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Prosodic analysis in manuscript and print: a short text from the bardic era

Pádraig Ó Macháin

INTRODUCTION

THE TRADITION of the documentation and analysis of Irish prosody is as long as the written representation of Irish poetry itself.¹ The continuity of analysis from ancient times to modern, and from script to print, is remarkable: from the *Auraicept* to the latest of the bardic tracts produced in Scotland;² and from these down to Tadhg Ó Donnchadha's *Prosóid Gaedhilge* of 1925, and on to Murphy's *Early Irish Metrics* (1961) and Cáit Ní Dhomhnaill's *Duanaireacht* (1975). As these works from different periods of the tradition indicate, much of the analysis has taken place through the medium of Irish itself, and studies of bardic poetry and metre have been, and continue to be, incremental in their contribution to scholarship.

In the manuscript tradition, the prosodic material has often been presented, to varying degrees, in combination or in association with grammatical, syntactical, and orthographic matter. It is of interest that this tradition has practically always been as concerned with the layout, presentation and contextualisation of this material as has the later print tradition. One may cite, for example, the digests of learning on the Latin alphabet that occur in miscellanies such as the Book of Lecan³ and RIA MS C i 2,⁴ the latter questioningly assigned to the sixteenth century by the manuscript cataloguer. The textual context in which the material is found in

¹I am indebted to the editor, Dr Gordon Ó Riain, for many helpful suggestions from which this paper has benefited greatly.

²Black (1990); Gillies (2005).

³RIA MS 535 (23 P 2), f. 166r.a37–c22. See Meyer (1918).

⁴RIA MS 1234 (C i 2), f. 39. See Kelly (2002).

Lecan is that of gnomic texts accompanied by the *Auraicept* and religious or hagiographical matter. That of C i 2 is largely genealogical, but two hagiographical anecdotes immediately precede. Included as part of a larger miscellany of contemporary learned matter, the tract in this manuscript illustrates another aspect of linguistic and metrical texts in Irish manuscripts, namely the orderly presentation of the material, taking the form, in this case, of the medieval question-and-answer technique, with each question accorded an individual paragraph.

This orderly and deliberate presentation of material is not confined to non-native subject-matter, but is also to be found in the representation of the bardic teaching embodied in the prosodic tracts known to us today under the title of ‘Irish Grammatical Tracts’ and ‘Bardic Syntactical Tracts’. A good example of this from the sixteenth century is the copy of *IGT* II in RIA 24 P 8,⁵ pp. 51–183, where different sizes of initials are employed to distinguish declensional categories from the examples used to illustrate the declensions themselves (e.g. pp. 117, 119, 121). As is well known, this text is flanked in the manuscript by *IGT* I to the front (pp. 3–48) and to the rear by a recension of the syntactical material (pp. 187–242). The Introductory tract is not distinguished by many paragraph-breaks, but some occur towards the end (e.g. pp. 42, 46, 47). The syntactical tract is marked in parts, not just by paragraph division, but by section sub-headings (pp. 216–25, 236).

Such thoughtful layout and presentation of prosodic material is not a palaeographical neologism of the paper era, but a continuation of a long tradition of the representation of grammatical and prosodic writing in manuscript.⁶ We might also cite the orderly layout of the verbal tract (*IGT* III) together with part of the syntactical tract in the sixteenth-century vellum RIA MS C i 3; or, further, the syntactical material in the fragment on folios 3 and 4 of UCD-OFM MS A 10, where the precepts and the exemplary half-quatrains are all given separate lines. This manuscript was not consulted by Fr McKenna for his edition, but the matter preserved on these four pages clearly belongs to a recension of that work.

All of this is, of course, only a continuation of the manner of presentation of earlier prosodic material, the copy of the *Auraicept* in the Book of Lecan

⁵This well-preserved paper manuscript, previously regarded as being of seventeenth-century date, has, as one of its watermarks (visible pp. 21, 27, 39, 45, 57, 75, 89, 105, 123, and 139), a one-handed pot with the letters ‘M I’ in its bowl. This is identical to Briquet (1907: §12767). The samples cited for this all emanate from the Low Countries and date to the 1540s.

⁶Continuity in another direction is represented in 24 P 8 through its ownership by poet and chieftain Seafraigh Ó Donnchadha, who bought the manuscript in Dublin in the mid-seventeenth century, and who contributed a number of notes and jottings to it (*RIA Cat.* Fasc. 18: 2317).

(ff. 151–62) being a good example. The origins of this in turn can be traced to prototypes found in early scholastic material, where St Gallen, Stiftsbibliothek, Cod. Sang. 904 is a true paragon, not just of the representation in manuscript of grammatical writing, but of many other features found in later Irish manuscript tradition also. The points being made here are, firstly, that grammatical and prosodic material in manuscript is generally subject to the same mainstream modalities of presentation as any other genre in Irish learned tradition; secondly, that, as deliberation in presentation or layout frequently extends to a consciousness in the positioning of texts, in Irish and other manuscript traditions, it follows that the manuscript context may contribute to our interpretation of any given text.⁷ We will return to this point later.

THE *RUDIMENTA*

Some of this bardic learning was brought together in a systematic and synthetic way ‘in quatuor partes’ in the work that we are commemorating in this colloquium, *Rudimenta Grammaticae Hibernicae*, the authorship of which has been ascribed to Fr Bonaventura (*al.* Giolla Brighde) Ó hÉódhusa.⁸ In ordering his material into orthography, parts of speech, syntax and prosody, the author was reflecting Latin practice—particularly with regard to the arrangement of the noun into five declensions, as pointed out by Ó Cuív⁹—and also in the sequence and organisation of the first three parts of the work.¹⁰ In imposing the structure of Latin grammatical analysis on the material that he was presenting, the author was conscious, as Mac Aogáin notes, of a readership familiar with that language.¹¹ With regard to the analysis of a vernacular language—if we accept that the *Rudimenta* was produced in the Low Countries—in addition to drawing on Classical models, it may also have been influenced by publications on Dutch that began to appear from the second half of the sixteenth century onwards.¹² For instance, the work entitled *De orthographia linguae Belgicae* by Antonius Sexagius was published at Louvain in 1576, and dealt at length with vowels, diphthongs, triphthongs and consonants in Dutch or Flemish.

The *Rudimenta* may have been further contextualized by the progressive and assimilative attitude of the exiled Irish, which was to give rise to works

⁷Compare comments regarding the positioning of the *Auricept* in late medieval manuscripts: Ahlqvist (1983: 13).

⁸See the contributions of Caoimhín Breatnach and Ailbhe Ó Corráin in the present volume.

⁹Ó Cuív (1956: 99–100).

¹⁰For instance cf. Perotti (1473) and subsequent editions.

¹¹Mac Aogáin (1968: xix).

¹²See Dibbets (1992).

as original and diverse as Ó Cianáin's 'Turus', and Keating's *Foras Feasa*. One can also view it in a general way as being associated with the production of counter-Reformation literature in Louvain at the time, to which context Ó hÉódhúsa's *An Teagasg Críosaíde*, published in 1611, obviously belongs, and which exhibits at the same time a similar openness to contemporary European influences as does the *Rudimenta*.¹³ In turn, the *Rudimenta* was to have great influence on many subsequent commentators, including Fr Francis O'Molloy and Edward Lhuyd. In more modern times, we can see that Eleanor Knott's description of metres in *Tadhg Dall* and *Irish Syllabic Poetry* is indebted to the *Rudimenta*, among other sources, possibly mediated through O'Molloy.¹⁴

The attempts to explain and define bardic metres to an English-speaking audience on the eve of Knott's groundbreaking work would be a study in itself. Such a study would have to refer to writers such as George Sigerson and Eleanor Hull,¹⁵ but perhaps the most significant scholar of the Anglo-Irish tradition, one who is generally overlooked in discussions of this kind, is Douglas Hyde. It could be contended that his explanation of bardic metres—in his *Literary History of Ireland* of 1899 and in his bilingual *Filidheacht Ghaedhealach* of 1902—through the use of loose English translations constructed in imitation of the rhyming and assonantal schemes of syllabic poetry, must have contributed in some way to the scholarly study of this poetry at the beginning of the twentieth century.¹⁶ It would also have helped to explain the intricacies of Irish metre to the same constituency as that addressed by Bergin ten years later in his lecture on bardic poetry. In this regard, Hyde was also, as far as I know, the first scholar to make extended, albeit embellished, use of the passage in the *Memoirs of the Marquis of Clanricarde* subsequently made famous by Bergin;¹⁷ and he was the first to publish the description of the bardic metres from the prosodic work of Tadhg Óg mac Taidhg Dhaill Í Uiginn.¹⁸ The origins of the treatment of metre from O'Molloy to Hyde, Knott and later commentators, can be traced therefore to not much earlier than the seventeenth century. Though remaining in manuscript until the twentieth century, the *Rudimenta* may be considered as being among the foundation-texts of Irish prosodic scholarship in the print tradition.

¹³Mac Raghnaill (1976); Ryan (2013: 169–72).

¹⁴Cf. Knott (1922–26: I, lxxxvi n. 1).

¹⁵Sigerson (1897: 32–3); Hull (1906: I, 234–5).

¹⁶Hyde (1901: 518–23); Hyde (1902: 104–113).

¹⁷Hyde (1901: 528–9); Hyde (1902: 94–101); Bergin (1912–13 (= Bergin 1970): 5–8).

¹⁸An Craoibhín (1932).

Comparison between the work of Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn and Part IV of the *Rudimenta*—the section specifically ascribed in one witness to Ó hEodhusa—brings out another point of interest. On the evidence of *Mittelirische Verslehren* the traditional exposition of metres seems to have been confined to definition by example. In part IV of the *Rudimenta* we are provided with a presentation of the ‘chúig [*sic*] aisdeadhá prinsiópálta nó oirdhearca’¹⁹ that involves detailed analysis of the syllabic components of the metres, together with specifications concerning rhyme, consonance (where present) and alliteration. To each analytic piece is then appended an illustrative example. This exhaustive approach to the description of metres is in keeping with the comprehensive thrust of other sections of the *Rudimenta*. That its origins lie somewhere other than in the Latin continental influences evident, for example, in the innovative declensional analysis of the nominal system, is suggested by the fact that Tadhg Óg’s tract—misleadingly titled ‘Graiméar Uí M[h]aolchonaire’—contains a description of the main metres that is identical in approach to that of Ó hEódhusa, and, if anything, is more comprehensively analytic still in its treatment of *séadna* and *rannaigheacht mhór* in particular.²⁰

This seems to suggest that both scholars are independently reflecting a native analysis of the metres that, for whatever reason, does not appear in the surviving vestiges of the bardic tradition prior to the early seventeenth century. This in turn serves to re-focus our attention on the manuscript tradition, and prompts us to ask if it contains any further hints of earlier prosodic analysis not previously noted. It happens that a very short text, an abstract of the principal bardic metres, survives in at least two sources. Adrift from any overtly pedagogical context, and despite its brevity, this abstract must still have been a part of bardic educational material, perhaps bearing a relationship to the substantial bardic tracts as part of a student primer might to an advanced textbook. This text contributes in a very small way, therefore, to our knowledge of the existence of expository bardic material, peripheral to the mainstream tracts.

THE PREFATORY MATERIAL IN RIA 23 D 4

RIA MS 23 D 4 is one of the seventeenth-century manuscripts catalogued by T. F. O’Rahilly in the first fasciculus of the Royal Irish Academy catalogue

¹⁹Mac Aogáin (1968: line 2700); see Mac Cárthaigh (2014: 166).

²⁰Mac Aogáin (1968: lines 3628–3689). Hyde’s opinion on the matter is worth quoting: ‘Saoilim go raibh leabhar de’n tsórt céadna ag gach file le linn an Dán Díreach do bheith i n-uachtar, agus saoilim nach raibh acht dithfridheachta beaga idir na cóipeannaibh do bhíodh ag na filibh’ (An Craoibhín 1932: 139).

under the heading ‘Scholastic verse’.²¹ Like the other manuscripts catalogued with it, it is an intriguing book in its own right. It is, for example, along with National Library of Scotland Advocates MS 72.1.44,²² one of the earliest instances in an Irish manuscript of poems being consistently laid out in one *ceathramha* per line of manuscript,²³ a layout earlier anticipated in parts of Advocates MS 72.1.37, the Book of the Dean of Lismore (e.g. pp. 85–6), and in print in both John Carswell’s *Foirm na nUrrnuidheadh* in 1567²⁴ and in the broadsheet of Pilib Bocht Ó hUiginn’s ‘Tuar ferge foighide Dhé’.²⁵ This arrangement, though implicit in the very term *ceathramha* (‘a fourth part’), appears to be confined to manuscripts of the paper tradition.

Manuscript 23 D 4 contains a large and important miscellany of bardic poetry in the broadest definition of the term, both *dán díreach* and lighter verse: what appears to have been the opening item in that miscellany was an Ossianic poem, now acephalous. Of particular note is its collection of *dánta grádha*, which ensured that it was among the manuscripts utilized by O’Rahilly for his famous publication of 1916 and subsequent editions.²⁶ With regard to the arrangement of the manuscript contents, it is notable that the collection of poems is preceded by religious material: the Catechism, the Confetior, and versions of the rosary (involving a change in script to a neat Latin book-hand where Latin text occurs at pp. 21–23) which may give to the manuscript, otherwise undated,²⁷ a Counter-Reformation milieu similar to the one in which the *Rudimenta* may have been produced.²⁸

This prefatory catechetical and devotional material is followed by a brief metrical tract, after which the collection of poetry proper begins. The metrical notes occupy a page and a half (pp. 24–5), and consist of short notices of the five principal metres, the ‘chúig aisdeadha oirdhearca’ of the *Rudimenta* (line 2621): *deibhidhe*, *séadna*, *rannaigheacht mhór*, *rannaigheacht bheag*, and *casbhairdne* (the order in the *Rudimenta* is *deibhidhe*, *séadna*, *rannuigheacht mhór*, *casbhairdne* and *rannuigheacht bheag*). The first four of these are indeed the metres that are most commonly found in the surviving corpus of bardic poetry, with *casbhairdne* and *ae fhreislighe* competing for a poor fifth

²¹*RIA Cat.* Fasc. 1, 30.

²²See Ó Macháin (1994).

²³The arrangement of two lines of poetry per manuscript line is found only on pp. 164–7, 174–84, and 379–82.

²⁴Thomson (1970).

²⁵Ó Cuív (1994: 193–4).

²⁶O’Rahilly (1916); Ó Rathile (1925: viii).

²⁷One of the watermarks contains the triplet ‘A/B P’ (e.g. pp. 139, 229, 239), so far unidentified.

²⁸O’Dwyer (1998: 212–13).

place,²⁹ though *casbhairdne* comes into its own in the Maguire *duanaire*.³⁰ The text is reproduced in full as text I below.

The noteworthy aspect of this tract is the reduction of the description of the metres to their bare syllabic essentials.

Thus, *deibhidhe*:

‘Seven syllables in the line and the last word of the second line has a syllable more than the last word of the first line.’³¹

Séadna:

‘Eight syllables in the first line and its last word is a disyllabic word. Seven syllables in the second line and a monosyllabic word at its end et cetera.’

Rannaigheacht mhór

‘Seven syllables in a line of it and a monosyllabic word as the end-word of every line.’

Rannaigheacht bheag

‘Seven syllables in a line of it and a disyllabic word as the end-word of every line.’

And *casbhairdne* (MS *casbhairrnidheacht*³²):

‘Seven syllables in a line of it and a trisyllabic word as the last word in its every line.’

With regard to the exemplary quatrains that accompany these descriptions, it is to be observed in passing that the first is written by the scribe according to the single-column pattern of one half-quatrain per manuscript line that became well established in the sixteenth century, and the remainder according to the layout of the rest of the manuscript; showing that the scribe’s use of

²⁹Ó Cuív (1968: 277); cf. An Craoibhín (1932: 144); Breatnach (2000).

³⁰Ó Macháin (2013: 682–3); Ó Macháin (2015b).

³¹I assume here that the first instance of *céadcheathramhan* is a slip for *ceathramhan*.

³²This appears to be a *hapax*, possibly formed through analogy with *rannaigheacht* etc.

the four-line layout—noted above—was not determined by considerations of available space. These five exemplary quatrains are all drawn from religious bardic poetry. Four have been identified to date.

The first is the quatrain exemplifying the metre *séadna*: ‘Lochrann corcra na ccoíg solus . . .’. This is the second quatrain of an anonymous poem beginning *Lóchrann chúig sholas Sainct Phroinsias*, edited by Cuthbert Mhág Craith from the earliest manuscript copy, that in the Göttingen MS dating to 1659.³³ He translates as follows: ‘The mystic fivefold illuminary, guiding all on the way to heaven—one must finally turn to him for guidance in the path upwards.’

The second is that illustrating *rannaigheacht mhór*: ‘Truagh a Eabha is goire ar ngaoil . . .’. This is q. 11 of a poem beginning *Do briseadh cunnradh ar cách* found uniquely, and unascibed, in the seventeenth-century TCD MS 1340 (H 3. 19, ‘The Tinnakill Duanaire’), from which it was edited by Lambert McKenna,³⁴ and translated by him as: ‘A pity, O Eve, thou didst not act as other women—they love to reveal a secret; seeing our connection with thee, it is not in the nature of us (men) to deny our sin.’³⁵

The third, exemplifying *rannaigheacht bheag*—‘Gár néanlaith níor fhás eiteall . . .’—is q. 13 of an unedited poem beginning *Níor tógbhadh éruic Íosa*,³⁶ ascribed to ‘Túathal ón Cháinti’ in the unique copy in the seventeenth-century manuscript NLS Adv. 72.1.49, f. 16. This may be translated: ‘Our birdflock did not learn to fly, [but] our sin grew from its roots, one day with us the next day against us: it was [fore]told to us by a woman’s word.’

The fourth is the one exemplifying *casbhairdne*: ‘Guais leam neart na núachórach . . .’. This is the seventh quatrain of a poem beginning *Diol molta maor tighearna*, attributed to Aonghus Ó Dálaigh, and edited with other poems of his by Fr McKenna.³⁷ His translation reads: ‘I fear the severity of [the renewed]³⁸ justice in view of the anger of the King’s wounded heart. Lessen the just claim of the wound-marked breast. Help O steward my failing.’ Unidentified to date is the quatrain exemplifying *deibhidhe*, which translates: ‘O man who sighs, there is a danger that doing so will anger God; abandon all other sighing and believe in the sighs of penitence’.

Were this seventeenth-century manuscript the only source for the bardic text, one would be inclined to regard the treatment of *dán díreach* metres

³³Mhág Craith (1967–80) Poem 20.

³⁴Mac Cionnaith (1938) Poem 21.

³⁵McKenna (1930: 591).

³⁶Identification by Dr Gordon Ó Riain.

³⁷McKenna (1919) Poem 31.

³⁸Left blank by McKenna.

therein as an end-of-era composition, an attempt to capture the bare essentials of bardic metre at a time when the bardic system was in decline. That such was not the case, however, is shown by the fact that a version of this text is also found in a much earlier source.

THE TEXT IN TCD MS 667

The minimalist, syllables-only, description of the metres is reminiscent of the treatment of *rindaird* in the preface to *Féilire Óengusa*: ‘Six syllables in every line, and twelve in the half-quatrain, and twenty-four in the whole quatrain, and if there be more or less it is an error.’³⁹ The 23 D 4 text has even more in common, however, with a text found in a fifteenth-century manuscript, and in a context of manuscript decoration that, as far as bardic teaching goes, is elaborate, if not indeed exotic, in its presentation. This earlier text occupies twenty-eight lines of a mainly Latin manuscript that David Greene described as ‘that great compendium of medieval literature’.⁴⁰ The book is TCD MS 667 (F 5. 3), a vellum manuscript containing 254 octavo-sized pages. The bulk of the manuscript presents a number of scribal hands writing the Latin texts in double column, and in a script which, in the opinion of Marvin Colker, displays a mixture of Anglicana and secretary forms.⁴¹ As an exception to this, matter on the first eight leaves (pp. 165–181a15) of the eleventh gathering—a gathering of twelve—is written in Gaelic script, and these leaves were assigned a separate manuscript number (1699) for the purposes of the catalogue of Abbott and Gwynn.⁴²

Our text is reproduced below as text II. It begins on p. 178b30 and finishes on p. 179a18 of TCD MS 667. Its textual context is that of a collection of generally brief moral and gnomic texts, some of which, as pointed out by Abbott and Gwynn, are also to be found in the *Liber Flavus Fergusiorum* (RIA MS 23 O 48). It is preceded, in the same scribal hand, by a short piece on the twelve types of penitence, and is immediately followed, in a different hand (*pace* Abbott and Gwynn) by a bardic poem on a moral subject, *Táinic ceo tar in creideamh*.⁴³ The prose resumes thereafter with brief notes on the ages of the world and on Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, before the Latin texts and

³⁹‘sé sillæba in cach cethrumthain 7 .xii. isin lethrand .xx.iii. immorro isin rand chomlan, et si sit plus minusue error est’: Stokes (1905: 5).

⁴⁰Greene (1944: 220).

⁴¹Colker (1991: II, 1123–64).

⁴²Abbott and Gwynn (1921: 323–5).

⁴³Edited from later manuscripts in Mac Cionnaith (1938) Poem 57, where the speculative attribution to Eochaidh Ó hEódhusa is to be ignored.

the Anglicana script begin again at p. 181a16 with a collection of epigrams and commonplaces, of a type that punctuates the larger texts in the manuscript as a whole. By way of signing off, it would seem, on this interlude of Gaelic texts, there is a note in the lower margin of that column, which reads: ‘Beatha is slainti and so o *Cormac mac Eoghain dfer an leabair seo*’ (‘Life and health here from Cormac mac Eóghain to the owner of this book’), in a hand that is neither that of the metrical notes nor that of the bardic poem.

As with the text in 23 D 4, this text again concerns the five pre-eminent metres: *deibhidhe*, *séadna*, *rannaigheacht mhór*, *rannaigheacht bheag*, and *casbhairdne*. In the manuscript it has the appearance of a filler item at the end of p. 178. Against that, however, the initials, both of the paragraphs and of the exemplary quatrains, are rubricated, even if they are in contrast to the flourished decoration and the alternating blue and red in the initials of the items that immediately precede. In addition, we may note that five distinct paragraphs are allotted to the five metres, with unfilled lines at the end of paragraphs 1, 3 and 4, such space bespeaking a conscious preoccupation with layout, and a consequent disregard for the usual scribal concern to fill out every line.⁴⁴

The curiosity value of the text in this earlier manuscript is accentuated by the fact that it was written without too much attention to strict orthographical propriety, for we note modern spellings such as *deibhi* and *senda* in the names of the metres; and note also *moir* for *mór*, *ach* for *acht*, and *baibhi* for *baidhbhi*. This is not the same as saying that the scribe was careless towards his subject matter, as the layout of the piece shows, but perhaps at this point he had no exemplar other than that of his memory.

With regard to content, no more than its later relative in 23 D 4, it is unlikely that any store is to be set by the order of the metres here: *rannuigheacht mhór* and *bheag*, *deibhidhe*, *séadna* and *casbhairdne*.⁴⁵ What is of interest, however, is the similar manner in which the metres are described. It is cryptic in the extreme, concentrating exclusively on the number of syllables per line, and on the presence or absence of consonance (*uaithe*). No mention is made of either rhyme or alliteration.

If we take the example of *casbhairdne*, our text reads as follows:

An chasbhairdne annso .7. silla i ngac ceathrumhuin agus .3.
hsilla ina huaithe amuil ata so

⁴⁴Ó Macháin (2011: 191).

⁴⁵Dr Eoin Mac Cárthaigh, however, suggested (at the colloquium) that the order here might reflect the author’s perception of the relative popularity of these metres at the time of composition.

This may be translated: ‘*Casbhairdne* here: seven syllables in every line and three syllables consonating thus’.

We can contrast this with the comprehensive treatment accorded the same metre in the *Rudimenta*:

As am[h]luidh bhíos an chasbhairn, bídh uaim 7 seachd siolla is gach ceathramhuin di. Bíd focuil déigheancha na [g]ceathramhan ag teachd d’uathne re chéile. Bíd focuil déig[h]eancha an tsheolaidh 7 an leathrainn ag teachd a gcomhardadh re chéile. Bíd na focuil oile ag tabhairt freagra do réir chomhardaidh san leathrann 7 do réir amuis san tsheoladh ar a chéile. Focuil trí siolla bhíos ar dheireadh na gceathramhan.⁴⁶

‘*Casbhairn* is as follows: there are alliteration and seven syllables in every line of it. The final words of the lines consonate with each other. The final words of the first and [second] half-quatrain rhyme with each other. The other [stressed] words correspond to each other according to rhyme in the [second] half-quatrain, and according to assonance in the first half-quatrain. The lines end in trisyllabic words.’

The description of *deibhidhe* in the MS 667 text is even more cryptic:

In deibhi .7. silla a ngac *ceathrumhain* di *agus* rand *curter* ria *agus* ni huathne *mur* ata so

A translation of this might be: ‘*Deibhidhe*: seven syllables in every line of it and *rand* is applied to it, and not *uathne*, thus’. We might take *rand* to mean ‘division’ here, referring to the *rind/airdrinn* division in the *deibhidhe* quatrain, but it is probably a case of substitution for *rind*.⁴⁷

Turning to the exemplary quatrains, of the four and a half that are cited I have identified the source of only one of these to date, though it is hoped that further identifications may emerge in due course. That is the quatrain exemplifying *deibhidhe*, ‘Blaithi na blaesg na huighi . . .’, which is quatrain 34 of the poem beginning *An tú arís a ráith Teamhrach*, addressed to Aodh Ó Conchubhair, King of Connacht 1293–1309, and edited by E. C. Quiggin

⁴⁶Mac Aogáin (1968) lines 2684–90.

⁴⁷On confusion of the two words in non-prosodic contexts see *DIL* R 12.29–39; cf. *rannaibh* > *reannaibh* in the quatrain mentioned below.

in 1913,⁴⁸ the second half-quatrain of which is also cited in *IGT* III.⁴⁹ Quiggin translates the quatrain as: ‘Smoother than the egg’s shell is the mansion of Caenraighe’s Raven; every drop runs off it without⁵⁰ wetting, even as it would run off a water-fowl.’

The quatrain illustrative of *rannaigheacht mhór* might be translated: ‘I cry no tear other than a red tear, should I do so I would regret it; my eyelashes emitting drops from the top, as a raspberry-tree above it’. This translation assumes emending *fhabhra* to plural *fhabhradha* in the third line as the line wants a syllable, and *in* to *ón* in the same line. Note that *lind* (which might be emended to singular *liom*) represents the form of the first person plural prepositional pronoun with non-palatal *-nn*, a form prohibited in the syntactical tracts.⁵¹

The quatrain exemplifying *rannaigheacht bheag* would also require editorial intervention, specifically with regard to reading *nÚra*⁵² in the second line, and *Úna* in the last line. The quatrain might be translated: ‘I lament the situation of Síodh Aodha in the absence of the king of fair Magh nÚra: noble/free under the powerful tree was the fair branch of the race of Úna’.⁵³

The quatrain in *séadna* requires no serious intervention, except for altering *rannaibh* to *reannaibh* in the fourth line. It translates: ‘They conceal gaiety from the grieving man—he cannot avoid listening to music—the sounds of the birds of spring squeeze streams of tears from the pupils of the eyes.’ And finally the translation of the half-quatrain in *casbhairdne* must remain doubtful due to the uncertainty of the manuscript reading in the second line, yet the overall sense must be ‘The fruit of the country falling heavily, which [?] obviates the need for] severity in contracts’.⁵⁴

TEXTS AND CONTEXTS

Comparing the tract in both sources, notwithstanding the use of different exemplary quatrains, there is no doubt that we are dealing essentially with the same text. The wording in the descriptions is virtually identical, with

⁴⁸Quiggin (1913: 346).

⁴⁹McManus (1997: 92). This quatrain is discussed by Prof. McManus in his contribution to the present volume (p. 228).

⁵⁰Reading *gan* for *don* in line *c*; our text translates ‘every drop of the wetting runs off of it’.

⁵¹*BST* 194.16.

⁵²For Magh nÚra see, for example, Gwynn (1903–35) Poem 4; and Toner (2007: 169).

⁵³Or: ‘my powerful tree was noble, the fair branch of the race of Úna’ (suggested by Dr Gordon Ó Riain).

⁵⁴MS *cunnartaibh* must be read as *cunnarthaibh* for consonance, as pointed out by Dr Gordon Ó Riain.

the exception that the detail of the number of syllables in the final word of the line in the later text has been substituted for the number of syllables in the consonating word (in the metres where consonance is a requirement) of the text in MS 667.

The similarity between the two texts is obvious. Take the respective descriptions of *rannuigheacht mhór* for example:

In rannuidheacht mhoir .7. silla i ngac ceathrumhain di agus aentshilla ana uaithne mur ata so (MS 667) ‘Rannaigheacht Mhór: seven syllables in every line of it, and one syllable consonating thus.’

Aisde rannuidheachta móire Seacht siolla isin cheathramhain di agas focal aointsiolla mar fhocal deaghnach gach éincheathraman (MS 23 D 4) ‘The metre of Rannaigheacht Mhór: seven syllables in a line of it and a monosyllabic word as the end-word of every line.’

This shows that the 23 D 4 text is not a distillation peculiar to the close of the bardic era, but rather that it has its origins in the high bardic period, and that it may therefore have had some elementary function within the system of bardic education. Separated by roughly two hundred years, there may be more points of comparison between the two versions of this ephemeral tract than the mere textual, however. For instance, returning to the point made earlier about the manuscript context contributing to our interpretation of any given text, one could argue that the location of the tract in the two manuscripts casts light on its role in both cases.

In 23 D 4 it is found as part of what was clearly intended as a preamble to the main contents of the manuscript, the miscellany of bardic verse. The catechetical and devotional matter that precedes the tract may be evidence of the times in which the book was compiled, and this theme is continued for the short duration of the metrical text itself. It might be coincidental, but the choice of exemplary quatrains—which must have been substituted for earlier examples—reads like a continuous commentary in itself on Man’s fallen condition and on the need for repentance and redemption.

In MS 667, as already stated, the metrical notes are followed in the manuscript, in a different scribal hand, by a copy of the poem lamenting indifference to religion, and beginning *Táinic ceo tar in creideamh* (note 43 above).⁵⁵ It is obvious, in a manuscript where no other bardic verse is found,

⁵⁵The hand displays many features that are idiosyncratic, such as elongation of the second minims of *u* and open *a*; the occasional representation of double *r* with one looped over the other; and a

and despite the separation of hands, that there is a connection between the bardic poem and the short tract that precedes it. In both the immediate context of the gnomic material in Irish that surrounds it, and in that of the contents of the manuscript as a whole, there is a sense that the subject of prosody itself is being regarded here as a matter for consideration among all the other moral material that makes up this great and broad collection of medieval wisdom literature,⁵⁶ in the same way, perhaps, as the text on the Latin alphabet in the Book of Lecan, mentioned earlier.

In both manuscripts, therefore, in its function as a preamble to what follows, this text presents a summary of the primary bardic metres that clearly was not and could not have been intended to be in any way comprehensive. Instead, it is an adequate summary of a core metrical feature of bardic poetry: that it is syllabic. In comparison with the detailed material in *IGT* and *BST* the tract is of course idiosyncratic, and practically extra-bardic. Yet the fact that it is found in a fifteenth-century source shows that it probably had some expository function in a bardic environment, presumably at a very primary level. In the context of the shared metrical teaching of Ó hEódhusa and Ó hUiginn referred to earlier, our text may therefore be regarded as affording a further glimpse, if fleeting, of a tradition of bardic teaching not discernible in the late medieval tracts.

In its positioning in 23 D 4 in particular, the text reminds one of the emergence of explanatory material on the rudiments of the Irish language in both print and manuscript in the Elizabethan era, especially in works where the readership was not expected to have any training in the language, one of the formal differentiating features between the catechisms of Seaán Ó Cearnaigh and Giolla Brighde Ó hEódhusa. In manuscript, the clearest articulation of the need for exposition is to be seen in the inchoate attempt at formulating a description of the Irish language in the manuscript Primer prepared for Elizabeth I by Christopher Nugent, Baron Delvin. For this Primer, in turn, may be claimed an association with Ó Cearnaigh's *Aibidil*.⁵⁷

The Primer is of course exceptional in its brevity and in the manner of its presentation of information on the Irish language. Yet, for all that, it has its place in the history of linguistic instruction in Irish, while at the same time being reckoned among the ephemera of that tradition. Summary descriptions of Irish continued in the seventeenth century, in works such as John Brody's

unique form of *Do* (p. 179b31). The text is presented in standard two-column format, with extensive use of *ceann fo eite*. In addition, the ornamentation is continued with rubrication of initials.

⁵⁶For further treatment of this aspect of MS 667 see Ó Macháin (2015: 343–4).

⁵⁷Ó Macháin (2012).

‘Introduction to the knowledge of reading, and writing the Irish tongue’ of 1640, prepared for the sixth Earl of Thomond.⁵⁸ This practice grew in the post-bardic era, and in the eighteenth century in particular, when alphabets, grammars and notes on prosody are included with increased frequency as material in manuscripts, sometimes as prefatory material.⁵⁹ Their function in many such cases is as an explanation of the language to a readership not thoroughly familiar with it—whose numbers were increasing as Ascendancy interest and patronage became a growing feature of Irish manuscript production of the time—and also possibly as part of the conscious effort to preserve a record of bardic art, which by then had become practically a lost literature.

It is in this context that comparisons may be made between the present texts and that written by Christopher Beaton in the ‘Black Book of Clanranald’ in the early seventeenth century, one of the late Scottish texts mentioned at the beginning of this paper. The latter is a brief guide on how to read and write Irish—for which knowledge of vowels, consonants and declension is required—and on how to compose a verse of *dán díreach*, which requires knowledge of the five metres (*deibhidhe*, *séadna*, *rannaigheacht mhór* and *bheag*, and *casbhairdne*).⁶⁰ Similar in thrust if not identical in wording, the summary of these metres recalls those in the texts discussed here, in the same way that the summary of the vowels and consonants recalls those of Nugent and Ó Cearnaigh. William Gillies, the editor of this text, suggests a function for this short text that parallels that of the ‘Clanranald histories’ of Niall Mac Mhuirich: ‘to epitomize the knowledge of the professional poet-historians for the benefit of his patrons at a time of anglicisation and social change, or to educate a younger generation of poets who would no longer have recourse to the learned infrastructure of the Classical period’.⁶¹

This harvesting and digesting of knowledge for the uninitiated is not greatly distant from the character of the text discussed in this paper, or from that of the explicatory material that appeared in Irish manuscripts from the seventeenth century onwards. In the eighteenth century, the grammar, or excerpts from the grammar, of Hugh McCurtin (Aodh Buidhe Mac Cruitin) was employed in this function, and became a resort for those supplying this new if small market, principally because it was written in English.⁶²

⁵⁸Oxford MS F.2.34 Linc., ff. 3–7. A study of this text is in preparation.

⁵⁹Examples of manuscripts of this type would be RIA MSS 23 I 13, 23 I 23, and Bodleian MS Ir e 6.

⁶⁰Gillies (2005).

⁶¹Ibid., 67.

⁶²Ó Macháin (2012b).

Before the publication of Mac Cruitín's book, other works were copied, in which the influence of the last of the bardic grammarians was even stronger. National Library of Ireland MS G 127 is an outstanding example of this. It was written by Richard Tipper of Castleknock, 1713–15, and contains a fine collection of bardic poetry, prefaced to which are grammatical and prosodic compendia, and copies of the two prosodic tracts ascribed respectively to Ó hUiginn and Ó hEódhusa. It signals at once indebtedness to the past and anticipation of a trend that would continue into the printed tradition as it gathered pace in the nineteenth century. It could be, therefore, that the inclusion of the epitome of bardic metres as part of the prefatory matter in 23 D 4—itself a comprehensive bardic anthology, as already stated—indicates that this book is to be interpreted as one that was prepared for some devout reader, now unknown, who was not thoroughly schooled in bardic knowledge.

Although one might be tempted, therefore, to regard the short tract discussed here as a piece of bardic trivia, it is a text that dates from at least the mid-fifteenth century, from the bardic era itself in other words, and, through its recycling in 23 D 4, it connects with the later tradition also. It is also a text that is indicative of some general points that may be made about bardic prosody and how it could be viewed at a remove from the detailed scholarship of the tracts of the poets, or indeed from the synthetic work of the *Rudimenta*. Despite its mnemonic brevity and its seemingly peripheral status, this text is still to be reckoned as part of the variety of bardic prosodic material.

Separated from any formal pedagogical context, the text could be deployed with versatility. In the two contexts that we have looked at here it appears to have served a prefatory function to the material that followed it, in ways that were not dissimilar but that differed slightly in emphasis. In MS 667, the earlier source, as well as introducing the following bardic poem, it is implicit from the textual environment that both tract and poem were being regarded as legitimate members of the broad family of wisdom literature; and we recall that, in the Middle Ages and later, grammar was seen as the gateway to the sciences and the liberal arts.⁶³ In MS 23 D 4 it was adapted, in the first place, as a template by which the moral tone set by the catechetical and devotional material that preceded it might be continued; and in the second place, it served as a brief guide to the syllabic nature of the big collection of bardic poetry that followed.

⁶³Murphy (1974: 137–8); cf. the comments on the twin study of Latin grammar and the Bible in early Ireland in Ahlqvist (1983: 14–15).

In the use made of both versions of the text, it is implicit that bardic verse is itself, at its core, a moral art form. In this way, the context in which this innocuous-looking text occurs in the two manuscripts affords us insights into the nature of bardic poetry that are not readily forthcoming from far more substantial collections of bardic prosodic data.

TEXTS

I

RIA MS 23 D 4, pp 24–5

Aisdi an dána annso síos agas *ar* tús

Aisde debhí

Seacht siolla isin cheathramhuin agas siolla breisi ag focal déaghnach na céadcheathramhan deanuidhe ar fhocal deaghnach na céadcheathramhan.

Baoghal a fhir na hosnadh.
fearg ag Dia ma deanamhsan
 leig don osnadhag eile.
 créid dosnadhagh aithridhe

Aisde séadna

Ocht siolla isin chédcheathramhain⁶⁴ agas focal da shiolla *mar* fhocal deaghnach. *seacht* siolla isin ttara ceathramhain agas focal aointsiolla na deireadh *et cetera*

Lochrann corcra na ccóig solus
 ag seóladh cáich don tigh thuas
 dul na leith fa dheoig do dligheadh
 do bhreith eoil na slighe súas

Aisde rannuidheachta móire

Seacht siolla isin cheathramhain di agas focal aointsiolla *mar* fhocal deaghnach gach éincheathraman

⁶⁴*chéad* inserted by scribe with caret-mark.

Truagh a Eabha is goire ar ngaoil
 séana ar ccoire níor dhual duinn
 nár ionann réim dheit is dáibh
 meinn do na mnáibh reic a ruin

[p. 25]

Aisde rannuidheachta bige

Seacht siolla isin cheathramhain dhi agus focal dá shiolla *mar* fhocal
 deaghnach gach éincheathramhan

Gár néanlaith níor fhás eiteall
 fás o phreamhaibh gar bpeacadh
 lá linn is lá dar locadh
 dfocal mná rinn do reacadh

Aisde chasbhairrnidheachta

Seacht siolla isin cheathramhain agus focal trí siolla a ndeaghnach gach
 éincheathramhan dhi.

Guais leam neart na núachórach
 fa cheann reachta an rioghthaobha
 sgaoil do chóir don chioghala
 fóir a mhaoir mo mhiothaoma.

II

TCD MS 667, pp 178b30–179a18

In rannuidheacht mhoir .7. silla i ngac ceathrumhain di *agus* aentshilla ana
 uaithe *mur ata so*

Ni *der* dhailim ach *der* dhonn
 da ndaileinn do budh lean lind.
 mhfhabhra a *cur* braen in bharr
mur crand subh craebh osa chind

In rannuidheacht bec annso .7. silla i ngac ceathrumhain di *agus* 2. shilla ina
 huaithe *mur ata so*

Leasg lim suighi sith aedha
 gan righ *finnmuighi mnura*.
 fa saer mu bile buadha
craebh cuana dfhine uana

[p. 179a]

In deibhi .7. silla a ngac *ceathrumhain* di agus rand *curter* ria agus ni huaithe
mur ata so

Blaithi na blaesg na huighi
 bruighean baibhi caenruidhe
tedh don fhleochadh gac deor di
mur do deochadh deon uisgi

Senda .8. silla sa *cead ceathrumhain* di agus .7. silla sa .2. *ceathramhain*
 agus .8. silla sa .3. *ceathrumhain* agus a .7. fa dheoigh amuil ata so

Ceilid aibhnus ar *fer cumhaidh*
 le ceol deisdecht ni fed cosg.
 faisgid gotha eon an *earraigh*
 srotha deor a *rannaibh* rosg

An chasbhairrdne ann so .7. silla i ngac *ceathrumhuin* agus .3. hsilla ina
 huaithe amuil ata so

Cnuas na tire a *tromfhearthain*.
*nac brigh*⁶⁵ *cruas* a *cunnartaibh*

⁶⁵MS br with suspension-stroke over r.