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Popular Reception of Classical Antiquity

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*Edited by
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and Vinnie Nørskov*

Popular Receptions of Classical Antiquity

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ÓR NA GRÉIGE IS STÓR NA HÉIGIPT

CLASSICAL ANTIQUITY IN IRISH-LANGUAGE POPULAR POETRY OF THE EIGHTEENTH AND NINETEENTH CENTURIES

GREGORY R. DARWIN

Introduction

During the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the public visibility and prestige of the Irish language were at their lowest point.¹ The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had seen the expansion of English power in Ireland under Tudor and Stuart monarchs. This expansion and consolidation of power was accompanied by the large-scale transfer of land ownership, and with it political power, from the Gaelic aristocracy to a predominantly Anglophone, Anglican, and Loyalist minority (Covington, Carey & McGowan-Doyle 2018b, 1). This political dominance was maintained, in part, by anti-Catholic legislation widely known as the Penal Laws, which restricted access to land, military training, education, and political representation, as well as limiting the activities of Catholic clergy (O'Connor 2018, 259-264).² One consequence of this sustained dominance of Anglophone élites and institutions was a language shift from Irish to English throughout much of the country: the 1851 census reports that less than a quarter of the population could speak Irish.³ Despite the “invisibility” of the Irish language in official sources, there is nonetheless a substantial and largely understudied

1 “After 1700, speakers of Irish were excluded from the centres of power and education which would have facilitated participation in the kind of intellectual activity found in other linguistic communities at the time. For this reason, they became, as it were, inaudible to outsiders, even if those outsiders lived in geographical proximity to them” (Doyle 2015, 83).

This research was conducted when the author was employed as a postdoctoral researcher at Aarhus University, as part of the ongoing project “Classical Influences and Irish Culture (CLIC)”, funded by the European Research Council (Horizon 2020 grant no. 818366).

2 The impact of these laws on education is discussed by O’Higgins 2017, 100-113.

3 Traditional narratives claim that the use of Irish declined dramatically in the first half of the nineteenth century, and that the establishment of the National Schools in 1831 and the potato blight of the 1840s played a major role in language shift. More recent work by Aidan Doyle (2018)

Irish-language literary corpus, especially verse, dating to the period.⁴ While Daniel Corkery's thesis of the "Hidden Ireland" (1967) is often overstated, it is fair to say that there was a wealth of economic, artistic, and intellectual activity which occurred in these centuries through the medium of the Irish language, and which was effectively invisible to English-speaking élites, as well as to contemporary historians and critics with no knowledge of the Irish language.⁵

Despite social marginalization and restricted access to formal education among the Irish-speaking population, knowledge of the past, including knowledge of classical antiquity, formed part of their intellectual and cultural life. One channel through which such knowledge was accessed was the remains of the older poetic and scribal classes who were previously patronized by the native aristocracy: patterns of patronage persisted among minor Gaelic gentry, although poets often had to sustain themselves through other means, such as manual labour, and copying manuscripts for Anglophone antiquarians who had begun to develop an interest in the so-called 'reliques' of Gaelic tradition.⁶ Another channel by which such knowledge was accessed were the so-called "hedge schools" which loom so large in Irish popular historical memory: informal, and indeed illegal, rural private schools which provided an education for the children of the landed gentry and large farmers, along with the lower classes to some extent, where arithmetic and literacy in English formed a major part of the curriculum (O'Higgins 2017, 1-9). While such informal schools were not unique to Ireland prior to the widespread adaptation of universal education throughout Europe, one striking feature of Irish hedge schools was the teaching of classical languages; motivated, in part, by the necessity of preparing children for study in seminaries abroad. As Laurie O'Higgins notes in her recent monograph *The Irish Classical Self*, while memory of the hedge school has been subject to romantic distortion, "nonetheless, eighteenth and early nineteenth century Ireland was unique in Europe for significant popular study of Classics, as varied evidence shows. By 'significant' I do not mean large numbers overall, but sufficient to constitute a pattern, to make a mark, and create a memory in the wider culture" (2017, 6).

One nineteenth-century song, known as *Amhrán na Leabhar* (The Song of the Books), offers a hint about the mental world of these schools in Ireland.⁷ The song was composed by the Kerry poet and schoolmaster Tomás Ruadh Ó Súilleabháin around 1822, on the occasion of the loss of the poet's personal library when the ship that was transporting it from Derrynane to Portmagee hit a rock and sank. Presumably the crew survived,

has suggested that language shift was a more prolonged process, beginning in the early eighteenth or later seventeenth century, with multiple complex and interacting causes.

4 On the "invisibility" of the language, see Doyle 2018. A broad overview of the existing literary corpus in Irish is given by Buttimer 2006.

5 Cf. Doyle 2015, 83. On contemporary attitudes to and debates regarding the Irish language among historians, see Kane 2018, 81-85.

6 On patronage of poetry, see Buttimer 2006, 353-360 et passim; on other forms of employment for scribes and poets, see Denvir 2006, 560-564.

7 The most recent edition and commentary is Sharpe & Hoyne 2020, xv-xxiv.

as the song makes no mention of any human victims, but the ship's cargo could not be recovered. Many Irish songs composed in the period commemorate local tragedies, including shipwrecks and drownings, and it is noteworthy that Ó Súilleabháin felt that the loss of a library was an event worthy of commemoration in such a way.⁸ Five of the song's eleven stanzas, normally omitted in contemporary performances, offer a catalogue of the books lost. Many of these are books that we would expect a schoolteacher to possess: works on mathematics, the natural sciences, history, and grammar; we also find books of the Bible and vernacular religious works in Irish and other languages, a late eighteenth-century manual of divination, and numerous works of Irish narrative literature. The poet furthermore lists some classical works as part of his library, including the *Distichs* of Cato, Euclid's *Elements*, and *Ár na Trae* or 'the destruction of Troy'. The latter work is, almost certainly, pseudo-Dares Phrygius' *De Excidio Troiae Historia* (History of the Destruction of Troy), a late antique prose re-telling of the Trojan war, which had been translated into Middle Irish some centuries previously.⁹

This is, of course, a song rather than a shelf-list, and it would be difficult to reconstruct Ó Súilleabháin's library on the basis of it. It seems unlikely that every book that was lost would be mentioned – and indeed, the poet makes such no claims to exhaustiveness. On the other hand, the poet undoubtedly exaggerates, such as when he claims to have had a copy of the Psalter of Cashel, a high medieval devotional manuscript which is believed to have been lost during the latter half of the seventeenth century (Ó Riain 1989). Although we cannot, therefore, assume that Ó Súilleabháin owned a copy of – or, had even read – every book that he mentions, the presence of titles and authors in this catalogue nonetheless indicates an awareness of these works and authors, and a sense of their cultural value and prestige. The loss of such works, including classical authorities, was seen as an event worthy of commemoration by the poet as well as by his audience(s).

References to classical authorities and classical tradition are not infrequent in Irish-language poetry and songs composed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: Irish-language poets became familiar with classical tradition and languages through study at hedge schools and seminaries, while scribal training also provided some familiarity with Latin as well as earlier forms of the Irish language, and thus with high medieval vernacular adaptations of classical and late antique literary works.¹⁰ While such highly

8 For example, Antaine Ó Reachairi's song *Eanach Dhúin* was composed on the occasion of 20 people drowning during an attempt to cross the Corrib by boat in 1828. A version of the song can be found in Hyde 1933, 69-73; an English translation is given in Ó Tuama & Kinsella 1981, 248-253.

9 The standard edition of *De Excidio Troiae Historia* is Meister 1873. The Middle Irish translation, *Togail Troí*, exists in no fewer than four recensions; for bibliographical information about editions and translations of these adaptations, as well as a discussion about their relationship with medieval Irish literature more generally, see O'Connor 2014, especially 13-17. For discussions on the impact of these adaptations on Early Modern Irish literature, see Ó Háinle 2015; Darwin 2021, 225-228.

10 In addition to *Togail Troí*, an adaptation of pseudo-Dares Phrygius' account of the fall of Troy mentioned above, other medieval adaptations of classical and post-classical works include Virgil's

educated literati were, no doubt, a small minority in the Irish-speaking world, their poems had a much broader audience: in the absence of any significant print culture in Irish, poetry was typically performed publicly, often set to music, and transmitted both via manuscript culture and orally.¹¹ *Amhrán na Leabhar* is something of an extreme case, as roughly 70 years elapsed between the song's composition and the earliest known written witness for it, but there are numerous other examples of authored poems with robust oral traditions along with, and in some cases prior to, manuscript and published transmission.¹² These poems and songs, including their classical elements, were therefore relevant and intelligible for a broader audience. Additionally, we find anonymous works composed in the same period which include references to classical antiquity. We can safely assume that not all – and perhaps not even most – of these songs were authored by individuals who had received an education in the classics. The foregoing indicates an engagement with classical antiquity which extended beyond direct engagement with classical texts and languages among Irish-speakers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; in other words, a widespread popular reception. The remainder of this discussion will consist of an overview of the most commonly encountered forms of classical allusion and reference within this poetry, followed by some tentative conclusions regarding the significance of such references for contemporary audiences.¹³

Greece

References to Greece are relatively common in the poems surveyed: most rely on the idea of Greece as a distant land of great wealth or sophistication, and betray little direct familiarity with its geography. Thus, in the lament for Pádraig Mac an tSaoi by Peadar

Aeneid, Lucan's *Bellum civile*, Statius' *Thebaid*, a summary of Achilles' boyhood deeds based on Statius' *Achilleid*, and various works whose immediate sources are more difficult to determine. See O'Connor 2014.

- 11 For a survey of the relationship between metrical form and musical practice in the Irish-language song tradition, see Blankenhorn 2003.
- 12 For example, Seán Ó Tuama's edition of *Caoinéadh Airt Uí Laoghaire*, the lament by Eibhlín Dhubh Ní Chonaill for her husband Art Ó Laoghaire, murdered in 1773, was mainly based on a transcription of an oral performance made by Nóra Ní Shindile in 1800, with variant readings from a version recorded from the same performer later in life, and a seemingly independent manuscript version. In the appendix, Ó Tuama gives an account of several other manuscript and oral versions of the lament (1961, 45-50).
- 13 The present study is based on published editions of Irish poetry, many of which were published around the turn of the twentieth century as part of the Gaelic Revival in Ireland. Several of these editions are now out of print, but are thankfully digitized as part of the Royal Irish Academy's *Corpas Stairiúil na Gaeilge / Historical Irish Corpus 1600-1926* (<http://corpas.ria.ie/>, accessed at various points between August 2021 and February 2022). Since many of these editions lack information on the musical and performative context of these poems, the present study is, out of necessity, primarily focused on their textual content, although it is noted at various points that these poems were publicly performed rather than privately read. See Blankenhorn 2003, 345-346. All translations are the author's, unless noted otherwise.

Mac Ualgaire, the women who lament Pádraig's death are clad in silk cloaks of Greek manufacture: "gach bantracht óg na sról-bhrat **gréagach**" (Ó Muirgheasa 1934, 127), and in a poem attributed to Toirdhealbhadh Ó Cearbhalláin (1670-1738), the poet imagines himself drinking Greek wine with his beloved at the fair: "is nach deas an gléas a bheith ag siubhal chun aonaigh, is **fion na Gréige** bheith dhá ól ann" (Ó Tiománaidhe 1906, 14). These ideas of distance and wealth lend themselves well to hyperbole: thus, the anonymous poet of *D'aithneoinn mo ghrá* (I Would Recognize my Love) would follow her beloved to Greece or even England to be with him (Ó Buachalla 1978, 44), and the poet of *Brighid Bhéasach* (Well-mannered Bríd) would bestow all of his wealth to his beloved, even if he were king of Greece (Hyde 1893, 126). In Art Mac Cumhaigh's lament for the ruined ancestral castle of the O'Neills at Glasdrumman Lake, the poet contrasts the wealth of the Mediterranean with the thought of being buried in his ancestral territory. Addressing the bird that had been singing to him from the ruins, he states:

*Ó bhreoidh tú mé le glór do bhéil
is nach bhfóir le leigheas ón mbás mé,
is go cóige Laighean is cóir dúinn gléas
go Dún Uí Néill ar máirseáil;
ór na Gréige is stór na hÉigipt,
is seinm dá dtéad ar chláirisgh,
ní fhóirfeadh an méid sin – is foghaim go léir é –
a stór, muna n-éagfainn láimh leat.*

You have wounded me sore with the sound of your words,
For no cure will now save me from death,
To the Province of Leinster we ought now to go
And march to Ó Néill's strong fort;
The gold of Greece or the wealth of all Egypt,
And music of strings played on harp,
All this cannot ease me, and I gain it all,
My love, if we die apart.

(Ní Uallacháin 2003, 259-264, tr. Ní Uallacháin)

Occasionally, these poems contain references to the anonymous "King of Greece", or to his son or daughter. Like the references to the country itself, these rely on the conceit of Greece as a distant and fantastic or wealthy land, and betray little familiarity with its geography or political structure, in either antiquity or the present day.¹⁴ The immediate

- 14 E.g. *An Bhanab ón gCarraig Léith* (The Abbess of Carriglea; de Brún, Ó Buachalla & Ó Con Cheanainn 1971, 14); *Dónall Óg* (Young Dónall; de Brún, Ó Buachalla & Ó Con Cheanainn 1971, 73-74); *Páidín Bán Ua Cormaic* (Fair-haired Páidín Ó Cormaic; Ó Tiománaidhe 1906, 25); *Brighid bhéasach* (Well-mannered Bríd; Hyde 1893, 126).

source for many of these allusions would seem to be the Irish oral storytelling tradition, rather than any particular classical narrative: perhaps inspired by medieval romance, Greece often functions as a distant land where fantastic and magical events can occur, and the children of monarchs often play the role of protagonists in Irish wonder-tales (Bruford 1966, 21-29).¹⁵

Greece has a similar function in the conceit that the Gaels – or certain families with aristocratic pedigrees, such as the FitzGeralds – are Greek in origin. While this idea is quite rare in poems dating to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it is much more frequently found in professional bardic poetry of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.¹⁶ Undoubtedly some of the popularity of this idea in bardic poetry, with its strict metrical requirements, was due to the possibility of alliteration between the words *Gaedheal* (Gael) and *Gréag* (Greece). Ultimately, this idea has its origins in the medieval Irish historiographic tradition, where an origin in Greece was one of several narratives offered for the ethnogenesis of the Irish (Jaski 2003). The infrequency of this motif in later popular poetry is not terribly surprising: with the downfall of the Gaelic aristocracy in the later seventeenth century, the mythologies which supported elite social institutions, including such origin myths, became increasingly irrelevant.

As noted above, these references rely upon vague notions of Greece as a distant land of wealth and wonder, which were in wide circulation within the native learned and popular tradition, and betray very little direct familiarity with classical narratives. While it is possible to dismiss these allusions as not a form of classical reception at all, it is hard to divorce them entirely from the more specific allusions to classical heroes and deities which occur more broadly within this repertoire, and in some cases alongside these vague invocations of Greece. The discussion now turns to references to specific figures from classical tradition.

Heroism

A common rhetorical device in bardic poetry of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is a simile directly comparing the subject of the poem with a hero or otherwise famous man from classical tradition, usually on the grounds of their strength, military prowess,

¹⁵ See also “The Adventure of the Men from Sorcha” (MacNeill 1908, 61-75) and *Créd so ag buaidh-breadh ban nGaidheal* (What is this Perturbing the Women of the Gael?; Mac Airt 1944, 226-232). On the “non-geographic” use of Greece as a space in medieval Irish literature, see McCoy 2017, 210-211.

¹⁶ Examples of this conceit in post-bardic poetry include *Peigí Ní Nuinsion* (Ó Tiománaidhe 1906, 37), *Cuirim séad suirghe* (I Send a Love Token, by Pádraigín Haicéad; Ní Cheallacháin 1962, 8-9), *Is bocht mo bheatha* (My Life is Wretched, by Dáibhí Ó Bruadair; Mac Erlean 1910, 56-57), and three poems by Aogán Ó Rathaille: the lament for Gerald son of the Knight of Glin (Dinneen & O’Donoghue 1911, 146), a poem in praise of Lucy Fitzgerald (Dinneen & O’Donoghue 1911, 170), and the lament for Eoghan son of Cormac Riabhach Mac Carthy by Aogán Ó Rathaille (Dinneen & O’Donoghue 1911, 216). On this conceit in bardic poetry, see Knott 1922, lix; Darwin 2021, 204, 225-226.

beauty, generosity, or other masculine virtues (Darwin 2021, 226; McManus 2009). This same practice can be found in elegies dating to the eighteenth centuries: the deceased is compared, perhaps somewhat hyperbolically, to the great martial heroes of the past. For example, in a lament for Eoghan Mac an Áлта of Tír Eala, County Meath, composed by Uilliam Ó Maoil Chiaráin in the middle of the eighteenth century, the poet likens Eoghan to the heroes of the Trojan war:

*Ó d’imthigh uainn Eoghan an leomhan ba tréine,
Mar Achilles eolach ag seoladh Gréagaigh,
Nó mar Hector na Traoi ag claoidh Mermidhdons,
Nó mar Pháris mhac Phrí ar thaoibh cnuic sléibhe,
Nó Alasdrán uaibhreach ‘raibh na slóighte dhó ‘géilleadh.*

Since Eoghan left us, the mightiest lion,
Like wise Achilles guiding the Greeks,
Or Hector of Troy, conquering the Myrmidons,
Or Paris son of Priam on the mountainside,
Or proud Alexander, whom hosts gave homage.

(Ó Muirgheasa 1934, 79)

The poet apparently saw no contradiction in invoking figures from both sides of the conflict, offering instead a non-partisan appreciation of heroic virtue. Similarly, the poet of the elegy for Pádraig Mac an tSaoi mentioned earlier states that:

*Bá é súd crann seasta ar thoiseach na gcéadthai,
Mar Gholl nó Osgar bhéirfeadh osadh i ngéibhionn,
Nó mar Hector go dian ag claoidh na nGréagach,
Nó mar Pháris éachtach chuaidh le bainríoghan na sgéimhe,*

He was the steadfast tree at the head of hundreds
Like Goll or Oscar who brought respite to captives
Or Hector, subduing the Greeks with vigour
Or death-dealing Paris who eloped with the queen of beauty.

(Ó Muirgheasa 1934, 129)

Goll and Oscar are figures known from the so-called Fenian Cycle (in Irish, *Fiannatocht*), a body of Irish and Scottish tales and ballads centred around the figure of Fionn Mac Cumhaill and his band of warriors known as the Fianna.¹⁷ Like the Trojans, the Fianna are associated with the distant pre-Christian past, although their exploits are typically

¹⁷ For an accessible introduction to this body of literature, see Nagy 2010 and references.

situated within the familiar landscapes of the Gaelic world as opposed to those of the Mediterranean. Such juxtapositions of native and classical literary tradition are fairly frequent in the poems surveyed; the implications of this will be explored later.

A similar juxtaposition of classical and native tradition appears in the Jacobite song *Bím-se buan ar buaidhirt gach ló* (Every Day I Am Afflicted by Sorrow) by Seaghán Clárach mac Domhnaill (Dinneen 1908, 1-3).¹⁸ Mac Domhnaill likens Charles Edward Stuart, the Young Pretender, to a range of figures from native Irish tradition: Aonghus Óg, Lughaidh Mac Céin, Cú Raoi Mac Dáire, Conall Cearnach, Fearghus Mac Róigh, and Conchobhar Mac Neassa. The deities Mars and Cupid are both made manifest in his body, indicating his martial prowess and beauty: “Tá Mars is Cúipid dlúith i gcóir / i bpearsain úir ‘s i ngnúis mo stóir” (“Mars and Cupid are [bound] close together in the young body and countenance of my beloved”), and the refrain of the song repeatedly states “S é mo laoch, mo ghile mear, ‘s é mo Shaesar, gile mear” (“He is my hero, my gallant darling, he is my Caesar, gallant darling”). In general, metaphorical comparisons to Caesar are quite common in the poems surveyed – so much so that it is not always clear whether the poet intended to invoke any particular Roman emperor, or whether the word *Saesar* or *Caesar* functions as a common noun meaning ‘hero, warrior’.

While comparisons between contemporary men and martial heroes from classical antiquity abound in both panegyric and elegiac bardic poetry of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in the eighteenth century such comparisons are largely restricted to elegies for the dead. A notable exception is Jacobite verse, although these poems are composed for a distant saviour, rather than a present and living patron. This absence is, perhaps, not particularly surprising: praise poems were a form of political propaganda for the Gaelic and Old English military aristocracy of the later middle ages, and functioned within a later medieval and early modern political context. Poems extolling the martial skill and wealth of a patron were, at best, an expensive anachronism in a period when most of the Irish-speaking gentry lived on greatly diminished estates and had no access to military training.

Women

While some of the anonymous poems, especially those written in a female lyric voice, may have been written by women, none of the poetry consulted can be securely attributed to a female poet. This absence is not surprising, as poetry – especially written poetry – is traditionally a masculine craft in Irish culture. Women formed a minority of Irish-language poets in the period in question, as indeed they do in the present day (Ní Shíocháin 2021; Ní Dhomhnaill 2005, 43-58). One known female poet from the eighteenth century was Máire Ní Chruaíoch; while none of her own poetry has survived, she is commemorated in elegies by three better-known male poets. Of relevance

¹⁸ The song is generally better known at present as *Mo ghile mear* (My Gallant Darling), from a musical setting in a collection of poems by Mac Domhnaill arranged by Dónal Ó Liatháin in the 1970s.

to the current discussion is the elegy written by the Cork poet Seán na Raithíneach Ó Murchadha (ca. 1700-1752):

*An bláth is buacaighe ghluais puinn eadrainn beó i nÉirinn,
bás cé fuair sí, a huaislidheacht mairfidh go deó déidheannach;
Sápphó suadh-ghníomhach nduain-mbinn startha agus cómad Ghaedhilge.
Máire shuairc Ní Chruadhlaioich, eala agus ógh, is Phoénics.*

The fairest flower that held sway here in Ireland
Was snatched by death yet lives, her fame eternal.
Wise-acting Sappho of metres, couplets, sweet songs
Dear Máire Ní Chruaíoch, phoenix, virgin, and swan.

(Bourke et al. 2002, 441-442, tr. Biddy Jenkinson)

Like the male subjects of the elegies discussed above, Ní Chruaíoch is explicitly likened to figures from classical antiquity, albeit to a poet and a mythical bird rather than to martial heroes. As Marie-Louise Coolahan (2013, 9-10) has noted, the allusion to Sappho is potentially double-edged: on the one hand, Sappho is the archetypal female poet from antiquity, while on the other, her name may have had connotations of sexual promiscuity and deviance for contemporary audiences. Ó Murchadha’s description of her as an *ógh* (‘virgin’) and as a pure-white swan are perhaps intended to pre-empt these potential readings.

Although there are very few surviving poems *by* women from the period, references *to* women are quite common in the works surveyed. Women are the subjects of panegyrics and the object of the poet’s desire in romantic verse, as well as playing the role of the *spéirbhean* (‘sky-woman’): a woman who appears to lament the dead or utter prophecy in political verse, at times understood to be a personification of the sovereignty of Ireland.¹⁹ The women in these poems, both real and imagined, are often directly likened to various women and goddesses from classical antiquity, and these comparisons are framed in the conventional terms of praise for women in the poetry of the period: sweetness of voice, brightness of skin, radiance of eye, and so on. In a lengthy poem in praise of a woman named Cáit, the Louth poet Peadar Ó Doirnín (ca. 1700-1769) states:

*Is ó táid tréithre uile ardghéagaibh Pharnassus ‘do lár,
is an cháil chéanna bhí i gclár chléibhghil Phenelope an áigh,
cás Dheirdre chuaigh i ndáil Naoise fán tuile ar an tsnámh,*

¹⁹ A particularly explicit example of this identification appears in Aogán Ó Rathaille’s *Mac an Cheannuidhe* (The Merchant’s Son), where the poet beholds a “gentle maiden, whose name was Erin” (Dinneen & O’Donoghue 1911, 12-13). The most in-depth study to date on such visionary poetry in the seventeenth and eighteenth century and its political and religious context is still Ó Buachalla 1996.

*más lánrogha leat, go lá an éaga biaidh mise ar do scáth.
Is í mo Cháit bhéilbhinn na mball saorchumtha is gile nó an blath
a bhfuil lánéifeacht an bhánlaioige ina timpeall gan smál;
is gath gréine mo ghrá péarlach is is loinnir ar dhath
an tsnáth shaibhir ler ghnáth Hélen a hinneal gach lá.*

Since all the virtues of the high-limbed women of Parnassus are present in you
and the same fame that was in the bright face of Penelope of the slaughter
Like Deirdre who pursued Naoise and swam over wave:
If it is indeed your will, until the day of my death I will be by your side.
My sweet-mouthed Cáit of the well-wrought limbs is brighter than the flower,
who is, without flaw, cloaked in the full power of womanhood.
My pearl-white beloved is a sun-beam, and a brilliant flame,
the rich thread with which Helen attired herself each day.

(Ó Buachalla 1976, 34-35)

Deirdre is a well-known character from Irish narrative tradition who was betrothed to an older king and eloped with Naoise, a much younger and more attractive man.²⁰ Like Helen's abduction by Paris, this was the cause of a bloody and destructive conflict; unlike Helen, Deirdre is typically portrayed as making an active decision to escape a betrothal that was made before her birth. As in the elegies and Jacobite songs discussed above, the poet clearly saw nothing inappropriate about invoking classical and native Irish narrative in the same breath.

Such explicit comparisons between contemporary women and women from classical antiquity are typically made on the grounds of beauty rather than any other qualities – the equation between Máire Ní Chrualaoich and Sappho made in her elegy being a noteworthy exception. The number of figures from classical antiquity who figure in such comparisons is quiet small, despite the frequency with which these comparisons occur.

Helen is by far the most frequent classical referent here, and poets often invoked her role in the destruction of Troy, perhaps simply as a means of identifying her, but perhaps also as an insinuation about the destructive nature of desire.²¹ Other commonly

²⁰ The Old Irish version of the tale is known as *Longes mac nUislemn* (The Exile of the Songs of Uisliu), and was most recently edited and translated as Hull 1949. An Early Modern Irish version also exists, *Oidheadh Chloinne hUisneach* (The violent death of the children of Uisneach), edited and translated as Mac Giolla Léith 1993. Deirdre's story became popular among Irish playwrights in the early twentieth century; see, for example, George William Russel's *Deirdre* (1902), William Butler Yeats's *Deirdre* (1907), and John Millington Synge's *Deirdre of the Sorrows* (1910).

²¹ For example, Fiachra Mac Brádaigh's *Aisling* (Ó Buachalla 1976, 27), Peadar Ó Doirnín's *M'uilleagán dubh ó* (O My Dark-haired Young Woman; Ó Buachalla 1976, 35), and Art Mac Cumhaigh's *Úr-chill an Chreagáin* (The Graveyard of Creggan; Ó Buachalla 1976, 41).

invoked figures include the goddesses Juno, Minerva, Pallas, and Venus; the nine Muses; Cassandra; and Constantina, daughter of the emperor Constantine.²²

A recurring motif appears in visionary poems that feature the *spéirbhean*. After the poet sees the strange woman and is impressed by her beauty, he asks her a series of questions in order to ascertain her identity, displaying his familiarity with classical and other traditions in the process. A brief example of this motif appears in a verse sometimes sung in the Jacobite song *Cáit Ní Dhuibhir*.

*Do shuigh sí ar bhinse taobh liom 's mo ghéaga do thit liom síos,
do cheapas gur phlanda ón nGréig í is gur bhaol dom í theacht im líon;
"An tú Júnó, Pallas, Vénius, nó Hélen do loisc an Traoi,
nó an bhean do chloigh na céadta, nó bhfuil gaol agat le Cáit Ní Dhuibhir?"*

She sat on the ledge beside me, and my limbs fell down, weak
I thought it was a fair maiden from Greece that surely came near me
"Are you Juno, Pallas, Venus, or Helen who burned Troy?
Or the woman who subdued hundreds, or are you a relation of Cáit Ní Dhuibhir?"

(Ó Buachalla 1978, 5)

These sequences of rhetorical questions invoke the same classical referents as the similes discussed above: Helen and other women contemporary with the Trojan war, the Muses, other goddesses, and so on. Classical and native traditions are often juxtaposed, especially those of Helen and Deirdre, suggesting a popular equation of the two figures.²³

This type of rhetoric was familiar enough that it could be parodied. In *Amhrán an Phictiúra* (Song of the Picture), the Clare Island poet Mícheál Mac Suibhne recalls coming home late one night and being terrified by a painting of a Turk which his mother had hung up. In his drunken state, the poet assumes the picture is a person and attempts to identify it. First, he lists various classical deities, then proceeds to a small catalogue of heroes, before turning to more sinister beings:

*An tú Mag Ag nó Polyphemus?
Nó tabhair sgéala chugam anois gan mhoill;
Nó an tú Arson a léir, mar léightear,
Chuidh i n-éigcéill i bhfad san gcoill?*

²² See also Eoghan Ruadh Ó Súilleabháin's visionary poem *Tráth is mé cois leasa* (Once as I Was by the Earthen Mound; Ua Duinnín 1901, 92-94) and Uilliam Ó Maoil Chiaráin's poem in praise of Nancy Dolan (Ó Muirgheasa 1934, 50-52).

²³ In addition to the poem in praise of Cáit by Ó Doirnín cited above, this juxtaposition is found in Ó Doirnín's poem *Méabha is Mánas Bui* (Maeve and Yellow Magnus; de Rís 1969, 32), Ó Maoil Chiaráin's *Géag Ráth Árlain* (Scion of Rathaldron; Ó Muirgheasa 1934, 43), and the anonymous *Ceanadus a' tSlóigh* (Kells of the Throng; de Laoide 1914, 16).

*An tú Hercules fuair buaidh ar Ghréagaibh
Le neart a ghéaga is le lúth a lainn?
Nó an tú Cerberus an maistín craosach?
Cia'r chuir an ghéar-bhruid sin ar do dhruim?*

Are you Magog or Polyphemus
– Tell me, without delay –
Are you Arson²⁴ who, as we read,
Went astray far into the woods?
Are you Hercules who overcame the Greeks
With the strength of his limbs and swiftness of his blade?
Are you Cerberus, the deep-mouthed mastiff?
Who placed that sharp goad on your back?

(Ó Tiománaidhe 1906, 66)

Divinity

In addition to figuring in the direct comparisons and rhetorical questions discussed above, the gods of Greece and Rome appear in the poems surveyed to represent spheres of human activity or the natural world. Cupid, unsurprisingly, appears in romantic poetry, and Bacchus is invoked in some poems in connection with revelry and drink.²⁵ As noted earlier, Seaghán Clárach Mac Domhnaill invokes Mars and Cupid in praise of the martial prowess and beauty of the Young Pretender. Phoebus is invoked as a personification of the sun and the light of day.²⁶ In the Jacobite song *Rosc Catha na Mumhan* (Battle Chant of Munster), by the Cork poet Piaras Mac Gearailt (1702-1795), the poet sees his anticipation of the return of the Pretender in the natural world:

*D'aithnigheas féin gan bhréag ar fhuacht
'S ar anfaithe Thétis taobh le cuan,*

²⁴ The identity of this 'Arson', or the narrative being alluded to, is unknown to the author.

²⁵ E.g. the poet Diarmuid Ruadh mac Muireadhaigh refers to Cupid's arrows as the source of his love-sickness in *Amhrán na Bradaile* (Song of the Pilfering; de Brún, Ó Buachalla & Ó Con Cheanainn 1971, 44), and there are references to Cupid tormenting the poet in Uilliam Ó Maoil Chiaráin's song *Nancy Bhéasach* (Well-mannered Nancy; Ó Tiománaidhe 1906, 14) and in the anonymous *An Mhódhambail Mhaiseach* (The Beautiful, Modest Lady; Hyde 1893, 120). In his lament for Art Óg Ó Néill, Art Mac Cumhaigh invokes Bacchus as a metaphor for the hospitality and carousing which he will no longer enjoy at the deceased's home (Ó Buachalla 1976, 45).

²⁶ E.g. Peadar Ó Doirín's *Cáit bhéilbhinn* (Ó Buachalla 1976, 34), Eoghan Mac Carrthaigh's *Go moch is mé im aonar gan aon im chómhair* (It Is Early and I Am Alone with No-one in My Company; Ó Foghludha 1938, 40), and Uilliam Ó Briain's song in praise of the daughter of Ó Biataigh of Moynalty (Ó Muirgheasa 1934, 59).

*Ar chanadh na n-éan go séiseach suairc,
Go gcasfadh mo Shéasar glé gan ghruaim*

I have seen, without a lie, from the cold
and the raging of Thetis by the bay,
from the pleasing, tuneful singing of the birds
that my bright Caesar will come without despair.

(Ó Foghludha 1905, 23)

A common device in elegiac verse is to portray the natural world in disarray, as if partaking in the poet's own performance of grief. In some poems, this upheaval is depicted through the actions of various classical deities: Phoebus for the sun, Nereus or Thetis for the sea, and so on. One example of this trope is in the *beochaoineadh* ('lament for a living person') of Seán Clárach Mac Domhnaill, written by Seán Ó Tuama (ca. 1707-1775):

*Atá spéirling is stoirm ghaosmhar ar uisce
Ag réabadh 's ag briseadh slím-chranna seoil,
Is caor-thonna neimbe ag Tétis ar muire,
Ag scéithchaint faoi imeall tíortha tar neoin;
Na stéid-eacha buile ag Phoebus ag rithe,
Gan géilleadh ná urraim díreach don chóir,
Phlégon ar mire, Aetan i bhfuinneamh,
Aeolus go tuirseach fíor-lag ar neoin.*

There is tempest and wild storm on the water
Tearing and breaking the thin masts of the ships
Thetis, in a frenzy, raises fiery waves
that strike the very edges of the land
Phoebus's enraged steeds run
without yielding or bending to the natural order
Phlegon enraged, Aetan incited,
Aeolus despondent and weak.

(Dinneen 1908, 57)

The Kerry poet Aogán Ó Rathaille (1670-1729) was evidently fond of this motif, as it appears in no fewer than four of his elegies.²⁷ The gods of classical mythology feature in Ó Rathaille's verse in other ways, such as in his hyperbolic description of the divine

²⁷ The elegy for Seaghán Brún, the second of the two elegies for Donnchadh Ó Ceallacháin, and the elegies for Seon Hassiadh and Eoghan Mac Cormaic Riabhaigh Mac Carthaigh (Dinneen & O'Donoghue 1911, 50-53, 92-95, 198-201, 220-225).

manufacture of a pair of shoes which a friend had gifted him (Dinneen & O'Donoghue 1911, 100-107). In three of his elegies, the gods are described as presiding over the birth of the subject of the poem, and bestowing various gifts pertaining to their particular domains upon him.²⁸ Implicit in these elegies is the idea that the gods of classical Greece and Rome are present in the Irish landscape and that, as with the Homeric heroes, they take a personal interest in the lives and deeds of certain leaders and, perhaps, their people.

Other references

The majority of references to classical antiquity in the poems surveyed fit neatly into the categories discussed above: vague references to the land of Greece, direct comparisons between the subjects of poems and classical figures, and references to the gods, especially in the context of elegies. There are, however, some other forms of classical reference or comparison which are worth discussing briefly.

Some poets praised the subjects of poems for their mastery over classical and other languages. In his poem in praise of the Ó Raghallaigh of Áth Cairn, County Cork, Uilliam Ó Maoil Chiaráin describes Ó Raghallaigh's wife as "sí is eagnaíde a léigfeadh dán i mBéarla is i Laidin" ("the wisest of all who would read poems in English or in Latin"; Ó Muirgheasa 1934, 38). An anonymous poem on the death of Seaghán Clárach Ó Domhnaill refers to the poet as "seabhac na sáimhe, sás na scéal do scríobhadh i Laidin go breágh, i mBéarla, nó i nGréigis ghlinn" ("a tranquil hawk who would write the sense of stories in fine Latin, English, or clear Greek"; Dinneen 1908, 61). While such praise was, no doubt, sometimes hyperbolic, these references indicate that such knowledge was held in high esteem. Poets also occasionally likened other Irish poets and musicians to their counterparts: in a poem on the decline of the native aristocracy, Peadar Ó Doirnín enumerates the amusements of courtly life: hunting hares, carousing, listening to the music of the harp and to poets who are likened to Ovid – "le file faobhrach mar Ovid caomh" ("listening to a sharp-edged poet like fair Ovid") (Ó Buachalla 1976, 30). Describing the welcome he would receive in Drogheda, the Armagh poet Art Mac Cumhaigh (1738-1773) likens the music of the harp that he would hear there to the music of Orpheus: "gheobhainn siamsa de'n gcláirsigh bhí tráth ag Orphéas" (I would find diversion from the harp that Orpheus once had") (Ó Muirgheasa 1934, 16).

Two eighteenth-century poems, both by Uilliam Ó Maoil Chiaráin, draw upon late medieval and early modern ecclesiastical ideas on the imminence of death and the vanity of earthly things, ideas which were widespread in Latin, Irish, and other vernacular languages (cf. Ó Háinle 2000). In both of Ó Maoil Chiaráin's poems, as in earlier Irish explorations of this theme, classical, biblical and native narrative traditions

28 The first lament for Donnchadh Ó Ceallacháin, and the laments for Diarmaid Ó Laoghaire na Cillíneach and Geralt, son of the Knight of Glin (Dinneen & O'Donoghue 1911, 80-81, 128-131, 154-157). This motif appears occasionally in later elegies, such as that of Piaras Mac Gearailt for the 'Squire Geal Freeman' (Ó Foghludha 1905, 56-58).

are used as a source of moral exempla.²⁹ In a song on the faithlessness of women, Ó Maoil Chiaráin states:

*Chualaidh mé dá léigheamh gur éaluigh a bhean ó Dháibhi,
Is arís ó Rígh na Féinne gur éaluigh sí Gráinne;
Dh'imthigh Helen le n-a sgéimh, agus Déirdre le n-a háille,
'S goidé'n fáth dhúinn 'bheith 'dréim leo? acht béid ag an bhfear is áil leo.*

I have heard it being read that David's wife left him
and that Gráinne left the King of the Fiann
Helen with her charm left, and Deirdre with her beauty
Why do we strive after them? They'll only belong to the man whom they desire.

(Ó Muirgheasa 1934, 24)

The "King of the Fiann" is Fionn Mac Cumhaill, mentioned earlier; his betrothal to Gráinne and her elopement with a younger man is the subject of a popular early modern Irish tale, *Tóruigheacht Dhiarmada is Ghráinne* (The Pursuit of Diarmuid and Gráinne; Ní Shéaghdha 1967). Gráinne's involvement in a love triangle with disastrous consequences would seem to motivate the implicit comparison with Deirdre and Helen, although no such explanation can be offered for David's wife (perhaps this is a misremembered version of the story of Bathsheba and Uriah). As is the case in many of the poems discussed above, events from classical and native narrative tradition seem to occupy the same mental 'space' for the poet.

Dán ar an mBás (A Poem on Death) takes the form of a long dialogue between an anonymous young man and Death. In response to the young man's boasting, Death states:

*Is faobhrach mo lanna 's ní sgarann aon slán liom,
Claoidhfidh mé tusa, má's measamhail 's má's áluinn,
Má's óg, is má's másach, is má's féiceamhlach breagh thú;
Ní bhacann sin mise, is goinfead gan spás thú,
Mar rinneas le Hector, Narcissus, is Dáibhi;
Cé gur tréan agus saoghalta nó Criostaidhe chum crábhaidh,
Le mo shaighdibh gur ghoineas gach duine de'n Ádhamh-chloinn,
'S ní éistim le leithsgéal, 's béidh tú mar chách liom.*

29 Cf. the use made of biblical, classical, and native tradition in Bonaventura Ó hEodhasa's 1611 translation of *Cur mundus militat*, a medieval Latin poem on the vanity of the world popularly attributed to Saint Bernard (Mhág Craith 1967, 55-58; 1980, 25-26). See also *Créad fa seachnainnse suirghe* (Why Should I Avoid Courtship?), a poem attributed only to *An Parson* (The Parson) and found in the early sixteenth-century Scottish manuscript *The Book of the Dean of Lismore*, edited and translated as Gillies 2008.

My blades are sharp, and no one escapes me
 I will wear you down, though you are esteemed and beautiful
 though you are young and strong, and fair of appearance
 That does not concern me, I will strike you without respite
 as I did to Hector, Narcisuss and David;
 Whether they were mighty and worldly, or pious Christians,
 With my arrows have I wounded every one of Adam's children
 I hear no excuses, you will be one and the same to me.

(Ó Muirgheasa 1934, 92)

As the poem progresses, Death lists other figures he has laid low: despite their strength and military power, Samson, Caesar, Priam, and Joshua could not escape death, nor could Hippocrates and Galen despite their intellectual achievement, nor Croesus despite his wealth. Such themes of *memento mori* are quite rare in the poems surveyed, especially in comparison to the poetry of previous centuries. This development most likely reflects changes in both devotional practices and the material circumstances of audiences: messages about the vanity of earthly aspirations are less immediately relevant when the predominant cultural narrative is one of disenfranchisement and dispossession.

Conclusions

References to classical tradition in the form of comparisons, metaphorical identifications, and brief allusive statements are fairly common in the poems surveyed. More sustained engagements, such as adaptations or retellings of classical narrative, do not occur. Such retellings may have been felt to be generically inappropriate for song – while there is an older tradition of mythological or historical narrative songs, most of the narrative songs composed in the period in question reflect the experiences of the poet and their community, or at least of the poetic ego.³⁰ Metaphors, similes, and brief allusions also place fewer demands, in terms of familiarity with classical tradition, on performers, singers, and audiences. As noted above, direct familiarity with classical languages and text was only available to a minority of Irish speakers, in particular those with clerical or scribal training; in most cases, it would seem that familiarity with the worlds of classical mythology came from Irish-language sources – in other words, persons such as Helen or Achilles had found a home for themselves in the Irish literary tradition.

³⁰ Narrative songs include the Fenian ballads, or “lays” as they are commonly known (following the Irish and Scottish Gaelic use of *laoithe*), mentioned above. The largest collection of lays was edited and translated as *Duanaire Finn* (Fionn's Poem-book; MacNeill 1908; Murphy 1933; 1953). In the modern period, narrative songs include songs commemorating tragedies such as *Amhrán na Leabhar* and *Eanach Dhúin*, which have been previously discussed, romantic songs, and visionary or prophetic verse.

Critics of Irish poetry, if they have offered comment on the use of classical learning in works of the period, have generally taken a negative view of it. In his edition of the works of Aogán Ó Rathaille, Patrick Dinneen refers to the catalogues of deities which appear in the poet's elegies as “the greatest blemish in these compositions” (1911, xxxv), and Cecile O'Rahilly dismisses much of the post-seventeenth-century tradition as “stereotyped and hackneyed” (1952, ix). Such assessments privilege the contemporary experience of *reading* these poems, as well as post-Romantic sensibilities which value novelty and individual genius. The repetition of classical names, whether individually or as part of a catalogue, has an impact in oral performance; moreover, these songs were composed with particular social functions of commemoration and consolation in mind, and much of what might be seen as cliché abets those functions.³¹ As O'Higgins (2017, 72) notes:

such capacious interrogation may strike modern readers as mechanical; yet it bore incantatory power. Through it, the poet laid out the cultural context in which the woman would tell her story, and the audience, hear it. She was not Helen, Medea, or Deirdre, but Ireland's history would be told in their shadow. The catalogue celebrated the fact that the poets' intellectual ‘stock’ includes classical literature as well as Irish—and implicitly claimed that the Irish and classical literary traditions constituted a literary and imaginative continuum, habitable by a single mind.

This juxtaposition of figures from Classic and Gaelic historical and mythological tradition is, as we have seen, a recurring feature of these poems. The idea of the commensurability of Irish with classical languages has roots in the middle ages: the eighth- or ninth-century *Auraicept na nÉces* or Scholar's Primer lists Irish alongside the Isidorean three sacred languages of Hebrew, Greek, and Latin; we find echoes of this text within the grammatical tracts which professional poets studied carefully in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.³² The survival of this idea of the commensurability of these traditions in the modern period is not mere antiquarianism. Irish identities were largely conceived of in sectarian terms in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: an identification with Rome in antiquity might bolster an identification with contemporary Rome, and form part of a national identity that sees affinities with Catholic Europe rather than neighbouring Britain. As noted in the introduction, the period in question was one

³¹ In reference to Ó Rathaille's elegies, and Dinneen's criticism of them, Breandán Ó Buachalla (2004, 31) notes that “although their underlying ‘sameness’ defies modern demands for originality, the stability of the genre suggests that they were efficacious within the culture and the mourning ritual in which they were originally embedded”.

³² The medieval *Auraicept* and its commentary was edited and translated by Calder 1917. An edition and translation of the ‘canonical’ *Auraicept*, representing the oldest stratum of its textual tradition, was prepared by Ahlqvist 1983. See Engesland 2024 for a recent discussion of this passage. An early modern retelling of the *Auraicept*'s account of the origin of the Irish language can be found at Mac Cárthaigh 2014, § 4.

when the Irish language and its speakers were excluded from many aspects of public life, and language shift was underway in much of the island because of the perceived economic advantages of English. Despite the relatively modest means of most poets, and especially their audiences, the repeated commemoration in performance of an Irish classical past offered some consolation: a sense of shared ownership of a metaphorical treasure which rivalled that of the great civilizations of antiquity.

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FROM THE RUBICON TO STEVNS AND BACK

INTERTWINED RECEPTIONS OF CAESAR IN *ELVERHØI* AND *ASTERIX* IN DANISH

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Since the 1960s, Uderzo and Goscinny's comic book series about the fictional resistance of Asterix and his fellow Gauls against Caesar's campaigns have conquered readers all over the world. Their key concept is, as will be familiar to most, a reverted perspective on the Roman action in Gaul in the 50s BCE known through the words of the conqueror Caesar in his *Commentarii De Bello Gallico*. In the comics, we see events from the point of view of the invaded – or rather the last fictional Gaulish stronghold, a small village inhabited by ordinary, recognizable people, among them the protagonists Asterix and Obelix. Comic effect is often obtained by placing the words and rationales of the conqueror in the mouths of the conquered Gauls. This makes for a refined critique of power without turning completely against Caesar. He is never made into a classic cartoon villain, although he is shown with a temper worthy of one. Caesar's position as a superhuman statesman is deflated – he is brought down to size and shown to be a person with flaws. This does not turn the reader against him but rather enables them to embrace him more. It is probably no exaggeration to say that this version of Caesar and the comic way into the world of ancient Roman culture paved by his fictional Gaulish 'nemeseis' has been a first introduction to the Roman world for many.

Although Denmark was never part of the Roman empire, the *Asterix* comics have been as successful here as anywhere else, since Denmark is just as influenced by Graeco-Roman culture as any other region of the Western world. By replacing the references to French culture of the original with similar references to Danish culture, history, geography, and so on, the Danish translator of the series for five decades, Per Dâ, has given the Gallo-Roman narrative of the series a Danish dimension too. This prompts the underlying assumption of this essay: that the Danish translations of *Asterix* present a Julius Caesar of a particularly Danish flavour. In the following I address one such example in the Danish version of the volume *Le bouclier Arverne* (1967; in English *Asterix and the Chieftain's Shield*, 1968; in Danish, *Asterix romernes skækk*, 1972). Here,