by now in printed catalogues, a reader may check with ease whether an editor has faithfully reproduced a text from a scribal source. The following three are suitable cases in point. The dynamic discourse of our first poem is excluded entirely, in fact, while varying degrees of editorial intrusion in the case of the two remaining poems ensure that the rhetorical force of the original is lost on the reader and the discourse itself is not only misrepresented, but inevitably devalued.

The first, a poem beginning *Ar dhrúcht na maidne is me ag taisteal go rómhoch*, 'By the morning dew while travelling very early', is attributed in scribal sources to Eoghan Rua Ó Súilleabháin (1748–84).[40] The poet appears here as witness to the testimony of two young women who candidly outline their physical and psychological misery, both being trapped in marriage to men considerably older than they are:

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[37] Ten verses published by Seán Ó Súilleabháin, *Diarmuid na Bolgaighe agus a Chomhursain* (Baile Átha Cliath, 1937), pp. 61-4. An alternative version, bearing the title *Seanduine Chill Chocáin*, circulated in Muskerry and was edited recently by Cormac Ó hAodha, 'Amhráin ó Mhúscraí bailithe ag Próinséas Ó Ceallaigh' (unpublished M.Phil. thesis, University College Cork, 1997), pp. 76-9; its accompanying tune was published by A. Martin Freeman, 'An Sheanduini II', *Journal of the Folksong Society*, 6/23 (1920), 286-9. I am grateful to Dr Seán Ua Súilleabháin for the latter two references.

[38] Ó Súilleabháin, *Diarmuid na Bolgaighe*, p. 63.

[39] Ibid., p. 179.

[40] Seven verses in all which I have edited in an article entitled 'Dán atá luaite le hEoghan Rua Ó Súilleabháin' (forthcoming).

Créad é an mhaitheas dom talamh bheith agam ná tiarnas
Go deo an fhaid mhairfeas an sraoill gan áird?
Lionsca meata nárbh annamh in' iarlais
Acht 'om aodhaireacht ó mhaidean go hoíche ' ghnáth;
An uair shínim síos go caoin chum leapa leis,
'Na phéic ní thíonn aon bhrí dá dheascaibh sin:
Is taodach fíochmhar do bhíonn 's is feargach,
Is nárbh fhearr bheith marbh ná i bpéin mar 'táim?

Dob fhearr leis a bhathas do ghearradh ná síneadh
Síos chum leapa le mnaoi go lá;
Níl brí 'na bhachall ná tapa 'na phíce,
Acht é líonta do ghalar gach n-oíche ' ghnáth.
A Rí na nDúl 's a Rún na Banaltran,
Cloígh san úir an cúpla meata so,
Go mbeimídne ansúd go súgach meanmnach
Lán do mhisneach ó aois go bás.

'What good is property or land to me while the slovenly straggler continues to live? A worthless thing who was not seldom a useless lump, only guarding me from morning to night. Whenever I stretch down gently to bed beside him, his rod remains limp as a result of that: jealous and fierce he is, and angry, and wouldn't it be better to be dead than in pain as I am?

He would sooner cut the crown of his head than stretch down to bed with a woman until daylight; his loins are devoid of vigour, his rod without vitality, being usually consumed by sickness every night. O God of nature and Beloved of the Blessed Mother, capture this listless pair in the grave so we can continue playfully and joyously yonder, full of confidence all through life.'

Although the poem itself is referred to by Pádraig Ua Duinnín and Risteárd Ó Foghludha in their respective introductions, its uninhibited strain clearly caused them embarrassment as each chose to exclude it entirely in their published anthologies of Eoghan Rua Ó Súilleabháin's verse.[41] Indeed, Ó Foghludha included the poem among five by the poet *ná hoirfeadh do chúrsaí scoile*, 'which would not suit school courses' in his edition from the 1930s.[42]

Our second example is an unsatisfactory edition of a poem by the same poet, beginning *A bhile gan chealg 's a sheabhaic don fhíor-fhuil*, 'O true oak and true-blooded hawk'. This poem, like that by Diarmuid 'na Bolgaí' referred to above, is a *Streitgedicht* of twenty verses in which an old married man, whom Eoghan Rua mercilessly styles *an t-árrachtach sean*, or the old monster, debates with the unmarried *calmach tapa neamhársa*, 'agile youthful hero', the question of young women's sexual desires. It was published by the aforenamed duo, Ua Duinnín and Ó Foghludha, but neither saw fit to

[41] *Amhráin Eoghain Ruaidh Uí Shúilleabháin*, ed. by Pádraig Ua Duinnín, (Baile Átha Cliath, 1901); *Eoghan Ruadh Ó Súilleabháin*, ed. by Risteárd Ó Foghludha, (Baile Átha Cliath, 1937).
[42] *Eoghan Ruadh*, ed. by Ó Foghludha, p. 27.

reproduce the entire text, replacing nine lines of a distinctly earthy strain with a series of asterisks and silently omitting verse eighteen.[43] Some individual lines, moreover, cannot be checked at all in one scribal copy, that in Royal Irish Academy MS 100 (23 L 2), as an anonymous reader inserted black lines, thereby rendering the poem illegible in parts! Verse eighteen of the poem reads as follows:

> Chum lachta nuair ' thigeann an fhinnebhean mhúinte
> Ó chumasc go dlúth 'na chúrsa le flaith,
> Le macanais curthar fé chuiltibh i gclúmh í
> Taiscithe i gclúid an scrúille so mheath.
> Ba ghreann leat an seanscruta a' leamhracht 's a' súgradh
> Le planda an fhir thall is é a' damhas ar a ghlúin aige,
> Is searbh ar chruitibh leis binneas Orphéus
> Seoch friotail a bhéil a' glaoch ar a dhaid.[44]
>
> 'When the well-mannered fair maid is approaching lactation through intimate intercourse with a strolling hero, she is fondly placed under covers on down, snug in the bed of this geriatric. You would be amused at the old wretch fooling and playing with the offspring of another as he gambols on his knee; harsh to his ear is Orpheus' sweetness on the harp [lit. harps] compared to the words of his mouth calling his father.'

Notwithstanding this robust description of the joining of the female and male body, the absurd contrast between a lusty young hero and an impotent geriatric reduces the latter to a fool who, despite his best efforts to keep a strict eye on his wife, is oblivious to events taking place about him. In removing this verse, Eoghan Rua's final scathing flourish is entirely lost on the reader while the farcical aspect of the old man's character is also less effective.

Our third and concluding example is an early nineteenth-century *Streitgedicht* of some 230 lines known as *An Sotach* [al. *Siota*] *is a Mháthair*, or 'The Chit and his Mother', which probably originated in south Galway or Clare. The poem was clearly popular, judging by the thirty or so extant manuscript copies, most of which give 1815 as the date of composition. Its contents involve a heated contention between a mother and her son, born outside wedlock, about illegitimacy, marriage, the plight of unmarried, pregnant young women and the role of the clergy in society, all of which is overheard by an anonymous narrator. Undoubtedly, there is a debt to Merriman's CMO here, but *An Sotach* is a contribution in its own right which offers interesting insights into attitudes towards women who gave birth outside lawful marriage in eighteenth-century Ireland.

A version of the poem which circulated within the oral Irish tradition of County Clare was published over twenty years ago.[45] However, a satisfactory edition from the manuscript corpus still awaits publication. We may note the following comment by

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[43] *Amhráin Eoghain Ruaidh*, ed. by Ua Duinnín, pp. 67-72; *Eoghan Ruadh*, ed. by Ó Foghludha, pp. 97-102.

[44] Royal Irish Academy MS 100 (23 L 2), pp. 49-58 (p. 57) and Royal Irish Academy MS 1072 (24 P 20), pp. 23-31 (p. 30); the orthography has been normalised here. I am grateful to Dr Seán Ua Súilleabháin for his considered opinion regarding the accompanying translation.

[45] Marion Gunn, *A Chomharsain Éistigí agus Amhráin eile as Co. an Chláir* (Baile Átha Cliath, 1984), pp. 43-50.

Pádraig Ó Siochradha (al. 'An Seabhac') in the introduction to an edition of the poem which he published in 1936:

> An téacs atá annso agam den "Sotach is a Mháthair", is é atá ann ná an leagan ab fhearr dob fhéidir liom a thoghadh agus a chur le chéile as fiche leagan beagnach, idir aithris béil agus láimhscríbhinní, a bhuail liom le 35 bliadhna.[46]
>
> 'The text I have here of *An Sotach is a Mháthair* is the best version which I could choose and compile from some twenty versions almost, both oral and manuscript, which I came across in 35 years.'

The result, then, of this editor's choosing and compiling is a text of his own creation which he did not base on any one particular source or group of textually-related scribal sources, or on any specified oral version of the poem. Nevertheless, further down in the introduction one manuscript, i.e. Ferriter MS 1 which was completed by Pádraig Feiritéar in 1894 and which is now in the possession of University College Dublin, is singled out because it contains a version quite different from other scribal copies. The text in this source incorporates additional lines into the poem from line 133 onwards as well as new passages from line 163, textual accretions which, the reader is told, are printed separately — *leo féin* — in the form of an appendix because the editor did not consider them to be part of the original poem.[47]

A comparision between the text of *An Siota* in Ferriter MS 1 and that of the published edition, however, indicates that 'An Seabhac' carefully bowdlerised the passages which he cited in the appendix. Indeed, in some cases he also omitted lines in the main text, marking them instead with a series of asterisks. The following passage by the female speaker is a case in point:

> Maille le drúis ní cúis ródhaor é,
> Is ní é a mbíonn dúil is tnúth gach aon neich;
> Ní fheacasa fós bean óg ná aosta
> Ná déanann fá thóin an gnó mar néimse.
> Is dá mhéid é a lón is a gcró san drochshaol so
> Gan meacan an spóirt ní fhónann aon rud;
> Is measa fá dhó do ghnóthaí féinig,
> Bheith tugtha do mhóide i gcóir 's in éitheach.
> Easparta is órd gan gó dá séanadh
> Is dalta na hÓighe gach ló dá chéasadh.[48]
>
> 'As for lust it is not a matter of too much concern, it is a thing for which all beings desire and long; I have yet to see a young woman or an old woman who do not have sex as I do. However much their provisions and wealth in this difficult life, they are worthless without a cause for fun; your own business is twice as bad, being fond of

[46] 'An Sotach 's a Mháthair', ed. by 'An Seabhac', *Béaloideas*, 6 (1936), pp. 313-28 (p. 313).
[47] Ibid., pp. 313-4.
[48] Ferriter MS 1, p. 256, ll. 127-36; the spelling in the original has been normalised here and in other passages from the poem quoted below.

> swearing truths and lies, condemning unfailingly evening devotions and ritual, and tormenting daily the Virgin's child.'

Only the final four lines of verse are reproduced by 'An Seabhac' in the appendix, while the main text reads *is measa fé dhó do ghnotha féinig, / ag séanadh Críost is dlighe na cléire*[49] 'your own business is twice as bad, / denying Christ and the law of the clergy', i.e. a couplet with four preceding lines marked by a series of asterisks. Reproduced in its entirety, however, this verse is an important part of the defence of her situation by the unmarried female speaker who embraces the natural carnal instincts of individual men and women.

The difficulties incurred by such a woman are addressed early in the debate between mother and son, respectively:

> Maille le dualgas ná luaigh é ar aon chor:
> Ód athair ní bhfuaireas duais ná caomhnadh
> Ná mórán áird[e] acht náire shaolta
> Ag sagairt is bráithre am chrá is am chéasadh.
>
> Dob é sin do phá bheith ad chrá is ad chéasadh,
> Mar bhíonn san ' lán de mhnáibh díchéile;
> Do ghabhais-se le fear gan cheart gan chomhairle,
> Gur bhuail ort dreas is gan meas ban phósta ort.[50]

> 'As for a responsibility don't mention it at all: reward nor maintenance did I receive from your father, nor any attention [either], but public scandal from priests and monks harassing and tormenting me.
>
> That was your payment to be harassed and tormented, as is the case for many foolish women; you went with a man wrongfully and stupidly, he had his shag and you're [now] without the respect enjoyed by married women.'

Unfortunately, 'An Seabhac' excluded any reference to the son's latter response as it occurs in the text of *An Sotach* in Ferriter MS 1, thereby misrepresenting the plight of the unmarried pregnant woman in this part of the *débat*. Equally, the woman's admission *Is go deimhin níor chleacht liom codladh liom féinig*, 'And certainly it was not my wont to sleep on my own', suggests that she may have resorted to prostitution in order to support herself, but this too was dropped in the printed version.[51] These insights into the life of the woman in our poem are not insignificant in the light of contemporary evidence. We may note that testimony recorded by the Poor Enquiry commissioners in different parts of Ireland in 1835 confirms that unmarried women who became pregnant were regarded as

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[49] 'An Sotach 's a Mháthair', ed. by 'An Seabhac', p. 319.
[50] Ferriter MS 1, p. 253, ll. 25-32.
[51] Ferriter MS 1, p. 259, l. 226; cf. 'An Sotach 's a Mháthair', ed. by 'An Seabhac', p. 324.

social outcasts who were shunned by acquaintances and, in some cases, were forced into prostitution in order to support themselves.[52]

An Sotach also discusses the role of the Catholic clergy in society. The female speaker defends the actions of priests, while her son highlights their harsh treatment of vulnerable offenders such as she. Hence, the following detailed treatment in the text of Ferriter MS 1:

> Éist a chailligh is leamh iad do ráite
> Ag moladh na sagart is ar maidin nár phráinn duit
> Dá mbeifeá agam marbh ar maidin amárach
> Is tu thabhairt go dtí an sagart ceangailte i mála?
> Ní déarfadh sé Aifreann gan airgead láithreach
> Ná fiú na cré beannaithe ' thabhairt gan pá duit.
> I gcás an bhaiste ná cluinim dá thrácht tu,
> Mar is minic le fada do chuala dá rá tu
> Le ró-mhéid d'easpa gan earra gan fáltas
> Go rabhas gan ainm go bhfeaca cúig ráithe.
> I gcúrsaí carthanachta fanadh mar atá sé:
> Is ní é ná cleachtar le sagairt ná bráithre,
> Cia thabharfaidís a mbeannacht gan faice do tháintibh,
> Is dá mb'fhiú leathphingin í ní scarfadh go bráth léi.[53]
>
> 'Whist you hag, your words are silly — praising priests, and wouldn't it be an emergency for you were I to find you dead tomorrow morning and bring you to the priest tied up in a bag? He wouldn't say Mass without immediate payment, nor even give of blessed soil without pay in return. Regarding baptism, let me not hear you talking about it because I often heard you say that as a result of your great poverty without goods or income, I was left nameless until the age of fifteen months. In matters of charity let it stay as it is: it remains unpractised by priests or monks although they would give their blessing for nothing to large numbers, and were it [blessing] worth a halfpenny they would never part with it.'

Marriage is criticised by the son who regards it as little more than a clerical business transaction:

> Maille le pósadh is gnó ródhaor é,
> Bíonn trí píosa óir is cróin don chléireach;
> Glaofar go hard chum cláir an cúpla,
> Chum airgead d'fháil beidh an pláta ar stiúir ann;
> Muna dtiocfaidh tú láithreach tá tú id bhrútach,
> *Till the Bishop is paid* ní léifear nóbís
> Is *Dispensation* ní fhuil i gcóir dhóibh;

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[52] S.J. Connolly, 'Marriage in Pre-Famine Ireland', in Art Cosgrove (ed.), *Marriage in Ireland*, (Dublin, 1985), pp. 78-98 (p. 91); idem, *Priests and People in Pre-Famine Ireland, 1780–1845* (rev. ed. Dublin, 2001), p. 184.

[53] Ferriter MS 1, pp. 257-8, ll. 180-93.

Is a chailligh nach daor é an tÉgo Vós san?
Is gurab é a n-abraim féinig tar éis a ngnóthaí,
Gurab é meacan an tsuilt a néidheas an pósadh
Ar leaba an uair théid chum a chéile d'onóradh.[54]

'As for marriage it's a very expensive business, [with] three pieces of gold and a crown for the clerk; the couple will be summoned loudly to a table, the plate as a guide to receive money there; if you do not come immediately, you are [regarded as] a brute; till the Bishop is paid *nobis* will not be read and a dispensation will not be given; is that *Ego Vos* not an expensive one, old woman? And after all their carry-on I myself must confess that the source of joy for any marriage is when they go to honour each other in bed.'

Here again the importance of the conjoining of male and female in this final couplet was excluded by 'An Seabhac', thereby diminishing the poem's central message of physical and psychological liberation.

As in the case of Merriman's CMO, the abrupt conclusion of *An Sotach* takes the reader somewhat by surprise, incorporating as it does the son's following *volte-face* regarding marriage:

Éirigh ar maidean is ceannaigh dhom léine,
Coisbheart leathair is carabhat gléigeal,
Triús geal fada ó is faisean ag éinne iad:
Pósfad feasda is ní fhanfad ag plé leat;
Is eol dom aingir tá maiseamhail tréitheach,
Córach cneasta gan ainimh gan éalaing.
Atá go greanta in earra is in éadach,
Is ór i dtaisce ag a hathair mar spré di.
Tá leath an mhargaigh measaim-si déanta:
Do bhíos ag an sagart ar maidean inné léi,
Tá fios a haigne agam le chéile,
Is ní fhuil dár n-easpa acht ceangal na cléire.
Beidh gnó feasta againn ar mhargadh is aonach,
Ag reic is ag ceannach ba capall is caorach,
Is beidh bólacht bleacht is seascaígh slé' 'gainn,
Is mórchuid airgid ghlanfaidh gach éileamh.
Ní bheidh mar mheasaim le caitheamh iom éadan
Acht tu bheith tamall ag stealladh na déirce,
Is go raibh tu acarach muna míscéal é,
Is do cheann san chnaiste le fearaibh an tsaoil so.[55]

'Rise up in the morning and buy me a shirt, leather footgear and a pure-white tie, a pair of bright, long trousers, since they are the fashion: I intend to marry and I'll not stop and argue with you; I know a maid who is fair and talented, comely and gentle without

[54] Ferriter MS 1, p. 257, ll. 153-63.
[55] Ferriter MS 1, p. 258, ll. 200-9.

> blemish or flaw. She is stylish in dress and attire, and her father has gold set aside as a dowry for her. Half the bargain, I think, is made: I went to the priest with her yesterday morn, I know what she's about entirely, and all we need [now] is the clerical knot. We'll set up business at market and fair, selling and buying cattle, horses and sheep; we'll own milch cows and dry cows, and plenty of money to cover every need. What is left, I think, to cover my cost will require you to go abegging for a little while; if it is not bad tidings, may you be useful and lay in bed with the men of this world.'

Onces again 'An Seabhac' reproduced all but the final couplet from Ferriter MS 1, which he marks with a series of asterisks. Despite its comical depiction of a sudden change of fortune, however, the unmarried woman's lot as outlined here is that of vagrant and beggar, a tendency which is also well documented by the Poor Enquiry of the 1830s.[56]

In the light of the above, then, Brian Merriman's CMO is one of a number of poems which focuses on men's and women's expectations of marriage in Ireland during the long eighteenth century. Much of the material discussed gives utterance to the physical and psychological imprisonment of women, their intimate life being presented through an uninhibited, and often robust, use of language. Given that the female voice is markedly audible in them, it is significant nonetheless that, where identifiable, the poets who give expression to the feminine are all male while the scribal transmission itself is also the work of male practitioners. Yet circulation and transmission *per se* presuppose an audience — male and female — who could derive meaning from the central message of these poems.[57]

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[56] S.J. Connolly, 'Illegitimacy and Pre-Nuptial Pregnancy in Ireland before 1864: the Evidence of Some Catholic Parish Registers', *Irish Economic and Social History*, 6 (1979), pp. 5-23 (p. 11).

[57] I am grateful to an anonymous reader for reading this article in draft and making a number of helpful comments.