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Shades of Arthur: The Irish Legend of Conaire

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Shades of Arthur: The Irish Legend of Conaire

The tale of the Érainn king, Conaire Mór, is related principally in the 11th century text *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* (*The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel*), but there is also a second briefer and earlier account entitled *De Shíl Chonairi Móir* (*Of the Race of Conaire Mór*), which is mostly taken up with the listing of Conaire's antecedents, thereby giving us some sense of the tribal entanglements behind the episode (Gwynn 130–143). Unquestionably, the most intriguing element of the Conaire story is his accession to the high kingship, which is likely to be an estimable account of the actual ceremony of inauguration, and which ushered in what Yeats described as “the brief and politic lives” of the High Kings of Ireland (iii).

From the narrative standpoint, the story of Conaire as it is told in *The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel* is perplexing as its mythical elements do not fit within what seems to be a historical account of some great upheaval. And what is more, very often the mythical elements and motifs presented in the saga lead to a narrative dead-end, suggesting that the whole pulls together different strands and waifs of literary and oral tradition in order to provide some semblance of a unified account.

What I propose here is to illustrate how the external elements of what may be regarded as the historical event not only amplify the narrative but also illustrate the imaginative voice of the work's oral provenance. I would also like to consider the nature of the “Arthurian betrayal” here in a story that is strewn with treacherous deeds; and which also begs the question as to who and what lies behind this unprecedented failure of high kingship? Certainly we may say that Conaire is primarily an agent of his own destruction, in particular by his not having possessed the decisiveness and ruthlessness required of a king who must rule over a fractious power base. On the other hand, the story also possesses the dimensions of Greek tragedy in that the course of events is shown as a reflection of the intrigues of divine will which drive the protagonist, and as a consequence, his innocent subjects, to the limits of despair and suffering. That the Conaire saga contains classical dimensions is also evidenced by the fact that the story does seem to contain reworkings of the orphan myth, in particular of the Greek variety. Bolstered by the intertextual evidence yielded by the 12th century *Merugud Uilix Maic Leirtis* (*The Wanderings of Ulysses, Son of Laertes*),¹ we may discern the imaginative way in which classical mythology informed the narrative scribal retelling of Irish myths.

1 See Robert T. Meyer, ed. *Merugud Uilix Maic Leirtis* (1958). The classical dimensions of Irish myth are discussed in *inter alia*: Barbara Hillers, “The Odyssey of a Folktale: Merugud Uilix Maic Leirtis” (1992) and William Bedell Stanford, “Towards a History of Classical Influences in Ireland” (1970).

It would not be hard to imagine that the account of Conaire's reign must have been recited in earnest detail to all incumbent kings with the flush of youth still upon them as a cautionary tale of how not to proceed. The discordance of the story is first apparent in the circumstances of Conaire's origins and birth. According to the genealogy provided at the beginning of *The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel*, Conaire was the great grandson of Eochaidh, king of Tara, and Étaín, whose coupling is told in the story of *The Wooing of Étaín*. Their own daughter, Étaín, is married to the Ulster king, Cormaic, who is displeased that the one child that she has borne him is an issue of fairyland. He orders this girl to be killed, but the hearts of the two thralls charged with carrying out this deed are softened by the sweetness of the infant's smile, and they leave her in the care of herders of the High King, Eterscéle. She is named Meas Buachalla and is raised in happy and benign circumstances, all the while being kept hidden in a cow shed with only a skylight for an opening. When Meas Buachalla comes of age, Eterscéle, who is childless, sees her one day and later sends "forward a man of his people to detain her" (*The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel* 17). But the night before the ransack, Meas Buachalla is visited by an otherworldly birdman who impregnates her and states that their issue shall be named Conaire, and that he shall not kill birds. When Meas Buachalla gives birth to Conaire, she has him fostered to those who had reared her. In all, Meas Buachalla has her son reared in three households so as to secure his protection, and Conaire grows up in the company of three foster brothers Fer Le, Fer Gair and Fer Rogain, sons of the king's champion, Donn Desa. Conaire grows up in perfect accord and on terms of equality with his foster brothers, and bestows one of his three gifts: the gift of hearing, eyesight, and good judgment upon each of them. By rights, Conaire should have a permanent claim on their loyalty. As the account relates, "The same raiment and armour and colour of horses had the four" (22).

If Conaire's origins and birth indicate a future beyond the ordinary, Conaire's coming of age and accession to the high kingship point toward a fair-weather reign. On the death of Eterscéle, a bull feast is held at Tara and as part of the succession rituals, a seer's dream of truth, brought on by his drinking of beef broth, determines that a man coming to Tara naked and with a stone in his sling will be the king of Ireland. At this point in the narrative, the story takes us away from Tara to where Conaire is in the company of his foster brothers. On hearing of the bull feast, he decides to travel alone to Tara on his chariot, and while journeying he sees a flock of speckled birds and pursues them to the seashore of Áth Cliath (Dublin) strand. Just as he is about to cast a stone, the birds take human form and attack him with spears and swords. He is only saved by the intervention of the bird-king, Nemglan, who tells Conaire of his otherworldly origins. It is not clear whether Nemglan is his father or not, although it would be a logical reading of this revelatory event. Nemglan instructs Conaire on how to approach Tara and how to answer the inquisitions of the host of the feast, but he warns Conaire that his "bird-reign" (27) will have restrictions. And here Nemglan says to Conaire:

Thou shalt not go righthandwise round Tara and lefthandwise round Bregia. The evil-beasts of Cerna must not be hunted by thee. And thou shalt not go out every ninth night beyond Tara. Thou shalt not sleep in a house from which firelight is manifest outside, after sunset, and in which *light* is manifest from without. And three Reds shall not go before thee to Red's house.

And no rapine shall be wrought in thy reign. And after sunset a company of one woman or one man shall not enter the house in which thou art. And thou shalt not settle the quarrel of thy two thralls. (27)

If these prohibitions can be divided into the mythical and historical, then we may assume that the mythical dictate where the king should be at sunrise and sunset, whereas the historical reflect a disaster that may have happened in an earlier reign, from which point on there was a standing agreement that no such event may be allowed to happen again (Ó hÓgáin 265–266). We may be sure that the sixth provision concerning rapine was also a fixed feature of the kingly oath. What is also interesting is that the bird motif ends with this episode, and his bird-like nature does not at all inform Conaire's actions. Indeed, what seems to be taking place in the saga is an attempt to “reconcile traditions of divine paternity to those of ordinary mortal fatherhood” (Gantz 60–61). And while the orphan myths have their similarities and variations, the myth of Perseus as principally told by Apollodorus and Ovid may have been used here as a literary *emploi*, albeit it must be said that the account of Apollodorus fits better here. That said, its late discovery in Byzantium in the 9th century AD (Smith & Trzaskoma xlix-li) possibly precludes such speculation, or indeed, conversely, it may indicate some tantalizing mediaeval provenance. At any rate, it is worth quoting the version as recorded by Apollodorus just so as to give a clearer sense of the shared markers:

When Acrisios consulted an oracle about fathering male children, the god told him that from his daughter a son would be born who would kill him. In fear of this, he had a bronze chamber constructed under the earth and put Danae under guard. According to some, Proitos [brother of Acrisios] seduced her, and that is how the wrangling started between Proitos and Acrisios, but others say that Zeus transformed himself into gold, flowed down through the ceiling into Danae's lap, and had intercourse with her. When Acrisios later learned that she had given birth to Perseus, he refused to believe that she had been seduced by Zeus and so put his daughter and her child into a chest and cast it into the sea. (Apollodorus *Library* II 4. See Smith and Trzaskoma 24)

Indeed, not only is there a shadow of incest cast over the birth of Perseus, but we read in *The Race of Conaire Mór*, that Conaire's father and grandfather may be one in the same, and that Meas Buachalla is indeed the daughter of Eterscéle, who subsequently got her (Meas Buachalla) with child. In this respect, the Arthurian myth meets at the crossroads of the Irish and the Greek myths, and here we may recall how according to certain traditions, Arthur begot a son by his half-sister, and that this progeny, named Mordred, would be an agent in the dismantling of Arthur's fair-weather reign (Tichelaar 33–106). Returning to the Perseus-Conaire narratives, even the bronze chamber which held Danae connotes the doorless barn where Meas Buachalla grows to adolescence. Whereas the other-worldly figure who fathers Conaire and the subsequent Nemglan episode suggest an amalgamation of Zeus and the messenger god Hermes. The bird theme is mirrored by the winged sandals that Perseus stole from the Gorgons and which allowed him, as Ovid described, to “cleave the thin air” (*Metamorphoses* IV 667).²

2 See Miller 225. For a further discussion on the figure of Nemglan, see Tom Sjöblom, “Advice from a Birdman: Ritual Injunctions and Royal Instructions in TBDD” (1996).

The name Nemglan (in modern Irish “neamhghlan”) is also curious as it is ambiguous and probably deliberately so. It means both “heavenly clean” and “unclean.” This takes into account both perspectives – extra-Christian (the ancient Celtic word *nem*, later *neamh*, referring to the sacred sky or the heavens) and Christian (“unclean” for a pagan personage). We may even speculate that this genial epithet wordplay pertains to the rightness of one miraculous conception as compared to another. Paris Alexander is also a parallel prototype orphan figure for Conaire, as like his Irish mythical counterpart, Paris was reared in bucolic surrounds, and with a firebrand future would ultimately bring destruction on his people. It is also important to note that the prohibitions given to Conaire come before the inauguration and so signify how the spirits play a direct hand in deposing him (O’Connor 67–71), which also approximates closely the fated death of Acrisios at the hands of Perseus (Smith and Trzaskoma 26). Ó hÓgáin also sees in this episode just how the workings of fate are portrayed as being exacting in their vengeance, for Áth Cliath strand, the place where Conaire meets Nemglan, is not far from the place where he will eventually meet his death (98).

Returning to the story, on Conaire’s approach to Tara, he is greeted by kings who have raiment for him. However, the most extravagant greeting is extended by his foster brothers, who place Conaire in a chariot and give him sureties of their allegiance. When Conaire arrives at Tara, he is quizzed by the host before an assembly as to his suitability for kingship, with doubts being raised primarily about the fact that he is too young to bear the mantle of such an office. Notwithstanding such objections, Conaire’s answers make a strong impression on the gathered assembly, who subsequently call for him to be made king.

Upon taking the kingship, Conaire so declares, “I will enquire of wise men that I myself may be wise” (26). In the short term, or rather for the honeymoon period, things go rather well, and in keeping with Conaire’s best intentions for his reign, the country enjoys serene and bounteous times. But with the divine antecedents of the king established, the historical account takes a sudden grip of the narrative, and a hard reality presents itself. Conaire’s brothers undergo a drastic change of character, seemingly aggrieved by their reduced circumstances. The malice which they bear towards Conaire causes them to reave and plunder throughout the land, rightly convinced that the king loves them too much to move against them. A farmer who has been victimised by the foster brothers complains to the king and petitions for action. But contrary to his prohibitions, Conaire refuses to entertain such accusations. In the end, it is only on the initiative of the Connaught militia that the raiders are captured. They are brought before Conaire for judgment, but he refuses to put them to death. Instead, Conaire banishes them across the sea so that they may wreak rapine on the men of Alba.³ However, a weak defense of Conaire may be to suggest that banishment may simply have been the penalty for treachery. Indeed, in the story of the defence of the White Strand of Munster, the King of the World is given knowledge of a suitable harbour to land his ships by Glas, son of Dremen, who “had been

3 Certainly if Herodotus were in a position to write a speculative account of the origins of the Anglo-Irish enmity, this episode may feature prominently. Or would he still prefer to find an Irish Helen to at least partly pin the blame on?

put out of Ireland by Finn for an act of treachery” (Gregory 146). But whatever may be said of the arguments in favour of dispatching one’s enemies in a perfunctory fashion, Conaire’s judgment spells the beginning of his end, and the remaining prohibitions that he subsequently breaks only provide an accumulative confirmation of the failure of his kingship. He then makes an excursion to the north which sees him making peace between two warring clans in contravention of his prohibitions (31–32). But this laudable peacemaking mission keeps him beyond Tara longer than another prohibition stipulates: and here we may infer that it was not expected of the High King that he be caught up in local feuds as such efforts could potentially undermine the integrity of his rule.

On his return journey, Conaire finds conflagration and rampaging war bands in every place. Forced to flee, Conaire and his retinue make the prohibited journey righthandwise around Tara and leftwise around Bregia. That he does not seek shelter in Tara suggests that the seat of his reign has either been overrun, occupied, or that Conaire has been unseated. One thing is clear, Conaire is a fugitive in his own land. During this flight, his retinue accidentally kills the beasts of Cerna, and in these most straitened of circumstances Conaire’s only concern is to take shelter in the hostel of Da Derga (meaning, “the hostel of Red”), an ally who is indebted to Conaire for his generosity and patronage, and whose home straddles the River Dodder, running as it does through the banqueting hall. However, on the road to Da Derga’s hostel, Conaire and his retinue find that they are following three red horsemen riding upon the same road:

When Conaire after this was journeying along the Road of Cuálu, he marked before him three horsemen *riding* towards the house. Three red frocks had they, and three red mantles: three red bucklers they bore, and three red spears were in their hands: three red steeds they bestrode, and three red heads of hair were on them. Red were they all, both body and hair and raiment, both steeds and men. (36)

In spite of the pleadings of Conaire and his champions with them to change course, the red riders continue onwards to the hostel. With no stratagem to hand, and spelling a definitive end to his authority, not to mention a renegeing of his electoral promise, Conaire declares that judgment is for good times. Resigned to the breaking of another prohibition, Conaire follows behind the riders to the hostel of Da Derga. It transpires that the mysterious red riders are expiating their sins for having wrought falsehood in the fairy mounds. However, beyond forcing Conaire to break yet another taboo, their role in the closing episodes of the tale is at best bewildering:

Three champions who wrought falsehood in the elfmounds. This is the punishment inflicted upon them by the king of the elfmounds, to be destroyed thrice by the King of Tara. Conaire son of Eterscéle is the last king by whom they are destroyed. Those men will escape from you. To fulfil their *own* destruction, they have come. But they will not be slain, nor will they slay anyone. (122)

The most ready explanation for the red riders is that they are ghostly apparitions of the three foster brothers, signalling that they have landed at Trácht Mhuirbhtean (Merrion Strand, Dublin) in preparation for their assault against Conaire. This speculation may also lead us to wonder whether Da Derga as a chthonic figure of death is also a party to

the betrayal of Conaire (Ó hÓgáin 97–98). This aspect of the story may have been lost in the layers of retelling, but if Da Derga's hostel is truly a house of death where a king is destined to be slain, then the episode of the red riders and Conaire's journey to Da Derga's hostel also draws us thematically to the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus. We may recall how in the *Agamemnon*, the returning king traipses the crimson red carpet laid down for him in treacherous welcome by Clytemnestra, his much aggrieved wife. Agamemnon will be knifed to death in his bath. Commanded by Apollo, Orestes, the son of Agamemnon, must kill his mother in vengeance. But in accordance with Zeus's law, "he who does shall suffer" (Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 1564. See Lloyd-Jones 94), and Orestes is subsequently tormented by the Furies and driven to Delphi, where he throws himself at the mercy of the gods. Indeed, it is hard to discern Conaire's flight to the hostel as anything other than a vision of phantom torment of the kind that we may imagine the Furies inflicted upon their quarry, filled with nightmarish regrets and a foreboding knowledge of impending doom.

Prior to the attack, the breaking of one final taboo awaits Conaire. When he is called to the door of the hostel where a hag begs entry, Conaire explains to her that for him to relent would be in contravention of his prohibition. But the hag persuades Conaire to allow her to pass the threshold all the same. It is his last ignominious act. Like a bard dismissing the king with a poetic utterance, the hag scolds Conaire for having allowed her to cross the threshold, and she declares that neither he nor his followers will survive the attack that will befall them.

With the battle cry "get you on to the house!," Ingcél, the outcast son of the king of Britian, sends his marauders to the home of Da Derga (313). But Conaire hears their approach, and he is the first to meet the attackers. As predicted by his foster brothers, who had reconnoitred the hostel earlier, Conaire dispatches six hundred assailants, thereby temporarily halting the attack. But Conaire is rendered helpless by the British druids, who put an unquenchable thirst on him, a thirst which recalls the thirsts of the biblical kings, Saul and David, in their final hours (O'Connor 262–263). In desperation, Conaire calls upon each of his champions to bring him water, but he is met with ripostes worthy of Cú Chulainn: they are in the business of defending his person and not waiting upon him like servants.

Says Mac Cécht: "This is not the order that I have hitherto had from thee, to give thee a drink. There are spencers and cupbearers who bring drink to thee. The order I have hitherto had from thee is to protect thee when the champions of the men of Erin and Alba may be attacking thee around the Hostel. Thou wilt go safe from them, and no spear shall enter thy body. Ask a drink of thy spencers and thy cupbearers." (316)

It is an episode which illustrates the limits of loyalty which a king may command, and calls to mind the initial failure of chalice-bearer, Bedivere, to obey the dying wishes of King Arthur that he carry Excalibur to a nearby lake and cast it into the waters. Having said that, in spite of his protestations, Mac Cécht grumpily agrees to find water:

he took Conaire's son, Lé fri flaith, under his armpit, and Conaire's golden cup, in which an ox with a bacon-pig would be boiled; and he bore his shield and his two spears and his sword, and he carried the caldron-spit, a spit of iron. (318)

Mac Cécht finds, however, that the rivers and lakes of Ireland will not yield forth water for Conaire and it is only by trickery that he manages to draw water from Uaran Garad. When he returns to the hostel, Mac Cécht sees the enemies beheading his limp and helpless king. Mac Cécht kills the attackers and pours water into Conaire's mouth (323), who like a dismembered Orpheus sings the praises of his champion. Mac Cécht routes the retreating marauders, and in a scene which echoes that of Aeneas carrying his frail father, Mac Cécht "dragged Conaire with him on his back, and buried him at Tara" (327), which it seems was more readily prepared to receive Conaire the King in death than in life. Apparently, in ancient times, just as now, a good death could go a long way to wiping the slate clean.

Over the centuries, Conaire has occupied a lowly place in the pantheon of Irish heroes for the simple reason that from a literary or speculatively historical perspective, he did not do enough to offset blame for the catastrophic events that came to pass on his watch. It therefore comes as no surprise that there is very little mention of his name in Irish literary tradition, particularly if we consider that Conaire as a cautionary tale stirred up little feeling in a country where to be forewarned and forearmed was hardly ever enough to stave off impending disaster. But from a literary perspective, he is an exceptionally informative figure for the Arthurian tradition, highlighting the extent to which folklore drew upon and freely altered classical and biblical motifs. Conaire's fall also contextualizes the bitter end to Arthur's reign, wherein we may come to understand that even the best of leaders may find themselves victims to circumstances which lie outside of their control.

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Streszczenie

Niniejszy artykuł podejmuje analizę postaci mitycznego irlandzkiego króla Conaire z cyklu Ulaid i omawia zarówno pochodzenie historii jak i jej miejsce w tradycji irlandzkiej literatury. Artykuł spekuluje na temat tabu, które powstrzymało panowanie Conaire'a i analizuje tajemnicze okoliczności zdrady jaka spotkała go z rąk jego przybranych braci. Ponadto ukazuje podobieństwa mitu Conaire'a z tradycją mitów greckich oraz z tradycją arturiańską i udowadnia, że mit Conaire'a jest w rzeczywistości pomostem pomiędzy tymi dwoma tradycjami.