



*Andrew Breeze*

University of Navarra, Pamplona (Spain)

ORCID: 0000-0003-3429-7191

## Irish Bards in Shakespeare's *Richard III* and *As You Like it*

### Irlandzcy bardowie w *Ryszardzie III* i *Jak wam się podoba* Szekspira

#### Abstract

Shakespeare alludes twice to Irish bards. In *Richard III*, the king mentions a prophecy by one of his imminent death; in *As You Like It*, Rosalind jokes on how Irish bards can supposedly rhyme rats to death. Both refer to supposed bardic powers of seeing the future and of ritual cursing of enemies. A survey of the literature shows satire and prophecy as going back to ancient times. There is in addition ample material on the (sometimes deadly) effects of satire in medieval and later Ireland, where it is known from chronicles, legal tracts, handbooks of poetry, and various surviving poems. There are in addition comic tales on how bards exploited their power, including an eleventh-century one on *King Guaire's Burdensome Company*, wherein the poet Senchán rhymes to death certain mice that had spoiled an egg reserved for him. Shakespeare's references can thus be related to traditions well-known in Gaul and medieval (or early modern) Ireland and Scotland.

**Key words:** *Shakespeare, Richard III, As You Like It, Ireland, Bards, Satire, Celts.*

#### Abstrakt

Szekspir odwołuje się dwukrotnie do irlandzkich bardów. W *Ryszardzie III* król wspomina prorocstwo barda dotyczące swojej bliskiej śmierci. W *Jak wam się po-*

*doba* Rozalinda żartuje, że rymy irlandzkich bardów mogą niechybnie doprowadzić szczyry do śmierci. W obu tych przypadków mamy sugestię, że bardowie potrafią przewidywać przyszłość i rzucać klątwy na wrogów. Lektura dzieł literackich ukazuje, jak satyra i prorocstwo sięgają czasów starożytnych. Dysponujemy obfitym materiałem dotyczącym (czasem śmiertelnych) skutków satyry w średniowiecznej i późniejszej Irlandii, o której wiemy z kronik, traktatów prawnych, podręczników poezji oraz zachowanych wierszy. Ponadto istnieją także zabawne opowiadania, jak to bardowie wykorzystywali swoją moc. Weźmy choćby XI-wieczną historię o *Kłopotliwym towarzystwie króla Guaire'a*, w której rymy poety Senchána doprowadzają pewne myszy do śmierci, bo zanieczyściły jajko przeznaczone dla niego. Odwołania Szekspira mogą zatem odnosić się do tradycji znanych w Galii i średniowiecznej (lub wczesnonowożytnej) Irlandii oraz Szkocji.

**Słowa kluczowe:** *Szekspir, Ryszard III, Jak wam się podoba, Irlandia, bardowie, satyra, Celtowie.*

Shakespeare refers to many countries. America figures in *The Comedy of Errors*; Mexico in *The Merchant of Venice*; Navarre (for its university) in *Love's Labour's Lost*; Russia (for its bears) in *Henry V* and *Macbeth*; China (for porcelain) in *Measure for Measure*. Poland is mentioned for its winters in *The Comedy of Errors* and (similarly) in *Hamlet*, on how the prince's father 'smote the sledged Polacks on the ice'.

Poland still has the ice and sledges and military valour known to Shakespeare. But this paper deals with another country: Ireland, and specifically its poets. Shakespeare alludes to them twice. The clearest reference is in *Richard III*. Its protagonist thinks of the Earl of Richmond (and future Henry VII), by whom he will be defeated and killed in battle. He remarks (IV.ii.102-6):

Richmond! When last I was at Exeter,  
The Mayor in courtesy showed me the castle,  
And called it Rouge-mout; at which name I started,  
Because a bard of Ireland told me once  
I should not live long after I saw Richmond.

Exeter's (ruined) Rougemont Castle can still be seen, on a hill of red volcanic rock inside the city walls. But (Irish clairvoyancy notwithstanding) Richard had no real reason to connect Rougemont ('red hill') with Richmond ('rich hill'), because these Anglo-French toponyms are not the same. Shakespeare did not know that; or did not care if he did.

Irish bards make a less obvious entry in *As You Like It* (III.ii.173-5). Rosalind, daughter to a banished duke, jokes about admirers, all busily making poems in praise of her.

I was never so be-rhymed since Pythagoras' time, that I was an Irish rat, which I can hardly remember.

Commentators note that poets in Gaelic Ireland were feared for their skill in satire and cursing, the allusion being predated by one of Sir Philip Sidney (1554-86), whose father, Sir Henry Sidney, was vice-treasurer and then lord-deputy of Ireland. Both knew more about Irish poetry (and its political function) than did most Englishmen. In his *An Apology for Poetry*, Philip Sidney thus commented how, even if Ireland seemed devoid of learning, poets were yet 'held in a devout reverence'. He closed his treatise with banter on those hostile to poetry. He would not wish them 'to be rhymed to death, as is said to be done in Ireland', but still pitied them. They will make no progress in love, 'for lacking skill of a sonnet': when they die, they will be forgotten, 'for want of an epitaph'. Editors of *As You Like It* quote a further source. In *The Discovery of Witchcraft* (1584), Reginald Scot (d. 1599), sometime MP for a town in Kent, reported how Irish bards boldly affirmed 'that they can rhyme either man or beast to death'. Scot's book (a critique of witchcraft-trials) was known to Shakespeare, who used it when writing *Macbeth*. Irish poets were thus familiar in various ways to Elizabethan intellectuals.

Yet there is more to say. In the second half of this paper we discuss work on Irish poetry by those who (unlike 99.9% of Shakespeare scholars) know Irish. Seeing the matter from a Gaelic perspective, they supplement all commentary on *Richard III* and *As You Like It*. Here, then, is a guide to books and articles on the Irish bard as satirist. They are a basis for a very large study indeed. They deepen understanding of Shakespeare and his world.

We begin with Charles Plummer (d. 1928), who remarked on how Latin hagiography shows Irish bards as 'an important and powerful class', thanks in part to their satires, said to 'raise actual blotches or blisters on the face of the person satirized' (especially for penny-pinching hospitality). It was said that (like Orpheus) their verses could affect even trees and rocks and rivers. No surprise if there should be many stories on the outrageous demands of poets. (Plummer, 1910, p. cii) These tales were examined in detail by F. N. Robinson, Harvard professor and editor of Chaucer. He paid special attention to *Imtheacht na Tromdhaimhe* or 'Circuit of the Burdensome Company', now better known as *Tromdámh Guaire* 'Guaire's Burdensome Host', a Middle Irish text on the hapless king Guaire (d. 643) and the seventh-century bard Senchan, who is represented as satirizing mice. They had spoiled an egg reserved for him. Despite their pleas, he is implacable. Ten mice drop dead in his presence. (Robinson, 1912, p. 97-130) So the persiflage of Sidney and Shakespeare is founded upon a long-known Irish tradition.

It leads us to Celtic poets in general and their satires in particular. Both went back to pre-Christian times, with much on poets in ancient Gaul (as reported by Latin and Greek writers) and medieval Ireland in comparative work by the Chadwicks. They observed that the Irish word for one class of poet is *fili*, with an ultimate sense of 'seer'. Poets could foresee events. (As Richard III knew.) Because they could also 'raise blisters on the face' of a person that they cursed or even 'cause his death', they were treated with caution. Hence (in 'The Battle of Howth') the story of the fili Athirne, who called upon Luain, a one-eyed king of Connacht. Athirne demanded the king's remaining eye. Luain was obliged to hand it over. Actual spells or incantations for more useful foundations (like recovering stolen cattle) have come down to us. (Chadwick, Chadwick, 1932, pp 97-98, 466-746, 604, 606)

That brings us back to Guaire, put-upon monarch, seventh-century ruler of Clare in the West of Ireland. He was famed for generosity, and the comic tale of 'Guaire's Burdensome Host' sets out what happened when there arrived at his court Senchán, notorious for his exorbitant demands. (Joynt, 1941, p. viii-xi) Not comic at all here is Irish law, where an early legal tract has statements on *áer* or 'satirizing'. It was a sword with two edges. If the satire was justified, victims were liable to penalties. But, if it lacked legal grounds, victims had a right to redress (Binchy, 1941, p. 69) Despite Shakespeare's hints on supernatural powers, an Irish bard was in some ways like a modern journalist, wary of the laws of libel.

Further comments bring out parallels between bards in Gaul and their later equivalents in Ireland or Highland Scotland. Sir Ifor Williams gave a lucid account of the Celtic poet, and how Diodorus of Sicily (in the first century BCE) described their themes as 'eulogy or satire'. (Williams, 1944, p. 9) Here may be mentioned a summary of 'Guaire's Burdensome Host', including Senchán's satire on mice (he then goes on to satirize cats). (Carney, 1954, 93) If the poet there lacks dignity, Irish law saw different, for it acknowledged those who before 'the coming of Patrick' had a right to speech in Ireland: lawyers, to give judgements; historians, to relate tales; and poets, 'for eulogy and satire' (Flower, 1947, p. 4) Relevant here is a document from as late as 1539, when Manus O'Donnell and O'Connor Sligo (two rulers in north-west Ireland) made a treaty. If O'Connor broke its provisions, the Church would excommunicate him; at the same time, poets of Ireland promised as a class to satirize him. (Carney, 1945, pp. 66-78) Further details appear elsewhere. (Carney, 1955, p. 263) General material is provided by Caerwyn Williams, including reference in the glossary of Bishop Cormac (d. 908) to satire as a weapon of Irish bards; there are also

disobliging remarks by sixteenth-century English administrators or settlers, who regarded Irish poets as troublemakers or worse (Williams, 1958, p. 46, 47, 147-148). Amongst those disobliging Englishmen was Thomas Smith or Smyth, a Dublin apothecary, it seems. In his violently partisan 'Information for Ireland' of 1561 (but not published until 1918), he has much to say on the filid, all of it negative. Apart from their flattery of native lords and chieftains, they offered 'prophecies' and were 'great maintainers of witches and other vile matters'; which prompted the comment that 'to the English mind, the power and prestige of these poets' was attributable only to their use of supernatural evil. (Greene, 1961, pp. 38-49) The terrible power of satire (or, better, 'ritual cursing') going back to pre-Christian times, Smith the Dubliner was nearer the truth than one might think. Modern anthropologists have accounts of Africans who died (for no obvious medical reason) after being cursed by local witches or warlocks. Whether in terms of prestige or something deeper, an Irish poet's satire was no trifle.

Comment of Diodorus and other Greeks and Roman on bardic 'eulogies and satires' were again presented by Kenneth Jackson (Jackson, 1971, p. 40) What such verses might look like was shown by Eleanor Knott. Their authors threaten dearth and penury for their victims; but more elegant are lines on one unfortunate person of the early seventeenth century, of whom the poet remarked that he was talked of in neither Ireland nor Scotland; and would not have been known at all 'if I had not satirized him'. (Knott, 1966, pp. 19-93.) In a different context, Irish bardic satire and its unpleasant consequences for a king, such as raising 'blisters on his face' and a 'blight' on his land, are elsewhere related to pre-Christian belief. (Carney, 1967, p. 11)

A lecture of 1912 by Osborn Bergin, to be found in a collection of bardic verse edited by him, has much on the status of bards, their training, metres used, and the downfall of the class (with the collapse of the Gaelic polity in Ireland) in the seventeenth century (it led to poems of complaint). But it has little on satire. (Bergin, 1970, pp. 3-22.) Jackson (in a well-known anthology), summarizing the duties and status of an Irish bard and how a chieftains might dread their satires, actually translates one such poem. It is savage. It is an attack on a Maguire who became king of Fermanagh (in south-west Ulster) in 1430 and died (after an adventurous life) in 1480. In its opening verse he is excoriated as 'mere dregs' or 'an old outlandish starveling cripple' and worse follows. (Jackson, 1971, p. 195, 227, 233) The contrast with the hyperbole of official praise-poetry could not be sharper. There is another point. The king concerned being celebrated for largesse, the poem will be due to malice for some slight.

Caerwyn Williams said little on satire, but did comment on evidence (mainly in the Indo-European etymologies of Celtic words for 'poet') on an Irish bard as originally a 'vehicle of divine inspiration'; reminding us of Richard III's encounter with one such person. (Williams, 1971, 87-135) As regards satire, such texts being of interest to historians, they are described in one handbook, with emphasis on them as not 'satires' (in the tradition of Horace and Juvenal) but 'versified curses'; they were composed not to ridicule, but bring about 'magical harm'. (They parallel ancient Latin or Greek curse-tablets discovered by modern archaeologists.) A fifteenth-century bard is credited with killing off by this means two persons who had plundered him, one being Sir John Stanley (d. 1414), English magnate and (it seems) author of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, sent by Henry V to be his lieutenant in Ireland. (Nicholls, 1972, p. 82) Stanley then being in his mid-sixties, however, English poetry hardly suffered thereby. Mention of the 1539 treaty between O'Donnell and O'Connor is made again as proof of such sanctions even in Henry VIII's day. (Byrne, 1941, p. 15.) For those who read Irish, there is a full account of Irish satire on rats (based on literary and folklore texts alike). (hOgáin, 1982, pp. 380-404) It ought to be the definitive study for the passages in Sidney and Shakespeare (which are quoted therein). As for the Scottish Highlands, where the bardic tradition survived into the seventeenth century and later, there is a study of vituperation in official verse of this period. (McCaughey, 1987, pp. 102-21)

There are valuable insights in a study from Finland, citing an Irish bardic tract (edited in 1891 by Rudolph Thurneysen) with instructions on how to write such a curse (as well as a book of 1960 by Robert C. Elliott on satire as dangerous and feared). (Sjöblom, 2000, pp. 118, 222) That the fili 'as purveyor of praise or blame' had a role going back to pagan times is noted elsewhere. (Cathasaigh, 2006, pp. 9-31) So, too, is instruction on where to utter such vituperation (supposedly on top of a hill before sunrise with one's back to a blackthorn). That the fili was etymologically a 'seer' is further noted in a monograph on Irish astrology and the like. (Williams, 2010, pp. 36, 81)

Finally, the satirist satirized. Irish bards and their outrageous demands got their deserts in various tales, the best being the eleventh-century one of 'Guaire's Burdensome Host' mentioned above. It now has an up-to-date bibliography (if not a proper translation or critical edition, both of them 'badly needed'). (Corráin, 2017, pp. 1495-1497) Thanks to these, future researchers on Irish satire have no lack of material. With references set out here, they can trace back Shakespeare's allusions via Clonmacnoise (where the story of Guaire was composed) back to Gaulish times, when ritual cursing was a sinister and ill-omened function of bards in Gaul and beyond.

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*Correspondence concerning this paper should be addressed to Dr Andrew Breese, FRHistS, FSA, who was educated in Sandwich at Sir Roger Manwood's School, and at the universities of Oxford and Cambridge. In 1984-6 he taught at the John Paul II University of Lublin; since 1987 he has been "profesor de filología" at the University of Navarre, Pamplona. Married with six children, he is the author of many publications on medieval English and Celtic Studies, his latest book being *British Battles 493-937: Mount Badon to Brunanburh* (Anthem Press, 2020).*

*E-mail: [abreese@unav.es](mailto:abreese@unav.es)*