

Princes and Performers: The Evolution of the
Bardic Oral Tradition, Ancient Times to the Present

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In a time long past, on an island half a world away, a truly different society existed. Imagine, deep in the forests of Ireland, a large building stands. Inside, an entire tribe has gathered for a feast, their celebrated chief at the front of the table. In the center of the group stands a man in an elaborately embroidered cloak, shadowing a similarly decorated robe that drapes over his arms as his hands fly across the strings of a harp. He sings a song of praise of his host, and as the chief smiles and the tribe cheers along, another bard watching from the back chuckles to himself. The chief assumes the bard made an obscure mistake, but is the joke really on the chief? Even in their time, the ways of the bards were mysterious to those outside of the elite circle; with time, more has been lost. However, what has been passed down from bard to bard until it was finally recorded is still available. Who were these bards, and what did they know? What was funny to their audience, and what was humor amongst their own circle?

The image and the ideas may seem far-fetched for many different reasons. Some may have a hard time imagining life this way; others may disbelieve that the language, the music, the humor, and the ways of the bards were this advanced at so early a time in history. However, music was important to all throughout the island of Ireland; the love of music, song, and literature in Ireland was “more nearly universal . . . than in any country of western Europe” (Hyde x). The bards were frequent guests at the houses of the chiefs of these clans, also; “the pettiest chief of the meanest clan would have been proud to lay his hearth and home and a share of wealth at the disposal of any Irish [bard]” (x).

Why was this the case, however? With such a love of music in the culture, the chief needed the greatest musicians to prove their chiefly might, and with their extensive training, the bards were the very best at what they did. Beyond that, however, the bard was more; they were the magicians and the shamans of their society, and while having one as an ally brought protection as well as entertainment, having one as an enemy brought the strongest curses and the worst fates.

The origins of the bardic schools of the Celts remain a mystery. The wholly oral tradition caused much of history to be lost and the schools “were ancient when St. Patrick came amongst us [the Irish]” (Corkery 27). Indeed, since the oral tradition of the bards left nothing behind, “we derive most of our knowledge of the bardic mysteries from two sources—the early writings of Classical authors, who frequently came in contact with the Celts, and the insular writings that have survived, mostly in late versions, and that were composed by native bards and story-tellers” (Matthews 12). Nevertheless, these sources do provide us with a wealth of information. We know that the bards were a special sect of Celtic society, second only to the king in influence and power. They were the keepers of history, as well as the creators of it. They were more than simply poets; they were also “seers, visionaries, and shamans, who know the true power of words and how to make bridges between the worlds with them, who can open magical doors with a poem . . . They are magicians, then, as well as singers” (Matthews 12). The great bard Taliesin, for example, “knew how to use

words in other ways, causing the boastful bards to utter nonsense, and the chains binding the poet's own patron to fall from his wrists and ankles" (Matthews 19). "Mortal performers in this literature occasionally embody traits of being 'sacred' or 'superhuman' in some way. Often they are given special skills and talents denied to ordinary mortal musical performers. . . . Many musicians, especially harpers, were considered to be of an elite class and more generally gifted than ordinary musicians" (Ralls-MacLeod 25). After all, to the Celts, "music was viewed as an integral part of the universe" (Ralls-MacLeod 2). The bard was charged with carrying out three of the most important tasks in Celtic society; "the three chief concerns of the bards were recognized as being the preservation of the language, the memorial of history, and the knowledge of genealogy and heraldry" (Matthews 20).

To reach this honored place in society was a daunting task. A bard's education was nothing simple; in about a dozen years, they were expected to learn from memory "at least 150 ogams, 580 tales, approximately 240 poems in various metres and forms, as well as grammar, history, land lore, orations, the arts of seership, bardic law and the Law of Privileges" (Matthews 13) [See appendix A.1].

One method of humor employed by the bards is their own secret language—the bards had a "secret poetic language with which the bards were able to communicate messages that only they could understand" (Matthews 11).

An example of this comes from the master poet Dallan, who composed this poem for a king named Aedh the Dark:

A hero of fortune art thou O Hugh
Thou daring, determined foe,
Thy goodness as the great ocean;
Thou canst not be subdued,
Thou canst not be impeded,
O Hugh, son of Druach the Dark.
Good and great is his substance,
Without censure, and without reproach,
Thou sun after leaving its stars
Which is awful to me,
Thou white chess-board
We will return, O hero. (Matthews 11)

However, after taking the secret language of the bards into account, with the “slight re-arrangement of a few syllables in the Irish” (Matthews 11) as they would have done, the poem reads like this:

Aedh mic Duach duibh,
you career no one celebrates,

you house of tiny winecups,
you giver of a soon eaten lunch,
You frightened pale sheep
that ploughmen will dine with,
you famine, grey as grease
from a cracked-legged brass candlestick,
you hoste of cold feasts
provider of crumbs,
you entertainer of the black beetle,
you disgrace, you yeaah! (Matthews 12)

[For more, see Appendix B.1].

Ancient Celtic poetry had a peculiar form of satire to it. In the bard's place as seer, prophet, and enchanter, his performance sometimes took on the quality of a magic spell; as such, it is often difficult "to say how far they are real lampoons and how far incantations" (Robinson 136). An example of this is from the tale of Senchan:

The most famous early instance, probably, is that of the poet Senchan, who lived in the seventh century. According to the 'Proceedings of the Great Bardic Institution' ('Imtheacht na Tromhámhe'), a tale of the Middle Irish period, an egg which had

been saved for Senchan's meal was eaten up by the 'nimble race', namely, the mice. 'That was not proper for them,' said Senchan; 'nevertheless there is not a king or chief, be he ever so great, but these mice would wish to leave the traces of their own teeth in his food; and in that they err, for food should not be used by any person after (the print of) their teeth; and I will satirize them.' Then follow stanzas in which Senchan threatens the mice with death, and they beg him to accept compensation instead. As a result of his verses, ten mice fell dead in his presence . . . (Robinson 134-135).

[For more, see Appendix B.2].

An interesting note regarding this is that some parts of Ireland still regard satires with the same fear from days of old – according to Charles de Kay, “the dread of satire is yet alive in Ireland. Within the last decade a local bard of Limerick is said to have procured for himself an office by satirizing in verse the town council” (335). This belief, then, in the power of poetic satire, can be seen both in the past and in the modern day in the Celtic nations.

One cause of the confusion between the meanings of the word satire in early Irish poetry is that “the Irish language itself employs the same words . . . for the rat-spells of Senchan and for the stricter satire of a later age” (Robinson 135).

A third sort of humor is more like what is seen in poetry today, as given in the example “The March of the Faerie Host” [see Appendix B.3]. It's unclear whether this was meant to be humorous or not, but a combination of a deadpan

delivery—the line “Good they are at man-slaying” stated so matter-of-fact—and the misdirection that comes from reading two full stanzas describing strength and beauty suddenly leading up to the last line.

This is but a sampling of what once existed. Much of the culture, knowledge, and history of the Celtic bards has been lost to time; what hasn't been is often of questionable authenticity. “Care must be taken, however, not to accept as authentic all the writings attributed to these bards. Much, if not most, of the poetry that bears their name is undoubtedly spurious and of much later date” (Morrice 1). Beyond that, some of the songs and stories have lost their meaning through being passed down between generations. An example is “Cape Breton Song,” arranged and performed by Capercaillie. In the lyric book to Delirium, they note, “‘Cape Breton Song’ cannot be translated as the words have mutated in the course of oral transmission” (track 4).

However, even in the documents that remain, it is clear that much of the humor has been lost to time. As was mentioned before, humor was found both in satire and through the use of innuendo; the most masterful bards would have used specific words that both praised their target in the normal language, but ridiculed them in the secret language of bards. Even the most perfectly translated poem, however, only breaches half of the gap—with the culture of the ancient Celts two millennia ago and seven thousand miles away, the chasm between cultures is an immense one. “The works of these early bards are not always easy to understand without an extensive knowledge of the culture of the time in which

they were written and recorded, and the latter often happened long after the former, requiring a further effort of understanding” (Matthews 24).

Nevertheless, it is clear simply through the power of the words, the ideas, the spirit, and the imagination, that the power and importance of the Celtic bard is still just as alive today as it was in ancient times. The influence is obviously there; the Scottish and Irish traditions of music were among the main influences in much of North America. Variations on Irish work songs are still sung in Nova Scotia and other parts of North America today. And with the recent revival in Celtic culture, groups from the Chieftains to Capercaillie and countless others bring both traditional and new material to the world every day. But it is the attitude—the love of learning, of music, and of imagination—that is the greatest gift from the ancient Celts to the bards of today.

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Appendix A: Extended Passages

Section A.1: An ancient bard's curriculum

“. . . Thus, in his [Caesar's] celebrated *De Bello Gallico*, we find the following: `report says that in the schools . . . the druids . . . learn by heart a great number of verses, and therefore some persons remain 20 years under training'.

For `druids' in this extract, read `bards', for the two roles were at various times virtually interchangeable. In fact it was more like twelve years that the bards spent learning their skills. In *Manners and Customs of the Ancient Irish*, the great Irish scholar Eugene O'Curry gives the following breakdown of what would have been a typical curriculum of bardic training, based on a document relating to the middle and late period of bardic activity.

- Year 1: 50 Ogams or alphabets. Elementary Grammar. Twenty Tales.
- Year 2: 50 Ogams. Six easy lessons in Philosophy. Some Specified Poems. Thirty Tales.
- Year 3: 50 Ogams. Six minor lessons of Philosophy. Certain Specified Poems. Grammar. Forty Poems.
- Year 4: *The Bretha Nemed* or Law of Privileges. Twenty Poems of the Species called *Eman*. (Births). Fifty Tales.
- Year 5: Grammar. Sixty Tales.
- Year 6: The Secret Language of the Poets. Forty Poems of the Species Called *Nuath* (Twins). Seventy or Eighty Tales.
- Year 7: *Brosnacha* (Miscellanies). The Laws of Bardism.
- Year 8: Prosody. Glosses (the meaning of obscure words). *Teinm Laeghda* (Illumination of Song). *Imbas Forsnai* (Light of Foresight). *Dicheltel do Chennibh* (Extempore Incantation). *Dindsenchas* (Land Lore).
- Year 9: A specified number of compositions of the kind called *Sennet* (?), *Luasca* (three oscillating springs over a Druid's head?), *Nena* (?), *Eochraid* (keys), *Sruith* (streams) and *Duili Feda* (Wisdom Tales). To master 175 tales in this and the next two years.
- Year 10: A further number of the compositions listed above (part of the 175 tales).
- Year 11: 100 of the compositions known as *Anamuin*.
- Year 12: 120 Cetals (Orations). The Four Arts of Poetry. During this and the two years previous to master 175 Tales, along with 175 of the tales learned by the Annruth—350 tales in all.

Some of this is mysterious and some of the terms cannot be easily translated. But what it tells us is that over a period of twelve years a bardic student was expected to learn, by heart, at least 150 ogams, 580 tales, approximately 240 poems in various metres and forms, as well as grammar, history, land lore, orations, the arts of seership, bardic law and the Law of

Privileges. Not forgetting the *Secret Language of Poetry* and a few things that are not necessarily included in this list.”

Source: “Introduction: The Story of the Bards” from *The Bardic Sourcebook*, pp. 12-13.

Section A.2: A note on archaic Celtic pronunciations

“The Irish language apparently underwent a series of major changes between the fifth and seventh centuries A.D., evolving from an ancient derivative of the continental Celtic mother-tongue into the language scholars today call Old Irish. But that earlier form of the language is nearest the one spoken by the Celtic tribes . . . and is also easier for non-Irish-speakers to pronounce. . . .

In the archaic tongue, stress usually falls on the first syllable. *C* is always pronounced like the letter *k*. *G* is always hard. *Ch* is pronounced as in the German *ach*. *Gh* is a soft guttural. Unstressed vowels generally have a sound similar to the *a* in sofa.

Amergin is pronounced almost as spelled, Ah'-mer-gīn. An accented *É* is pronounced “ay”, so *Éremón* is Āy'-ră-mōn, showing also the accented long *ó*. An accented *Í* is pronounced “ee”; thus *Míl* is Meel, *Ír* is Eer, *Ítos* is Eetos.

Other Gaelic names are pronounced as follows: *Éber Finn*—Āy-ber Finn; *Donn*—Dūnn; *Colptha*—Kolp'thāh; *Irial*—Irr'-ee-ăl; *Nial*—Neel; *Breoghan*—Bray'-o-ghän; *Conmael*—Kon'-mīle; *Ferdinón*—Fer'-di-nōn; *Odba*—Od'-bă; *Lugaid*—Loog'-id.”

Source: “Notes on Pronunciation” from *Bard: The Odyssey of the Irish*, p. iii.

Section A.3: The look of an ancient Irish bard

According to McCurtin, the Irish Bards in the 6th century wore long, flowing garments, fringed and ornamented with needlework; and from the Brehon laws, the Bards in several instances were of the Nobles; from whence we may presume, their dress was, in most respects, comfortable thereto . . . From a *baffo rilievo* found in the ruins of New Abbey, near Kilcullen, it appears, that the dress of the Bards consisted of the Truife or long Cotaigh, and Cocahl. The Truife, or straight Bracca, was made of weft, covering the feet, legs, and thighs . . .

[At this point, the library was closing, so I had to take bullet notes. –Brian]

- A long cota/cotaigh – made of plaited linen and dyed and ornamented depending on the rank of wearer. It would cover the entire torso and down to mid thigh.
- The cochal – a long cloak, reaching to the ankles, fringed “like shagged hair” at the borders.
- A “neck pendant” – essentially, a hood that covered the shoulders and draped partly down the back.
- Hair flowing to the neck and shoulders.
- The “harp in good grace was always present before him.”
- The colors of the outfit were generally white, blue, green, black, and red.

Source: *Historical Memoirs of the Irish Bards*, pp. 14-15.

Section A.3.2: The look of an ancient Irish bard, from another source

A bard's robe must be of one uniform colour; but every chief bard, to whichsoever of the three grades he may belong, has a proper and distinctive colour, suitable to his own order.

A poet, if also a primitive chief bard, wears a robe of that sky-blue colour which is perceptible in serene summer weather, as an emblematic indication of peace and heavenly tranquility; and signifying, likewise, that light, and all other visible things, are best seen through the medium of that colour. This robe, being of uniformly light blue colour, presents, also, a symbol of truth, which is unicoloured throughout, and all over, whether considered in its analytical aggregate, or varied position, and presents no change whatever, from any possible circumstance.

A druid's robe is entirely and uniformly white, to indicate purity of conduct, learning, and piety; for white is both the colour and emblem of light. A druid's robe is uniformly white, in emblem, also, of truth.

An ovate's robe shall be green, to signify, in emblem, the growth and increase of learning and science: it is, also, uniformly green, to present a symbol of truth.

Source: "The Voice Conventional" from *The Bardic Sourcebook*, pp. 308-309.

Appendix B: Selected Examples

Appendix B.1: Another of Dallan's satires

O Hugh, son of Duach the Dark,
Thou pool not permanent;
Thou pet of the mild cuckoos;
Thou quick chafferer of a blackbird;

Thou sour green berry;
Swarms (of bees) will suck the herbs;
Thou green crop like fine clothes;
A candlestick without light;

Thou cold wooden boat;
Thou bark that will give dissatisfaction;
Thou disgusting black chafer;
Thou art more disgusting, O Hugh.

Source: "The Proceedings of the Great Bardic Institution" from *The Bardic Sourcebook*, p. 260.

BRIDGET Thou mouse that art in the hole,
 Whose utterance is opposition;
 'Twas thou, whose claws are not short,
 That ate my leavings in your ambling.

MOUSE My own son Bianan (sleek skin'd) of the white breast,
 Thou art the non-observer of ordinances;
 To the mighty and luxurious bardic body,
 Is the knowledge of it, thou little doomed being.

SHANCHAN Clear ye out of your spacious abodes,
 As we are prepared to convict you,
 Come ye all out of the hole (or burrow)
 And lie down (here) O ye mice!

And it is stated that ten mice feel dead in the presence of Shanchan; and Shanchan said unto them—"It is not you that I ought to have satirized but the party whose duty it is to suppress you, namely, the tribe of cats; and now I will satirize them effectually . . ."

Source: "The Proceedings of the Great Bardic Institution" from *The Bardic Sourcebook*, p. 260.

Appendix B.3: March of the Faerie Host

In well-devised battle array,
Ahead of their fair chieftain
They march amidst blue spears,
White curly-headed bands.

They scatter the battalions of the foe,
They ravage every land I have attacked,
Splendidly they march to combat
An impetuous, distinguished, avenging host!

No wonder though their strength be great:
Sons of kings and queens are one and all.
On all their heads are
Beautiful golden-yellow manes:

With smooth, comely bodies,
With bright blue-starred eyes,
With pure crystal teeth,
With thin red lips:

Good they are at man-slaying.

Source: "The March of the Faerie Host" from *Lyra Celtica*, p. 12.

Appendix B.4: “The Mary Ellen Carter”

She went down last October in a pouring, driving rain
 The skipper he'd been drinking and the mate he felt no pain
 Too close to three mile rock and she was dealt her mortal blow
 And the Mary Ellen Carter settled low
 There was just us five aboard her when she finally was awash
 We'd worked like hell to save her, all heedless of the cost
 And the groan she gave as she went down, it caused us to proclaim
 That the Mary Ellen Carter would rise again

Well the owners wrote her off, not a nickle would they spend
 She gave twenty years of service, boys, then met her sorry end
 But insurance paid the loss to us so let her rest below
 Then they laughed at us and said we had to go
 But we talked of her all winter, some days around the clock
 She's worth a quarter million afloat and at the dock
 And with every jar that hit the bar we swore we would remain
 And make the Mary Ellen Carter rise again

Rise again, Rise again
 Let her name not be lost to the knowledge of men
 Oh those who loved her best and were with her til the end
 Will make the Mary Ellen Carter rise again

All spring now we've been with her on a barge lent by a friend
 Three dives a day in a hard hat suit and twice I've had the bends
 Thank God it's only sixty feet and the currents here are slow
 Or I'd never have the strength to go below
 But we patched her rents, stopped her vents, dog hatch and porthole down
 Put cables to her fore and aft and girded her around
 Tomorrow noon we hit the air and then take up the strain
 And make the Mary Ellen Carter rise again

(Chorus)

For we couldn't leave her there you see to crumble into scale
 She'd saved our lives so many times living through the gale
 And the laughing drunken rats who left her to a sorry grave
 They won't be laughing in another day
 And you to whom adversity has dealt the final blow
 With smiling bastards lying to you everywhere you go
 Turn to and put out all your strength of arm and heart and brain
 And like the Mary Ellen Carter rise again

Rise again, rise again
 Though your heart it be broken and life about to end
 No matter what you've lost be it a home, a love, a friend
 Like the Mary Ellen Carter rise again (repeat chorus)

Source: Stan Rogers, “Mary Ellen Carter”, from Home in Halifax, track 16.

Appendix B.5: “The Ex-Oil Carter”

She ran aground one winter and unleashed a ton of goo.
The skipper, he'd been drinking, and the mate, he had no clue.
Thank God it's only sixty proof, and the service here is slow,
But he managed to get plastered even so.

So the mate was in command of her the night she ran aground.
We knew we were in trouble when we heard that grinding sound.
And the gurgle of a hundred zillion gallons made it plain
That soon gas and oil prices would rise again.

Chorus:

Rise again! Rise again!
So we won't show a loss when the year's at an end.
All those who love the cash that the motorist will spend
Will see those gas and oil profits rise again.

Well, the public got pissed off, which is mighty shabby thanks,
When we work like Hell to rush our precious product to their tanks.
The state complained of all the birds and beasts we would kill,
And they hinted that they'd stick us with the bill.

So we bleached the sails, rinsed the whales, sponged off a seal or two.
Cleaned up a baby polar bear with gallons of shampoo.
Tonight we'll show it on the air, so the public won't complain...
'Til those gas and oil prices rise again.

(Chorus)

For we'd never sneak away, you see, not 'til the coast was clear.
The fish were in a sorry state, or so it would appear.
But the tanker and the public mind share one trait going strong:
That neither holds its contents very long.

And you to whom diversity means maximized return,
With fuzzy mammals sniveling at you everywhere you turn,
Won't grumble if, from time to time, a black and greasy stain
Forces gas and oil prices to rise again.

Chorus:

Rise again! Rise again!
Though the land it be poisoned, and life about to end!
No matter what the cost, be it the whales, the seals, the men!
Long as gas and oil profits rise again!

Source: “The Ex-Oil Carter” from the Songworm parody web site.