Rhetoric of Myth, Magic, and Conversion: Ancient Irish Rhetoric

> *Of our conflicts with others we make rhetoric; of our conflicts with ourselves we make poetry—William Butler Yeats*

Our first tendency is to look outside Europe when searching for ancient rhetorics that do not follow the Greco-Roman tradition. After all, much of European culture was strongly influenced by Roman culture, especially following the conquests of Julius Caesar in 58-51 BCE and subsequent conquests that brought most of Europe under Roman control. Rome's civic practices, including variations of Greco-Roman rhetoric, were eventually taught in most parts of the continent. Even after the fall of the Roman Empire in 476 A.D., Greco-Roman rhetoric continued to flourish in Europe, because St. Augustine, a generation earlier, had re-purposed it for the Roman Catholic Church in his *On Christian Doctrine* (426 A.D.).

Ireland, however, offers us an interesting exception to Romanized Europe. The island's remoteness allowed it to preserve much of its Celtic culture while keeping at arm's length the cultural influences of Rome and much of medieval Europe. The Irish traded with the Roman world, and eventually they were converted to Christianity after the arrival of St. Patrick in 431 AD. Nevertheless, Irish culture stood apart from European culture, especially during the crucial period of the so-called "Dark Ages" from the fifth to ninth centuries. It was not until the date 1172 AD, when England's Henry II conquered Ireland, that we might mark Ireland's capitulation to European civic and educational practices—and then only as a conquered people. Even Ireland's conversion to Christianity left intact many Celtic religious rituals, civic practices, and educational traditions, because the "Celtic Church" was mostly autonomous from the Roman Catholic Church. Indeed, these Celtic ways, including the unique rhetoric at their heart, still shape Ireland today.

In some ways, ancient Ireland offers us a time capsule for exploring rhetoric in pre-Roman Europe. While much of Europe was mired in the Dark Ages that followed the collapse of Rome in the fifth century, the Irish educational system and civic structure flourished. Irish monasteries, universities, and libraries became stable places of learning, preserving not only Irish culture but much of the intellectual tradition of Europe. When the rest of Europe finally stabilized in the ninth century, itinerant Irish priests and monks were partly responsible for re-introducing important intellectual and spiritual traditions of Western culture to Europe. Historians like Thomas Cahill and Philip Freeman might disagree about whether the Irish "saved civilization," as Cahill asserts, but they agree that Irish culture was left mostly intact while other Europeans suffered some of their lowest moments (O Corrain 10-14; Pennick 82). For this reason, the Irish have always treasured and preserved their legends and histories, because they consider their contemporary culture to be an uninterrupted continuation of the past. While other European nations have been conquered and re-conquered—allowing the victors to write, erase, and rewrite history again—the Emerald Isle has enjoyed a comparatively continuous history from prehistory to the present.

In this article, we will show that the Irish employed a rhetoric that was decidedly different from the familiar Greco-Roman rhetorics of Europe. Admittedly, this article raises many more issues than it concludes. After all, no one, as far as we can tell, has done any comprehensive work on ancient Irish rhetoric, so this article will stitch together only the available scraps of evidence. There are enough scraps, however, to show that the Irish developed their own civic and educational practices, which—though touched by Rome—also stand outside of the Greco-Roman tradition.

Rural Ireland: A Chronological and Mythological History

To begin, our initial premise is that the ancient Irish employed a rhetoric that was narrative-based and identification-centered, making it more suitable to their primarily rural lives. Before the fifth century, ancient Ireland was solely made up of small agricultural villages run by local chiefs (*rì tùaithe*) with no urban areas. Consequently, systematic rhetorics suitable for urban purposes, like those of Aristotle, Cicero, or Augustine, would not have been useful to the ancient Irish. As an exclusively rural people, they would have had little need for rhetorics that supported urban activities like deliberation, forensics, and public oratory. Instead, our premise is that the ancient Irish relied on a narrative-based rhetoric to persuade others, conduct their civil affairs, educate their youth, and preserve their cultural values. Their rhetoric employed strategies of identification, as Kenneth Burke would define the term, to build cohesion and shape actions.

To prove this premise, we need to start with some historical background. To understand Irish rhetoric, it is important to understand that the Irish actually preserve two kinds of history, a chronological history and a mythological history. The two histories do not conflict. Rather, they offer two complementary ways of seeing Irish culture. Also, they offer complementary perspectives about the religious rituals, civic practices, and educational traditions that shaped ancient Irish rhetoric. In these histories, we see rhetoric at work at two levels. At a global level, we see how Irish myths and legends employed the recurring repetition of common narrative patterns that would have been ingrained in the psyche of Irish audiences (e.g. the martyr, the heroic melee, the final battle, the berserker rage of a warrior, the curse, the feast, the seduction). Globally in these narratives, we find consistent thematic patterns that construct and preserve Irish thought and beliefs. At a local level, within these narratives, we see how language, especially poetry, is an essence of power and an central ingredient to life in ancient Ireland. The rhetoric we see in these narratives is very intimate, used not to persuade large urban audiences but rather to build a sense of identification that would have appealed to individuals and small groups in rural settings. The rhetoric shown in these histories is a narrative-based rhetoric, steeped in legend, myth, and magic, which promoted and preserved Irish culture and values.

Chronological History of Ireland

Irish historians and archeologists have stitched together a rather coherent chronological history of Ireland. The culture of Ireland as we recognize it today began to form with the arrival of the Celts in the Iron Age (500-400 BCE). The Celts did not invade or conquer Ireland through force; nevertheless, their colonization dramatically transformed life on the island. Over the next few centuries, Celtic became the universal language of Ireland and the megalithic people who preceded the Celts seem to have been wholly assimilated (or they died or were killed off). As a result, Ireland became a geographically remote culture grounded in one common language. In addition to a common language, the Celtic colonizers also brought over their religion of

Druidism and their refined civic structure, which was grounded in a strong tradition of storytelling, magic, naturalism, and poetry. Because the Celts did not write down their druidic practices, even when literacy was available after the arrival of Patrick, their religious beliefs are hard to determine. Nevertheless, the Celts clearly placed a high value on nature as a source of wonder, with narrative, poetry, and song as core vehicles of their faith and magic.

The Irish kept in contact with the rest of known world. Artifacts show that they actively traded with their neighbors in Britain, the outermost satellite of the Roman world, for durable goods and weapons. Irish pirates also regularly raided the British coast, robbing coastal residents and collecting slaves. As we will discuss below, Patrick himself was a victim of just such a slave raid. Irish merchants also traded with much of Europe and beyond, including nations in the Mediterranean. Irish heroic legends commonly refer to places like Greece, Spain, and Egypt, so it is likely they traveled to these places. In turn, the Roman world was well aware of the existence of Ireland (O Corrain 3). In his journals, Julius Caesar mentions Ireland, estimating it to be an island half the size of Britain. Other Roman geographers commented more or less accurately on the conditions of the barbarians of Ireland, comparing Irish lives unfavorably to the conditions of Romanized people in Britain. Around 100 AD, Ptolemy, the Alexandrian geographer, drew a map of Ireland that was surprisingly accurate in the shape of the island and the locations of rivers and rural villages. Ptolemy likely worked from information offered by Roman and/or British traders who visited Ireland (O Corrain 3).

Patrick arrived in approximately 431 A.D. While historians dispute the claim that Patrick single-handedly "Christianized" Ireland, they generally agree that Irish Christianity would not have developed how and when it did without the efforts of Patrick. When he arrived, Ireland already had a small Christian community, probably made up of British slaves. These communities were large enough to warrant a bishop. Accordingly, Palladius was sent, perhaps in 430. Patrick, however, sought not simply to minister to the British living in Ireland, but rather to convert the Irish, who were thought by Patrick's contemporaries, to be savage, unredeemable pagans. During his tenure as bishop, Patrick wrote two works, the *Letter to Coroticus* and *The Confession.* These works begin the recorded history of Ireland. They are tantalizingly obscure about the author's life; nevertheless, it is because of them that we know more about Patrick than any other fifth-century Briton. At the time of his death in approximately 460, Ireland was irrevocably on the road to Christianization.

Mythological History of Ireland

The mythological history of ancient Ireland can be found in four sets of legends: the Irish origin myths and the three major cycles of Irish legend. These legends consistently demonstrate the importance of language, poetry, and rhetoric to the ancient peoples of Ireland. Perhaps more importantly, though, they form the bedrock of Ireland's narrative-based rhetoric.

We see the importance of poetry and eloquence from the beginning. In the origin myths, Brigit, the Irish creator goddess, uses poetry to persuade her companion gods to help her create Ireland (Young 3). Brigit is a portrayed as a singing, joyful, maternal goddess, who first hears Earth singing to her. She persuades the other gods to help her create Ireland because "The Earth wails all night because it has dreamed of beauty" (5). The Earth is described as the "bottom of an abyss, the writhing, contorted, hideous life that swarmed and groped and devoured life

ceaselessly (7). As the gods descend into this abyss, poetry is one of their gifts and a major tool that the gods use to bring order and beauty to the chaotic earth. The Earth wails to the gods, and the gods respond by creating Ireland with poetry and other divine gifts.

Besides Brigit, Irish origin myths also bring forward a trinity of greater deities, all of whom use language, poetry, and rhetoric to do great feats. The first of these greater gods is called "the Dagda," which means "the Good." He is a universal paternal god that is accomplished in all areas, and most legends show him to be an especially accomplished poet and player of the harp. The second god, Lugh, is a young savior-god of music, knowledge, and medicine. Stories of Lugh show him to be a warrior and harper who could charm people asleep with music. The third god is Ogma, the god of eloquence, poetry, and rhetoric (Scherman 34). The 2nd century Greek satirist, Lucian of Samsota, described Ogma as "drawing a willing crowd of people, fastened to him by slender golden chains, the ends of which pass through his tongue" (Scherman 35). In Irish myths, the Dagda, Lugh, and Ogma are always shown to be on the right side of issues. Lesser Irish gods, meanwhile, are similar to Greek gods, taking sides in battles, meddling with heroes at crucial moments, and exhibiting a penchant for being impulsive and fickle.

It is telling that the Irish would place Ogma, a god of verbal eloquence, among their trinity of greater gods. Their myths and legends show that they clearly favored eloquence as a mark of greatness and divinity. Of the major gods, however, he is the least descript. The Dagda is shown in legends to be a powerful over-god, who has many great adventures. Lugh is an even more colorful god, usually portrayed as a young savior, who regularly rescues heroes and other gods. In these narratives, the Dagda and Lugh tend to work alone or with sidekicks, often using song and language to win the day. When Ogma, who is often referred to as "Splendor of the Sun," is mentioned, he usually appears with the other two as reinforcement. In other words, you know something serious is going to happen when the Dagda, Lugh, *and* Ogma show up. Ogma is usually described as a tanned strongman with a club. He also serves a "binder god" in Irish myth, meaning he leads the dead to the afterworld where they await rebirth. However, Ogma is best known as the god of the spoken word and the inventor of Ogham, the first writing system in Ireland. Ogham is a system that combines Celtic and Roman forms of writing. It uses a series of horizontal strokes along a stem line, and it is typically found on one corner of a stone column. Being an inefficient form of writing, though, Ogham, was primarily a ceremonial form of writing, usually used for inscriptions for the dead.

Evidence of rhetoric can also be found in the three cycles of Irish legend: the Cycle of Invasions, the Ultonian Cycle, and the Ossianic Cycle. Each of these cycles contains an independent body of stories depicting related sets of events and heroes. The oldest is the Cycle of Invasions, which chronicles the Celtic colonization of the island. This cycle reflects many of the events described in the chronological history above; but it also contrasts in ways that can help us understand prehistoric Celtic rhetorical practices. According to the Cycle of Invasions, the Celtic Irish believed they were colonizers of the island, often claiming that they originally migrated from Spain, which may or may not be historically accurate. It's not clear whether the Irish Celts believed they came from the Iberian peninsula, which itself supported Celtic peoples, or if "Spain" referred to the "Land of the Dead" which is where the Milesians, the Celtic tribe that first colonized Ireland, believed they originated.

According to Irish legends, the Milesian Celts first arrived in Ireland after a mystical naval journey that brought them from Spain to the "Land of the Living," which is Ireland. When the Milesians made landfall, they found the island populated by the Danaans, a magical people who were not strong militarily but gifted in the arts of magic, science, poetry, music, and artistry. The Milesians demanded that the Danaans leave Ireland or submit to Milesian rule. The Danaans, recognizing their opponent's military superiority, asked the Milesians to withdraw for three days while they considered the demands. Then, while the Milesians waited offshore, the Danaans used their magic to send a mist and a storm that hid the coast of Ireland and dispersed the Milesian ships on the ocean. After the Milesians regrouped and returned to the island, they defeated the Danaans. The Danaans, however, ultimately did not withdraw from the land or disappear. Instead, they made themselves invisible and literally went underground by living in the earth. For this reason, many of the earthen mounds, megaliths, and ruins found in Ireland were believed (and still are believed) to be places of fairies (Heaney 55). Almost all Irish fairy tales are grounded in the idea that the Danaans, as an ancient race of artistic, magical, and wise people, are working wonders and mischief on the descendents of the Celts.

The other two cycles of Irish myth are the Ultonian and the Ossianic cycles. The Ultonian cycle, approximately set in the 1st century AD, contains stories that center on Conor mac Nessa, the king of Ulster in northeastern Ireland. In these stories, the Irish warrior, Cuchulainn (pronounced Koohoo'lin) and Queen Medb are prominent figures who regularly contest with each other. Cuchulainn can be seen as a cross between the Greek Odysseus and the Jewish Samson, being wily, strong, virile, and destructively vulnerable to his passions. He is young, noble, beautiful, and somewhat unpredictable. Meanwhile, Queen Medb, the ruler of the Connacht kingdom in northwestern Ireland, is not a mortal enemy of the Ulster kingdom per se. Rather, she is presented in a favorable if adversarial light. We will discuss the Ultonian cycle in more depth below.

The third cycle, the Ossianic cycle, centers on the figure of the High King Finn mac Cumhal (pronounced "mac Cool"), who is supposed to have lived in the 3rd century A.D. In this cycle, Finn and his band of men, called the Fianna, do extraordinary feats of arms. They drink and feast with abandon, while quelling domestic insurrections and repelling foreign invaders. The stories of Finn and the Fianna are original to the Irish, but the nature of their adventures often seem to be a cross between Arthurian tales and Robin Hood and his merry men. Notably, a few Ossianic stories introduce Patrick as a character who meets with Oisin, the son of Finn, and Keelta mac Ronan, one of Finn's surviving warriors. But these saintly cameos are almost certainly due to Christian adaptations of these stories. An obvious problem is that Oisin and Keelta, who narrate the stories of the Fianna to Patrick and his scribes, would have needed to live over two centuries to bridge the gap between Finn and Patrick. Almost surely, Irish storytellers introduced Patrick as a way to legitimize these Celtic stories for a Christianized Ireland.

Rhetoric in Irish Myth, Legend, and Magic

Let us turn to the civic uses of rhetoric in ancient Irish culture. Though we are looking beyond the Greeks in this article, it is hard not to draw some parallels between ancient Ireland and pre-Socratic Greece. Indeed, the parallels are rather striking, especially because both cultures put such a high value on language. Also, as in Greek culture, poetry and rhetoric are conflated in ways that make both uses of language powerful and magical.

As with the pre-Socratic Greeks, in Irish histories and legends we see evidence of a narrative-based rhetoric that was used to pass along the values and beliefs of the pre-literate Irish culture. Meanwhile, the exclusively rural existence of the ancient Irish and their fascination with the power of language centralized eloquence, poetry, and rhetoric in their lives. Their rhetoric was highly contextual and thematically based. As Walter Ong argues in *Orality and Literacy*, a culture's limitation to orality would lead to a very different relationship with words than a literate culture. As Ong suggests, oral cultures like the ancient Irish retained their stories through poetic and rhetorical techniques, such as mnemonics, rhythms, antitheses, cliché, formulaic repetitions, and common thematic patterns. We clearly see these oral characteristics in Irish myth and legend, where stories often fall into memorable and repetitious patterns. And, as Ong argues, "in an oral culture, to think through something in non-formulaic, non-patterned, non-mnemonic terms, even if it were possible, would be a waste of time, for such thought, once worked through, could never be recovered with any effectiveness, as it could be with the aid of writing" (35). This seems to be the case with ancient Irish rhetoric.

The Aes Dana

One interesting parallel with the Greeks is the existence of the *aes dana* in Irish culture. In ancient Ireland, only two classes of people were allowed to travel freely outside their own *tuath*, or kingdom—the nobility and a class of people called the *aes dana*. The *aes dana* were skilled freeman in a variety of arts, including poetry, teaching, law, storytelling, healing, and practical crafts (Scherman 33). In most cases, these traveling scholars were either druids (the *faithi)* or bards (the *filid)*. It is important to note that the terms 'druid' and 'bard' were often used interchangeably in Irish legends, unlike today (Rutherford 32). Indeed, the distinction between druidic clerics and bardic poets was blurred in ancient Ireland, only becoming distinctive with the introduction of Christian priests, who served as clerics but not as bards. In ancient Ireland, druids and bards used many of the same kinds of language-based practices to teach, heal, judge, and entertain. Today, the strong Irish tradition of storytellers and poets descends directly from this custom of traveling druids and bards.

In ancient Ireland, however, the *aes dana* were more than storytellers and poets as we might define these occupations today. Historians commonly translate the term *aes dana* as "people of poetry" but the etymology of this title suggests more. The word *dana,* likely refers back to the Danaans, the magical fairy people who were believed to co-occupy Ireland with the Celts. So, the proper translation for the term probably should be "people who practice the arts of the Danaans." If so, this designation would have made these traveling scholars powerful people indeed. The *aes dana* were not the Danaans themselves, but they had gained the knowledge and arts of these magical people. As masters of language, song, and poetry, druids and bards were at the center of ancient Irish culture. Describing the role of druids and bards among the Gaulish Celts, Caesar wrote the following:

> They preside over sacred things, have charge of public and private sacrifices, and explain their religion. To them a great number of youths have recourse for the sake of acquiring instruction, and they are in great honor among them. For they generally settle all their disputes, both public and private; and if there is any transgression perpetrated, any murder committed, or any dispute about inheritance or boundaries, they decide in respect of them. (*De Bello Gallico*, VI, 13-18, quoted in Matthews)

In essence, druids and bards were responsible for pollinating and cultivating the culture of Ireland. They were responsible for teaching and normalizing Irish culture through their stories and poetry.

Our hunch is that the druids and bards served a similar role in Irish society as poets and sophists served in ancient Greece. Like ancient Greek poets, they used poetry and stories to educate and spiritually nourish their communities. Like the sophists, they were teachers, jurists, and entertainers who imparted wisdom on a variety of subjects and taught their students how to operate in civil society. And, to further the parallels, the eloquence of the *aes dana* was seen as a gift from the gods (i.e. the Danaans), much as it was in pre-Socratic Greece (Enos 9). To fairly make this comparison to the Greek sophists, though, we need to first need to adjust our conceptions of the sophists. The older Greek sophists, as classicist Michael Gagarin has argued, were not primarily teachers of persuasion or rhetoric, as is commonly believed in our field. Rather, as Gagarin writes, "persuasion was only one goal of sophistic *logoi*, and not the most important" (275). Indeed, the sophists were primarily teachers of *logos*, showing their students how to attain *arête*, or excellence, and be leaders in their community. They were polymaths, who taught on issues of religion, natural philosophy, law, mathematics, music, astronomy, and other intellectual topics. The sophists were also sometimes thought to be magicians. Gorgias certainly was described in these terms (de Romilly 3-22). Above all, the sophists claimed to be experts in *logos,* by which they meant the powers of language, thought, and the natural world (Kerferd 83). Druids and bards too seem to have also been experts in something akin to *logos*, and the ancient Irish, perhaps as much as the Greeks, were fascinated by the power of language to shape reality.

In significant ways, the *aes dana* were also different than Greek poets and sophists. Though druids and bards were generally welcome in Irish society, legends also show them to be magically powerful and feared. For example, the poet Amhairghin, who accompanies the Celtic Milesans in their colonization of Ireland, uses chanted spells to sweep away the mist and tempest created by the Danaans. Then, when his boat reaches the shore, he chants "The Rann," which Young translates as—

> I am the wind that blows over the sea,
> I am the wave of the sea,
> I am the sound the sea makes,
> I am the ox of the seven combats,
> I am the vulture upon the rock,
> I am the ray of the sun,
> I am the fairest of plants,
> I am the wild boar,
> I am the salmon in the water,
> I am the lake in the plain,
> I am the word of knowledge,
> I am the spearpoint of battle,
> I am the god who kindles fire in the head,
> Who makes wise company on the mountain?
> Who makes known the ages of the moon?

Who knows the secret restingplace of the sun? (117-118)

Amhairghin's chanted spell is an important ingredient of the Milesians' victory that day. Spells like this one often tip the balance of power in many Irish legends. The use of language to effect corporeal change is an important part of their rhetoric.

Indeed, much more than the Greek sophists, the Irish druids and bards were invested in natural magic as a source of their power. They used words, in the form of spells, chants, music, or prayer, as keys to unlocking nature's power. Legends of bards show them regularly using poetry to do feats like prophesying, healing, controlling the elements, sending dreams, putting warriors to sleep, and even killing their enemies. In another difference from the sophists, the druids and bards were believed to have the power of shape-shifting, a common element in Irish legends. In Irish stories, druids and poets regularly change into other forms, especially animals. Historian Thomas Cahill suggests that this belief in metamorphosis showed that the Irish believed in a fluid and unfixed reality, a belief that is found in many oral cultures, including pre-Socratic Greece (129). Among the Greek sophists, we also see elements of a belief in a fluid reality, but not quite to this extent.

When exploring an ancient rhetoric, an important concern is how much consideration we should give to magic as a form of rhetoric. Certainly, the people of Ireland believed that words could be magical, and this belief alone had great power over them. In his book, *Magic, Rhetoric, and Literacy,* William Covino makes the argument that magic and rhetoric have been sister disciplines since antiquity. As Covino suggests, it is only with the rise of science, which uses reason to legitimize practices from natural magic, that the bonds between magic and rhetoric are weakened. Even so, as Covino points out, today these bonds are still evident even in simple ways. For example, the concept of correct "spelling" is connected to the idea that a spell must be said in the proper order to be effective. An earlier work that explored the relationship between rhetoric and magic is Jacquiline de Romilly's book*, Magic and Rhetoric in Ancient Greece*. De Romilly argues that the sophists directly drew from a tradition in which poets were "superhuman creatures and whose powers, in all sorts of matters, were both mysterious and great" (4). Gorgias, de Romilly writes, certainly used this tradition of magic in his arguments for the power of *logos*. The ancient Irish would have been familiar with the connections among poetry, rhetoric, and magic that Covino's and de Romilly's works illuminate.

The Magical Uses of Narrative and Satire

The most obvious rhetorical tool for a druid or bard would be the use of narrative, specifically in the form of myths and legends, to promote and preserve Irish cultural practices and values. Like all narratives, Irish myths and legends reveal their truths not in facts but in the themes at their cores. The repeated telling of particular narratives in an oral culture reinforces particular patterns of cultural behavior that shape how a people behave. Historian Cahill points out that Irish narratives prominently sustain four major themes that shaped the Irish culture—courage, generosity, loyalty, and beauty (94). Of course, these themes are not exclusive to the Irish. They can be found in many cultures' legends and myths, including the Greeks. Nevertheless, the consistent and pervasive repetition of these themes is so persistent in Irish rhetoric that they seem to serve the same central role as *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos* in Greek rhetoric.

In Irish mythology, almost on cue, characters will adjust their actions in ways that demonstrate a powerful gravitational pull around courage, generosity, loyalty, and beauty. Heroes triumph when they act (or are persuaded to act) in accordance with these themes. Villains and fallen heroes, meanwhile, are ultimately undone when they go against the four master themes. And, interestingly, Irish heroes are only defeated when their allies or foes use their duty to courage, generosity, loyalty, and beauty to persuade them to lay down their life for others. By today's standards, Irish characters often do things that seem impulsive and immoral. They deceive, lie, steal, and murder. They are sexually promiscuous and quick to violence. Chastity is not a concern for men and most women. Nevertheless, their actions are rigidly governed by these master four values. If they are courageous, generous, loyal, and beautiful, they are acting in line with the themes of ancient Irish culture. If, however, they go against these principles, they predictably meet their doom.

Perhaps these characteristics are best laid bare in the most revered Irish legend, the *Tain Bo Cuailgne*. The *Tain* also introduces us to two archetypal characters, Queen Medb and Cuchulainn, who very much represent feminine and male ideals of power (Bitel 214). The story begins with Medb and her husband, King Ailell, in bed, discussing whether Medb's life has been improved by marriage. The beautiful Medb, who had been successfully ruling the kingdom before her marriage and still wields the power behind the throne, becomes annoyed by Ailell's suggestion that she only owns and has power over "women's things." She proceeds to remind him that she is the daughter of the former king and that all Ailell's power has come through her. To prove her power, she suggests that they take an inventory of all their possessions to see who has more.

Comically, Medb and Ailell begin calling in all their possessions, including servants, herds of animals, horses, jewelry, and every other kind of wealth. In almost every way, the possessions of Medb and Ailell are evenly matched—except one. Ailell owns a great bull that had once been a calf in Medb's herd. Medb had allowed it to go over to Ailell's herd because it was uncontrollable in hers. Realizing she will lose the argument without a bull to match, Medb asks her advisors where she can acquire a bull that betters Ailell's. They tell her about the greatest bull in Ireland, which can be found in the northern Ulster kingdom. Medb sends her ambassadors to Dara, a chiefton in Ulster, to ask if she can borrow the bull, and she offers many cattle and much land in return. Dara agrees to the deal. However, at dinner that night, Medb's ambassadors backhandedly compliment Dara on his shrewdness by telling him that the bull would have been taken by force anyway. So, he was wise accept Medb's generous offer. Dara is angered to hear about Medb's alternative plan and chooses not to lend the bull after all. Hearing this, Medb decides to take the bull by force, saying "Twas known the bull would not be yielded by fair means; he shall now be won by foul"—a key admission that shows Medb is stepping outside the master themes of Irish legend (Rolleston 204). She assembles armies from her own western kingdom of Connacht and her allies in the south-central kingdom of Leinster. Soon, Conor mac Nessa, the overking of Ulster, hears of Medb's plans to invade. He begins to collect his own armies to defend against the invasion.

Medb assembles a vast army, but Conor mac Nessa has a trump card—his 17-year-old champion, Cuchulainn. Like other Irish champions, Cuchulainn is the spawn of a god—in this case Lugh. He also trained with Skatha, a warrior-woman who runs a training school for young men. And,

like any Irish champion, Cuchulainn is well-versed in poetry and an accomplished poet in his own right. He plays the harp, and slays his foes with almost cruel abandon. As Medb's forces march toward Ulster, Cuchulainn uses a variety of magical signs to slow their march. As Medb's army approaches, he cuts an oak sapling and braids it into a circular band. On it, he writes in Ogham how the braided band was made, and he places a "geis" on Medb's army that forces them to stop until one of them could match the feat. A *geis* (pronounced 'gaysh'; pl. *geise*, pronounced 'gaysha') is a spell or magical sanction that cannot be violated without great misfortune (Rolleston 164). In Irish legends, *geise* are popular handicapping devices used by druids and bards to hamper warriors. They are sacred obligations that champions must obey, or meet almost certain doom. Later, after Medb's army overcomes the first *geis*, Cuchulainn creates another *geis* by slaying some of her scouts and impaling their heads on a four-pronged branch. He sets the branch adorned with heads in a river ford that the Medb's army must cross. To cross, one of Medb's champions must use his fingertips alone to remove the branch from the river. Cuchulainn's *geis* slows Medb's army again.

As shown in the *Tain*, an interesting feature that distinguishes ancient Irish legends is the heightened emphasis on language as a necessary ingredient to power. Magical uses of symbols and language, like Cuchulainn's *geise*, are regular features of Irish legend. Meanwhile, the characters use language to persuade each other. In one scene in the *Tain*, for example, Medb and Cuchulainn meet in a field, where she tries to persuade him over to her side. He refuses her offer. Later, one of Medb's lieutenants, who is a former teacher of Cuchulainn, persuades him not to attack the army as long as they send one champion to meet him at a time. Cuchulainn agrees. Each single combat, then, includes a series of conversations in which the themes of courage, generosity, loyalty, and beauty are reinforced. Cuchulainn prevails in each melee because his foes slip up or are found lacking in one or more of these qualities. Cuchulainn's only match is his life-long friend Ferdia, who is fighting with Medb's army. But the two warriors had previously sworn to each other not to ever clash—an oath Ferdia would break.

In the lead up to the climactic melee between Cuchulainn and Ferdia, the power of rhetoric in Irish culture becomes obvious. In Irish legend, one of a bard's greatest powers was to use the *glam dicing,* a form of satire to publicly shame someone. The *glam* had magical power, much like a spell, allowing bards to force the victims of their satire to do something against their will. So, Ferdia is ultimately persuaded to fight Cuchulainn, because Medb threatens him with the *glam* if he refuses. Ferdia is caught between his loyalty to Medb and his loyalty to his friend Cuchulainn. Here, we see the narrative theme of loyalty coupled with the verbal power of magic. Apparently, being satirized with the *glam dicing* is more threatening to Ferdia than almost certain death at the hands of Cuchulainn. The two warriors fight for days, exchanging compliments and sorrows the whole time. Ultimately, however, Ferdia is killed when Cuchulainn goes into his signature "warp-spasm," a berserker frenzy that transforms him into a hideous monster. Cuchulainn uses the Gae Blog, a unique weapon that completely fills the victim's body with barbs.

Ultimately, though, it is clear that Ferdia dies because he broke his loyalty oath to his friend Cuchulainn. It is his disloyalty that costs him his life. Interestingly, later in the Ultonian cycle, Cuchulainn himself is killed when opposing bards use the *glam* to force him to give them his

three magic spears. Only then, with his own spears, can he be defeated in a way that is worthy of his stature as a great champion.

The final cycle of Irish legend, the Ossianic Cycle, continues to reinforce many of these same relationships between language and power, rhetoric and magic that have been discussed to this point. So, we will leave exploration of this cycle to the future. However, it is notable that the first test to join Finn and his Fianna, the heroes of this cycle, is to be "versed in the Twelve Books of Poetry, and must himself be versed in the rime and metre of the masters of Gaelic poesy" (Rolleston 264). Again, we see the high value the Irish put on the power of the spoken word.

Patrick and the Rhetoric of Conversion

The arrival of Patrick and Christianity introduced new dimensions to Irish rhetoric, but Patrick's rhetorical strategies also reflected an interesting continuation of ancient Celtic practices. Through Patrick's efforts, Ireland was the first nation to convert to Christianity without force of arms. Even though Patrick can only take partial credit for this conversion (though legends often give him full credit), he did lay the all-important foundation for conversion in a dangerous and hostile place to outsiders. How did he do it? The available evidence, as we will show in the remainder of this article, suggests that Patrick's rhetoric of conversion employed some of the familiar Celtic rhetorical techniques and themes that we have discussed to this point in the article.

We may begin to know Patrick by contrasting him with his contemporary, Augustine (354-430), whose place in the rhetorical canon is much more assured. Though they were contemporaries, they could not have not have been more different. Augustine, the great rhetorician and theologian, reconciles Greco-Roman philosophy and rhetoric with Christian teaching. He battles and defeats the Pelagian heresy and defends Christianity's place in Roman civilization. He operates almost exclusively in urban environments, preaching to the converted. Patrick, on the other hand, is out beyond the fringe of the Roman world, preaching to an unconverted, potentially hostile rural audience. His writings show no interest in the theological controversies of his day, nor does Patrick ever mention the upheavals in Rome. It's doubtful that Patrick ever heard of Augustine, and it's almost certain that Augustine never heard of Patrick. But perhaps the most important difference between the two is Patrick's minimal rhetorical training, which contrasts sharply with Augustine's status as a professional orator and rhetorician.

Patrick, however, does something that Augustine does not— he takes Christianity beyond the Roman Empire. Though "his Christianity seems to have been wholly conventional, low-brow, and commonplace […] his determination to export Christianity beyond the Roman frontier" sets Patrick apart (Thompson 36-37). At the time of Patrick's work in Ireland, mission work beyond the Roman world was still rare (Freeman 73). Such a mission would have required rhetorical prowess just to survive, whether or not his writings displayed the kind of rhetorical sophistication recognized by Augustine and the Greco-Roman tradition. While Augustine is sophisticated and urban, employing the full force of Ciceronian rhetoric to preach to the converted, Patrick is unrefined and rural, using his local knowledge of Celtic practices and beliefs to convert Irish chieftains one at a time.

So how was the minimally-educated Patrick able to succeed? Ironically enough, it may have been Patrick's lack of formal education that prepared him to evangelize Ireland. Patrick was from a well-placed family. His grandfather was a priest, and his father was both a *decurion*, or local magistrate, and a church deacon (Thompson 8; Freeman 2-3). As a boy from the elite class, Patrick would have received the typical Roman education of his day, which included study in grammar and literature. If uninterrupted, his studies would have culminating in the study of rhetoric. This education was crucial for "a young many with any hope of a public life of government service, military leadership, or a role in the Christian Church" (Freeman 12-13). Before completing his education, however, he was captured by Irish raiders at about age 15 and sold into slavery in Ireland, where he remained for the next six years. Thus, while his peers were studying rhetoric, Patrick was on an Irish hillside tending sheep. While enslaved, he learned the Irish language, and he more than likely learned Irish legends and mythology.

By the time Patrick escaped his enslavement at around age twenty-one, he had become a devout Christian. The years that immediately followed his return to Britain are obscure, but during this time he likely studied for the priesthood. Eventually, after a dream vision that told him that he would be the "Voice of the Irish," Patrick decided to return to the land of his captivity. It was a ministry for which he was uniquely prepared. By the time he left Ireland, not only could he speak Irish, but he also understood Irish culture more thoroughly than any of his ecclesiastical contemporaries. The year 431 has traditionally been cited as the date of his return, but, like almost everything else about Patrick, it uncertain. During his bishopric, he wrote two documents that survive, the *Letter to Coroticus* and his *Confession.* The former was a letter of excommunication to a band of pirates who had slaughtered and enslaved some Christians newly baptized by Patrick; the latter a defense of his ministry against charges of corruption and incompetence. His writings, which have made him the best documented fifth century Briton, would seem to indicate that was a poor writer at best.

Patrick makes clear throughout his compositions that he is aware of his shortcomings as a writer. He begins the *Confession* by stating, "I am Patrick, a sinner, most uncultivated and least of all the faithful and most despised in the eyes of many" (sec. 1), and the *Letter* in much the same way, "I Patrick, a sinner, very badly educated, in Ireland, declare myself to be bishop" (sec. 1). While such self-deprecation may have been conventional, Patrick's constant references to his lack of education reveal his obsession with that lack. Apparently he had some reason. His writing was "plain and stumbling," "schoolboy," and "execrable" (Thompson 41; Freeman 142; Hanson, *Origins* 165). Moreover, his prose lacks the sophisticated style that he might have acquired had he not been enslaved at a young age. In her lectures on Patrick's Latin, Christine Mohrmann writes, "We shall […] look in vain for traditional rhetorical elements […] there is an almost complete absence of the artificial rhetorical elements that we later find in the works of Gildas and Columbanus" (48). R.P.C. Hanson suggests that Patrick's prose "is almost unique in the whole range of Latin Patristic literature, in that it is destitute of any artificial rhetoric whatsoever" (111), and in *The Life and Writings of the Historical Patrick*, he writes, "Patrick's writing is completely devoid of rhetoric" (36). Though these scholars do not exactly clarify what they mean by "rhetoric," their use of the words "elements" and "artificial" seems to suggest the kind of rhetorical flourish that a rhetorician like Augustine might have favored. Section 9 of the *Confession* provides a typical example:

> Wherefore I have long had it in mind to write, but up to now I have hesitated; I was afraid lest I should fall under the judgment of men's tongues, because I am not well read and others are, who have successfully assimilated law and sacred literature, both disciplines equally, and they have never made a change in the languages which they have spoken from childhood, but rather have continually improved them to entire fluency. For our speech and language has been translated into a foreign tongue, as can easily be demonstrated by the savor of my writing, the extent of my education and learning, because, it says, the wise man will be recognized by his speech, and so will his understanding and his knowledge and the teaching of the truth. (sec. 9; quoted in Hanson *Life* 82).

Even in translation, it is easy to see both the problems in his style and his discomfort with those problems. If Patrick is correct, and the wise man will be recognized by his speech, we can see why many of Patrick's contemporaries thought him unfit for ministry in Ireland. However, Patrick did not willingly concede to those of his peers who had received a rhetorical education:

> So now, you great and small who fear God, be amazed and you, skilled masters of rhetoric, listen therefore and look. Who was it who roused me out from those who appear to be wise and powerful in speech and in every subject, yes inspired me, whom this world hates, more than the others to see if I was capable—and if I only could!—of serving faithfully with fear and reverence and without complaint that nation to which the love of Christ carried me, and he granted that, if I were to be worthy, I should at last do them good service during my lifetime with humility and sincerity. (sec. 13).

The Latin in this passage that refers to rhetoricians reads *dominicati rhetorici* or *domini cati rhetorici,* and scholars are unsure to whom Patrick was referring (Hanson, *Origins* 109-112). A.B.E. Hood translates the Latin as "clerical intellectuals" (43), while Hanson argues that the phrase simply means "masters, cunning ones, rhetoricians" (*Origins* 109). Either way, the phrase likely referred to educated clergy in Britain who thought Patrick too badly educated to serve as a bishop (112). Indeed, it is also possible that Patrick was referring to Christian orators, much like Augustine, who had been trained in the conservative ways of the Second Sophistic. In the Roman world, sophistic rhetors often worked on the fringes of the empire, preaching the glory of Rome (Kennedy 47-49). When Christianity became the dominant faith of Rome, the practices of the Second Sophistic continued, even though the message changed to suit the new faith. It is possible that these *domincati rhetorici* came from that tradition.

Regardless the meaning of the phrase *domincati rhetorici*, it seems clear that Patrick is referring to those who received the classical rhetorical training that he did not. We should not, however, conclude from this passage that Patrick had some problem with rhetoric itself. Rather, he seems to embrace his lack of learning here insofar as it contrasts himself with the clerical intellectuals back in Britain. In this example of *antistrephon*, Patrick makes his lack of cultivation a strength rather than a weakness. Pressing this point home in the next section of his *Confessions*, Patrick writes, "Consequently, I must teach from the rule of faith of the Trinity, without fear of danger to make known the gift of God and eternal comfort, to promulgate the name of God everywhere fearlessly and faithfully, so as to leave after my death a legacy to my brothers and my children

whom I have baptized in the Lord, so many thousands of people" (sec. 14). In this passage, Patrick seems to be reminding his audience that he has been out in the field doing the Lord's work despite the tremendous danger—danger that was real and recognized by the clergy in Britain, who thought the Irish wild savages beyond civilizing. In other words, Patrick may be subtly taunting his adversaries who criticize him from the safety of Britain.

In these passages, we see Patrick adopting some key elements of ancient Irish rhetoric for his own use, perhaps giving us some clues about how he was successful in his attempt to convert Ireland to Christianity. Patrick uses identification, as Burke defines the term, rather than persuasion, as Augustine might have understood the term. Unlike Augustine, Patrick would not have preached to large assemblies in a primarily rural Ireland. Rather, he would have traveled from village to village to preach to local chieftains and, more likely, their wives. To make such travel possible, Patrick probably identified himself as a druid, a group whose religious status gave them the right to travel from region to region unmolested. Freeman suggests that he would need to identify himself with druids, who, ironically, would have been his main competition. The simplest way to do this would have been through dress: "White clothes, such as bleached robes, were especially favored as symbols of purity and cleansing of sin. Since Druids also wore white, Patrick may have consciously used this color of clothing to mark himself as a religious practitioner" (Freeman 76-77).

Patrick's use of identification may indicate a larger trend in his use of Irish rhetoric. Because of his long enslavement in Ireland, he would have been familiar with Irish legends and mythology. He probably used that knowledge to his advantage, reinterpreting the scriptures according to the four master themes that Cahill lists—courage, generosity, loyalty, and beauty. Certainly it would have been easy to cast Jesus as an embodiment of these values. This is not to say that Patrick did nothing more than place a veneer of Christianity over Irish culture. After all, certain aspects of that culture—its sexual promiscuity and violence—were in direct opposition to Christian teaching. But through use of identification, rather than overt persuasion, Patrick may have managed to encourage what Burke calls "an attitude of assent" that might "then be transferred to the matter which happens to be associated with the form" (58). For example, a common Irish legend says that Patrick plucked up a shamrock to explain the Trinity to a high king. Though the story might be the creation of hagiographers who lived centuries after Patrick, the legend suggests that Patrick used identification and "consubstantiality" to align Irish themes with Christian themes.

Patrick may have also used some other interesting parallels between Irish mythology and Christianity. One reason Christianity might have entered Ireland without violence is because it already paralleled many Celtic Irish religious beliefs. The trinity of the Dagda, Lugh, and Ogma established a tri-part pattern that would have been familiar to the Irish. Indeed, the number three had been a magical number in Irish culture, long before the arrival of Christianity. As Patrick likely recognized, it would not have been a radical move for Irish Celts to transfer many of their beliefs from the Celtic trinity to the Christian trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Indeed, in the Celtic trinity, Ogma serves a very similar function to the Holy Spirit in the Christian faith. He is a binder god who brings language, writing, and eloquence to the people. And, like the Holy Spirit, he is the least descript of the three major Irish gods, often serving as support for the other two. Lugh is a young savior-god, who shared some obvious characteristics with Jesus. And the

Dagda is very much like the Father in the Christian trinity. Almost certainly, the Irish would have been powerfully drawn to the idea that Jesus laid down his life for his friends. Irish legends consistently hold up these kinds of self-sacrifices as the greatest form of heroism.

Further parallels were apparent. Brigit, the Irish origin goddess, could have been identified with Christianity's Mary. Indeed, the first female saint of Ireland was St. Brigit, who is often referred to as the "Mary of the Gael," making the connection to the Celtic past and Christianity even stronger. Meanwhile, the "Celtic Cross," which ornately incorporates a circle into the crucifix, is believed to be a druid symbol that predates Christianity. These symbols were likely common before Christianity arrived, again reinforcing Patrick's argument that Christianity was pre-existent in Ireland. A familiar legend of Patrick is that when he was shown a megalith with a druidic circle that represents the moon, he draws a cross on it, creating the Celtic Cross. To the Irish people, such a move might have symbolized Patrick's willingness to accept some pagan beliefs with Christianity (Marsh and Bamford 18).

In sum, we believe Patrick succeeds because he uses identification to make Christianity consubstantial with Celtic beliefs and practices. He adopts the narrative-based rural rhetoric that we find in Irish legends and mythology. More than likely, he had the appearance of a traveling druid, and he used narratives of Jesus that reinforced the Irish master themes of courage, generosity, loyalty, and beauty. His rhetoric was rustic and narrative-based in a way that would appeal to rural people like the ancient Irish.

Indeed, it is important to recognize that Augustine's Greco-Roman rhetoric would not have worked in Patrick's ministry. More than likely such overt rhetorical flourishes would have gotten him killed. As Freeman suggests, "[Patrick] would have kept the details simple and straightforward—no hairsplitting theological debates, as were the fashion in Rome and Constantinople. After all, he was preaching to a people new not only to Christianity but to the very idea of a single God" (75). Put simply, the traditional forms of persuasion, which worked in urban settings, would not have availed Patrick anything with this rural audience. Instead, Patrick's rhetoric used identification while incorporating Celtic Irish beliefs and rhetorical practices. In most ways, to the Irish he appeared to be a magic-using druid, one of the *aes dana*, whose message is somewhat different, though also familiar, in its themes and values.

Conclusion: Narrative, Orality, and Literacy

Regarding rhetoric, what do we take away from our readings of Irish myths and legends? Here again is where contrasting them with Greek myths and legends can be helpful. In ancient Irish literature, there is no equivalent to Plato's famous sigh in the *Republic* about the "ancient quarrel between the philosophers and poets." By the time Plato wrote the *Republic*, literacy had been available to educated Greeks for at least three centuries, making possible a tradition of analytical philosophy and literary criticism. The advent of literacy in Greek society created a new class of people, namely philosophers, who used reason and empiricism as ways to study their society and critique their myths. Magic began to lose credibility in a culture where reason could be used to explain natural phenomena.

Quite differently, in ancient Ireland, literacy was thrust upon the culture in a rather sudden way soon after the arrival of Patrick. With their pre-existing fascination with language, the Irish took

to literacy with relish, quickly establishing monasteries with some of the best scriptoriums and libraries in Europe. When the Irish monks ran out of books from Europe to copy, they would busy themselves by writing down their own Celtic legends. As a result, Irish legends often seem to have been committed to paper in a rather raw form, perhaps preserving many of their oral trappings. In contrast, Greek and Roman mythology were tempered and refined by the evolution of literacy, as each generation of scribes and critics polished the stories to satisfy the increasing ability to analyze stories as literature. Irish narratives are clearly oral, whereas Greek myths and legends had been reshaped to meet the standards of literacy.

Perhaps the retention of these oral characteristics is due to the willingness of Irish monks to preserve these stories as they were told in the oral tradition. Certainly, the myths and legends were recognized as pagan, which would have led to their suppression by Catholic leaders, as they were in the rest of Europe. For instance, England, as the poet Yeats points out, is lacking in fairy tales, because these pagan narratives were not allowed to co-exist with Christian dogma (iii). In Ireland, perhaps due to its remoteness, oral myths and legends were allowed to be copied down rather directly into written form by monks. In prefaces to these works, Patrick himself is often posed as the authority who orders his scribes to faithfully copy down the myths and legends without alteration, even though they are pagan in origin.

In essence, the rhetoric of ancient Ireland is the use of narrative to preserve a coherent culture through identification with heroic archetypes and the master values they embody (or betray). The Irish are not urban, like the Greeks and Romans, so their rhetoric is far more oriented around narrative, making it highly contextual and thematically based. They use myth, legend, and magic as rhetoric to pass along the values and beliefs of pre-literate Irish culture.

To conclude, we believe ancient Irish rhetoric offers evidence of a non-Greco-Roman rhetoric that flourished in Europe. It is a rhetoric that relies on a backbone of legend, myth, and magic. As we conclude this article, we realize how much is left to be explored. We have only peeked into a library full of incredibly rich material. Our notes, many of which are not incorporated here, suggest there is so much more to be explored. We hope others will take up the journey with us.

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