

ROMANCING THE BARDS:

Early-Modern Latin Translations of Irish Poetry*



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In 1647 John Colgan published a transcript and Latin translation of a mid-ninth-century Irish poem about St Patrick; in 1685 Roderic O'Flaherty produced a series of transcriptions and translations of Old Irish verse in his historical study of Ireland, the Ogygia. This article examines the different approaches to translation employed by these scholars and the linguistic difficulties inherent in the process of translating Old Irish into Latin. The contrast between literal and literary translation is located in the differing antiquarian traditions represented by each author.

In the early seventeenth century hundreds of Irish Catholics fled abroad as English Protestant rule tightened its grip in Ireland. In order to represent their plight at the courts of Europe, they sought to demonstrate to potential patrons the richness of the Catholic culture that they represented.¹ They boasted of Ireland's history as a land of saints and scholars, but were consistently undermined by Scottish exiles on the continent who, seeking patronage for themselves and the cause of Catholic Scotland, claimed many Irish saints for their own national heritage. Repeatedly, Scottish authors joked about the fact that the Irish could only cite evidence from vernacular annals that no-one had ever seen, which had never been edited or published, and which nobody could understand. The response of the Irish was to gather, edit, and begin to translate the corpus of medieval Irish literature, particularly the annalistic and hagiographical material.² Much of this was preserved only in the Irish language. In this article, we will examine the difficulties of translating into Latin the metrical texts belonging to this tradition. We will focus on two examples – John Colgan's translation of a medieval poem about St Patrick, and several fragments of bardic verse translated by Roderic O'Flaherty.

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¹ See, for example, O'Sullivan Beare 1621 and Lombard 1632.

² Recent studies include Caulfield 2004, McCafferty 2006, Bhreathnach & Cunningham 2007, Ó Riain 2009, and Caulfield 2009.

In 1647, John Colgan became one of the first to print an Irish language poem. He published it in his *Trias Thaumaturga*, a collection of source materials relating to the lives of Saints Patrick, Brigid and Colum Cille.³ Colgan was a Franciscan from Donegal who had been based in Louvain from the early 1620s, where he began studying Irish hagiography, a field in which he quickly rose to prominence in collaboration with the eminent Jesuit scholar Jean Bolland.⁴ The example of his work that we will focus on is his translation of *Fiacc's Hymn*, a verse life of St Patrick which is found in the *Liber Hymnorum*, a collection of Irish and Latin hymns and prayers used in the early Irish Church.⁵

The *Liber Hymnorum* exists in two manuscript copies, the earlier of which dates probably from the early years of the eleventh century and is housed in the collections of Trinity College Dublin under the catalogue number (and press-mark) TCD MS 1441 (*olim* E.iv.2). The later copy dates probably from the end of the eleventh century or perhaps even the beginning of the twelfth and is presently part of the Franciscan manuscript collection at University College Dublin, catalogued as UCD Franciscan MS A 2. It is this copy that Colgan used while preparing his translation of *Fiacc's Hymn*. Little is known of this manuscript's provenance, but it was kept in the Franciscan friary at Donegal until shortly after 1630, at which point it was sent to the Franciscans in Louvain along with other Donegal manuscripts.⁶ These were then placed at the disposal of the scholars engaged in a project to gather and translate Irish source material, notably Colgan himself. The copy of *Fiacc's Hymn* in UCD Franciscan MS A 2 used by Colgan is found on pages 36–38 of that manuscript. The opening section of the poem is preceded by a prose preface occupying the top of the page while the poem itself is surrounded by later glosses in the margins. There is also an abundance of interlinear glosses throughout the text of the poem. These are written in both Latin and Irish and were reproduced by Colgan as an appendix to his edition.

Fiacc's Hymn is attributed to Fiacc, Bishop of Sletty, who was a contemporary of St Patrick and is referred to in the short prose preface to the poem as its author. He is also mentioned in the martyrologies of Óengus and of Donegal.⁷ However, on the basis of linguistic evidence, the hymn cannot be dated to the time of Patrick in the mid-fifth century. The editors of the *Liber*

³ Colgan 1647.

⁴ Ó Riain 1997.

⁵ Bernard & Atkinson 1898, I 96–104; translation given in II 31–35; cf. Stokes & Strachan 1901–1903, I 307–321.

⁶ Bernard & Atkinson 1898, I xiii–xv.

⁷ Stokes 1905; Todd & Reeves 1864.

Hymnorum, John Henry Bernard and Robert Atkinson, suggest that the poem could not have been written before the eighth century and the later editors, Stokes and Strachan, state that the language is “not much later than 800”.⁸ A date in the middle of the ninth century is most likely. This places it in the Old-Irish period, which is generally said to date from c. 700 to 900. In terms of content, it is effectively a brief summary of the Latin prose lives of Patrick by Muirchú and Tírechán in the *Book of Armagh*, which are dated to the seventh century.⁹ In producing the *Trias Thaumaturga*, Colgan consulted both of these texts and thus was able to interpret the poem against the backdrop of its own sources. Nevertheless, as we shall see throughout our discussion, although Colgan was a native speaker of Irish, the language of the poem regularly presents difficulties to him on account of the enormous phonological and morphological developments in the Irish language between the eighth and seventeenth centuries.

If we compare Colgan’s transcription of the text of *Fiacc’s Hymn* which he reproduced in the *Trias* with his manuscript source, the first thing we note is that it contains a number of errors. These are mostly minor matters of orthography (some of which could be attributed to the typesetter) but in some instances Colgan himself seems to be misled by the faulty transcription in his translation. For example:

Quatrain	MS A 2	Colgan
10	tua	word omitted
25	<u>mos</u>	<u>mór</u>
30	<u>hetsect</u>	<u>betsect</u> ¹⁰

In quatrain thirty, the word *hetsect* has been transcribed as *betsect*, which renders it meaningless, but this may be regarded as incidental because it does not affect Colgan’s translation and thus may have been mistakenly introduced by the typesetter. A similar explanation may be given for quatrain ten, where Colgan omits the word *tua* from his transcript of the Irish text although it is in the manuscript and his Latin translation clearly renders it by the phrase “sub silentio” (in silence) in the Latin text. The third instance is, however, more noteworthy. Colgan seems to have misread the manuscript and unwittingly created problems for himself. The line in the manuscript is “dochum nime mos-raga”, which means literally ‘to heaven soon you will go’, the word *mos* being etymologically linked to the Latin *mox*. However, Colgan’s version “do chum nimhe mór raga” could only mean something

⁸ Bernard & Atkinson 1898, II 175–176; Stokes & Strachan 1901–1903, II xxxvii.

⁹ Bieler 1979.

¹⁰ Colgan 1647, 2–3.

like ‘to heaven you will greatly go’. This being somewhat bizarre, Colgan has rationalised it by seeming to ignore the word *mór* and thus simply rendering the line as “ipse ad caelos venies” (you yourself will go to heaven):

MS A 2	“dochum nime <u>mos</u> -raga”	‘to heaven <u>soon</u> you will go’
Colgan	“do chum nimhe <u>mór</u> raga”	‘to heaven you will <u>greatly</u> go’
Colgan’s translation:		“ipse ad caelos venies”

This instance is indicative of the impact of scribal errors upon Colgan’s treatment of the poem. Thus, although his transcription of the poem as a whole is by and large faithful to the manuscript, nevertheless, his translation is vitiated by the few mistakes he makes.

It is also necessary to take into account Colgan’s approach to translation. Although he follows the line breaks of the Irish text, he does not attempt to write Latin verse. *Fiacca’s Hymn* itself is written in a common Irish rhyming syllabic metre, known as *rannaigeacht*, which, in its relatively uncomplicated state during the Old Irish period, represents a precursor of the elaborate and highly-ornamented strict rhyming syllabic metre employed by the bardic masters of the Classical Modern Irish period between the years *c.* 1200 and *c.* 1650.¹¹ Colgan evidently put some thought into how best to represent such a poem in Latin. His decision to render the verse into prose allowed him to avoid the difficulty of providing an equivalent Latin verse form, and reflected his decision to provide a literal rather than literary translation. He explains his approach to translation in his notes to the poem:

In versione sensum conati sumus assequi litteralem; & vbi aliquod verbum hinc inde (quod et raro fit) explicationis gratia inseruimus, quod in textu expresse non habetur; hoc ipsum fidei nostrae liberandae causa, caractere diverso adnotamus.

(In this translation we have tried to follow the literal sense, and where for this reason we have inserted some word for the sake of clarity that is not expressly contained in the text (which seldom happens), we have noted this in a distinct font in order to discharge our [duty of] fidelity).¹²

Colgan’s translation style is guided by antiquarian goals rather than literary criteria. Thus it seems appropriate to measure him against his own standard of accuracy. As an initial example, let us look at quatrain seventeen:

¹¹ Knott 1928, 13–15.

¹² Colgan 1647, 6.

Pritcadh Soscela do cách,	Praedicabat Euangelium populis:
do gnith mór fearta i leathu,	multas virtutes & signa simul operatus:
iccaid luscu la trusca,	curabat caecos & leprosos:
mairbh dos fuisceadh do beathu.	mortuos reuocabat ad vitam.

A literal translation of the Irish reads as follows:

He used to preach the gospels to everyone;
 he used to perform many miracles far and wide;
 he healed the lame and lepers;
 the dead, he used to rouse them to life.

Colgan's translation appears to preserve some sensitivity to etymology. In the first line, *Pritcadh* is a loan word from Latin, derived from *praedicare*. *Soscela* means 'good stories' and thus is a calque of the Greek εὐαγγέλιον. However, he clearly had more trouble with "do gnith mór fearta i leathu", which means 'he used to perform many miracles far and wide'. The etymology of *fearta*, sing. *feart*, is from medieval Latin *virtus*, meaning 'a miracle'. In medieval Irish manuscripts the singular is often glossed *signum* or *miraculum*; only the plural forms are glossed *virtutes*.¹³ The addition of "et signa" may be explained as hendiadys, a common feature of medieval translation, used to clarify the meaning of complex words or to bring out their full force. However, Colgan stated that words which he added for the sake of clarity were placed in a separate font, but that is not done in this case. One might therefore suppose that "et signa" must translate something else in the line. The difficulty is compounded by the fact that Colgan has not understood the phrase "i leathu" correctly. In this he is not alone. Two medieval glossators interpreted the word as "in latitudine saeculi", while one added the possibility that it might mean "i n-Etail" (in Italy), evidently understanding the phrase as "i Leatha" (in Latium). The latter is the translation given by Colgan for "i llethu" in the next quatrain, which adds to the difficulty of trying to understand why he rejected that translation in this case.¹⁴ Colgan follows neither of these readings; rather, his translation, *simul*, may suggest that he had the Old Irish adverb *immalle* in his mind.¹⁵ This adverb, which means 'jointly, together, at the same time' (as reflected in Colgan's translation), is structured in such a way that it ends with the preposition *le* meaning 'with' which originally derives from the Old Irish noun *leth* meaning 'side'.¹⁶ This is the same *leth* that Colgan is attempting to translate in the phrase "i leathu". The same preposition makes up part of another Old Irish adverb *ille* meaning

¹³ *Dictionary of the Irish Language* 1983, s.v. fiurt.

¹⁴ Stokes & Strachan 1901–1903, II 316.

¹⁵ *Dictionary of the Irish Language* 1983, s.v. immalle(i), immelle(i).

¹⁶ Thurneysen 1993, 523 §845.

‘hither’ or, in a temporal sense, ‘since, down to the present time’. This adverb forms part of the Old Irish idiom *ó shoin ille*, later replaced by *ó shoin i leith* (the dative singular of *leath*), which can mean ‘over and above that’. Supposing that Colgan may have been aware that *leath* in the phrase “ó shoin i leith” replaced Old Irish *ille* and that *ille* displays a similar morphological formation to *immalle*, it is possible that he had these things in his mind when he was translating “i leathu”, a phrase which closely mirrors the adverb *ille*.¹⁷ Perhaps he confused the semantics and, in reading *i leathu* as if it were related to *ille*, translated it with *immalle* in his mind. If this is the case, then “virtutes et signa” is simply hendiadys for *fearta*, perhaps deliberately echoing Acts 8:13 (“signa et virtutes”) or else more generally employing the medieval linguistic register appropriate to the genre of hagiography.

In the next line, Colgan seems to have been misled by a false friend to translate *luscu* (which derives from the Latin *luscus*) as *caecos*, whereas its primary meaning in Irish is ‘lame’ rather than ‘one-eyed’ or ‘blind’. The mistake is all the more noteworthy given that *luscu* is glossed in Irish as *bauchu* in the margins of the manuscript that Colgan consulted (more correctly spelled *bacachu* in TCD MS 1441 [*olim* E.iv.2]), making the meaning ‘lame’ perfectly clear. In the last line of the quatrain, *mairbh* and *beathu* are etymologically linked to *mortuos* and *vitam*. Colgan is not going out of his way to reflect etymology, rather the religious character of the Irish text ensures that it is permeated either with loan words from Latin or cognate vocabulary. The task of translation is thus made considerably easier. Colgan does, however, introduce one dissonant note in his translation of this quatrain. The Irish phrase “do cách” means ‘to everyone’, whereas Colgan has translated it as *populis*. It is probable that the religious language of the quatrain prompted this Biblical echo, but it also rather nicely, in an Irish context, alludes to the apostolic injunction to transmit the Word to the outermost reaches of the world.

Irish verse is not always, however, so readily turned into idiomatic Latin. One of the most common problems is that Irish employs parataxis much more widely and in a broader range of contexts than Latin. A good example is found in quatrain twenty:

Conda tanic in Tapstal
do faith gidh gaethe dene
pritchais tri fichte bliadhna
croich Crist do thuathaibh
Fene.

Donec aduenit Apostolus,
qui eos praeseruauit, licet turbines
vehementes; qui praedicauit annis
sexaginta Crucem Christi populis
Feniorum.¹⁸

¹⁷ *Dictionary of the Irish Language* 1983, s.v. *ille, illei*; Thurneysen 1993, 516–518, esp. 517 §D.

¹⁸ Colgan 1647, 2.

The Irish text may be rendered as follows:

Until the Apostle came to them;
 he led [them] though they were strong winds;
 he preached for three twenties of years
 Christ's cross to the peoples of the Féne.

At this point the poem is explaining that the Irish were in a state of perdition prior to the coming of Patrick, the great Apostle. “Conda tanic” consists of three distinct elements – *co*, *da*, and *tanic* – with nasalization following the first of these, the conjunction *co*. The second element, *da*, is an object pronoun infixed between the conjunction and a verb in the preterite/perfect tense, third person singular, *tanic*.¹⁹ Thus “conda tanic” means ‘until to them he came’. The word ‘until’ refers back to the previous quatrain, which states that “The transgressor flung them into the deep vast pit.”²⁰ The subsequent lines cannot be dependent upon *conda* because the verbs are not in the conjunct forms that use of the conjunction *co* would require.²¹ The second line of the Irish text is problematic. The standard edition of the *Liber Hymnorum* translates it “he sent ... of a swift wind.”²² In other words, “do faith” is understood as ‘he sent’, and “gaethe dene” is understood as a noun and an adjective in the genitive singular, meaning ‘of a swift wind’. The lacuna in Bernard and Atkinson’s translation relates to the middle word *gidh*, which means ‘although it be’, rather like the Latin *licet* or *quasi*. In a later edition, Stokes and Strachan rendered the line as “even the wind’s swiftness led him”, translating *cid* (*gidh*) as ‘even’, reading *dene* as a substantive and the subject of the verb, and assuming that Patrick is the absent object of the verb.²³ Neither of these translations is satisfactory but both convey the fact that there is no syntactical link between the first three lines.

Colgan, however, treats the whole passage rather differently, making the second and third lines into relative clauses dependent upon *Apostolus*. This enables him to avoid repetition of the personal pronoun *eos* by treating *aduenit* as intransitive and making *eos* the object of *praeseruauit*, which is an elegant rendering of “do faith”.²⁴ Thus, in order to render the Irish into idiomatic Latin, Colgan treats the three verbs *-tanic*, “do faith”, and *pritchais* as though they were dependent on *conda*, whereas in fact only the first is. His translation of the couplet may therefore be rendered “Until the

¹⁹ Thurneysen 1993, 255–264.

²⁰ Bernard & Atkinson 1898, II 33.

²¹ Thurneysen 1993, 554–556.

²² Bernard & Atkinson 1898, II 34. Elipsis is in the original.

²³ Stokes & Strachan 1903, II 317.

²⁴ *Dictionary of the Irish Language* 1983, s.v. do-fed.

apostle came, who looked after them even though they were wild whirlwinds”.

Quatrain twenty-two reveals further difficulties that Colgan faced as regards parataxis:

In Ardmacha fil righi	Ardmachae est regni Sedes,
is cian do reracht Emhain	futura aeterni nominis populis Emaniae:
is Cell mór Dun-leth-glaise	& est Ecclesia celebris in Dundaletglas;
nim dil cidh ditrubh Temhair	nec gratum quod Temoria deseratur. ²⁵

The Irish text reads as follows:

There is sovereignty in Ard Macha;
 it is a long time Emain has been abandoned;
 Dún Dá Leth Glas is a great ecclesiastical site;
 Temair is not dear to me though it be a wilderness.²⁶

The quatrain contains four separate sentences, but whereas Irish verse can link units of sense without conjunction, idiomatic Latin tends not to do so. Colgan therefore attempts to articulate the sense of the quatrain as a whole by turning it into a single sentence, but in doing so he misunderstands the poet’s meaning which is built upon a contrast between the Christian and pagan world. The two couplets of the Irish quatrain are not syntactically linked but are written in contrasting pairs. Thus, sovereignty lies in Christian “Ard Macha” (Armagh), not pagan *Emain* (Navan), and Christian “Dún Dá Leth Glas” (Downpatrick) is now an imposing site whereas *Temair* (Tara), the seat of the pagan high-kings of Ireland, has become a wilderness. This adversative structure is not reflected in Colgan’s translation. He breaks the pattern in his rendering of line two, where he fails to identify the verb correctly, probably because the verb “do reracht” ‘has been abandoned’ was no longer in use during the early-modern period. Colgan therefore interprets

²⁵ Colgan 1647, 2–3.

²⁶ This quatrain clearly presents the reader with a contrast between the fallen former pagan centres of power and the present flourishing Christian centres of power. The first couplet is unequivocal in its setting forth of this contrast. The wording of the second couplet, especially the final line, is not as clear. The sense of the final line would appear to be that even though Tara has long since ceased to be a pagan seat of power, has been rendered empty of inhabitants and is no longer a threat to the Christian strongholds of Ireland, it is *still* not dear to the author: he continues to distrust it. Colgan’s notes reveal that his only concern in regard to the interpretation of this line was as to whether the subjunctive verb could be interpreted to mean that Tara was already desolate, or whether it meant that it would become desolate in future. Since he dates the poem to shortly after Patrick’s death, at which time he supposes that Tara was still a significant site, he interprets the line as a prophetic allusion to the fall of Tara after it was cursed by St Ruadhán in the mid-sixth century.

the copula *is* in the adverbial phrase “is cian” (it is a long time) as the main verb of the sentence. He then assumes that the subject of the verb is *Ardmacha*, and therefore uses a participle construction to link to the previous line, translating “is cian” as “futura aeterni nominis”. Since he does not recognise “do reracht” as a verb, he interprets the pre-verbal particle *do* as the preposition *do*, which takes the dative case in Old Irish, and surmises that *reracht* must be an inflected form of *rerach*, meaning ‘an old man’ or ‘patriarch’, which he then translates *populis*.²⁷ Oddly, in the lemma of his note on this line of the poem, he writes “proceribus Emaniae”, but explains the phrase as a general reference to the peoples of Ulster. It seems probable that this line of thought prompted him to emend his translation from *proceribus* to *populis*, but that he neglected to emend the lemma in his note. At any rate, the effect of Colgan’s mistranslation of this line is to obscure the adverbial structure of the quatrain as a whole.

A further consequence of this interpretation of the quatrain may be seen in his translation of the fourth line where he interprets *cidh* as *quod*, introducing an explanatory object clause instead of a concessive clause. In this he was followed by the editors of the *Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus*, Stokes and Strachan, who translated the line as “it is not dear to me that Tara should be desolate.”²⁸ This translation supposes that the poet has a positive view of Tara which, it has been suggested, reveals a nostalgic attitude towards the pagan past.²⁹ However, the line can better be translated with the opposite meaning, since *cidh* (*var. gidh* – see discussion of quatrain twenty) commonly means ‘even if it be’ or ‘although it be’. In other words, Tara is not pleasing to the poet even though it has been destroyed.³⁰ This reading is lent weight if the line is considered within the context of the structure of the quatrain, but since Colgan’s translation of line two obscured that structure

²⁷ In fact, the dative plural of *rerach* ought to be *rerachaib*.

²⁸ Stokes & Strachan 1901–1903, II 317.

²⁹ See Lambkin 1999, 147 n. 58: “A similar tolerant, almost nostalgic attitude is found in the eighth century *Fiacc’s Hymn*: “is cell mór Dún Lethglasse : ním dil cid díthrub Temair” (Downpatrick is a great church; it is not dear to me that Tara should be desolate). This is emphasised by the attempt of the eleventh century glossators to reverse the sense: “ni hinmain lem Temair cid fas” (not dear to me is Tara though it be desolate), Stokes and Strachan, *Thesaurus* ii, 317.7, 16, 40–41.” Cf. *Félire Óengusso* or the Martyrology of Oengus, Stokes 1905, 24 §165: “Atbath borg tromm Temra/ la tairthim a flathe/ col-lín corad sruithe/ maraid Ard mór Machae” (Tara’s mighty burgh perished at the death of her princes: with a multitude of venerable champions the great Height of Machae (Armagh) abides).

³⁰ Glosses found in the two surviving manuscripts of the poem support this interpretation of the line, as Lambkin points out, though he sees this as evidence of later discomfort with the poet’s supposed sympathies towards paganism.

he had no reason to prefer it to the translation that he eventually opted for, since both are viable interpretations of the Irish text.

In assessing Colgan's translation of *Fiacc's Hymn*, we have focused on problematic passages which reveal the process by which Colgan worked. The Patrician scholar Ludwig Bieler rather sharply asserted that Colgan's translation was of little or no value:

Of Fiacc's hymn and of the Tripartite Life of Saint Patrick, which were originally written in Irish, we have no Latin versions except those by John Colgan, which are practically valueless.³¹

However, this judgement is too harsh. Lacking lexicographical tools or access to most of the now-extant corpus of Old Irish, Colgan managed to interpret with reasonable accuracy language that was almost a thousand years old to produce a broadly accurate version of the majority of the poem. In many instances this is done with considerable elegance, such as his rendering of "ochus cuilche fliuch imme" (and a wet quilt about him) as "cassula amictus madida", or in the numerous places where he employs Biblical phrasing to enhance the sense of Patrick's apostolic character. It is clear that Colgan's governing principles in producing this translation were antiquarian, and that stylistic effects were accordingly of secondary concern to him when compared with the priority of giving a verbally accurate rendering of the Irish text. Nevertheless, the differences between Latin and Old Irish, particularly their habitual modes of conjoining disjunct thoughts through co-ordination and conjunction, naturally shaped the means Colgan had available to him to express the meaning of his source text through idiomatic Latin.

A better sense of the strengths and weaknesses of Colgan's translation style can be gained by comparing it to the Latin translations of Irish verse produced by Roderic O'Flaherty, who was writing some forty years later. O'Flaherty was an antiquarian from Galway whose work is part of a second generation of seventeenth-century scholars who devoted their studies to representing the Irish-language corpus in the world of Latin learning. In 1685, he published a history of Ireland called *Ogygia, seu, Rerum Hibernicarum chronologia*, a title which alludes to the island of Calypso mentioned by Homer, which many scholiasts sought to locate in the Atlantic, and which some Irish scholars identified with Ireland. O'Flaherty drew much of his material from Gaelic Irish sources such as annals and verse chronicles. Like Colgan, he was concerned to quote directly from these in the original language with accompanying translation; however, unlike Colgan, he chooses to render quatrains of Irish verse into Latin hexameter couplets. For example:

³¹ Bieler 1942, preface.

Atá sunn forba feasa: fhear Néirionn gan aincheasa,
Rémeas gach Rígh ro ghabh Gíall: Lóaóghaire go Laóchbhrían.

Vera datur series, quos fudit Hibernia, Regum
Loegari a primis ad tempora summa Briani.³²

The Irish text may be rendered literally as follows:

Here is the foundation of knowledge of the men of Ireland without
[difficulty,
The reign of every king who seized a hostage, [from] Loeghaire to
[heroic Brian].³³

O’Flaherty prints each quatrain as two lines, which is how most Irish verse is set out in manuscript. This clearly helps to keep the correspondence between Irish and Latin, with two distichs parallel on the page; yet it also reflects a notion that we have seen in Colgan’s translation of *Fiacc’s Hymn* that the quatrain is itself a coherent unit of sense. Naturally, the decision to translate the poetry into verse results in a less precise rendering of the source’s meaning. For example, in the case just mentioned, the Latin is not a literal rendering of the Irish but rather distils the essence of the Irish quatrain’s meaning, ignoring words superfluous to the historical content. For example, “gan aincheasa” meaning ‘without difficulty’, refers to the poet’s prowess and is a formulaic bardism typical of the Irish poetry of the period. Since it is a literary trope of little historical relevance to his work, O’Flaherty dispenses with it in his translation.

Nevertheless, O’Flaherty is conscious of the difficulty of maintaining a balance between accuracy, Latinity, and length in his translations. Thus, in the following example, which is a list of common bardic epithets for Ireland, since he is unable to keep his translation down to a distich, O’Flaherty prints the quatrain as four lines but writes three hexameters:

Goirthear teach Tuathail Déirinn,
Cró cuinn, is fonn Finnfeidhlim,
Iath Ugoine, is Eachoidh, Airt,³⁴
Críoch Chobhthaigh, is clár Chormaic

The Irish text may be translated as follows:

Ireland is called the house of Tuathal,
the enclosure of Conn, and the territory of fair Feidhlim,

³² O’Flaherty 1685, 2.

³³ ‘Loeghaire’ is a reference to Laegaire mac Néill, a fifth-century Irish king; ‘Brian’ is a reference to Brian Bórama, an early eleventh-century Irish king.

³⁴ Read *Achadh Airt*.

the country of Ugoine, and field of Art,
the land of Cobhthach, and the plain of Cormac.

O’Flaherty translates it:

Dicta Tuathalii domus Eria, regia quinti:
Fedlimii fundus, plaga Cobthaca, et Hugonis arvum:
Arturi regio, vestrum et Cormace theatrum.³⁵

In this case, O’Flaherty’s translation is quite close to the Irish, although the use of a vocative construction in the last line, and the change in the order of places referred to, are metrical conveniences. In most instances, it is only fragmentary quotations that he chooses to translate, but in several places lengthier quotation is required. In one striking case he is able to employ elegiac couplets, but only by leaving out considerable detail in his translation, with a resulting reduction of three quatrains (printed as distichs) to four lines of Latin verse:

Ní uairiodar loch no linn: an Eránn air a ccionn
Acht trí locha ionradh gann: as deich srotha seanabhann.
Slionnfheadsá go fíor iadsin: Anmann na trí seanlochsín.
Fíonnloch Irrius ucht glain: Loch Lurgan: Loch fordreamain.
Laoi: Buas: Banna: Bearbha buan: Samér: Sligeach: Modhorn: Muadh.
Fíonn: Bife [*sic!*] a Baighnibh [*sic!*] go gleth: is íad sin na seanhaibhne.

The Irish text may be translated literally as follows:

They did not find a lake or a pool: before them in Ireland
Save three lakes of scant fame: and ten streams of old rivers.
I will name those truthfully: the names of those three ancient lakes.
The pure-breasted *Fíonnloch* (fair lake) of *Irrus*: *Loch Lurgan*: *Loch Fordreamhain*.

The *Laoi* (River Lee), the *Buas* (River Bush), the *Banna* (River Bann),
the enduring *Bearbha* (River Barrow), the *Samér* (River Erne), the
Sligeach (River Sligo), the *Modhorn* (River Mourne), the *Muadh*
(River Moy).

The *Fíonn* (River Finn), the *Lífe* (River Liffey) in *Laighin* (Leinster):
these are the ancient rivers.

O’Flaherty translates it:

Fordremannus, Finnloch, Loch-lurgan stagna vetusta:
Quos, quam culta prius, fudit Ierna lacus.
Banna, Sligo, Bosius, Finn, Liffeus, Erna, Modhornus,

³⁵ O’Flaherty 1685, 19.

Berva, Lius, Muadus Flumina prisca decem.³⁶

The technical feat of producing this list of names in metrical form is made easier by the freedom he has allowed himself in the spelling and scansion of Irish names. For example, the double ‘n’ in *Fordremannus*, which represents the final slender ‘n’ of the Irish, is scanned short; the ‘dh’ of *Modhornus* counts as a single consonant; no epenthetic vowel is shown in *Berva*; the ‘i’ in *Lius* is scanned short though it would have been pronounced long; and the Erne and Sligo rivers are Latinised from their English forms rather than representing the Irish *Samer* and *Sligeach*. Further, he has totally omitted to translate the first quatrain, but seems to have felt unable to leave it out altogether from the Irish text, since the streams and rivers mentioned in it are the grammatical antecedent of the pronoun *iadsin* (those) at the start of the second quatrain. In reproducing the entire syntactical unit, O’Flaherty shows sensitivity to his Irish source, whereas the Latin rendering of it appears to be a virtuoso performance designed to entertain and impress his reader rather than to inform him.

Elsewhere in the text O’Flaherty takes this approach to its logical conclusion. Having composed a masterful translation of one quatrain from an Irish poem, he goes on to expand it into his own poem on the same theme as that contained in the quatrain:

Sinsireacht ni ghabhann ceart
A ttír do ghabhtar le neart:
Calmacht na bhfear is ceart ann
Sni sinsireacht fhear nanbhan.

The Irish may be translated as follows:

Seniority does not give a right
in a land which is taken by force.
Bravery of men is fitting there
and not the seniority of weak men.

O’Flaherty translates it:

Senioris agris jus cadit,
queis vi domari contigit:
virtus virorum aetatibus
non cedit imbellum senum.³⁷

This is a remarkable example of O’Flaherty’s ability to compose in lyric metres, in this case the iambic quaternarius, while also producing a very

³⁶ O’Flaherty 164.

³⁷ O’Flaherty 1685, 406–407.

close rendering of the Irish text. The careful structure of the quatrain is evident: it begins with *senioris* and ends with *senum*; there is also a balance between *cadit* and *non cedit*. However, as we have said, O’Flaherty does not content himself with merely translating this quatrain, rather he goes on to write a longer paraphrase, introducing it as: “Quod per Paraphrasim variatis verbis ludens aliquando meditatatus sum” (Which at one time I tried to paraphrase, playing with varied phrases).³⁸ He then goes on to give us his “variata verba”, an original poem which is a paraphrase or adaptation of the sense of the original quatrain into eleven elegiac couplets:

Jus nihil est natale solo, quod quaeritur armis:
fortior imbelli fit seniore prior.
Non fratrum natu, sed robore maximus est dux
in terris, victrix quas premit ense manus.
Non frater senior praestat, sed dignior armis;
cum ruit hostiles vis inimica lares.
Res igitur ferro siquando; non quotus annis,
sed quotus est palmis antefendus erit.
Si plagis subigenda plaga est, maturior aetas
posthabita est ausis praecocis ingenii.
Jura paterna domi seniore ex besse manebunt:
parte ex asse foris prosperioris erunt.
Naturae abripuit virtute, quod illa negarat
tempore; germanum gignier ante suum.
Marte suo, non forte patrum quem laurea cingit,
antevenit meritis tempora iniqua suis.
Concedunt animis anni, spoliisque potitur
non citius genitus, sit nisi Marte prior.
Devictis potitur fundis praestantior armis:
non refert natu an major, utrumve minor?
Junior aut senior partos vi possidet agros
frater uter terris acer, et acer aquis.³⁹

This poem is a literary exercise in creating as many different renderings of the same sentiment as possible within the form of elegiac couplets:

There is no natural right to soil, which is won by arms;
the stronger takes precedence over the unwarlike elder.
Of brothers, not the eldest, but the strongest is leader
in lands that the conquering hand subdues by sword.

³⁸ O’Flaherty 1685, 407.

³⁹ O’Flaherty 1685, 407.

Not the elder brother but the worthiest in arms excels
 when enemy force rushes upon unwelcoming homes.
 Thus if any matter is to be decided by sword, not the
 number of years but victories is to be preferred.
 If by blows a region is to be subdued, older age
 is set aside for deeds of precocious genius.
 Ancestral rights entitle the elder to inheritance at home;
 elsewhere, spoils belong solely to the more successful.
 He takes by virtue of his nature what nature denied
 in time – to be brought forth before his brother.
 By war, not lot of birth, he whom the laurel binds
 circumvents by his own skill inequality of time.
 The years concede to spirit; not the soonest born
 but the best in war acquires the spoils.
 The greatest in arms rules the conquered lands.
 Does it not matter whether one is older or younger?
 By force a brother, be he younger or older, owns
 the fields he has gained, whether strong by sea or land.

The notion of “*variata verba*” underlies O’Flaherty’s approach to translation, to a greater or lesser degree, throughout the *Ogygia*. It is the Irish text which bears the burden of historical evidence in his work, leaving to his translations the role of entertainment. Their virtuosity is indicative of the sense of intellectual flair that characterises the book as a whole, with its wide-ranging diversions through complex Old Irish antiquarian lore, published at a time when the traditional institutions of Gaelic learning were crumbling under pressure from the English regime in Ireland. Yet in his poetic translations, O’Flaherty is unmistakably *ludens* in a way that is not evident in the prose of his antiquarian analyses. The result is an approach to translation which conveys something of the poetic character of his sources without losing the core of their historical import.

What O’Flaherty gained in poetry he lost in accuracy, just as Colgan gained in accuracy what he lost in poetry. The different approaches taken by both men reflect their varying concerns as scholars, but is also part of a larger shift in the intellectual culture of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. In translating into verse, O’Flaherty is concerned to reflect the poetic character of his sources, but the desire to demonstrate his own virtuosity is still more evident. Colgan’s struggles to represent word for word the precise meaning of his sources have no counterpart in O’Flaherty. He gives the appearance of greater accomplishment, but that is a carefully crafted appearance. The free adaptations that he produces are the literary predecessors of the MacPherson forgeries of the mid-eighteenth century,

though without any of the latter's desire to deceive. By printing his sources prior to adapting them, O'Flaherty allowed himself a freedom that was grounded in historical legitimacy. Nevertheless, his poetic translations are intentionally loose and, accordingly, of less heuristic value than Colgan's. It is not always possible to gauge in detail his understanding of the syntax and vocabulary of Old Irish because he does not attempt to convey it with sufficient precision in his translations. Thus, although O'Flaherty may have put more romance into bardic verse, it is through Colgan that we are better able to assess the complexities of rendering bardic verse into a romance language.

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